



VANGUARD INCARCERATED PRESS

Volume 7, Issue 4

inside
august 2024

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What It Feels Like to Have LWOP

By Jeff Ayers

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility & State Prison, Corcoran

My name is Jeff Ayers, and I am going to die in prison.

I am not being melodramatic, nor am I exaggerating my situation for literary purposes. I am simply speaking truth, my truth, as it has been for the past twenty-eight of my almost fifty years of life. Some day—could be tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, who knows?—I will not wake up, and that will be it. I will have died in prison. And that is the best case scenario, dying as an old man in bed. I could also die from being stabbed accidentally or intentionally. I could die from an errant gunshot during a melee or riot. I could die from an undiagnosed illness. Whatever the cause, the effect will be the same. I will have died in prison.

How can I be so certain my death in prison is inevitable? Simple. I have been sen-

tenced to that living death known as Life Without the Possibility of Parole, or LWOP for short.

My sentence of LWOP means exactly what it says: I will never have the opportunity to appear before the parole board, never have the chance to allow the commissioners to make their determination as to whether I am suitable for parole back into society, or unsuitable at that time and ordered to reappear in three, five, seven, ten, or even fifteen years. LWOP means no parole hearing, no parole opportunities in my future. The only way I will ever leave prison is as a corpse, adorned with a toe tag, with a zippered body bag for my shroud.



"My name is Jeff Ayers, and I am going to die in prison."

People say, "Have hope! The laws are changing! You may even get commuted!" Have hope, indeed! How many times have well-intentioned people sought to lift my spirits with those words? *Continues on page 4*

Death in Georgia Prisons Becoming the Acceptable Norm

By Jimmy Iakovos

In 2022 there were forty suicides within Georgia's oppressive prison system. Futility of effort, neglectful abuse, and abandonment of hope in a system of slavery has taken a grim toll. Add to the suicides another thirty confirmed murders and 169 "other" deaths for a total of 239 human deaths in the last calendar year. Judging by the lack of effort to make changes in the system, that number is acceptable.

News media talking heads do not even opine that another death in prison is sad before moving on to news of more crimes having been reported and of mass arrests being conducted to recreate safe neighborhoods. The overall thought being planted in the mind of the citizen, "It's the person in prison's own fault. They asked for it." The "they" you are picturing in your mind, if the propaganda machine has accomplished its task, are the gangs Governor Kemp has his police army



The since closed Georgia State Prison
Source: Judson McCranie, via Wikimedia Commons

arresting in great number for the crimes of living in the wrong place, going to the wrong schools and abandoning their families to earn the money needed to live above the level of mere survival. The prisons are always bulging at the seams with our poor under the heading of some mostly victimless crime or another.

Euthanasia is the age old fiscal correct solution to the snowball effect

of arresting masses of people, convicting them of victimless crimes, and keeping them longer to be tough on crime—rather than smarter than crime—versus the exorbitant price of enslaving human beings until they are too old to run. For the past three years there have been allowed thirty murders per year inside the Georgia prisons. The new Department of Corrections Commissioner, Tyrone Oliver, commenting on the state of the system he was just appointed head of said, "But thirty [homicides] out of 50,000 [incarcerated people], from a percentage standpoint, relatively speaking... I know it sounds bad. But it's not as bad when you look at the population we're dealing with." That is blatantly stating that some human beings are have less value than others. There is no ignoring the genocidal implications of such a mentality.

There was an incredible increase of deaths... *Continues on page 4*

Welcome to the August Issue!

By Joan Parkin

If there is one sentence that contradicts any notion of rehabilitation, it's the sentence of life without parole. Regardless of how much an individual has transformed, they cannot go before a parole board for possible release. They are destined to die in prison. According to the Sentencing Project, as of 2021, there are 55,000 people in the United States serving life without parole (LWOP) sentences. This is a 66% increase since 2003. In this issue, Jeff Ayers, in "What It Feels Like to Have LWOP," asks, "How can I be certain my death in prison is inevitable?" His response speaks volumes: "I have been sentenced to that living death known as Life without the Possibility of Parole, or LWOP for short."

For David Lee, Jr. "the closest analogy [he] can articulate would be being on life support." In his article "Support System," Lee writes, "But dying in prison does not seem as fearful as the thought of living in prison until I eventually die." Altogether, the U.S. has more than 200,000 people serving sentences of over fifty years, which is about one in seven prisoners.

In addition, the LWOP sentence disproportionately impacts people of color. According to Generation Progress, in 2016, 67% of people sentenced to LWOP were people of color. Moreover, in 2018, two-thirds of African Americans were sentenced to LWOP in nine states: Illinois, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, and South Carolina. The authors of the report note that "Life without parole is a punishment that takes young people of color and permanently separates them from their communities. And it's getting worse: between 2003 and 2016, life without parole sentences increased by fifty-nine percent."

LWOP sentencing is just the tip of the iceberg. In "Realities of Prison," Jacob Lester asks, "Why do we choose to ignore the realities of the conditions in prison?" He describes a horrific scene when the officers allowed a police dog to attack him, biting him to the bone. For Lester, "The ugly truth is prisons are a continual torture for inmates designed to keep them coming back." Former death row prisoner William Proctor describes what it was like as a death row inmate liv-

ing on a Level IV maximum facility. He complains that death row inmates have been forced to live for over forty years not based on behavioral risks, need, or care factors but based solely on their sentence. He says, "I've been forced to live in this Level IV environment since 1983, and it's a traumatic experience." Thanks to the passage of California's Proposition 66, the rules have changed, and former death row prisoners have been reclassified



LETTER
from the editor

"If there is one sentence that contradicts any notion of rehabilitation, it's the sentence of life without parole."

based on behavior, risks, and needs.

