Ending Perpetual Punishment

The case for commutations for people in Michigan prisons.
ABOUT AFSC

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is a Quaker organization that promotes lasting peace with justice, as a practical expression of faith in action. Drawing on continuing spiritual insights and working with people of many backgrounds, we nurture the seeds of change and respect for human life that transform social relations and systems.

AFSC has a century of experience building peace in communities worldwide. Founded in the crucible of World War I by Quakers who aimed to serve both humanity and country while being faithful to their commitment to nonviolence, AFSC has worked throughout the world in conflict zones, in areas affected by natural disasters, and in oppressed communities to address the root causes of war and violence.

The Michigan Criminal Justice Program exists to ensure that every Michigan prisoner is treated fairly and their voices are heard. We are a resource and advocate for prisoners, their loved ones and everyone who believes that the human rights of prisoners should be protected.

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THANK YOU
Thank you to all of the men and women serving long time in prisons, featured in this report and not featured in this report, who have shared their stories with us throughout the years. We are so grateful for your willingness to share some of the most painful and heart-wrenching truths of your personal lives. We know that your openness to reliving the trauma of your histories will lead to healing and freedom for more people.

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To read this report online, please visit afsc.org/mi-commutation
Why should we care about the hardest cases?

Life and long indeterminate sentences

In these pages you’ll read the stories of 10 individuals sentenced to serve life or long, indeterminate prison sentences—what we call “virtual life” sentences—in Michigan. Why are we highlighting these stories?

Because they don’t often get heard. At AFSC, we’re fortunate to have the opportunity to work closely with people who have served—or are serving—life or long-term prison sentences.

These are people who are often forgotten about once they’re sent to prison, but they are also living proof that healing and personal transformation are possible—that people convicted of serious offenses can return and live as vital parts of our free-world community.

We’re also raising up these stories as part of the growing call and commitment to end mass incarceration in the United States. Any effort to interrupt the U.S. criminal justice system that has disproportionately criminalized the poor and people of color—and diverted resources from schools, health care, and other programs that truly make our communities safer—must include a discussion of how to help people who’ve committed the most serious of offenses.

We invite you to read more about these issues in the following pages, see our policy recommendations that begin to address them (page 8), and explore these firsthand stories (page 12).
OVERVIEW

The United States’ criminal legal system overly relies on life sentences and long, indeterminate sentences in response to harms done in communities. People who receive these sentences are most often guilty of very serious offenses, the kinds of offenses society struggles to talk about or deal with beyond this type of punishment—the hardest cases.

This group makes up a significant portion of America’s prison population. In Michigan, over 70 percent of people serving prison sentences are serving on an assaultive offense.

Any serious discussion or plan to depopulate our costly, harmful, and burgeoning prison system must include these difficult and complicated cases.

“As of 2016, there were 161,957 people serving life sentences, or one of every nine people in prison. Nearly half (48.3%) of life and virtual life-sentenced individuals are African American, equal to one in five black prisoners overall.”

In Michigan, where the issue is just as stark, 1,317 people are serving parolable life sentences and 3,804 are serving life without parole sentences. Another 590 are serving 50-year minimums or more. In 2016, a total of 7,213 people were serving sentences with 20-year minimums or higher.

Many of us are unaware of the lasting impact that warehousing people in prison has on the people who make up these data and statistics. Once the state prosecutes and incarcerates a person who has caused serious harm in community; once the news stories (if any) have died down; once the prosecuted individual is locked behind the state’s barbed wire, concrete and steel cages, then the forgetting begins.

Most people—unless they have a loved one locked up, are a victim or survivor of crime, have experienced incarceration, or are somehow involved in either a professional or political way in the criminal legal machination—have no idea about the inner workings of prison systems, parole and commutation policies, or the overall lasting impact of systems of confinement on marginalized communities. These systems subject those in prison to two traumatic extremes—either overwhelming isolative conditions or overwhelmingly crowded conditions with no privacy.

This is not to say that the public has remained completely ignorant of myriad injustices associated with the criminal legal system in this country. Over the last six years, since the publication of Michelle Alexander’s “The New Jim Crow,” a growing number of people and policymakers across the country have begun to pay closer attention to the racial inequity and overt discrimination in our country’s legal system as outlined in Alexander’s writing. But that analysis focuses on the low-level “nonviolent” drug “offender”—individuals often considered more deserving of mercy than those who commit more serious crimes.

In all reality, we must focus—even fixate—on the hardest kinds of cases. Individual and collective histories filled with trauma and violence permeate the American landscape. As Common Justice’s founder Danielle Sered so rightly asserts:

“Nearly all poor communities bear the brunt of policy choices that have


nurtured violence. In communities of color, the detrimental impact of these policies is amplified by historical and present injustices. These harms included colonization, continued with slavery and its more proximate counterpart, convict leasing, and persist with the more recent phenomenon of redlining—the practice of refusing loans or insurance to people because they live in areas deemed to be ‘poor financial risks’ — a practice applied almost exclusively in communities of color.”

These systemic legacies that foster policy choices and whole systems that otherize groups of people and cultivate violence are also the catalyst for the investment in the militarization of the police and disparate application of law enforcement and justice practices on communities of color.

We know that actual crime has been drastically trending down. But this does not mean that the systems of oppression that built our burgeoning prison system and over-reliance on mass incarceration have fallen away or that the cyclical violence connected to surviving in inhospitable times and places is gone. Based on both the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and a national survey conducted by the Alliance for Safety and Justice, people of color are also 15 percent more likely to be victims of crime.

By relying on the state to offer up one-dimensional solutions for harms in communities, we have forgone pathways toward healing and transformation. Instead, we’ve created spaces like prisons where violence and trauma are perpetuated.

