

Fighting for Dignity

Incarcerated Women Speak

By Asia Johnson

PUBLISHED OCTOBER 20, 2022

In 2009, I became a resident at the Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility, the only women’s prison in the state of Michigan. Prior to my incarceration, those who were locked behind bars never crossed my mind. I fell victim to the stereotypes and media narratives about “prisoners” — that they were all there because they deserved to be. That myth was quickly dispelled the moment I was without my freedom. Every single woman in prison — every single person in prison — has a story and a life beyond the crime for which they were convicted.

On the inside, I learned everything I could about the women there with me. What led them to the worst day of their lives? What were their childhoods like? What did they dream of becoming? And how did they continue dreaming while living in a nightmare?

While the experiences of women behind bars are not universal, I found that there are important aspects that are shared. This paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding by exploring the lived experiences and sentiments of women in several states who are currently serving time. One theme is the experience of trauma. For many women, traumatic experiences — including physical and emotional abuse — have brought them in contact with the legal system. These unaddressed traumas are then compounded by a sense of unfairness in the criminal

justice process and inhumane treatment in correctional facilities. To survive these experiences, women develop coping mechanisms that sustain them until their sentences are up.

I was six years old when a relative’s 26-year-old friend began molesting me, and the abuse continued for months. When my family realized what was happening to me, my abuser suffered no consequences. I grew up feeling confused and unprotected. I didn’t understand the emotions I was experiencing or know how to express them. Even though I knew the abuse was wrong, I started to believe it was normal — that it was something all little girls go through.

Living in fear at home forced me to rely on my inner strength to get through each day, and, strangely, it also meant finding a sense of safety once I began venturing out into my city. I was unafraid when I encountered danger in Detroit, thinking it couldn’t be worse than the abuse I had endured. In my mind, I was strong enough to handle whatever threats were out there. I swallowed the pain, internalized the trauma, and put on my best face for the world as long as I could.

In 2009, *Forbes* named Detroit the most violent city in America.¹ That year, 365 people were murdered² — my grandmother among them, by my hands.

The act was a product of mental illness brought on by trauma. Once I was in the Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility, I witnessed and experienced dehumanizing treatment and learned that unaddressed trauma, poor mental health, abuse, guilt, and regret are their own prisons, special kinds of hell that the penitentiary exacerbates rather than treats.

Like the other women in this study, while incarcerated I leaned on a number of coping strategies to survive the experience. I was also fortunate enough to receive intense therapy, which gave me both hope and the tools I needed to improve my life and understand the traumas I had experienced. I joined peer groups, formed supportive friendships, and read every self-help book available. I was determined to leave prison a healthier woman, not just an older version of the unwell girl who had entered.

A Woman’s Distinctive Path to Prison

More than 150,000 women are incarcerated in the United States today. The number has increased nearly fivefold over the last 40 years. According to the Sentencing Project, “The rate of growth for female imprisonment has been twice as high as that of men since 1980.” Black women and Hispanic women are, respectively, 1.7 and 1.3 times more likely to end up in prison than white women. The female incarceration rate varies greatly from state to state, ranging from 6 per 100,000 in Massachusetts to 110 per 100,000 in Idaho in 2020; nationally, the rate was 47 per 100,000.³ The Justice Department reports that 40 percent of women in state correctional facilities are sentenced for violent crimes, 26 percent for drug offenses, 23 percent for property crimes, and 11 percent for public order offenses (such as possession of weapons or parole/probation violations).⁴ These statistics show that a woman’s race, state, and charges all affect whether she will end up in prison and how long she will stay there.

Statistics tell a story, but often an incomplete one. Numbers do not convey the names, faces, and experiences of the women behind them. If our understanding of incarcerated women is reduced to a collection of data, then I am just a Black woman convicted of a violent crime to be tabulated alongside other entries. When experiences such as abuse and trauma are discounted or ignored, it increases the chances that women will be imprisoned and experience further injustice while incarcerated. But if we bring these women’s experiences to life, we can hope to change the excessively punitive nature of our criminal legal system.

Toward this end, I have incorporated the voices of the women I interviewed throughout this paper. The analysis concludes with their assessment of how the prison system can better account for gender in its programming

and operations and how it can better address the trauma that is so central to women’s path to prison and experience there.