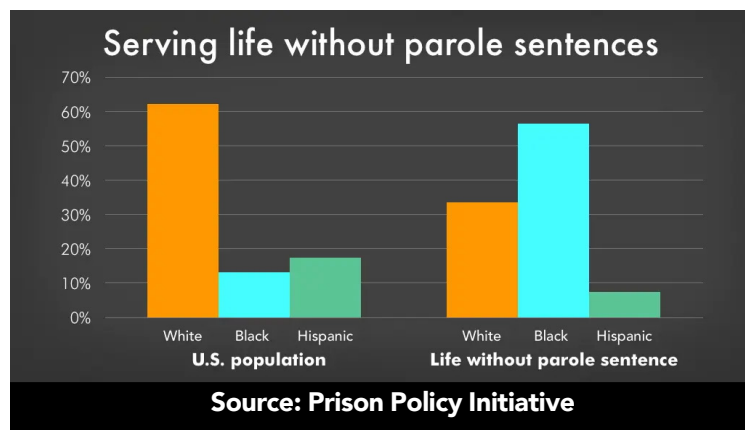
In "Living with Life and Death on Death Row," Glenn Cornwell writes: "Here, in East Block, I can't help but feel that death and prison are twin brothers. Since I've been incarcerated, I went from being the baby sibling in a family of five to a daddy, grandfather,

then great-grandfather. Everyone from my grandparents to my siblings has passed on, floating down the river of time." Fortunately, Cornwell has been transferred to a lower-level security prison thanks to the passage of Proposition 66. Aside from the torture of a life sentence at a maximum-security facility, others write about equally disturbing news. Jimmy Iakovos tells us in "Death In Georgia Prisons Becoming The Acceptable Norm," that there was a total of 239 deaths in the last calendar year and, "Judging by the lack of effort to make changes in the system, that number is acceptable." It seems that in the eyes of the system, prisoners' lives don't have the same value as non-incarcerated persons.

D. Razor Babb asks us to consider the big picture in "Voices from the Shadows: Plight of the Oppressed." Babb writes that "Since its inception, the nation has grappled with its collective humanity, questioning the illusion of the ideals of democracy itself, with those confined in its prisons—over two million souls—understanding better than most that how we treat the least of us defines the rest of us, as slavery continues in the penitentiaries of the twenty-first century." He asks us to consider how the way a society treats its prisoners is a reflection of the values of that society.

"It seems that in the eyes of the system, prisoners' lives don't have the same value as non-incarcerated persons."

The looming question for this issue is how we can eliminate LWOP sentencing. If you are battling an LWOP sentence and have a story or want to share your news about efforts to defeat LWOP, please write to us. Amazingly, as painful as these stories are, there are always stories of perseverance. Horace Thomas writes in his poem "Gutter of Sin": "In a last-ditch effort/They buried me in the hole! /But still I saw the light/And reached for my goal!"*



Joan Parkin is the Director of the *Vanguard Incarcerated Press*, the author of *Perspectives from the Cell House*, *An Anthology of Prisoner Writings*, and co-founder and former director of Feather River College's Incarcerated Student Program where she is also a Professor Emerita. She also serves on the Board of Directors for the Vanguard News Network and teaches college English in prisons. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Boston University and PhD in Comparative Literature from The Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York. She was the coordinator in Chicago for the Death Row Ten, a group of wrongfully convicted death row prisoners who were tortured by former police commander Jon Burge, many of whom won pardons by Governor George Ryan in the victorious abolition campaign that led to historic death row commutations.

Who We Are

The *Vanguard Incarcerated Press* (*VIP*) wants to do more than shine a light in the darkest corners of America's prison system; We want to build a bridge between the incarcerated and the community through our newspaper. Prisons by design isolate and dehumanize incarcerated persons, leaving them with few resources to connect with a larger community.

A newspaper produced by incarcerated persons working with educators and social justice activists on the outside has the potential to create communities of readers and writers who are no longer isolated from each other but joined by the relationship to our newspaper. When an incarcerated individual sees his/her/their name in print, they know that they have joined a broader conversation of contributors to and readers of the *VIP*.

Our parameters are simple, anyone with a story about prisons or the criminal justice system can submit for consideration. Of course, themes appear around the viciousness of the system, its racism, barbarity and absurdity. While maintaining an abolitionist framework of the system, we remain inclusive of the vast array of voices that make up the carceral landscape. As abolitionists, we plan to join these incarcerated voices in the larger conversation about prison abolition.

In partnering with other organizations, we join forces with the broader abolitionist movement. Our goal is to join our writers and readers in a larger movement to challenge conditions of confinement and the inequities that oppress disenfranchised masses and resist positive change.

Our Mission

The *VIP* publishes hard-hitting news and commentary written by the incarcerated themselves, depicting prison life, human rights issues, and critiques of the criminal legal system. We seek to expose injustices lurking in America's prisons, empowering a community of incarcerated voices along the way. We are enabling those voices to be heard, without censorship, and creating a community forum where our contributors can engage in civil debate, oppose the brutalities of the carceral state, and challenge the status quo, all in the pursuit of systemic change and prison abolition.

Disclaimer

The purpose of the *VIP's* monthly publication is educational, providing incarcerated writers with a platform to improve their skills as journalists and exposing our readership to a diversely sourced representation of authentic inside voices. For this reason, the *VIP* does not censor the content submitted by its contributors; The views and perspectives represented in articles from our contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the *VIP*, its affiliates or employees.

A Note on Language

We are staunchly committed to maintaining our anti-censorship policy, as outlined in the above disclaimer. However, as of this issue, we are updating our policy on language going forwards: we will change all instances of the word "inmate" to person-centered language, such as "person in prison" or "incarcerated individual." We do this to acknowledge that many incarcerated people find these terms dehumanizing and to meet the current standards of other incarcerated journalism organizations, such as the Marshall Project. We ask that all of our writers uphold this new policy going forward, or we will edit this language in your piece for you before we publish it.

