

Maximizing Time, Maximizing Punishment: The Lived Experience of Long-Term Sentences in California Women’s Prisons

A REPORT OF THE **UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SENTENCING PROJECT**
IN COLLABORATION WITH THE **CALIFORNIA COALITION FOR WOMEN PRISONERS**
AND THE **UCLA CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WOMEN|STREISAND CENTER**

Maximizing Time, Maximizing Punishment

Report by the University of California Sentencing Project

In collaboration with the California Coalition for Women Prisoners and the UCLA Center for the Study of Women|Streisand Center

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DEDICATED TO



LINDA GOMEZ EVANS
1982-2022

Our beloved friend and co-organizer.
May you continue to shine a light
on the path to freedom.



ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

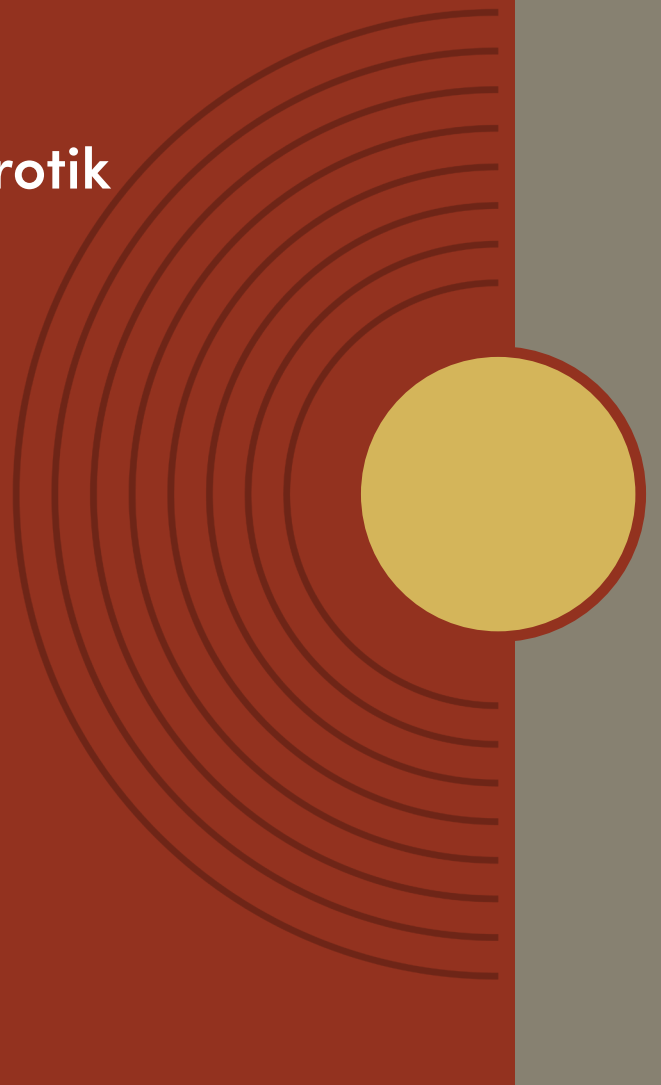
The **University of California Sentencing Project** (UCSP) is a research collaboration between the California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP) and an interdisciplinary group of faculty, researchers, and graduate and undergraduate students affiliated with the University of California. Conceived by CCWP member Jane Dorotik, who herself served twenty years of a twenty-five-to-life sentence before her conviction was overturned, the UCSP advances and shares research on extreme prison sentencing that is conducted by and with directly impacted people. Founded in 2019, the UCSP prioritizes participatory research approaches that center the lived expertise of people currently and formerly imprisoned in California's women's prisons.

The **California Coalition for Women Prisoners** (CCWP) is a statewide organization of people inside and outside prison walls that monitors and challenges abusive conditions inside California prisons designated for women and advocates for the release of incarcerated people through legal advocacy, campaign organizing, policy advocacy, grassroots media production, and mutual aid efforts. CCWP sees the struggle for racial and gender justice as central to dismantling the prison-industrial complex and prioritizes the leadership of the people, families, and communities most impacted in building this movement.

The **UCLA Center for the Study of Women|Streisand Center** works towards a world in which education and scholarship are tools for social justice feminism, improving the lives of people of all genders. The UCLA Center for the Study of Women is an internationally recognized center for research on gender, sexuality, and women's issues and the first organized research unit of its kind in the University of California system.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Maximizing Time, Maximizing Punishment: The Lived Experience of Long-Term Sentences in California Women’s Prisons” is based on the inaugural study of the University of California Sentencing Project (UCSP). In partnership with the California Coalition for Women Prisoners (CCWP), the UCSP grew out of a demand by people incarcerated at the California Institution for Women (CIW) for research that examines the under-studied conditions and lived ramifications of long-term sentences. In December of 2019, the UCSP launched its first research effort with twenty-two collaborators who had served or faced a long-term sentence in California’s prisons designated for women. Based on an analysis of in-depth interviews and focus groups, the report highlights five key themes:

- 1. Unrecognized as a Victim or Survivor:** The criminal legal system’s systematic refusal to recognize the circumstances of criminalization as stemming from survival and trauma fuels extreme sentencing.
- 2. Traumatized by Criminal Legal Procedure:** Criminal legal procedure produced and exacerbated trauma caused by racialized, gendered, and sexualized violence. This in turn undercut participants’ ability to participate effectively in their own defense.
- 3. Hanging in the Balance of Racist, Sexist Law and Order Politics:** The tendency to view sentencing as a discrete judicial event conceals the role of the wider web of political actors and structural forces that shape sentencing outcomes.

- 4. Sentenced by Prison and Parole Authorities:** Prison authorities, prison guards, and Board of Parole Hearings (BPH) commissioners play significant roles in extending the duration and punitive effects of sentencing.
- 5. Sentenced to a Lifetime:** The harmful impacts of long-term prison sentences are embodied; relational; life-long; and multigenerational.

These findings demonstrate that “sentencing” is not a one-time court order but a set of interconnected social, political, and legal processes that begin before entering a courtroom and extend into and beyond incarceration. Sentencing, in other words, is not a singular event but a multi-faceted process that involves an array of social processes and state actors. Crucially, participants in the pilot study understood these sentencing processes as designed to maximize the time they spent incarcerated. Maximizing time, in turn, maximized the punitive and traumatic impacts of imprisonment. Those serving long terms are de facto sentenced to ongoing racialized gendered violence in prison, the erosion of physical and psychological health, reproductive rights violations, severed familial, cultural, and community ties, lost economic opportunities, and life-long social stigma. Participants shared their lived expertise in the hopes of advancing research that contributes to struggles for freedom and transformative social change.

A LETTER FROM JANE DOROTIK

Dear reader,

My conviction was overturned after I spent twenty years behind bars in California for a crime I did not commit. The abuse I suffered in the system, and the abuse so many suffer without any form of relief, will never be justifiable. But I learned so much while I was incarcerated. I learned that many of the women I was with behind bars were survivors of abuse in many forms before they became victims of state-sanctioned abuse. I learned that this earlier abuse was never taken into consideration in the so-called justice system. I learned that California has so many enhancements to increase a sentence, that very often the enhancement is greater than the sentence itself. I also learned that there is very little research about long-term incarceration in particular, and the kinds of effects it has specifically on women, and all trans and non-binary people behind bars and after release.

