News Inside

A compilation of criminal justice news from The Marshall Project

August 2025 — Issue 20

The Marshall Project

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On the cover:
The common area of the Restoring Promise unit in Turbeville Correctional Institution.
PHOTO BY WILSON/THE MARSHALL PROJECT

A Letter From Lawrence

Hey *News Inside* readers,

In May, I had the incredible opportunity to join a delegation of leaders in the criminal legal system, advocates, and journalists to Germany. It was led by the Vera Institute of Justice, a nonprofit working to end mass incarceration in the U.S. What I saw in Germany blew my mind — their approach to justice is completely different from ours.

We visited the Moabit Criminal Court in Berlin, Europe's largest. Here's what shocked me: Unlike the adversarial system in the U.S., where prosecutors fight to convict, German prosecutors are inquisitorial. They actually seek the truth, even if it means freeing the defendant.


Moabit Criminal Court in Berlin, Germany, 2025.

We toured six prison facilities that challenged everything I thought I knew about incarceration. Some were coed, where relationships happen naturally, despite being against the rules. Others let people go home for 12 hours a day, three days a week! I walked through a high-security prison with tiers, bars, gates and Plexiglas that looked more like the New York prisons I lived in, and visited a facility that houses people who've completed their sentences, but are still considered public safety risks. Picture this: They live in modern condominiums with rooms to make art, gyms and entertainment spaces. Staff told me, "They're not in prison, but they can't leave until we're satisfied they won't reoffend."

This brings me to what's packed into this issue. In "The Future of Prisons?" you'll read about the Restoring Promise Initiative, the Vera Institute's German-inspired program in South Carolina, where older prisoners mentor young men in units with more freedom and dignity than typical of most U.S. prisons. Despite a 66% drop in violent incidents for the young men being mentored, the program battles political opposition and funding cuts.

"How We Survived Extreme Heat in Prison" features powerful accounts from incarcerated journalists across six states who endure dangerous conditions — medical emergencies, broken cooling systems, scalding showers — while being forced to buy expensive cooling supplies. The research is sobering: Extreme heat increases prison deaths, and suicide rates soar after a heatwave.

In "Judge Stops Federal Prisons From Enforcing Trump's Trans Care Ban, For Now," you'll learn how a federal judge temporarily blocked the Trump administration's ban on gender-affirming care, ordering continued hormone therapy and access to chest binders and gender-affirming clothing like undergarments for over 600 transgender prisoners.

Plus, we've got all your favorites: The Peeps, Reader to Reader, the crossword puzzle, In the Spotlight, Local Focus, and Thinking Inside the Box.

So settle in and flip through these pages. As we used to say when I was inside, I'll catch you when pen meets paper again — or in this case, when fingers hit keys.

Lawrence Bartley
Lawrence Bartley is the publisher of The Marshall Project Inside. He served a 27-years-to-life sentence and was released on parole in May 2018.

Letters From Our Readers

I came across an old issue of *News Inside* . It was very powerful, inspiring, and informative. I shared it with everyone in my hall because I couldn't believe how interesting the stories were. I actually learned a lot. I enjoy staying informed on everything happening in the DOC, so could you please add me to your subscription list? Thanks so much for everything you do and for not forgetting about your time locked up.

—Kaira R., Virginia

I just read "Love Beyond Bars: Jules and Samantha." It was a great story. What I admire most was that it was succinct and narratively effusive. What's more, I appreciate that it was more uncanny than the quotidian prison relationships in its dynamics and sexuality. Camille's lens brought it all home. It's a great spread. Keep doing what you do. More fire!!!

—Joseph W., New York

We have been given access to an education portal that features many self-help options, as well as your video and magazine series. I'm writing to request a subscription to *News Inside* and any back issues that y'all are willing to send to distribute to the population here. I'll also note that in the Inside Story videos, there's a transition that features a blank indigent envelope from California's Men's Colony in San Luis Obispo, CA. I just left there a couple of months ago. I figured I'd share that. I look forward to seeing more videos from your organization.

—Steven W., California

I just stumbled upon a copy of the Sing Sing [Film Festival] issue of your magazine. I can, and will, ramble on and on about how I find material such as this fascinating. I'm simply here to say thank you and ask to add my name to the mailing list.

—Anthony P., New York

I found out about *News Inside* and The Marshall Project through the Edovo app on the tablets here. I really like the content you produce. I appreciate the awareness you bring to certain situations we face, not only within the jail but also in the legal system and the community. Thank you for being a voice to some of us who feel unheard. Continue the great work!

—Jaime Q., Illinois

I ran across your *News Inside* magazine. This was my second time reading one of your publications, and I found it to be very informative and helpful for an incarcerated person.

—Timothy S., Florida

We appreciate your letters, so keep them coming! Please note that we will edit what you write to us for length and clarity.

Manager's Note

The Marshall Project provides *News Inside* to you free of charge. While we appreciate the gesture, you do not have to send stamps, money or donations of any kind.

Please know that we are unable to write back. Our *News Inside* team has been where you are now, and we understand the struggle. But we are a small team with limited capacity.

When you request a subscription, please follow the format below to ensure you receive your copy of *News Inside*:

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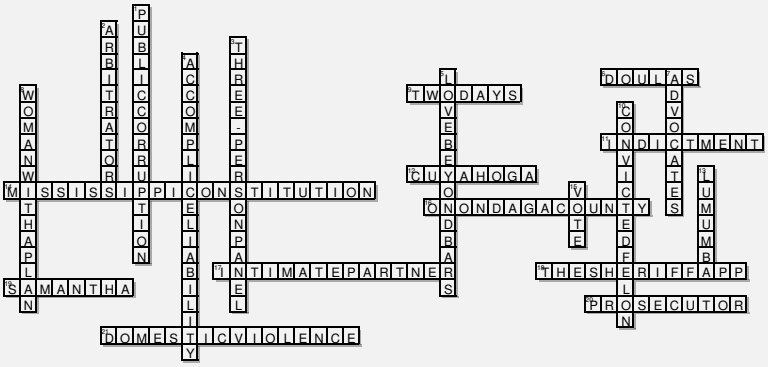
Thank you for your continued interest in and support of *News Inside*!

Answers from Issue 19 Crossword



Martin Garcia

Martin Garcia is the manager of News Inside. *He served a 10-year sentence and was released on parole in September 2019.*

The Future of Prisons?

9.26.2024

Inspired by Germany, South Carolina let prisoners design their own units, write house rules and settle their own disputes. Then came politics.

By MAURICE CHAMMAH

1. "A Modern-Day Plantation"

Seven years ago, amid the cotton fields of South Carolina, a stabbing spiraled into America's deadliest prison riot in a generation. The next morning, it fell to a prisoner at Lee Correctional Institution named Ofonzo Staton to start mopping up the blood.

As he lifted body bags onto gurneys, the 41-year-old father found himself judging the young gang members whose rampage had killed seven men and injured many others. "If you're going to be angry," he recalled thinking, "be angry against the oppressor!"

In media reports, state officials largely attributed the violence to gang rivalries and contraband cell phones. But after two decades inside, Staton — who goes by "Zo" — could talk like an anthropologist, describing how endless sentences, meager medical care and moldy food had spawned hopelessness and rage among the mostly Black population. The prison itself bore the name of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, leading another man inside to call it "nothing more than a modern-day plantation."

So it was all the more jarring to see cheery flyers, posted around the prison soon after the riot, inviting men to apply for a new unit called "Restoring Promise," where residents ages 18 to 25 would supposedly find "a right to privacy, self-expression, and connection with family."

Staton had seen programs come and go, but this one seemed radical. The concept drew on German prisons, where people have individual cells they can personalize, and officers act more like counselors. In the new unit, older men like Staton would serve as mentors. They would design the living environment and teach classes on everything from financial literacy to parenting. They would also write the unit's rules, and decide together how to treat rulebreakers.

For Staton, Restoring Promise was a chance to share the wisdom he'd earned over 21 years inside. The Marlboro County native was doing life for helping a cousin murder a woman, but he always maintained his innocence and never stopped filing appeals.

"I said early on I wouldn't conform to prison, because I wasn't trying to stay there," Staton said in an interview last fall. If someone asked when he was going home, he'd respond, "Probably tomorrow!"

But underneath that carefree attitude, Staton constantly worried about his son, Ja'Kirus, who was born less than a year before his arrest. Visit by visit, he'd watched the squirming toddler grow into a hot-headed teenager who he worried might be drifting toward prison himself.

This new unit couldn't help Ja'Kirus, but it would give Staton a chance to guide men his son's age and plant something he could leave behind. Staton didn't know it at the time, but he would soon be released. He also had no way of knowing how much his work would matter to the future of American prison reform.

2. Searching for Solutions in Germany

Restoring Promise is a national initiative led by the Vera Institute of Justice, a New York-based nonprofit that partners with states on criminal justice reform programs. The first unit launched in Connecticut, a blue state, in 2017 — a moment when public officials across the left and right were talking about making prisons more rehabilitative. Soon after, Vera received applications for the program from several red states, including South Carolina.

But shortly after the Lee unit opened in 2019, the pandemic-era spike in serious violent crimes and the tumult of the George Floyd protests made talk of change more politically perilous. In this context, Lee was a testing ground: If a program designed to give incarcerated people more control over their lives could blossom there, perhaps there was hope everywhere.

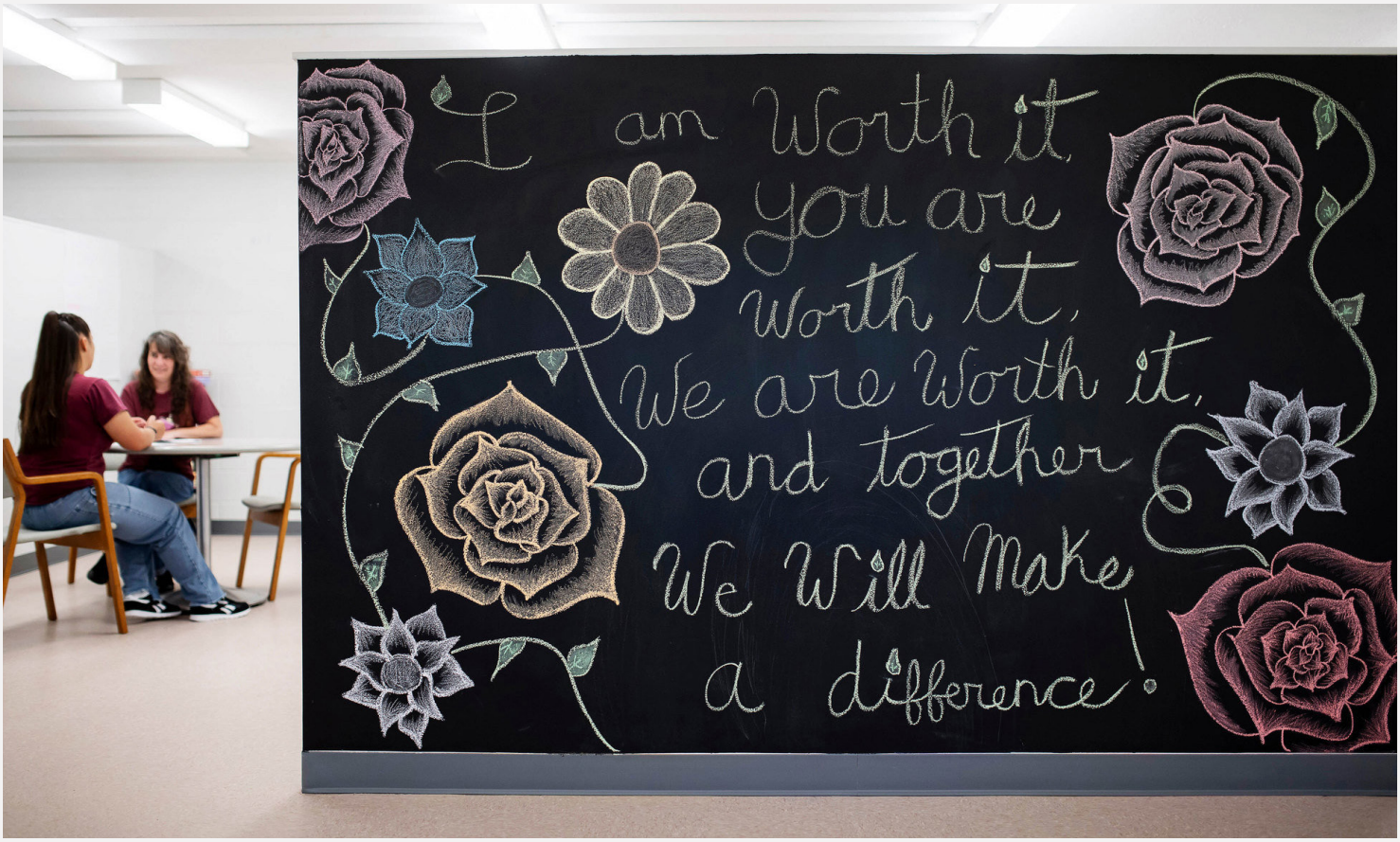
The seeds of Restoring Promise were first sown in Germany. In 2015, the Vera Institute took a group of American prison officials, prosecutors and researchers to visit the country's rehabilitation-focused lockups, where people can serve fewer than five years for violent crimes. I tagged along. Everyone on the trip had a favorite detail. Some were drawn to the therapeutic horses and rabbits in the idyllic barns of rural Neustrelitz Prison. Others raised their eyebrows at the kitchens full of knives.

In the United States, a disproportionate number of incarcerated people are Black or Latino. In German prisons, people born abroad — mainly in the Middle East and Eastern Europe — are overrepresented. But my trip-mate Khalil Gibran Muhammad, a Harvard University historian who studies racism and crime policy, noted how this inequity didn't produce decades-long sentences. "The point was that nobody spends a lot of time in their prisons, no matter who they are."

Muhammad asked our guides about the origins of their approach, and they described how, following the Holocaust, the Federal Republic of Germany adopted a new constitution that declared human dignity "inviolable" and required "all state authority" to "respect and protect" that dignity. Unlike the U.S. Constitution, which still allows "slavery and involuntary servitude" for people convicted of crimes, Germany's Basic Law doesn't formally exclude incarcerated people.

For Muhammad, the lesson was that a society can't truly move forward without reckoning with its history and transforming its culture.

Another trip-mate, Scott Semple, then the commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Correction, was struck



Chalk artwork done by residents of the Germany-inspired York Correctional Institution in Niantic, Conn., in 2018.
PHOTO BY KARSTEN MORAN FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

by how young-adult prisoners receive more intensive therapy than older people, based on the idea that the human brain remains especially receptive to change before age 25. Back in Connecticut, Semple ordered his staff to develop a unit for young men that would enlist older prisoners as mentors.

Over the next few years, Connecticut expanded the program to York Correctional Institution, a women's prison, and more Restoring Promise units sprang up in Massachusetts, Colorado and North Dakota.