Methodology and Analysis

Engaging the Women

I interviewed seven women currently incarcerated across the country in a series of semi-structured interviews covering their lives, the circumstances of their incarceration, and their recommendations. I was connected with each of them through either a professional contact or a nonprofit organization. To be eligible for an interview, respondents had to self-identify as a woman and be at least 18 years old.

Each woman expressed a willingness to share her story and provided verbal consent for the recording of our conversations. The interviews were conducted by phone over a six-month period. Calls were often limited to 15 to 30 minutes, so interviews required multiple calls over several days. Interruptions sometimes occurred due to an interviewee having her phone privileges revoked, being placed in solitary confinement, or needing to use scarce phone time to call family, friends, or legal counsel. Further interruptions occurred because facilities went into lockdown or placed other restrictions on phone calls. These circumstances sometimes resulted in extended periods between interviews. Each woman was provided resources to make the calls possible.

About the Women

The seven interviewed women — identified only by their first name and the state where they are imprisoned, to grant some measure of privacy — are as follows:

- Alexandria, Florida
- Asia V, Virginia (a V has been added to distinguish her from this paper’s author)
- Brittany, Michigan
- Chelsey, Indiana
- Elizabeth, California
- Jasmayah, Georgia
- Nicki, New York

The women range from 28 to 47 years of age and are serving sentences between 10 years and life. Three of the

women self-identify as African American, two as biracial, one as Hispanic, and one as white. Four of the women are mothers. Five of the women report being sexually and physically abused or having suffered from drug or alcohol addiction.

Data Analysis

All interviews were captured with written notes and/or audio recordings. Audio files were then transcribed using Rev, a speech-to-text service. The Brennan Center's Justice Program research team and I identified themes from these interviews both deductively and inductively.

The Primary Role of Trauma

Previous research has identified the prevalence of trauma in incarcerated women's lives. The Vera Institute of Justice reports that coping with poverty, joblessness, and health concerns is often at the root of women's involvement with the criminal legal system.⁵ Research shows that incarcerated women are more likely than incarcerated men to have been victims of sexual, emotional, and physical abuse and to struggle with emotional and behavioral disorders.⁶ Approximately three-quarters of incarcerated women with mental health challenges are dealing with drug dependence or abuse, with more than half having used cocaine or methamphetamines in the month prior to arrest. More than two-thirds of incarcerated women experiencing mental health issues have experienced physical or sexual abuse.⁷

These issues often begin in childhood. Temple University legal scholar DeAnna Baumle developed the trauma-to-prison pipeline theory to describe "how the juvenile justice system criminalizes girls because of their experiences of multiple and intersecting forms of trauma, including trauma resulting from the structural forces of racism and poverty." Baumle explored the role of sexual abuse in the lives of girls in the juvenile justice system and suggested that trauma's lasting and tangible effects, if left untreated, are likely to lead to further involvement with the criminal legal system.⁸

"When my biological mother sold me to a man for crack, the abuse became the backdrop for the story that is my life," says Brittany, an incarcerated woman in Michigan. "The emptiness I felt from being hungry to being alone during my childhood, it all molded me into a young girl who was desperate for freedom." During the dark days of her adolescence, Brittany thought the way she was treated was normal, and she was willing to do anything to escape the reality of being unloved by all the adults in her life. When she finally left her foster parents, she hoped a sense of freedom would come. But that would not be the case.

Alexandria, incarcerated in Florida, can still hear the echoes of arguments between her parents. She can still feel the way her heart raced whenever she had to intervene to defend her mother against her father's abuse. She vividly remembers the loneliness that came from being a five-year-old experiencing depression and becoming accustomed to feeling invisible. In school, she was bullied. She says it was only natural to begin using drugs to numb the throbbing pulse of pain. At 41, Alexandria has felt the emptiness of being without love her entire life.

In Indiana, Chelsey first tried to take her life at 15 years old. Finding her pain too intense and having no healthy outlet, she cycled in and out of the juvenile justice system. Chelsey recalls, "Doing drugs became a way to be accepted by my peers," but her reasons changed over time. "I have severe abandonment issues that still plague me at the age of 39." Drug use was a way to ease that fear of being left.

