

News |||| Inside

A compilation of criminal justice news from
The Marshall Project
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|||| The Marshall Project



Table of Contents

- 2 Letter From Lawrence
- 3 Letters From Our Readers
- 3 Manager's Note
- 3 Answers From Issue 20 Crossword

NATIONAL NEWSROOM

- 4 From Surveillance to Robot Guards: How AI Could Reshape Prison Life
- 5 Trump's Anti-DEI Push Raises Concerns Among Black Officers in Local Police Departments
- 8 How Trump's Medicaid Cuts Will Slash Health Coverage for People Leaving Prison
- 9 The Problem With Screening the Mail in Prisons
- 11 Cops Took My Christmas Bike. Now I Give Kids the Freedom To Ride.
- 13 When the 'Diddy' Case Hits Home
- 15 Why Closing Prisons — Even Bad Ones — Is Complicated
- 16 Love Beyond Bars: Raymond and Cassandra
- 20 The Heartbreak, Rage — and Discipline — of Immigration Court Watching

LOCAL FOCUS

- 22 Letter From Louis
- 23 No Showers, Black Mold and Clogged Toilets: America's Jails Are Disgusting
- 25 A Woman With HIV Spent Six Years in Solitary. She Sued and Missouri Will Change Its Policy.
- 28 Reader to Reader
- 32 The Peeps
- 34 Crossword
- 35 In the Spotlight
- 35 Thinking Inside the Box

On the cover:

Raymond Flanks and Cassandra Delpit embrace by Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans. Photograph by Camille Farrah Lenain.

A Letter From Lawrence

Hey *News Inside* readers,

As 2025 winds down, I've been reflecting on how the year's political shifts have landed — both inside and out. Out here, it has been one shock after another.

One story close to my heart is that of my friend Orville Etoria. We did time together at Sing Sing. Orville was a calm, quiet guy — not especially into prison programs — but he still pushed himself, earning a bachelor's degree through Hudson Link and Mercy College and even starting his master's at Union Theological Seminary. After his release, he worked at a men's shelter and, as a Jamaican citizen, kept up with immigration check-ins, doing everything by the book.

Then came the policy changes. During one of Orville's routine meetings with ICE, President Donald Trump's third-country deportation order hit. Instead of being returned to Jamaica, which never rejected him, Orville was sent to Eswatini, Africa. He spent two months in solitary at Matsapha Correctional Complex, with no charges, no legal counsel, and no answers. After sustained advocacy, he was finally repatriated to Jamaica in September. The very next day, he video-called me on WhatsApp, smiling. I



Lawrence Bartley on a video call with Orville Etoria.

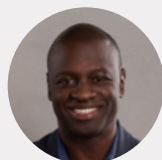
expected horror stories, but in his usual laid-back way, he just said, "It was bad, but after we protested, we got out of our cells for a reasonable time, and I finally got to dig my toes into the soil of the motherland."

This issue of *News Inside* carries that same spirit of survival and resistance. Joseph Wilson reflects on his own childhood sexual abuse through the lens of the Sean Combs trial in "When the 'Diddy' Case Hits Home," explaining how victims often appear complicit when they're actually trapped. In "Cops Took My Christmas Bike. Now I Give Kids the Freedom To Ride," Dorsey Nunn shares how losing his bike as a kid pushed him toward prison — and how he turned that pain into decades of holiday bike giveaways for kids with

incarcerated parents. And in "From Surveillance to Robot Guards," we explore how AI could potentially reshape prison life, from robot-led searches to predictive surveillance, raising new questions about privacy, bias and control.

And of course, your favorites are here too — The Peeps, Reader to Reader, the crossword and more.

Stay sharp, stay connected. I'll catch you next time.



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

Please add me to the subscription list for your award-winning news publication. Such information may prove beneficial to me. I have an insatiable desire to learn and understand as much as I can concerning all forms of law, especially in the criminal justice profession.

—Gregory M., Pennsylvania

Reading *News Inside* has helped me so much these four years I've been down, especially during this time of crisis in New York. I was reading all the really old ones because no one had any new ones. I just wanted to read as many as I could get. I wanted to let all of you know at The Marshall Project that it means a lot to me that you put this out for us to read. I'm thankful to you all.

—Maisarh S., New York

First off, thanks for being awesome! Lawrence, you inspire, educate and give hope to broken people like me in a time of need! So keep up the great and hard work; we are grateful!

—Taylor, Massachusetts

We received the tablets last year. I must say, I like your *Inside Story* videos. They are very interesting. I respect and salute you for holding strong throughout your bid, as well. Please send me a subscription to the *News Inside* magazine.

—Kevin S., North Carolina

I wanted to thank you again for taking the time to visit the students at Logan. They were, as I'm sure you saw, thoroughly engaged in the discussion and very grateful you made the trip to talk with them in person. It's clear that The Marshall Project truly walks the walk in its work with incarcerated people

—Professor at a college-in-prison program in Illinois

I have been incarcerated for 30 years. I was recently given a copy of your *News Inside*. I was very impressed with what I saw and read. Please continue to be a voice for those whose voices can't be heard. I appreciate each and every one of you who makes it possible for *News Inside* to exist.

—Archie G., Ohio

Your story inspires me a lot and gives me hope. I truly enjoy reading *News Inside* and watching *Inside Story* cover what's happening inside. I especially enjoyed the August 2025 *News Inside* article, "The Unbearable Darkness of Jail," because I could relate to the story of the bad conditions in jails across the country.

—Andrew S., North Carolina

With no real connection to the streets, *News Inside* has opened my eyes to society. It has brought me to a level of perspective where convicted felons are also relevant to society without a criminal mindset. It opened my eyes to a community for people behind bars everywhere.

—Moufassa H., Nevada

I want to thank you and your amazing staff at The Marshall Project. You truly are an inspiration because of your dedication and hard work in providing us on the other side of these fences and walls with a toolbox full of contacts and knowledge.

—Eric V., Virginia

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 note 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*:

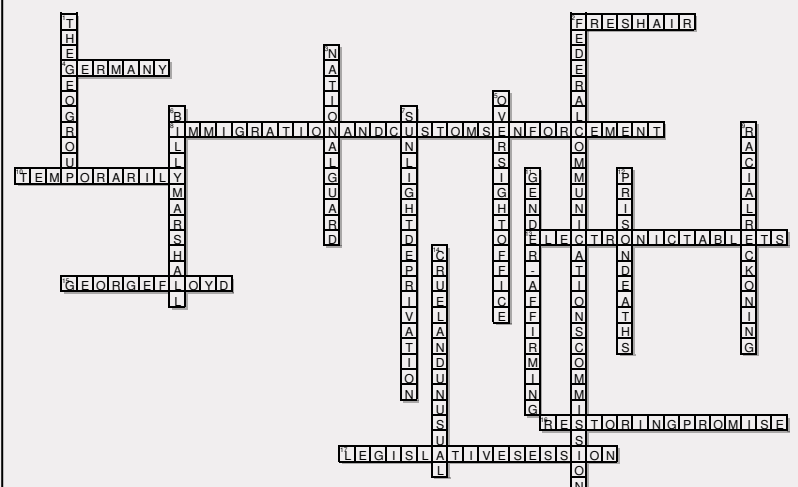
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Thank you for your continued interest in and support of *News Inside*!

Martin Garcia

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

Answers from Issue 20 Crossword





An incarcerated man makes a phone call from Cybulski Community Reintegration Center in Enfield, Connecticut, in 2016. Prisons and jails are looking to integrate AI-driven tools to assist with phone surveillance, such as recording and transcribing calls for documentation. JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

08.30.2025

From Surveillance to Robot Guards: How AI Could Reshape Prison Life

Critics worry about opaque data collection, privacy violations and the technology's bias spreading in jails and prisons.

By REBECCA MCCRAY

In July 2025, Tesla fans lined up for hours in Los Angeles to check out the new “retro-futuristic” diner and charging station opened by Elon Musk. Among the attractions was the company’s “Optimus” robot, which served popcorn to hungry customers near the humans grilling Wagyu burgers. Fifty miles east in Chino, Delinia Lewis, the associate warden of the California Institution for Women, hopes to one day put AI-powered machines like these to work in her prison doing far more important jobs than slinging snacks. As staffing shortages continue to plague prisons around the country, Lewis believes AI could help close the gap.

“Medicine distribution, cell feeding, security searches, package searches for fentanyl, all the hazardous and routine tasks that staff don’t want to do,” said Lewis. “Why not let the robot do it? Then staff can focus on more intricate parts of the job.”

Lewis has written about the use of AI in corrections, and said she is forming a business to produce AI-driven robots for use in corrections settings. While she hopes the tech could be employed within the next 10 years, the state’s budget crisis makes acquiring cutting-edge AI tools tough.

“Who knows when California will be back in the green,” Lewis said of the state’s budget, “but we are losing staff at a record rate, so the bridge has got to break, and we’ve gotta really take advantage of technology.”

Robots behind bars may be a ways off, but prisons and jails have been rapidly adopting other AI and machine-learning tools. Advocates critical of the technology are concerned about opaque data collection processes, privacy violations and bias.

Prison telecommunications companies were some of the first to dip their toes in AI

technology. In 2017, LeoTech began marketing Verus, a phone surveillance tool to record and monitor calls. The company uses Amazon’s cloud and transcription services to flag keywords that might alert staff to “valuable intelligence.” At least three states used the tool to monitor phone calls for mentions of coronavirus during the pandemic, in an attempt to track outbreaks, according to The Intercept. While tools like Verus were originally marketed as add-ons to existing phone services, many prison telecommunications giants have since made AI call monitoring a default part of their services.

“Given Securus and Global Tel Link are now providing it, it means it’s going to be a lot more accessible in a lot more places,” said Beryl Lipton, an expert on law enforcement and prison surveillance tools at the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

The use of these tools has led to serious breaches of attorney-client privilege. From 2020 to mid-2025, lawsuits were filed in several states against Securus, alleging that the company recorded privileged calls. Securus has settled some of the lawsuits and has denied purposely recording protected calls. The controversy hasn't stopped corrections departments from using the technology, or vendors from marketing it. LeoTech has been lobbying in Ohio, where lawmakers passed a budget for 2025 that includes \$1 million for the state's prison system to pay for software that will "transcribe and analyze all inmate phone calls" beginning in 2026, according to Signal Ohio. Florida inked a deal with LeoTech in 2023.

Lipton's primary concern with the AI tools in prisons and police departments is how the data they gather is stored, retained, and later fed into other systems.

"Law enforcement and the companies helping them do this are very interested in collecting all the information they possibly can collect on somebody, because they think this is going to aid them in solving or preventing a future crime," said Lipton.

While some AI technology is making its way into the system, in some ways, the U.S. is playing catch-up with other countries. In July

2025, the United Kingdom's Ministry of Justice laid out its plan to embed AI across prisons, probation services and courts. Some of the agency's goals include integrating AI transcription and document processing tools for probation officers, and the creation of a "digital assistant ... to help families resolve child arrangement disputes outside of court."

But the star of the announcement is a new "AI violence predictor" that promises to prevent prison violence by analyzing data, including an incarcerated person's age and previous involvement in violent incidents. If this sounds familiar, you might be thinking of risk assessment tools that have long been used across the U.S., which ProPublica documented in 2016 and found rife with racial bias and "remarkably unreliable in forecasting violent crime." The older tools generally assess risk by considering a set of weighted variables — such as age and prior convictions — either manually or by using an algorithm. AI-driven "predictors" are like risk assessment tools on steroids, drawing on much larger datasets.

While today's AI-driven tools are more sophisticated in some ways, the risk for bias and error is still there, and the efficacy of predictive tools has repeatedly been called into question.

"A lot of these predictive tools can create

unintended errors where certain communities are underserved or misunderstood because of how the model missed or wrongly accounted for individuals' risks in that community," said Albert Fox Cahn, founder and executive director of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, who has studied AI surveillance in prisons.

In addition to predicting violence against others, some correctional staff are looking to use "biometric behavioral profiling" tools in combination with AI to prevent in-custody deaths and medical emergencies. The Maricopa County Sheriff's Office, in Arizona, wants to buy wearable technology to track heart rate, body temperature, and other "key indicators," according to AZ Central. Jails in Colorado, Alabama, and elsewhere in Arizona have already begun using similar tools.

Lewis, the associate warden in California, is well aware of the ethical concerns that come with AI tools, and believes criticism will ultimately produce better outcomes.

"I welcome concerns, because that gives us an opportunity to do more research and resolve those concerns," said Lewis. "I don't think it's going to inhibit us, I think it's just going to help us make a more advanced and a better product." ■

Trump's Anti-DEI Push Raises Concerns Among Black Officers in Local Police Departments

04.28.2025

DEI professionals and officers of color fear that a Trump-led backlash will erase the diversity gains made after the George Floyd protests.

By WILBERT L. COOPER

This article was published in partnership with The Guardian, Cleveland Scene, Ideastream Public Media, Signal Cleveland and The Land.

After the murder of George Floyd, protests pushed some police agencies to bring in a new class of professionals like Colleen Jackson to help make departments more representative of and responsive to the communities they serve.

Hired as the first chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer in Shaker Heights, Ohio, in 2021, Jackson has assisted in a hiring process that swore in a class of women, Black and Asian American recruits and has surveyed residents on their experiences with the police. She organized an event to bring together young residents and Black officers that she hopes will lead to safer interactions on the street.

"I hope what I do touches people's hearts and that changes their behavior," she said.

Yet, the threat of the Cleveland suburb losing a federal grant because of her work only becomes more palpable as her friends and colleagues in the field of DEI lose their jobs — and the work they've dedicated their lives to hemorrhages esteem. "I'm just not the person who's gonna operate in fear," she said. "But I am a person who operates in reality."

There's a growing realization among DEI professionals like Jackson and police officers across the country that a backlash is gaining momentum. President Donald Trump, who



Colleen Jackson was hired by the city of Shaker Heights, Ohio, to be its first diversity, equity and inclusion officer. DANIEL LOZADA FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

has called DEI “illegal,” has halted federal programs and encouraged executive branch agencies to investigate and withhold funds from institutions that engage in DEI practices.

The Trump administration has threatened to pull federal funding to compel policy changes in other areas of American life, such as universities, but policing experts are skeptical that a similar tactic would work on the nation’s roughly 17,000 local and state law enforcement agencies, particularly because they draw most of their funds from local taxes.

Still, Trump’s actions are already having an impact, contributing negatively to the culture in police departments by “encouraging tension within the ranks,” said Jenn Rolnick Borchetta, the American Civil Liberties Union’s deputy project director of policing. Opposition to diverse perspectives, she said, can breed an insular culture prone to abuse of underrepresented groups.

“This is not merely about the threat to diversity in policing,” Borchetta said. “That threat can spill out into the street.”

Increasing diversity among the ranks isn’t a panacea for police abuse — think of the case of Tyre Nichols, a Black man in Memphis, Tennessee, who died after being beaten by several Black officers. Still, policing experts say, hiring a more diverse force combined with efforts to change the culture within departments can help.

Trump’s anti-DEI push isn’t the first time efforts to diversify policing have faced a backlash. Black officers hired in the South during Reconstruction lost their jobs in the late 1800s when the federal government relinquished its control over former Confederate states. Later in the 1970s, after the Civil Rights Movement era, federal efforts to force several big-city police departments to diversify faced

opposition from White-dominated police unions. By the 1990s, most of these federal efforts were terminated.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, after Floyd’s murder in 2020 and the rise of DEI in policing, the number of Black officers hit its high-water mark in 2022, constituting 17% of the nation’s rank-and-file cops before falling to 14% in 2024, which is about the number of Black Americans in the country. In 2024, White people made up more than 79% of police officers and women made up more than 14%.

