

ACTION UPDATE

MARCH 2021

OVER THE PAST YEAR, I've been asked many times whether there's a connection between Covid-19's devastating spread behind bars and prisoner rape. People are often surprised to learn that sexual abuse thrives in prisons and jails for many of the same reasons that Covid-19 does. The primary cause of both crises is government indifference to the safety and dignity of people who are locked up.



Back in December, when Jared Polis, the Governor of Colorado, in comments about the vaccine, stated that, "There's no way it's going to prisoners before it goes to people who haven't committed any crimes," we at JDI were outraged — but not surprised. We've heard similar sentiments before when it comes to keeping prisoners safe. Shamefully, in times of crisis, incarcerated people have always come last.

Governor Polis ought to take a lesson from the South African government. Last month, the country announced a plan to prioritize the vaccination of incarcerated people against Covid-19. The plan recognizes that prisoners are no less deserving of a shot than anyone else — and that protecting them from the disease makes sense for the country as a whole.

At the time of this writing, there's still plenty of uncertainty about when prisoners will get their vaccines. But we know that we'll keep fighting for prisoners' right to be safe — and we're grateful that we can always count on your support.

Linda McFarlane

Linda McFarlane
Executive Director

Our Commitment to Survivors

During the pandemic, we are continuing to help survivors at a time of need

SINCE 2016, JDI has been a fixture at the California Institution for Women (CIW), a state prison just outside Los Angeles. JDI's Mental Health Program Director, Vanessa Sapien, along with a team of other JDI staff and interns, has provided support to hundreds of people at CIW. We offer individual and group counseling to survivors of sexual abuse, provide support and training to sexual abuse prevention peer educators, and run on-site wellness programs — a series of workshops that help survivors heal from trauma.

All of JDI's work inside CIW is guided by the people living there, and Vanessa meets regularly with the prisoner-led Council on Wellness, which ensures the programs we

offer are based on their needs and interests. Just about everyone at CIW knows Vanessa's name, and when she's on the grounds both the staff and the people in custody make it a point to stop and say hello.

Trauma-informed support can be transformative — sparking a dramatic shift inside prison and changing the lives of the people who live inside its walls. "Counseling was essential to my healing," said Johanna Hudnall, a JDI Survivor Council member who met with Vanessa prior to her release in 2019. "Vanessa was like part of the family here at CIW."

Then last year, the pandemic hit. All in-person programs were abruptly cancelled. "We knew we had to find a way to keep supporting the

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During the pandemic, JDI has pivoted to virtual programs for incarcerated people. As soon as prison doors re-open and it's safe — for our staff and the survivors we work with — we will be back running in-person programs, like the art workshop above at CIW, from 2017.

A Safe Place to Heal, and Grow

AS ANY SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVOR KNOWS, talking about the experience can be scary. When people come forward about such abuse, they are often blamed or made to feel as if they deserved it.

In December, Just Detention International-South Africa's (JDI-SA) Prince Nare and Unathi Mahlati traveled to the rural town of Thohoyandou to spend time with a group of women who understand all too well how hard it is to share painful experiences. Each of the women had been held in police custody or served time in prison. They are also survivors of trauma, either in custody or in the community — or both. The purpose of the visit was to give women a safe space to talk about what they had been through, free from any judgment and far from the people who caused them harm.

The JDI-SA staff had met with the women a few weeks earlier, via a video conference, to talk about the horrific conditions in detention facilities, including the lack of medical and mental health care. This second meet-up was different, not only because it was held in person, but because the JDI-SA team came equipped with a set of powerful tools: colored pencils, markers, and a thick stack of construction paper. Using the same model we use in U.S. prisons, Prince and Unathi ran an art workshop for the women, inviting them to use creative expression to reflect their process of healing.

Each woman's artwork tells a powerful story of perseverance and hope. Thami,* a survivor of rape by a police officer, created a colorful, flowering tree, which represents her love for



Thami's drawing, "The Bright Tree of Life"

her children. Rori,* a rape survivor who struggles to breathe when she thinks of her assault, drew three elephants in the wild. The picture, named "Elephant's family," transports Rori to the countryside, where the air is fresh and she can take deep, easy breaths.

