

About Chicago Books to Women in Prison

Who We Are

Chicago Books to Women in Prison is a volunteer collective working to distribute books free of charge to women in prison nationwide. We are dedicated to offering women behind bars the opportunity for self-empowerment, education, and entertainment that reading provides.

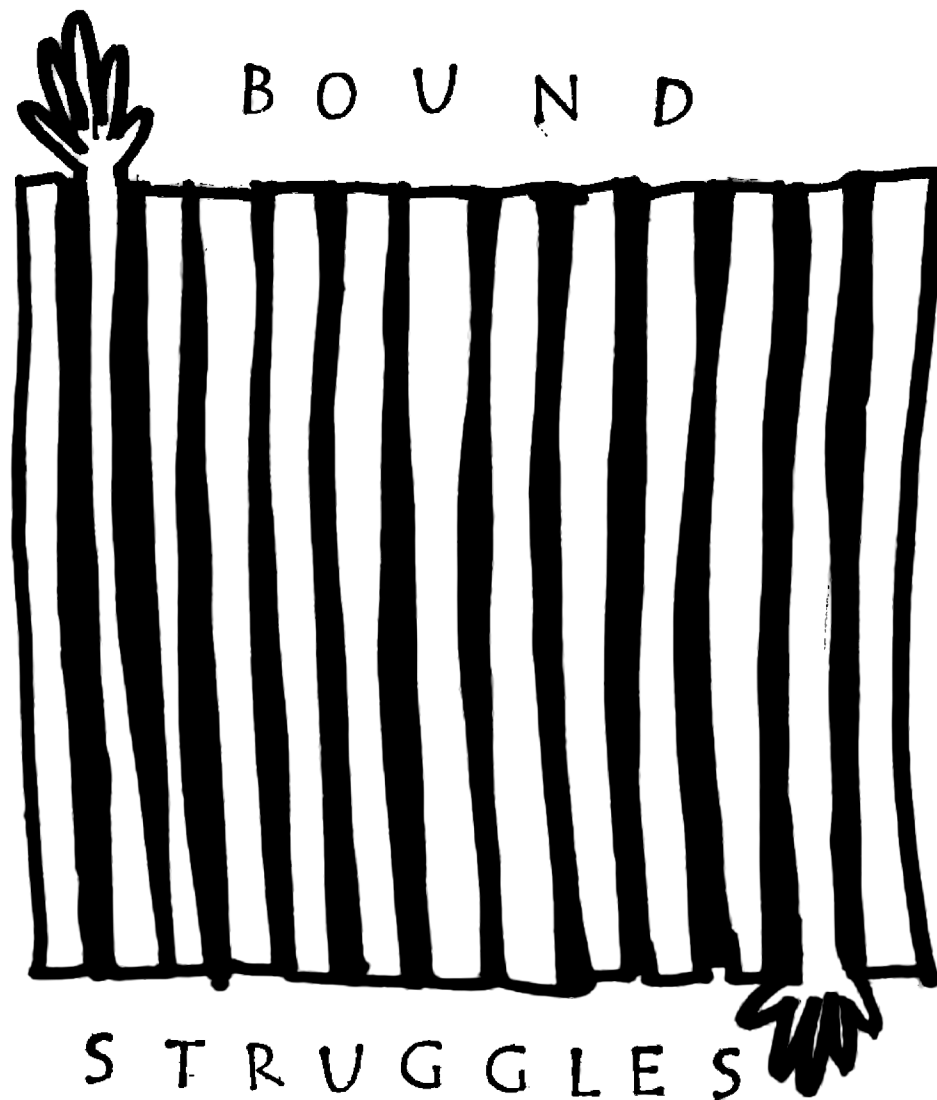
What We Do

Incarcerated women send  their requests for books directly. We attempt to furnish the requested materials from our stock of donated books. We send three books in each package. Reading through the letters we receive, one begins to get a sense of the overwhelming need for educational and supportive projects like this one.

You Can Help

- **Volunteer:** Help us open letters, match up requests, and package books. We meet every 1st & 3rd Sunday of the month at 7013 N. Glenwood from 2-5pm. Everyone is welcome.
- **Donate Books:** We can only accept paperback books. We particularly need books pertaining to parenting, recovery from addiction, self-help, lesbian/queer fiction and non-fiction, dictionaries, Spanish language materials, and fiction by people of color.
- **Contribute:** \$10 will send 3-4 packages of books to women in prison. Make checks payable to BeyondMedia Education. Please write Books to Women in Prison on the memo line. Thanks!

BOOKS TO WOMEN IN PRISON
c/o BeyondMedia Education
7013 N. Glenwood Ave.
Chicago, IL 60626
www.chicagobwp.org



voices of women in prison. august 2004.

volume 1. \$2.00 or free to women in prison.

