When You’re Locked Up, a Letter Is a Lifeline

JDI Is Fighting Back Against a Jail’s Dangerous ‘Postcard-Only’ Policy

If you were to ask a sexual abuse survivor about their healing process, chances are they’d talk about the people in their emotional support network — parents, spouses, best friends, counselors.

Survivors of prison rape depend on the same networks for support. But instead of getting help in person, the primary way for many inmates to get help is by writing letters. Survivor Council member Joe Booth credits letters with saving his life. As he put it, “JDI held my hand through the mail. Without them, I’m not sure I would have made it.”

Letters may seem desperately old-fashioned to those of us on the outside — but for prisoners, they are a lifeline. They are safer and more reliable than other options for sharing deeply personal information. Visits from family and friends are often held in noisy public areas of the prison, monitored by staff, and limited to one hour — hardly an ideal setting to discuss personal information. Visits from family and friends are often held in noisy public areas of the prison, monitored by staff, and limited to one hour — hardly an ideal setting to discuss the personal, intimate information that goes on in a survivor’s healing.

In the brief, JDI and our partners take aim at the jail’s policy of limiting inmate correspondence to just postcards. Needless to say, a postcard is ill-suited for sharing sensitive information. Prisoner rape survivors reach out to us because they feel safe doing so — but that sense of safety is lost when a survivor can only communicate using a flimsy 5 x 2.5 inch piece of cardboard and a rubber stamp.

The Baxter County jail ban also covers printed correspondence to just postcards. Needless to say, a postcard is ill-suited for sharing sensitive information. Prisoner rape survivors reach out to us because they feel safe doing so — but that sense of safety is lost when a survivor can only communicate using a flimsy 5 x 2.5 inch piece of cardboard and a rubber stamp.

JDI’s main office, in Los Angeles, is pretty ordinary. It has what you would expect to see in a busy workplace; there are desks, photocopiers, and a constantly running coffee machine.

But our office also holds something that exists nowhere else in the world. In a dozen or so locked file cabinets, stacked against the walls of an unoccupied room, are decades’ worth of letters written to JDI by incarcerated sexual abuse survivors.

Together, these letters — more than 30,000 total — make up the world’s only archive of one of the worst human rights crises of our time.

The letters offer a devastating glimpse into the lives of prisoners — of their isolation, their trauma, and their daily struggle to get by. But at the same time, these letters are brimming with hope. The pages document how people living in desperate conditions are able to persevere, and heal.

Right now, JDI is fighting back against an Arkansas jail that has banned inmate letters (see page 4). This policy is completely unnecessary, and dangerous. Indeed, we have more than 30,000 examples showing why letter-writing from prison is so important.

I believe that one day we’ll stop adding letters to our archive. But when that happens, it won’t be because of short-sighted correctional policies. It will be because we have stopped prisoner rape, once and for all.

Lovisa Stanov Notice Director

It’s Time to Release Migrant Children from Custody

Our Immigration Detention System is Broken — and Children are Suffering as a Result

In migrant facilities along the southern border, children are living a nightmare. They are being held in cages, with no access to showers, toothpaste, or clean clothes. Food is often so scarce that kids go to bed hungry.

These conditions, while horrific in their own right, hint at an even deeper human rights crisis. In a recent op-ed for the Houston Chronicle, JDI Executive Director Lovisa Stanov spotlighted the rampant sexual abuse and harassment inside Customs and Border Protection (CBP) facilities. There have been scores of reports of sexual assault against children in CBP custody — and those are just the cases that we know about. Considering that kids typically don’t report abuse in any situation — let alone when they’re locked up, and the adults in charge don’t care enough to give them adequate food or soap — the true scale of the problem is unfathomable.

The failure to keep migrant children safe should not come as a surprise. Sexual abuse thrives in detention facilities that are badly run — and the agencies that hold migrant children are a case study in poor leadership. Top immigration officials have done little to rein in toxic staff culture. Sexism, homophobia, and anti-migrant views are rampant among the rank and file. Speaking out against a fellow agent is taboo, under the “green code,” loyalty to the uniform is prized above all else, including human rights.

The Children’s Defense Fund, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the American Civil Liberties Union have all spotlighted sexual abuse in CBP facilities, with the Southern Poverty Law Center reporting that: “The scale of the problem is unfathomable. Sexual abuse thrives in detention facilities that are badly run — and the agencies that hold migrant children are a case study in poor leadership. Top immigration officials have done little to rein in toxic staff culture. Sexism, homophobia, and anti-migrant views are rampant among the rank and file. Speaking out against a fellow agent is taboo, under the ‘green code,’ loyalty to the uniform is prized above all else, including human rights.”