We have allowed the politics of a tough-on-crime era to lock away indefinitely some of the best minds and hearts of our time.

In Michigan, we have defaulted to believing that all survivors of crime and communities impacted by crime desire a lifetime of punishment. In reality, victims of violent crime widely support shorter sentences and a reduced reliance on incarceration.

THE POWER OF TRANSFORMATION AND CHANGE

We are living in a time where people are yearning for something to move us through the violence toward healing, transformative possibilities, and new beginnings.

At AFSC, we work with people serving long time for the harshest of crimes, and we have been fortunate to witness and accompany people on journeys through some of the most difficult landscapes. It is through this witness, through the single stories that weave into a collective narrative, that we are able to firmly proclaim that change and healing are possible.


7. In an ASJ survey of victims of violent crime, 61% of people surveyed preferred shorter prison sentences and spending more on prevention and rehabilitation programs. While 27% preferred keeping people in prison for as long as possible. In addition, 69% of victims surveyed preferred creating different options to hold people accountable that went beyond just prison and only 25% wanted to simply put people in prison. For the whole report: https://www.allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/Crime%20Survivors%20Speak%20Report.pdf
We cannot weigh out the moral fabric, compassion, and capacity for empathy of the human heart. Personal transformation is not quantifiable. Of course, we can try to measure for this change and growth through various indicators—low recidivism rates, successful job placement, successful school completion, placement in permanent housing, number of years sober, reduced amount of contact with law enforcement, and so on—that authorities and academics try to collect in order to make the claim that people are redeemable and should be released.

But the individual stories and the larger collective frame are the real indicators of success—whatever that success might look like. Because success is not without struggle, and all of the hardship and trauma of prison haunts those who have lived there and who have worked there. To look internally without much help of any kind after being banished to isolative, hostile, stark, and brutal conditions that are all about control and nothing about matters of the human heart, is an indicator of human tenacity, resilience, and ultimately the power of love.

**SHARING STORIES: PEOPLE SERVING LONG SENTENCES**

In April of 2017, AFSC held a focus group of people who were released from prison after many years served and are doing well in the free-world community. Six men and one woman joined us at the United Way for Southeastern Michigan to discuss what their lives were like before they went to prison, what happened to move them into prison, how they were able to gain their freedom from prison, and how they are able to now be successful in community. The conversation focused on personal accountability, the trauma of prison, collective healing, and making a new life after release.

Due to the generous donation of an anonymous donor, a videographer filmed the conversation and then made a short film for us to use in our community education and political advocacy work. We wanted to lift up the stories of success of people coming back to our communities instead of the stories of failure and violence that the media all too often focus on.

Through our work, we have the rare opportunity to learn about and better understand the complicated systemic and personal causes that lead people to create serious harm and end up in prison. We know men and women who have served 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 years in prison. We know the many details of their lives, their childhoods, their adolescence, their struggles through poverty, addiction, scarcity, violence, neglect, lack of opportunity, and lack of public care. We know how prison was at first a hard, concrete maze for them—where the violence that landed them there to begin with continued for a time. We know that for many people, multiple points of clarity and direction begin to open up in that maze—not due to any offerings from the prison system itself, but due to their amazing capacity to survive and the desire to transform and grow into better humans.

In addition to the stories collected in our focus group, we have collected video stories from people who have been given a second chance at life in the free-world as well as written narratives from men and women still in prison who have served long time and are ready to be let free.

We hope you’ll take the time to read these stories...
A call to action for our governor

We do all of this to raise awareness on long-term prison sentences in Michigan. We aim to draw attention to the problems with Michigan's parole and commutation system and its inability to comprehensively address men and women who have served very long periods of time in prison.

We do know that people serving life sentences who are given second chances are unlikely to recidivate with a new offense. A report by Stanford Law School scholars indicates that, "In a cohort of convicted murderers released since 1995 in California, the actual recidivism rate is in fact minuscule. In particular, among the 860 murderers paroled by the Board since 1995, only five individuals have returned to jail or returned to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitations for new felonies since being released, and none of them recidivated for life-term crimes."

In addition, Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending (CAPPS) conducted original research in late 2014 that concluded in Michigan between 2007 and the first quarter of 2010, more than 99 percent of people paroled on homicide and sex offenses "did not return to prison within three years with a new sentence for a similar offense."

It will take courageous leadership to shift the discourse around our systemic use of perpetual punishment. We know that people who have been in prison a very long time can be safely released back into our communities. We also know that these people need supports and services to transition back to the foreign land of the free-world.

The governor plays a key role in ending mass incarceration and moving our state away from a system focused on punishment and retribution to one of healing and transformation. The governor has the power to instruct the parole board to release more long serving parole eligible people. And, ultimately, it is the governor who can design systems and policies to process more commutations and release people who have no chance at freedom unless they are commuted.

It is critical that whoever becomes Michigan's next governor recognizes the unique power of the office to set up processes that support commutations and parole of more people.

At AFSC, we're often asked why it's important to focus on the hardest cases in addressing mass incarceration. Our answers focus on the reality that the men and women who teach us the most and who are so very capable, skilled, thoughtful and extraordinary inside Michigan's prisons, are the men and women who once upon a time did awful things and made terrible decisions. We also emphasize the importance of analyzing individual cases and histories to ensure that public safety and successful re-entry are critical to discussions around releasing the longest-serving people. There are guidelines and measures that can be adopted to help with these difficult and politically charged decisions.

AFSC understands that this is heavy and slow work. It will not be accomplished over a few years. These recommendations come in the spirit of being committed to the long work ahead.