Mail Call

Darkness and loneliness filling my cell
With pain and fear too great to yell
I wait for the mailman to deliver to me

As I wipe away the tears no one can see
I pray sincerely with head raised above,
"Please, God, soon send me a letter of
love."

I long to gaze upon pages so dear,
with riches to bring my loved ones near
words are diamonds on pages of gold
A message from heaven as their story unfolds
"We love you, miss you, pray you'll be
free"

A treasure filled envelope just for me
Please bring memories of joys I once knew
Family, friends and things I would do.
The darkness and pain of my cell will prevail
As my name, again, was not called for mail.

poetry and art by Pat in Florida.

"If you have come to help me,

you are wasting your time.

But if

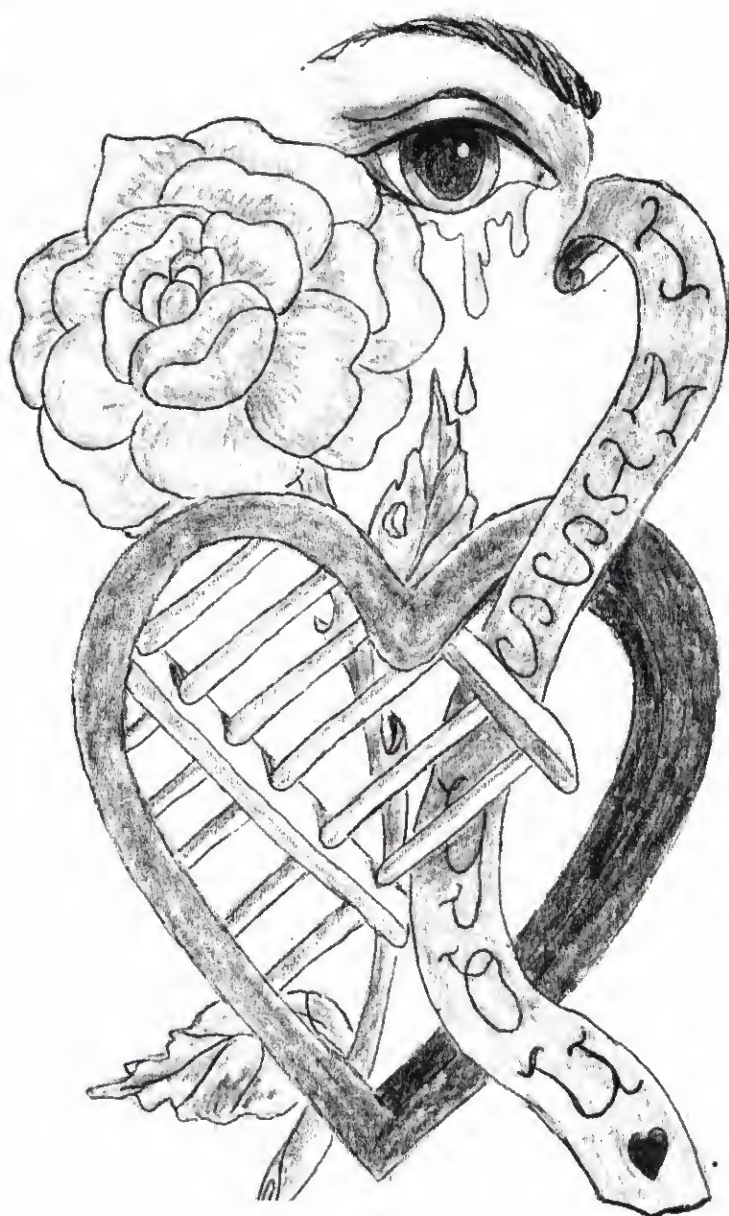
you have come because your

liberation is bound up with mine,

then let us work together."

Lilla Watson
— an aboriginal educator
— and activist —

BOUND STRUGGLES is the newsletter of the Chicago Books to Women in Prison Project. We send books to women incarcerated in 6 states. ~~and~~ Together with the Minneapolis Women's Prison Book Project, volunteers answer requests from women serving time in nearly every state in the country.



this country's got big problems. have you noticed?

this project is a drop in the bucket. but even the most ferocious thunderstorm starts out with a few drops.

"I was delighted to learn of your efforts to help us exercise our minds. I think this is a wonderful act of kindness and I ask for more applications to encourage many others to participate in challenging themselves and broadening their horizons. I take a trip beyond the walls and gates when I open a book. This is quite an awesome experience and it helps me grow at the same time in many areas of my life.