Around the same time, other prison reformers were taking cues from Norway, which also "normalizes" prison environments to mimic the outside world. After touring Norwegian lockups, Pennsylvania corrections officers created "Little Scandinavia," a special unit at State Correctional Institution-Chester where residents can shop for groceries online, cook their own meals and even dine with officers.

Despite the buzz, these experiments remain drops in the ocean of America's prisons and jails, which hold nearly 2 million people, often under conditions that can make the word "corrections" feel like a cruel joke. For all the tax dollars spent on them, U.S. "correctional facilities" seldom address the underlying problems — from a thin social safety net to rampant inequality — that drive crime.

Prison agencies typically measure their performance by recidivism, meaning whether the people they release are arrested or locked up again. Even by this metric, American correctional facilities do a poor job: A recent federal analysis found that 82% of people released from state prisons were rearrested within a decade.

At the same time, programs like Restoring Promise must prove their value to maintain funding and withstand changing political views. Such programs are also at the mercy of lawmakers and voters, who are as torn as ever about the purpose of incarceration. Are prisons supposed to be punishing people or rehabilitating them?

3. Building a New Unit, Step by Step

To develop the Restoring Promise curriculum, the Vera Institute partnered with MILPA, a California-based collective of formerly incarcerated Native American, Black and Chicano activists, to teach concepts like restorative justice and intergenerational leadership. After working in Connecticut and Massachusetts, the nonprofit staffers knew South Carolina would be different. "My first image is driving up to Lee and seeing all the cotton fields, all the Confederate flags in front of peoples' houses," said MILPA's deputy director, John Pineda, who spent much of his youth in California lockups.

In the summer of 2018, Vera, MILPA and the South Carolina Department of Corrections co-created the state's first unit, at Turbeville Correctional Institution, where shorter sentences would allow mentors to reach a lot of young men quickly. At both Turbeville and Lee, prison staff picked the mentors. Young men applied to be mentees with letters about their personal goals, and those who qualified were selected randomly.

By March 2019, all of the Restoring Promise participants had moved into their individual cells, which they were allowed to decorate extensively. Although they weren't allowed to wear their own clothes like their German counterparts, they traded in orange jumpsuits for khakis and blue button-up shirts. They wrote house rules: no sagging pants, no do-rags before 4 p.m., no gossiping.

To strengthen the mentees' relationships to their families, the prison administration let parents, siblings and children enter the units and bring in personalized bedspreads. "We'd all sit in this living room area and take turns helping make each others' beds," Staton recalled. "We'd eat together, play games, even dance. It gave family members a sense of comfort."

Under MILPA's guidance, the mentors handled small infractions — like mentees tussling with each other or possessing contraband — through restorative justice circles. They'd sit and discuss how to make amends, often through formal apologies and extra chores or classes. These infractions wouldn't affect their institutional records or result in the loss of phone calls or family visits.

But there were limits: If you stabbed someone, you still might spend time in isolation, which the state calls "disciplinary confinement." Some young men who repeatedly broke rules were asked to leave.

Many prison staff told me they were skeptical at first, but slowly warmed to the program. Among them was former Turbeville warden Richard Cothran, who said most programs in the past only helped men who wanted to change. For the young prisoners with behavior problems, "There was never buy-in, probably because it was created by some old White guy in a room like me, who meant well, but the young men could see right through it."

4. Meeting the Mentees

When I visited the Turbeville and Lee units in fall 2023, the walls of both were covered with vibrant murals of nature scenes and civil rights leaders. Mentees' cells were full of items prisons don't typically allow, like potted plants and an electric piano.

The South Carolina Department of Corrections does not allow journalists to report incarcerated people's last names, and most of my interviews were monitored by staff. But even in short conversations, the mentees sounded like they'd been through a lot of therapy.

Aaron, a 24-year-old at Lee serving life for murder, told me when he first arrived in prison at 19, he noticed how men would brush his arm while talking. He saw it as a way of invading his space, to test whether they could take further advantage of him.

Restoring Promise mentors taught him how to be assertive without violence and defuse tension with humor. Recently, when another man had gotten too close, he blurted out, "Come on with that predator shit!" Then he walked himself back: "Damn, bro, this head of mine, you never know what's going to come out of my mouth."

Aaron told me that when the mentees interacted with the general population — in the rec yard and food hall — they had to deal with outsiders calling their program "police shit" and tempting them away with the promise of more free time and easier access to drugs. But Aaron knew if he didn't choose self-improvement, prison would only train him "to be a better slave."

Encouraged to be vulnerable, the men agonized over their past choices. Some traced their crimes to low self-esteem, grief and trauma. Michael, 26, recalled how — on the path to convictions for manslaughter and armed robbery — he'd taken beatings for his younger siblings. "I didn't mind being collateral damage, which is not good," he said. In Restoring

A cell in Lee Correctional Institution's Restoring Promise unit has a television and is decorated with San Francisco 49ers paraphernalia. PHOTO BY WILSON/THE MARSHALL PROJECT

Promise, he "realized I had something to live for."

I noticed a tension in these autobiographies. The official line from mentors and prison staff is that the mentees must take unequivocal responsibility for their mistakes if they're ever going to grow into mature men with positive futures. On the other hand, the Vera and MILPA trainers discuss systemic issues like mass incarceration and the 13th Amendment, the part of our Constitution that allows forced and unpaid labor by people convicted of crimes. The residents learn about how (mostly) White people with power have made policy decisions that imperil their (mostly) Black lives.

Each mentee I talked to told a story of their life that fused these two visions. Demarea, a 23-year-old at Turbeville, accepted blame for carrying an illegal weapon, but he also said he needed it for protection: "A lot of young Black males were dying in my area," he said. When he gets out, he plans to distance himself so that he doesn't need to carry a gun. "I've already missed a year of my son's life," he said. "That's what keeps me up at night."

5. The Ballad of "Zo" Staton

Touring the South Carolina prisons with Staton meant constantly pausing for staff and residents to embrace him. It was like tagging along with a college alum during homecoming. Only he was never supposed to graduate.

In 1995, Marlboro County prosecutors charged his cousin Johnny Pearson, a mechanic, with the rape and murder of a customer named Darlene Patterson. Several witnesses claimed they had seen Staton at a party where multiple men raped Patterson, as well as on the bridge where her body was found. But these witnesses eventually recanted, and Staton's cousin signed an affidavit stating he acted alone.

"I was destined to go to prison, innocent or not," Staton said. But like many of his mentees, he also cast some blame on himself, recalling how his mother had warned him about relatives like Pearson.

Staton knew his son, Ja'Kirus, didn't blame him for being in prison. But as he watched his boy grow into a man, he began to hear arrogance in his voice. Eventually, Ja'Kirus admitted that he was "selling dope, running with the wrong people, fighting, shooting."

One summer day in 2019, Ja'Kirus, then 25, missed a planned visit. Staton called home the next day. "There ain't but one way to tell you," his mother said. "Ja'Kirus got killed last night."

Staton found an empty room to cry in, and by the time he got back to the unit, the news had spread. Staff and residents prayed with him and brought him meals.

Six months after Ja'Kirus' killing — which remains unsolved — Staton applied for parole. He'd been denied many times before, but this time his peers wrote letters extolling his mentoring skills. And, to his surprise, the lead prosecutor from his case wrote a letter describing his involvement in the crime as "minimal."

In February 2020, the parole board agreed to release Staton, and soon after, lawyers at the North Carolina Center on Actual Innocence agreed to help him seek exoneration. They're still investigating his case.

On April 7, 2020, Staton returned to his mother's house in tiny Bennettsville and found a welding job. After a few months, MILPA hired him as a researcher. They

People standing in the common area of the Restoring Promise unit in Turbeville Correctional Institution in 2023. PHOTO BY WILSON/THE MARSHALL PROJECT

would teach him how to analyze data about the unit he had helped to create. They certainly needed him, because Restoring Promise was struggling.

PHOTO BY WILSON/THE MARSHALL PROJECT

6. Trouble Behind the Scenes

After my visits to the Lee and Turbeville units in November 2023, I exchanged letters with 10 mentees. Under cover of anonymity, they painted a much bleaker picture than the one I'd gotten. "Prison officials do not want the initiative to work," wrote one young man.

Their examples ranged from surface-level (a broken washing machine) to systemic (mentors not being paid for their work). The mentees also said there were often not enough prison staff around. Lockdowns due to problems elsewhere in the facility interrupted their classes and other activities.

Chrysti Shain, the director of communications for the South Carolina corrections department, said there is "enormous support" for the program, and that residents may have failed to fully convey their needs to staff. She attributed understaffing to typical turnover, noting that prisons across the U.S. struggle to recruit and retain workers. South Carolina is trying to fix the problem with better pay and benefits.

But in interviews, some former corrections department leaders described a series of setbacks. They asked the state to pay the mentors, and were denied. (Shain said South Carolina pays people who work for prison industries, but not mentors and peer counselors.) Some of these leaders quit in frustration at the slow pace of growth and said that skeptics took their place.

Former Vera staffers I interviewed said they were prepared for challenges. But about two years in, some felt demoralized by post-riot conditions statewide. Two units housing fewer than 100 men between them couldn't make a dent in a system that incarcerates about 16,000 people and draws frequent complaints of medical neglect and censorship.

During my visit to the Lee unit, I met Brian Stirling, the corrections department director responsible for security measures such as deploying drug-sniffing dogs at the prisons. He recounted how he'd been working as then-Gov. Nikki Haley's chief of staff when she offered him the corrections job in 2013. At the time, many conservatives were calling for shrinking prison populations, and he recalled Halley telling him, "Most of them are getting out, and we need to make them better than when they came in."

Stirling signed the state up for Restoring Promise, ramped up job training systemwide, and made it easier for people leaving prison to get driver's licenses and other documents. But then the political winds changed in the state. Haley stepped down as governor in 2017 to work for the Trump administration. Her successor, Henry McMaster, allowed the Restoring Promise units to take root, but he has focused most of his attention on limiting early prison releases and restarting executions.

7. The Challenges — and Opportunities — of Self-Evaluation

When it came time for Vera to formally evaluate the national Restoring Promise Initiative, researchers were adamant that they would only study the South Carolina sites if the residents gave their consent. As part of a growing trend toward "participatory action research," they enlisted the men in the program to help code the data. And Staton himself helped write survey questions as a staffer at MILPA.

Released in summer 2023, Vera's study of Restoring Promise found a 66% decrease in the odds that the mentees would be charged with a violent disciplinary infraction, compared with young men who were not in the program. As with any social science research, there were plenty of caveats: COVID-19 lockdowns had interrupted the family visits and classes that formed the core work of the unit.

Perhaps the most important thing about this research was what it wasn't measuring: recidivism. In other words, Vera chose not to track whether the young men who got released were arrested again. In nonprofit circles, this choice was a declaration of values amid an increasingly contentious debate about what counts as a successful criminal justice initiative.

Restoring Promise has relied on around $2.25 million in federal grants and, as of fall 2024, $7 million from Arnold Ventures, an organization that also grants money to The Marshall Project. The funding comes from John Arnold, an oil, gas and hedge fund billionaire who looks for proof that ideas work before he encourages governments to expand them. Arnold Ventures vice president Jennifer Doleac publicly feuded with Vera in 2023 over whether its research methods were rigorous enough, amid a larger fear that criminal justice nonprofit funding, which began falling in 2021, will sink further. (Vera ended its contract with MILPA in June 2024, and MILPA staff cited budget constraints amid a broader decline in criminal justice reform funding.)

But in 2022, Arnold Ventures also funded a report by a group of criminal justice scholars about why recidivism shouldn't be the main marker of progress. Most measurements amount to a simple yes or no. Someone was rearrested, or they weren't. They went back to prison, or they didn't. But these numbers don't reveal how a person stays out of prison. A woman might not return because she earned a law degree. Or she might have died from a drug overdose on the outside.

Other scholars have pointed out that outcomes can be warped by police, prosecutors and others who decide whether to arrest people and send them back to prison.

Vera staffers see better prison conditions as a moral necessity rather than a numbers game. "Regardless of whether you're coming back or not, you should be treated like a human being," said Chloe Aquart, the new director of Restoring Promise.

At the same time, Restoring Promise may be good for an entirely different group of people behind the prison walls: corrections officers. Many have reported "feeling safe and finding purpose in their work" in program surveys.

Ofonzo Staton during his November 2023 visit to Lee Correctional Institution. In 2024, he was working on a study of the Restoring Promise program.
PHOTO BY WILSON/THE MARSHALL PROJECT

8. A Full-Circle Moment

After my tour of the Lee unit, Staton and I drove to a combination gas station-diner for lunch with a group of corrections department staffers. I had never seen a man break bread with the people who once confined him. But what surprised me most was the way they listened to him.

He and Nikeya Chavous, the director of the state's division of youth parole and reentry, had a particularly strong rapport, with a back-and-forth about history, racism and the cultural challenges they face when trying to reach the young Black men in their care.

The next evening, I sat with Staton and his mother, Kathey, in her living room. We were talking about his life, his son's death and the culture of prisons when his mother interrupted us.

"They should have been paying him because he ran the prison," she declared.

Staton laughed. "They need to let me run it for a little while."

"Would you?" I asked.

""Nah, I don't think I want the headache," he said. But then he started musing on what he'd do as a warden, which he summed up with a single insight: "You've just got to show them that you care." I wonder what else Staton — who lost so much to our broken prisons, but gained such wisdom about how to improve them — would do if given that power.

Arnold Ventures is a funder of The Marshall Project. Under the terms of its funding, The Marshall Project has sole editorial control of its news reporting.

This story has been cut for length.

How We Survived Extreme Heat in Prison

9.19.2024

Incarcerated journalists detail the first signs of a heat wave in prison — and how they've coped with record-breaking temperatures.

By PRISON JOURNALISM PROJECT CONTRIBUTORS and AALA ABDULLAHI

This article was published in partnership with Prison Journalism Project and The Guardian.

After a summer of record-breaking temperatures, scientists determined that 2024 was the hottest year on record. For people in U.S. prisons and jails — who often lack access to even the most basic cooling measures — conditions behind bars exacerbate the risks of dangerously high temperatures.

Several courts have ruled that extreme temperatures in prison violate the Eighth Amendment's provision against "cruel and unusual" punishment. But these rulings have not led to a widespread adoption of air conditioning or other methods to cool prison facilities or prevent heat-related deaths. Public health researchers at Brown University estimate that just one day of above-average summer temperatures is associated with a nearly 4% increase in prison deaths. Suicides spike 23% in the three days following a heat wave. And for every 10 degrees above the average summer temperature, prison deaths increase 5%.

As temperatures shattered records across the country last summer, The Marshall Project and Prison Journalism Project asked several incarcerated reporters to document the impact of extreme heat on their facilities. Their stories reveal the brutal reality: frequent medical emergencies, increased tension among the incarcerated and little respite from the heat.

Derek R. Trumbo Sr., 46, Kentucky

Derek Trumbo is a writer who was previously incarcerated at Northpoint Training Center. He is a member of Voices Inside, a prison playwrights' workshop, and he is a multiple-time PEN America Prison Writing Award winner, who has also been published by the Vera Institute of Justice.