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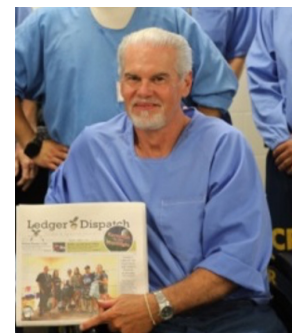
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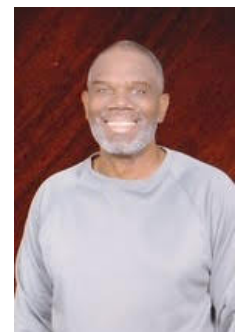
Angie D. Gordon

California State Prison, Sacramento



D. Razor Babb

Mule Creek State Prison



Jamel Walker

Mule Creek State Prison



What It Feels Like to Have LWOP continued... I have lost count. As if those words can somehow lessen the absolute finality of my LWOP sentence. Oh, how I wish I could share their naivete!

I do have some hope, after a fashion. I hope to wake up in the morning. I hope the food in the dining hall is at least palatable, if not visually appealing. I hope to receive mail from my friends and loved ones. But hope for an end to my sentence of LWOP? Hope for a release from prison while reasonably of an age where I am able to enjoy what life would be left in me? No, I do not hope for such things.

Am I cynical? Perhaps. I believe I have earned the right to be so, that I am entitled to it. Have hope? In what? In a legislature which continually and specifically excludes me from any relief under the law offered to the incarcerated because of nothing more than my sentence of LWOP? In a judicial branch which continues to rule such arbitrary exclusion of LWOPs is constitutional? In an executive branch whose acts of clemency have been sporadic, with the criteria used to determine who is worthy being completely subjective and lacking in transparency? Have hope in these? I think not, and I do not.

Fault me if you wish; call me cynical if you like. Before you do, however, I invite, no, dare you to imagine spending twenty-eight years—and counting—in prison, with the full knowledge nothing you do, no certificate, no college degree, no accomplishment, no matter how impressive, will ever render you worthy of an opportunity for parole. It is my fervent hope you should never find yourself condemned to LWOP, but should you find yourself in that unfortunate position, see how long and how well you retain your optimism, your sense of hope under those circumstances.

My sentence of LWOP has ensured I have lost much more than my freedom. It has ensured I have suffered much. As the years and decades have unfolded before and gone past me, I continue to lose and suffer more still. Already I have lost parents, brothers, aunts, uncles, and my friends to death. I have accrued injuries which are slowly but steadily growing worse. I have lost far more than I have gained over the

“It is this acceptance of death which has provided me with the only freedom I will ever know.”

past twenty-eight years. Perhaps these losses would seem less devastating were there a chance at parole, at freedom. But there is not. There is no chance for me, and not for anyone sentenced to LWOP. There is only the grave, open and awaiting my earthly remains.

The school of Stoic thought has a saying: “Amor Fati. Love your fate.” I will never come to love my sentence of LWOP, for it is a fate worse than death, one which will cause even the stoutest of hearts to falter. I have, however, come to accept my fate, to account my inevitable death in prison. It is this acceptance of death which has provided me with the only freedom I will ever know. It is a freedom only the living dead can understand and look forward to. This is what it feels like to have life without the possibility of parole. *

Death in Georgia Prisons Becoming the Acceptable Norm continued... under the guidance of recently departed DOC Commissioner, Timothy Ward. Specifically, before Ward, there were twenty-eight prisoner murders over a span of three years. During his reign that total was bested annually. This same Timothy Ward once led the Tactical Squads responsible for quelling riots. Controlling prisoners was his specialty, yet he chose not to when put in charge. Ward’s role in a propaganda film about Georgia’s prisons produced for the National Geographic Channel while he was still a prison warden, just a couple of years before his rise to the top, is reminiscent of dictators throughout the world smiling for the press.

“That is blatantly stating that some human beings are of lesser value than others.”

Ward has been rewarded by Governor Kemp for the job he did in Corrections; he now holds one of the five most powerful, judicially untouchable positions in the State as a member of the Board of Pardons and Paroles, determining which of the 50,000 prisoners gets out alive. That appointment only makes sense when truthfully the horrendous result of his management was the one desired by the Governor’s political party. 169 human beings died in prison (officially Paroled to Death) for reasons other than murder or suicide. All of those could not have been heart attacks or accidents. An unknown yet unacceptable number of fragile men and women were being held in a \$1.8 billion a year prison system when they could have been allowed the hospice care of family members.

Instead they are kept in prison because their last breath benefits the ends of justice. It is difficult to estimate the cost of housing aging slaves unto death due to the “tough on crime,” Life Without Parole sentences for children and long mandatory minimum sentences that are essentially death sentences for middle age arrestees. This acceptable number of deaths serves to normalize for the public that prisons euthanize people by neglecting their physical and mental health care.

There is a growing murmur among lifers with possible parole (who rarely are allowed parole anyway) to volunteer for the death penalty. Compared to being found dead hanging in a shower stall, overdosed on a beautifully waxed floor, or just shamefully emancipated in solitary cells labeled infirmaries, to leave this plane of existence with any measure of decorum is an attractive option. Thus far no requests for converting Life into Death sentences have been acknowledged or responded to. Letters to the Georgia Board of Pardons and Parole are state secrets, not readily available for review.

The death count doesn’t seem very high compared to the population, to paraphrase the reported opinion of the newest Prison Commissioner, Tyrone Oliver. The reports on the news are already becoming ho-hum to a public more concerned with trying to make ends meet. New crematoriums, when constructed near prison facilities, will be applauded for adding jobs. Why endure the cost of transporting the dead all that way when each region can have its own oven to dispose of the bodies unclaimed by family members who are financially unable to have the body of a loved one returned for local burial. Small cardboard boxes of token ashes can be mailed bulk rate to the next of kin on record. “Here’s your mother, brother, sister, father. Sorry for your loss. You’ll have to sign for the box please, thank you.” *

“This acceptable number of deaths serves to normalize for the public that prisons euthanize people by neglecting their physical and mental health care.”