AFSC RECOMMENDS THAT THE GOVERNOR:

- Expand parole board by 5 members (to 15) in order to process more natural lifers/LIDs and parolable lifers. These members should have one or more of the following credentials: Work with people in prison, psychology/mental health background, social work background, and/or corrections professionals. At least one of these term-limited members should be fully trained in gender responsive methodologies.

- Instruct the parole board member/s conducting public hearings to take back the hearing process from the Attorney General's representative (AAG). The board member is in charge of the hearing, not the AAG. The AAG is given way too much latitude to essentially “re-try” people instead of letting them express their past wrongs and how they have worked on themselves amidst difficult obstacles to set things as “right” as possible.

- Instruct the MDOC director to rely on ground staff—where the prisoner in question has spent a lot of time—to help in the board’s discernment process toward commutation (and parolable life parole) consideration. This process could be made a formal provision of the commutation application.

- Establish community review boards to ensure support for release and provide political coverage for the parole board and governor. These boards would consider prisoners selected through a community-developed framework that seeks to identify those who are most prepared and supported to come home (e.g. solid institutional records with model prisoner behavior, major program involvement, community support system). The community review boards would be comprised of professionals connected to social service agencies, criminal legal agencies, and/or corrections and re-entry agencies to review information collected from long serving people. After review, the community board would further investigate the individuals and decide whether or not to write letters of support for each person’s return to the community. We intend for this to be a non-biased process that is rooted in the community’s desire to bring the longest serving and most transformed people back to society.

CATEGORIES TO SERIOUSLY CONSIDER FOR RELEASE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE:

- Staff recommendations and/or multiple community organization recommendations and/or support of victim/victim’s loved ones
- Medically fragile prisoners (and natural/parolable lifer/LID) housed at:
  - Lakeland Geriatric Unit
  - Huron Valley Women’s Infirmary
  - Woodland
  - Duane Waters, C Unit, or Ryan Dialysis Unit
- Tier 1: Prisoners who have served 30+ years and are in Level II or lower
- Tier 2: Prisoners who have served 20+ years and are in Level II or lower
- Tier 3: Women prisoners who have served 15+ years
- All mandatory or parolable juvenile lifers

Please note medical/mental health commutations should never be initiated and processed without the assent of the prisoner.
A call to action if you were in prison, are in prison, or love someone who has been to prison

None of the recommendations to the Executive Branch listed above will come to fruition without pressure from the public demanding change. This call is rooted in the power of relationships and stories to transform hearts and minds. Prison exists in shrouds of misinformation, sensationalism, and invisiblization.

Ordinary stories can shift people’s perceptions about things they have abhorred or ignored. And being in genuine and caring relationships with people who have lived through the oppressive systems we are seeking to change helps these stories become more than a panel presentation or public education experience.

WE NEED TO MAKE SPACES TO LIFT UP THE VOICES AND EXPERIENCES OF:

• people who went to prison for serious harms in the community and who have lived years behind bars tending to personal transformation and the care of the prison community;

• the mothers, fathers, children, partners, neighbors, sisters, brothers, and friends of people who were sent away to essentially die in a state-run prison system and are now trapped there because perpetual punishment has become an easy remedy to social harm;

• people who served many years in the prison community and came back to the free-world and are surviving and thriving.

These stories are essential in building a movement grounded in the human possibility to change and to love. In order for wrongs to be righted, accountability to be established, relationships to be restored, and transformation to unfold—again and again, we need to make sure the impacted parties are allowed to participate in the process. When all of our systems are designed to allow the state to overshadow the humans involved in the conflict, we are left with a prison system steeped in retribution, surveillance and social control, and the proliferation of inhumane prison policies and practices.

While lifting up stories of personal transformation and resilience, it is important to also advocate for a different system while calling attention to the problems with the current system and the victories that happen on an individual level.
TO MOVE US TOWARD A SYSTEM THAT UNDERSTANDS WHY WE MUST STOP USING PERPETUAL PUNISHMENT AND START DEVELOPING CONCRETE SOLUTIONS FOR COMPLEX SOCIAL PROBLEMS, WE CAN:

• Work at a county level to institute restorative justice practices for serious harms in community.

• Educate the public about the power of prosecutors in their communities and work to elect prosecutors who have a racial justice analysis, the wherewithal to support genuine restorative practices over punitive practices, and will only use incarceration because there is no other option.

• Share these stories in what might seem to be unusual spaces. Example: Every one of the people serving long sentences in Michigan’s prisons had some encounter with schooling in America. Our schools can function both as catalysts for preventing violence and oppression and as the impetus for exclusionary practices that target young Black boys disproportionately and lead to suspensions and expulsions that then lead to more and more entanglements with law enforcement and the criminal legal system. Use the stories that demonstrate the failed experiment of perpetual punishment to foster restorative practices in schools.

• Involve impacted communities at every level of decision making. Survivors of violence are often situated in the same communities as perpetrators of violence and/or survivors may indeed have caused violence at some other time in their lives. It is imperative to develop alternatives to incarceration that are centered on survivors and community healing.

• Provide wrap-around social services for young people involved in the justice system. This includes access to education, health and mental health care, substance use counseling, access to comprehensive sexual health information and resources, positive family-like mentoring, transportation, jobs, and access to prosocial fun.

• Provide wrap around social services for all people returning from prison to their communities. This includes access to education, health and mental health care, substance use counseling, access to comprehensive sexual health information and resources, positive family-like mentoring, transportation, jobs, and access to prosocial fun.

• Rely less on law enforcement to help resolve interfamily and domestic conflict.

• Develop more survivor-centered, trauma-informed victims’ services that are not linked to law enforcement.

• Work to develop services inside prisons that are centered around trauma informed care for prisoners and prison staff alike.

• Get involved in AFSC’s Good Neighbor Project, which pairs up free-world individuals with people serving life or long sentences so they can develop “co-mentoring” relationships.