Why has our society decided that a 25-year gun enhancement is reasonable to add onto a 15-to-life sentence for second degree murder, when the woman was only trying to protect herself from abuse? Why don't we talk about the California parole board as a sentencing authority in its own right, and one with no oversight? We have to think of public safety in much broader terms and take into consideration things like emotional safety, economic safety, and safety from state violence.

When I was still incarcerated, I suggested we do more research on long-term sentencing and what was happening from a gendered perspective in particular. I am so proud of our team for this first step in what we hope is a long journey of researching and exposing more truths about this system— truths that we must learn from people with lived experience. It is our hope that this research will be of use to movements for decarceration and prison abolition, to policymakers concerned with developing strategies for decreasing California's use of incarceration, to scholars of criminalization and imprisonment, and to individuals navigating their own legal cases and the long-term harms of incarceration.

Mass incarceration has been an abysmal failed experiment that has massively harmed our society. It's time to listen to and learn from those who know the most about these failures. Thank you so much for taking the time to read this report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jane Dorotik". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jane Dorotik

INTRODUCTION

As is now well known, the United States incarcerates more people than any other country on the planet.¹ With five percent of the world's population, it cages approximately twenty-five percent of the world's imprisoned people.² And while the United States leads globally in the number of people it imprisons, California leads among U.S. states. The most recent data aggregated by the Prison Policy Initiative shows that of the roughly two million people currently incarcerated in U.S. jails, prisons, and detention centers, 239,000 of them are caged in California with an average annual cost of \$106,131 per person.³ Mirroring national disparities, Black people make up nearly one-third of the state's incarcerated population despite comprising only seven percent of its entire population. Together, Black and Latinx people make up nearly two-thirds of those incarcerated in the state⁴ California's annual price tag for state and local-level policing and the operations of criminal courts, city and county jails, state prisons, and probation and parole systems is approximately \$50 billion as of 2020.⁵

California's dubious distinction as an epicenter of incarceration in the United States is not only defined by the numbers of human beings caged or the number of dollars spent to cage them, but also by the number of people serving extreme sentences. The Sentencing Project's 2020 census of people with life sentences found that thirty-three percent of California's

1. Including federal and state prisons, local jails, juvenile and immigration detention centers, and other systems of confinement, the US is estimated to incarcerate nearly two million people in 2023, outpacing all other countries (Wendy Sawyer and Peter Wagner, "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2023" (Prison Policy Initiative, 2023), <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2023.html>).

2. Roy Walmsley, "World Prison Population List, 12th Edition" (World Prison Brief, Institute for Criminal Policy Research, 2018), https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/wppl_12.pdf.

3. Alexi Jones, "California Profile" (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018), <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/CA.html>; "California's Annual Costs to Incarcerate an Inmate in Prison" (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2022), https://lao.ca.gov/policyareas/cj/6_cj_inmatecost.

4. Jones, "California Profile."

5. Scott Graves and Chris Hoene, "California Spending on Law Enforcement, the Legal System & Incarceration" (California Budget and Policy Center, June 2020).

prison population was serving either Life With Parole, Life Without the Possibility of Parole (LWOP), or Virtual Life, which requires a person to serve fifty years before they are parole eligible.⁶ Of the 105,567 people in the United States serving a Life With Parole sentence as of 2020, a staggering one-third are imprisoned in California.⁷ The state ranks third in the nation in the number of people serving LWOP with more than 5,000 people facing what many refer to as a “living death” sentence or “death by incarceration.”⁸ As reported in 2019, although people serving LWOP in women’s prisons comprise less than five percent of California’s total LWOP population, California had the highest rate of people in women’s prisons serving a life sentence, with one in four sentenced to Life With Parole, LWOP, or Virtual Life.⁹

The rise of extreme sentencing in California can be traced to the racialized law-and-order politics and political-economic crises of the 1970s that produced a simultaneous gutting of public welfare on the one hand and the expansion of police power and prison capacity on the other. In this larger context, an overwhelming majority of voters passed the Death Penalty Act in 1978.¹⁰ This ballot proposition expanded the list of “special circumstances” that mandate sentences of the death penalty or LWOP, including felony murder special circumstances. “Felony murder,” is a theory of law that defines any death that occurs in the commission of a long list of felonies as murder, even if the death is accidental. In these cases, prosecutors only have to prove a defendant’s intent to commit the underlying felony (i.e. robbery) in order to hold them liable for murder, even if they did not intend and/or cause a death that occurred. As a result, many people serving life and LWOP sentences today in California’s

6. Ashley Nellis, “No End in Sight: America’s Enduring Reliance on Life Imprisonment” (The Sentencing Project, 2021), p. 17.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

9. This figure excludes many transgender women who are incarcerated in men’s prisons and includes all people incarcerated in women’s prisons, including transgender men and women, and two-spirit and gender nonconforming people.

10. “California Proposition 7, Expand Death Penalty and Life Imprisonment for Murders Initiative (November 1978),” Ballotpedia, [https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_7,_Expand_Death_Penalty_and_Life_Imprisonment_for_Murders_Initiative_\(1978\)](https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_7,_Expand_Death_Penalty_and_Life_Imprisonment_for_Murders_Initiative_(1978))

prisons were not directly responsible for a death.

Multiple ballot propositions passed in the 1990s further entrenched extreme sentencing. For example, Proposition 115 (1990) and Proposition 195 (1996) once again extended the list of special circumstances under which either the death penalty or LWOP sentence must be imposed.¹¹ The state's three-strikes law, initially passed in 1994 and amended in 2012, stipulated that anyone sentenced to three felonies would receive a mandatory twenty-five-years-to-life sentence.¹² Proposition 21 (2000) contributed to the extreme sentencing of youth, paving the way for those as young as fourteen to be tried in adult courts and expanding the lists of serious and violent offenses as well as the use of gang enhancements.¹³ California has more than one hundred separate penal code sections that prosecutors can use to enhance, or extend, sentences based on the current charge/conviction or on past conviction records.¹⁴ The expansive reach of accomplice liability, or holding people charged as accomplices equally liable (for murder, attempted murder, etc.), including through "aiding and abetting," "failure to protect," and felony murder statutes, has further facilitated extreme sentencing, with disproportionate impacts on women, transgender men, and gender nonconforming people, particularly survivors of intimate partner violence. These legal developments, among many others, have fed a culture of zealous prosecution that incentivizes

11. "California Proposition 115, Changes to Criminal Law and Trials Initiative (June 1990)," Ballotpedia, [https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_115,_Changes_to_Criminal_Law_and_Trials_Initiative_\(June_1990\)](https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_115,_Changes_to_Criminal_Law_and_Trials_Initiative_(June_1990)); "California Proposition 195, Special Circumstances Punishable by the Death Penalty Measure (March 1996)," Ballotpedia, [https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_195,_Special_Circumstances_Punishable_by_the_Death_Penalty_Measure_\(March_1996\)](https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_195,_Special_Circumstances_Punishable_by_the_Death_Penalty_Measure_(March_1996)).