The heat affects everyone in prison.

One day in late July, the temperature outside got up to around 100 degrees. The very hot days tend to run together, melting and merging in the heat. But I remember this particular day because during a routine training session of the prison's Certified Emergency Response Team (CERT) a correctional officer collapsed and died.

He suffered a heart condition. Nurses attempted to resuscitate him, but he passed away at the hospital. The entire prison mourned the 24-year-old man's passing. Local news stations reported on it, and officers wore black rings around their badges to show solidarity and compassion.

Even though the heat can be deadly, the prison offers little respite. Our windows are riveted shut, and there are no trees in the yard to offer a single lick of shade. In the sweltering blister of summer, the prison's pastoral landscape — with its amazing sunrises and sunsets — only magnifies the sun's intensity.

Inside the prison, the dingy white linoleum floors become slick and damp with the brown water oozing from the overhead water pipes that sweat with condensation. The puddles sit as if a small child had spilled ice cream on hot asphalt in the desert.

If the air conditioning goes out, as it often does during a heatwave, the prison will roll out large industrial fans that circulate the hot air like a convection oven.

The communications director for the Kentucky Justice & Public Safety Cabinet stated that prison leadership equips facilities with free "cooling stations, industrial fans, water bottles, extra blankets and clothing." They would not comment on specific maintenance issues but added that their leadership "act[s] swiftly and work[s] through the state procurement system to quickly fix." Regarding details about the facility, they added that the "Department of Corrections does not confirm or deny facility layout and structure."

Ashleigh Smith, 39, Michigan

Ashleigh Smith is a writer incarcerated at Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility. She has taken a creative writing class through Eastern Michigan University and has been published in The Oakland Arts Review through Oakland University.

The first sign of extreme heat in my prison is a smell that comes from the walls, which hold in the heat until they sweat. The stench reminds me of the rolled-up floor mats the wrestling team used for practice in high school.

The next signal is when my peers and I change into tank tops or white T-shirts during count instead of the stifling navy blue uniform — even though we risk getting written up. And the final sign is when the prison cancels medical appointments because the administration doesn't want people overexerting themselves by walking long distances to get to an appointment.

Once, during an exceptionally warm week in August last year, I was supposed to push a friend in a wheelchair a little under a quarter mile to one of the health care areas for a routine treatment, but the unit officers had locked the wheelchairs away to make sure nobody left the unit. It was 103 degrees.

Not having control over the water temperature in the shower is the hardest part of being in prison during a heatwave. When I come back to my housing unit after being called out, and I'm sweaty, I just want to take a cool shower to rinse off. But instead, I have to get in a scalding hot shower.

According to the Michigan Department of Corrections' public information office, incarcerated people "do not risk getting written up if they wear their white [T]-shirt during count." They also stated

that "medical appointments are not canceled due to heat, but some restrictions in movement may be made because of the heat index." They did not respond to questions about locking away wheelchairs.

Ryan Green, 33, North Carolina

Ryan Green is a writer and military veteran currently housed at FCI Butner Medium I. He writes about the treatment of incarcerated people and the need for justice reform.

In a heat wave, the prison doesn't do anything for the elderly, sick or more vulnerable, even though we are in a medical facility. Once, I had a cellie who had what I thought was a heart attack due to the heat and lack of hydration. He told me he was feeling dizzy, had pain in his chest and arm, and was short of breath. He said that when he went to the medical unit, the staff told him to drink more water and sent him back. But they don't supply bottled water in a facility where the water quality is known to be bad.

I have no way of knowing how hot it is in the summer months. The one thermostat I've seen is in the UNICOR factory, where there is air conditioning for the safety of the machines. But I know it's too hot in my prison when I wake up soaked in sweat when the air-conditioning unit breaks in the living areas.

I've been in FCI Butner for nearly five years, and I have never seen my facility give us anything for a heat wave. Last spring, staff searched people's cells, and wound up taking many people's fans that they had purchased from the commissary. We can't buy new ones because they no longer sell them.

The commissary sells water bottles for 50 cents, antifungal cream for $2.40, sunscreen for $4.80 and hats for $9.10. Many jobs here pay under 50 cents an hour, so buying supplies is expensive for us.

Citing privacy reasons, a representative of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) Office of Public Affairs would not comment on the medical condition or treatment of Green's cellmate. Regarding the water quality, the BOP stated that FCI Butner I and the larger FCC Butner complex receive water from the same source as the local community and that it "meets community standards." They also stated that "all housing units at FCI Butner I have functional HVAC air conditioners and ice machines" and that HVAC failures during inclement weather are promptly resolved. The BOP said it could not comment on the cell searches and fan confiscations for security reasons.

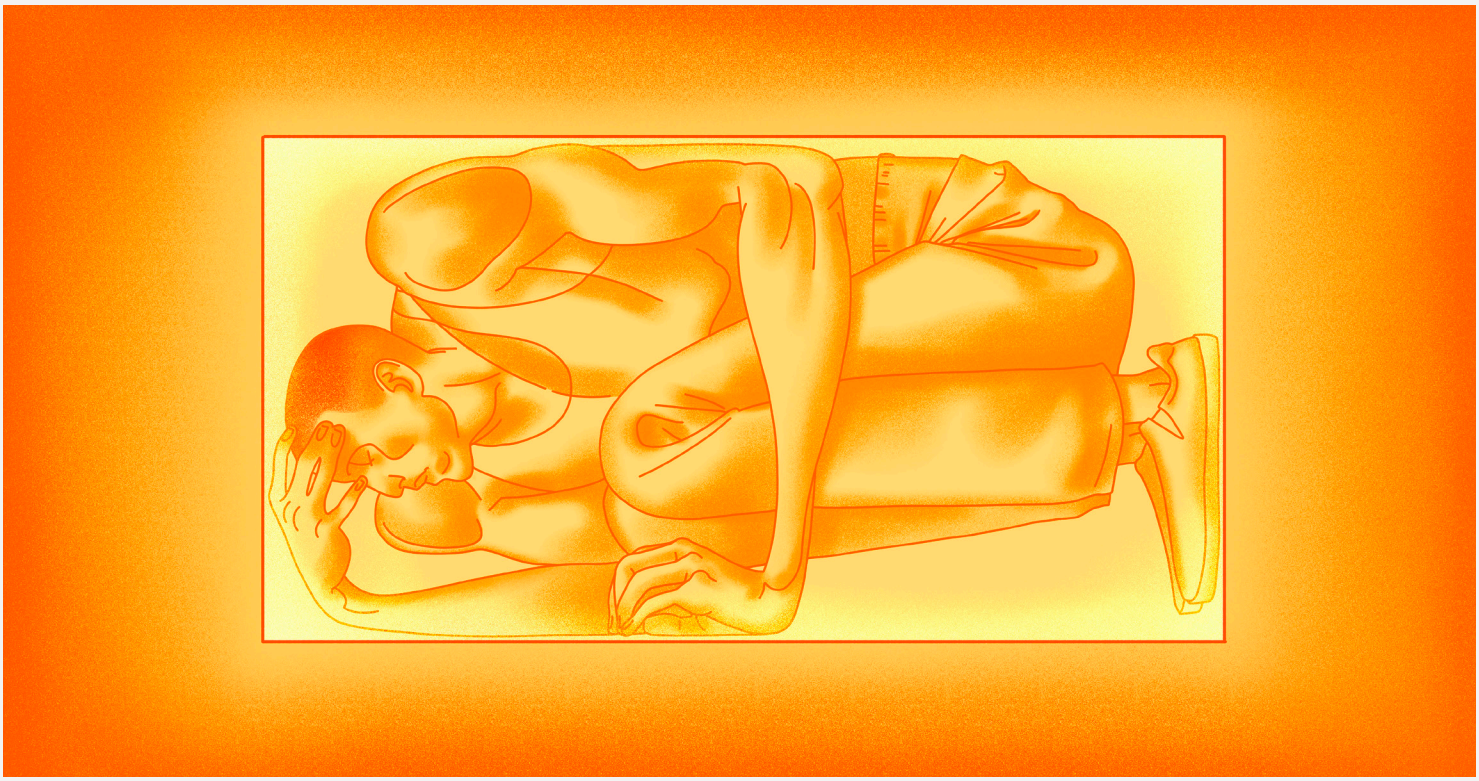
James Mancuso, 40, Idaho

James Mancuso is a writer and poet. He was the editor in chief of The High Seas of Saguaro, a prison newsletter published at the Saguaro Correctional Center in Arizona. He is currently serving time at Idaho State Correctional Institution.

When I was incarcerated in a private prison in Arizona back in 2023, the temperature reached 118 degrees one summer. I remember because the prison canceled recreation, but they made everyone stand in an outdoor line under a canopy for medication handouts for about 45 minutes. It felt like we were in an oven. Even the breeze was hot.

In my current prison, older and sick people can have in-house meals so they don't have to walk across the breezeways that are open to the sun and sky. People in some units have to walk a quarter mile to cross the compound.

During a heatwave we still have to wear our prison uniform: blue jeans and a blue button-up short- or long-sleeved shirt. Thankfully, the prison allows us to wear our commissary-purchased shorts and T-shirts to pick up our meals from the kitchen or go to recreation. But policy requires that we be dressed in our facility uniform for most other activities, including classes and work.



AVALON NUOVO FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

This year, the prison started giving us Gatorade when it gets hot. It can get up to 111 degrees here in Kuna, Idaho. I know because I saw the temperature on the news.

The manager of public affairs for CoreCivic, which operates the Arizona prison referenced, stated that the facility allows "heat-sensitive individuals" to receive their medications in air-conditioned medical unit waiting rooms.

Derek LeCompte, 44, New Jersey

Derek LeCompte has been incarcerated since 1999. An aspiring writer, poet and journalist, LeCompte is in his senior year at Rutgers University through NJ-STEP, pursuing a degree in Justice Studies. He is currently housed at South Woods State Prison.

Most of the time we never know how hot it is in our prison, but there are small digital thermometers in certain areas. Regularly, prison staff will go to units and measure the temps, but they don't go into the cells, and results aren't posted for us to see.

During very hot periods, the prison administration will send out memos about taking care in the heat. The prison offers a green "cooling towel," which you wet with cold water and place on your head or the back of your neck. The towels stay cool for an extended period of time. But we have to buy that from the commissary. Because the commissary always has an issue with keeping high-demand things in stock it can take up to two weeks from order to delivery.

During the summer months, the prison rents what are called "chillers," which are basically mobile, industrial air-conditioning units that look like a semi-trailer and run on diesel fuel. These chillers are hooked up to the prison's ventilation system and, in theory, pump cool air into the prison. But the system often doesn't cool down the prison much or frequently breaks down. The actual air-conditioning system has been broken for over 10 years and the administration has yet to fix it.

Most hot days, we are practically basting and cooking in our cells as if we're in a brick oven. All the air is hot and recycled through our ventilation system. We can't even open the windows when it gets cooler at night.

A spokesperson for the New Jersey Department of Corrections stated that there have been "occasions when one of the two chillers have required maintenance, but never both at once." He said that when one chiller breaks down, the other maintains "a comfortable temperature" and "the vendor is contacted to fix the equipment." He also added that the department is "aware of the issues with the current chillers at [the prison] and [has] been seeking funding to replace both systems."

Amy McBride, 61, Pennsylvania

Amy McBride is a writer serving time in the State Correctional Institution at Muncy.

In my previous prison, Maryland Correctional Institution for Women, it would get so hot during the summer that walls would sweat and reek of 85-year-old prison funk. The sweat would make all your belongings smell. It didn't matter the number of showers you took — you still stunk.

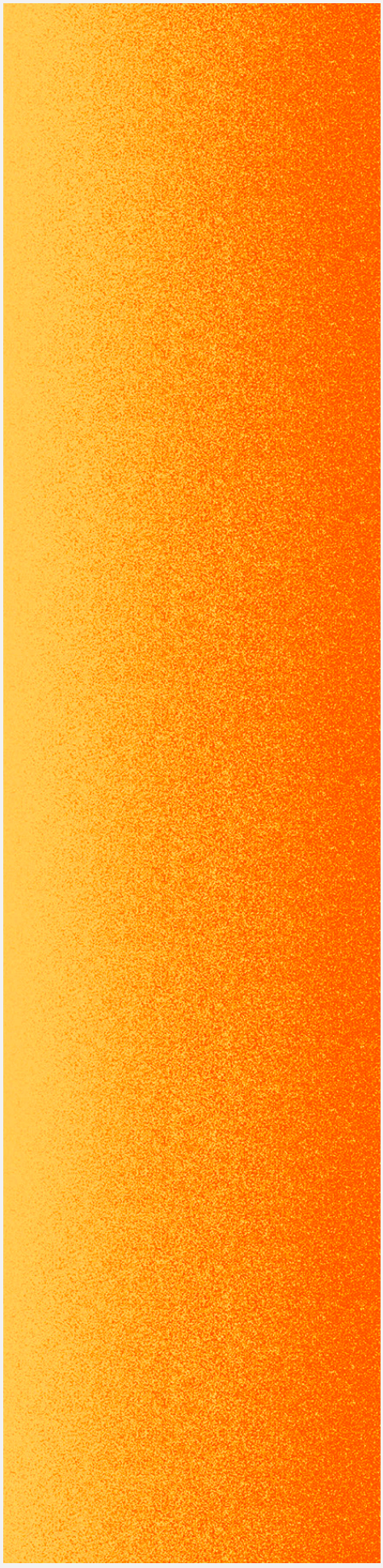
The humidity of the mid-Atlantic summer also made everything wet. I would think about my dad a lot during those hot summer days because, as a Vietnam vet, he had PTSD, and heat like that triggered him.

People were housed in cells that were so small you could touch the opposite walls at once in that prison. We did our best to keep the sun out — covering the windows with a robe — until a guard forced us to take it down. The heat was unbearable. I remember guards would hand out ice, but oftentimes it was melted by the time you got some.

Compared to my old prison in Maryland, SCI Muncy is like a Club Med resort. Now, on extremely hot days the air conditioning in my unit is so cold I have to wear thermals, a T-shirt, a sweatshirt, pants and my winter headband over my ears. To keep my hands warm, I blow on my fingers or wear my garden gloves.

On hot Sundays, I can't wear my hearing aids during church service because the fans sound like plane engines. I can't hear the sermon and all I can do is pray.

The Maryland Department of Corrections said it takes "multiple steps to mitigate the heat and ensure the health and well-being of both incarcerated individuals and staff." The department denied that condensation forms on cell walls during the summer months and could not confirm the dimensions of prisoners' cells.



What Will Trump's Executive Order on Private Prisons Really Do?

The order reverses former President Joe Biden's ban on private prison contracts with the Justice Department. Private immigrant detention never stopped and is expected to grow.

By SHANNON HEFFERNAN

On the first day of his second presidency, Trump reversed Biden's executive order on private prisons.

Biden's order had barred contracts between the Department of Justice and private detention centers. When Biden issued the order, in 2021, only about 14,000 federal prisoners were in private facilities, a fraction of the nearly 152,000 federal prisoners, according to the Associated Press.