Although law enforcement diversity and inclusion experts like Nicola Smith-Kea maintain that DEI is about more than race — it’s about including people with different abilities, genders, faiths and ages — Smith-Kea thinks Trump has transformed the acronym into a “code word” for Black, creating a framing that DEI is discriminatory against White officers.

Smith-Kea said a backlash could mean “removing programs” that serve “the broader population, not just any one race,” such as accessibility ramps for disabled people or equal pay programs for women.

In February 2025, Attorney General Pam Bondi dismissed Biden-era lawsuits that accused police departments of hiring discrimination. Bondi dropped a case against the Maryland State Police before an agreement could be signed that would have required MSP to revise a test that Biden’s Justice Department found disproportionately disqualified Black and women applicants.

In her dismissal, Bondi said police officers would now be “chosen for their skill and dedication to public safety — not to meet DEI quotas.”

Phillip Atiba Solomon, the chief executive of the Center for Policing Equity, an organization that collects and analyzes public safety data to improve policing outcomes, said he wondered whether the Trump administration might try to use the DOJ to investigate police departments with DEI programs for “reverse racism.”

Although Trump might have the power to quickly transform the executive branch, lawyer James Fett believes that the decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court are far more consequential and long-lasting. Fett, who frequently represents White officers who say they have faced employment discrimination, is especially focused on the fallout from the court’s June 2025 ruling in *Ames v. Ohio*. The court unanimously ruled in favor of a woman who claimed she was denied a promotion with the Ohio Department of Youth Services because she’s not gay.

Before the ruling, many federal courts

required men and White people suing for employment discrimination to meet a higher standard than minorities. Experts believe the precedent set by *Ames v. Ohio* will lower the standard that majority groups will have to showcase to prove they’ve faced discrimination. “It’s going to be much easier when people want to attack promotions or hiring or even terminations based on a DEI policy,” Fett said.

Charles Billups, of the Grand Council of Guardians, the umbrella organization for New York State’s African American policing organizations, said he and many of his members fear that Trump’s anti-DEI orders could roll back the progress they’ve seen in hiring and promotions. “A lot of us are preparing for the fair competition fostered by DEI to be eliminated,” he said.

Even before Trump, some DEI professionals said they were facing pushback

Delaware County, Pennsylvania, hired Lauren Footman as its first DEI director in spring 2022. Included in her purview were the park police and law enforcement officials within the local prosecutor’s office. She said she felt tokenized right away in a department that was not interested in cultural change and only supportive of hosting parties for identity celebrations like Black History Month.

“Someone in HR actually thought that I was an event coordinator,” she said. During her time, she never worked with the park police or criminal investigation division because she says that Delaware County didn’t compel them to participate.

Footman was fired in the spring of 2024. She says the termination was retaliation for her attempts to address the county’s culture of discrimination and she is currently pursuing legal action. When asked about Footman’s claims, Delaware County said that after her termination, the county worked with a consultant to evaluate its programs and make recommendations. However, county officials vigorously denied her accusations.

Even in departments where DEI appears to have support, it can fall short. Veteran Sgt. Charlotte Djossou believes that is the case in the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department.

Djossou is a whistleblower who has been speaking out since the 2010s against the racial targeting in the MPD’s jump-out tactics, which involve plain clothes units accosting and searching people on the street. The courts have repeatedly found jump-outs to be discriminatory and unconstitutional. When Djossou first talked about them in the news media, she attributed their pervasiveness to the lack of Black officers in positions of power.

But while she’s seen more Black people



MARK HARRIS FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT; SOURCE IMAGES: ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

hired and promoted due to DEI, she doesn't believe it's altered the way the Black community is policed. "It's not a Black or White thing. It's a blue thing. And no matter what your race is, in policing, you have to conform in order to move up," Djossou said.

Djossou filed a lawsuit in 2020 against the MPD claiming it retaliated against her for whistleblowing by denying her promotions during a time when the department has been engaged in a high-profile DEI campaign to recruit and hire women. That DEI effort was shepherded by Chief Pamela A. Smith, who initially joined the MPD in 2022 as its chief equity officer in the aftermath of Floyd's murder.

"I'm Black. I'm a woman. And all they've



Sgt. Charlotte Djossou is a veteran of the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C. DEE DWYER FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

done is hold my career back," said Djossou, whose suit was settled out of court in 2025 before it went to trial. The MPD did not respond to a request for comment.

Smith-Kea understands the frustration some reform-oriented officers might have had with DEI. "Change doesn't happen overnight," she said, but there are advances, pointing to the widely used toolkit she helped develop for the Bureau of Justice Assistance that instructs departments on how to implement interventions for dealing with people in a mental health crisis.

Tragic killings like that of Daniel Prude have revealed the interplay between race and mental health in fatal police interactions. Prude was apprehended by Rochester, N.Y., police in the midst of a mental health crisis in 2020 and died of asphyxia after police put a mesh hood over his face and pinned him on the ground. Smith-Kea believes DEI-rooted solutions can prevent deaths like Prude's. As an example, she points to the BJA toolkit's potential to make all people, not just Black people, safer.

Despite all the worries about DEI's fate in policing, the ACLU's Borchetta said departments have incentives to keep DEI because many learned in the 2020s that to solve crimes they "need to gain the trust of the people and that trust is more easily eroded when police departments don't reflect the people they're policing."

Borchetta noted that police departments also learned to use diversity to avoid accountability. She was the lead attorney in the case that brought an end to the New York Police Department's unconstitutional practice of stop-and-frisk in 2013. While working on that case, she said, one of the NYPD's key defenses was simply, "See how diverse our department is."

However, she also credited that diversity with helping to win the case, including the contribution of Latino and Black officers who raised alarms about stop-and-frisk. "That's a reminder that diversity is important because it brings in perspectives of people who might be affected by your program in different ways," she said.

In Shaker Heights, where the mayor has vowed to continue its DEI initiatives, Jackson was optimistic about the future of DEI in policing. She believed that her work had touched people, and that kind of personal impact couldn't just be erased with an executive order. She said she was certain she and other DEI professionals would continue the work, regardless of Trump's efforts.

"I recognize these executive orders could bring the end of this particular name for the work — DEI — but it doesn't mean the work will stop," Jackson said. When asked how she could be so sure, she said: "The work of DEI has been going on for generations. It's the only reason why I, as a Black woman, have a job in the public sector, you know what I mean?" ■

How Trump's Medicaid Cuts Will Slash Health Coverage for People Leaving Prison

08.09.2025

The massive cuts will hit the formerly incarcerated hard — and that could increase crime, experts warn.

By WILBERT L. COOPER

Since 2010, formerly incarcerated people have greatly benefited from expansions to Medicaid health care coverage. Those gains are now at risk in the face of an estimated \$1 trillion in federal spending cuts outlined in President Donald Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which was signed into law in July 2025. Experts who spoke to The Marshall Project warn that the lost coverage will lead to unnecessary deaths.

Medicaid coverage is especially important for people post-release, because incarceration can wreck their health. One long-term study published in 2021 that investigated the mortality consequences of incarceration using national data found that imprisonment decreased the life expectancy of a 45-year-old person by 13%.

Dr. Shira Shavit, the co-founder of the Transitions Clinic Network, which provides care to people post-incarceration, has seen the toll of imprisonment on her patients.

"Carceral systems are not really set up to be health care systems," she said, before pointing to the conditions often found in jails and prisons, such as overcrowding and inadequate treatment for chronic diseases, mental health, and opiate use disorder. The poor health that people develop on the inside follows them when they get out, and can worsen as they struggle to access consistent health care.

As an example, Shavit pointed to a patient she'd treated after prison. He was enrolled in Medicaid in the wrong county, and fixing the error caused him to miss three months of lifesaving cancer treatments.

Since Shavit co-founded Transitions in San Francisco in 2006, she has seen successive federal efforts to try to expand health care coverage and close the gaps for her post-incarceration patients.

The expansion of Medicaid under President Barack Obama's 2010 Affordable Care Act was the first major advance in access to care. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the act made health insurance available to 80% to 90% of formerly incarcerated people who had previously been ineligible. Shavit noted that President Joe Biden's administration gave states permission to enroll incarcerated people in Medicaid prior to their release. "This allows people to get care that might not have been historically provided as they were leaving incarceration, like medications for opiate use disorder," Shavit said.

Interruptions to care can be deadly. One widely cited study on people released from the Washington State Department of Corrections between 1999 and 2003 found that they faced a risk of death almost 13 times higher than other state residents, largely due to the risk of drug

overdose. Grim realities like these have Shavit fearing the fallout from the Big Beautiful Bill, which the Congressional Budget Office estimates will increase the number of uninsured people nationwide by more than 10 million over the next decade.

"This pulling back on access to Medicaid post-release is really a step backwards," Shavit said.

The most consequential change to Medicaid in the new bill are work requirements, which go into effect on Dec. 31, 2026, and drive the largest share of expected cuts to the program. Under the new requirements, Medicaid enrollees older than 19 will have to demonstrate that they've been employed, or are participating in forms of "community engagement," such as community service, for at least 80 hours in the month prior to health coverage. To maintain coverage, they'll need to recertify their work status at least every six months.

Wanda Bertram, a communications strategist for the Prison Policy Initiative, an advocacy nonprofit focused on mass criminalization, believes these stipulations are especially burdensome for the formerly incarcerated, who face stigma when trying to get hired. "Our data says that 27% of people who have been to prisons are unemployed, meaning they want to work, but they cannot find work," Bertram said. By comparison, the nation's unemployment rate was 4.2% in August 2025.

Michigan University law professor Mira Edmonds says many formerly incarcerated people are working, just not in jobs that would fulfill the requirements in the new legislation. Because their criminal record worsens employment impediments like racial discrimination and incomplete schooling, "the jobs that they can get are on the black or gray market, under the table," Edmonds said. Those jobs are inconsistent and can't reliably provide references.

The new law does have some carve outs that could blunt the impact on incarcerated people, most notably a pause on work requirements for three months after a person has been released from prison. There are also exemptions from work requirements for people with proof of a qualifying condition, such as substance use disorder or a developmental disability.

But Shavit says that the three-month pause is not enough time to find your footing after prison. "It is so difficult to manage the needs and requirements from probation and parole in those first few months. People have to pick and choose where their priorities lie and are often very confused about how to navigate the systems," she said.



Dr. David Mathis waits to be let into the main building of California Medical Facility in Vacaville, California, in 2012. RICH PEDRONCELLI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Lily Roberts, the managing director of inclusive growth for the progressive nonprofit Center for American Progress, believes these exclusions are almost as onerous as the work requirements. The exclusions call for paperwork and doctor's visits — all while people are dealing with their health issues. Roberts added that the red tape is likely self-defeating, if the point is to promote employment. "People who are healthy get a better job, and they stick with it for longer," she said.

Trump officials like Dr. Mehmet Oz, administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, tout work requirements as an opportunity for beneficiaries to "show they have agency over their future" and as a way for the federal government to fight "waste, fraud, and abuse."

But Andy Schneider, a research professor for the Center for Children and Families at Georgetown University with more than 50 years of experience working with Medicaid, believes the requirements are just a tactic to "make states walk away from adults covered under the ACA Medicaid expansion."

Something similar is already happening in Georgia, which implemented Medicaid work requirements in 2023 through a program called Pathways. The program was pitched as a way to get people coverage and get them back to work. But according to an investigation by ProPublica and The Current, Pathway's enrollment has been 75% lower than initially estimated, in part because of the onerous process and the state not having enough people to help with sign-ups. At the start of 2025, there were thousands of applications still being processed. And more than 40% of the people who started applications gave up.

"It's diabolical to make cuts that you know are going to make it harder for people who were otherwise eligible to access these programs," Roberts said. "This doesn't incentivize people to get a job. It incentivizes people to quit trying."

Schneider, the Georgetown researcher, believes that formerly incarcerated people across the country will be especially vulnerable to losing coverage due to the work requirements' paperwork. But he said states will also suffer — even if some of those states want to continue covering the scores of formerly incarcerated people who were eligible for Medicaid under the ACA. "On a day-to-day basis, it's the states that

are gonna have to administer all this paperwork and ultimately, they're going to have to outsource that work to private companies," Schneider predicts.

In Georgia, Deloitte Consulting has been paid more than \$50 million for software the state uses to help verify work requirements. According to reporting by ProPublica and the Current, users of Deloitte's application have had issues with their info disappearing and their progress being erased.

As a result of these issues in establishing Medicaid eligibility systems, Deloitte is one of several contractors Democratic senators targeted in an inquiry launched in October that calls on these middlemen to "build systems that allow people to access the health care benefits they need to be healthy and be able to participate in the workforce, rather than to prioritize their bottom line."

Schneider is skeptical that they will do that. "The point is the red tape," he said. "It's designed to make it more painful."

Bertram, from the Prison Policy Initiative, agrees that work requirements are not being instituted to fight fraud. "When you think about it, you realize that you can't cash in and sell your Medicaid on the black market," she said. "The idea that people would be personally profiting off their Medicaid coverage is just totally out of whack."

Instead of fighting crime, Bertram believes that rolling back access will create more crime. That's because, according to research by the Prison Policy Initiative, states that expanded Medicaid have seen lower recidivism — the number of formerly incarcerated people who commit new offenses. One study found that in those states, the recidivism rate of "multi-time offenders with violent offenses" was as much as 16% lower during the first two years after they left prison, compared to states that did not expand health coverage between 2010 and 2016.

"The consequence of these requirements is going to be that more people end up arrested and in jails and in prisons, which has its own cost," Bertram said of the Big Beautiful Bill mandates. "This bill is a transfer of public spending away from health care and towards incarceration, which I think is in line with the Trump administration's explicit priorities." ■

The Problem With Screening the Mail in Prisons

08.02.2025

New York's controversy over scanning mail in prisons reflects a national debate involving security and privacy.

By **REBECCA MCCRAY** and **JAMILES LARTEY**

In July 2025, we took a look at the lingering effects of the New York correctional officers' wildcat strike, which ended in March. To bring officers back to work, one of the demands that the state met was to introduce scanners for legal mail, intended to help prevent drugs from entering prisons. Striking guards argued their safety was at risk by both exposure to drugs, and by prisoners acting erratically after using drugs, according to the Times Union.

As of late October, the scanners were in use "system wide," according to a Department

of Corrections and Community Supervision spokesperson. The department has so far been able to bypass the formal rulemaking process due to the emergency conditions of the strike, but it has proposed to make the policy permanent.

Those moves have ignited controversy, and reflect a long-running debate in prison systems across the country between the need for security measures and respect for incarcerated people's access to mail as a vital avenue to connect with families and legal help.

When prison administrators, lawmakers and advocates talk about "scanning" incoming mail, there are two separate things they can mean. One is the digitization of mail by copying the contents into an electronic format so prisoners can read it on a tablet. The other meaning — more accurately described as screening, as in the case of New York's new system — is technology to physically test mail for signs that it has been soaked in, or otherwise contaminated with illicit substances. Incarcerated people and



Corrections officer Mike Barrett searches an envelope for contraband in the mail room of Maine Correctional Center, in Windham, Maine, in 2011.
CRAIG DILGER/THE NEW YORK TIMES, VIA REDUX

advocates have expressed concerns with both kinds of scanning, having to do with privacy, delays and the sentimental value of handwritten letters and physical keepsakes.

In New York, regular mail from family and friends was already photocopied before the strike. The new scanners are a trickier proposition, because legal mail is protected by attorney-client privilege.