12. The California Legislature originally enacted Three Strikes sentencing law in 1994 through AB 971 (Jones, Costa). Voters approved amendments to the law by passing Proposition 184 in 1984 and Proposition 36 in 2017. "California Proposition 184, Three Strikes Sentencing Initiative (1994)," Ballotpedia, [https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_184,_Three_Strikes_Sentencing_Initiative_\(1994\)](https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_184,_Three_Strikes_Sentencing_Initiative_(1994)), "California Proposition 36, Changes to Three Strikes Sentencing Initiative (2017)," Ballotpedia, [https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_36,_Changes_to_Three_Strikes_Sentencing_Initiative_\(2017\)](https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_36,_Changes_to_Three_Strikes_Sentencing_Initiative_(2017)).

13. "California Proposition 21, Treatment of Juvenile Offenders Initiative (March 2000)," Ballotpedia, [https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_21,_Treatment_of_Juvenile_Offenders_Initiative_\(March_2000\)](https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_21,_Treatment_of_Juvenile_Offenders_Initiative_(March_2000)).

14. Ryken Grattet, "Sentence Enhancements: Next Target of Corrections Reform?" (Public Policy Institute of California, 2017), <https://www.ppic.org/blog/sentence-enhancements-next-target-corrections-reform/>.

prosecutors to pursue the longest sentence possible.¹⁵

As these legal processes have reshaped the criminal legal system in California, they have been accompanied by an increase in narratives that propose lengthy incarceration and harsh sentencing as necessary to preserve “public safety.” Yet even critiques of such narratives, whether in popular press or academic scholarship, are rarely based on, much less instigated by, people with direct experience of long-term incarceration and sentencing. In partnership with CCWP, the UCSP launched this inaugural study designed to seed and incubate a research agenda on sentencing in California based on the expertise of people directly impacted.

15. Jullily Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); John F. Pfaff, *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform* (New York: Basic, 2017); Beth E. Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America’s Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

APPROACH

The study was designed in alignment with CCWP's commitment to amplifying the lived expertise of those directly impacted by imprisonment. The methodology was intended to situate people with lived experience as investigators and knowledge producers.

In December 2019, the UCSP held two daylong research sessions with twenty-two collaborating participants who had served or faced a long-term sentence in California's prisons designated for women. Each day began with a discussion about the prospective development of the UCSP followed by a brief workshop on narrative interviewing. Participants then met in pairs to conduct and record interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. This approach provided people with a conversational and supportive context as they discussed sensitive and potentially retraumatizing content. Interviews were followed by a meal and a large group discussion. In both interviews and the group discussion, participants reflected on (1) their own and one another's experiences with sentencing processes; (2) what they saw as the physical, emotional, and relational impacts of serving a long-term sentence; and (3) questions and concerns related to the causes and impacts of extreme sentences in California. Participants were also invited to reflect on the study itself, including the interviewing experience, and to discuss considerations, priorities, and questions for future UCSP research. These approaches were intended to cultivate opportunities for participants to build relationships with each other while engaging in collective, structural analysis of their individual pathways through criminal legal, jail, and prison systems.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by members of the UCSP. Preliminary analyses were presented to participants who elaborated on the initial findings and provided comments that were directly incorporated into the report.

The Participants, at a Glance

At the time of the interviews, the 22 participants ranged in age from 29 to 64. Collectively, they had spent more than 300 years behind bars. While all had faced an extreme sentence and been incarcerated in California women's prisons, their experiences of sentencing varied in meaningful ways:

- Participants faced sentences ranging from a determinate seven-year term to Life Without the Possibility of Parole (LWOP).¹⁶
- Time spent incarcerated ranged from 18 months to 31 years.
- Six participants had been sentenced to life terms in prison.
- Four people were sentenced to Life Without the Possibility of Parole.
- Prison admission dates spanned more than three decades.
- The majority of participants were sentenced as youth to long prison terms. Fifteen of 22 participants entered state prisons at the age of 25 or below.
- Twelve participants had pleaded guilty through a prearranged plea agreement, and 10 were convicted in a jury trial. Several participants had been prosecuted multiple times and had experienced both jury trials and negotiated plea deals.
- Fifteen of the 22 participants were sentenced in Los Angeles County.
- The vast majority of participants were represented by public

16. Three of the four participants who had been sentenced to LWOP received commutations through executive clemency, a rare occurrence that briefly increased during Governor Jerry Brown's final two years in office and subsequently decreased during Governor Gavin Newsom's administration. The fourth person sentenced to LWOP was released after her conviction was overturned through the appeals process, an exceedingly rare occurrence.


defenders, or other appointed attorneys. A small number of participants had hired private attorneys to defend them.

The participants were racially and ethnically diverse, including seven participants who identified as Black; two as Black and Indigenous; five as Latina; one as Indigenous; one as Pacific Islander; four as white; one as mixed Japanese, Indigenous, and white; and one as bi-racial. Nineteen participants identified as women and two as gender nonconforming or fluid. Twelve participants identified as bisexual, queer, or asexual; eight identified as straight; and two chose not to identify. All but two of the participants identified as survivors of interpersonal violence or abuse, whether in childhood, adulthood, or both.

FINDINGS

1. Unrecognized as a Victim or Survivor

Participants entered the criminal legal system having survived multiple forms of racialized, gendered, and sexualized violence that were directly and indirectly tied to the charges they faced. This section demonstrates how sentencing processes erase these contexts of violence and how the systematic refusal to recognize the circumstances of criminalization as stemming from survival and trauma fuels extreme sentencing.




“[T]hey are so busy and quick to sentence people to major years or to life in prison without knowing the full why and how-come of your crime. . . they just want to put you under the prison, basically, and throw away the key.” – Anna

“We’ve got to educate more people about the system. Because the system is made to beat us down.” – Roshawn


The events leading to participants’ criminal charges were largely described as part of a longer sequence of experiences of surviving structural and interpersonal violence, including child physical and sexual abuse, rape, domestic violence, poverty, and racial criminalization (via school systems, the child welfare system, and neighborhood-based policing). Participants spoke to the ways that our adversarial system, which relies on a victim/defendant binary, worked to negate their experiences of victimization and decontextualize acts carried out in the context of survival. In facing criminal charges, participants said that their statements about abuse and coercion were largely ignored or minimized

by police, detectives, prosecutors, and even their own defense attorneys, including recent traumatic events with direct bearing on their alleged crime. For example, Kelly's eighteen years in prison was the result of being convicted of "failing to protect" her unborn child from her partner's abuse. Yet existing documentation of the intimate partner violence she herself had been experiencing in that relationship was not introduced in court.



"I thought somebody would advocate for me. And I thought that the prosecution knew that I was also a victim of my husband's abuse, but it was their job to just dirty me up as much as they could, whatever they could to just get a conviction. And it wasn't what I thought our system was about, which is justice, and figuring out what went wrong here. . . . I was waiting for that moment and it never happened." – Kelly Savage-Rodriguez

The adversarial environment exacerbated post-traumatic stress, fear, and grief, that participants said was then weaponized against them. For instance, Barbara Chavez expressed reluctance to speak to law enforcement because she feared further violence or death at the hands of her co-defendant. Investigators actively worked to capitalize on her fear and trauma to elicit a statement they later held against her.



"When they first started to interview me, I asked for an attorney, and I invoked my right. But when they got me in the car to transport me from Barstow to Bakersfield, they got me to talk. They were scaring me. They were saying things to me during the drive.... I ended up giving a statement and they let me go for 10 months... and then they came back and arrested me because they felt like I was not saying what happened and that I was protecting

people. In reality, I was afraid. I just left an abusive relationship and this guy, I didn't know what he was going to do or his family was going to do, I was scared."