Ultimately, these recommendations are just the beginning of lists of action steps and ideas. It is AFSC’s hope that we will all be more courageous and forgiving. We hope to leave the next generation with a world that is learning to move toward less violence and less violent systems.

It is now that we are reckoning with our individual and collective traumatic histories of exclusion, racism, torture, and punishment. We share all of this to help envision a world rooted in genuine safety for all, care for all, less violence over all—a world without perpetual punishment and prisons.
I grew up in Lapeer county out in the sticks. Close-knit family. I had a great life.

I did well in school until I hit high school. Then I became more interested in being one of the cool guys in school and attracting all the sorts of negative attention that kids like to. Short-term goals were the only goals we had, and it was stealing stuff.

In 1994, just about two years after I graduated from high school, Dan, my best friend, got killed in a car accident. The two of us that were remaining—me and Sean—we just kind of lost it. That was the point we got into real armed robberies.

We were eventually caught and sent to prison. I tried to escape the first year I was locked up. [My friend Chris] came up to MTU with a bunch of guns and bolt cutters and tried to break [six of] us out. When it was really clear that we weren't going to make it out, Chris pointed one of the guns at himself and shot himself.

Somehow, despite all that I had done and the person I was, I maintained family support, which has just been the thing I got going for me all the way along. They didn't know what was wrong with me, but everybody just stood by me.

I was taken next door to max at Ionia Correctional Facility. I knew I was going to be in solitary confinement for a long time. I started reading, teaching myself math, and eventually got into legal research and writing.

I was paroled in the fall of 2008. It was the fifth time I was interviewed for parole, and I was years past my earliest release date at this point.
I started at Mott Community College in 2009. Paul Reingold at U of M law school hired me as a part-time paralegal to work on a big class action he had going. After, a job opportunity opened at AFSC. It was a great place to work. It was also a rewarding job, being able to help out people that I had left behind in [prison] and meet new people along the way.

I graduated from U of M Flint with a bachelor’s in political science. I started law school at Wayne State at their part-time evening program in 2012 and graduated there in 2016.

When I look back at my prison experience, the points where I think I turned it around were when I hit rock bottom. After everything that I had done to other people, there was some point, or a series of points, where I had matured enough, and I had slowed down enough, and restrained enough that I had to think what I had done and the effects it had on other people.

We got a lot of people in [prison] that have been through some really screwed-up stuff in their lives, and they can’t see a clear path to getting to where they want to be in life. I don’t think they have unrealistic dreams. People are sober enough in there that for the most part, they know that they are getting out, and it’s going to be really tough on them. But if they could get some help with this—how you can get from Point A to Point B to get where you want to go—there’s no question that they can do it. Given the opportunity and support and understanding, they will do it.

Watch Peter’s story: afsc.org/mi-commutation-peter
I grew up in southwest Detroit. My mom had me when she was 14 years old. We lived on welfare and my stepfather was very abusive. In school, I did well, but I got beat up a lot in the neighborhood. Southwest Detroit is a really rough neighborhood. I got a boyfriend who was a drug dealer. He offered me protection. I became desensitized to selling drugs.

[When] my boyfriend broke up with me, I decided to be a drug dealer myself. I was involved in a drug deal, and I was the driver. We were all under the age of 19. I should have known right away that this was going to turn into a murder, but I went along with it because I think partly I was scared, and I was with this group that offered me protection and a way to make money. One 19-year old man was shot, another one was paralyzed.

We all ended up in prison. [At age 17], I was given 25 to 50 years, convicted of second-degree murder as an aider and an abettor, and sentenced to Scott Correctional Facility.

The first night I was put in prison I woke up to noise. There was a guard that was standing in the room right across from me, and he was raping the woman in that room. Within days, I already knew what my life would be like in prison. The first time I was raped, I didn't know I was raped because I thought it was part of prison life. It happened several times, and it was happening to all of the women around me.

One day I had decided, if I had to be in prison for the rest of my life, I wasn't going to be a urinal for corrections officers. I had to get strong to fight for changes.
I started studying a book called “A Course in Miracles.” I started writing down stories of the women around me and the stories of the guards. I started going to the most popular women, the toughest women, convincing them to tell their story. And we had a group of attorneys who were working [on] a class action lawsuit. It was those stories that I had recorded over several years that the attorney used to pursue this case [to] trial.

That was a turning point for me—when I realized that I could make changes, that I could speak up for myself, that I could say no, that I am more than my past.

I received a commutation. Within six months, I was released. I had inherited a platform because of the work that I had done in prison. People were calling me to share my story. I started working right away. I had my dream job, working in an organization that helped women and girls, provided educational tools to women and girls in Southwest Detroit.

And then something wonderful happened, I became pregnant with my daughter. And life slowed down. There came a point where I had to make a decision: Do I keep putting myself out there as an advocate? Or do I just step back and be Sophia's mom? And I tried that—it doesn't work. Felonies are forever; my life is public. I can only be who I am.

Not only did I inherit a platform, but I inherited a responsibility to do well—not just for me, not just for my daughter, not just for my community, but for the women who are still incarcerated who deserve a second chance. And that is why I chose to continue, to work through the pain, through the fear.

If I could say something to the parole board or Governor Snyder, I would say that over-incarceration serves no one. Women who go to prison cannot heal in a prison environment because you’re in a fight or flight zone. In order to heal, you have to feel safe and protected. So I ask them to consider better conditions in prison and to give some women a second chance.

Watch Toni’s story: afsc.org/mi-commutation-toni
I was the oldest of five children and grew up in Flint, Michigan. We had a beautiful home. When I was growing up, we used to travel summers in a motor home.