My only suggestion is for read-along listening and teaching tapes. Lots of women here cannot read. If they could privately hear what they're trying to read and comprehend, I believe growth would take place. Illiteracy is embarrassing and a hindrance. It may well be the root of many sociological disturbances and yes, criminal occurrences. Knowledge truly is power." - Michelle



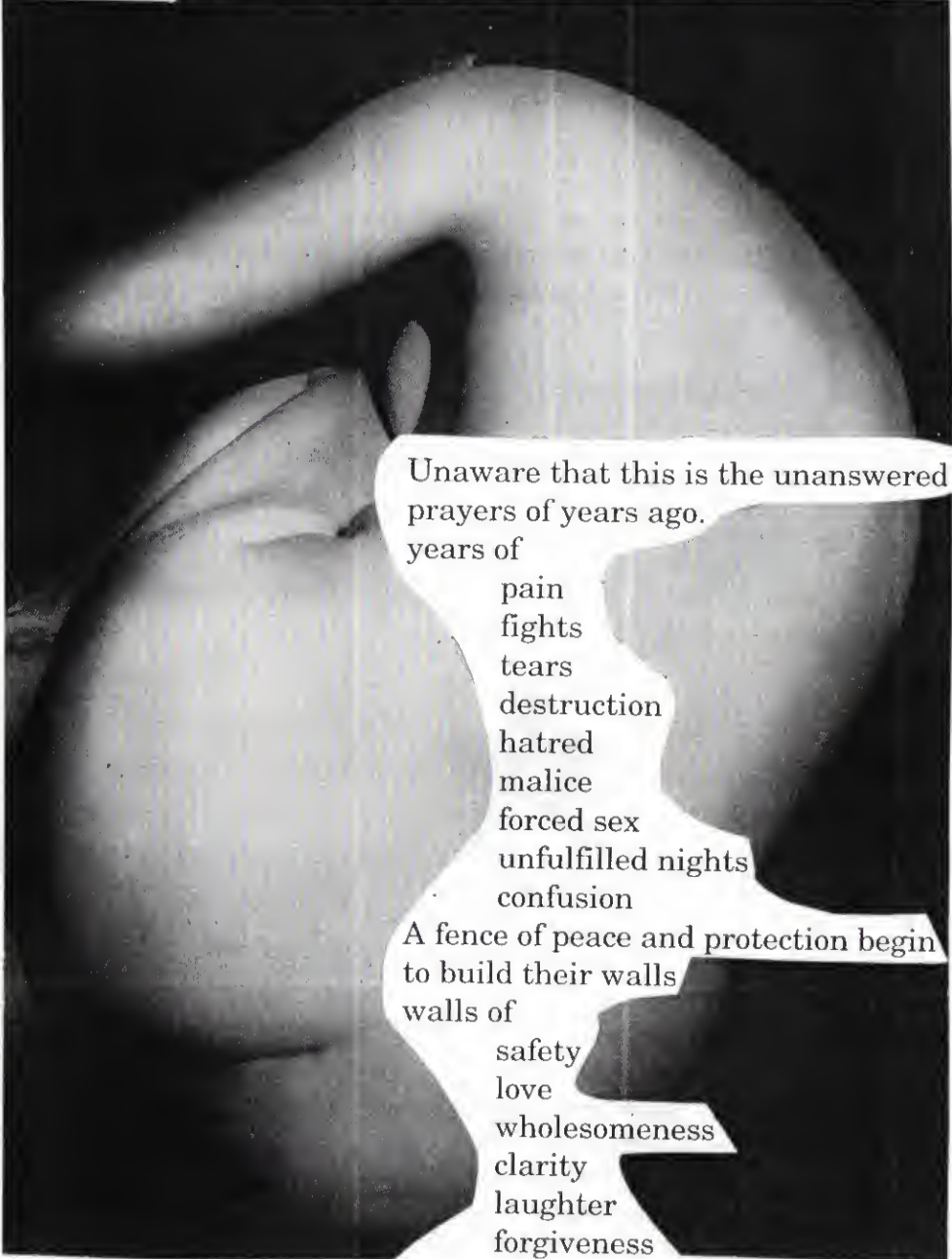
The purpose of the Books to Women in Prison Project is to send books to women in prison. We believe that everyone should have free access to the ideas, information, and enjoyment that reading offers. Women write to us and request books and we do our best to meet their requests using a stock of donated paperback books.

Like Michelle, we firmly believe that education ~~is~~ is a critical element in working towards a more just society. This first issue is dedicated to the topic of education. 70% of state and federal prisoners in the U.S. lack a high school diploma or GED. Education is a lot more than schooling though. It is about living with your eyes open, being open to possibility. This zine is dedicated to raising awareness outside prison walls and providing our sisters inside with the knowledge that their struggles are not forgotten, but in fact intricately linked with our own.