The Bureau of Prisons offered scant information about Trump's order, or whether it would pursue new contracts. In a written statement, officials wrote that the bureau "supports and will comply with all executive orders issued by the President of the United States. Beyond this, we have no further information to provide."

Lauren-Brooke Eisen, senior director of the Justice Program at progressive think tank Brennan Center for Justice, said because many federal facilities are facing deteriorating infrastructure and insufficient funds to fix buildings, a small portion of the population may be moved to private facilities.

Specific groups may be more likely to be kept in private detention than others.

"Traditionally the population that was held in custody by for-profit firms tended to be those convicted of federal crimes who are undocumented," said Eisen, author of a book about private prisons and mass incarceration. She said that is because undocumented prisoners, many of whom will be deported after their incarceration, don't get as much programming or services.

People being detained by the U.S. Marshals Service before their trials may also be more likely to be held in private facilities, because they need to be near courthouses where there may not be federal jails.

Detained men walk to a recreation area at a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Processing Center run by private prison company The Geo Group, in Tacoma, Wash., in 2019. TED S. WARREN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Trump's nominee for attorney general, Pam Bondi, lobbied in 2019 for a major private prison company, the Geo Group, among other clients. In a recent earnings call, the Geo Group indicated it was already anticipating a potential increase in government business.

Private prison stocks have soared since Trump won the election. But Bureau of Prison contracts are unlikely to be the biggest driver of profits for these companies. According to the Brennan Center, prison companies' most significant contracts are with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. For example, in 2023, 43% of Geo Group's revenue came from ICE. Considering Trump's promise to expand immigrant deportation and detention, that is a likely area to see growth.

Neither Biden's order nor Trump's reversal of that order affected existing or future ICE contracts.

6.3.2025

Judge Stops Federal Prisons From Enforcing Trump's Trans Care Ban, for Now

The district judge ordered the prison system to continue providing hormone therapy to transgender people as needed, while a lawsuit proceeds.

By BETH SCHWARTZAPFEL

Federal officials cannot withhold gender-affirming care — for now — from people incarcerated in the Bureau of Prisons system, a federal judge ruled on June 3.

Under an executive order that President Donald Trump signed in January, transgender federal prisoners lost the right to receive hormone therapy and other accommodations, such as access to undergarments and gender-specific commissary items. The new order, by Senior Judge Royce Lamberth of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, applies temporarily while attorneys for the American Civil Liberties Union and the Transgender Law Center pursue a lawsuit against the Trump administration challenging the presidential order.

In his opinion, Lamberth wrote that the rules the federal Bureau of Prisons laid out in response to Trump's executive order seemed "arbitrary and capricious" and that they likely violated the law requiring federal agencies to carefully weigh and explain new policies. "And nothing in the thin record before the Court suggests that either the BOP or the President consciously took stock of — much less studied — the potentially debilitating effects that the new policies could have on transgender inmates," Lamberth wrote.

The judge ordered the prison system to continue providing hormone therapy to transgender people as needed, and to restore access to social accommodations such as hair removal, chest binders and undergarments. "The BOP may not arbitrarily deprive inmates of medication or other lifestyle accommodations that its own medical staff have deemed to be medically appropriate," he wrote.

The ACLU and the Transgender Law Center filed the suit on behalf of one trans woman and two trans men, but the judge made it a class action representing any person incarcerated in federal prison who now needs, or who may in the future need, access to gender-affirming care. More than 600 people have been prescribed gender-affirming hormone therapy by prison doctors, according to documents in the case.

Corene Kendrick, an attorney with the ACLU, said that after Lamberth's orders, "The court showed that trans people, like everyone else, have constitutional rights, even when they are incarcerated."

Donald Murphy, a spokesperson for the Bureau of Prisons, declined to comment on the pending litigation. In court filings, lawyers for the bureau argued that the federal prison system "has not categorically banned the provision of hormone medication to inmates with gender dysphoria," and that there are no grounds for the lawsuit because the named plaintiffs are still receiving their medicines. But the judge rejected that argument, saying

Senior Judge Royce Lamberth of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, pictured in 2008, ruled that federal officials cannot withhold gender-affirming care from people incarcerated in federal prisons while a lawsuit proceeds. CHARLES DHARAPAK/ASSOCIATED PRESS

that the plaintiffs were told that they may lose their access to hormones in the future, and that he was not reassured that others would not as well. "It suffices to say that all three plaintiffs' access to hormone therapy is, as best the Court can tell, tenuous."

Lamberth was nominated to the bench by President Ronald Reagan in 1987 and is also overseeing several other cases challenging the bureau's recent attempts, in response to Trump's executive order, to move transgender women from women's prisons to men's facilities.

Trump signed his order shortly after his inauguration in January, but for more than a month afterward, bureau officials in Washington, D.C., issued no formal guidance about how to implement it. More than 2,000 people incarcerated in federal facilities have self-identified to prison psychology services as transgender. As a result of the delay in guidance, there was chaos and confusion across the system, as wardens and other officials confiscated items of clothing, then returned them, then confiscated them again.

In late February, bureau officials identified several long-standing accommodations for trans people that would no longer be provided. A Feb. 21 memo said, "Staff must refer to individuals by their legal name or pronouns corresponding to their biological sex." Trans people could no longer have access to gender-affirming clothing and underwear. All support groups and programs for trans people "must also halt." Across the country, people reported having bras and other undergarments confiscated in cell searches. Other accommodations, like pat-down searches of trans women by female correctional officers, were no longer available.

When it came to gender-affirming medications, the bureau's Health Services Division sent prison administrators a memo on Feb. 28 that reiterated the language of the executive order barring medical procedures and medications. But the memo did not explain what to do about the hundreds of people already on hormones, or how to proceed when prison psychologists think hormone treatment or surgery is needed.

On June 3, the judge ordered the bureau to stop implementing both of those memos, and ordered Attorney General Pam Bondi and other federal officials to stop enforcing the executive order when it comes to gender-affirming care and social accommodations in federal prisons.

The judge's ruling applies temporarily while the lawsuit makes its way through the courts in the coming months. |||

SOPHIA DENG FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

5.9.2025

When New Jersey Switches Prison Tablet Companies, I'll Lose 10 Years of Family Memories

Writer Shakeil Price uses his JPay tablet as a hard drive for his photos and videos. He'll soon have to mail it home or have it destroyed.

By SHAKEIL PRICE
Additional reporting by AKIBA SOLOMON

Over the past decade, dozens of states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons have contracted with private companies to provide their incarcerated populations with electronic tablets. These secure devices enable people in jails and prisons to exchange email-like messages with their loved ones, receive money, and download entertainment and educational materials. Some allow video visits.

While tablets can keep imprisoned people more connected to the outside, they come at a cost. Prices and services vary according to the deals made by each corrections system, but users tend to pay a fee for every message, download and deposit. With the average prison wage maxing out at 52 cents per hour, families often absorb the cost of staying in touch.

The two companies that dominate the prison telephone business also command the tablet market — ViaPath Technologies, rebranded from GTL, and Securus, which acquired JPay in 2015. Years of activism by incarcerated people, their families and advocates resulted in the Federal Communications Commission capping the cost of prison phone and video calls last year. But tablet-based products remain largely unregulated.

Because prison telecom vendors tend to bundle their services, corrections systems often contract with a single provider, regardless of quality. And dozens of states make "commissions" from user fees. Within this context, incarcerated people become the unwilling consumers of a billion-dollar industry. Shakeil Price, one such user at New Jersey State Prison, explores another aspect of package deals: What happens when a state switches providers?

Imagine if you were forced to change

your cell phone provider, and the new company said you wouldn't be able to keep the content you've gathered over the last 10 years. How would you feel? As someone facing a similar scenario, I would say: distraught.

This situation began last March when the New Jersey Department of Corrections announced that, after a decade, it was changing its "inmate communications provider" from JPay to ViaPath. The electronic memo it sent was vague and failed to mention exactly how the transition would take place.

We could safely assume that ViaPath would replace our tablets. We also figured the company would remove our current kiosks, the shared computers we sync up with our tablets to send messages and download movies, music and games.

What we didn't know was how much ViaPath would charge us or what would happen to everything on our JPay tablets, which essentially function as hard drives. The lack of details heightened anxiety among the population at New Jersey State Prison because we were unsure of how the future would unfold.

Our wing representatives gathered our questions and concerns and took them to the administration. What they brought back was mostly, "They're gonna get back to us on that."

Eventually we learned that the ViaPath tablets will be facility-owned "loaners" that we'll receive free of charge. But that "free" hardware can't possibly cover the personal and financial losses we'll sustain when we either send our JPay tablets home or give them to the prison system for disposal.

My little 7-inch JP6 tablet with its meager 32 gigabytes of memory may not mean much to the state, but it holds a decade's worth of sentimental e-messages, pictures and video messages from my family and friends. By changing vendors, I will lose access to photographs from my son's high school graduation and videos of my grandchild saying his first word, taking his first step and riding his first bike. These items are priceless to me; a dollar amount can't measure their worth.

I can calculate how much I've spent on JPay products. Let's start with the cost of exchanging e-messages. Like other prison tech companies, JPay sells digital "stamps." In New Jersey, they cost 35 cents apiece and only come in packages of five, 10 or 20.

Each e-stamp covers a message with 20,000 characters or less. Anything over that limit will cost you or your loved one another stamp. If you attach a digital image or greeting card to your message, that will take additional stamps. Clearly this adds up.

Snail mail was once a viable alternative, but now it takes about three weeks to reach us. In the name of security, our loved ones must mail their correspondence — letters, photos, drawings, postcards and greeting cards — to a processing center in Las Vegas run by a private company called Pigeonly Corrections. Pigeonly scans the mail for illegal substances and red-flag words and sends copies of mail marked safe to each prison for distribution by staff. This inconvenience all but guarantees that our loved ones will use digital messages.

Next, consider how much I've spent on hardware. Since 2015, my tablets have broken or malfunctioned on three separate occasions. These devices cost $75 apiece, so I've spent a total of $225 on tablets that will soon be obsolete.

Then there's the small fortune I've spent on downloads. Over the decade that I've had a JPay tablet, I have downloaded over 3,000 songs at $1.99 apiece. I've spent an estimated value of $6,000 on music because it's my lifeline. I am a hip-hop enthusiast with a background as a rap artist, and I listen to everything from Rakim to Wu-Tang Clan to Jay Electronica.

I am a gamer, too. I've downloaded 25 games at $3.99 to $8.99, plus tax. I play my Chess, Sudoku and NBA Jams for hours at a time, often while I'm listening to my music.

JPay sells its downloads for a one-time fee. Once you buy the license to a song or game, you can use it whenever you want to. Your purchases are stored in the cloud, and you can even remove items from your tablet to make space, then download them again at no additional cost.

ViaPath, on the other hand, operates a streaming service that charges fees for usage on top of downloads. At the time of this writing, even after more than a year, I still don't know the cost of streaming or how often I will have to pay for it.

Even scarier is the prospect of paying per minute to send e-messages and use media you've already purchased. That's what they do in Tennessee, according to a March 2025 article in Prison Legal News. In that state, prisoners must pay 3 to 5 cents a minute to watch their movies, play their games — and type their messages.

This vendor change could put a strain on my already depleted finances. I only get paid $1 per hour as a teacher's assistant, and my workdays are five hours. Truth be told, this $5 job is considered one of the best in the prison.

Not everyone is fazed by the switch. Clarence Artis, a man who stays in a cell a few feet away from me, said he's looking forward to using the video visit option on his ViaPath tablet. (On JPay, we have to use a public kiosk for video visits.) "Sometimes you have to give up something to get something," he told me. "If I gotta give up these throwback tablets with everything on 'em, oh well. I wanna see my girl's face when I talk to her."

I totally understand that not everybody in prison is faced with the same circumstances. If I'd only purchased one tablet and 100 songs, it wouldn't be that big of an issue for me to change vendors. Also, if I was going to be released from prison in a few months or years, my position would be different. I wouldn't be bothered by the vendor change because I'd be home, in the physical presence of my loved ones, enjoying their smiles and laughter up close.

Unfortunately, that's not the case for me. I am serving a life sentence, and I'm not eligible for parole until 2077. Most of the brothers here at New Jersey State Prison are long-haulers. They don't tend to send people here with less than a 30-year sentence. To part from such personal belongings is like losing a part of your existence.

For a solution, I've suggested that we keep the old tablets that we bought in our possession. That's what Idaho is planning to do when it switches from JPay to ViaPath this month. According to a February update on the state's corrections department website, "residents" will be able to hold on to their hardware and use what they downloaded "until the tablet stops working." Prisoners will also have the option of mailing the tablet back to JPay so that the company can put their downloads on a USB, unlock the tablet and send both to a home address. Their families and friends will be able to use the unlocked tablet.

I believe it's also technologically possible to transfer material to a new vendor's tablet. When Ohio switched from JPay to ViaPath tablets in 2023, it reportedly allowed prisoners to transfer all content except for games. That June,

the corrections department's website proudly pronounced it "the first time in history that a correctional agency has switched communication vendors without the incarcerated population experiencing a loss of meaningful media files, such as messages, music, and photos." I'm not sure how well the implementation actually went, but I hope my state at least tries to negotiate this kind of deal.

New Jersey started using ViaPath's slightly cheaper financial services in late March, and I've seen workers installing new routers in my facility. But the gradual rollout and unanswered questions have made this vendor switch frustrating and stressful.

Many of us come from poor communities. We have invested so much — emotionally and financially — into these companies, and when we take losses, it hits differently. These communication vendors exploit the fact that, as prisoners, we are desperate for entertainment and ways to stay united with our families through these isolated times. With this desperation ever-present amongst a captive market, companies like JPay and ViaPath have forged a monopoly at our expense. |||

Shakeil Price is a poet and a published author. His book, "P.E.A.C.E. in Prison," is available on Amazon. Price has also published articles as a freelance journalist for Prison Writers and as a contributing writer for the Prison Journalism Project. As of today, he remains incarcerated at New Jersey State Prison as he fights to overturn his murder conviction.

New Jersey Department of Corrections Director of Public Information Christopher Greeder stated that "the [d]epartment is currently reviewing additional services to be provided by ViaPath and will communicate any updates or enhancements to the incarcerated population when they become available."

He added that "kiosks will be eliminated and replaced with tablets. If an incarcerated person refuses a tablet, they will be offered paper forms to complete any tasks needed."

Regarding Pigeonly's mail delivery times, he stated that it takes "typically less than two weeks," but varies depending on the speed of the U.S. Postal Service.

5.25.2025

George Floyd, 5 Years Later

On this anniversary of Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, here are six pieces about why it happened — and what followed.

By DAPHNE DURET

In the Pulitzer-prize winning biography "His Name Is George Floyd," his sister remembers how, as a toddler, Floyd would jump into his mother's lap and pepper her cheeks with kisses.

He was just as affectionate as a grown man, family and friends said, describing the Black, 6-foot-6 security guard and truck driver as the type to say "I love you" just because he felt like it.