– Barbara Chavez

Having to manage acute trauma during pre-trial detention and trial proceedings directly shaped sentencing outcomes by compromising participants' ability to participate in their own legal defense. Some participants said they were fragile, afraid, or confused, and that their lack of clarity of voice was exploited and pathologized. For instance, GU attributed her long sentence to the ways in which post-traumatic stress interfered with her ability to clearly narrate what had happened to her or to grasp the possible prison time she was facing. In the pre-conviction period, she did not know what was "up or down" and was unable to "express what happened." Even her own lawyers preyed on this vulnerability to pressure her into a plea deal by falsely suggesting that this was her parents' desire. As GU's experience reveals and as the next section discusses in depth, previous trauma was often exacerbated by the traumatizing effects of criminal legal procedure. This compounding of trauma further facilitated extreme sentencing and had life-long effects on the participants.

2. Traumatized by Criminal Procedure

Criminal legal proceedings are physically, emotionally, and economically grueling. The dehumanization and marginalization that participants endured from authorities (police officers, guards, prosecutors, and sometimes even their own defense lawyers) prior to and during trial or plea bargaining amplified their previous experiences of trauma. Participants consistently described how information was intentionally

withheld from them or couched in specialized and legalistic language, how conditions of detention and treatment by police and guards were violent and dehumanizing, and how medical neglect was common. All of this undermined their sense of agency during criminal legal proceedings and contributed to a coercive environment for plea bargaining. This section describes how criminal legal procedure exacerbated trauma caused by racialized, gendered, and sexualized violence, and how the criminal legal system undercut participants' ability to participate effectively in their own defense.

“Unresolved traumas buried deep inside of us are then multiplied by the traumas that are happening in custody, in transport, and above all, in the court setting.”

– Wendy Staggs

Participants felt shocked and humiliated, once detained, as they experienced strip searches, rough handling by guards, and an overall lack of bodily autonomy. They described their experiences in detention awaiting trial or sentencing as tantamount to “torture,” and came to believe that these conditions were intentionally designed to make them accept plea deals that often resulted in long sentences. In a focus group, several participants identified “dry runs”—the practice of shackling and transporting detained people to court even when they do not have a scheduled hearing—as one example of how authorities intimidated people throughout pre-trial proceedings.¹⁷ The dry run served no other purpose than to frighten people to “hurry up and sign” a plea deal, as Marilyn put it. Wendy Staggs described transportation between these points of confinement as “designed to degrade.”

17. Participants underscored how transportation more generally – from jail to court, from jail to prison, from prison to medical facilities – served as a space of heightened vulnerability and potential violence.



“I would stay at the courthouse, the old dirty courthouse where I’m in a belly chain and shackles. And for hours, I would be in there from 7:00 in the morning to 7:00 at night in a room with no mattress on the bunk. It’s just a metal bunk. I would use a tissue paper for a pillow to try to sleep but I’m shackled and handcuffed, I only got one hand free. The whole process of court is just... you just want to hurry up and sign. That’s how I felt, too. I want to hurry up and sign so I don’t have to come to this courthouse anymore.”

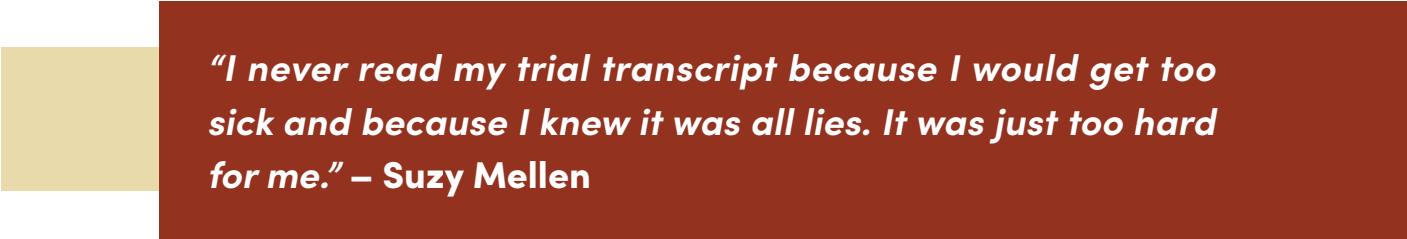
– Marilyn

The group also concurred that strip searches, which happened during criminal procedure but which also continued throughout incarceration, were an especially acute tool of collective sexualized and gendered punishment designed to humiliate and intimidate. As Domonique Perkins explained, “We all had to face that. The strip outs in the county [jail]. You strip in front of men. You’re a woman. You just feel belittled. You just feel disgusted, you know, and they’re looking at you, laughing at you... I mean, I’m not trying to go into detail, but it is just a horrible feeling.” GU, who identifies as Black, made an analogy to being on a “slave block” during strip searches. She intentionally tried not to be strip searched with people she knew because seeing someone she knew personally being forced to strip was that much more dehumanizing and made it more difficult to disassociate from what was happening to her.

In pre-trial detention, participants experienced medical neglect and the loss of medical decision-making power, both of which contributed to a coercive environment for plea bargaining. For example, Deirdre Wilson, who was pregnant in jail, was forced into induced labor despite her self-advocacy for spontaneous labor. She recounts a male prison guard saying, “Your body’s the property of the state when you’re in here, and you don’t have that choice.” Several participants reported being to

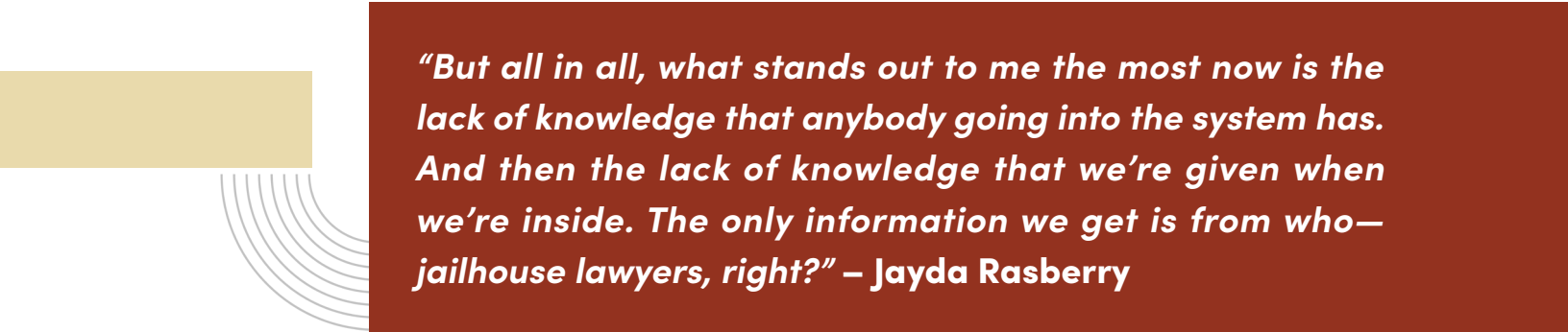
take medications that muddled their thinking and contributed to their confusion about their criminal legal proceedings.

In court, participants consistently felt deceived, lied about, and lied to, leaving them exhausted by their inability to prevent the distortion of their experiences. Some described the experience of narrative manipulation as traumatizing in and of itself. As Mary Shields relayed, “The prosecutor blew up my case into something that it wasn’t. That was the most, I guess, traumatizing thing because I sat there and I listened to these people say all these terrible things about me, and I knew that wasn’t true. And the prosecutor even lied and held back information.”