Much like field drug tests, the scanners aren't always accurate. Some advocates and incarcerated people say the new machines, which were purchased through a \$4.4 million contract with "contraband detection solutions" company RaySecur Inc., are incorrectly flagging contraband-free mail. When a piece of legal mail is flagged, the corrections department's proposed rule allows mailroom staff to withhold the mail without confirming it actually contains contraband. A coalition of legal organizations with clients in New York prisons outlined their concerns in a letter to the agency.

"What DOCCS appears to be doing is laying the groundwork for these machines to be the final determination," said Antony

Gemmell, supervising attorney with The Legal Aid Society's Prisoners' Rights Project and co-author of the letter. "They're using this technology beyond its intended scope."

RaySecur describes its scanners as a tool to reduce the volume of mail that requires further inspection by staff, not a way to eliminate that step.

Jeremy Zielinski, who is incarcerated at Woodbourne Correctional Facility, said he was surprised when a letter from the Second Circuit Court of Appeals was blocked by the mailroom. "It may make the situation more dangerous if they're relying too heavily on tech that doesn't work right, potentially decreasing security by becoming lax with their ordinary inspection routines," he said of guards.

Civil rights attorney Amy Jane Agnew, who has clients who have died following overdoses in New York prisons, supports scanning the mail if it saves even one life, and isn't bothered by having to resend the occasional letter. But, she contends that staff smuggling narcotics into prisons is a bigger problem than drugs coming through the U.S. mail. "The best approach is putting drug dogs in the officer's

locker rooms, because that's where it's coming in."

This debate is part of a bigger discussion playing out in states across the country and in the federal government. A bipartisan Senate bill, introduced in April 2025, would mandate that the Federal Bureau of Prisons perform both kinds of scanning at its prisons and jails systemwide. The bill would require the agency to digitally reproduce all mail within 24 hours for access on a tablet, and then to deliver the physical mail within 30 days, so long as it is determined to be free from drug contamination during screening.

Advocates for incarcerated people argue that digitizing personal mail invades privacy and further chips away at crucial connections with loved ones. And legal mail is trickier still, given confidentiality concerns. But mail is a real avenue for drugs in prisons, and corrections unions across the country have expressed concern that handling contaminated mail poses serious and even fatal risks to staff.

In 2024, correctional officer Marc Fisher died at a federal prison in Merced County,

California, after opening a letter laced with narcotics being passed off as legal mail. Three people involved in the mail scheme — including one incarcerated at the prison — were ultimately arrested and charged. The letter was found presumptively positive for fentanyl, synthetic marijuana and amphetamines. Fisher reported severe symptoms within minutes of exposure to the mail. His autopsy found that he died of natural causes from a heart attack, according to a government filing, but also that “the circumstances of death suggest external influences.”

The scientific consensus on brief or incidental drug exposure from things like handling drug-soaked mail is that it is extremely unlikely to cause a fatal overdose. Still, it’s not uncommon for police and corrections officers to experience odd symptoms after handling (or believing they have handled) illicit substances. Early in 2025, a New York State Police hazardous materials

team investigated the cause of guards fainting and exhibiting slurred speech after an alleged exposure to contraband. The team found no evidence of “toxic substances or drugs that might be responsible for the workers’ reactions.”

Just how much contraband is coming in through mailrooms is unclear. Available data is often spotty, if it’s tracked at all, and is collected by corrections agencies themselves, causing some to question its accuracy. It’s also not always clear that scanning mail actually helps reduce the flow of drugs: In the months after the Missouri Department of Corrections started digitizing mail, overdose deaths actually increased. A New Jersey correctional union representative, on the other hand, said digitizing mail led to a 50% decrease in overdose rates in state prisons.

In any event, both kinds of scanning are catching on quickly. In Tennessee, a pilot program to digitize mail at three women’s

facilities began on Aug. 1, with incoming personal mail to be sent to Maryland for scanning. In Illinois, there’s been a legislative push to ban most physical mail entering prisons, and the state department of corrections released new guidelines in late September 2025 stipulating that all non-privileged mail be scanned or photocopied.

The technology used to screen mail is also evolving rapidly, and is diverse across prison systems as different vendors seek to win contracts. While New York and Hawaii are using “T-ray” imaging technology, pitched as more sensitive and accurate than X-ray technology, others are using “hyperspectral imaging.” And early in 2025, the Virginia corrections department became the first in the world to pilot a CT-based scan (like the ones used in medicine) combined with AI machine-learning algorithms. ■

12.20.2024

Cops Took My Christmas Bike. Now I Give Kids the Freedom To Ride.

For formerly incarcerated activist Dorsey Nunn, the most wonderful time of the year is a holiday bicycle giveaway for kids with parents in prison.

By DORSEY NUNN

Bicycles and the winter holiday season have always been tied up together for me. They speak to love, freedom and the loss of it, shame — and revolutionary acts of philanthropy by formerly incarcerated people.

My earliest Christmas memory stars a deep purple bike with a banana seat and cruiser-style handlebars. It was 1960, and I was 9 years old. The bike was too glorious for wrapping, towering over the other presents that sat lumpy and small under the shiny synthetic tree. Somebody had bent the front wheel’s chrome forks down, giving it a low-rider slope that made me feel like a little man before I even took the thing for a spin.

That bike meant a lot, given how hard my parents had been working to do right by me and my seven siblings. Nearly five years earlier they’d moved us from a housing project in South San Francisco to a home in Belle Haven. This neighborhood on the peninsula was part of the growing suburb of Menlo Park, but it sure as hell didn’t feel like it. Because right after the Nunn family moved in, the neigh-

borhood turned from White to Black, almost overnight.

Real estate salesmen whispered in the ears of White homeowners that a “Negro” invasion was coming, so they better sell immediately. Meanwhile, the sweet, zero-down payment deals they offered to Black families like mine seemed too good to be true. And they were. Those loans blew up when balloon payments came due. By December 1960, we were on our third house in the neighborhood. My father was working two jobs, scratching his way forward in search of the American dream. When us kids got a little older, my mother would join him in the low-wage workforce — taking care of White kids and cleaning White homes.

The freeway hemmed Belle Haven in from the rich White neighborhoods to the west, turning our community into an invisible cage. But that Christmas I felt free. I had my first bike! I rode it with pride, popping wheelies just a few blocks from our house. That feeling lasted six days, ending when I heard a police

siren behind me. Two cops got out. The big one picked up the bike to look for a serial number. “It’s stolen,” he said, not even looking at me. Then he tossed it in the trunk and they were gone.

On the slow walk home, I puzzled it out. Maybe my father or one of my brothers had stolen it. Maybe they’d bought it from someone who had. One thing I knew for sure: The bike wasn’t mine anymore. I was a Black kid, and that made me a suspect. That shit feeling marked the birth of my rage against law enforcement. And it played on repeat. In my invisible cage, there was no presumption of innocence.

I had my next memorable encounter with law enforcement two years later. There was one pedestrian bridge that crossed the Bayshore Freeway, and that’s the route I walked with my childhood best friend, Nate Harrington, to get to the park where we played our Little League baseball games.

One day we were crossing the wide lawn of an elementary school when we saw a hunk of



Volunteer Ayanna Elliott-Green, left, All of Us or None co-founder Dorsey Nunn, second from right, and two bike recipients at the organization's 23rd Annual Community Giveback in 2022. TASIN SABIR

metal winking at us in the sunlight. We pitched some rocks at it, baseball style. Then we took it with us, a cool chunk of junk.

We made it one block before those sirens pulsed again. My supposed crime this time: stealing public property. That piece of metal turned out to be a sprinkler. Instead of taking us to the station, the officers brought us home and let our fathers do the beating.

Nate and I were so upset, we devised a fucked-up plan to run away that relied on the freedom only a bike can provide to a kid. By this time, we each had one to call our own, so we rode without looking back. About 14 miles to the north, we hunkered down in a public bathroom, shivering in the cold fog. We didn't last long after that.

Inside the invisible cage where we grew up, it was the police, not school teachers, who were molding our future. They were treating us like thugs when we were just being boys. The more they defined me and my friends as suspects and criminals who didn't belong — even in our own neighborhoods — the more we accepted the identity they imposed on us. We became what they told us we were.

I stole a lot of bikes from the esteemed institution of Stanford University, which was so close but so out of reach for anything other than thieving. I pulled off some fine burglaries on that side of town, too. That's as lofty as my notion of Black brilliance got back then. Drugs complicated the picture — first weed and then heroin when it came flooding in after the weed supply dried up.

I was 19 years old when I took part in a robbery that left the store owner dead. When I told my father I wouldn't snitch and give up the shooter, I saw him weep for the first time.

When I entered the state prison system in early 1972 with a life sentence, I had a son and a daughter with two different mothers. My kids needed a father, but I hadn't even started shaving yet. There would be no family Christmas for me for many years to come.

I served my first two years in Deuel Vocational Institution, a prison east of the Bay Area that was so violent in the 1970s it was known as Gladiator School. I ran into plenty of friends and acquaintances there, but what shocked me most was to hear Nate — who was quiet and brilliant — call out my name. Because our schools in Belle Haven had turned into the Black version of "Lord of the Flies," I was barely literate. It was Nate who taught me how to read inside my new cage made of concrete and steel. He taught me how to reason and how to dream. I spent a lot of time in the hole, mostly for allying myself with any Black revolutionary brother who could feed my intellect. The guards would stoke racial tensions among the mostly Black, Mexican and White population, stand back as we beat and shanked each other, then lob tear gas and fire bullets into the shitstorm they'd created.

After Gladiator School, I spent seven years at a place that proved even more violent — San Quentin State Prison. Survival required me to sacrifice my humanity in ways I would spend decades processing and deeply regretting. But I was fortunate to have my godsister Shirl Miles and my pen pal Kathy Labriola in my corner. They visited often, offering me friendship and softness and helping me preserve a thin thread of a lifeline to my inner self. They allowed me to reflect, and the winter holiday season was always significant.

As I grew into my manhood, I recognized my father's personal sacrifice. His absence from my Little League and Pop Warner games stung because I wanted to shine for him. But bouncing from cell to cell, I came to understand that his absence stemmed from the fact that he was working his ass off to keep the rent paid and food on the table.

This realization turned the spotlight back on me. I knew my responsibility was to take care of my own kids and provide for them. Every Christmas was a reminder that I had failed in that responsibility.

I engaged in some risky hustles so I could pass some cash to my mother during the holidays — to make sure my little girl had something she could call a gift from her daddy. My son would have to wait. His mom and I were on the outs when I was locked up.

The day I walked out the gates of San Quentin on parole — Oct. 22, 1981 — my plan was to eat a Winchell's donut, drink a Henry Weinhard's beer, smoke some weed and find a sweet sister to snuggle up with.

Instead, I wore holes in my prison-issued Naugahyde shoes searching for my son since I'd lost touch with his mother. When I found him two days later, I had \$10 in my pocket. I gave him \$9. It was the least I could do after so many years of absence and failed responsibility, and it wasn't near enough.

Since I got out of prison, I've never held a job that wasn't dedicated to improving the conditions for human beings living in and coming out of cages. I worked for half a dozen years as a paralegal for the nonprofit Prison Law Office, sitting face-to-face with brothers on death row, recognizing how easily I could have been one of them.

The trauma proved to be too much. I gave in to crack addiction in the late 1980s. But I got clean and helped build Free At Last, a drug program in my neighborhood to help fix the mess I helped make. Then, with a year of sobriety under my belt, I was privileged to go to work for Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, eventually becoming the longtime executive director of the Oakland-based nonprofit. Together, we helped bring an end to the shackling of incarcerated pregnant women and to indefinite long-term solitary confinement in California prisons.

In 2003, a handful of other formerly incarcerated people had come on board as staff. In casual meetings, we all agreed: We were sick of others speaking for us, using our personal experience as garnish for their policy work, however well-meaning. So a group of us got together for a marathon planning session and created All of Us or None, a grassroots movement of formerly incarcerated people

demanding restoration of our full civil and human rights — in our own voices.

With our Ban the Box campaign, we've successfully pushed for laws and measures across the country that eliminate questions about criminal history from job applications. We have also worked to re-enfranchise voters in jail or on felony parole so they can exercise their citizenship, sit on juries and influence our governance. Despite all those accomplishments, one of things I'm most proud of is giving bicycles to kids with incarcerated parents during the winter holidays.

The Big Bike Giveaway started small. In 1999, a prisoner inside San Quentin who'd been repairing used bikes let me know a new shipment had come in.

At the time, some of the men I'd practiced political education with in prison had been gathering to figure out how to do good. We called ourselves "Timers," and our crew included community activist Robert Moody and former Black Panthers Geronimo Ji-Jaga Pratt and Arthur "Tha" League.

In 2000, the Timers got with San Quentin officials and asked for the bikes so we could give them to kids whose parents were incarcerated. We focused on a housing project in West Oakland, surveying the place to see how many adults were missing because they were locked behind bars. Their kids were the first to get bikes, and we let the children know the gifts were from their parents.

San Quentin helped steer bikes in our direction for a few years, but we knew we had a problem when the assistant warden asked me to tell the kids the bikes came courtesy of the prison. For them, it was a smooth PR move. For me, it was a nonstarter. As Addie Kitchen, a correctional officer I'd known since the '70s, walked me out, I said, "These kids don't need to know that San Quentin loves them. I'm gonna tell them that their parents love them."

So, we parted ways with San Quentin and started scraping together the money on our own, lining up at midnight before Black Friday sales with cash burning holes in our pockets. By this time, All of Us or None was a growing movement. Some of us who gathered at those early meetings had been out of prison for months or weeks, even days. Others for decades. But we'd still ask everyone in attendance to give up \$50 to buy a bike. Even chickenshit people who would sell you a loosie would reach in their pockets to make a donation. Others would say, "Hey, I can't give you \$50, can I help put the bicycles together?" The answer was always yes.

Eventually we changed the name of the Big Bike Giveaway to the Community Giveback to emphasize how we were collectively partici-

pating in philanthropy. The act of giving back isn't something only rich people do.

Year after year, I've stood at microphones and asked a growing crew of volunteers, "How many of y'all have stolen a bike?" Plenty of hands go up. "Well," I shout, "now's your chance to give one back!"

In the crowd are men and women who, like me, sat in their cells feeling inadequacy and shame in their failed responsibility. Doing right for other people's children helps fill the hole.

As members of All of Us or None became better organizers, we also became better fundraisers. An army of formerly incarcerated volunteers still distributes the bikes at our Community Giveaways, but we raise the money to get them from outside donors. We buy the bikes in bulk, along with a helmet for each child.

The second Saturday of every December, we throw up a big tent, light up the barbecues and turn up the music. There's face painting for the kids and gifts to pamper the mothers and grandmothers. Art supplies are set up at a separate table so kids can make thank-you cards for their loved ones inside. Because, as we tell them, these bikes are from them.

These days we're reaching out to the chaplains inside prisons — including women's facilities — to make sure we get the word out. They provide applications to anyone who has a kid who needs a bicycle and can make it to the festivities. At our 2022 giveaway, a 9-year-old named Paris arrived with her grandmother. Her daddy had been locked up since she was 2, and her grandmother told me that trust between them was raw and delicate. I got to see Paris' eyes go wide as her dad called from California State Prison, Sacramento, and told

her, "I bought you a bike. That's why you're there, to pick your bike!" Listening to that little girl speak to her father, I knew I had hit the ball the right way.

Dec. 14, 2024, marked our 25th annual Community Giveback. We raised enough money to give away 280 bicycles. And we did something a little different. We sent those bikes into San Quentin so prisoners there could help put them together. We wanted them to taste a bit of the joy that comes with giving back.