On the outside, it looked like we had this amazing life. On the inside, we lived a tortured life. My dad was a hell of a strict disciplinarian. He would beat me. He was mean to my mother. It was crazy.

I grew up angry, aggressive. I was battling internal traumas. I didn't realize I was becoming what my dad was without even realizing it.

My mom shot and killed my dad in front of my younger brother and sister. I was 22. I was married and had two children. Now I was responsible for taking care of my own family, my mom, and my younger brother and sister. I was going to college, working full time, and I had a house full of people—so I never had time to grieve.

You could see the trajectory of my life spiral from there. I started selling drugs. During the day I was working at Ford, and at night I'm selling drugs, pistol-whipping people, out there living that life. Because it was a vent.

One day, my buddies and I were picking up money from the houses we were selling drugs out of. One of the houses was under surveillance [by] police. We stop, I get out of the car. I’m leaning on the hood, drinking a 40-ounce of beer. The car pulls up. [An undercover police officer] pulled up behind us, and when he gets out, he squats down in the doorframe with a gun. A shootout ensued.
I jump over a fence and run off. The guys in my car took off. I got arrested that evening, ended up getting charged with assault to commit murder on a Flint police officer. Mind you, the police officer’s statement never said I shot at him, never said I had a gun. But nine months later at trial, that turned into me jumping over a fence with a gun shooting. They made up all of these stories. I ended up getting convicted, getting 30- to 50-year sentence.

I went to prison angry. The first five years [in prison], I was part of the problem, not part of the solution, because I was angry at the world, angry at myself, angry at everyone. A friend of mine brought me a book called “Vision for Black Men.” It clicked something in me. It made me think of self-responsibility. When I read this I said, I’ve been a damn fool all of these years, I started changing my way of thinking. I went to the law library, I became a paralegal through classes. In 1992, I got hired as a paralegal at Prisoners’ Legal Services Michigan.

I made it my point to not fight so much for myself. I started trying to beat down the door for others. I started looking around, and I saw the injustice of humanity in prison. I saw the trauma that prison inflicts on people, and I dedicated myself to changing it. So I became an advocate.

On Father’s Day 2001, my only son—21 years old—was shot and killed by a 14-year-old juvenile. I was so determined to make a change that I advocated for the 14-year old child to be treated as a juvenile [not an adult]. I didn’t wish prison on my worst enemy. I didn’t wish prison on the guy that killed my son.

In 2006, I filed a habeas corpus. In 2009, the courts reversed my conviction, which was a very great time. But it was bittersweet because they appealed it, but nobody would give me bond so I sat in prison for three years. My first job [out of prison], I worked at an oil manufacturing company. It was a nasty job. I started working on cars again; my brother had a little garage in Flint.

Natalie Holbrook gave me a chance—she gave me an internship [at AFSC]. After the internship ended, I became a full-time program associate. From that I got enrolled in a fellowship in New York called Just Leadership USA. They offered me a job. Now I am the Director of Outreach and Alumni Engagement.

Watch Ronald’s story: afsc.org/mi-commutation-ronald
I was 19 years old when I murdered my father and his girlfriend in our home. I grew up in an abusive relationship with my father. I carried out those traits as a young teenager. At that time, I didn't understand how to resolve conflict, communicate with my father, so I used the next best thing, which was violence. I served 26 years in prison. I carried the same behavioral traits into prison. I thought I had to prove myself.

Once I hit a point in my life where I reflected on my violent behavior and abusiveness toward others, I never wanted to be treated like that in the first place. I began to reflect why I treated other people that way. That was my turning point to change the way I treated others. I realized I couldn't respect others if I didn't respect myself.

I maintained positive relationships with my family and friends throughout my incarceration, which was huge for my success. I educated myself through college while I was incarcerated. I involved myself in programs, kept active in sports. It was through the education, it was self-reflection that allowed me to change the way that I used I think and the way I treated people.

I was denied parole twice. Even though I had changed the way that I'd thought and behaved, I still struggled with who was to blame for my crime. Part of it I still struggles with taking was full responsibility. I still wanted to blame my father. It was after the 24-month continuance that I realized that you know what, you are responsible; take responsibility for your actions. I did, and I felt a great release off of my shoulders. And I eventually earned my parole.
During my reintegration, I faced challenges. A lot had changed. One of the things is my family changed. I was more assertive now. I was able to communicate how I felt, what I was thinking. That was a challenge for them to accept. They are proud of me, I am proud to have them.

I wanted to provide for myself. I worked to gaining that independence today. I’m able to accept help today, ask for help. When I was a teenager, I would never ask for help. Those understandings that I gained through programming and self-reflection were huge.

I’m employed now with LUCK. We were all incarcerated, working towards positivity, and helping other men change the way that they thought. It’s a blessing to be working with these men, to have the resources available to provide to these men when they come out of prison—transportation, housing, jobs. I’ve walked in their shoes, so I know what they need, what their struggles are. You see the results because they don’t want to resort to the way that they used to think and behave in the streets.

It was horrifying to know that I terrorized so many people with my actions—the ripple effect. I believe that it is important for other men to be given a second chance because everyone has the ability to want to do good and to do good. I think we need to reach them inside prison and help them with their transformation.

Watch Ron’s story: afsc.org/mi-commutation-ron
My story would kind of begin [with] a perpetual way of thinking that was in my family, passed down from one generation to the next. It was the norm in my family to hustle.

[When I was] 17, my mother died of cancer. That's when my life began to spiral out of control. I had no direction, no understanding of the consequences of my actions, so I got caught deep into the street life.

Which led to me getting caught—this was for drug charges. However, I had a sympathetic judge. At the time, the laws mandated a certain period of time you'd be sentenced to regardless if you had no priors—a mandate of “war on drugs” initiatives. He refused to sentence me to natural life, so I was sentenced to a 13-year term.