Voices from the Shadows: Plight of the Oppressed

By D. Razor Babb

Mule Creek State Prison

The cruelest abuses witnessed during slavery, through post-Civil War Reconstruction and the Jim Crow South, continuing with class and racial oppression throughout the twentieth century and extending to the present day, are most starkly exemplified by staggering racial disparities in mass incarceration rates. In the US, Black people are incarcerated at five times the rate of whites, with the US responsible for nearly a quarter of the world's incarcerated population. This exceedingly high rate of imprisonment has significant social effects. Prisons are places of oppression and censorship. The weaponization of the legal system and practice of persecution through over-policing and hyper-zealous prosecutorial practices and penal policies fosters extreme inhumanity, race and class stratification, moral and philosophical failing, misery and waste. Any form of oppression has debilitating effects, not only on those directly subjugated but on society as a whole. The ripple effects of tyranny cascade outward, infecting individual relationships, families, communities, and entire cultures. Since its inception, the nation has grappled with its collective humanity, questioning the ideals of democracy itself, with those confined in its prisons—over two million souls—understanding better than most that how we treat the least of us defines the rest of us, as slavery continues in the penitentiaries of the twenty-first century.

Mass incarceration is a system based on race and class stratification, oppression, and carceral economics, executed in the shadows, and hidden from public view. Prisoners and their families are targeted and monetized as commodities as the justice system preys on the most “despised populations,” as pointed out by Professor David Pellow in his academic article, “Environmental Struggles in Prisons and Jails.” These marginalized minorities are targeted at every turn to fill prison beds, chattel for an ever-expanding Prison Industrial Complex, with the imprisoned forced to work or lose privileges, in effect, paying for their own incarceration. According to YES! Magazine, the value of goods and services generated by incarcerated workers is over \$11 billion annually. Base economics appear to be at the core of the Department of Corrections’ objectives. After implementing the Prison Industries Authority (PIA) in the 1980s, prisons nationwide began providing low-skilled factory-like positions such as sewing, meat processing, lunch packaging, dairy, and health facility maintenance. Prisoners work for slave labor wages and are confined in modern-day plantations under the governance of overseers synonymous with the antebellum South. The capitalization of incarceration has turned punishment into profit and prisoners into federal and state corrections departments’ most prized profit base. Just as the foundation of colonial slavery was economic and capital-based, financial incentives drive mass incarceration, and those subjugated and exploited are kept in check through intimidation and fear.

Immersed in a culture of fear, where correctional officers and staff assume the role of overseers, those in power have unlimited control over those held captive. In this atmosphere of autocracy and tyranny, in the shadows of prison walls, abuses occur and are kept hidden from scrutiny. Absent are the voices from this shadow world—those 2.2 million incarcerated Americans who exist behind walls and fences. Public discourse on the debilitating effects of mass incarceration, its legacy in slavery, the devastating impact on entire racial and cultural swaths of society is incomplete. We can’t have meaningful, purposeful discussions on these topics and expect improvement if we exclude the voices of those impacted the most. A St. John’s Law Review article

“...How we treat the least of us defines the rest of us...”

reads, “The marketplace of ideas does not function properly when government impedes prisoners from participating in public discourse, especially concerning criminal justice and mass incarceration matters.” The article explains that when the power of prison officials to restrain free speech is unimpeded and prisoners’ voices are prevented from entering the public domain, the democratic process is subverted. Just as democracy and community is best served by free speech and a vibrant and free press, so too is a prison community. Ideals built on honorable premises will be tested just as the grit and will of the individual spirit are tested in the face of the storm. The frailty of the human condition is exposed when subjected to tyranny and oppression from those who wield power by force and intimidation. If fear is my master, truth is my victim. If I am motivated by fear, if what I do and the choices I make are driven by fear, then I am not being led by or influenced by truth. Truth becomes the victim of my fear. In the sweltering heat of the cauldron of adversity, up against the forces of tyranny and injustice, those who refuse to be silenced gain strength with staunch adherence to truth and resilience to threats and coercion. Margaret Brennan of CBS’s *Face the Nation* stated, “Information is the currency of democracy.” A legitimate democracy relies on the free exchange of information. Silence is the best friend of tyranny. Free speech is its worst enemy.

Unrestrained prison censorship excludes prisoner voices from the discussion of political and public issues that are central to facilitating democratic decision-making. As for checking the value of free speech, if there are no restraints on the power of prison officials who have the authority to keep complaints about their conduct and prison conditions from ever leaving the prison’s walls, then free speech is a constitutional right unrightfully abridged in the illegal act of censorship. As mass incarceration spreads its toxic contamination across the country, free speech becomes even more important as more souls than ever before are subjected to speech restrictions. Poor people, people of color, whole communities, and cultures are affected. Silencing prisoners’ voices has the insidious ability to exclude those incarcerated from the conversation of incarceration itself. Prison censorship robs the incarcerated of their power of expression and distorts public discourse. Those locked up—the 2.2 million who are blacker, browner, and poorer than the population at large—are excluded from the conversations and debates that affect us most radically. Thus, those conversations are skewed in favor of wealthier, whiter, non-incarcerated participants. Criminal justice concerns are being conducted by those

“Criminal justice concerns are being conducted by those least impacted, leaving out those most impacted.”

least impacted, leaving out those most impacted. The marketplace of ideas, the purpose of which is seeking truth, cannot function wholly in this vacuum, and in this scenario, the open exchange of ideas is not open to everyone.

Mass incarceration and social acceptance of the carceral beast is a way of admitting that some people are expendable, that some are lesser than, and that it is acceptable to extract the undesirable elements from society. It is a plantation philosophy that permeates society 160 years after slavery was abolished. From these dark places, where the light of humanity rarely shines, incarcerated voices call out from the shadows. *

D. Razor Babb is a former network affiliate broadcast journalist and current social justice reporter for VIP, Empowerment Avenue, Prison Journalism Project, & The Mule Creek Post. Razor has published several books, is a 3-time PEN awards winner, and finalist in the 2024 L.A. Press Club Awards for crime reporting.