I'm 73 now and semi-retired. Many people my age have been getting out of prison with nowhere to land where they're treated with dignity. Legal Services for Prisoners with Children is working to turn the unused parsonage of a West Oakland church into supportive housing for those elders, but too many are dying in the meantime.

As for the nearly 20 million of us on the outside marked by felony convictions, too many are still considered suspects in our own neighborhoods. Revolution is a slow process, and there have been setbacks. We keep pushing. In the meantime, we'll be giving away bikes in the name of those still locked inside, knitting our communities back together. ■

Dorsey Nunn retired as the executive director of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children in 2024. His book, "What Kind of Bird Can't Fly: A Memoir of Resilience and Resurrection," was published that year by Heyday Books. Co-authored by longtime journalist Lee Romney, it tracks Nunn's personal and professional story from boyhood to incarceration in the revolutionary 1970s, the tough-on-crime prison explosion of the '80s and '90s, and the creation of All of Us or None, a national movement of formerly incarcerated people demanding restoration of their full civil and human rights.

When the 'Diddy' Case Hits Home

10.3.2025

As a kid, Joseph Wilson was sexually exploited by someone who was supposed to take care of him. The trial of Sean "Diddy" Combs resurfaced old wounds.

By JOSEPH WILSON

Additional research by AKIBA SOLOMON

On Oct. 3, 2025, a federal judge sentenced Sean "Diddy" Combs to 50 months in prison for two counts of transportation to engage in prostitution. The 12 months he spent in jail counted toward his prison time. He was also fined \$500,000, the maximum possible. New York's Joseph Wilson filed this essay days after the July 2, 2025, verdict in the highly publicized trial. The Marshall Project published it on the day of Combs' sentencing.



SUN BAI FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

On July 2, 2025, as I ran a final lap through Green Haven Correctional Facility's yard, I saw a man with his arms in the air. "They're squirting baby oil up at the Manhattan court!" he shouted while making squeezing gestures with his hands. This is how I learned that Sean "Diddy" Combs had been acquitted of the most serious charges in his federal RICO trial for racketeering conspiracy, sex trafficking and transportation to engage in prostitution.

The hip-hop music mogul famously stockpiled baby oil for days-long, drug-fueled sessions where he would watch — and sometimes film — his then-girlfriend Casandra "Cassie" Ventura having sex with male escorts he'd hired. Separately, an ex-girlfriend, only known to the public as "Jane," participated in these so-called freak-offs or hotel nights.

Prosecutors argued that the father of seven, then 55, used domestic violence, financial abuse, threats and drugs to coerce Jane and Ventura — a singer 17 years younger than him, and who was signed to his Bad Boy record label — into hundreds of these encounters. The racketeering conspiracy charge stemmed from what prosecutors described as an inner circle of associates and employees who facilitated and covered up his alleged crimes.

At the end of the eight-week trial, Combs was convicted of two counts of transportation to engage in prostitution but acquitted of racketeering and sex trafficking. His defense team has argued for a 14-month prison sentence, citing his personal growth and recovery from

drug addiction.

But on Sept. 30, prosecutors asked for a minimum of 11 years in a pre-sentence submission, according to CBS News. For Ventura, it's a safety issue: "My worries that Sean Combs or his associates will come after me and my family [are] my reality," the mother of three reportedly wrote in a letter accompanying the submission. "I have in fact moved my family out of the New York area and am keeping as private and quiet as I possibly can because I am so scared that if he walks free, his first actions will be swift retribution towards me and others who spoke up about his abuse at trial."

For '80s babies like myself, the man formerly known as "Puffy" or "Puff Daddy" was an icon. He taught us how to dress and dance, and he influenced our musical tastes. Now, through his trial, he's teaching us about sexual violence, a lesson many of us miss. Since I started reading up on the laws Combs was accused of breaking, I've been thinking about how commercial sex, coercion and exploitation have shown up in my own life — and why I never told anyone about it.

Commercial sex is roughly defined as performing sexual acts in exchange for food, money, housing and other things of value. When you add in threats of violence, financial control, lies and other harms, it becomes a form of sex trafficking.

I know firsthand how this goes. At age 12, my caregiver — a role model and a religious leader — proposed to show me how to

masturbate "properly." I thought his intention was to teach me how to be a man. But after a while, I realized that things had taken a turn. As a child, I was powerless to stop the abuse.

I lived with a group of other young men, and I learned that they were also subjected to such treatment. I began to take notice of the stark contrasts between those who participated and those who didn't. The boys who complied had better access to basic necessities, like food, spending money and clothing. Because we were under 18, what happened to us met the legal definition of sex trafficking.

At age 14, I made the choice to refuse his advances. My options were to report the crime or resort to crime to support myself.

I did not report. With my pain, anger, low self-esteem and mistrust in tow, I entered the criminal lifestyle.

As a criminal, I could be independent and feel safe. There was an abhorrence of pedophilia embedded in New York City street culture that I could rally behind.

Besides, reporting the abuse just didn't make sense to me. I could not trust the people I had loved, so why would I trust the police and child services? I had neither heard nor seen anything good about them. And I wondered who would believe me anyway. After all, I participated, just like Cassie and "Jane," who told the court, "I felt obligated to perform because my partner was paying my rent," according to *The Hollywood Reporter*.

For years, other survivors accused my caregiver of abuse — mostly through

grumbling and face-to-face call-outs. But their disclosures were dismissed as rumors. This man was able to use his good social standing, community influence and cult-like following to insulate himself from scrutiny. He also hid behind the trope of “the good Black man being taken down.” But what he relied on most was survivors’ shame. This shame quieted a storm of voices, leaving the outcry of individuals in the breeze.

It’s important for me to note that speaking up doesn’t guarantee results. Ventura and Jane both testified in detail about Combs beating them, feeding them large quantities of drugs, and threatening to leak the recordings of their “freak-offs” to the public. Prosecutors presented visual evidence to back up their claims of violence, and Combs’ team conceded to it. And yet the verdict suggested

that these women had not been coerced. The jury seemed to buy into the defense’s argument that the case was only a matter of “love, jealousy, infidelity and money,” as PBS News quoted one of his attorneys as saying early in the trial.

Perhaps the prosecution should have called an expert witness to explain why victims seem to willingly participate in sexual abuse. They should have quoted the anti-sexual violence organization RAINN, which points out that people who are high or “manipulated into saying yes” cannot give consent. They should have added that saying yes once doesn’t mean that will always be the case.

Another major lesson I hope people learn from this trial is that commercial sex isn’t just prostitution by force — think poor women with violent pimps at truck stops or

immigrant women being trafficked in shipping containers. I can tell you from experience that a lot of survivors aren’t sobbing in the dark corner of a room, chained to a bed or fed drugs until they are in a stupor.

Most of us are ordinary exploitable people — naive children, loving partners and ambitious employees. We are groomed to put our trust in someone who violates it over and over again. Then we’re left facing shame, powerlessness and skepticism. After all, who is going to believe you once you’ve had your first “hotel night”? ■

Joseph Wilson is a father, self-taught composer, librettist, singer, songwriter, pianist, art curator, writer and co-founder of the Sing Sing Family Collective. He is incarcerated at Green Haven Correctional Facility in Stormville, New York.



Minnesota Correctional Facility - Stillwater prison in Bayport, Minnesota, in 2020.

JOHN MINCHILLO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Why Closing Prisons — Even Bad Ones — Is Complicated

07.19.2025

From politics to economics, closing old or bad prisons is not always straightforward. Even some incarcerated people have mixed emotions.

By JAMILES LARTEY

In July 2025, the Trump administration moved to keep the federal prison camp in Duluth, Minnesota, open. The minimum security facility had previously been slated for deactivation by Biden administration officials who cited asbestos, lead and condemned buildings as safety concerns, alongside persistent staffing shortages that made it difficult to operate. In a rare moment of bipartisan agreement, the decision earned applause from Democratic lawmakers who had strongly opposed the closure.

The reprieve means that roughly 90 staff members won’t have to relocate or find new jobs. Officials told The Star Tribune they expect that the incarcerated population — which had fallen from over 700 to less than 300 during the transfer process — will soon grow again. Democratic U.S. Sen. Tina Smith called the decision “a major victory for the workers, families, and community that have fought to keep these good-paying, union jobs in the region,” in a statement.

This dynamic, where taxpayer spending on prisons is pitched as economic activity for prison towns, has been dubbed by some academics as correctional or “penal Keynesianism,” a nod to the economic theory that promotes government spending to boost growth. Research varies on how much economic benefit prisons actually deliver to communities in the aggregate, but it often finds that prisons deliver much smaller long-term benefits to communities than promised, especially in rural towns banking on them as economic lifelines.

Of course, that big-picture view isn’t very convincing to people whose livelihoods are at stake. In Centre County, Pennsylvania, local officials have rallied to stave off the proposed closure of the Rockview state prison and the closure of the Quehanna Boot Camp in nearby Clearfield County. While the region’s economy is largely dominated by Penn State University, prison jobs remain an important source of blue-collar employment in surrounding towns.

Corrections unions have been out front in voicing these concerns. “In nearly every case, a state

prison is the primary economic development engine of its area. Families in these communities deserve better,” John Eckenrode, president of a Pennsylvania corrections union, told the Pennsylvania Capital-Star. County commissioners estimated the closure would result in nearly \$120 million in economic losses in the tri-county area.

Reporting on the closures for Penn Live, Tirzah Christopher captured many of the themes that often emerge across the country when prisons are slated for shutdown. While corrections workers and local politicians worry about economic fallout, Gov. Josh Shapiro is touting projected savings in the hundreds of millions, and decarceration advocates see it as a chance to shrink the size of the system.

But those who wish to see fewer prisons also note that closures are not a panacea unless they are accompanied by broader reforms. Regarding a planned closure of Minnesota’s Stillwater state prison, organizer David Boehnke wrote that the process should be paired with investments in recidivism programming and diverting people with nonviolent offenses away from prison altogether.

In Minnesota, currently and formerly incarcerated people have also put together a coalition to demand a say in shaping what comes next. At a press conference in May 2025, several men who had served time at Stillwater spoke candidly about their experiences and described a complicated relationship with the facility. Some said the culture of the prison was better than others, but that “the physical structure of the building didn’t reflect” that reality, reported KARE 11. But they also acknowledge that closures can be deeply disruptive. Some heard concerns from men inside that being transferred might leave them double-bunked with a cellmate who wasn’t on their same rehabilitative path, and who might set them back.

That tension is one commonly expressed by incarcerated people. Writing for The Marshall Project’s Life Inside series, Rashon Venable described how he worried about losing the relationships he had built when officials announced the closure of New York’s Sullivan Correctional Facility, where he’d been for three years. Similarly, Johanna Mills wrote that her first emotion was fear when she learned the FCI-Dublin prison in California, where she was incarcerated, was closing — even if the closure was in part due to a pervasive culture

of sexual abuse. As a survivor of sexual violence, Mills wrote that “relocation can exacerbate that violence — even when the place you’re leaving is so toxic that you can’t stay there.”

Stateville Prison in Illinois is yet another that’s been deemed too toxic to continue operations. The state moved to close the century-old facility after a watchdog group declared conditions there “decrepit, unsafe and inhumane,” and a federal judge ordered it closed. In the spring of 2025, the state finished transferring all the people incarcerated there to other facilities so they could begin work on a \$900 million rebuilding project for Stateville, as well as Logan, the state’s primary women’s prison.

Already, the effort has some worried about how money is being spent. According to the Chicago Tribune in May 2025, the Illinois Department of Corrections was proposing to spend more on the facility in the upcoming year than two years ago, despite the fact that it’s been emptied. Officials said it was because a minimum security unit and a reception center on the Stateville grounds are still operational.

It’s indicative of how prison spending and cost-savings are often more complicated than they first appear. In California, for example, the state has closed several prisons in recent years as part of a plan to shrink its correctional footprint. The Sacramento Bee reported that the state has claimed nearly \$1 billion in savings. But the advocacy group Californians United for a Responsible Budget noted that the state has also spent about \$300 million maintaining those shuttered facilities in a “warm shutdown” so that they don’t deteriorate further. The state has said that zoning, regulatory and liability issues limit its ability to sell, repurpose or demolish the structures.

Meanwhile in Wisconsin, prison closure advocates are having trouble getting their efforts off the ground politically. While there is widespread agreement that the 127-year-old Green Bay Correctional Institution is overdue for closure, disagreements over how to close it led to the effort being stripped from the state budget in June 2025. The Wisconsin Examiner reported that criminal justice advocates in the state are frustrated. “You’re talking about a facility that was built in the 1800s ... And you’re putting people in this facility in 2025, and you are expecting them to come home sane,” Sean Wilson, an advocate who was previously incarcerated there, told the Examiner. ■



Love Beyond Bars: Raymond and Cassandra

07.26.2024

Raymond Flanks spent nearly 39 years in Louisiana lockups for a murder he didn’t commit. Luckily, he found love with an old friend, Cassandra Delpit.

Photographs by CAMILLE FARRAH LENAIN

As-told-to by CARLA CANNING

Photo editing CELINA FANG

Word editing by AKIBA SOLOMON



Raymond and Cassandra reconnected at the Angola Prison Rodeo in 2012. They took pictures together on subsequent visits at the prison.

In December 1983, at the age of 20, Raymond Flanks was arrested for robbing a New Orleans supermarket. He pleaded guilty to that crime, but not before police found a gun on him that they wrongly connected to the fatal shooting of an elderly man named Martin Carnesi.

The state's case relied heavily on the account of a single eyewitness to the botched robbery that claimed Carnesi's life: his traumatized widow. Although the suspect she described did not match Flanks' age or appearance, police put his picture in a photo lineup. She picked him out with the help of a flashlight.

Flanks was tried twice. The first jury deadlocked. The second found him guilty, and in 1985 he was sentenced to life without parole. He wrote to the Innocence Project dozens of times, but he lacked the DNA evidence the organization needed to take his case.

Innocence Project New Orleans agreed to help Flanks in 2020. In their investigation, they discovered that the prosecution had withheld key evidence that might have led police to another man. Louisiana agreed to vacate Flanks' conviction on Nov. 17, 2022. He walked out of the courtroom a free man after nearly 39 years of incarceration. He'd served most of his time at the notorious Louisiana State

Penitentiary, which is better known as Angola.

One bright spot in Flanks' ordeal was Cassandra Delpit, an old friend who became his life partner. In this third installment of our series, "Love Beyond Bars," Raymond describes how the couple bonded at the Angola Prison Rodeo.

Cassandra and I grew up in the same neighborhood, but we lost touch when I was arrested. I used to walk by her house to get to work when I was 15 or 16 years old. We hadn't seen each other in years, but had begun speaking in letters when she surprised me at the Angola Prison Rodeo in 2012.

The rodeo has tents, food, events and people selling crafts like any festival in society. I was sitting in my tent, trying to sell the rocking chairs, tables and little jewelry boxes that I had made. Next thing you know, I heard a voice. I looked up and there Cassandra was. She had said she might come, but I wasn't really expecting her to. She got some food for us, and we ate and talked while I was selling my products.

After that, she began to come to each rodeo. Sometimes she'd bring her grandkids or friends. The rodeo allowed [me] to get away from the mundane, to move around and

have a little liberty. But I never once felt free because we were always being monitored. You had officers always walking around and cameras everywhere.

Still, the rodeo was a big part of Cassandra and I actually being able to see one another in public. Those were great times, but in the back of my mind, I knew that I was being watched. I always anticipated having these moments without being under security.