On May 25, 2020 — his face pressed down on a Minneapolis sidewalk with a White police officer's knee on his neck — the 46-year-old father of five said goodbye in death as he did in life.

"Tell my kids I love them," Floyd said, according to a bystander's cell phone video of the killing. Floyd later called out to his late mother before gasping, "I can't breathe."

Chauvin, who was fired from the Minneapolis Police Department and is now serving a 20-year prison sentence for the murder, ignored the pleas of more than a dozen bystanders to release Floyd. He also rebuffed a colleague who asked if they should at least roll Floyd on his side.

While many Americans had seen videos of police killing Black men such as Eric Garner and Alton Sterling, footage of Floyd's murder was particularly visceral. Around the world, protestors called the killing a modern-day lynching, broadcast to an audience stuck at home during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Despite the outcry and countless headlines about a great American "racial reckoning," many police agencies and companies have backed away from the promises they made that summer.

Over these five years, The Marshall Project has covered it all — from how Minneapolis police failed to adopt crucial reforms before Floyd's murder to how departments around the country are now abandoning commitments they made to change in 2020. Here is a selection of those stories.

What Are Cops Really Thinking When Routine Arrests Turn Violent?

Using 90,000 complaints against Chicago police over a span of 13 years, along with data from several other large cities and interviews with current and former officers, reporters Simone Weichselbaum, Jamiles Lartey and Humera Lodhi provided insight into why some cops resort to excessive violence during routine encounters.

"If you are gonna use force, you have to use a lot of force, or you are going to die," Paul Hubel, a Chicago police veteran turned private investigator, said of how many police are trained. "You can't be a namby pamby.

As George Floyd Died, Officer Wondered About "Excited Delirium"

Less than two weeks after Floyd's murder, reporter Alysia Santo explored "excited delirium," a controversial diagnosis often tied to deaths in law enforcement custody.

Thomas Lane, a Minneapolis officer on the scene, invoked the syndrome when he asked Chauvin if they should roll Floyd onto his side. "I am worried about excited delirium or whatever," he said, according to authorities.

The article, produced in partnership with Slate, detailed how people with excited delirium are said to be aggressive and incoherent, and to have "superhuman strength," often after taking stimulant drugs such as cocaine or methamphetamine. Police groups and some experts say it's a real condition, requiring immediate action and medical treatment. But critics, including some medical experts, have attacked it as junk science, deployed to justify excessive police force.

"That Could Have Been Me": The People Derek Chauvin Choked Before George Floyd

Three years before Floyd's death, Zoya Code found herself handcuffed, facedown on the ground, with Chauvin's knee on her. "He just stayed on my neck," she told The Marshall Project in a story produced in partnership with The New York Times.

Code and two other people gave their first-ever interviews about their violent encounters with Chauvin to reporters Abbie VanSickle and Lartey. A fourth person, a Minneapolis grandfather, said he watched the officer choke a young man in March 2019, providing details to reporters that matched a police report in the case.

"Looking back on Mr. Floyd, that could have been me," one man said as he recalled how Chauvin wrapped his arms around his neck during a 2016 arrest.

Before George Floyd's Death, Minneapolis Police Failed to Adopt Reforms, Remove Bad Officers

Floyd was murdered in a city many had hoped would be a beacon for progressive policing. But, as Lartey and Weichselbaum reported, police failed to adopt important reforms.

The Minneapolis Police Department had revised its use-of-force policy, which it later used to fire Chauvin and others implicated in Floyd's death. But advocates said police officials never followed through on promises to update their policies on neck restraints or to follow a federal recommendation to fix an inadequate process for identifying problematic officers.

"They never got back to the public, it is frustrating," said Chuck Turchick, a police accountability advocate who was on the committee formed to help the city roll out federal reforms. "It was a joke."

The Minneapolis Cop Who Beat Him Pleaded Guilty. He Still Fears the Department Won't Change.

Over several interviews with Lartey, Jaleel Stallings chronicled his journey through the criminal justice system after Minneapolis police beat and arrested him during protests that followed Floyd's murder.

In the story, produced in partnership with The Washington Post, Stallings described how it felt to see a social media account for Trump's 2020 presidential campaign describe him as a "would-be-cop-killer."

"You took my innocence away," Stallings said of the social media post. "You put it so that every new person that I meet, I now have to fight past the stereotype of them thinking I'm the bad guy."

Stallings also outlined what happened when he decided to reject a prosecutor's offer of a plea deal and take the criminal case to trial, where he made the risky move to testify in his own defense.

Five Years After George Floyd's Murder, Police Reforms Are Being Rolled Back

In Minnesota and a few other places across the country, several recent events have signaled a shift away from reforms promised in the aftermath of Floyd's murder. And police accountability initiatives, like oversight boards, are becoming either rudderless or stripped of what little investigatory power some of them possessed. ▮

A woman leaves flowers at the site where police murdered George Floyd on May 25, 2020, while in police custody, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. STEPHEN MATUREN/GETTY IMAGES

William Marshall speaks during a West Virginia legislative meeting in December 2023. President Donald Trump is appointing Marshall to head the Federal Bureau of Prisons. WILL PRICE/WEST VIRGINIA LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY

4.12.2025

Who Is Billy Marshall? What to Know About Trump's New Bureau of Prisons Director

West Virginia's top corrections official led a troubled state agency, and will now head a federal bureaucracy plagued with problems of its own.

By BETH SCHWARTZAPFEL, KERI BLAKINGER and SHANNON HEFFERNAN

This article was published in partnership with the Los Angeles Times.

In early June, Trump appointed Joshua J. Smith as deputy director of the Bureau of Prisons. Smith was pardoned by Trump during his first term, and is the first formerly incarcerated person to hold this role.

William "Billy" Marshall, the relatively unknown head of the West Virginia corrections department, has been selected to lead the troubled federal Bureau of Prisons, a Trump administration choice that took advocates for federal prison staff and incarcerated people aback.

Trump made the announcement Thursday night on his Truth Social platform.

"Billy is a Strong Advocate for LAW AND ORDER," Trump wrote. "He understands the struggles of our prisons better than anyone, and will help fix our broken Criminal Justice System."

Marshall inherits an agency that has been understaffed and plagued by scandal for years. The bureau has recently faced congressional scrutiny, and its union leaders are unhappy about the president's recent order to end collective bargaining for federal workers.

In a written statement to The Marshall Project and the Los Angeles Times, Marshall thanked Trump for "this tremendous opportunity."

"It's been an honor and a privilege to serve the state of West Virginia," he said, adding that he's "excited to take that West Virginia pride to the next level."

After decades in law enforcement, Marshall took the helm in January 2023 of the West Virginia Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation, which includes all of the state's prisons, jails and juvenile lockups. Prior to that, he was assistant commissioner for the division and the head of the juvenile corrections division. He also spent 25 years in the state police and worked as a criminal investigation director for what is now called the West Virginia Department of Homeland Security.

It's unclear whether that experience will translate well to a system as large as the federal Bureau of Prisons. The West Virginia corrections department incarcerates just about 10,000 people on a typical

day, while the federal system houses more than 155,000.

U.S. Sen. Jim Justice — who, as West Virginia's governor, appointed Marshall to lead the state's prison system — praised Marshall's selection in a Facebook post.

"I was proud to put Billy in charge of our Department of Corrections in West Virginia and we were able to turn it around after decades of decay. I have full confidence in him & know he will do a great job," Justice wrote.

West Virginia's prisons and jails have a fraught history. When Marshall took over, the state's prisons were in the midst of a staffing crisis so severe that the governor had declared a state of emergency and deployed the National Guard to act as correctional officers.

Marshall worked with the legislature on a package to increase starting salaries, and to raise pay and offer one-time bonuses for current correctional officers.

The state's regional jails have come under scrutiny for squalid conditions, excessive use of force and record numbers of deaths. They were the target of several civil rights suits, including one filed in 2022 that alleged the jail had broken toilets infested with maggots, 70 people sharing a single shower, and people being forced to sleep on "cold, wet floors in the winter without heat."

In response to such allegations, Marshall said that "inmates made up claims of inhumane treatment and told relatives to spread them," a local television news station reported at the time.

A judge sanctioned state corrections officials for intentionally destroying evidence in that suit, writing that he "will not turn a blind eye to the Defendants' blatant arrogance and flippant response to their legal obligations." Marshall himself did not destroy evidence, the judge found, but as head of the agency, "he still bears responsibility for any and all continuing video that is lost." Two agency staffers were later fired as a result.

Lydia Milnes, an attorney who has sued West Virginia's corrections department several times, expressed worries about Marshall's appointment.

"I'm concerned that he comes from a past where the culture is to use force to gain control as opposed to considering less violent alternatives," she said. "He has continued to foster a culture of using excessive force."

A separate suit, which the corrections department settled in 2022, alleged widespread failures of the jails' medical and mental health care. In April, attorneys for people locked up in the jails accused Marshall and other state officials of dragging their feet on implementing the reforms they had agreed on, and withholding critical information.

Much like its smaller counterpart in West Virginia, the Bureau of Prisons has dealt with severe problems, including staffing shortages, preventable deaths and overuse of solitary confinement in recent years.

An investigation by The Marshall Project in 2022 disclosed pervasive violence and abuse at a high-security unit in the Thomson federal penitentiary in Illinois. After congressional inquiries and another death at the unit, the bureau closed it in 2023.

Another facility, FCI Dublin in California, was dubbed the "rape club" because of numerous sexual abuse scandals. The facility, roughly 20 miles east of Oakland, shut down last year after more than a half-dozen correctional officers and the former warden were convicted of sexually abusing women incarcerated there.

The bureau also faces massive infrastructure challenges. A report from the Justice Department's Office of the Inspector General found needed maintenance at every bureau facility, including leaky roofs and buildings that were in such poor shape that the bureau determined they needed to be partially or fully closed. As of early 2024, the prison system estimated major repairs would cost $3 billion.

The bureau has also struggled to hire staff, and labor leaders say that problem is likely to get worse because of Trump's executive order ending collective bargaining for agency employees. That has increased discontent among staff members, who were already upset about cuts to recruitment and retention bonuses that had bolstered officer pay at some of the agency's hardest-to-staff facilities.

Adding to the pressure, as of February, the Bureau of Prisons was holding hundreds of immigrant detainees as part of Trump's mass deportation efforts, a move that agency observers fear will exacerbate the prison system's challenges.

The agency has been largely rudderless since Trump fired the prior director, Colette Peters, in January. Shortly after, at least six top bureau officials resigned, including then-acting director Bill Lothrop.

Brandy Moore White, president of the national union for federal prison workers, said she's "cautiously optimistic" about Marshall's appointment, though she wasn't familiar with him. "Somebody leading the ship is better than everybody pointing fingers," she said.

To some federal prison workers, news of Marshall's appointment came as a shock, and they describe it as confirmation that the White House appears to have little interest in working with federal employees.

"We were beyond surprised and a little bit disappointed that the announcement came through a social media post," said John Kostelnik, the California-based Western regional vice president for the correctional workers union. "Our agency officials, the high-ups — they had no clue."

Kostelnik said he and other union leaders have learned few details about Marshall, beyond the basics of his resume. Still, Kostelnik said he's optimistic it will be a fruitful relationship, and that the union is ready to "work hand-in-hand" with the new director.

Josh Lepird, the union's South Central regional vice president, echoed that hope, but added a hint of caution: "I'm hopeful he's here to work with us, but I don't know," he said. "With the current administration's actions, it could be that he's here to privatize us."

On April 11, typically outspoken advocacy organizations offered measured responses to Marshall's appointment. Shanna Rifkin, deputy general counsel of FAMM — a nonprofit that works to improve the justice system and prison conditions — said Marshall's lack of federal experience didn't necessarily pose a problem and that the organization looked forward to working with him.

"I think it's good he has experience running a prison system and hope that he'll be open to learning about the federal system from people in the advocacy community and impacted populations and their loved ones," Rifkin said.

David Fathi, director of the ACLU's National Prison Project, called the federal prison system a "deeply troubled agency in urgent need of reform," and said he hoped the new director would tackle the "many systemic problems that have been identified by courts, the Inspector General, and Bureau staff." |||

The Big Business of Bad Prison Food

3.8.2025

A market analysis said the food service industry in U.S. prisons and jails is worth billions — and is forecast to grow.

By BETH SCHWARTZAPFEL

Feeding incarcerated people has become big business as states and counties outsource their food service operations. The food behemoth Aramark (which also services colleges, hospitals and sports stadiums) and smaller corporations like Summit Correctional Services and Trinity Services Group have inked contracts in the last decade worth hundreds of millions of dollars in prisons and jails across the country. Privatization of prison food isn't a new phenomenon, but it's growing substantially. According to one market analysis, the industry was worth almost $3.2 billion in 2022 in the United States alone, and is forecast to keep growing.

The food in prison is, as a rule, bad. You don't need an investigative journalist to tell you that. Generally privatization is touted by the companies themselves and the public officials who hire them as a way to improve quality, save money or both. But a closer look at conditions in states that privatized versus those that haven't reveals many of the same widespread problems.

It's not just that meals are bland and unappetizing — though they often are. Cellphone images smuggled out of jails and prisons across the country reveal food that hardly looks edible, let alone nutritious. A Marshall Project headline describing the effect of the pandemic on prison meals read, "Ewwwww, What Is That?" In lawsuits and news reports, kitchen workers at prisons in Arizona, Oregon and elsewhere reported seeing boxes of food that were served to prisoners marked, "Not for human consumption."

Meals at Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman, Mississippi, in 2020, according to attorney Marcy Croft.

At a jail in Cleveland, staff warned administrators in 2023 that the meals served by Trinity were so disgusting that they put staff in danger, Cleveland.com reported. "I am scared for my life, and the life of our officers who are asked to hand out these horrible meals," one staffer wrote his supervisors. "My prayer is that myself or any of our officers are not assaulted because of these meals."

There's also not enough food. A 2020 study by the criminal justice reform advocacy group Impact Justice found that 94% of incarcerated people surveyed said they did not receive enough food to feel full. More than 60% said they rarely or never had access to fresh vegetables. With the average wage paid to incarcerated workers maxing out at well under a dollar an hour and commissary prices rising, the food served in the chow hall is often people's only sustenance. Meager portions have left desperate people eating toothpaste and toilet paper, as my colleague Alysia Santo reported. Prison officials say hunger has led to unrest and a riot.

"Our menu is enough to keep us alive, I suppose, but never enough to supply and satisfy the appetites of grown men," David DeLena, incarcerated at a state prison in California, told me in 2022. Most states spend less than $3 per person per day on prison food — and some as little as $1.02, according to the analysis by Impact Justice. Even Maine, widely seen as a model for providing good-quality food in its prisons, only spends $4.05 per person, per day. By contrast, the Food and Drug Administration's "thrifty" plan estimates that feeding an adult man "a nutritious, practical, cost-effective diet" costs about $10 per day.