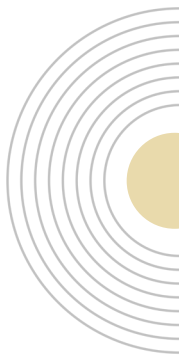


“I never read my trial transcript because I would get too sick and because I knew it was all lies. It was just too hard for me.” – Suzy Mellen

Relatedly, participants critiqued criminal legal proceedings as opaque and inaccessible, with profound consequences for their ability to self-advocate during trial and/or plea bargaining, during incarceration, and in parole hearings. They felt “kept in the dark,” which in turn intensified feelings of being targeted, as well as of fear, confusion, desperation, and disregard for their basic humanity. Participants saw it as a feature, rather than a bug, of the system: a deliberate barrier to their self-preservation. This opacity left many feeling stunned and betrayed by the prison sentences they received.



“But all in all, what stands out to me the most now is the lack of knowledge that anybody going into the system has. And then the lack of knowledge that we’re given when we’re inside. The only information we get is from who—jailhouse lawyers, right?” – Jayda Rasberry



“You’re in shock... and scared and you just say, yes, but you don’t understand the enormity of it, of your case or what they know, and what they don’t know and you’re supposed to be kept in the dark. They know certain things and this and that, and then they define your fate and you had no control over it? It could be hearsay. It could never have been evaluated or given any credence or truth to it. And then you’re locked away.” – GU

3. Hanging in the Balance of Racist, Sexist Law and Order Politics

There was a collective common sense among participants that guilt is predetermined in a white supremacist heteropatriarchal society. As Marilyn summarized it, “For a lot of people that I see, and from my experiences . . . you’re really guilty until proven innocent.” Participants situated their experiences of sentencing within the larger landscape of the racist and sexist politics of law and order. This included racialized prosecutorial practices; the influence of electoral campaigns for governors, judges, and district attorneys; an “old boys’ network” in the courts; “tough on crime” ballot initiative campaigns; and the policing of families, schools, and neighborhoods.

“I didn’t have any prior convictions. You would think that would work for me, not against me. But I was Black, and I think during that time, and during that decade, it was all about mass incarceration.” – Romarilyn



“We shouldn’t be victimized because we were born Black and we happen to be transgender, gender nonconforming. That shouldn’t be marked against us.” – Krystal Shelley

“So, there’s a trauma there, things that [gender nonconforming people] face that it feels like other people don’t understand.... It’s like the way we’re looked at in court when we’re getting sentenced... [like] we’re more dangerous somehow.” – Rojas

“Going in there, you already know what they’re going to do with you, and especially if you’re a woman, a woman of color, from the projects, and you don’t have money to get an attorney and you don’t have money to get a private investigator or get these things, they can and do pretty much whatever the hell they want to do with you. And they do.” – Linda Gomez Evans

Participants theorized that electoral campaigns impacted the length and severity of sentences, including chances at parole or clemency. They felt like their lives were subject to the whims of political actors trying to prove their tough-on-crime credentials. In California, the Governor appoints Board of Parole Hearings commissioners and maintains final discretion to approve or deny the Board’s decisions. Former Democratic Governor Gray Davis’ words on the campaign trail haunted Norma: “He said, ‘Under my watch, no one with a life sentence will be paroled but in a pine box.’ That article was pinned up. And I still remember everybody was so quiet. The guy who had the utmost power, the one person that we looked to, we wanted him to be elected because he was a Democrat, the one thought

was gonna save us... told the world... that our lives don't matter."


Several participants also identified a so-called "old boys' network" of judges and prosecutors as meaningfully impacting the severity of their charges and sentences. Romarilyn described how the judge and district attorney in her case, both elected officials, "were in collusion together" to facilitate a murder conviction from an all-white jury. The district attorney and judge in Kelly Savage-Rodriguez's trial had been college roommates. When the district attorney "accidentally" left a box of documents in the courtroom and "jurors went through it," the judge failed to act. GU shared that her own private lawyers were previously district attorneys and had strong social and professional ties to the prosecution.

"When I got sentenced, it was an election year. So, during those times, they got to get as many convictions as they can." – Linda Gomez Evans

Participants drew a direct line between highly racialized ballot initiative campaigns and the length of the sentences they received. For example, Linda Gomez Evans explained that she and her co-defendants were painted as villainous "poster children" in the context of the successful campaign for Proposition 21, which increased extreme sentencing for youth (especially for any offenses related to alleged gang affiliation) and caused more youth to be tried in adult courts: "We were all Latinas, we were all brown. There was one male. He was Latino. We were all under the age. And this was during Proposition 21, where it's trying minors as adults and gang enhancements.... I had fourteen years in gang enhancements and I actually had more time in that than in my crime.... So I kind of feel like they used this as a poster child for that.... I do believe that race and politics had a big part in that."

Participants traced how racist and sexist tough-on-crime politics have not only shaped prosecution and courts but also schools and social services.

They experienced the latter as punitive institutions that played a key role in their criminalization as Black and Brown youth, resulting in devastating, life-time consequences. For instance, Taylor Lytle situated foster care as a central hub in the relentless web of criminalization she experienced. She also emphasized how gender norms shaped by race and embodiment were used to ensnare her in this web.



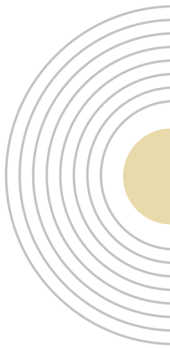
“From foster care to incarceration it was as if everybody knew who I was, and I never got one chance to tell my story. It was like I had to be whatever they said I was and then that started to grow on me, like, around fifteen to sixteen, like I might as well just be this person. A lot of stuff happened to me because of my size, being big and tall, and Black and how people think I don’t look normal as a woman. Growing up, I felt like I was always treated like a hazard. Little old me just wanted to be understood and heard, but I was seen as a monster for too many years. I was mistreated, I was jailed my whole life simply because of my size and race. People can’t tell you the violent crimes I committed because I didn’t. And that’s just the reality of it.” – Taylor Lytle

4. Sentenced by Prison and Parole Authorities

Even after conviction and sentencing, participants reported that prison authorities, prison guards, and Board of Parole Hearings (BPH) commissioners played significant roles in maximizing the duration and punitive effects of their incarceration. This section focuses on how prisons and BPH effectively wield another kind of sentencing power over those

already incarcerated, often taking advantage of the fact that incarcerated people have weakened due process rights which can be rendered non-existent by lack of monitoring or protection.¹⁸

Conditions of confinement including hostile prison staff impeded participants' capacity to appeal their convictions or petition for forms of sentencing relief while incarcerated. For example, interference with prison mail was one of the many ways that guards undermined participants' ability to engage in their own legal advocacy. As Domonique Perkins described, the prison meted out a form of administrative punishment by restricting access to correspondence which had direct material consequences for her case.



“They try to make excuses to go through your mail, tear up your mail, not give you your mail, give you your mail when it’s late. So, [court] time limitations ran through it. And then they’ll say you can’t backdate it, or try to make sure you can’t backdate it, to where it gets denied. They just trying to prevent you from going home.”