JOURNEY

BY

Roxanne, ILL. DEPT. OF CORR.



Unaware that this is the unanswered
prayers of years ago.
years of

pain
fights
tears
destruction
hatred
malice
forced sex
unfulfilled nights
confusion

A fence of peace and protection begin
to build their walls
walls of

safety
love
wholesomeness
clarity
laughter
forgiveness

But had it not been for this journey
they couldn't know the real
woman who lives inside of me.

"I am the Editor for our institutional newsletter down here, *Making Choices*, and writing short stories and reading novels is what I enjoy doing. I've accumulated 3 college degrees since my incarceration here. I've tutored and I thoroughly enjoy helping others to make constructive use of their time and energy through learning. What better way to do that is there than through reading? This is part of the learning process, a very integral part. I am physically handicapped (I walk with a cane) so my job assignments (which have diminished) are limited, because I am not able to lift heavy objects, stand in one place very long, engage in sports activities or do any type of strenuous manual labor. I'm 56 years old. I've been incarcerated since 1989 and I have 5 more years to complete.

In addition, I only receive \$15 a month for a "house help" assignment and that is light duty. I am very independent and I raised 3 boys as a single mother. I was blessed by coming here basically. I had hit rock bottom with my drinking and now I've come to a point where I *want* and *need* to make a difference to those who are struggling with an addiction, learning problems, or anything which could keep them in a frame of mind where they return to a life of self-destruction and ultimately return to prison as a statistic. Repeatedly. This change can be started by reading, writing and becoming involved in self-help projects this book project."

Maureen

Illinois Dept. of Correction

Vinette Crowley and her husband were indicted for an alleged meth conspiracy. Faced with life in prison, they both took a plea. Vinette received 97 months and her husband was sentenced to 240 months. They were sentenced using the wrong manual which would have made a difference of 19 months in Vinette's case. Now the appeal with respect to the 19-month difference, the Assistant US Attorney has characterized the error as "insignificant." Since when is 19 months of a person's life simply something to throw away?

A poll of the American public reported that a vast majority of Americans believe mandatory minimum sentencing is not fair (72%) and favor mandatory drug treatment and probation for non-violent offenders (74%). It is a shame that those who physically harm, kidnap, rape, intentionally maim, or kill someone will serve substantially less prison time than a first-time non-violent drug conspiracy offender.

Under the current law, since drugs are not even necessary for a drug charge, anyone could be indicted, including you. You could become part of a drug conspiracy by innocently lending your telephone, car, or a helping hand to a neighbor or boyfriend. Giving a ride to a friend could send you to federal prison for the rest of your life.

"No society since Nazi Germany has built so many prisons in so short a period of time."

- Mike Davis, author of *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear*

"I have no family that writes me. Except my 14 yr old grandson. He is a bit of a rebel. Aren't we all at that age? My family is shamed by me. My sons are educated, successful pillars of their communities. One is a nuclear power engineer and the other is a commercial heating and air conditioning foreman.

I am incarcerated for 25 years for killing my abusive, alcoholic husband. He was a drug addict also. My boys didn't really know him. My crime on the Florida DOC website is in black and white. My story is in many shades of grey. There are many women in prison in Florida for crimes stemming from abuse. Florida does not have a Self-Defense Law - abuse laws are very weak. Jeb Bush claims to be hard on crime and criminals but his daughter has been arrested and found guilty twice of drug crimes. The last one involved writing fraudulent prescriptions and obtaining drugs with them. She doesn't go to prison. His wife was detained and arrested for bringing contraband into the US from South America. Again nothing. Tough on crime. Bullshit. In Florida's system I'm not sure where the criminals are. Bush's wife also owns a large chunk of AIRMARK, the contractor that feeds us. Hmmm."

Pat

Florida Dept. of Correction

"I am amazed at the number of mothers, aunts, sisters, wives, sista-friends, girlfriends and women in general that are locked up and not in circulation in mainstream society. Prison is the result for a lot of us of broken dreams, unfulfilled wishes and relationships gone bad. Our coping skills had not

equipped us to deal wisely with failure, disappointment, unrealistic expectations and unrequited love. There are many talented, educated, beautiful women behind the walls. It is my goal to better myself, empower myself and those around me. It is an African proverb that states it takes a village to raise a child...well it

takes positive people to help re-raise those displaced and thrown away."

Grian

Indiana Dept. of Correction

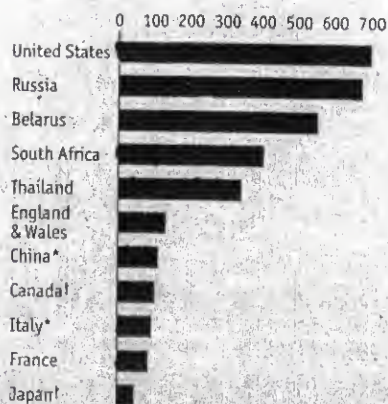


It's hard for a free fish to understand what's happening to a hooked one.