"I came from an abusive home where the abuse was singularized to me," says Chelsey. The sexual abuse began at the age of five — abuse she suffered at the hands of her stepfather. Her grandmother's house sometimes offered a reprieve, but the abuse resumed whenever Chelsey returned home.

Elizabeth, a woman doing time in California, remembers, "I had been abused and emotionally neglected my whole life, which made me live in fear every day as a child. Of course, today I understand that my parents raised me the best way they could and knew how. However, as a teen, I couldn't have seen things how I see them now. Not shifting blame on them, it's just that I believe if I would have felt heard, supported, and safe, I wouldn't [have] made the choices I made."

"I have experienced many traumas," says Jasmiyah in Georgia, who was sexually and physically abused growing up. "My mother was also very violent with her words and treatment of my twin and I." With her self-image distorted, her relationships unstable, and the one person in her life who was supposed to protect her neglecting her, Jasmiyah became introverted and insecure. "I didn't know where I belonged in the world, I became a people pleaser, and I looked for love in my boyfriend. Being so young, I didn't understand the power of my decisions, especially long-term decisions. I only cared about being loved in that moment and escaping the pain and anger I felt on the inside. So, I found solace in my boyfriend and in marijuana."

So often, women in prison sit in the dark, alone with their trauma history, trying to salvage the few healthy pieces of themselves they have left. Every woman inside the fencing is fighting for freedom. But the idea of a fight isn't new. Most of us who find ourselves incarcerated have been fighting for much of our lives — fighting to keep the bad at bay and pressing forward in search of the good. "The safest thing we can do is be in denial about our pain, our truth," says Elizabeth.

When I was inside, I had a really close friend; I loved her as if she were my sister. Her story was tragic and gut-wrenching, but I saw life in her eyes. Sexually abused by her father and neglected by her mother, she fought drug addiction from the age of 13. While in prison, she gave birth to a beautiful little girl. But being shackled while giving birth and having her baby stripped away soon after delivery proved devastating. She struggled emotionally and began using heroin. I watched her fight her addiction even after she was released. But within a year, she was dead, killed by a heroin addiction exacerbated by trauma.

The Criminal Injustice System

My friend's story is not unique. Often the unfair treatment and inhumane conditions women experience during arrest, trial, sentencing, and incarceration only worsen their mental and emotional struggles. When asked if the criminal legal system treated them fairly, six out of the seven women interviewed answered no.

Brittany, who is biracial, recalled being tried by mostly white men, hardly a jury of her peers. Alexandria felt like she had been sentenced much too harshly. Nicki, incarcerated in New York, wasn't aware of her rights when she was arrested. The list of concerns over how most of these women were treated points to a system that values punishment over justice.

Unjust Arrest, Trial, and Sentencing

From their first contact with the police, women report unfairness and harsh treatment that compounds the trauma that brought them to that situation in the first place.⁹ Nicki recounts that, the day she was arrested, detectives used her ignorance of the law and her desire to return to her sick baby at home to convince her to accept more responsibility for a crime than was actually the case. She says that she wasn't read her rights because she was told that the detectives only wanted to talk. But after she cooperated, she says, "I spent three days in the precinct. No food, no shower, no nothing. No nothing. No nothing. No nothing. Three days."

As women move through the court system, they can feel victimized once again by forces outside their control. Brittany, explaining her feeling that her trial wasn't just, says, "I don't believe I was treated fair at all. Being a woman of color from out of state who committed her first crime during the election season — who was tried in front of a mostly white male jury — does not seem super fair at all."

Alexandria also invokes electoral politics as an explanation for the excessive punishment she feels she received, as well as for why she was not offered drug-treatment

services. She notes that she was sentenced by a judge who was up for reelection, and studies show that judges hand down more punitive rulings when they are on the ballot.¹⁰ Alexandria says, "There was people that their crimes were more heinous than mine that were getting 20 to 25 years. You know what I'm saying? And you give me 40 years when it was clearly known that I had serious drug issues?"