The prosecutors were not satisfied with that. When the prosecution appealed his decision, I was brought back in front of a visiting judge, who had no idea or concept of my case and the reasoning behind Judge Howard's decision. I was sentenced to three natural lives and a 10-20.

When I was in prison, I wasn’t ready to accept that sentence. When you’re in an environment that perpetuates anger, you have to find a space where you can find your own peace. So I engaged myself in my religion and as well as educating myself. I began to engulf myself in understanding law, and I used that to lift myself out of the conditions that bred so much hate.

One time in particular where I was extremely sick. There was an internal infection. [Prison staff] were just like “hey take an aspirin, and go lie down,” but I was literally
dying. It was just the compassion of an officer who saw that there was something drastically wrong with me. She broke protocol and reached out to my family, and my family began to call around until it forced their hands. I remember being rushed to the hospital and being handcuffed to the bed. I can vividly remember the doctor walking in, [telling me] 'you would've been dead in a day.'

I know what it's like to be in a place where you're where you're not considered a human being. And finding a place where you can rise above it.

In 2007, Gov. Granholm was doing her state of the state address. She was saying she was going to take an aggressive approach to alleviate the strain on the Michigan Department of Corrections. I thought this might be my opportunity. I sat down and drafted my own commutation and sent that commutation in. The parole board [saw] there was merit. I ended up receiving parole.

The thing about parole is it's still incarceration in a sense. Although you have physical freedom, you still have to walk a very thin line to maintain that freedom.

From that point, I began to work. I started off working outside, in the winter time, part-time, in a recycling plant, minimum wage. I kept pushing, I kept working. I met my now wife. Having a support system, having people who believe in you, having people who go to bat for you, for me personally, was the turning point in my release. I started working in hospitality. I worked my way up. I ended up becoming a night manager and assistant GM for a multimillion-dollar hotel.

[One day my wife] saw the posting for the job at AFSC. She said, “This is you.” I went for it, and I was blessed by Natalie Holbrook, who was the director, to give me that opportunity.

The experience of being incarcerated made me who I am today. I will always fight for what I know is right. When I look in two-year-old son's eyes, there's nothing I won't do to pave the way for him to not experience what my father, and what my father's father and I experienced.

My passion now is this work. Educating communities, speaking to individuals, and talking about the injustices of the system, how flawed it is, and what work we must do in order to facilitate change—it’s become my life.

Watch Demetrius’s story: afsc.org/mi-commutation-demetrius
Mario Bueno
Co-founder and co-director, Leaders Under Correct Knowledge (LUCK)
19 years in prison

I served 19 years in the Michigan Department of Corrections from the age of 16. As a youth I experienced a broken home that is common to most of this demographic. I experienced parents that resolved conflict through aggression and violence. By 11, 12, I was witnessing my family members use hard narcotics, substance abuse.

I began to socialize with my older sister’s boyfriends, so I began to sell drugs. By age 13, 14, 15, I was robbing drug dealers. By 16, unfortunately, I took Samuel’s life during the commission of an armed robbery in a drug deal. He was 26 years old.

I served over 387 days in solitary as I fought off first-degree charges of armed robbery, felony murder. I was convicted of second-degree murder, sentenced to 22-40 years. I served 19 years.

The first 10 years were turbulent at best—three years in solitary before the age of 23. The adult male prison system is an environment that’s like the streets, but it’s heightened. You are battling internal kind of challenges—discovery of who you are, self-image, self-efficacy—and then you are dealing with the external environment, predatory in nature, whether it be monetary, sexual. After so many years, it becomes unconscious. You just can’t lose a fight in prison.

What it created is a sense of disconnectedness to the world around you. Unfortunately, there came a point where I lost a sense of my humanity.
The difference between me and a lot of the individuals who served is I was nurtured during those times of pressure, those times of solitary. I was given great works—the autobiography of Nelson Mandela, Nietzsche, Dwayne Dyer. I also had a father who paid for my education. I got my associate’s degree in eight years.

What I seen was a difficulty in my thinking. Finally, I found myself dissatisfied with who I was, coupled with the reality that I was who I was because of me.

Eventually I found myself at Jackson Cooper Street, my 16th prison. There was a program pulling in men from the prison yard who were influential into programming to teach others. They created a space for me. It created a space for us to become better, to become humane. To not only learn the skills but to act it out.

I was called into counselor’s office one day as I was teaching three classrooms of prisoners. They said my “good time” was given back, and I’d see the parole board in 13 days. I saw the parole board without even a recommendation letter. And I was blessed with an opportunity to act out what I was already doing. As I say to most, it was not philosophy it was physics. That’s how I got out. I was living as if I was free.

I was released January 22, 2014. I immediately knew I needed more skills. I was denied at U of M and Wayne State Social Work because of my crime. I was accepted into the School of Business at Wayne State University and graduated in 2016 with a BS in accounting. Serendipitously I was pulled into a program. I did a research study that involved some successful juvenile lifers. We found that there was a sense of resiliency under immense pressure—the lower you can go, the higher you can go.

[At LUCK], I have two co-founders that were men inside with me and we have been able to employ 10 transformed men that we deploy into the community to help returned men like ourselves. Meet them where they’re at, expand their vision, and try to guide them to where they want to be. We are also a service provider, working with 50 high-risk eighth graders, teaching them how to resolve conflict among themselves.

I’m about safeguarding the community. I’m committed to trying to prevent further murders at the hands of broken men and women that just don’t have the skill set to resolve the conflict that exists within them.

Watch Mario’s story: afsc.org/mi-commutation-mario
I was incarcerated from July of 1989, and I didn't return home until 1998. I went back in 1999. I was heavily involved in gangs. I did 15 years total. I returned to the streets in 2001.