In the last decade, several states quickly jettisoned private contracts after lawsuits revealed unsanitary and, frankly, disgusting conditions. In 2021, Mississippi canceled a contract with Aramark after a federal lawsuit described "spoiled, rotten, molded or uncooked" food, contaminated with rat, bird or insect feces. In 2015, Michigan switched from Aramark to Trinity for similar reasons, only to have many of the same problems: maggots, mold and dirt in food, and bouts of food poisoning. Michigan eventually resumed managing its own food service when its three-year, nearly $159-million contract with Trinity ended in 2018.

"They aren't asking for five-star meals," Marcy Croft, the attorney on the Mississippi lawsuit, told CBS News. "They're just asking for food that's edible and that can keep them alive — it's a very basic request."

Part of the problem, critics say, is a conflict of interest: All three of the major private food providers also have a stake in the booming prison commissary business, where incarcerated people can buy staples like ramen, tuna and coffee, as well as chips, cookies and other snacks. In 2022, Aramark bought the commissary company Union Supply Group. Summit Correctional Services includes both food services and a commissary arm. Trinity is owned by the same private equity firm as Keefe, one of the dominant commissary companies. A Detroit Free Press columnist asked whether the Trinity-Keefe merger was "a motive to serve yucky meals?"

Poor food served in the chow hall drives hungry prisoners to the commissary, which only adds to the companies' bottom lines, Croft, the Mississippi lawyer, told me. "Crappy food is being paid for twice. And then the state is paying for the medical care on that," she said.

Another problem is that there's no such thing as a surprise kitchen inspection at a prison. Because of security precautions, health departments have to arrange inspections in advance. In sworn testimonies, people in prison describe manic cleaning sprees in advance of inspectors' visits. Even when violations are found, inspectors are generally reluctant to shut down the kitchens, as they would a restaurant. How else would incarcerated people eat? One inspection report in a New Mexico prison found mice droppings and "Blood and milk on the floor in walk-in cooler" — yet the kitchen was still "approved."

The proliferation of "jailhouse cookbooks" might imply that eating behind bars can take on a scrappy, can-do — even fun — quality if you have the right attitude and money for supplies from the commissary. But food has always been a source of warmth and camaraderie, a bright spot in dark places. My former colleague Keri Blakinger recalled how, on her first Thanksgiving in prison, she and a visitor raided the visiting room vending machines and used a paper clip to carve the words "turkey" and "mashed potatoes" onto the Snickers and Reese's. Until prison chow halls serve palatable, nutritious meals, that may be the best people can do. |||

Maine, widely seen as a model for providing good food in its prisons, only spends $4.05 per person, per day. Food trays at Maine Correctional Center in Windham in 2023. BEN MCCANNA/PORTLAND PRESS HERALD VIA GETTY IMAGES

LOCAL FOCUS

News and Information From Our Local Newsrooms

The Unbearable Darkness of Jail

05.21.2025

Jails in St. Louis, Cleveland and Jackson, Mississippi, don't provide direct access to sunlight and fresh air – even when their own policies require it.

By IVY SCOTT, BRITTANY HAILER and DAJA E. HENRY

Jails are notorious for inhumane conditions. Detainees often complain of violence, inedible food, limited programming and subpar health care. Lack of sunlight may be an unexpected addition to the list. But sunlight deprivation causes a myriad of serious issues, including high blood pressure, osteoporosis, and an increased risk of diabetes, as well as a host of mental health problems such as depression and sleep disorders.

Jails built in the last century often have few windows and little room for recreation and natural light, making them "obsolete" by today's design standards, according to Kenneth Ricci, prison and jail architect with Nelson Worldwide, a design firm.

Bringing sunlight and fresh air into jails often takes a back seat to other pressing issues. But a lawsuit in San Francisco suggests forcing detainees to live in the dark could violate their constitutional rights. In 2021, a group of men awaiting trial at two California jails sued the city and county of San Francisco because they were confined without fresh air and sunlight.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Sallie Kim ultimately agreed with the men. In 2023, she ruled that the jails had violated the Constitution's due process clause. The officials "created the problem by building a jail without a secured outdoor exercise yard and then relies upon that problem to claim that it cannot provide a secure way for inmates to have access to direct sunlight," she wrote.

These issues are top of mind for residents who have followed the opening and closure of jails in St. Louis, Cleveland and Jackson, Mississippi, where detainees can go years without seeing the sun. The jails in all three cities have requirements to provide sunlight and fresh air, either mandated by jail policy, or by the state or federal governments. Yet all three have consistently fallen short, according to jail officials and state and federal inspection reports.

Jail administrators in Cleveland and Mississippi are banking on new facilities to improve conditions. City officials in St. Louis closed their crumbling older jail in 2021, but shuffling detainees into the remaining, newer jail hasn't solved the problems. In each city, questions remain about whether new jails will address the web of challenges — building design, court backlogs and understaffing chief among them — that keep detainees from seeing the sun.

Reporters from The Marshall Project's local news teams offer a closer look at the effects of limited sunlight access on people held in jails in Cleveland, St. Louis and Jackson.

ST. LOUIS CITY, MISSOURI

When Darnell Rusan saw the sun for the first time in over a year, during a transfer from the city jail to the courthouse, he later recalled, he gazed up at it and took a deep breath.

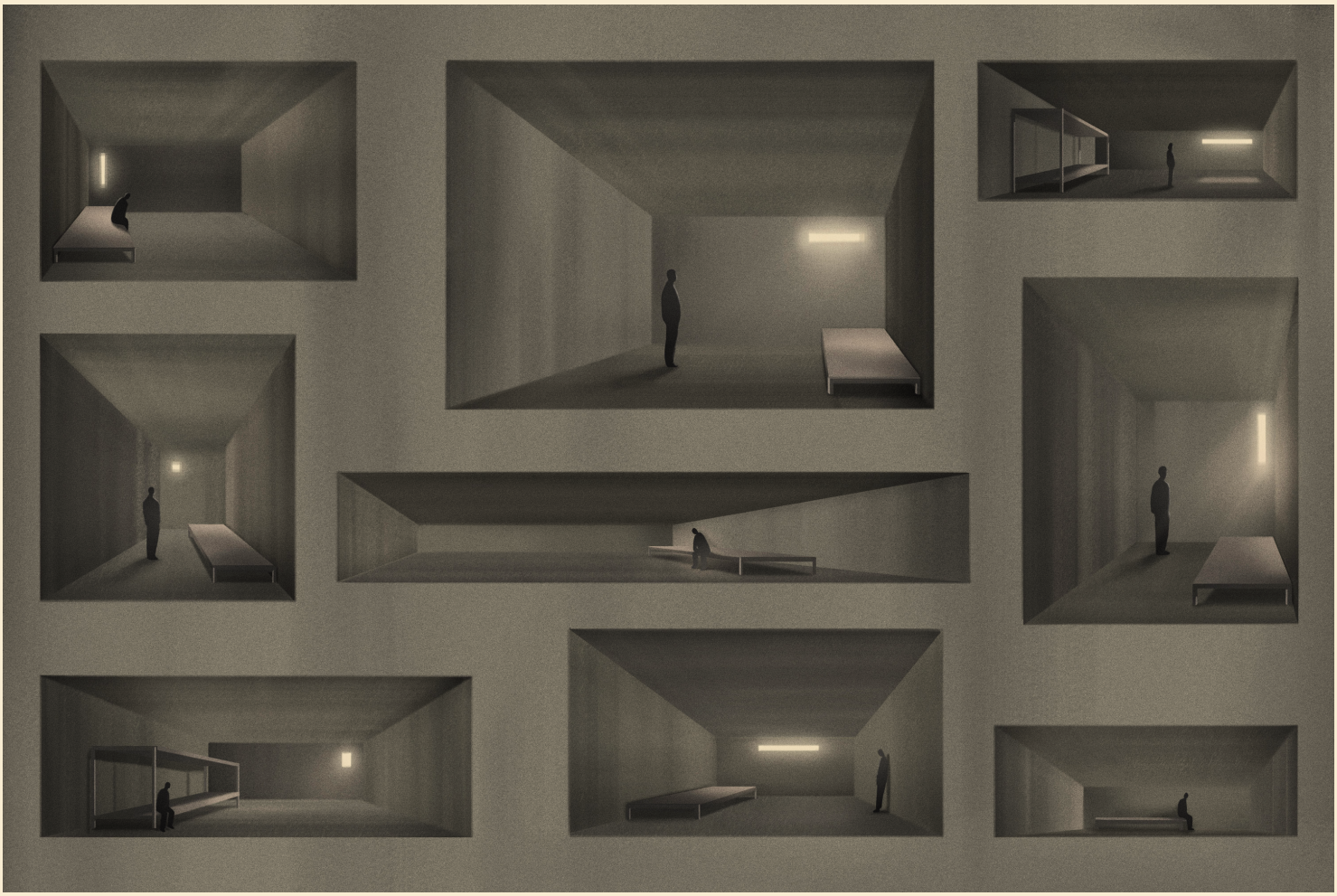
"I hadn't seen it in so long, breathed fresh air in so long," said Rusan, who was released from jail in March. "I'm going to make sure I never go back in there."

The St. Louis Division of Corrections stipulates in its official policies and procedures that every jail in the city "will have an outside exercise/recreation area for inmate use or an area that provides natural light." In addition, all facilities must provide "a wide range of recreational program[s]" that includes indoor and outdoor exercise and leisure-time activities.

However, the city's downtown jail — the maximum-security St. Louis City Justice Center — doesn't meet these requirements, conceded interim Jail Commissioner Doug Burris. There is no outdoor exercise area and there are no windows in the cells, just a pane of glass in the door that faces the dayroom.

Burris said in an April interview with The Marshall Project - St. Louis that, even on a bright summer's day, "not much" sunlight makes it to people inside. Only a paltry amount of light filters through thick frosted windows at the top of a small rec area where, on a good day, detainees may spend a few hours. What's more, he said, some people go years without access to the outdoors.

"We've got 50 to 75 people in here that have been here for at least two years, up to five years,"



GRACE J. KIM FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

he said. "We're taking an abundance off their life."

Instead of lobbying to improve outdoor access at the jail, Burris said he is in the process of updating the jail's guidelines to remove this requirement. The City Justice Center was designed without an outdoor recreation area. Fixing it would require finding the space in downtown St. Louis to construct a secure outdoor yard, or building one on the roof — both extremely costly, said Ricci, the architect at Nelson Worldwide.

However, Burris believes the lack of opportunities for recreation and exercise is harmful. "To house people at the facility in excess of a year likely exacerbates mental health issues for detained people already afflicted," he wrote in a 2025 operational review of the jail. "It also could create mental health issues for those who previously had none."

Rusan was detained awaiting trial for more than four years. Over the course of his stay, Rusan said he was often unable to tell the difference between day and night. As a result, he suffered disruptions in his sleep that continued well after he returned home.

"That place is like a basement," said Rusan, who was ultimately found not guilty. "Now that I'm home, [my family has] been asking me why I keep waking up at night."

Understaffing also means sections of the jail are on lockdown for 23 hours a day, meaning that many detainees are "not even going to the indoor rec area," said Khanika Harper, a member of the city's detention facilities oversight board. "As far as actual sunlight, they don't have access to that at all." (Burris confirmed in April that roughly half of the pods in the jail are on 23-hour lockdown.)

With the demolition in March of the Workhouse, St. Louis's former medium-security jail, Burris said the city's focus is on improving conditions at the Justice Center. But improving access to natural light and fresh air was not on Burris' list of immediate action items, which includes redesigning the jail intake area, getting a tablet for every detainee and creating a mentorship program and retention plan for jail staff. However, he said he hopes increased staffing and a "rocket docket" (allowing people who have been detained longest to get their case quickly before a judge) will ameliorate the worst effects.

"I would like to get to a place where we could even get some vans and go pick up trash, just so they could be out in the sun," he said. "But I've got more immediate needs right now."

CUYAHOGA COUNTY, OHIO

The Cuyahoga County jail is housed in a foreboding brutalist structure also known as the Justice Center. Built in 1976, the complex is made of concrete and includes the Cleveland Police headquarters and the Cuyahoga County and Cleveland Municipal Courts tower.

When it first opened, the Justice Center was heralded as starting a new era for humane conditions for the incarcerated. It replaced the "leaky old jail" — compared in the press to a "crumbling coffin" — where, in the span of six months, 16 prisoners escaped through the windows. The Justice Center was expanded in 1995 and renovated four years later to add more

beds.

Today, "Jail 1," the original highrise built in 1976, doesn't have a single window in the north section of the tower. The 1996 expansion does have windows — thin slits that don't let in much light. As a result, the people incarcerated there — and the jail's employees — do not have access to fresh air or sunlight for most of their stay.

Incarcerated people routinely complain that the disconnection from the outside is disorienting, said one jail staffer who worked in the building from 2017 until last year. She spoke to The Marshall Project on the condition she not be named for fear of being retaliated against by people who still work in the jail. She said the incarcerated people she interacted with told her they could only tell what time of day it was by the meals they were served.

State law mandates natural light in housing units in every jail in the state, and the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction has repeatedly cited the Cuyahoga County jail for falling short, state records show. Even though the jail was cited in 2019, 2021, 2022 2023 and 2024, county jail officials have never faced penalties for failing to meet the standard.

Little has changed in the 30 years since the second building was built.

Darrell Houston was booked into jail in 1991 after being charged with a murder. His conviction was later reversed, and he was exonerated after serving 18 years in state prison. But he still remembers the lack of air and sunlight in the county jail.

He said the windows on the main housing units are "a little slot. You have to peek out. You don't get a full view. It's about the width of your finger." (The windows in one tower of the jail are roughly 1.5 inches by 5 inches with steel fixtures secured on the outside, County Executive Chris Ronayne confirmed. In the jail's second tower, the windows are 2.3 inches by 2.3 inches.)

Houston also remembered the windowless "dead rooms" in the jail, which were used as punishment.

The emphasis on security over sunlight affects employees, too. Adam Chaloupka, general counsel for the Ohio Patrolmen's Benevolent Association, which represents the county's corrections officers, said union members call it "a sick building." Over the years many officers said they have developed breathing problems from the lack of fresh air, he added.

"No real air circulates. All air is recycled," Chaloupka said. "In the rec rooms, which are little gyms in a few parts of the jail, they can open up shutters. That's about the only access to outside air."

He said the county's hopes of resolving the complaints seem to lie in the construction of a new jail.

County officials have budgeted nearly $1 billion for a replacement facility, which officials say will address the jail's substandard conditions. However, Cuyahoga County Council members have expressed frustration and concern about the county executive's lack of clear communication about the building plans.

As of mid-June, the county had not yet set a date to present its design planning progress to the council's Public Safety Committee. A jail steering committee was established in 2019, but hasn't convened since 2022. Last year, four Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Court judges wrote a letter pleading with the county executive to reinstate the committee to ensure accountability and oversight of the new project.

A spokesperson for the county executive told The Marshall Project - Cleveland that the new building will provide access to "fresh air and natural light" and that the administration takes "the health and safety of our staff and those in our custody at the Cuyahoga County Corrections Center seriously."

The new facility is expected to be completed in late 2028 or early 2029.