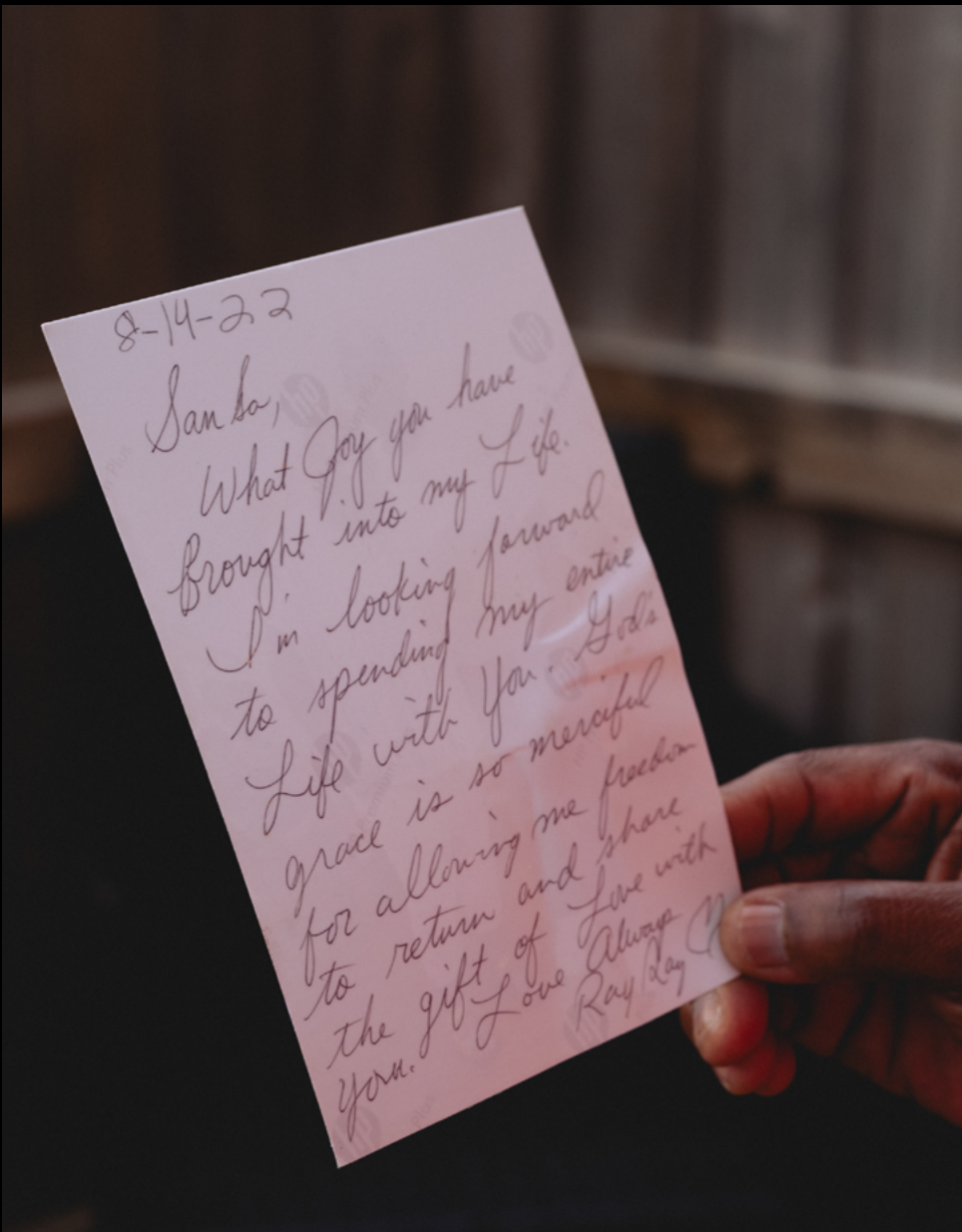
Camille Farrah Lenain is a French-Algerian documentary photographer who grew up in Paris. She relocated to New Orleans in 2013. Her photographs have been exhibited internationally, including at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, the Arab World Institute, Photoville and Les Rencontres d'Arles.

Carla Canning is an engagement journalist and contract editor at Prison Journalism Project. She previously worked on Life Inside as The Marshall Project's Tow audience engagement fellow. At the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism, she created a website guide for people visiting loved ones incarcerated in New York State prisons. ■



Raymond was exonerated of a murder he did not commit after nearly 39 years of incarceration. Cassandra reconnected with him while he was incarcerated and then continued visiting him for 10 years.

Cassandra holds a letter from Raymond,
handwritten on the back of a photograph.



Cassandra began visiting Raymond at Angola in 2012.



TARA ANAND FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

The Heartbreak, Rage — and Discipline — of Immigration Court Watching

As an observer, Tim Murphy had to calmly prepare immigrants to face masked ICE agents. “You’re witnessing unspeakable cruelty, but you can’t lash out.”

By **TIM MURPHY**

In July 2025, after watching horrifying footage of masked immigration agents snatching civilians off the street under the guise of fighting crime, I decided to volunteer as an immigration court observer at New York City’s 26 Federal Plaza. This was one of many federal immigration courts across the country where President Donald Trump’s brutal leadership had dispatched agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), as well as a hodgepodge of other federal agencies, to arrest immigrants who were dutifully showing up to long-scheduled court hearings. Many of these people had no idea they were walking into a trap. I watched judges grant people 18-month continuances, only to have masked federal agents — usually burly men of all races — take them away to a holding floor. They were held in rooms without basic accommodations for several days before being shipped off to a larger detention center somewhere in the U.S.

The point of court watching was not merely to observe. We were there to gently, calmly tell immigrants awaiting their hearings that there was a chance they might be taken away regardless of their hearing outcome. We asked these people — whom we called “immigrant community members,” “neighbors,” or “compas,” short for *compadres* in Spanish — if they would share their vital information. We asked for their name, phone number, immigration number and their emergency contacts. If they were indeed detained, we let their contacts know, and also tried to connect them to legal aid. Often, we were the only link between a compa and the outside world once they were effectively disappeared.

We were not there to obstruct, jeer at, or otherwise mix it up with the masked agents doing the disappearing. Doing so could have gotten us arrested. It also could have jeopardized the entire court-watching effort. Though it’s perfectly legal for citizens to be in the building and observe the hearings, court administrators had threatened us with expulsion if we interfered too much.

And that was a challenge for me. As an early member of progressive direct action groups such as Gays Against Guns and Rise and Resist and various HIV/AIDS rights organizations, I had long participated in confrontational protests where it not only felt good, but it was expected that you name, shame and blame as loudly as possible.

But immigration court watching required stoicism. You came within mere feet of faceless thugs doing the Trump administration’s sadistic and arguably unlawful bidding, but you couldn’t block or provoke them in any way. You were witnessing unspeakable cruelty, but you couldn’t lash out. You had to remember that you were there strictly as a friend of immigrant community members on what may have been one of the scariest days of their lives. You were also there to alert the outside world to what had happened to them.

Many of the compas were migrants and asylum-seekers coming to court for routine check-ins that probably wouldn’t have led to immediate deportation before Trump 2.0. They were walking out of court thinking they were good until their next hearing, and instead, they were being ensnared by this country’s ever-growing deportation machine.

If they were lucky enough not to be nabbed when they exited the courtroom, then our job extended to walking them out of the building and to the nearest subway.

HOW WE COURT WATCHED

Because we were dealing with people who were vulnerable and afraid, we started by introducing ourselves. If we spoke their language, we told them that we were their neighbors and we were there to help. (If we didn’t, we gave them a flyer with all the necessary info spelled out in either Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Haitian Kreyol, Russian, Spanish, Turkish or Wolof.) We then asked them if they wanted to fill out a small information sheet with their name, country of birth, A-Number, phone number, and the name and number of an

emergency contact. We told them that if they were detained, we would pass this sheet to another volunteer who would reach out to their emergency contact.

Because our neighbors could be separated from their cell phones during their arrest or detention, we advised them to write down essentials on their arm, such as their emergency contact’s name and phone number and 9233#, the phone number of the National Immigration Detention Hotline.

When we could, we sat with our compas in the courtrooms, where the judges varied from total assholes, who clearly didn’t want us there — to laid-back and ally-ish, suggesting to me that they were horrified by what was happening outside their courtrooms and welcomed our mitigating effect.

After the court proceedings — the ones I witnessed tended to take 15 to 20 minutes — we walked out with our neighbors. This was the heart-pounding moment of truth: They would either be apprehended by those masked agents, or allowed to walk right by them and proceed down the elevators and out of the building. If the former happened, amid our dejection, we immediately passed the information they gave us to a central organizer.

If it was the latter, we offered to escort them out. That’s because ICE agents might have been lurking by the elevators, on the ground floor or just outside the building. If a compa didn’t have a lawyer — and many did not — we alerted the central organizers to try to connect them to legal representation. We could never fully know why one of our neighbors was detained, or where ICE agents would catch them. There was a seat-of-your-pants vibe as volunteers split into small groups to strategize.

A TALE OF TWO SHIFTS

When I started court watching in early July 2025, I left my shifts both happy and dejected. July 11, my second day, was relatively happy. My watch partner and I were working with two compas who received

follow-up hearing dates in early 2027. We were able to safely escort them to the subway, and they repeatedly thanked us for being there.

It was not a good day for other watchers who witnessed their neighbors being detained. In one case, when a terrified man began yelling “Ayúdame!” — “Help me!” in Spanish — ICE agents tackled him to the ground. During the month or so that I court watched, I saw countless excruciating videos of similarly chaotic apprehensions, including ones with women and children wailing in agony as the man who was presumably their spouse and father was taken away.

Although scenes like these made my blood boil, it was still healing to my soul to be working with a group of people who, like me, were so offended by what they were seeing that they were doing what they could — rather than just going about their lives. (Many of them were some damn tough middle-age ladies with frizzy humidity hair and WNYC tote bags, and I loved them all.) Even if the people we were trying to help never saw another free day in the U.S., I hoped that they remembered that not everyone in this country was against them.

July 30 — my third time court watching — was brutal. My team and I were accompanying two immigrants who showed up dutifully for their hearings. One was a woman from Colombia who actually wanted to tell the judge that she was ready to self-deport. I wasn’t allowed to go into the courtroom with her. As she exited, I seized my chance to get into the courtroom with the compa I’d attached myself to, a soft-spoken Senegalese man.

Later, someone on my court-watching team told me they’d witnessed the Colombian woman taken away by the two masked female immigration agents wearing all black, backed up by their large, unmasked male colleague who, in a T-shirt and jeans, looked like any schlub who just walked in off the street. Who even are these people?, I constantly asked myself as I stared at these mercenaries.

The Senegalese man I was with was hoping to get an extension so he could continue looking for an affordable lawyer for his asylum case. We sat together for 90 minutes with me speaking to him in French, even though his better language was Wolof. The hardest part was telling him that he would most likely be deported. I knew this because when we walked down the hall to go to the bathroom before his hearing, one of those two female immigration agents tried to detain him. They only paused when a waiting room security guard told them he hadn’t yet had his hearing.

When he finally did, the judge granted him a continuance. He was ordered to come back to court in early 2027, but I suspected this meant nothing. Sure enough, as soon as we walked out of the courtroom, the two masked women and the unmasked man took him away. He went without resistance, his head hanging. I called out to him, “I’m sorry! We’ll tell your emergency contact and try to get you legal aid.”

And then he disappeared around a corner.

This was around 11 a.m., the usual end to our shift. My team and I had been there since 8:30 a.m. Deflated, we left the building to get coffee and commiserate. I said that in several years of different kinds of activism, this was both the saddest and most enraging work I had ever done. The groups organizing this work hosted both in-person and online debriefs after shifts so volunteers could process the emotional toll of doing this work.

THE DEPORTATION MACHINE UP CLOSE

I started this work in July, about two weeks after masked ICE agents arrested New York City Comptroller and then-mayoral candidate Brad Lander for linking arms with a man being taken into custody. “Do you have a judicial warrant?” Lander repeatedly asked as agents apprehended the man. But as lawless as it may have seemed, immigration enforcers didn’t need a judicial warrant to arrest a non-citizen in a public space. (They could obtain an administrative warrant, which doesn’t require a signature by a judge.)

And since Congress had ballooned the budget for immigration enforcement to approximately \$170 billion over four years, there was little doubt that these disappearances would happen more often and in many more venues, including: farms, restaurants, hospitals, parking lots, and houses of worship during sermons and preschool pickup. In this climate, more U.S. citizens who were nine months pregnant would be surrounded and arrested by masked male Customs and Border Protection agents in military garb.

To ensure that there were enough workers to carry out deportations, ICE was offering new agents signing bonuses of up to \$50,000 and student loan repayment and forgiveness up to \$60,000

To hold the thousands of people ICE is deporting, the Trump administration was using empty prison beds and reopening troubled correctional facilities, like Leavenworth in Kansas.

And states had passed dozens of anti-immigration bills that fueled the Trump administration’s crackdown. In an Aug. 1 article, The Marshall Project found at least 34 new statutes in 2025 that “encourage state and local police to cooperate with federal authorities, criminalize aid to undocumented immigrants, create state immigration enforcement bureaus and more.”

Even as I continued to do this work, I remained shocked that it was happening. I wasn’t naive. I knew the U.S. had a brutal history, on our soil and overseas, of physically capturing people. And yet this moment still outraged me. For one thing, I couldn’t believe that most of the agents were masked, and many refused to show their badges if they even had one. It was a reminder that Gestapo tactics, storm-trooper tactics — the kind of thing we associate with dystopian movies — were the order of the day in Trump’s ever-more authoritarian United States.

The other thing that outraged me was that, according to the Cato Institute, the majority of the people taken by ICE had no criminal records, and nearly all of them had no records of violent crime. In a quest to fulfill Trump’s pre-election promise of mass deportations, the regime was scooping up countless garden-variety undocumented immigrants, many of whom had been quietly living and working here for years. They were also picking up recent migrants and asylum-seekers who were once insulated from deportation by the Biden-era expansion of Temporary Protective Status. As of August 2025, the Trump administration had rolled back this humanitarian status for immigrants from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

I dreaded the thought of these often brutal apprehensions — at least one of which I witnessed via my social media feeds — penetrating deeper into American life, including my own majority-immigrant neighborhood in Queens, New York.

I was involved with a handful of groups who were poised to organize nonviolent mass civil disobedience in response to this escalation. I desperately wished this wasn’t happening. But if it did, I couldn’t wait for the chance to stand with my neighbors and scream into the face of those masked goons what I’d wanted to scream for so long:

How can you live with yourself, doing what you do? Why don’t you show your face, you coward? Do you tell your own kids that you separate other kids from their parents for a living?

In the meantime, I kept showing up for court accompaniment (even as reports were coming in that fewer and fewer immigrants were showing up for their court dates). I realized it was good for me. I had almost always expressed my thirst for justice and fairness through anger. But we didn’t have that option in immigration court. So what was left is an act of love — the quiet, frustrated love of sitting or standing by someone’s side through a process that will culminate in either a bit more freedom or the abrupt end of their American dream. The comfort of talking to them in their own language, or a gentle hand on their back or a squeeze of their shoulder. The profoundly good feeling of walking them to the train, knowing they’re going home, at least for a while, to their family or friends. The rightness of centering the vulnerable over the villains.

After all, if those things — gentleness, kindness, compassion, love — are not at the center of all fights for what’s right, then what’s the point of rage in the first place? ■

Tim Murphy is a New York City-based freelance health journalist, the author of novels including “Christodora,” and the creator of “The Cattan Chronicles,” a Substack featuring interviews with famous and notable older gay men.