— Carol Phillips

Land of the not-free

Prisoners per 100,000 population, 2002
Selected countries



Source: International Centre for Prison Studies, King's College London

incarcerated mothers and their children

Data from Harris School of Public Policy, University of Chicago, 2003

- Single mothers are the fastest growing segment of the US prison population. In Illinois, women entering state prison tripled between 1990 and 2000.
- 35,000 children had a mother who went to state prison in Illinois during the 1990s.
- Between 1993 and 2000, the proportion of women admitted for drug offenses rose from about 1/5 to more than half of the overall population.
- 1748 women admitted to prison in 2000 from Cook County, 960 (55%) were there on drug or DUI charges. 470 (27%) were convicted of non-violent property crimes. The most common type of property crime was retail theft under \$150.
- 84% of the 1748 women from Cook County are mothers.
- Almost 5000 children in Cook County had a mother admitted to state prison in 2000.
- Incarcerated women are among the poorest people in America. 1 in 5 was homeless in the year before being arrested. 2 in 3 do not have a high school education.

occurred within 1,000 feet of a park, which substantially increased the penalty. The rationale is that parks are playgrounds for children and that children would, thus, be in close proximity to drug-dealing activity. In this case, it didn't matter that the park was not frequented by children, nor that the equipment was dilapidated. It didn't matter that there weren't any drugs in the case, nor that a murder occurred within a half block of the park. This is hardly what could be considered a play area of children.

Take, for instance, the case of Ruth Catter, a first-time non-violent drug offender serving 188 months in federal prison for a conspiracy charge.

During Ruth's first year in prison, her 21 year-old daughter was killed by a drunk driver and her eldest daughter's leg was crushed in the same accident. The perpetrator of the collision served only 8 months in prison.

This is not to suggest that violations of drug crimes should go unpunished. Inherent in promoting a peaceful existence, there must be order and values. A judge should be allowed to sentence a particular defendant by taking into consideration the nature and circumstances of the crime, the criminal history of the defendant, and how the individual and society would best be served. Under our current system, a judge has absolutely no discretion.

Another example of a victim of the system is Connie Popejoy, a mother of three, indicted for a methamphetamine conspiracy. Connie lived on a farm. During a drug raid, anhydrous ammonia was found in her barn. The chemical is used as fertilizer. Unbeknownst to Connie, anhydrous ammonia is also used in the manufacture of methamphetamine. Although she had no knowledge of the illegal use, Connie was held responsible for the chemicals and sentenced to 177 months in prison. This is her first offense, and without the possibility of parole, there is no hope.

Lori Kavitz is serving 292 months in prison as a first-time drug offender. Her case allegedly

"I would like any self-help books that you have. Right now, the prison I'm in does not offer educational programs. When I first got here they did, and then they did away with it.

I think it's a shame the prison system doesn't offer anything to rehabilitate the prisoners. I worry on what I'm going to do when I get out.

We now have a new warden here and things have been changing greatly. The main thing that needs to change is education. The next thing is the canteen. You can now only purchase 10 items. A lot of people solely survive on the canteen.

Also last week it rained real bad here and lightning. Well, they kept us working out in it. My socks were soaked and so were my boots. You cannot work when it is pouring down rain."

Donna

Illinois Dept. of Correction



"I am a 38 year-old African-American mother of 4 children, 1 grandchild. I was given an 84 month sentence (7 years). Really my crime was low self-esteem and drug addiction. My whole incarceration along with many of the mothers I see here is unjust.

When I am released I want to be a voice. I also want to help in any way I can. My heart is burdened by the American Criminal Justice System. Right as I speak I have 2 sons incarcerated, a 20 year-old and a 15 year-old. The 20 year-old is willing to allow me to tutor him through the mail. He even has a friend (his dawg) who wants to be tutored as well since the county

jail where they are offered no school, GED or otherwise. Please send school books, high school level (not hardcover). I am in need of an English dictionary and recently I've taken up knitting."

Cherry

Connecticut Dept. of Correction

"I am a 26 year-old from the state of Michigan and I am concerned about the Mandatory Minimum Sentencing Guidelines. As an inmate in a Federal Prison Camp, I see the guidelines as unjust and unfair.

I have been incarcerated for one year and I am a first-time non-violent offender. I came here as a result of conspiracy to distribute 50 grams of cocaine. I received a sentence of 120 months based on the Mandatory Minimum Sentencing guidelines. I had thought that the minimums were created to capture "kingpins" and not the underdogs.