Living With Life and Death on Death Row

By Glenn Cornwell

California Medical Facility, where he was recently transferred after spending decades on San Quentin's Death Row

Life on the row has several different flavors and circumstances, death being the bottom line. Sometimes I feel like I'm standing by the river of time, watching everyone I know and love float by into the abyss. The yards here are broken up into several different exercise areas about two-thirds the size of a basketball court. Two fences with razor wire on top separate each yard. On several occasions, I've had guys call me to the fence and talk to me for between thirty minutes to an hour about nothing. Every conversation left me feeling like I had missed something. At some point, they'd thank me and in a roundabout way say goodbye. It never failed. That evening the alarm would go off in the building. The guy I'd just kicked it with had either hung himself or shot up heroin or fentanyl, and was gone!

My good friend Chuck told me he'd shot heroin since age twelve, probably because I don't judge. Since so many people had overdosed I was really concerned. One day we were in the enhanced out-

patient (EOP) exercise cages talking up a storm. Seeing I had an in, I asked him if he'd be careful shooting "H" mixed with Fentanyl. I didn't think shooting something fifty to one hundred times stronger than what other guys had been using was sane. I suggested he "break it down ten times smaller than his normal dose." He said it

sounded like a good idea. At the same time, he was barely standing. That night he overdosed. I can't remember why, but I walked into one of the cages on the first tier the next morning. My boy Rockhead gets staged right next to me and said, "Did you hear, "Sponkeo (Chuck) overdosed last night?" "Nawh I didn't," I replied. "Yeah G, that fentanyl is hella good, I've gotta get me some of that!"

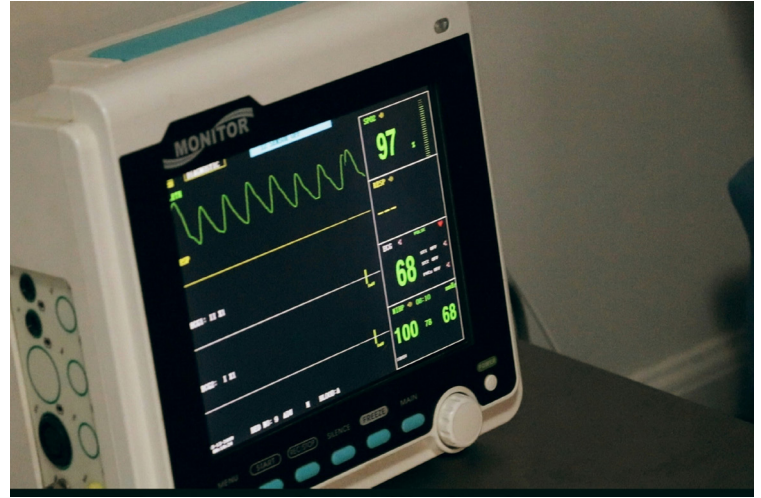
Feeling like I was about to throw up, I sat down on the crate in my cage and said, "Be careful." A day or two later, Rockhead was also dead, from fentanyl! His appeal lawyer was my habeas lawyer so I called as soon as possible. Here, in East Block, I can't help but feel that death and prison are twin brothers. Since I've been incarcerated I went from being the baby sibling in a family of five to a daddy, grandfather, then great-grandfather. Everyone from my grandparents to my siblings has passed on, floating down the river of time. *



Support System

By David Lee, Jr.

Substance Abuse Treatment Facility & State Prison, Corcoran



Beep, beep, beeeeeep! The eerie sounds of medical equipment clinging me to life startles me to consciousness. The sobering thought of the beeps turning into a flat line has awakened me yet again. However, as I awake, I look languidly at my surroundings and I am more reminded of a huge sarcophagus as opposed to any medical facility. As I look further, peering out the near window,

the view of barbed wire and control tires in the distance reinforces my belief that this is no hospital, bringing me to a startling reality. Approximately seventeen years ago, a judge sentenced me to three life sentences without parole terms plus 196 years! During this journey I have been asked on

many occasions to describe what it is like to serve a sentence of Life Without the Possibility of Parole. And the closest analogy I can articulate is being on life support. Being on life support is the only way I can imagine to describe living in prison with a sentence of life without the possibility of parole. It is a sentence that nearly ensures I will die in prison. But dying in prison does not seem as fearful as the thought of living in prison until I do eventually die. Living in prison, but essentially teetering between life and death. Only surviving by the hope that my sentence is not a true reality. Surviving through the support lent by family members who do an occasional check in to see if it's time to pull the plug. Surviving through the perfunctory care CDCR provides to ensure that the beeps keep beeping. I'm only thriving through the support lent by advocacy groups who fight to keep me alive. I'm thriving through the support lent by others in the same predicament who also refuse to let the beeping become a constant beeeeeeeep!!!!!! *

"I am more reminded of a huge sarcophagus as opposed to any medical facility."

"But dying in prison does not seem as fearful as the thought of living in prison until I do eventually die."

Proposition 66: An End to Cruel and Unusual Treatment?

By William Proctor

Pelican Bay State Prison

Pursuant to Proposition 66, an initiative approved by California voters in 2016, the condemned transfer program mandated that California transfer condemned incarcerated people from the two prisons that have been housing them since the 1970s and move them to other prisons throughout the state. These prisons include San Quentin State Prison where condemned men are imprisoned and Central California Women's Facility where condemned women are imprisoned. A memo released on February of 2022 by California's Division of Adult Institutions reads in part:

These transfers will allow CDCR (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation) to phase out the practice of segregating people on death row based solely on their sentence and will remove maximum custody designations for the majority of [people in prison]. This will allow case-by-case reviews to determine where an [incarcerated person] should be housed. How an [incarcerated person] is housed should depend on behavior, risks, needs, other case factors such as health care, mental health, as well as any safety and risk concerns... Being housed in other facilities will allow the person to be located closer to family and/or county of commitment, which would allow for great employment opportunities and access to rehabilitation programs... participants of Mental Health Services Delivery System will continue to receive services consistent with your level of care, not dependent on your housing.