LOCAL FOCUS

News and
Information
From Our Local
Newsrooms

LETTER FROM LOUIS

Hello readers,

In this issue of *News Inside*, the Local Focus examines the disturbing and tragic conditions inside county jails. Our team of local reporters, located in Cleveland, Jackson and St. Louis, examined conditions inside Missouri's St. Louis City Justice Center, the Raymond Detention Center in Hinds County, Mississippi, and the Cuyahoga County jail here in my home state of Ohio. When a person is detained at a county or city facility awaiting trial, they typically experience a familiar set of conditions. Overcrowding. Unsanitary spaces. Limited access to showers.

The jails in this story also lack cleaning supplies, hygiene products, toilet paper and feminine products. These are not luxuries. These are basic necessities that every person should have access to, no matter where they are.

The second article is just as heartbreaking. It tells the story of Honesty Bishop, a transgender woman confined in Missouri who was placed in isolation because she was HIV-positive, and labeled as sexually active following a sexual assault while in custody. Honesty was kept isolated, denied the chance to interact with others and forced to face profound loneliness day after day. When Honesty was released, she sadly took her own life.

Both of these Marshall Project stories show the pain, struggle and isolation faced by so many people whose bodies are caged and confined.

But even in darkness, there are moments of light. I want to end this letter by sharing an expression of hope. The ability to create art is often a powerful tool in an individual's healing process. Art allows you to communicate and pour out feelings and emotions that can't be explained in words.



"TRAUMA" BY ALEX CHRISTOPHER NORRIS

During my visit to Lebanon Correctional Institution, Alex Christopher Norris, a talented artist, gifted me three paintings that expressed his journey and hope for the future. Norris' artwork reveals how the trauma of the criminal legal system shaped his life and the lives of others. Our conversation and his artwork reminded me that even in dark places, beauty can still be born.

Even in confinement, creativity breathes. No matter how thick the walls or heavy the doors, the human soul still reaches for freedom.

Thank you for reading, and stay strong.



Louis Fields

Louis Fields is the outreach manager for The Marshall Project - Cleveland. He served 23 years in Ohio state prisons and was released on parole in October 2021.



ISABEL SELIGER FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

No Showers, Black Mold and Clogged Toilets: America's Jails Are Disgusting

10.09.2025

Understaffing, outdated facilities and poor management have led to filthy conditions in jails in St. Louis, Cleveland and Hinds County, Mississippi.

By IVY SCOTT, BRITTANY HAILER and DAJA E. HENRY
Illustrations by ISABEL SELIGER

Poor sanitation in jails has been the subject of civil rights lawsuits for decades. Plumbing issues, vermin infestations, feces-covered walls, and limited access to basic hygiene products, such as soap or tampons, are common complaints.

Courts almost universally agree that a lack of basic sanitation violates detainees' constitutional rights, said David Fathi, director of the ACLU's National Prison Project. Pretrial detainees have sued, arguing that filthy conditions violate their due process rights. If a person has already been convicted, allegations

of foul living conditions are considered cruel and unusual punishment.

Despite widespread legal challenges, many jails across the country are still filthy. Litigation against substandard conditions often ends in a settlement, Fathi noted, with officials agreeing to a change in policy, or better monitoring and enforcement, in exchange for not taking the case to trial. Settlements are typically the fastest route to clean things up, but they don't set a legal precedent for other facilities, meaning there's nothing requiring jails in the same county or state to adopt reforms.

Good hygiene in jail is often about more than detainees' willingness to keep clean. Understaffing, overcrowding, facility maintenance, and mental health issues can all play a role. For example, the ACLU of Oregon, settled a lawsuit in 2019 against a county jail that had allegedly crowded a dozen women into a single intake cell, where they had to beg for toilet paper and menstrual products, and were denied showers.

"People don't want to live in filth," said Dr. Fred Rottnek, director of community medicine at St. Louis University and former medical lead

at the St. Louis County Jail. “They are at the mercy of the administration to provide needed services because they can’t do it on their own.”

Reporters from The Marshall Project’s local news teams dug into the state of sanitation at jails in St. Louis, Cleveland and Hinds County, Mississippi, home to Jackson, the state capital. They found that poor jail maintenance and management, as well as understaffing, mean many detainees are left to live in unsanitary conditions.

ST. LOUIS CITY, MISSOURI

On most days, Marvin Young is desperate for a shower. For over a year, he’s been detained at the St. Louis City Justice Center awaiting trial on an attempted robbery charge.

“I haven’t had a shower in three to four weeks,” he said in June 2025 from the jail’s visiting room, pulling at the stains on his jail-issued T-shirt. Even through the glass, the odor was unmistakable.

Detainees are supposed to have shower access at least three times a week, according to jail policy, which was last updated in 2020. (The city did not respond to multiple requests for confirmation that staff still adhere to these policies.) In the past, detainees have accused jail staff of withholding water access to punish people for speaking out about their conditions or asking questions. Jail policy says correctional officers can also force people to shower in certain circumstances. According to Young, however, people are desperate for the chance to rinse off.

“We gotta take bird baths in our cell,” he said, describing how he tries to cover the small opening in his cell door for privacy before attempting to clean himself over the sink. “I try to keep my spirits up, my health up ... [but] I’ve been so mad, my knuckles are black from punching the walls.”

Current staffing levels mean there aren’t always enough officers to supervise people during recreation time — the hour that detainees get outside their cell for showers, phone calls, and stretching their legs — or to check and see if cells are clean. The jail, which houses roughly 800 detainees, is currently down about 50 correctional officers, according to jail commissioner Nate Hayward.

Hayward, who started at the jail in September 2025 after more than three decades at the county jail, said his goal is to hire 40 correctional officers by January 2026, as well as two additional maintenance workers to address clogging in the showers and other facility needs.

The city’s former jail commissioner, Doug Burris, told The Marshall Project in April 2025

that roughly half of the pods in the jail were on a 23-hour lockdown. People formerly incarcerated at the jail described being held for days at a time in cells with feces on the walls. Their only reprieve was the hour they could spend in the dayroom — when there was enough staff to supervise it.

To make matters worse, detainees rarely have enough hygiene supplies, said Khanika Harper, a member of the city’s Detention Facilities Oversight Board.

The jail is supposed to give each detainee a personal hygiene kit with a toothbrush, soap and deodorant when they first enter the jail. Once they run out, they have to purchase replacements through the commissary, or apply for free items through a caseworker if they can’t afford the commissary. Certain items, like underwear, can only be replaced for free after a caseworker has physically inspected the old ones, according to jail policy.

Harper said she’s heard multiple reports of people not receiving soap, deodorant or cleaning supplies for their cell and common areas, leading to a buildup of dirt and bacteria on people and surfaces alike. The showers have cockroaches and feeble water pressure, she added. Men wash their clothes in the sink when they can’t get clean laundry. Women on their periods are supposed to receive free pads and tampons from caseworkers, but Harper said detainees told her those supplies don’t always make it to women in time.

“If they have mercy on you, they’ll get it to you when they get it to you,” she said.

Hayward, however, is optimistic that some of the strategies he implemented at the county jail could also work in the city. For example, on days when the county jail was too short-staffed for detainees to get out for rec hour, he instructed shift captains to let people out for the few minutes they needed to take a shower.

“If they don’t get out all day,” he said, “we gotta at least give them a shower.”

CUYAHOGA COUNTY, OHIO

The Cuyahoga County Jail doesn’t have enough showers. The jail has been cited by the Ohio Bureau of Adult Detention year after year for not meeting the state’s standard of one shower for every dozen beds.

From June 2024 to June 2025, there were 334 work orders placed for malfunctioning or unusable showers, with complaints ranging from clogged drains and no water, to black mold in the shower with a leaking ceiling, according to records obtained by The Marshall Project.

Even if the jail cleared the backlog, it would still fall short of its requirement because some

of its cells are holding two people, which exceeds the state’s ratio, Jennifer Ciaccia, press secretary for the Cuyahoga County Department of Communications, wrote in an email. Aging infrastructure exacerbates the strain on the jail’s plumbing system, Ciaccia added, leading to “frequent malfunctions.”

Detainees — some of whom can spend months awaiting trial — are responsible for cleaning the showers and other parts of the facility. But there is no set cleaning schedule, Ciaccia noted. Corrections officers are tasked with ensuring that the housing units are cleaned daily, and that showers are power-washed “regularly.” Officers are required to provide residents with cleaning supplies, including solutions, mops, brooms, scrub pads and toilet brushes.

Despite the mandate, detainees consistently complain of filthy conditions, including scratches and dirt on surfaces, disgusting sinks, and toilets caked in body fluids and grime. Staying clean is hard, they said, because the water pressure is so weak you can’t wash your hands. One detainee said he had to use the same spoon for every meal, cleaning it in the sink attached to his toilet.

In August 2025, Tiana Carter spent several days in jail after being arrested for a domestic violence charge. She refused to shower, she said, because the stalls were filthy. The toilets were so dirty, she asked for menstrual pads from a corrections officer so she could clean them first. Every time she went to the bathroom, she said she had to ask a corrections officer for toilet paper, and she was held in a cell where the toilet was backed up for hours.

“No matter how much they clean it, it’s still bad,” she said. “It’s so bad.”

HINDS COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI

When court-appointed monitors walked through Hinds County’s Raymond Detention Center in 2022, they found a myriad of deplorable conditions: broken toilets and showers, empty cells used as dumpsters, mice and people sleeping on floors in general areas, with no access to toilets. One thing particularly troubled a monitor about the cleanliness of a housing unit: Two men had been found covered in feces.

Three years later — even though the dumpster cells have been cleaned up and the most problematic housing unit is closed — monitors said the jail is getting worse.

“Overall, the Hinds County jail system has regressed over the past two-and-a-half years,” monitor David Parrish said in an August 2025 court hearing.

People detained there described vile conditions: smells of sewage, limited access to showers, toilets and laundry facilities.

The jail's sanitation problem is just one symptom of larger operational failures, said Kathryn Bryan, who was the jail's administrator in 2021. It is a reflection of the jail's many other issues: overcrowding, understaffing, gang control and crumbling infrastructure. The jail has a well-documented history of negligence. In October 2025, a court-appointed federal receiver took control to manage the jail's budget and day-to-day operations.

Hinds County Sheriff Tyree Jones declined to comment on the conditions, citing pending litigation and the incoming receivership.

"There's nothing clean about that place," said Tedrick Francois, who spent two weeks in jail during the summer of 2025, after being arrested for allegedly attempting to deposit the same checks more than once. He was first held for hours in a dark holding cell with about 20 others. He remembers a broken toilet overflowing and spilling human waste onto the

floor. His housing unit had one functioning shower, the monitoring report found.

Reports by court-appointed monitors say the jail is severely understaffed, with 71 corrections officers, about one-third of the number necessary to operate the facility. In the gaps, incarcerated people take control. "Pod bosses" control the distribution of food, hygiene products, and in some cases, who gets a cell, the monitors found.

"For the most part, there are no rules," Francois said. "It's the wild, wild west in there."

To use the bathroom, D'Juanya Carter had to pay people in cells with toilets using snacks and bars of soap, his mother, Nicole Shelton, told The Marshall Project. Carter is currently incarcerated, awaiting trial for a murder charge. Shelton said she spent about \$50 each week on commissary items. She said her son has irritable bowel syndrome, and as a result, often has to purchase more toilet paper in addition to the one roll he is supposed to be provided each week. His hygiene products are sometimes stolen or taken away by corrections officers in shakedowns, she said.

"I know that they're in jail, but they are human beings, and they deserve at least basic care," Shelton said. "I refuse to let my son be a casualty of war."

Court documents show multiple examples of the system of exploitation that pervades the facility. In one case, two incarcerated people in the jail's isolation unit were discovered underweight and covered in feces, as the "pod bosses" in control denied them food. In another case, a man was assaulted after urinating in the shower because he refused to pay to use someone's toilet. Another defecated in the showers for the same reason.

Francois said the two weeks he spent in the jail and seeing how detainees were treated without dignity was not only dehumanizing, but desensitizing.

"You grow numb," he said. "If you're in there long enough, I can see how quickly you become an animal or a person who doesn't care as much about people as you did when you went in there." ■

A Woman With HIV Spent Six Years in Solitary. She Sued and Missouri Will Change Its Policy.

08.21.2025

Honesty Bishop was attacked by her cellmate. Prison officials deemed her sexually active and kept her in isolation for more than 2,000 days.

By KAVAHN MANSOURI, The Midwest Newsroom,
and KATIE MOORE, The Marshall Project

This article was published in partnership with The Midwest Newsroom, an investigative and enterprise journalism collaboration that includes St. Louis Public Radio, Iowa Public Radio, KCUR, Nebraska Public Media and NPR. The Midwest Newsroom is a member of the The Trust Project.

Honesty Bishop could hear the screams of other people in solitary confinement. Sometimes it was so cold in her cell, she could see her breath. She dealt with scabies and mold. Her days and nights were spent in extreme isolation.

The Missouri Department of Corrections kept her locked in a cell about the size of a parking space for over six years.

She wrote letters to her sister, Latasha Monroe, in St. Louis. They both wondered why Bishop continued to be held in such severe conditions at Jefferson City Correctional Center, a men's facility.

Interviews and records on Bishop's years in solitary confinement paint a dark picture of a person who felt alone and hopeless, and, in the

depths of despair, was driven to self-harm.

Bishop, a transgender woman, initially landed there after her cellmate tried to sexually assault her in spring 2015.

She was HIV-positive and because of the assault was classified as "sexually active" — even though she was the victim and had been on medication, making the virus undetectable and therefore untransmissible, according to a federal lawsuit filed against the Missouri Department of Corrections.

Among the reasons people can be kept in isolation, according to the department's policy, are murder, rape and being sexually active with HIV. In her suit, Bishop said corrections officials kept her in solitary con-

finement because of her HIV status.

Whenever she appeared before a committee that reviewed her placement in solitary, which generally took place every 30 or 90 days, corrections officials noted 15 times when Bishop had no violations since the previous review.

"I've been good," she told them during a hearing on her solitary confinement in January 2016, and again that September.

Though she filed grievances about how long she had been kept in solitary, her pleas were ignored. Department of Corrections officials wouldn't release her from the unit until 2021 — after more than 2,000 days.

Missouri is one of three states that singles out people with HIV when it comes to solitary confinement, according to a review of 49 states' policies on administrative segregation and restrictive housing.

The department's HIV policy will be changed under the terms of an Aug. 20, 2025, settlement that resulted from the lawsuit.

The state agreed to remove language singling out people with HIV for segregation. The terms also include conducting an assessment of anyone with HIV who is sent to solitary and mandatory training for some prison staff.

The department would not comment specifically on the policy or the lawsuit. Karen Pojmann, a spokeswoman for the agency, said a committee is in the process of overhauling restrictive housing. Two prisons are piloting a new model that includes "meaningful hearings" and programming to help people reenter the general population in prison, she said.

Bishop did not live to see the policy change — she died by suicide on Aug. 13, 2024. She was 34.

PUNISHING PEOPLE WITH HIV

In March 2011, O'Fallon, Missouri, police showed up at Bishop's foster mother's home in the St. Louis suburb with an arrest warrant alleging Bishop had stolen something worth less than \$750.

Bishop and her siblings had been split up when they were younger, but stayed in contact with the help of a caseworker.

Monroe, 38, said her sister showed signs of her gender identity as a child.

"Kids, they play house or something, and she would want to be the momma," said Monroe, who was four years older than Bishop. "She was always the mom, and we were like her kids and everything, so I felt it then."

In their later teenage years, the siblings didn't need a caseworker to help keep them together — the sisters stayed close on their own. Monroe gave Bishop driving lessons in

Forest Park in her Oldsmobile Cutlass. They went to the Pride festival in St. Louis for many years, and to parties and drag shows, where they could let loose and be themselves.