Dehumanizing Conditions Inside

Once a woman is sentenced to time in prison, she is essentially condemned to a lifetime of trauma. Conditions inside prisons are abysmal, and the dehumanization begins when you enter. The process of intake involves stripping and having your naked body on display for officers — male and female — to gawk at, being forced to squat and cough, and having all your personal possessions that mark who you are as an individual taken from you. Your clothes are replaced with a uniform; your name replaced with a prison number.

The first women's prison, Mount Pleasant Female Prison, opened in New York in 1839. After 30 years, it was closed due to complaints of inhumane conditions and treatment, including the use of straitjackets and gags.¹¹ Nearly two centuries later, there are more than 130 state and federal prisons for women in the United States. The terrible conditions persist.¹²

The prison system was not designed to account for the particularity of the female experience. For example, across the country, many prisons are ill-equipped to meet the needs of those who are pregnant or have recently delivered a child, do not have policies or programming ensuring menstrual or menopausal equity, and often fail to account for the societal disparities that mean that women are more likely than men to be victims of abuse and experience financial insecurity.¹³

Many states still shackle women who are giving birth.¹⁴ Solitary confinement is still practiced in most women's prisons. And numerous states strip women of their clothing if they show any suicidal tendencies. The carceral experience itself is traumatic, and it is compounded for women, especially when they receive neither humane health care nor adequate treatment for mental illness or substance abuse.

More than 80,000 incarcerated people are sexually victimized every year, in both "staff-on-inmate" and "inmate-on-inmate" abuse. However, sexual assault by correctional staff remains underreported by women due to factors such as the fear of reprisal (including the denial of certain goods and resources), the assumption that the accusations will not be believed, and the belief that the offending staff member will not be punished.¹⁵

For women with a history of being abused, searches and restraining tactics can be re-traumatizing, and the stressors of confinement can trigger post-traumatic

stress disorder. Lack of treatment can lead to antisocial behaviors that prisons often respond to with more punishment.¹⁶

The response of the criminal legal system to these realities contributes to a prevailing sense of injustice and unfairness felt by incarcerated women. Public health scholars have found that “mass incarceration, by its very nature, compromises and undermines bodily autonomy and the capacity for incarcerated people to make decisions about their reproductive well-being and bodies.”¹⁷

Economic Punishment

Economic injustice is prevalent, too, and occurs in a variety of ways. Phone and video calls can be costly, work is paid at excessively low wages, and goods available through prison commissaries are marked up. Many prisons limit the number of tampons or pads they allot to women who are housed together (a Connecticut women’s prison provided just five pads total for two women to share per week), and women are required to buy additional ones from prison commissaries.¹⁸

“I am living in poverty,” says Brittany of the intensifying economic insecurity she is experiencing in state prison. After her conviction, she owed fines, restitution, and a \$600 fee for her court-appointed attorney. Without family support, Brittany relies on the meager pay she receives as a worker in quartermaster operations, managing uniforms for incarcerated women and correctional officers. She makes less than \$30 a month, and she must use some of that money to purchase tampons and other hygiene products. After she meets those needs, she has little left to pay for calls on the fee-based phone system or buy stamps to send letters, much less pay down her debts to the state.

Lack of Mental Health Care and Addiction Treatment

For women struggling with addiction, prison does little to help them get and stay sober. Most drugs that are available outside of the barbed-wire fencing can be found inside it too. Alexandria says her sobriety is tested daily because her drug of choice is sold inside her prison. Asia V in Virginia recounts seeing women come into prison addicted, continue to use inside, and leave addicted, only to return to prison months later.

Treatment and therapy in prison have the potential to help many women address the very issues that contributed to their incarceration. But even when these programs exist, they are often ineffective. “I have a drug problem,” Alexandria says. “You know what I’m saying? So, you throw me in prison for 40 years and you never take the time to address my actual issue. So, you do nothing for me to help with that issue. And I mean, you have [therapy] modality in a drug class here, but everyone’s getting high in it. What’s the point of doing that? You know what I’m saying? So I’ve had to rehabilitate myself.”

For most women who need help managing their mental and behavioral health, the best they can hope for is a 30-minute therapy session once a month. That was my experience in Michigan, and Alexandria reports a similar policy in Florida. Chelsey explained that she knows she needs therapy, but a change in an inmate’s mental health status could mean a change in housing, privileges, and even release date. So she chooses to remain quiet. Incarcerated women are forced make an impossible choice: freedom or mental health.