See Release Migrant Children, continued on page 2
We’re Fighting for Stronger Prison Oversight. And It’s Working.

JDI led the effort to remove auditors who gave passing marks to dangerous facilities — including the MDC in Brooklyn, New York. It’s Working.

We’re Fighting for Stronger Prison Oversight. And It’s Working.

Release Migrant Children

Shamefully, the response of CBP’s top brass has been to pass the buck. Every new scandal that comes to light — the agent who leveraged his position of power to target the mother of a boy in his care; the facility where staff openly mocked a gay detainee; the secret CBP Facebook group where rape jokes were being shared regularly — is dismissed as the work of “a few bad apples.”

This defense is the stock and trade of weak connections officials. Good leaders recognize that if it is their duty to crack down on unprofessional conduct — that a “bad apple” is not just a workplace nuisance, but an indicator of a larger problem that must be addressed.

CBP is not the only federal agency that is falling short in its mission to ensure the safety and dignity of children. In February, it was revealed that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which houses unaccompanied migrant children after their release from CBP custody, had received thousands of reports of sexual abuse.

Like their counterparts at CBP, the top officials at HHS have been quick to point fingers elsewhere. One HHS official, during questioning before Congress, tried to downplay the problem by noting that the abuse in HHS shelters was committed either by other children or by contract workers — as if that fact somehow absolved his agency, or diminished the trauma of the children who were victimized.

It is possible to end the sexual abuse of migrant children in detention, and it is the government’s job to do so. But agency leaders have proven again and again that they are not up to task.

When the government takes away someone’s freedom, it takes on an absolute responsibility to keep that person safe. If it cannot do so, then it must stop detaining them.

Isak Takes Off the Mask

In the groundbreaking documentary Taking Off the Mask, prisoner rape survivor and human rights advocate Isak Sass talks about his journey to healing. (Photo still from Taking Off the Mask/JDI-SA and Azania Rizing Productions)

For a long time, Isak Sass did not use his real name when talking about being sexually abused in a South African prison. Isak had good reason to avoid exposure. As in the US, prisoner rape survivors in South Africa are often made to feel like the abuse was their fault. The intensity of the stigma around sexual violence was made clear to Isak when he tried to speak out while locked up. No one lifted a finger to help: “a guard laughed in his face, the prison nurse told him to ‘wash his staining body,’” a priest told him to repent, and the judge presiding over his case told him that rape was a fact of life in prison and that he should get used to it.

But in recent years, Isak has grown more comfortable talking about the assaults. He found that opening up to people he trusted, like the team at JDI-South Africa (JDI-SA), helped him process difficult feelings. It also became clear to Isak that by speaking out, he could help shift people’s negative attitudes toward prisoner rape survivors. Eventually, Isak started appearing at JDI-SA advocacy events, sharing his story with reporters, policymakers, and even corrections officials.

And now, Isak is telling his story to the world. This summer, JDI-SA premiered a groundbreaking documentary about Isak called Taking Off the Mask. Co-produced by JDI-SA and Azania Rizing Productions, the documentary traces Isak’s long, and ongoing, journey to healing — and the pivotal role of advocates who are helping him along the path. “I was always blaming myself for what happened to me,” Isak says in the film. “JDI helped me come to the conclusion that it wasn’t me, it wasn’t my fault.”

Taking Off the Mask was screened in Johannesburg on July 18 — Nelson Mandela Day in South Africa — before a standing-room-only crowd. For most of the people there, the film was their first time seeing a person talk about being raped in prison. “Isak’s vulnerability, and his willingness to share such a traumatic experience, is remarkable,” said one attendee. “I feel so grateful for his bravery.”

The film’s reach will extend far beyond that packed theater. JDI-SA will show Taking Off the Mask at workshops aimed at teaching corrections officials how to deal compassionately with survivors. And the Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services — South Africa’s prison watchdog — plans to share it with its staff.

The widespread embrace of the film is exactly what Isak hoped for. While he can’t undo the trauma he endured, his goal is to make the public understand that prisoner rape is a devastating crime, and that it is up to all of us to stop it.

Meet our Newest Survivor Council Members!

Prisoner rape survivors have always been at the forefront of JDI’s work. They serve as media spokespersons, as policy analysts, and as our expert trainers on how to run safe prisons and jails.