– Domonique Perkins

Many echoed Perkins' assessment that guards deployed authority in ways that felt designed to prolong incarceration or “prevent you from going home.” Participants spoke of their time in prison as a constant struggle to avoid further punishment. Some described the combination of being at the mercy of prison authorities, feelings of despair and inability to find hope, untreated trauma (their own and others'), and omnipresent surveillance as a “set up” for accruing administrative rule violations (or “115s”), a significant mechanism through which prison time is extended.

18. For example, the 1996 Prison Litigation Reform Act established structural barriers for incarcerated people who access courts for civil rights claims (Andrea Fenster, “Slamming the Courthouse Door: 25 years of evidence for repealing the Prison Litigation Reform Act,” (Prison Policy Initiative, 2021), https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/PLRA_25.html).

During her first and most difficult years of incarceration, Angelique Evans struggled with drug addiction, which led her to accrue several violations: “I kept fighting, so I kept doing 115s and losing ninety days [until] I maxed out.” Originally sentenced to a six-year term, Evans eventually “picked up a case” inside—or in other words, was convicted of a crime while in prison—and ultimately served twelve years. Linda Gomez Evans, who was seventeen years old when she received a life sentence, shared that her sense of futility and hopelessness about getting out of prison was a contributing factor to her accumulation of violations. She, too, eventually incurred a new conviction inside, adding an additional four years to her twenty-four years in prison.

Participants also described the impossibility of protecting themselves or others from guard abuse without risking disciplinary violations. Queer and gender nonconforming participants, in particular, described being targeted. Angelique Evans, for example, recalled being routinely taunted by guards about whether she “wanted to be a man.” In one instance, guards accused her of hiding contraband in her boxers to justify a physical search. When she resisted this act of gendered and sexualized violence, she received a disciplinary violation. This example and others point to the many ways that people accrued disciplinary violations, from resisting prison guard harassment and violence to arbitrarily enforced procedural rules. Yet, authorities failed to recognize the “tightrope,” as Lizz Campbell described it, that prison conditions create, forcing incarcerated people to submit to abuse or potentially face more time in prison because any form of resistance can be written up as a violation.

Participants described how rules violations can be punished with added time in prison. For people with life sentences, violations can lead to longer prison terms by affecting people’s ability to be found suitable at parole eligibility hearings. Those serving life sentences viewed BPH commissioners as authorities who ultimately decided the length of their sentence. The commissioners employ broad discretion to deny parole and

set a new amount of time to be served before the next parole hearing. The passage of Proposition 9 or Marsy's Law in 2009 made it such that commissioners can make someone wait as long as fifteen years for another parole suitability hearing after a denial.¹⁹ Participants charted a direct link between disciplinary violations and parole denials. For example, Ilka Rosales shared, "The first time I went to the board, I got denied ten years.... On paper, when it came to my education, the certificates and the groups, [the commissioner] said, I'm perfect on paper. It's just when they turn that paper over and go through my violations, my 115s and 128s, he said that's where it goes bad, you know. So he's like, you can get out of here, you just gotta stop getting 115s."²⁰

Participants also spoke of the BPH requirement to perform "insight" related to their convictions, a concept which they found intentionally vague. While demonstrating sufficient "insight" was required to secure parole, it was experienced as a flexible tool used to deny parole without reason or regard for pre-sentencing circumstances. They came to understand that "insight" meant contorting one's own story to fit the state's narrative. Speaking from her experience of thirty-one years of incarceration, Anna noted that, "by the time you get to that age of being an elder, you don't remember details [of the original incident or charges]." In Anna's view, BPH commissioners often misinterpret this inability to remember as evasiveness or insufficient insight and in turn use it as a pretext to find someone unsuitable for release.


Participants who were convicted while surviving domestic and sexual violence faced additional barriers to being found suitable for parole.

19. Ryan S. Appleby, "Proposition 9, Marsy's Law: An Ill-Suited Ballot Initiative and the (Predictably) Unsatisfactory Results," *Southern California Law Review* 86, no. 2 (2013): 344.

20. A 115 is a CDCR form used to administer disciplinary violations that are deemed serious. They are applied with very broad discretion by CDCR staff as a punitive measure against incarcerated people. A 128, or "counseling chrono," is a CDCR form that can be used to administer "non-serious" disciplinary infractions which can still result in serious consequences. Incarcerated people have reported that these violations are arbitrarily punitive, coercive, used as retaliation for complaints, and extremely difficult to challenge (Kitty Calavita and Valerie Jenness, *Appealing to Justice: Prisoner Grievances, Rights, and Carceral Logic* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015)). Yet, violations are a major evaluative factor in parole hearings and used by the Board of Parole Hearings as a justification to deny parole.

Several participants experienced prolonged incarceration for describing themselves as victims of violence, which commissioners interpreted as shifting blame, indicating a lack of “insight” into their convictions.²¹ This interpretation was common, regardless of whether or not these non-expert parole investigators and commissioners determined that the abuse they survived was “substantial” enough to warrant consideration. For participants in this study, BPH denials were common and could result in people serving anywhere from an additional year to additional decades in prison.

Yet participants crafted strategies for navigating the nearly impossible demand for “insight.” Mary Shields recalls that truthfulness was not enough, noting that BPH commissioners always follow the state’s description of events. Upon her realization that the commissioners were uninterested in the truth, Mary developed a comprehensive strategy which included marshaling the emotional fortitude necessary to undergo the hearing and face the potential for denial. Participants like Mary thus managed to be found suitable for release against enormous odds.




“[T]hey kept saying, well, where’s your insight? Where’s your insight? And I was like, I’m telling you what happened.... Growing up, my mother, my grandparents and the elders in our family said ‘always tell the truth.’ And so that’s what I did. I told the truth. But they have a twisted thing in the system.... You’re telling the truth, but they have a different perception of what the truth is. And so that gives them a reason to deny you.... Now, like my

21. Parole Board commissioners continue to make these determinations despite legislation passed in 2012 to prohibit them from using a lack of “insight” as evidence to deny suitability in cases involving intimate partner battering (CA Penal Code § 4801(b)(3)).

sixth or seventh time, I realized what they were doing.... so they are putting the question to you is a big part of it, and managing going and knowing you're gonna be denied. You're not going to go to the board and [get] out the first time you go... You have to become more like them and understand them, you know?" – Mary Shields

5. Sentenced to a Lifetime

The punishment of a prison sentence, and particularly a long sentence, extends beyond the period of incarceration, resulting in lifelong detrimental effects on health, economic security, and social well-being. These forms of punishment extend to families of origin (e.g., parents, children, grandchildren), kinship networks, and broader communities. Thus, long-term sentences fundamentally altered the life chances of not only participants but their loved ones. This section focuses on some of the lifelong and multi-generational consequences of imprisonment, highlighting the exponentially punitive impacts of long term sentences.

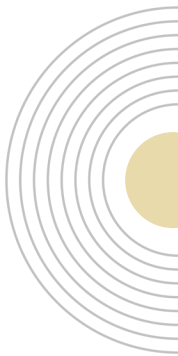


"So, you know, when they sentence you, they sentence you to being more abused. They sentence you to being abused, to being treated very inhumanely. That's what they sentence you to." – Angelique Evans

“Longer sentences do not increase public safety. It doesn’t save the state any money. It’s not good for the person incarcerated. It’s destructive. And it puts more people at risk and at harm, than it does not.” – Romarilyn

Participants explained the profound imprint of incarceration on their physical, emotional, and social health and well-being. They calculated their sentences not only in absolute months and years, but in terms of enduring the psychological torture of an indeterminate release date (for those serving life with the possibility of parole) or no release date (for those serving Life Without the Possibility of Parole); experiencing repeated denigration and mistreatment; and living in conditions that “scared [them] to death,” inducing a trauma that would echo throughout the rest of their lives. Several participants emphasized the psychological toll of living in an institutional setting where one is entirely subject to the control of other people and under omnipresent surveillance. As Lizz Campbell explained, it felt like walking “a tightrope every day. You know, just teeter tottering through it.”