Thinking back to my days in prison, I recall the little injustices that reminded me how unimportant I was in the eyes of the state. Whether it was having to wait several days to see a dentist while in excruciating pain or waking up with my eye swollen shut and being refused treatment because it was not deemed an emergency, the denial of care and the resulting dehumanization should not have been part of my — or any woman’s — punishment.

Optimism, Coping Mechanisms, and Healthy Habits

Confined to four walls in a system that does not treat them humanely or adequately prepare them for life after prison, incarcerated women find various strategies to cope with their past and present trauma.

Despite the abuse and injustice they suffer, incarcerated women develop coping mechanisms and build community, both of which contribute to post-traumatic growth.¹⁹ The women interviewed identify a number of strategies that help them make sense of their past experiences, survive their current circumstances, and plan for their lives upon release. Identifying and understanding these coping mechanisms has significant potential for prison reform, as programming that supports and builds on them has the best chance of providing a truly rehabilitative experience.

Peer support is a crucial source of incarcerated women’s perseverance and resilience, facilitating pro-social behaviors, more successful sobriety outcomes, successful reentry strategies, and supportive communication. In particular, research has found that supportive communication among peers plays a variety of important roles: “Legitimizing problems, behaviors, and perceptions; advising on practical and logistical issues; soothing and reassuring; clarifying the problem; esteem-building; and emotion-expressing.”²⁰

And here is another critical research finding that my personal experience confirms: the process of reidentification or redefinition — of seeing oneself as something other than a prisoner or defining oneself in terms not

connected to a crime — is critical to the effectiveness of coping mechanisms.²¹ While incarcerated, I became a published writer through the University of Michigan’s Prison Creative Arts Project, acted in several plays through Shakespeare in Prison, and was mentored by poets such as Rob Halpern and Rosie Stockton. These experiences helped me define myself as something other than what the state labeled me. I may have been convicted, but I am not a convict, defined by the action I regret most. I am a person, filled with talent, capable and deserving of living a healthy life.

Recalling good memories, leaning on healthy relationships, and envisioning a positive future are additional ways that the women cope with imprisonment. Asia V comes from a very close family and continues to rely on that support to get through each day. “I was happy and always felt safe in my house with my parents and brothers,” she says of her childhood. A self-described dreamer, Asia V wanted to be an accountant and believed that hard work would help her realize this goal. She admits that she wishes she had made different choices and sought help for the postpartum depression that led to her offense, but she believes remaining goal-oriented is key to staying positive. “If you continue to stay strong and motivated in your mind,” she says, “and you keep people around you uplifted and people that are supportive in your life, even on the outside, you’ll be able to function out there in society again.” To cope with prison, Asia V talks to her family and friends, reads the Bible, and journals. “I’ll write down goals that I want to complete, whether it’s in prison or when I go home. And that’s what keeps me going, because I know that this is not the end.”

Elizabeth focuses on using her experience to help other women in prison. She recalls that she was never taught the life skills or coping techniques necessary to deal with her abuse or find a way out of her neighborhood. “I give the young girls in here what was never given to me. It is the only way that I can give back,” she says. “There is nothing [else] I can do.” She thinks a lot about a future bringing awareness to the trauma that results from abuse and helping victims go on to live productive lives. And she is resolute: “Everything that I needed as a child or as a teen, surrounded by broken and lost women, still trying to find themselves — I want to use my life story as a tool to help others find freedom through healing.”

Alexandria tries to focus on the positive things buried under all the negatives: she thinks about her children who are safe with family, she is thankful that she has been sober and clean for more than six years, she appreciates the honest dialogue she was able to have with her father before he passed away, and she is glad to be away from the rough community where she was raised.

The women rely on the practices and techniques identified by previous scholarship.²² They establish prosocial behaviors through relationships and productive commu-

nication. Many have found friendships in prison that have become more like family. They undertake frank assessments of themselves and their circumstances, both recognizing the role of social structures in their lives and confronting the choices they have made. Undergirding it all is a strong sense of self-preservation and a realization that they are more than their mistakes, even if their present circumstances suggest otherwise.