Russell Dan Smith understands JDI’s commitment to empowering survivors better than anyone. Indeed, it was Dan, as he is known to his friends, who started People Organized to Stop the Rape of Imprisoned Persons — the organization that would become Just Detention International — when he was released from prison in 1980.

Today, nearly four decades later, Dan continues to play a leadership role at JDI, as one of the newest members of our Survivor Council.

For the past four years, the Council is the world’s only network of prisoner rape survivors dedicated to ending this violence. It is also incredibly effective. Members of the Council have been instrumental in all of JDI’s successes, from the development of the organization’s lifelong inmate wellness programs in California to securing groundbreaking legislative wins on Capitol Hill.

Dan is part of a slate of powerful survivor advocates who are still incarcerated on our Council. Among the other new members are Zahara Greene, Nathan Jones, Rodney Roswell, and Stephanie Walker; each has excelled at conveying to public audiences why we, as a society, must commit to defending prisoners’ safety and dignity.

Dwight Hines and Jossie Ramos — both of whom are still incarcerated on our Council — have also joined the Council, helping to ensure that those who are still behind bars are also involved in our work.

To learn more about JDI’s Survivor Council members, visit www.justdetention.org/designation/survivor-council.
**Release Migrant Children**

Shamefully, the response of CBP’s top brass has been to pass the buck. Every new scandal that comes to light — the agent who leveraged his position of power to target the mother of a boy in his care; the facility where staff openly mocked a gay detainee; the secret CBP Facebook group where rape jokes were being shared regularly — is dismissed as the work of “a few bad apples.”

This defense is the stock and trade of weak corrections officials. Good leaders recognize that it is their duty to crack down on unprofessional conduct — that a “bad apple” is not just a workplace nuisance, but an indicator of a larger problem that must be addressed.

CBP is not the only federal agency that is falling short in its mission to ensure the safety and dignity of children. In February, it was revealed that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which houses unaccompanied migrant children after their release from CBP custody, had received thousands of reports of sexual abuse.

Like their counterparts at CBP, the top officials at HHS have been quick to point fingers elsewhere. One HHS official, during questioning before Congress, tried to downplay the problem by noting that the abuse in HHS shelters was committed either by other children or by contract workers — as if that fact somehow absolved his agency, or diminished the trauma of the children who were victimized.

It is possible to end the sexual abuse of migrant children in detention, and it is the government’s job to do so. But agency leaders have proven again and again that they are not up to task.

When the government takes away someone’s freedom, it takes on an absolute duty to keep that person safe. If it cannot do so, then it must stop detaining them.

**Isak Takes Off the Mask**

In the groundbreaking documentary Taking Off the Mask, prisoner rape survivor and human rights advocate Isak Sass talks about his journey to healing. (Photo still from Taking Off the Mask/JDI-SA and Azania Rizing Productions)

**F**

or a long time, Isak Sass did not use his real name when talking about being sexually abused in a South African prison. Isak had good reason to avoid exposure. As in the US, prisoner rape survivors in South Africa are often made to feel like the abuse was their fault. The intensity of the stigma around sexual violence was made clear to Isak when he tried to speak out while locked up. No one lifted a finger to help: a guard laughed in his face, the prison nurse told him to “wash his stinking body,” a priest told him to repent, and the judge presiding over his case told him that rape was a fact of life in prison and that he should get used to it.

But in recent years, Isak has grown more comfortable talking about the assaults. He found that opening up to people he trusted, like the team at JDI-South Africa (JDI-SA), helped him process difficult feelings. It also became clear to Isak that by speaking out, he could help shift people’s negative attitudes toward prisoner rape survivors. Eventually, Isak started appearing at JDI-SA advocacy events, sharing his story with reporters, policymakers, and even corrections officials.

And now, Isak is telling his story to the world. This summer, JDI-SA premiered a ground-breaking documentary about Isak called Taking Off the Mask. Co-produced by JDI-SA and Azania Rizing Productions, the documentary traces Isak’s long, and ongoing, journey to healing — and the pivotal role of advocates who are helping him along the path. “I was always blaming myself for what happened to me,” Isak says in the film. “JDI helped me come to the conclusion that it wasn’t me, it wasn’t my fault.” Taking Off the Mask was screened in Johannesburg on July 18 — Nelson Mandela Day in South Africa — before a standing-room-only crowd. For most of the people there, the film was their first time seeing a prisoner talk about being raped in prison. “Isak’s vulnerability, and his willingness to share such a traumatic experience, is remarkable,” said one attendee. “I feel so grateful for his bravery.”