When the officer showed up at her home to arrest Bishop, who was 20 at the time, she initially complied, then ran. They scuffled, and she bit him. Once in custody, she told the officer she fled because she was scared.

She pleaded guilty to resisting arrest, assaulting a law enforcement officer and recklessly risking HIV infection — a crime that came with a 15-year sentence. Missouri passed a law in 1988 that criminalized some forms of transmitting HIV. The measure was expanded in 2002 to specifically include biting, but that provision was removed in 2021.

After Bishop violated probation, she was sentenced to 22 years in prison in March 2014.

As of January 2025, 218 people with HIV were incarcerated in Missouri, according to records obtained by The Midwest Newsroom and The Marshall Project - St. Louis. Twelve were housed at the Jefferson City Correctional Center, a facility that has been the subject of complaints and where the 2023 death of an incarcerated man led to criminal charges against several corrections officers.

It was there that Bishop began transitioning from male to female. At times, she had access to gender-affirming clothing and medical care. Bishop chose her first name, Honesty, Monroe said, because she was honest and was "gonna tell you like it is."

Transgender people in prison are particularly vulnerable to violence and discrimination. Thirty-five percent reported being sexually victimized in prison, according to a 2015 federal study. Bishop's cellmate attempted to sexually assault her in April 2015.

The sexual assault led the Missouri Department of Corrections to deem her "sexually active." Its policy says someone with HIV who is sexually active can be sent to solitary. Missouri, Alaska and Michigan single out those with HIV in their administrative segregation policies. In response to a public records request, Alabama said its policy was "a restricted document."

Such policies are "very unnecessarily stigmatizing," said Tara Vijayan, a professor of medicine at UCLA who has been caring for patients with HIV since 2007.

"It's not clear to me what the goal is or what they're trying to prevent," she said, adding that since 2011, evidence has shown that patients with undetectable levels of the virus cannot transmit it.

It's unknown how many people are held in mandated single cells in Missouri based on being sexually active with HIV. The

department does not have those records, said Matt Briesacher, chief counsel for the Missouri Department of Corrections.

THE DAMAGE OF SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

Bishop was allowed out of her cell — shackled — for one hour, three days a week, according to the lawsuit. She did not have access to a phone, classes or a job. She particularly missed TV and radio because she loved music. Beyoncé was her favorite artist.

For three years, Bishop did not receive gender-affirming medical care. She was exposed to chemical agents used to subdue other prisoners. A corrections caseworker told Bishop she was going to "rot in there" because she had HIV, the lawsuit said.

She got depressed and anxious, and tried to take her life in 2015 and again in 2016.

Craig Haney, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, has been studying the psychological effects of solitary confinement since its use began increasing in the 1970s as a way to deal with overcrowding.

"It is a psychologically traumatizing experience," Haney said of the research he and others have done. "It persists after somebody gets out of solitary confinement. In some instances, it's fatal."

People in long-term isolation often draw deeper into themselves, he said. Their capability to interact with others atrophies. When they're released back into the general prison population, there's an expectation that everything is OK again.

"Nobody gives people coming out of solitary confinement the kind of special attention and therapeutic contact that they need to be able to reintegrate themselves back into a social world," Haney said. "And that's compounded if they then get released from prison, and they have to figure out not only the difficult task of making the transition from prison to the free world."

By September 2016, the department determined Bishop did not have any so-called enemies. The next month, charges against her from the altercation with her cellmate were dropped.

Bishop filed several grievances about her extended time in isolation — all of which were denied. In response to requests to review these documents, Briesacher said the grievances are closed records because they pertain to the "safety and security" of the prison.

While she was in solitary, corrections officials brought Bishop before a classification committee, which helps determine housing decisions, dozens of times. Findings were



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MARCI SUELA/THE MARSHALL PROJECT. SOURCE IMAGES: BRIAN MUNOZ/ST. LOUIS PUBLIC RADIO, GIS GEOGRAPHY, FACEBOOK AND MACARTHUR JUSTICE CENTER.

often nonexistent, according to the reports, only saying she was "on single cell mandate." Documents show the department's justification for keeping her in isolation changed. A 2015 hearing cited the altercation with her cellmate. A September 2016 report said "poor behavioral issues." A hearing from March 2017 claims she was assigned to solitary "due to adjustment issues."

Some hearings failed to include a reason for her continued confinement. Others noted improved behavior or said she'd had no violations since the last review.

In the lawsuit, Bishop's attorneys described the hearings as "sham reviews," often lasting less than a minute. Bishop alleged that prison staff sometimes did not allow her to speak. In November 2017, she told the committee she had been violation-free, which is confirmed in notes on the reports.

Finally, she was released from solitary in July 2021, and was freed on parole the following year.

HONESTY'S LEGACY

Monroe and another sister drove to the prison to pick up Bishop.

"I just had joy," Monroe recalled.

Bishop had grown out her hair and looked different due to her transition. The sisters celebrated her release, and Bishop was intent

on getting her life together. She got a job as a cook and dishwasher at a local club, saved up to buy a Dodge Dart and met a man who became her partner, Monroe said.

The sisters enjoyed going to The Grove, a St. Louis neighborhood known for its LGBTQ+ culture. Monroe said it was an area where her sister felt like she could be herself. In other places, Bishop could feel paranoid.

With assistance from the MacArthur Justice Center, a nonprofit civil rights firm, and Lambda Legal Defense, Bishop filed her lawsuit against the Missouri Department of Corrections in June 2023. Monroe said her sister wanted justice and a change in policy after spending years in solitary confinement with no answers. The suit alleged the department's policy was unconstitutional.

"It targets people living with HIV in a discriminatory way, based on stigma, and there's just no reason for it," said Shubra Ohri, an attorney with the MacArthur Justice Center.

"It is our position [in the lawsuit] that she was tortured while in solitary confinement," said Ohri.

Even when there was little to be positive about, Bishop saw the good around her, Ohri said. "I like to say when you talk to Honesty, it felt like she was glowing," she said. "She was just such a beautiful person and so curious about the world."

Bishop was open about her struggles in solitary, and her suicide attempts.

Things took a turn when her boyfriend died in July 2024. Shortly after, Bishop and Monroe talked for hours. Monroe encouraged her to grieve, but also tried to impart some positivity. The last time they talked, Monroe told her about teaching her partner's son to drive in Forest Park. Bishop sounded down on the call. A few days later, the family found out she had died by suicide.

Ohri said Bishop's time in isolation played a "huge role" in her death. Outwardly, Bishop tried to stay positive. When she was struggling, she looked for a way to escape her sadness. But the "base trauma" of over six years in solitary created anxiety and darkness. That compounded when Bishop's partner died.

In February 2025, her attorneys refiled the case with Monroe as the plaintiff. The family wanted to pursue the case because they knew it was important to Bishop.

Life without her has been quieter. Monroe said she didn't attend Pride in June.

"I'm used to her calling my phone and be like, 'Hey honey,'" she said. "It's been rough."

But Monroe said her sister would be glad there was some measure of justice and that "things changed for the next person so they won't have to go through what she had to go through." ■

Reader to Reader

Our last callout asked how you manage your finances inside: how you stretch a few dollars, make ends meet or build stability when pay is low and work options are limited.

Many of you described finding creative hustles like fixing headphones, sewing clothes, drawing portraits or crafting art to trade for commissary. Others talked about sharing meals and costs with bunkmates or planning shopping lists down to the cent.

You wrote about saving where you can, including skipping “fancy” meals and keeping an emergency balance on your books. Some of you see budgeting as discipline, proof that you can rely on yourself when help from the outside runs out.

Taken together, your responses show that managing money inside isn’t only about getting by. It’s about being adaptable and knowing when to spend and when to save, and how to turn a skill into something tradable.

Here’s what you shared about making every dollar count.

I fix headphones and earbuds for the things I need. Eat the little bit of chow they feed us and save your money as much as you can. Always have some money aside for materials when they run out.

—FROM A READER IN TX

I knew a guy who could do all sorts of sewing with extra thread and a staple gun. I would rewrite drafts for one guy who has bad handwriting and wanted to send his manuscripts back home. There’s always a demand that can be satisfied if you’re creative enough.

—FROM A READER IN FL

Find a cooking buddy. I try to eat good, but most good food goes bad fast. We can only shop every two weeks and order three food packages a month. When I buy food, I can never eat it all on my own before it spoils. It helps to have a cooking buddy who will take turns buying meals. If you plan meals efficiently, then there is no worry about perishable food going to waste.

—FROM A READER IN NY

I manage my finances by setting small goals that will lead to bigger rewards, like going over my canteen sheet eight times, and posting notes on my wall about saving. The biggest financial problem I face has been buying things I don’t need to help me succeed.

—FROM A READER IN NC

Try not to fill out your commissary sheet on an empty stomach. Then you won’t buy things you really don’t need.

—FROM A READER IN NY

I have a printout of the next two years of what my state pay will be, with and without restitution, which I have thankfully paid off. From there I'll see what I need to do next month, making my commissary list down to the cent. As for cutting back, my buddy and I usually chill out in the chow hall and ask people for their leftovers. Say, on a pizza day, most people just grab the pizza and run, so he and I will be like, "Hey, bro, mind if we get your corn?" It works 90% of the time and we leave full and satisfied. To stay afloat, find a good hobby craft. At my facility, we can do beading stuff and that sells for good money both in and out of prison, even more so on the outs if you have someone to throw it on eBay under "Prisoner Art."

—FROM A READER IN CO

I build a financial template with a core surrounding my essential needs, then expand from there. This could differ for all, depending on what is essential to you, for me it's coffee and protein.

—FROM A READER IN IL

I'm double-bunked, so my bunky and I work together buying food from the store to save money. He goes one week and I go the next. It works perfectly for us.

—FROM A READER IN NY

For quite a while, I have budgeted by taking my money balance (including the ol' stimulus from a few years yonder) and dividing by my sentence time remaining in months. Then I can budget how much I can safely spend each month and not consider some outside income. I also factor in my monthly "state pay" of \$14. I go further by figuring [out] what my weekly budget should be. Rarely will I treat myself to bags of potato chips or sodas, but by and large I limit my purchases to fundamental items and stuff that has a long "shelf" life.

—FROM A READER IN IL

I eat half a soup instead of a whole one since we do not get paid in Arkansas. As a field minister, I have to not double up in the chow hall, so I have to eat what I get, and stretch commissary anyway I can. Instead of whole sausages, cut them into quarters and use one quarter for half a soup with some beans or rice. One of the biggest challenges is that my people are getting older and cannot work to send money, and I hate asking for anything as I know times are tough out there. Hobby craft sales have been limited by staff, so visitation sales are gone. In my thirty-three years of incarceration, I have learned to do with very little and make it seem as if I have a lot.

—FROM A READER IN AR

My advice is to always keep a spendable balance in your commissary account. What I mean by that is: I keep enough in my account to buy a major item if it breaks. I treat a certain amount as a \$0 balance. So if I have, let's say \$200 in my account, I treat that as if I had zero to spend. That way, if my TV or tablet breaks, I have enough to buy a new one. Also, don't always spend your allowed commissary limit. You tend to eat just to eat if you have lots in your locker. Just buy enough for the weeks between and order only what you need!

—FROM A READER IN MI

The biggest way I [save money] is by shopping at the commissary. I don't do fancy meals like ramen, meat and condiments or beans, cheese and wraps. Yeah, all that is good, but expensive. I will [just] get ramen and simple things like crackers. Filling and a lot cheaper. I always ask myself, "What will last the longest? What will stretch the most?"

—FROM A READER IN AR

Write down your needs first (soap, deodorant, etc.), then write down your essential goals (legal work material, phone call funds, etc.), then write down your wants. After this, get your basic necessities [like] deodorant and soap. Write down which essential goal you absolutely need accomplished and sacrifice either your wants or needs to get it done. This puts everything into perspective and your sacrifices will pan out as an example for all others behind your future success. Good luck.

—FROM A READER IN FL

I invest my money in Magic: The Gathering trading cards. It keeps me from eating all my money up in commissary. When I need cash, I liquidate my collection to pay for things like my kid's birthday or paying for things I really need like a TV or shoes.

—FROM A READER IN IL

Don't get in debt with ANYONE!!!! If you get in debt with someone, it's only a matter of time before it spirals out of control and becomes 2, 3, 4 people you owe.

—FROM A READER IN NY

I have learned over the time that I have been incarcerated to plan my meals each day for the week. That way I know everything that I need to buy and I stick to that menu. No extra impulse buying!

—FROM A READER IN FL

It all boils down to whether you need a certain item [in the] canteen or [if] you can do without. Wanting a chocolate bar or needing some toothpaste. Do I get chips and cookies or a pack of ramen noodles for when "my stomach is touching my back"? Sacrifices play a huge role in jail. You're literally making sacrifices for things you want but just can't afford due to it either being too costly, or you simply just don't have the funds. The best advice is to get what's going to take you further. Things you need to survive as opposed to want.

—FROM A READER IN IL

Best advice I ever heard: Set a hard line on how much you can spend per week. Before you calculate that, subtract a small amount as savings per month. Maybe five [dollars] per month, or if possible, a larger amount. The trick is to stay on budget, no matter what.

Discipline is a good life skill to work on.

—FROM A READER IN FL

I personally have found that when I first arrived in prison back [in] 2009, I wanted to make extravagant cookups and now I see that it is not important. I shop for filling foods versus fancy foods. Soups, rice and beans go a long way.

—FROM A READER IN MI

My biggest financial challenge as a juvenile waiver case who has served over 35 years in the prison system, is that I did this sentence completely on my own dime, and proudly can say that I did not burden anyone. I learned to use money responsibly and spending only as necessity called [for], rather than spending money on just wants. TV, tablets, food, stamps ... money is never spent unless it is a priority or real need. I rely on prison jobs, but I also learned how to draw and know how to make extra drawing or painting a portrait or picture that someone may want to give their people or loved ones. By being self-reliant financially you learn the value of working and earning your belongings and it means something when you can say: I did that or earned that. I think if we learned the real value of work when we were free, maybe our lives could have avoided prison. —FROM A READER IN MI

My biggest lesson is having learned the opportunity cost of not budgeting properly. Buying things on impulse that you know you don't need is a good way for your money to run out quickly. I would implore people to consider how much they believe a purchase is truly worth in the long run and whether they are willing to pay the opportunity cost for satisfying temporary wants over the opportunity to obtain more durable goods when the opportunity presents itself.

Decide what is most important to you and make room in your budget for that first before anything else.