I speak for other inmates across the country when I say that sentences imposed on first time, non-violent offenders are simply too harsh. The prisons are overcrowded and families are being ripped apart. Millions of tax dollars are being wasted and inmates are wasting away, being warehoused with limited educational opportunities. As the prisons rapidly expand, a growing number of families are being affected."

Marlo

Illinois Dept. of Correction

they saw it, with a sledgehammer, making no allowance for the circumstances of any particular case. Under the sledgehammer approach, it makes no difference whether a defendant actually owned the drugs with which he was caught."

In a court of law, nor does it make a difference whether there are any drugs at all. "Conspiracy" is a catch-all phrase and charge intended to curb the drug problem in America by allowing indictments up and down an alleged drug distribution network, regardless of physical evidence. A person's word is enough to form the basis of a prosecution. The person offering up information about another is usually involved in a criminal case himself and the choice becomes one

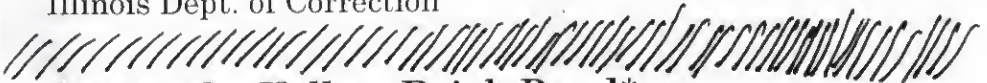
of either telling a story pleasing to the prosecution or becoming the sacrifice.

The conspiracy laws were implemented to target a "King Pin" who is commonly shielded by underlings and never prosecuted. However, this system has failed in that the "King Pins" have the most valuable information to offer the government authorities, and the underlings are left serving time "under the yellow brick road" as federal conspiracy sentences are extremely lengthy with a starting point of ten years without the possibility of parole. US attorneys and law enforcement officers have become obsessed in hunting down drug offenders for their own career advancement, fortune and recognition. The greed of the game has altered the rules by allowing lies to replace the truth and money to replace justice.

I am currently serving 2 years and 4 months as a first-time non-violent drug offender in a meth conspiracy. I am submitting an article written by Frank Rinella. I think you will find it not only enlightening in terms of what is happening here, but also an example of the travesty of justice which is occurring in America concerning God's forgotten people - those buried under the "yellow brick road" in prisons and work camps.

Lori

Illinois Dept. of Correction



Under the Yellow Brick Road*

by Frank Rinella

*originally published in *The Bloomington Alternative*, Aug. 2003

In life, we span the globe in an ever-changing society where the hustle of daily living often contrasts with the Golden Rule: Do unto others as we would have them do unto us. We have become a people divided by ungratefulness, mistrust, and warfare; a people driven by greed and self-gain. Our "justice" system in America has become exactly that - "just us" - referring to a government entity consumed with winning at all costs and having no room for compassion and second chances.

84% of all offenders now imprisoned are first-time or non-violent offenders. Many are serving draconian sentences for drug conspiracy convictions while only having minor culpability. As a sentencing judge most appropriately wrote, "Congress decided to hit the problem of drugs, as

I have been incarcerated since 1986 and the change in the educational opportunities has changed dramatically. When I first arrived at [REDACTED] Correctional Center an inmate could enroll in basic education for those who scored below a 6th grade level on the TABE (test of adult basic education). Those who did not have their high school diploma or GED could take classes to achieve their GED. For higher education, [REDACTED] offered college courses, usually 8 a semester. Later, after a AA or AS degree was achieved one could go even further and get a Bachelors degree. I got my Bachelor's in 1995.

If education wasn't your choice there were vocational programs such as restaurant management, beauty school or industrial maintenance. There were also apprenticeship programs (recognized by unions) in baking, cooking and water treatment plant maintenance.

Now due to budget cut backs and the get tough on crime policy the only programs left are Basic Education, GED, Beauty Shop, and an Associates degree. Spots in these programs are limited. The public repeatedly says they want violent offenders punished as harshly as possible. Yet the violent offender goes home too. As a result of budget cuts, bad decisions on the part of the system and just the length of ones sentence, the violent offender goes out ill prepared to deal with the world they are now thrust into. They may have been incarcerated for 10, 15, or 20 years and the world has dramatically changed while in prison they stagnated.

Janet

Illinois Dept. of Correction



Second Chance?

By Puff

Florida Dept. of Correction

As I listened to President Bush's latest state of the union address I thought I heard "America is the land of second chances and when the gates of prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life.

Bush outlines a surprising new initiative to help prisoners reintegrate back into their communities once released. What he proposed is admirable considering that record budget deficits are forcing reductions in most other non-entitlement domestic programs. Bush's modest 300 million over 4 years is long over due and suggests the seriousness of our nations ever growing ex-prisoner population.

For over 3 decades our nation has incarcerated more than any other nation. More than 14 million Americans have felony convictions: more than 600,000 prisoners will be released from our prisons and jails this year.