Many participants, even after release, continued to feel constantly monitored and experienced regular anxiety and panic attacks, with common triggers including enclosed spaces, loud noises, screaming, and slamming doors. Additionally, years of harassment, threats, strip searches, and abrupt room searches by cisgender male prison guards continued to have profound impacts on participants’ social relationships with men for years after release. Participants also related how they were relegated to a lifetime of judgment by society and found themselves having to navigate social stigma in all aspects of their lives, from housing, employment, and mental health to establishing and maintaining relationships with family or friends.



“I realized from a very young age, after I fell victim to cycling through the system like it wanted me to, I really had to pay attention to how you stay out.... It’s not that prison ‘rehabilitated’ me.... No, that is not true. Prison has scared me to death. Now I have to walk around... scared to death to do anything, to walk outside in a neighborhood that I grew up in all my life, because I never know if I could be put in a situation that would take me back to jail. Just understanding that this is a biased system that targets people of my type.”

– Taylor Lytle

Many participants emphatically stressed that prison creates impossible conditions for healing and accountability. While some said they got sober, grew emotionally, and were able to “stay out of trouble” while incarcerated, they tended to attribute this to the supportive relationships they built with other incarcerated people. They recounted difficulties in gaining access to academic and vocational programs and physical and mental health services, which were limited and poorly resourced. Taylor Lytle identified the recent suicide crisis in California’s women’s prisons as damning evidence of the cruelty of the prison system.²² Wendy Staggs described being “traumatized completely” after waking up to her cellmate hanging in her cell. These types of experiences have life-long impacts on the participants.

Prison conditions eroded participants’ physical health and well-being over time. Participants spoke about the repercussions of living for many years without access to nutritious food, sufficient sleep, and adequate healthcare services. Stories of medical neglect included misdiagnosed

22. California State Auditor, “California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation: It Must Increase Its Efforts to Prevent and Respond to Inmate Suicides” (Sacramento: California State Auditor, August 2017); Hillel Aron, “Why Are So Many Inmates Attempting Suicide at the California Institution for Women?” LA Weekly, July 20, 2016, <https://www.laweekly.com/why-are-so-many-inmates-attempting-suicide-at-the-california-institution-for-women/>.

and long undiagnosed medical conditions that led to painful, preventable, and sometimes ongoing or deadly health problems. Overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, constant surveillance, harassment, and physical violence exacerbated health problems. Participants highlighted barriers to prompt and competent care and abusive medical treatment at multiple sites, including in transport to outside healthcare facilities and from healthcare providers within the prison and in outside healthcare facilities. As Domonique Perkins summarized and condemned this routine medical violence, “They just do you like dogs in there. Not even like dogs. They do you worse than dogs. They do you like cockroaches.” Moreover, some participants spoke to the ways their healthcare experiences while incarcerated have had repercussions well beyond prison. The neglect and abuse GU endured in prison, for example, instilled deep mistrust and fear in her of medical providers more broadly, causing her to delay and avoid healthcare services except in cases of emergency.


Long-term incarceration fundamentally interrupted participants’ relationships with their loved ones and inhibited their ability to give and receive support from family systems. Some participants said they had very little contact with anyone outside of prison, compounding the social alienation of incarceration. Indeed, some said their family members chose to pretend they no longer existed in an attempt to manage the pain of separation. Many described their family members’ feelings of distance, mistrust, loss, doubt, resentment, anger, and abandonment. Upon release, participants found that fear of reincarceration continued to shape their relationships with close family members. Participants critiqued the state’s role in punishing their families through sentencing. As Linda Gomez Evans put it, “[T]hey didn’t just sentence me that day. They sentenced my mom that day. They sentenced my grandma that day. They sentenced my sister, my stepdad that day. When we’re sentenced, we’re not the only one that is sentenced, our family is sentenced too. Because we’re ripped from them.”

“What stands out to me then and now is the total absence of truth and healing or caring for members of a family, especially the children—who they claim to be protecting by throwing us as far under the jail as possible.”

– Deirdre Wilson

Participants with children faced numerous barriers to maintaining connection, including the price of phone calls and visits, the discretion of prison authorities and social workers to ban or block visits or correspondence, ostracization from their community, and physical distance.²³ The unknowability and changeability of release dates for those with the possibility of parole was especially crushing for parents and children alike. Deirdre Wilson described it as “like the end of life . . . like the guillotine coming down basically. And nothing I could do.” Suzy Mellen shared that at the time of her arrest she made a promise to her young daughter, who witnessed her being thrown to the ground, cuffed, and arrested in the parking lot of a McDonalds, that she would be home for dinner that evening. She wasn’t able to come home for seventeen years. She described the day when she broke her promise as “probably the worst day of my life,” something she tried to make up for by taking her daughter—now an adult—out for a happy meal the day of her release, seventeen years delayed. Participants expressed feelings of frustration and grief about their inability to have private and self-determined communications with their children. The prison monitored all correspondence, and in some participants’ experiences, social workers decided whether letters would or would not be delivered to children.

23. The relatively smaller number of women’s prisons can mean greater distance for families to travel to visit, making it even more difficult to sustain family ties (Brenda van den Bergh et al., “Imprisonment and Women’s Health: Concerns about Gender Sensitivity, Human Rights and Public Health,” *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 89, no. 9 (September 1, 2011)).



“I wrote my daughter, who was in foster care the whole time. When I got out and we connected, she had no idea I had written. She never received one single thing. She went and spoke to her social worker. Why did I not receive anything? Her social worker leaned down into the desk in the bottom drawer and pulled out a box with everything I had ever sent her. [The social worker] said that that was better for her. Who are they to decide? I still had all of my parental rights. All she did was make my daughter believe her mother had forgotten her.” – Wendy Staggs

“My son had a hard time writing and he was too broken. He was only seven when I was arrested. I probably got only two cards and two letters in 17 years. He couldn’t write to me, it hurt too much. He never talked to me to any of his friends because he would break down and cry.... I would draw my hands on my letters to my children so they could touch my hands and then they would send me their hands. I only saw them a few times in 17 years.... That was my contact with my children.” – Suzy Mellen

Participants worked to repair the harms inflicted on parent-child relationships by incarceration, including navigating their children’s anger, grief, frustration, and feelings of estrangement. These ruptures lasted for decades in some cases. Shirley described the labor of this repair work as a “rollercoaster ride.” Linda Gomez Evans reflected on the multi-generational effects of these ruptures: “I think that what it’s doing is creating generations of trauma.” In addition to disrupting existing relationships with children, incarceration also prevented many

participants from having children, which was a deep source of grief for them.