Nicki says she has no choice but to be hopeful; it is a survival tactic and its own form of self-care. “I have to be because anything else, I will lose my mind,” she says. “Anything else, I will be crying every day.”

Rethinking Prison

According to a 2021 Justice Department report, nearly two-thirds of women released from state prison were rearrested within five years, about 46 percent of those arrests led to a conviction, and a third of those released were facing new sentences.²³ For those incarcerated women with release dates, they are acutely aware of what awaits them after prison.

Given their particular vantage point, the women have a range of suggestions for how to improve correctional facilities in ways that will not only reduce recidivism but also address the root causes of criminal acts.

Several of the interviewees — including Asia V, Alexandria, Chelsey, and Elizabeth — emphasize a lack of funding, programming, staffing, and overall rehabilitative support in prison. They describe their living conditions as inhumane — a reality worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁴ The interviewees recognize that an unsanitary, unsupportive environment without addiction treatment or adequate medical care cannot address the underlying traumas that have led them to be incarcerated in the first place, and in fact often makes these issues worse. In addition to necessary legislative reforms to specific parts of the criminal legal system, the interviewees advocate for improvements to the availability and administration of prison programs and services.

One of their most easily implemented recommendations is for prison programs to be taught by people who have been through similar circumstances. These programs are an opportunity to help women address the social, mental, and emotional difficulties in their lives, but they risk being unrelatable and ineffective if not led by credible teachers. Alexandria reports parenting classes and sessions on coping with addiction taught by people who are not parents or who are not experiencing addiction themselves. She notes that this is one of the quickest ways to lose the women in attendance: “How are you going to tell me when you have never gone through it? I shut myself off when it’s like that because there’s nothing that you can tell me.”

Another concern is diet and living conditions. Research has noted that, on the outside, criminal activity often occurs in food deserts.²⁵ Within prison, Asia V cites a lack of fresh food as a key contributor to the deterioration of women's overall physical and mental health: "There's no healthy eating. There's no healthy living. It's not good. And that's why a lot of [women], they come in here, they eat all this junk food. It's not good. It's really not. We don't have vegetables. We don't have fruits."

Without quality programming and educational materials, health care, and sanitary living conditions, prisons do little to improve the outcomes for those incarcerated. Asia V questions whether the money spent on correctional facilities is being used efficiently: "We're costing all these taxpayers all this money, but where is the money going to? The living conditions in prison is terrible. I mean, I know I'm not saying this is the Ritz-Carlton or anything, but really... all these bugs everywhere, the lack of medical care. The medical staff here is terrible. They don't do anything for you."

Generally, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the support offered to incarcerated women. Chelsey says, "All of the times that I have been in trouble, I have never been offered help, ever. Not inside, not outside, at no point in time does my rehabilitation come into this. Where are you transitioning them back into society to ensure that they don't fail?" She continues, "You are in charge of your own rehabilitation, otherwise you're screwed. If you don't figure out how to take care of it yourself, you're screwed."

In addition to these concerns, the women recognize the necessity of laws and regulations to make the criminal legal system more humane and rehabilitative. They hope for reforms such as greater protections for constitutional rights during arrests and interrogations, especially prohibitions on practices that prey on a mother's desire to ensure the safety of her children or that take advantage of women who are the primary caretakers in their families. The interviewees feel that these are considerations that state lawmakers, who are overwhelmingly white and male, are often not sufficiently aware of or willing to act on.²⁶

There have been a few small signs of progress. The First Step Act of 2018 enacted reforms in the federal prison system, such as providing menstrual pads and ending the shackling of pregnant women. Some states have also taken or considered measures to address the particular experience of incarcerated women.²⁷ In Indiana, where Chelsey resides, House Bill 1272, which was introduced this past legislative session, would require the Department of Correction to provide free toilet paper, tampons, and pads; limit the use of shackles and restraints on pregnant and postpartum women; and improve women's access to health care.²⁸