As recognized by Bush and demonstrated by the best social science research, if these ex-prisoners can't find work or a home or community support, they are much more likely to commit a crime and return to prison. Certainly a successful re-entry program should benefit public safety as well as prisoners and their families. By expanding job training and placement assistance as well as transitional housing and support counseling services ex-prisoners would reap huge benefits. Much of this is sadly lacking in the Florida system.

I'm a survivor of sheer tragedy
Full of forgiveness in my heart.
My family has suffered tremendously
I am everything a woman was put on earth to be

Unique in my own way
Sometimes making the wrong decisions
Please forgive me.

Knowing deep down inside where I need to be

I am someone who cares
I am a praying soul
Who desires to be set free

I am only me
Reaching out for help, to make a new start
I give thanks to thee (The Lord)
Because it's my fault my life fell apart

Something beautiful can come
from any tragedy
If you desire to change your way
of thinking, living & cleans your spirit

This is who I am
A winner even in the end.

Ironically, most of all of our ex-offenders are citizens and the Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that no one can be stripped of her citizenship because of a criminal offense. Yet, we deny millions of ex-offenders one of the most basic rights of citizenship, the right to vote.

How is the path to a second chance followed that is blocked by so many laws and restrictions. Hasn't the ex-offender paid enough for her crime? Where is the second chance?"



This is a poem from my heart. I wrote it while participating in a DePaul University Creative Writing Class last fall.

Gloria
Illinois Dept. of Correction

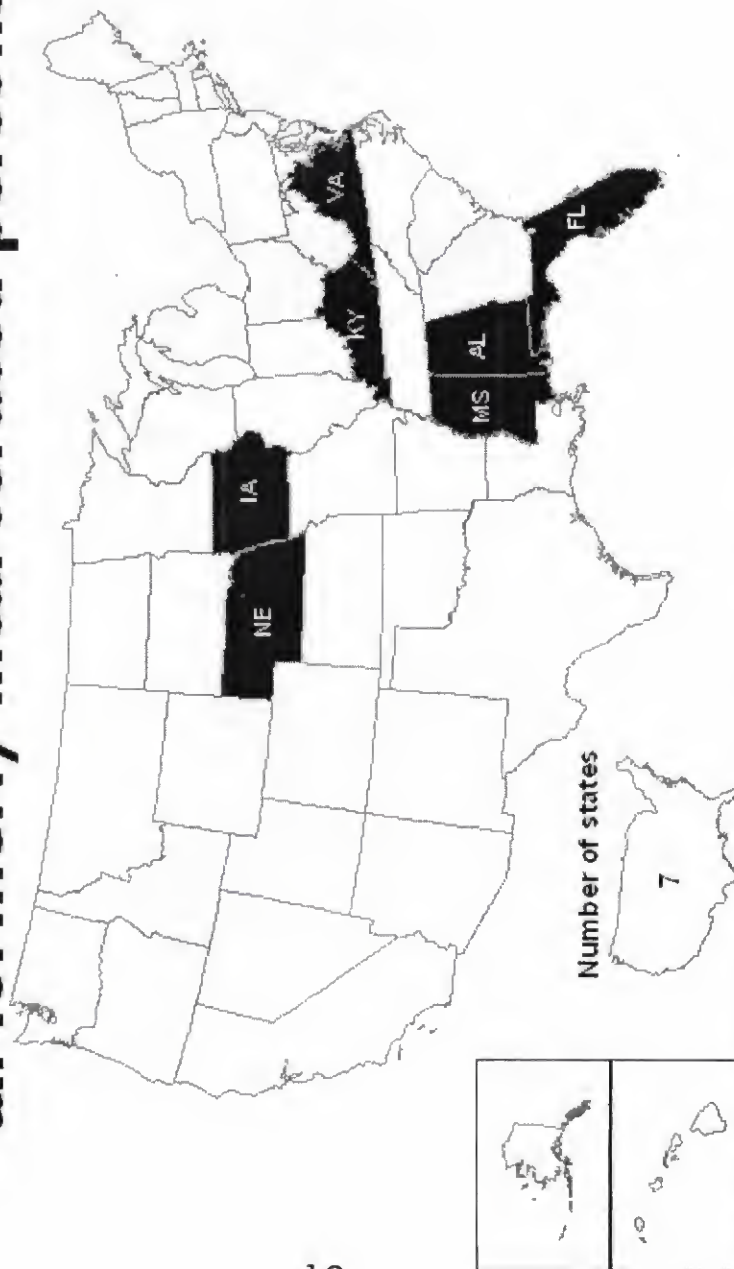
I AM

I am a praying soul
who desires to be set free
from this deep black hole
which I'm sure, I soon will be.