The lifelong consequences of long-term incarceration were also economic. The costs of mounting a legal defense, as well as the costs of imprisonment, exhausted personal resources and strained families and loved ones. Participants spoke of how challenging it was to prove that they would achieve economic security as a condition of being found suitable for parole. Providing evidence of a job opportunity, or other outside support, to the parole board is especially difficult for people who have spent decades in prison with limited ability to develop transferable work history or skills. As Romarilyn put it, “trying to find a job in the community is extremely difficult when you are recently released from serving a life sentence. How do you explain that—that you don’t know how to use a computer or, you know what the Internet is, or any of those things when there is so much technology in the world?”

In sum, participants measured the “sentence” they received not only by the years they spent inside jails and prisons, but by how their time incarcerated affected them and their loved ones long after release.

DISCUSSION

The UCSP was created to advance research on the under-studied causes and lived ramifications of long-term prison sentencing in California. This study focused on the experiential and analytical insights of formerly incarcerated people who served or faced long prison terms in California’s women’s prisons. It proceeded from the foundational premise that people living with the lifetime effects of long-term sentences hold essential knowledge and insight about the social, cultural, economic, and legal costs of extreme sentencing.

Taken together, the findings reframe the commonsense idea that “sentencing” is a one-time event in a courtroom wherein a judge hands down a ruling. Rather, participants mapped lived experiences of sentencing as shaped by a broader set of social, political, and legal processes. From this perspective, sentences are imposed and expanded through an elaborate ecosystem of actors, policies, and decision-making processes that extend well beyond any one individual’s legal case. This includes, as participants theorized, the extrajudicial sentencing power of police, state agencies, and political organizations that perpetuate racist narratives constructing people of color and their neighborhoods as inherently criminal. It also includes the discretionary power of prison and parole authorities to effectively determine the length of a sentence. Moreover, when sentencing is understood as including the lifelong and multi-generational impacts of incarceration, the extrajudicial sentencing power of parole and prison authorities, including prison guards, comes into even sharper view.

Understanding sentencing as a set of processes involving multiple state actors further highlights due process concerns that fall far beyond the

limited rights technically afforded to incarcerated people.²⁴ Given the ways in which participants were traumatized upon arrival at the jail, subjected to traumatizing pre-trial practices, including being forcibly medicated, and “kept in the dark,” it was impossible for them to provide informed consent as they navigated plea bargaining and trial. During incarceration, administrative violations, new charges, and parole denials emerge as ongoing practices of sentencing by prison and parole authorities with unchecked power.

By centering people who were incarcerated in women’s prisons, the vast majority of whom are survivors of interpersonal violence, this report further illuminates how the victim/perpetrator binary that organizes the criminal legal system enables the long-term sentencing of criminalized survivors. This finding supports existing research that critiques the dominant construction of perpetration and victimization as a zero-sum game.²⁵ For participants in this study, long-term prison sentences were facilitated by social and legal processes that reduce survivors to their alleged crimes, decontextualizing (and often denying) their experiences of victimization and self-defense, and alienating them from state protections afforded to those who are recognized as victims. The victim/perpetrator binary also organizes the prison and parole systems, wherein those serving long sentences are systematically denied the ability to hold state actors accountable for abuse within prison. At the same time, being categorized solely as a perpetrator while incarcerated undermines the ability to heal trauma and make amends for harms caused.

Long sentences levy forms of punishment beyond simply holding a person for a set amount of time. Those serving long terms are de facto sentenced

24. Fenster, “Slamming the Courthouse Door.”

25. Richie, *Arrested Justice: Survived & Punished*, “Defending Self-Defense: A Call to Action by Survived & Punished,” eds. Alisa Bierria and Colby Lenz (*Survived & Punished* and UCLA Center for the Study of Women, 2022); Mimi E. Kim, “Transformative Justice and Restorative Justice: Gender-Based Violence and Alternative Visions of Justice in the United States,” *International Review of Victimology* 27, no. 2 (2021): 162–72; Cynthia Godsoe, “The Victim/Offender Overlap and Criminal System Reform,” *Brooklyn Law Review* 87 no. 4 (2022): 1319–50; Lisa Young Larance et al., “Beyond the Victim–Offender Binary: Legal and Anti-Violence Intervention Considerations With Women Who Have Used Force in the U.S. and Australia,” *Affilia* 37, no. 3 (2022): 466–86.

to termination of parental rights and lost reproductive years, severed family and community ties, loss of financial resources and opportunities, life-long social stigma, the deepening of racialized and gendered trauma, and the broader erosion of physical and psychological health and well-being. This finding contributes to existing research on the ways women, children, and other loved ones of incarcerated people are also sentenced to the life-altering impacts of incarceration.²⁶ These harms have been previously described as the collateral consequences of a prison sentence but are reframed in this study as a form of sentencing in the first instance. Moreover, as extreme sentences disproportionately impact survivors and racially and economically oppressed and marginalized communities, long-term and permanent sentences are also a form of collective punishment targeting already vulnerable populations.

Finally, this study is an action research project. Participants shared their lived expertise with the UCSP and one another in the hopes of advancing research agendas that contribute to struggles for freedom and transformative social change.

We hope that this research will be of use to movements for decarceration and abolition; policymakers concerned with developing strategies for decreasing California's use of incarceration; scholars of criminalization and imprisonment; and individuals navigating their own legal cases and the long-term harms of incarceration.

26. Gina Clayton et al., "Because She's Powerful: The Political Isolation and Resistance of Women with Incarcerated Loved Ones" (Essie Justice Group, 2018).

RESEARCH AGENDA

POTENTIAL RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

People who have experienced long-term sentencing develop and exchange vital knowledge about sentencing practices—knowledge that is often otherwise unavailable or obscured. A principal objective of the UCSP pilot study was to identify research questions for further investigation based on the experiential knowledge of participants. The following questions reflect priority areas identified through the pilot study.

Patterns of inequality in sentencing

- How do systems of oppression based on race, gender, sexuality, age, and disability shape sentencing, from arrest and pre-conviction to post-conviction, incarceration, release, and beyond?
- How do prison disciplinary practices, prison institutional cultures, and Board of Parole Hearings processes contribute to prolonged incarceration? How are these shaped by systems of oppression based on race, gender, sexuality, age, and disability?
- How do systems of oppression based on race, gender, sexuality, age, and disability influence determinations of parole violation(s) post-release and increase chances of reincarceration, thereby extending people's time in prison?
- What is the relationship between domestic/sexual violence survivorship and prolonged incarceration?
-

The politics of prosecution

- How do election cycles influence sentencing severity?
- How does sentencing vary by county of conviction?
- How do District Attorneys influence Board of Parole Hearings decisions?
- How do we expose and end prosecutorial misconduct?

Long-term and wide-reaching harms of incarceration

- How do long-term sentences impact the physical and psychological health and well-being of individuals during and after incarceration?
- How do criminalized people make sense of and survive long-term sentences?
- How are kinship and community networks impacted by long-term sentences?
- How do people serving long-term sentences continue to provide care to children and other loved ones across prison walls? What barriers must they contend with as they engage in such care work?
- How do long-term sentences shape relations and practices of care among incarcerated people?
- What is the role of long-term sentencing in accounting for racial and gender differences in health and life expectancy?
- How do long-term sentences impact the reproductive and parental opportunities of communities most impacted by incarceration?
- How do long-term sentences impede people's ability to make amends for harms they have caused?
- How do long-term sentences contribute to wealth and income inequality facing communities most impacted by incarceration?

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