A similar bill with unanimous support passed the House of Representatives in Georgia, where Jasmiyah is imprisoned. The Georgia Women's CARE Act would

permit pregnant women to defer their prison sentences until several weeks after they have given birth. This is especially important because the state has the sixth-highest female detainee population (disproportionately women of color) and one of the worst maternal mortality rates in the country.²⁹ The bill, however, was tabled by the state senate in April 2022.³⁰

Above all, the women want compassion to temper many states' seeming obsession with excessive punishment. Alexandria hopes the state of Florida will reinstate parole and abolish natural life sentences. "It's not a life sentence of 25 years anymore," she says. "It's you get *life*; you *die* in prison. I mean, that's crazy." Elizabeth also supports abolishing life without parole. Brittany's view can be summed up like this: more redemption, less retribution.

Conclusion

It is 2022, a long way from 2009 and my entrance into the Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility. Yet, I still pause to look at my hands. I wonder how they could be responsible for the worst day of my life, how they became vessels for untreated trauma and poor mental health. But then I look to my heart, which is with those 150,000 women who are still inside of our nation's jails and prisons. And I look to my voice, confident and strong, which I now use to support the voices of those who are locked away. Today, all three — my hands that once committed a violent act, my heart that was broken when I was sexually abused as a child, my voice that too many have tried to take from me — are tools that I use to improve our criminal legal system. After my release, I left Detroit and now live and work in Los Angeles, but the distance between today and that tragic night in 2009 seems far wider to me than the 2,500 miles between here and home.

My story is bound up with the stories of the women with whom I spoke. They, too, have the goals of remedying the harm they have caused, living a healthy and productive life, and changing a system in which too many have suffered. The experiences they shared and the solutions they recommended all point to the central importance of treatment and rehabilitation over punishment. While each of the women recognizes that a debt must be repaid to society, much of their experience suggests that the system is consumed by the idea that being "tough on crime" is the number-one priority.

In order to give incarcerated women a real second chance, prisons, for as long as they exist, must address pre-incarceration trauma and be operated in ways that greatly reduce additional suffering. Legislators and prison administrators should be attentive to the injustices specific to women's experiences in the criminal legal

system, from arrest through release. And they should provide programming that builds on the coping mechanisms that women develop to endure incarceration; that will increase women's chances of success, both in prison and after release. Most of all, we should neither normalize nor accept the stripping of humanity and dignity from incarcerated women as just punishment for a crime.

In her final reflection, Chelsey shared a message we would all do well to remember when thinking about the women locked away in our nation's prisons and jails:

We're a community. We build off of each other. Some of us tear each other down; it's the nature of this place. But at the same time, we are a community, and people tend to forget that we're more than our crimes. No matter what the level of crime is that we've come in here for, even for people who are lifers or have 100-plus years, you forget the type of women that you put in here. We're not these crimes. We're moms. We deserve second chances. That's really what it just comes to. We're not disposable. We didn't ask for this life. This life was chosen for us long ago.... We are the land of the discarded souls. These women have been abused in every possible way, whether it's from a man, a woman, somebody we loved, a stranger, brother, sisters. Whatever the case is, we all shared that exact same level of pain. Every one of us.

Endnotes

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

► **Asia Johnson** is a fellow at the Brennan Center for Justice, where she focuses on lived experiences within the prison system. She is also a writer, filmmaker, and senior associate at Zealous, a national nonprofit. She has previously worked with several other organizations in the criminal justice reform space, including the Bail Project, Shakespeare in Prison, and the Prison Creative Arts Project. Johnson is a student at the University of Michigan, Dearborn, where she studies criminal justice and film. When she isn't amplifying the stories of those impacted by the criminal legal system and making her dream of a world without cages come true, Johnson is writing poetry exploring topics such as love, justice, race, sexuality, loss, and beauty.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Brennan Center gratefully acknowledges The JPB Foundation for its generous support of our work. This is an independent Brennan Center publication; the opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of our supporters.

The author profusely thanks the women who agreed to be interviewed for this paper and the organizations that helped make it possible. Thanks also to Brennan Center colleagues who provided research and editorial support for this project, especially Theodore R. Johnson, Larissa Jimenez and Emelia Gold in the Fellows Program and Lauren-Brooke Eisen, Josy Hahn, Alia Nahra, and Noah Kim in the Justice Program.