The art workshops are an important step along the women's healing journey. JDI-SA will continue to provide them with support, including through referrals to local counselors. "These are women who have been failed again and again by the people who were supposed to help them," explained Unathi. "The purpose of the art workshops isn't to give survivors the strength to pull through difficult times. Rather, the purpose is to help them find the strength that they already have."

**The women's names have been changed to protect their privacy*



A group exhibition of the drawings made during the Thohoyandou art workshop

Our Commitment to Survivors

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people at CIW," explained Vanessa. "We can't allow incarcerated people to be cut off from the help they need and deserve."

Over the past year, as prisons nationwide shut down vital programming left and right, we adapted our in-person services so they could be provided remotely. In a monthly written update to the people at CIW, we offer guidance on ways to cope with difficult feelings; Vanessa has also been providing individual support by letter. In addition, JDI is creating virtual programming to reach people in custody. We developed pre-recorded art workshops for people at the Central California Women's Facility, which will soon be launched at CIW. During the workshops, JDI staff guide people in custody in creating art to express and release painful feelings, an approach we pioneered based on a model developed by nonprofit arts organization A Window Between Worlds.

Our work during the pandemic extends well beyond California. In New York state prisons, we are running virtual workshops that are live, allowing direct interaction with JDI staff. The art that the participants have made depicts their healing journey — and shows the importance of a connection to the outside world, especially during this time of intense isolation. At the same time, our groundbreaking crisis hotline has remained open, serving people incarcerated in Michigan and Vermont. And we continue to respond to letters from survivors nationwide.

The hotline, letters to survivors, and virtual programming are making a profound difference. But remote sessions can never fully replace the in-person interaction that JDI staff provide. As soon as their doors re-open and it's safe — for our staff and the survivors we work with — we will be back inside prisons and jails. Until then, we will keep finding ways to bring services to people locked up in California, and in detention facilities nationwide.

Sending *Words of Hope* Behind Bars

WHEN WE ASKED people who care about incarcerated sexual abuse survivors to send them holiday messages this year, the stakes felt a bit higher than usual. Prison life has always been isolating, but during the pandemic, survivors have been cut off from their families and friends more than ever before.

Not surprisingly, you came through in a huge way. Over the holidays, many of you gave survivors a reason to smile — more than 20,000 reasons, in fact. That's the total number of holiday greetings that JDI delivered to people locked up nationwide. Your outpouring of compassion gave hope and comfort to survivors, like Vernon.

For Vernon, like so many people on the inside, 2020 was a tough year. But your holiday messages gave him a powerful emotional lift. "Thank you for always remembering me during my worst times," he told us in a letter.

Vernon was far from alone in expressing his appreciation for your heartfelt *Words of Hope* messages. Our office has been flooded with letters since the New Year. Another survivor

wrote to say, "You cannot imagine how it feels to be so alone in the system, and then to have someone remind me that we are real people, and someone cares!"



JDI supporters sent heartfelt holiday greetings to incarcerated survivors

JDI Remembers Joe Booth

OUR MOVEMENT to end prisoner rape lost one of its most powerful advocates on February 22, 2021, when Michael Joseph Booth passed away. Joe, as he was known to friends, was one of the movement's most recognizable faces — a fearless spokesperson who shared his story of being raped in prison to raise awareness of this violence and champion the humanity of survivors.

"It's amazing to know that because I shared my story, people in our government are more likely to listen the next time a survivor reaches out to them," Joe said after speaking at an advocacy meeting at the White House in 2016.

"Joe Booth was a true hero in the fight for safety and dignity for incarcerated people," said Linda McFarlane, JDI's Executive Director. "He inspired countless advocates to provide incarcerated survivors with the help they deserve. Joe was part of the JDI family, and we will miss him."



Joe Booth outside JDI's Los Angeles office in 2012

Survivor Council Lends Its Expertise

REEENTERING SOCIETY after serving time in prison is fraught with challenges. Housing and steady employment can be nearly impossible to come by; worse still, strict parole requirements mean that many people live on a knife's edge, aware that even the smallest mistake can land them back in prison. These obstacles can be even greater for sexual abuse survivors, who must figure out ways to cope with the effects of trauma on top of meeting basic needs.

Rodney Roussell, a JDI Survivor Council member who was released from prison in 2017, was fortunate in having crucial support from his family and in being able to get counseling. But he still had difficulty finding a sense of stability. "There's so much I wanted to do but couldn't," he explained. "I found myself back in a familiar place of helplessness."