—FROM A READER IN OK

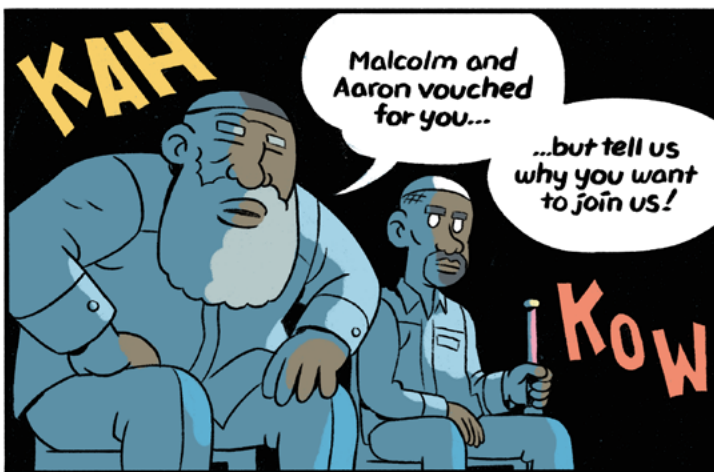
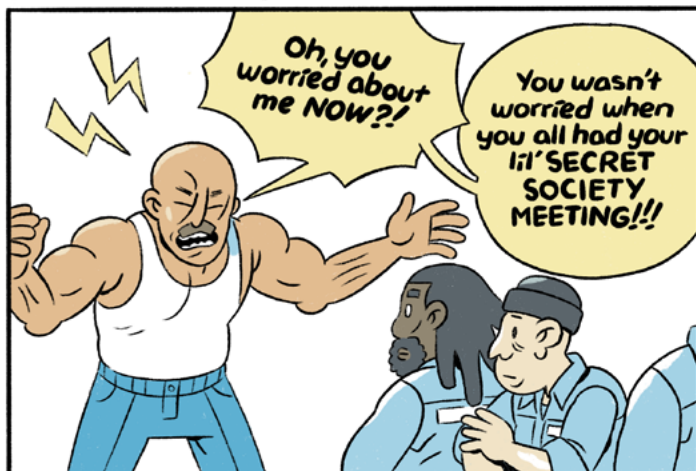
Stay self-sufficient, because you never know when outside support will fall on hard times and not be able to help or pass away and you [would] not have the survival skills to maintain a healthy living style while incarcerated.

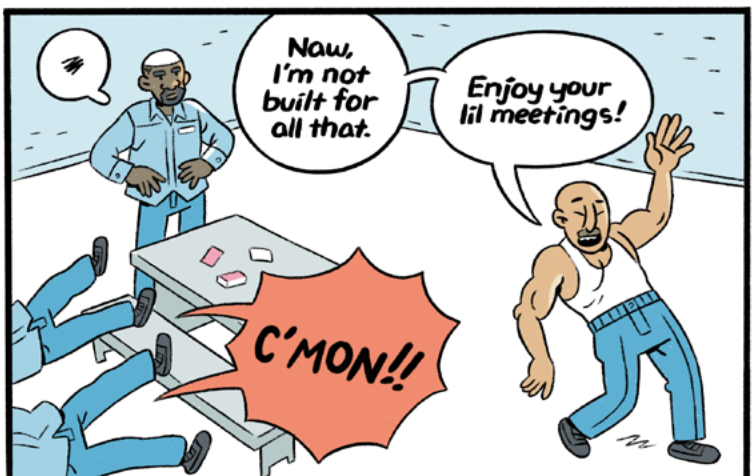
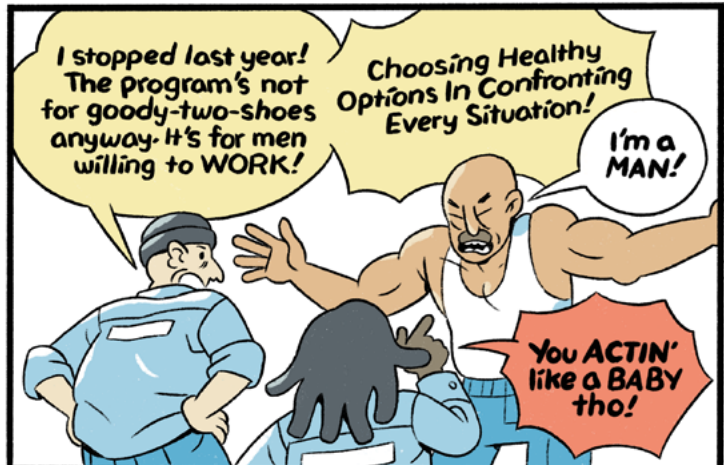
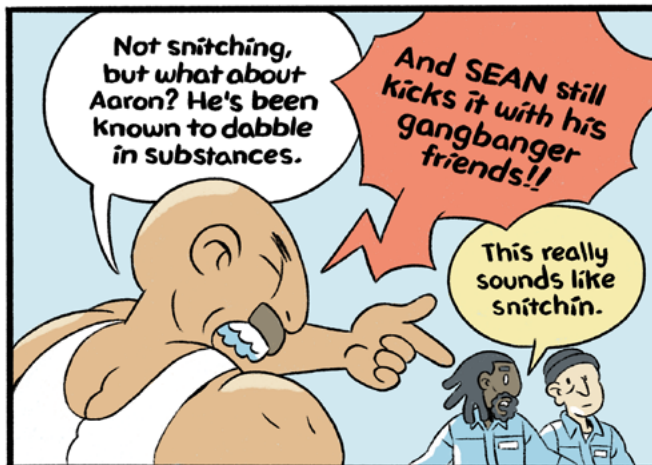
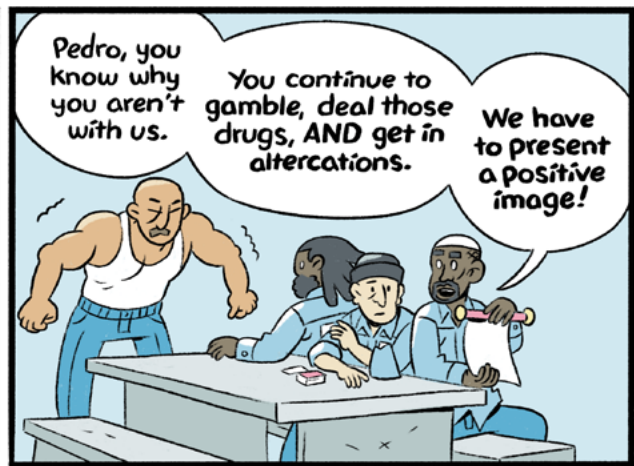
—FROM A READER IN AR

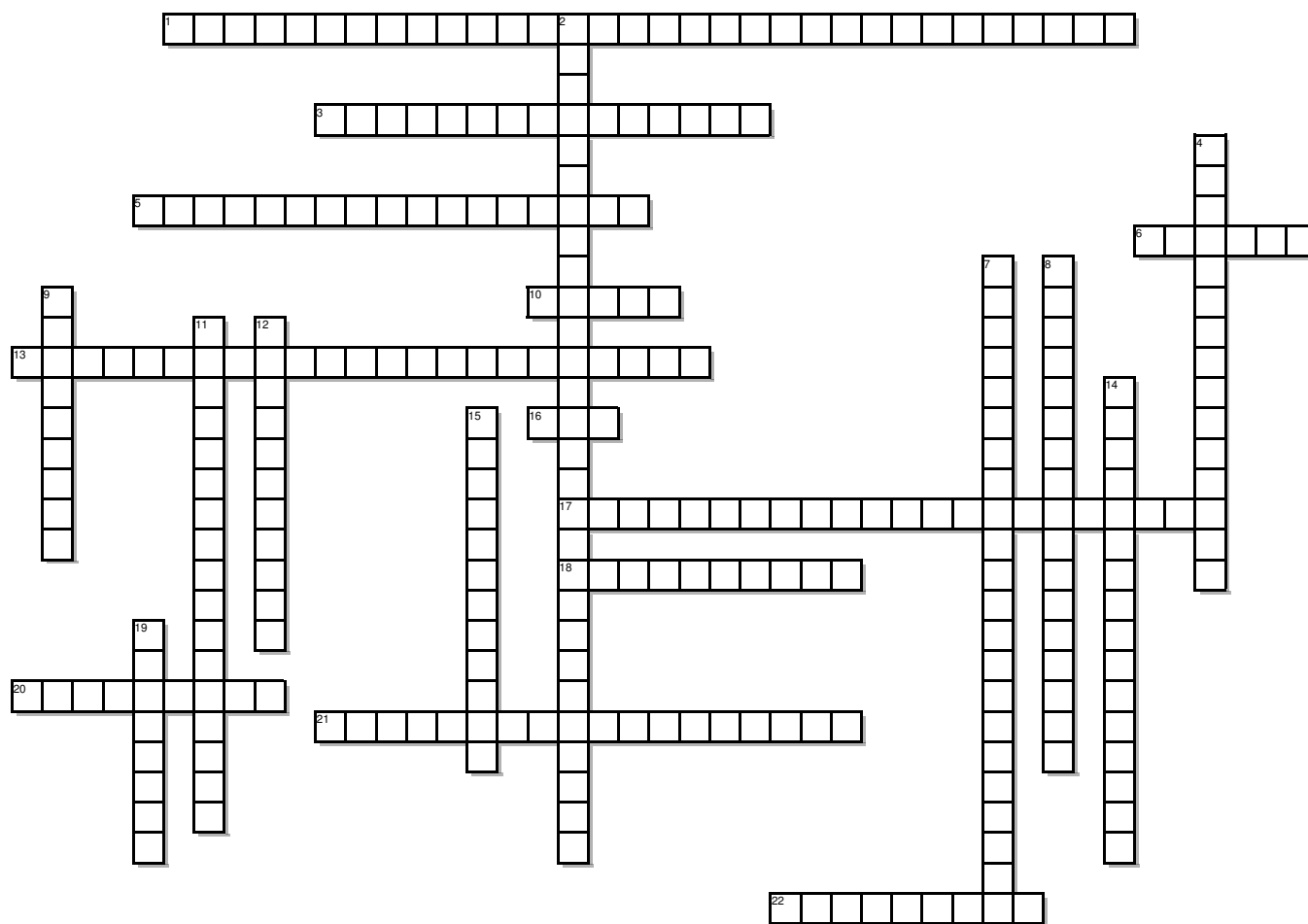
Finding Your **PURPOSE** When Facing a Lifetime Behind Bars

Serving a long or life sentence means learning how to live with time — to face it, fill it and find a way to keep moving through it. For many people, knowing they're going to age behind bars can take a toll on their sense of self. How have you learned to live with a long sentence? What keeps you steady or gives your days meaning? Have you found ways to stay hopeful, build purpose or keep growing? What's been hardest to adjust to, and what has helped you most along the way? If someone was just starting a long stretch, what would you want them to know?









ACROSS

- 1** What does "ICE" stand for? (4 words)
- 3** "Over the last five years, lawsuits have been filed in several states against Securus, alleging that the company recorded _____." (2 words)
- 5** "This dynamic, where taxpayer spending on prisons is pitched as economic activity for prison towns, has been dubbed by some academics as correctional or '_____'; a nod to the economic theory that promotes government spending to boost growth." (2 words)
- 6** "[The Cuyahoga County jail] has been cited by the Ohio Bureau of Adult Detention year after year for not meeting the state's standard of one _____ for every dozen beds." (1 word)
- 10** Honesty Bishop spent more than _____ days in solitary confinement in the Missouri Department of Corrections. (1 number)
- 13** Organization that collects and analyzes public safety data to improve policing outcomes (4 words)
- 16** What is the acronym for human immunodeficiency virus? (1 acronym)

- 17** What does AI stand for? (2 words)

- 18** "For formerly incarcerated activist _____, the most wonderful time of the year is a holiday bicycle giveaway for kids with parents in prison." (2 words)
- 20** Immigrant community members, "neighbors," or "compas," short for _____ in Spanish (1 word)
- 21** "Prison _____ companies were some of the first to dip their toes in AI technology." (1 word)
- 22** "_____ are supposed to have shower access at least three times a week, according to [the St. Louis City Justice Center's] policy, which was last updated in 2020." (1 word)

DOWN

- 2** What does DEI stand for? (4 words)
- 4** Legal mail is protected by _____-_____ privilege. (2 words; hyphenated)
- 7** An advocacy nonprofit focused on mass criminalization (3 words)
- 8** Raymond and Cassandra bonded at this prison-based event. (3 words)

- 9** As a volunteer court observer, Tim Murphy calmly prepared immigrants to face masked _____. (2 words)

- 11** According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, the _____ made health insurance available to 80% to 90% of formerly incarcerated people who had previously been ineligible. (3 words)
- 12** "_____ people in prison are particularly vulnerable to violence and discrimination." (1 word)
- 14** President Donald Trump's One _____ Act, proposes an estimated \$1 trillion in federal spending cuts. (3 words)
- 15** Author of the Life Inside essay, "When the 'Diddy' Case Hits Home" (2 words)
- 19** Incarcerated people and advocates have expressed concerns with both kinds of [mail] _____, having to do with privacy, delays and the sentimental value of handwritten letters and physical keepsakes. (1 word)

In the Spotlight



COURTESY OF MAURICE CLIFTON SR.



I used my time inside to learn many skills and teach others. My deep passion for education made me a teacher's aide, helping others pursue their educational goals. In 2020, I was released early under the First Step Act. What a relief! I was so thankful for a second chance, and so impacted by my incarceration, that I decided to continue dedicating my life to teaching and helping others that I left behind. While you are incarcerated, you barely have access to current events from the outside. Most people are oblivious to how local, state and federal policies affect them prior to incarceration, let alone while they are incarcerated, including myself. Being released exposed me to events and people that helped me learn more about politics, laws, policies and how this world actually works. Today, I continue fighting for the rights of the incarcerated, helping them get access to news and information through The Marshall Project, Black Voters Matter, and other groups that [provide information] and advocate for the rights and conditions of the incarcerated.

Maurice Clifton Sr. is a Mississippi freedom fighter and champion for his people who spent 23 years in the "belly of the beast" as a first-time offender. Since his release, Maurice has served as a chaplain and reentry coordinator at the Mississippi Department of Corrections. He is now a chaplain with the United States Chaplaincy Corps. Through S.A.I.L. (Sippis Advocacy Initiative & Leadership), his nonprofit organization, he works tirelessly to restore the voting rights of the disenfranchised.

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 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. **TRUE** **2** 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. **TRUE** **3** 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. **TRUE** **4** Private prison stocks have declined since Donald Trump won the 2024 presidential election. **FALSE** *Correct answer: Private prison stocks have soared since Trump won the election.* **5** When New Jersey switches prison tablet companies, incarcerated people will lose access to all of their downloaded content. **TRUE** **6** 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. **TRUE** **7** 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. **TRUE** **8** 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. **TRUE** **9** According to the Missouri Department of Corrections, 139 people died in their custody in 2024. **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: The use of these [artificial intelligence] tools has led to serious breaches of attorney-client privilege.

2 T or F: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, after [George] Floyd's murder in 2020 and the rise of DEI in policing, the number of Black officers hit its high-water mark in 2022, constituting 17% of the nation's rank-and-file cops before falling to 14% last year, which is about the number of Black Americans in the country.

3 T or F: Over the past 15 years, formerly incarcerated people have greatly benefited from expansions to Medicaid health care coverage. Those gains are now at risk in the face of an estimated \$1 trillion in federal spending cuts outlined in [the] One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

4 T or F: In New York, regular mail from family and friends was already photocopied before the strike.

5 T or F: Dorsey Nunn and the Legal Services for Prisoners with Children helped bring an end to the shackling of incarcerated pregnant women and to indefinite long-term solitary confinement in California prisons.

6 T or F: According to the anti-sexual violence organization RAINN, people who are high or "manipulated into saying yes" cannot give consent.

7 T or F: [The] dynamic, where taxpayer spending on prisons is pitched as economic activity for prison towns, has been dubbed by some academics as correctional or "penal Keynesianism," a nod to the economic theory that promotes government spending to boost growth.

8 T or F: Raymond and Cassandra met when Raymond was released from prison.

9 T or F: [Volunteer] immigration court observers are tasked with informing immigrants of the possibility that ICE will detain them following their court hearing, regardless of the outcome. They also collect their loved ones' [emergency] contact information; connect them with legal resources and provide emotional support.

10 T or F: Poor sanitation in jails has been the subject of civil rights lawsuits for decades.

11 T or F: In 2015, Honesty Bishop was placed in solitary confinement because she was HIV positive and had been classified as "sexually active" following her cellmate's attempt to sexually assault her.



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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