This memo exposes the cruel and unusual treatment of people on death row over the last four decades. In the memo, the Director of the Division of Adult Institutions Connie Gipson speaks about how, "the moves will allow CDCR to phase out the practice of segregating people on death row from others based solely on their sentences and removing the maximum security custody designation from the majority of [incarcerated people]."

The manuals regulating custody designations are thousands of pages, and far too extensive to try and sort out here, but in order to help the reader understand the cruel and unusual nature of forcing people on death row into maximum custody housing I will explain the custody designations generally.

"This memo exposes the cruel and unusual treatment of people on death row over the last four decades."

There are four custody levels in California's prison system, Levels I through IV. These custody designations are based on a point system. An incarcerated person gets points added or subtracted based on behavior, risks, needs, case factors such as health care, mental health, and safety concerns. Levels I and II are minimum security custody. Incarcerated people who have proven to be low-level threats to the security of other people in prison or the staff are allowed to move around inside prison and partake in a variety of educational, vocational, and rehabilitative programs, as well as having access to prison events like concerts, food drives, church, and sporting events, and of course they get access to the exercise yard. They're not handcuffed or searched when leaving their cells or dorms.

Levels III and IV are where men and women are housed who have earned enough points to merit a higher security threat to other incarcerated people or prison staff. They earned their points because of rule violations which could involve refusing to work, possession of contraband, violence, or some other behavior deemed a violation. Violence is the norm in Levels III and IV, the fences around exercise yards and housing areas are lined with weapon-carrying correctional

officers who have been trained to shoot incarcerated people when they commit acts of violence. These levels have a high population of gang members living there. There's always a threat of violence.



"I've been forced to live in this Level IV environment since 1983, and it's a traumatic experience..."

People on death row have been forced to live in Level IV maximum security for over forty years, not based on their behavior, risks, needs, care factors such as health care, mental health, and safety concerns, but based solely on their sentence.

I've been forced to live in this Level IV environment since 1983, and it's a traumatic experience, countless incidents of violence on the yards and in the unit, guards firing a variety of weapons onto the yard to break up violent incidents.

Fortunately, because of Proposition 66 the rules have changed, recently I was reclassified based on my behavior, risks, needs, case factors such as health care, mental health, and safety concerns, and I was classified as a Level II custody designation, which is the lowest level a person on death row is allowed to attain. *

"People on death row have been forced to live in Level IV maximum security for over forty years... based solely on their sentence."



From the Belly of the Beast: Realities of Prison



By Jacob Lester

Arkansas Department of Corrections, Cummins Unit

Why do we ignore the sufferings of others? Why do we choose to be willfully ignorant to what actually occurs in our societies in the name of justice? Why do we ignore the truths of our carceral system? Why do we choose to ignore the realities of the conditions in our prisons?

The ugly truth is prisons are a continual torture for incarcerated persons designed to keep them coming back. The truths can be seen in the daily occurrences at Cummins Unit in Arkansas and several other places. Yet society still chooses to ignore the ugly truth.

“The ugly truth is prisons are a continual torture for incarcerated persons designed to keep them coming back.”

Listen to my truths earned through painful traumatic experiences. Listen to the ugly truths you choose to ignore! I have been at Cummins Unit since October 2022. In that time I've come to understand the true horrors of prison and to realize the fact that trauma is the norm in this hell I've landed in.

Unaffiliated white males are robbed, whether with force or intimidation. Some thieves steal from anyone and everyone and call it “taking.” People are beaten with socks that have either a lock or bars of soap in them, or just fists and boots on a regular basis. People are



stabbed with homemade shanks with regularity. Drugs, especially K2 and meth, are readily available. If you are unaffiliated you have to be even more cautious walking the halls or on the amount of commissary you have. If you are homosexual you face open disdain and covert attempts to get you to play.

Then the actual conditions of this condemned hell hole. The roofs in barracks, chow halls, and hallways leak every time it rains. Roofs cave in due to the leaks and rot. Heavy rains cause the leakier barracks like 10A, 13, 14, etc.

“Drugs run rampant and rule the prison.”

to flood worrying inmates about their property and safety. Rats and roaches own the chow halls and kitchen playing as they delight in the food prep areas. Was that extra crunch seasoning or bug?

When occasionally you get real meat your body cannot handle it since rarely do they feed you anything other than soy, chicken, or mysterious meat blends. What could that meat be? Horse? Cow? Soy? Rat?

Drugs run rampant and rule the prison. Meth, deuce, which do you choose? You can use credit, sure, but pay on time or else a bruise or two will help you remember. Can you handle your drugs or will you fight or stab someone in paranoia?

Discrimination is the name of the game. Drug dealers run the roost and users that are known get some extra leeway, but you face the risk of being the target of staff ire or being ignored by staff as you are beaten to death for no good reason.

“What could that meat be? Horse? Cow? Soy? Rat?”

Get in trouble and the hole or restrictive housing is where you land after being stowed away in a holding cell for hours or days. No toilet or sink in

the holding cells. You face extreme temperatures, freezing in winter begging for a blanket, sweating yourself unconscious in the summer. If you are unlucky enough to land in Holding Cell One or Two, where suicide watches usually go, be cramped and freeze worse than anywhere else, plus no tray slot exists. Instead, the tray is slid under the bottom of the cell bars which are ever so nasty and centimeters from your uncovered food. Plan to eat cold meals everyday because trays are allowed to sit made up for hours before being fed to you. The risk of food poisoning growing by the minute, and yet staff do not care.

The horrors you see and trauma you experience. Why would you not be ready for anything? When are you ever safe? When can you truly relax or rest? Why or why are we tortured so? Do we truly deserve this slavery, torture, and hell? Are we unredeemable? Why oh why refuse to help us? Why oh why refuse to see?

“Do we truly deserve this slavery, torture, and hell?”

“From the Belly of the Beast” is a new segment in our newsletter where we feature a raw, unedited letter from an incarcerated writer exposing the horrors of our prison system.