Living, longing, missing my family
I am truly remorseful.
I only ask to be appreciated and loved genuinely
All my life, my hands have always been full.

I am a miracle

States that disenfranchise all formerly incarcerated persons



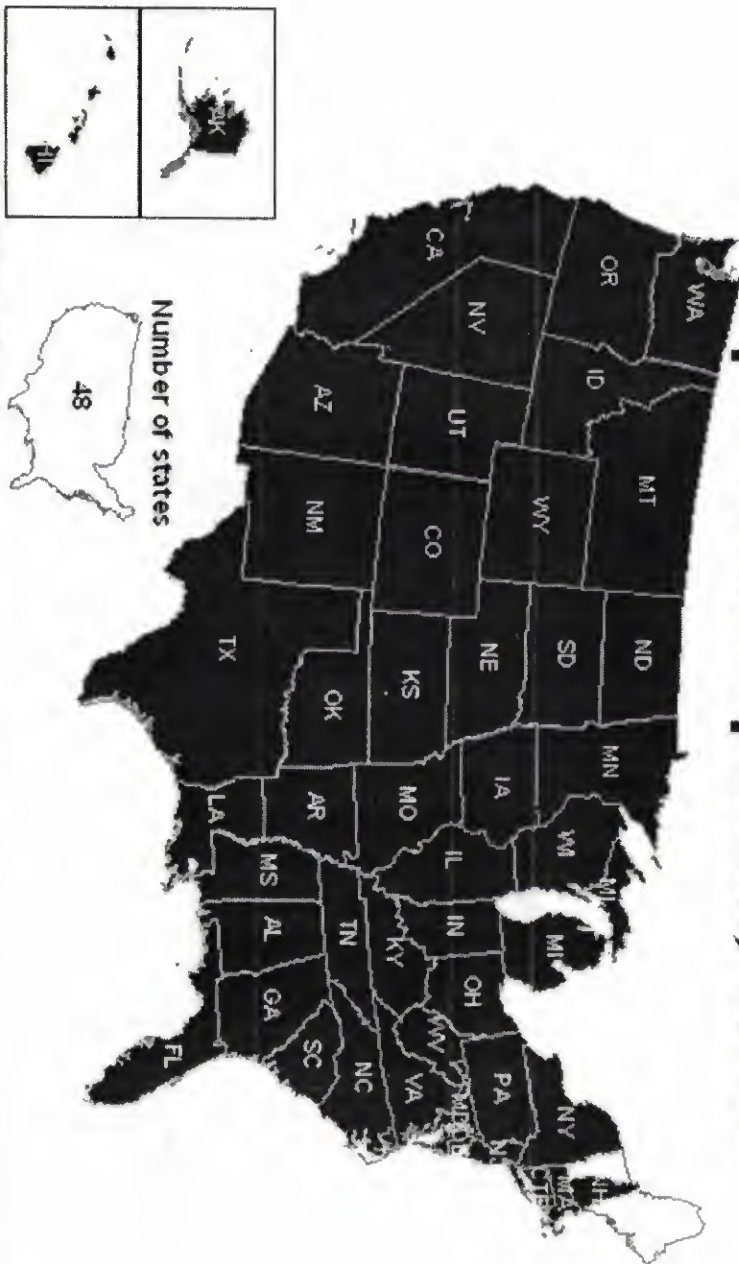
Data source: Sentencing Project,
Felony Disenfranchisement Laws in the United States, January 2004

While this initiative is commendable we must also focus on many other hurdles such as employment and other legal restrictions and prohibitions on a wide-range of civil and political rights that keep ex-offenders from finding their place in society. The war on crime has pushed to the point where a large number of legal restrictions have made successful reintegration much more difficult. These restrictions include prohibitions on occupational licensing, access to public housing and other social programs aimed at the poorest Americans. In addition, political rights abrogated include the right to vote, serve on juries and hold public office. Many states including Florida make a criminal history easily discoverable, branding an ex-offender for life.

Many of the restrictions logical or not seem aimed more at extending punishment than serving any socially useful purpose. For example, in 1988 Congress passes a Higher Education Act that barred ex-felons from being allowed to receive Pell Grants, the largest type of federal student assistance. How can people of our society expect ex-felons to build better lives for themselves if we don't allow them to compete for grants and scholarships like everyone else?

Similarly, many restrictions on the types of jobs that can be held defy logic. What purpose does it serve to prohibit an ex-offender from becoming a barber, contractor, beautician, social worker? Other restrictions relate to participation in public life. While we expect ex-offenders to abide by the law, most states prevent those with felony convictions or who are on probation or parole from voting.

States that disenfranchise persons in prison, 2004



Data source: Sentencing Project,
Felony Disenfranchisement Laws in the United States, January 2004

Prison Policy Initiative