With survivors like Rodney in mind, JDI is exploring how to help recently released people get back on their feet. Formerly incarcerated survivors themselves are playing a leadership role in this work. In February, Rodney was part of a virtual JDI Survivor Council meeting to discuss the challenges to reentry that survivors often face. Joining Rodney were Johanna Hudnall, Troy Isaac, Stephanie Walker, and Joe Booth, before he passed away later in the month (see *JDI Remembers Joe Booth*, on this page). Working with JDI, the group will develop guidance to share with other survivors who have just been released.

"Each of our struggles with reentry was different, and we want our advice to reflect that no one's journey is the same," said Johanna after the meeting with her peers on the Council. "The Survivor Council has so much expertise to share, and I'm excited that we're working together on a project that will change lives."

Rodney agreed. "Many people are set up to fail when they get out. We hope our work will help put survivors in a position where they can heal — and thrive."

Our Victory in the Fight to Keep Kids Safe

The government finally released vital data on sexual abuse in youth detention — a huge step forward in the fight to end this violence

WE DID IT! Thanks to many of you, the Department of Justice finally published its latest research on the sexual abuse of kids in youth detention facilities — research it had been withholding for more than a year.

Last August, we asked you to join us in demanding the Department of Justice share what it knows about sexual violence in youth detention facilities. We knew that getting this data would be an uphill battle. After all, the Department had twice released only some of its findings, while holding back crucial information about kids who are most at risk for abuse and the staff who perpetrate it.

But we couldn't let the government continue to suppress its own studies. Hundreds of you joined us by writing the Justice Department, calling for transparency. Dozens of incarcerated survivors — people who know better than anyone that secrecy allows sexual violence to flourish — submitted their own letters. As Barry, one of the survivors who took action, explained to us, "I hope and pray it helps. I won't stop fighting until all detention facilities are safe." The government took notice and, in December, disclosed its full findings.

To be sure, the newly released data paints a grim picture of our system of juvenile deten-

tion. Staff are preying upon children in custody, grooming them for abuse by behaving in blatantly inappropriate ways that ought to be obvious to their colleagues, not to mention leadership. Abusive staff target kids in their care who are most likely to be marginalized and overlooked — kids who are LGBT, kids who have disabilities, and kids who have endured prior sexual abuse. Clearly, we have our work cut out for us.

But there's also reason to feel optimistic. We now have much more information about who is committing abuse, and how. It's more apparent than ever that the problem lies with shoddy leadership and a toxic staff culture that places little value on the rights of children. Thanks to this government research, we can focus our work where it will stimulate the changes that are badly needed in youth detention facilities.

Barry was elated to hear that the government had at last allowed its findings to see the light of day. "I'm so glad I could help," he wrote to us. "I went through a lot, and I'm still going through a lot, but I'm thankful that I could help others."

It won't be easy to fix our broken youth detention system. But we can, and we must, in order to keep all children safe.



By securing the release of BJS data, our movement to end prisoner rape is helping to shine a light on the conditions inside the juvenile justice system. (Photo Credit: Richard Ross)

Join JDI's Office Hours

With services behind bars severely limited due to the pandemic, we are working closely with our partners in rape crisis centers so they can continue to advocate for incarcerated survivors. At our virtual "Office Hours," our staff gives information and support to advocates, and some corrections officials, to help them meet the challenges of delivering services during ongoing facility lockdowns.

"It's exciting to see the energy and dedication that rape crisis counselors put toward helping survivors who are incarcerated," said Cynthia Totten, a JDI Deputy Executive Director. "We know that counselors face obstacles to working behind bars that won't vanish once the pandemic is over. But together, we are learning how to overcome those obstacles and get services to survivors who need them."

Advocates and corrections officials interested in joining JDI's virtual Office Hours can find out more information at www.justdetention.org/officehours.

JUST DETENTION INTERNATIONAL

3325 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 340
Los Angeles, CA 90010
Tel: (213) 384-1400

East Coast Office
1900 L Street NW, Suite 601
Washington, DC 20036
Tel: (202) 506-3333

JDI-South Africa
Norwood Place, 2nd Floor
66 Grant Avenue
Norwood, Johannesburg 2192
South Africa
Tel: +27 (11) 483 0989

info@justdetention.org
www.justdetention.org



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