When I got out, I was still kind of lost. I got heavily involved in drugs and alcohol. I thought I was done with all this, but I was still lost and how to even conduct myself as a productive citizen in the community.

In 2005, I was convicted of felonious assault—still didn't learn my lesson. I did a year in county jail. The judge showed leniency and didn't send me to prison.

In 2005 I met the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation; they started working with me. I met [founder] Angela Reyes, and she took me under her wing. One time when we were locking up at the end of the day, she told me it was time to go home. I yelled back that I was already home.
She turned to me and said, “You’re ready to change. I can feel it.”

The next year, she hired me part time, and 12 years later I am the building manager.

One day at the organization, they told me they had a doctor who could remove my tattoos. I was like this is too good to be true. But true enough, Dr. Seaver showed up and said he could remove my tattoos. I got my gang tattoos removed from my hands and every day I wash my hands and thank that man for giving me a new beginning.

We talked to Dr. Seaver and told him that we want to start a program to remove tattoos from returning prisoners, and the program really took off. One of the other doctors donated a machine to remove tattoos. Every month we went through 100-150 people removing their tattoos. The program is still going on, been going on for eight years now.

What I would say to others is don’t be afraid. You can be anyone you want to be. Reach for the stars, reach for your goals. Don’t let anybody hinder you by telling you ain’t nobody.

People come back to me now, they say “Look Dave, I changed my life because of you.” Money can’t buy you that.

Mistakes were made. I did multiple “B and E” [breaking and entering]. I broke into houses, businesses. When I was incarcerated, I ran away, I was just a big bowl of problems. The [Michigan Department of Corrections] knew I’d be back. All the corrections officers knew I’d be back. They’d say to me, “Here come Doughboy, up to something.” I was a wild one.

Now I’m calmed down, a family man. I have four girls and one boy. I live a good life.

The hardest thing in life was denouncing my gang in prison. They put a bounty on my head. It was really difficult to function. I was blessed that I did enough in my world to help me get through that.

Watch David’s story: afsc.org/mi-commutation-david
Shearod McFarland

Incarcerated at age 17
31 years in prison

I was originally sent to prison for 2nd Degree Murder, and Felony Firearm for an incident that occurred in Wayne County when I was 17. Subsequently, eight years into my prison sentence, when I was 25, I was involved in an incident at Carson City Correctional Facility in Montcalm County for which I was charged and convicted of Assault with intent to Commit Murder.

For my first conviction in Wayne County, I received 25 to 40 years for 2nd degree Murder and two years for felony firearm. For the Carson City charges, which is in Montcalm County, I was given 16 to 40 years.

I have been incarcerated for 30 years.

While in prison, I have done the hard work of self-reflection, self-analysis, and self-evaluation, which in turn forced me to confront my anger, rage, selfishness, violence, and general moral failings. As a result of years of introspection, I have come to understand my flawed thinking and warped value system, and now as a 48-year old man, know and understand the value of life and seek to share that value with everyone that I encounter.

Besides successfully working on improving my character on a daily basis [and] working toward earning my bachelor's degree at Jackson College, my biggest achievement is my ability to use my past experience to effectively mentor young people so that they make better choices in their futures.

I spend my days reading, studying (for school), working out, and doing what I can to raise the levels of awareness among the youth.

As a result of my actions at Carson City, I spent 11 years in administrative segregation. Although I deeply regret my actions during this period, the time I spent in “the hole” was the most important and necessary time in my life. The isolation of ad-seg forced me to deal with myself, which led to edifying self-discovery.

Society should never want to discard or discredit the idea of redemption. America is established on a healthy respect and belief in human potential. To give second chances is to acknowledge the power of the human spirit to overcome past mistakes. This outlook is encapsulated in the very simple idea of forgiveness. Forgiveness represents the best of people and society.

I ask this governor and future governors to contemplate the following: Do not confuse revenge with justice. Consider state supported self-help programs, particularly those that involve intensive group therapy. Support victim outreach programs, perhaps as a final stage of self-help programs. Establish as many educational programs in the department of corrections as possible. Education is the key to producing developed human beings. At all times, be open to the idea of positive change, and the ways in which this can benefit society.
India Porter
Incarcerated at age 21
16 years in prison

I was sentenced to 25 to 40 years for two counts of Assault with Intent to Murder, felony firearm, and felony possession of a firearm.

As of August 28, 2017, I will have served 15 years on that sentence. Am I guilty of my crimes? Yes. Had someone asked me that question almost 11 years ago, I would have probably blamed everyone and everything else before I took responsibility for my actions.

I could rant and rave how unfair this system is and about how much of an injustice was done to me to lead me here. I could tell you how big of a desire I have to be set free ust like millions of other incarcerated people. But our reality is that a lot of us are in much bigger prisons—the ones without barbed wire fences and bars.

True freedom is a state of mind. One of the biggest epiphanies I have had happened while I was incarcerated here. And that was: Until I could take a real hard, honest look at myself—not the self looking back at me in the mirror nailed onto the wall—but my real self, the self no one else saw because it was on the inside of me—, if I did not get real about what was broken in me and figure out what really sent me to prison, I would never be free.

I realized that my real enemies were not my victims, or my prosecutor, or the judge. My real enemy was my “inner me.” That was when I got free. I carried around so much hurt, anger, and resentment from my childhood. The sum total of all those years of not dealing with my issues in a healthy way came out when I committed my crime. It is a fact, hurt people, hurt other people.

Studies by the U.S. Department of Justice and others have found that girls who are chronic runaways show significant levels of sexual and physical victimization. This suggests that although their offensive behavior may not appear to be very serious, girls may be fleeing from serious problems and victimization, some involving illegal behavior by adults. These girls are vulnerable to subsequent victimization and engaging in behaviors which violate the law, such as prostitution, survival sex, and drug use. Similarly, research on aggression in the context of their families, peer groups, schools, communities, and life experiences.