The film’s reach will extend far beyond that packed theater. JDI-SA will show Taking Off the Mask at workshops aimed at teaching corrections officials how to deal compassionately with survivors. And the Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services — South Africa’s prison watchdog — plans to share it with its staff.

The widespread embrace of the film is exactly what Isak hoped for. While he can’t undo the trauma he endured, his goal is to make the public understand that prisoner rape is a devastating crime; and that it is up to all of us to stop it.
When You’re Locked Up, a Letter Is a Lifeline

I f you were to ask a sexual abuse sur-
vivor about their healing process, chances are they’d talk about the people in their emotional support network — parents, spouses, best friends, counselors. Survivors of prisoner rape depend on the same networks for support. But instead of getting help in person, the primary way for many inmates to get help is by writing letters. Survivor Council member Joe Booth credits letters with saving his life. As he put it, “JDI held my hand through the mail. Without them, I’m not sure I would have made it.”

Letters may seem desperately old-fashioned to those of us on the outside — but for prisoners, they are a lifeline. They are safer and more reliable than other options for sharing deeply personal information. Visits from family and friends are often held in noisy public areas of the prison, monitored by staff, and limited to one hour — hardly an ideal setting to talk about trauma. Phone calls (other than with an attorney) are monitored or recorded, and the cost excessive; email access is becoming more common, but emails, like phone calls, are never private unless exchanged with spouses, best friends, counselors.

In the brief, JDI and our partners take aim at the jail’s policy of limiting inmate correspondence to just postcards. Needless to say, a postcard is ill-suited for sharing sensitive information. Prisoner rape survivors reach out to us because they feel safe doing so — but that sense of safety is lost when a survivor can only communicate using a flimsy 5 1/2 x 8 1/2 piece of cardboard and no envelope. The Baxter County jail ban also covers printed materials that are vital to survivors’ wellbeing. If an inmate at the jail were to contact JDI, we would be prohibited from sending them materials that are vital to survivors’ wellbeing.

Survivor Council member Joe Booth corresponded extensively with JDI while he was in prison. “JDI held my hand through the mail. Without them, I’m not sure I would have made it.”

Survives Council member Joe Booth corresponded extensively with JDI while he was in prison. “JDI held my hand through the mail. Without them, I’m not sure I would have made it.”

It’s Time to Release Migrant Children from Custody

Our Immigration Detention System is Broken — and Children are Suffering as a Result

I n many ways, JDI’s main office, in Los Angeles, is pretty ordinary. It has what you would expect to see in a busy workplace: there are desks, photocopy machines, and a constantly running coffee machine. But our office also holds something that exists nowhere else in the world. In a dozen or so locked file cabinets, stacked against the walls of an unoccupied room, are decades’ worth of letters written to JDI by incarcerated sexual abuse survivors. Together, these letters — more than 30,000 total — make up the world’s only archive of one of the worst human rights crises of our time.

The letters offer a devastating glimpse into the lives of prisoners — of their isolation, their trauma, and their daily struggle to get by. But at the same time, these letters are brimming with hope. The pages document how people living in desperate conditions are able to persevere, and heal.

Right now, JDI is fighting back against an Arkansas jail that has banned inmate letters (see page 4). This policy is completely unnecessary, and dangerous; indeed, we have more than 30,000 examples showing why letter-writing from prison must be protected.

I believe that one day we’ll stop adding cases that we know about. Considering that kids typically don’t report abuse in any setting — let alone when they’re locked up, and the adults in charge don’t care enough to give them adequate food or soap — the true scale of the problem is unfathomable.

The failure to keep migrant children safe should not come as a surprise. Sexual abuse thrives in detention facilities that are badly run — and the agencies that hold migrant children may well be aware of this problem, yet seem powerless to correct it.

Top immigration officials have done little to rein in toxic staff culture. Sexism, homophobia, and anti-migrant views are rampant among the rank and file. Speaking out against a fellow agent is taboo, under the “green code,” loyalty to the uniform is prized over all else, including human rights.

See Release Migrant Children, continued on page 2

CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION IS HOLDING SCORES OF MIGRANT CHILDREN IN NIGHTMARE FACILITIES — INCLUDING THE ONE PICTURED ABOVE, IN McLENNAN, TEXAS. IF THE AGENCY CANNOT PROTECT THE CHILDREN IN ITS CUSTODY, THEN IT MUST RELEASE THEM. (PHOTO BY JOHN Moore/GuUImy Images)