Jacob Lester is from Arkansas. After struggling to become a nurse, he landed in prison. Through all of this, he's always advocated for others and loves to write, and is working to combine the two through his journalism and a memoir.

Gutter of Sin

By Horace Thomas

Salinas Valley State Prison

6⁷ years
Was the judge's decision
Would I live to get out
Or rot in a prison?

Back behind the walls
Where I'd be stuck
Determination would get me out
Not a whim or luck!

I felt numb
Warehoused in the tomb
I wanted another chance
To crawl back into the womb!

What had I done
To be caught up and twisted?
Why did I deserve
To be falsely convicted?!

So I sat in a cell
At an all time low
My future uncertain
And life full of woe!

The only way I'd survive
Was to pull myself together
Or I'd be sitting in prison
For what seems like forever!

During my post-conviction
Issues were raised
But not enough
To have my liberty saved!

The final decision
Didn't change much
Just knocked off 8 years
Appellate procedures and such!

I researched my issues
When I didn't have a clue
Preparing myself
For the right thing to do!

Slowly but surely
In time I'd learn
With enough effort
Things could take a turn!

I sat in Folsom prison
Getting my head together
In the worst of times
Even under the weather!

Each time I tried
My petitions were rejected
This negative impact
I found unaccepted!

A lot of hard work
Was put in effect
Work that would pay off
And I wouldn't regret

Trial and error
I didn't give up
I had already had
A brush with bad luck!

In between my struggle
I was thrown in segregation
It was all good though
Further degradation!

When that didn't stop me
They put me back on the yard
And back in the hole
Making my time hard!

I learned real fast
I was singled out
The game the prison played
What they were all about!

I had to love myself
And never stop!
Putting one foot in front of the other.
And never drop!

They recognized my ambition
Desire to succeed
Piles of paperwork
How I continued to proceed!

In a last ditch effort
They buried me in the hole!
But still I saw the light
And reached for my goal!

After my hole time
I hit the general population
With the gang members and gangsters
Making preparations...

Pelican Bay prison
The end of the road
Where violence controlled the yard
Where the system unloads...

The worst of the worst
This includes staff
No exceptions
All were a part of the wrath!

Everything about the place
Made survival slim
All the news society heard
Was sad and very grim...

The people that worked

there
Were much like the men
In the bowels of a city
Within a gutter of sin!

Racial riots
Thunder storms
Pigs running
At the sound of an alarm...

Inmates were afraid
Motivated by fear
Unable to control their emotion
Forced to live here!

They couldn't break me
By selective housing in the system
And repeated failure
To make me a victim!

Next on the agenda
Was cover up false reports
The district attorney
Refused to take me to court!

No more mainline
I became obsolete
Their play in motion
Execution complete!

Only the beginning
Of the lies and deceit to come
A taste of politics
The damage was done!

I was ready
Holding back restraint
I exercised my first amendment right
Initiating complaints!

Time and again
I threw up a roadblock
They teamed up on me
With crafty plots!

I continued my struggle
Getting creative
Using my head
Being innovative... *



Join the Conversation

By Bao Vu Nguyen

Central California Women's Facility

The CDCR plans to establish the California Model and Dynamic Security, to which I would ask, "Whose security?"

I saw recently, a sergeant tried to elicit an incarcerated person to volunteer up his cardboard box because it is contraband. The incarcerated person made many reasons as to why he should keep the box and would not volunteer it up. So the sergeant, instead of confiscating the box as his job dictates, called his officers to search the whole building for cardboard. As a result, many incarcerated people are mad at the sergeant and the officers for searching. Many incarcerated people are mad at the person for not giving up the box and getting the building searched. The incarcerated person's selfish actions aside, the sergeant's actions were not conducive to the safety and security of all involved.

There are good examples too. I have had many professional, positive and respectful encounters with staff and officers on a daily basis. There was a charity drive last October, when an Associate Warden pitched and batted in a homerun derby, and a Captain competed in a hangman contest. I, myself, recently played ping pong against the same Captain.

Dynamic Security is a real possibility with training and experience. The factors that can prevent Dynamic Security and the California Model are time and money. Training needs money, and experience needs time, and both are in public favor, which can change. Ultimately, Dynamic Security and the California Model are good things for all Californians and should be a future of CDCR. *

From the Inside Editor's Desk

By Jamel Walker

Mule Creek State Prison

One of our goals at the VIP is to give an uncensored voice to the voiceless. We have the opportunity to use our publication as a platform to honestly expose the truth of what occurs behind the walls and fences of our nation's carceral system while advocating for social justice, change of the conditions, and the eventual abolition of the prison industrial complex as we know it. The question is, how do you want your voices to sound? For us, it is not so much what we say as much as it is how we say it. What does this mean?

It means, as a professional journalistic publication, we must adhere to professional journalistic standards. As editors, one of our responsibilities is to curate your submissions in an effort to determine which best fit our goal of honestly exposing the truth of our experiences and the conditions in which we experience them. This also means balancing honesty and truth with pragmatism. We do our cause no benefit when we write unsupported claims, or present unbalanced, biased opinions, simply just rant, or fail to adhere to journalistic standards..

Another of our responsibilities as editors is to help those who submit articles become better writers, both for our publication in particular and in general. This means that there will be times when we will request a revision or rewrite. Our feedback is not just criticism, but constructive criticism for the sake of improving your writing. We ask that you see it in this light. *

Incarcerated since the age of 21, Jamel Walker is serving his 39th year of a life without parole sentence. While incarcerated, he has earned several college degrees and certifications including, but not limited to, a degree in Sociology, with honors, Social and Behavioral Science, and Arts and Humanities. He is a Certified Peer Literacy Mentor, a Certified Human Services Paraprofessional, a social justice advocate, paralegal, abolitionist, and experienced, published writer. He is a student at California State University - Sacramento working on a Bachelor's of Arts in Communication Studies.