I am one of those delinquent girls the U.S. Department of Justice and other studies referred to. I am that girl, all grown up, just like they predicted, serving 25 to 40 years for an assaultive crime.

My story starts when I was 11 years old. That was the first time I was molested. My mother battles schizophrenia, and my father was a drug addict. I may have seen him a total of 15 times my entire life until he died of an overdose when I was 17. By the time I was 13, I was a homeless runaway, living with a friend in the same household with the person who had molested me when I was 11. At this time, he was having sex with me. He was an adult, but I didn't think it was wrong because I consented to having sex.
with him. At the time, I thought sex equated to love. I didn't have anyone else in my life telling me they loved me, so for him to say it in exchange for my body, I felt was worth it.

By the time I was 14, I was doing whatever was necessary to survive, mainly having sex with men of many different age groups for money. Survival sex. This had become my life. Sex with men for money.

After I had been sexually abused at 11, it was like my world had been enveloped in a cocoon of darkness. My whole view on life was warped. I didn't love or value myself. I had no idea even how to. I had never felt love from anyone. The only time I felt wanted was when I was having sex with men. So, I grew up associating my worth as a person to my desirability to men. Drugs were never an issue for me. I was addicted to wanting to be loved—just like an alcoholic looking for refuge in the bottom of a bottle or a drug addict chasing that high in their next I thought sex was the closest I would ever get to it – not knowing I was losing myself in the process.

By the time I committed my crime to come here, I was lost. I had so much emotional damage built up inside me. So much anger that I was literally mad at the world. I could never understand why that even when things seemed to be going right for me, I could never really be happy. One of the hardest realities I had to face about myself was that I was a victim of the sex industry. I was raised to believe that I had to use my body to survive. I never thought that this lifestyle was dysfunctional. I just believed that was how it was for me. Coming to prison and realizing this was like being sloppy drunk, having a blackout, and waking up the next day hung over with people telling me all the crazy things I had done the night before.

Between 66 percent and 90 percent of women in the sex industry were sexually abused as children. Women in the sex industry experience higher rates of substance abuse, domestic violence, rape, violent assault, sexually transmitted diseases, and post-traumatic stress disorders. All of these revelations angered me. My entire life summed up in a study by the U.S. Department of Justice.

It angers me still because the system knows about this. Yet, no one is doing anything to help young girls like I was to prevent them from experiencing the Hell that comes along with sometimes only being born. When I reflect over all the things that have led to my offending and coming to prison, I often feel like I never had a chance.

I read a quote from Benjamin Disraeli, “Man is not the creature of circumstances; circumstances are the creature of man.” He’s right—I have to take responsibility for my own existence.
Michael Sean Perkins

Incarcerated at age 22
30 years in prison

I am currently serving life without parole for felony murder and arson. Crime occurred in the city of Southfield, county of Oakland. I was 22 years. I’ve served 29 and a half years in prison.

Throughout my incarceration, I’ve committed my life to positive self-development, which has prepared me emotionally in becoming a steward of peace. I’ve developed great social skills and problem-solving skills through general and specialized education. I also enjoy being fiscally responsible, e.g., finding pleasure in saving money and spending it wisely.

My greatest teachers are from reading books by the greatest thinkers, spiritual motivations, everyday people, and personal experiences. Society no longer has to protect itself from me.

I’ve managed to successfully change my life from an impulsive, hypersensitive, weak-minded, sometimes violent person into a deeply considerate, rational, caring, non-violent man.

I rise between 5:30-6 a.m, with a stretch and a prayer. Either I’m reading self-development material, writing my next book, studying law, or working on my next project (charity-based). I tutor men who are less than two years from their [earliest release date]. I exercise when able and teach music to my peers.

There have been a few turning points in my incarceration, but one incident I often reference is in 1998 after my interview with a parole board member. I was having an in-depth discussion with an officer I trusted about the interview who admonished me with three simple words: “Think for yourself.”

Statistics support that most people who have served decades in prison are not likely to reoffend. I believe the true essence in all people is peace, love, and joy. Within these three attributes dwells empathy, understanding, and forgiveness. When a person’s actions display the amount of time a person has done, it’s the quality that person has devoted to healing themselves during that time. The people who devote to bringing the best version of themselves forward every day should be recipients of a second chance.

To this governor and future governors:
On March 7, 1988 L.S.’s life ended by my selfish and horrific acts of violence. Linda was taken away from her son, and other family members and friends. My deep anguish, sorrow, remorse, and empathy can never provide comfort to her family, nor contentment within me.

During my incarceration, I have lost loved ones. I have been robbed and assaulted and subjected to the same harms I committed on others. In a great sense, I understand the magnitude of grief, pain, and loss I’ve caused people in the past.
My prison experiences became the catalyst to making a life decision to change the thinking that caused my negative reactions into positive responses. I had to “get real” with the harm I had caused others; accountability for circumstances I create, patience with happenstances; then discovered my life’s purpose that would ultimately progress into leading a personal and socially healthy life. Now I know that my existence was meant for something better.

I have inherited the incomplete legacy of the woman I killed, and I will spend the remainder of my life bringing the best of myself forward and extending myself to those in need and helping those who can’t manage to remove themselves from the dark places in their lives.

I am asking for a second chance not because of the length of time I’ve been incarcerated, but because of the due diligence I have committed to becoming a responsible, respectable person whose heart wants to expand to every living person and creature in this universe in a positive way.

Second chances transpire from never underestimating the power of the human spirit’s ability to change.
THANK YOU

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