HINDS COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI

When Semiko Crump arrived at Raymond Detention Center in December 2023, she said officers threw her "in the hole." Crump estimates she was in the dark, single-person cell for a few hours, writhing in pain from a broken foot. A small window allowed very little light in from the outside. "It was like a hole," she said. "It's no lights, absolutely no lights in this place."

Crump's nephew, Dexter Crump, was also arrested and taken to Raymond Detention Center on the same day. "I couldn't tell what time of day it was," he said. He remembers seeing a small window high up, but none that he could see out of.

Years of dangerous conditions at the detention center prompted a federal takeover in 2022. Lack of sunlight rarely makes the list of issues to resolve, but experts argue it exacerbates existing problems.

"It's all of the stressors adding up, and then they tend to compound each other," said forensic psychiatrist Dr. Terry Kupers, who has visited correctional facilities across the country and served as an expert witness on lawsuits about their conditions. He likened the conditions in many U.S. prisons and jails to torture.

"You've got someone who doesn't get exercise, has no window to the outside world, whose lights don't work. All of this adds up to despair," he said.

Former jail administrator Kathryn Bryan oversaw the jail until January 2022. She said jail practitioners know "with a certainty that environment dictates behavior." Hinds County had a number of compounding issues, she recalled: The majority of the jail's windows were completely covered, allowing no sunlight, and there were broken light fixtures.

"Hinds County was experiencing the most deplorable conditions I have witnessed," she said. "Cells were dark 24 hours a day."

Over a span of three months, there were more than 70 assaults. Seven people died in the jail in 2021. "When there's a lack of sunlight and fresh air and recreation, almost unilaterally you see more critical incidents occurring," Bryan said. "Inmates who are idle or who are afraid take life-saving measures to protect themselves. So they create weapons … [and] you see sicker inmates because of the stress."

A consent decree with the U.S. Justice Department, overseen by a federal judge, required five hours of outdoor recreation each week for people incarcerated in the jail. But those monitoring the jail consistently reported that it failed to meet this standard. There simply weren't enough employees to regulate recreation time.

Hinds County Sheriff Tyree Jones denied the court monitor's reports, and said incarcerated people in all pods of the jail get recreation time. "I think the monitors did not present a clear picture to the courts of how the jail operated at times," Jones told The Marshall Project - Jackson.

Meanwhile, the county is building a new jail, set to be completed in 2028. In the new facility, each housing unit should have its own recreation area that is managed by detention staff in that unit, an architect working on the project testified in a 2022 court hearing.

Bipartisan Bill in Missouri Would Create Office to Inspect Prisons, Open Investigations

06.10.25

Incarcerated men in Missouri said an oversight office could address issues with health care, staff violence and administrative segregation conditions.

By KATIE MOORE

Tammy Reed grew emotional while testifying in front of Missouri legislators in April. She was a corrections officer for 27 years before retiring. Her son, Brandon Pace, died behind bars at the prison in Tipton in April 2023.

A lawsuit filed by Reed alleges guards exposed her son to an excessive amount of pepper spray after he ingested drugs.

Reed appeared at the Missouri House for a Corrections and Public Institutions Committee hearing to support a bill that would create an oversight office for the Missouri Department of Corrections. Organizations pushing for reform said they were concerned about the increasing number of deaths behind bars. In 2024, 139 people in prison died, according to the department. That was more than in recent years, including at the height of the COVID pandemic.

Reed told the state legislators that she wanted justice for her son and that she was still waiting on answers about what happened.

"We have to have something to hold these people accountable for their actions," she said.

The oversight office would:

- Monitor conditions of confinement
- Inspect each facility at least once every three years, and maximum security prisons every year
- Publish inspection reports
- Be able to interview any incarcerated person, employer or contractor
- Review department policies and procedures
- Open an investigation on its own initiative or based on a complaint from a person in prison or their family member
- Create an online form where family members, friends or advocates can submit complaints or inquiries

Karen Pojmann, a spokeswoman for the Missouri Department of Corrections, said in an email that the agency did not have a position on the bill, but added that the department already has a significant amount of administrative oversight in place. That includes an anonymous complaints hotline, a grievance system and a constituent services unit. She also noted that the department's facilities are audited for compliance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act, a federal measure to address sexual abuse, and that its education programs are accredited.

A man at Farmington Correctional Center, who asked not to be named out of fear of retaliation, said he wanted to see the bill pass, particularly because of health care problems in prison. Sometimes people wait months to be seen by a provider, he said. Others hit roadblocks when they want access to their own medical records.

A man currently detained at Jefferson City Correctional Center, who also asked not to be identified out of fear of retaliation, referenced the December 2023 death of Othel Moore as one reason he supports the bill. According to a lawsuit filed by Moore's family, guards pepper-sprayed Moore and put a hood over his head to prevent him from spitting. They then placed him in a restraint chair and took him to a cell. Attorneys for his family said people heard Moore crying out, "I can't breathe." He was later pronounced dead.

Five correctional employees were charged. The Department of Corrections said it has since stopped using that restraint system and began using body cameras in some restrictive housing units. The detainee said the department also needs oversight when it comes to the length of time people are placed in administrative segregation, as well as the conditions there. He said he supports the legislation because the department needs to have more checks and balances.

The proposal appeared to have bipartisan support. Three state representatives sponsored similar measures to establish the oversight office: Democrat Kimberly-Ann Collins of St. Louis, and Republicans Bill Lucas of DeSoto and Bill Allen of Kansas City.

Legislators said at the hearing that the bill was necessary to ensure safety for officers and people in prison, and to reduce the number of costly lawsuits against the department.

Collins said an existing state statute allows legislators to visit prisons unannounced. Since 2021, she has conducted hundreds of "prison pop-ups" at every facility.

"The journey for me started off personal because my father passed away in DOC … and I don't have any understanding of how he passed away," she said.

She was a teenager when he died in 2007 and had spent her childhood visiting him in prison.

"The Missouri prison system has been faced with numerous issues over the years, including reports of abuse and inadequate health care and poor living conditions," Collins said. "Passing this bill could provide much-needed oversight, ensuring that complaints are taken seriously, and that facilities are held accountable."

The legislative session ended in May with the bill still on the table.

Byron Case, who is incarcerated at Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center in Bonne Terre, said he was not surprised the measure failed.

"I think that the legislature — at least in this state — operates under the belief that their constituents don't want prisoners 'getting off easy.' Whether their belief represents the reality of the voting public, I can't say, but my suspicion is that your average Missourian doesn't care about ensuring that state prisons are being run ethically," he said in an email.

Advocates say they hope the bill will be reintroduced in the next session,which begins in January 2026..

Reader to Reader

In our last callout, we asked how you show personal style — or how you hold onto who you are — inside. Your responses covered everything from grooming routines to creative clothing hacks.

Some of you press sharp creases into your uniforms, tailor your pants or keep your shoes spotless. Others cut hair, sew clothes for themselves or others, or add details to uniforms like rolled cuffs, tucked collars or handmade patches made from whatever materials you can get your hands on.

Several people got creative with skincare using different products. Smelling good came up, too. Some people make scents using oils, powdered blends or perfume strips torn from magazines. And for many of you, style is more than appearance. It's a way to feel present, stay grounded or to quietly resist being erased.

Here's how you put that into practice.

I cannot adequately express with words how important it is, after incarceration, to retain some expression of your personal identity. When I entered the Oklahoma prison system, I was literally stripped of everything and given a uniform with "Inmate" stamped across my back. Once settled in, I found a needle and thread, and tailored my uniform to fit my build. Next, I pressed my uniform to match my style when I was free, which was a form of resisting the assimilation. My barber keeps me groomed and my shoes are wiped clean at the end of every day. The judge sentenced me to life without parole, not life without self-esteem.

FROM A READER IN OK

For me, my creative expression comes in my art and poetry. I find not just release, but the ability to "be me." Art helps me to hold on to my sanity amid the chaos and cacophony that is daily prison life. Seeing my art and writing make it into print or hung in an actual gallery on the outside gives me the reassurance that I AM still alive.

FROM A READER IN SC

I like to sign all "sign out sheets" with something crazy, elaborate and eccentric. I also recently chose to go from having a foot-long, full beard to a handlebar mustache. You wouldn't believe the reactions you receive when you make a drastic change, and I love every minute of it. ;-).

FROM A READER IN WV

I stay true to myself in prison by keeping up with my physical frame and my appearance. I have dreadlocks and I style them often. As soon as new growth appears, I take them down and restyle them. I maintain a temp fade and line up, and I keep my beard and mustache neat and lined up.

FROM A READER IN IN

I never lost sight of who I was when I got incarcerated. I still sing in the shower to some of my favorite songs, or in the cell when my roommate is gone. Also, I go outside and watch the clouds and smell the flowers in the yard.

FROM A READER IN NE

On the outside, I'm a real deal diva. In here, that's kind of hard, but I make it work. We do have access to some makeup, but I rarely use it. I do always make sure my eyebrows are shaped nicely, and I fill them in with a number two pencil, and my hair is ALWAYS done! I try different styles every day!

FROM A READER IN WV

When you have a sense of style and creativity, I think being incarcerated brings it to life. Being that all inmates have the same attire, I set myself apart by altering my jacket collar by folding it inside in order to appear as if I have a scrub jacket on. I also keep a napkin in my front pocket as if I have a handkerchief, like a casual men's suit jacket. If I want to look more urban or street savvy, I sometimes have a cuff in my pants legs and wear my jacket collar flipped up!

FROM A READER IN NC

At my current facility, we have keys to our cells and tablets. One of the main things I do is customize my keychain with colors I like. Every month or so, I'll make a new one. I also have a different picture on the back of my tablet, too. Most people prefer women, but I enjoy art photos.

FROM A READER IN CO

I use my own blend of scented oils and canteen lotion to make myself and my cell smell good. I use our irons to keep sharp creases in my prison uniform. I have also tailored my state-issued pants to look like "skinny jeans" instead of looking like MC Hammer parachute pants. I also decorate for the holidays, hanging paper snowflakes and Christmas trees from the ceiling, handmade turkeys for Thanksgiving, etc. This brings me joy and lets me know that I am still the same person I was before incarceration. Hopefully, it inspires others to enjoy the little things that make life worth living.

FROM A READER IN CO

I have a hack for keeping my teeth white and have found a way to blend my grey hair to seem less noticeable. I also add vitamin C to lotion for my face and make my own beauty serum with vitamin E gel tablets. I'll be 60 this year and easily look 10-15 years younger. I keep my shoes clean and my whites crispy.

FROM A READER IN MI

As a transgender woman, I usually get my clothes tailored to fit my form, wear fragrances from fashion magazines, and wear makeup using what's available in the commissary, including Kool-Aid and coffee.

FROM A READER IN CA

I shave my head every day. When I started going bald, I started shaving my head and most guys in here that shave their heads don't do it every day, but I do. And when I'm asked why I do it every day, I always make them laugh when I tell them that hair is overrated.

FROM A READER IN KY

I maintain my style and appearance as being "under the radar" — meaning, I don't try to stick out from the crowd by displaying gold necklaces, or wearing rings or styling my receding hairline in a particular way. I don't want the attention from my peers or the prison staff. I'm confident in my mundaneness.

FROM A READER IN CA

BACKGROUND IMAGES COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

I express my personal style by coming up with phrases. I always be like, "How you doing, my brother?" to everyone. When people see me, they be like, "What's good, my brother?" I also be like, "Merry Christmas," as in, "Good morning," or as a greeting or when leaving. Everyone says it now. Or when someone curses, I be like, "20 push-ups." All those things put joy on people's faces. My personal style is "joy" inside here. It's rare, so I like to be that light to brighten my brothers' days, including the officers and staff. God bless.

FROM A READER IN NC

I love hiking, so I just go outside, walk the track, and imagine I'm on a beautiful trail somewhere. The imagination is a wonderful thing and can provide a much-needed escape from the prison atmosphere.

FROM A READER IN OH

I've always had a unique style. I've always worn my hair in what some would call "childish hairstyles," but really it resembles how the rapper, Da Brat, would wear her hair (she's my influence). I always rocked ponytails, two-strand twists, and braids, but they always had some beads, barrettes or knockers on them. Trust me, I pull it off well. It's so hard to feel like me in here. There aren't any hair products for Black women where I am, so it makes it that much harder. But I still rock my ponytails and braids and am always on the lookout to get my hands on a bead or two, or crocheted barrettes. It works because even people here who didn't know me at home know that that's my style!

FROM A READER IN IN

I don't pay much attention to my physical appearance since coming to prison. The need to impress anyone is no longer in my thinking. Instead, I put greater emphasis on things that really matter: who I associate with, feeding my mind positive information, eating healthy, exercising and walking righteously. Everything else is a waste of my precious time.

FROM A READER IN TX

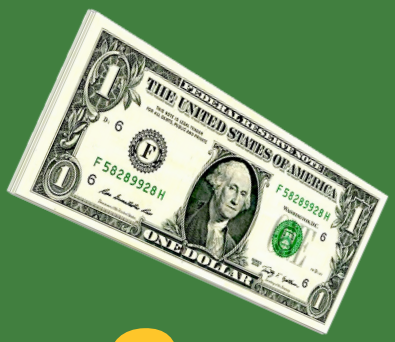
I run regularly throughout the week. I paint pictures and send them home. I journal. I play my guitar. I read constantly. I tutor GED material in Spanish for the Hispanic demographic enrolled in school. I listen to music. My head's a kaleidoscope of pictorial productivity.

FROM A READER IN OH

Since we aren't allowed to modify our clothes in almost any way, I make it a point to keep my clothes clean and pressed to show I care about my appearance. I also have changed my facial hair regularly to show my personality; right now, I'm sporting a mustache that curls at the ends.

FROM A READER IN TN

Our next Reader to Reader is about ...