Organizational Update

By Angie D. Gordon

California State Prison, Sacramento

For a realist, or a pragmatist for that matter, abolition is a challenging position to defend, demanding that one dream of freedom in a world which does not yet exist. At the VIP we -for the most part- are staunch abolitionists, and part of our job is to consider not merely what words fill these pages, but also how those words embody action, and the spirit of practical conviction that stands behind the cause we argue for. Our work here represents more than merely casting lofty ideals into the void; rather, we must be realistic, when we talk of problems we must also offer solutions, and we must strive to inspire joy and hope within our readers, cultivating the will to struggle on with pride and dignity in the face of constant despair.

We must also be realistic, and that means facing some hard and unavoidable truths. We must acknowledge that the carceral system also represents an integral feature of how racism and class oppression function within the span of advanced capitalism. Our social order is dependant upon the prison, dependant upon the functional disciplinary matrices which bridge it with the schoolhouse, but more so, our society's administration of wealth inequality is socioeconomically linked with the penal system, producing subjects thought to be "unworthy" of care and support. In this sense, the prison industrial complex functions as it was designed to, benefiting middle and upper-class white heterosexual individuals, while at the same time segmenting, subjugating, and ensuring the maldistribution of good-life resources to all those who fall on the periphery of that privileged group. Perhaps the more sobering realization we must contend with is the fact that, in spite of all the presumed gains of the civil rights era, time and again those gains have been reabsorbed by the system itself, and through them racial and class-based inequity have simultaneously been heightened and obscured. As Fasching-Varner et al. note, disparities in wealth, educational opportunity, and criminal status have significantly broadened between white communities and those of color in the last fifty years.¹ Without prison, this system of inequity and structured oppression would not be possible, and for that reason we must accept that, without a drastic and radical reorganization of our entire social order, prison-like racism- is here to stay.

This perspective is called "penal realism" and admittedly, it rings of a certain bleakness; however, it also offers a window onto a practical way forward, that is, if we are still dedicated to do what we can with the time we've been given. We cannot stop prisons on a dime, or realistically, even make a noticeable dent in their steely edifice, but what we can do is find ways to improve the quality of life for those who have been condemned to live out their days within captivity. I want to urge our writers to never name a problem without also offering a solution, and in those solutions, prioritize the enhancement of hope and joy and the capacity to dream of freedom. A very close friend of mine told me recently that "joy is its own form of resistance." And where, as a queer trans woman, this is a profound recognition for me and my community, it is also a perspective which should resonate with anyone who struggles beneath the yoke of brutal adversity. As abolitionist writers and journalists, as realists, we should strive to inspire joy in the face of unyielding oppression, doing our best to cultivate hope and giving careful ear to the whispers of will and joyous resistance which persist under unspeakable circumstances.

Tourmaline defines "freedom dreams" as being "born when we face harsh conditions not with despair, but with the deep knowledge that these conditions will change."² As we write, let us tap into that knowledge, and with it foster a sense of community within which our collective dreams of freedom are able to thrive. Let us write on with joy and resilience until the day breaks and a new world opens up, or until we fall down, proud and defiant in the dark, our bodies paving

the path for those who will follow. Let us recognize that life must go on, and together we can enhance its quality, a huddled mass who, rather than finding fault and error in one another, find hope and joy in the words we share, voices that light our way through this weary night and remind us that we are not alone. *

1. Fasching-Varner, K. J., Mitchell, R. W., Martin, L. L. (2014) Beyond school-to-prison-pipeline and towards an educational and penal realism. *Equity & Excellence in Education*. 47(4), 410-429
2. Tourmaline, "Filmmaker and activist Tourmaline on how to freedom dream," *Vogue*, July 2, 2020, www.vogue.com/article/filmmaker-and-activist-Tourmaline-on-how-to-freedom-dream

Angie D. Gordon is a journalist and scholar incarcerated at California State Prison, Sacramento. She has been published in *Critical Criminology: An International Journal* and a handful of incarcerated press publications. Angie is an executive member of the VIP's editorial board and a staunch advocate for the LGBTQIA+ incarcerated community.

Support Our Work

The *VIP* is a nonprofit publication written and edited by incarcerated people. We distribute our monthly issues to incarcerated readers free of charge; we also provide training courses and mentor services for both incarcerated journalists and scholars. Through the education and equitable empowerment of the incarcerated, we work tirelessly to disrupt the oppressive and violent social hierarchies in prison, striving to create meaningful opportunities for change and personal growth in the lives of those on the inside, but we cannot maintain this important work without the gracious support of our allies and community partners.

If you believe in what we do and have the ability, please make a financial contribution to our cause. For those who are unable to contribute financially, please help us promote the *VIP* and share it with a broader audience, bridging the gap between the prison and the community.

To make a donation and learn more about the work we do, please visit www.davisvanguard.org. Checks may be made out to *The Davis Vanguard*, with *VIP* in the memo, and mailed to the address at the bottom of this page.

Write To Us



The *VIP* accepts submissions, either as manuscripts or query letters, from currently incarcerated writers. We are interested in content covering prison and the experiences of the incarcerated. For a more detailed coverage of the content we are looking for, please send us a self-addressed stamped envelope and we will forward you a copy of the *VIP*'s Official Style Guide.

All submissions making factual claims must include their sources and appropriate citations for referenced material; likewise, content which includes interviews with incarcerated people's names, likeness or quoted words must adhere to departmental requirements governing media interviews with incarcerated people.

Generally, we are looking for the following types of articles:

- Carceral Narratives
- Profiles/Interviews
- Investigative Reporting
- Op-Eds
- Prison Culture Analysis
- The Criminal Justice System
- Humorous Anecdotes
- Special Event Coverage
- Program Coverage

Please send **your submission and a short bio** to to the mailing address listed below.

Subscription Information

The *VIP* is a monthly publication distributed free of charge to incarcerated readers; likewise, we share digital copies of the *VIP* to our supporters on the outside. If you are interested in being added to our mailing list, please use the following contact information:

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