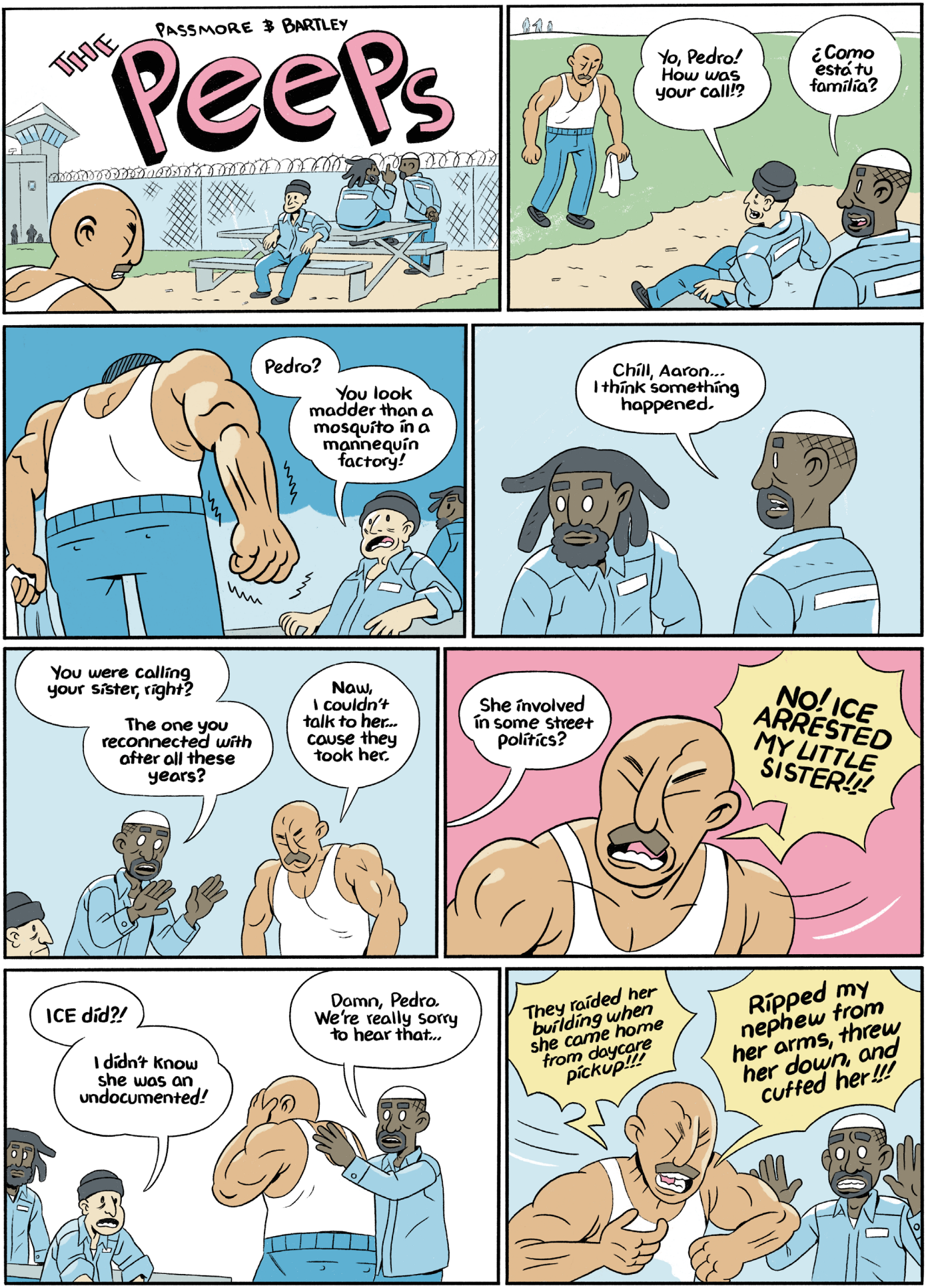


Commissary or Calling Home? Making Every Dollar Count Inside

Making money stretch in prison can be a daily challenge. Between buying from the canteen, making phone calls and saving for expenses on the outside, every dollar has to go a long way.

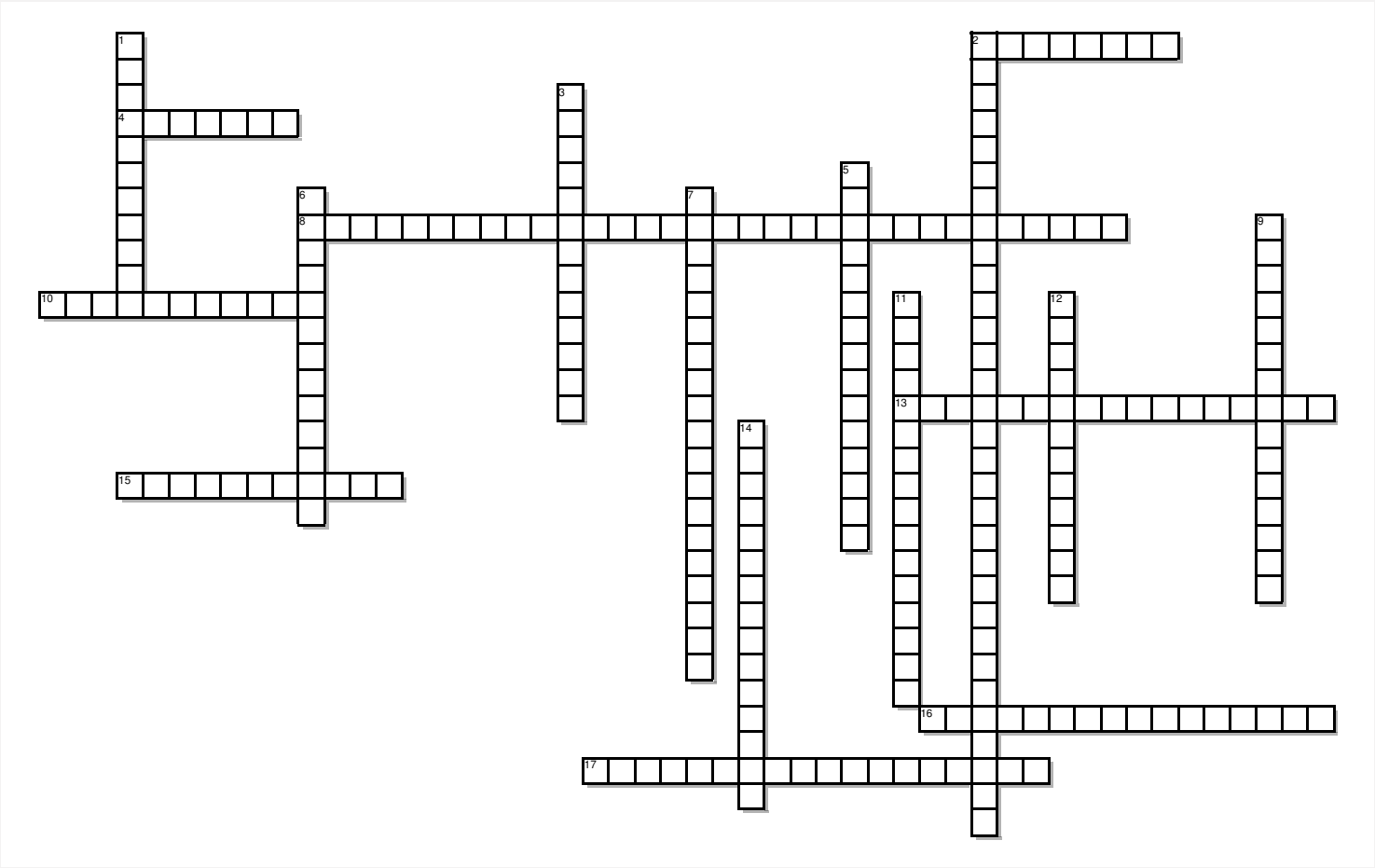
How do you manage your finances while inside? Have you found creative ways to budget, earn money or cut back on spending? What advice would you give someone trying to stay financially afloat in prison? What is the biggest financial challenge you have faced inside? What financial lesson do you wish you had learned sooner?

BACKGROUND IMAGES COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS


PASSMORE & BARTLEY
THE PEEPS
Yo, Pedro! How was your call!?
¿Como está tu familia?
Pedro?
You look madder than a mosquito in a mannequin factory!
Chill, Aaron... I think something happened.
You were calling your sister, right?
The one you reconnected with after all these years?
Naw, I couldn't talk to her... cause they took her.
She involved in some street politics?
NO! ICE ARRESTED MY LITTLE SISTER!!!
ICE did?!
I didn't know she was an undocumented!
Damn, Pedro. We're really sorry to hear that...
They raided her building when she came home from daycare pickup!!!
Ripped my nephew from her arms, threw her down, and cuffed her!!!


Yo, sorry, dog... but why didn't she come in, like, the right way?
Shut up, Knucklehead!
It's not our fault! My mom started the naturalization process... but never finished it.
That means ICE could be coming for you, too?!
No sé!
ICE used to wait 'til release day, but these days I'm not sure what they'll do! It's not fair!!!
That IS brutal! You should be celebrating on release day!
Wait, I'm more confused than a blind dog in a meat factory.
Didn't your sister's husband vote for the current president?!
You're a what?
C'mon now, pay attention! We should be supporting our brother, 'cause this all don't make sense!
The parole board denied him TWICE for being a "public safety risk"?!
Which is STUPID, porque I wouldn't even be released to the U.S. public anyway!!! ¡Maldita inmigración!
So many things seem self-inflicted.
Her husband said he voted for the deportation of criminals and a better economy, meanwhile, the government put his wife in cuffs, and the economy is still in the basement!
Man's cornbread isn't done in the middle, know what I mean?
NO!!!
NO ONE KNOWS WHATCHU MEAN!
HA! HA!!
But it IS kinda making me feel better...
...for now.
END

Crossword



ACROSS

2 "Jails in St. Louis, Cleveland and Jackson, Mississippi, don't provide direct access to sunlight and _____ ___ — even when their own policies require it." **(2 words)**

4 "Inspired by _____, South Carolina let prisoners design their own units, write house rules and settle their own disputes." **(1 word)**

8 "According to the Brennan Center [for Justice], prison companies' most significant contracts are with _____ _____ _____ _____." **(4 words)**

10 "The judge's ruling [on President Donald Trump's trans care ban] applies _____ while the lawsuit makes its way through the courts in the coming months." **(1 word)**

13 Prisons across the country are contracting with private companies to provide these devices to incarcerated people. **(2 words)**

15 The Black man whose murder in Minneapolis in 2020 by a police officer sparked widespread protests against police brutality and racial injustice. **(2 words)**

16 The national initiative led by the Vera Institute of Justice, a New York-based nonprofit that partners with states on criminal justice reform programs. **(2 words)**

17 "The _____ _____ ended in May with the bill still on the table." **(2 words)**

DOWN

1 A major private prison company **(3 words)**

2 "Years of activism by incarcerated people, their families and advocates resulted in the _____ _____ _____ capping the cost of prison phone and video calls last year." **(3 words)**

3 Military group deployed by the governor during a state of emergency in West Virginia to act as correctional officers **(2 words)**

5 "[Tammy] Reed appeared at the Missouri House for a Corrections and Public Institutions Committee hearing to support a bill that would create an _____ ____ for the Missouri Department of Corrections." **(2 words)**

6 Name of the new director of the Bureau of Prisons **(2 words)**

7 "But sunlight deprivation causes a myriad of serious issues, including high blood pressure, osteoporosis, and an increased risk of diabetes, as well as a host of mental health problems such as depression and sleep disorders." **(2 words)**

9 "Despite the outcry and countless headlines about a great American '_____ _____,' many police agencies and companies have backed away from the promises they made that summer." **(2 words)**

11 "Federal officials cannot withhold ____-_____ care — for now — from people incarcerated in the Bureau of Prisons, a federal judge ruled on June 3." **(2 words; hyphenated)**

12 "Public health researchers at Brown University estimate that just one day of above-average summer temperatures is associated with a nearly 4% increase in _____ _____." **(2 words)**

14 "Several courts have ruled that extreme temperatures in prison violate the Eighth Amendment's provision against '_____ ___ _____' punishment." **(3 words)**

In the Spotlight


COURTESY OF LUKE PIOTROWSKI

When The Marshall Project launched as an online publication in 2014, I was invited to write the inaugural essay for the Life Inside section, which was dedicated to publishing articles from people affected by incarceration. It was a pivotal time. I had been participating in a creative writing workshop and had published a couple of times. I took to a particular style of first-person narrative nonfiction, capturing the felt life of my peers, learning their backstories, hooking their personal stories into universal issues, and then weaving through my own reflections. My access became my edge over outside journalists, and people were becoming more curious about what was going on in the American prison. In that inaugural essay, I described the life of an elderly man dying of cancer in Attica.

In 2016, when I transferred to Sing Sing and met Lawrence Bartley and Martin Garcia, I told them I was a journalist. It was an odd way for a prisoner to introduce himself, but I was desperate to create a new identity. Today, both of them are journalists on the outside. And I mentor several men in New York prisons, men who used to bang, men who have published stories in The Marshall Project, The New York Times and National Geographic. Men who also have the nerve to call themselves journalists.

John J. Lennon is serving his 24th year behind bars, currently in New York's Sing Sing Correctional Facility. He's a contributing writer for The Marshall Project, a contributing editor at Esquire, and his work often appears in The New York Times, New York Review of Books, The Atlantic and Rolling Stone. His work has been recognized with prestigious fellowships and award nominations, and has been anthologized in "Best American Magazine Writing." His first book, "The Tragedy of True Crime: Four Guilty Men and the Stories That Define Us," will be published in September 2025. He will be eligible for parole in 2029.

Website: https://www.johnjlennon.net

If you are interested in being featured in "In the Spotlight," please mail your response to the address on the back of the magazine or send us an electronic message at newsinside@themarshallproject.org. If you are chosen to be featured, we will contact you to request a picture of you and discuss your response if needed.

Last Issue's Answers

1 Samantha was in prison when she gave birth to her son, Julius, and his twin sister, who died. **TRUE** 2 A 2019 addition to the correctional officers' union contract in New York mandates a three-person panel — an arbitrator and representatives from the union and the state — to decide cases of serious misconduct. **TRUE** 3 "In some states, failure-to-protect laws allow a parent to be punished for child abuse committed by another person if the courts believe they should have prevented the crime. **TRUE** 4 Doulas are women who deliver babies. **FALSE** *Correct answer: Doulas are not midwives. They are much-needed emotional and physical support people and act as a second voice for the mother.* 5 The vast majority of people serving time in state and federal prisons do not get to vote. **TRUE** 6 Advocates say having immediate access to jail rosters is vital, not only to law enforcement, but to the public, as well. **TRUE** 7 Public corruption cases have become more complicated to prosecute and are overturned on appeal more than half of the time because of the gray areas that the political process creates. **TRUE**

? Thinking Inside the Box

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

1 **T or F:** Restoring Promise is a national initiative led by the Vera Institute of Justice, a New York-based nonprofit that partners with states on criminal justice reform programs.

2 **T or F:** Several courts have ruled that extreme temperatures in prison violate the Eighth Amendment's provision against "cruel and unusual" punishment. But these rulings have not led to a widespread adoption of air conditioning or other methods to cool prison facilities or prevent heat-related deaths.

3 **T or F:** A federal judge ordered the prison system to continue providing hormone therapy to transgender people as needed, and to restore access to social accommodations such as hair removal, chest binders and undergarments, while litigation is pending.

4 **T or F:** Private prison stocks have declined since Donald Trump won the 2024 presidential election.

5 **T or F:** When New Jersey switches prison tablet companies, incarcerated people will lose access to all of their downloaded content.

6 **T or F:** Advocates said police officials never followed through on promises to update their policies on neck restraints or to follow a federal recommendation to fix an inadequate process for identifying problematic officers.

7 **T or F:** Prior to being appointed as the new director of the Bureau of Prisons, Billy Marshall was the commissioner of the West Virginia Division of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

8 **T or F:** Sunlight deprivation causes a myriad of serious issues, including high blood pressure, osteoporosis, and an increased risk of diabetes, as well as a host of mental health problems such as depression and sleep disorders.

9 **T or F:** According to the Missouri Department of Corrections, 139 people died in their custody in 2024.

The Marshall Project

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

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