
ENHANCING KNOWLEDGE



LETTERS FROM CURRENTLY AND FORMERLY INCARCERATED SURVIVORS

All people — including those who are incarcerated — have a right to be safe from sexual abuse and get the help they need to heal. No group of survivors has been more neglected or more isolated from life-saving advocacy services than survivors behind bars.

The experience of being locked up is in itself traumatic, but for survivors of sexual abuse, life in custody exacerbates prior suffering. For example, people in custody are subjected to frequent strip and pat searches, that — even when done according to protocol — may feel degrading and invasive. They must cope with a complete lack of privacy and personal autonomy.

Moreover, incarcerated survivors endure the structural violence that is embedded in the fabric of corrections facilities more broadly. It is reflected in institutional policies, procedures, budgets, norms, culture, and accountability systems. Structural violence means the conditions that permit and even facilitate interpersonal violence. For example, corrections facilities in general severely limit incarcerated people's access to routine necessities like toilet paper, sanitary

napkins and tampons, soap, food, medications, and communication with the outside world. Such practices send a message that prisoners do not deserve basic dignity, while also creating a profound sense of scarcity and deprivation that abusive staff and prisoners will seek to exploit. As federal government data has consistently shown, incarcerated people who have experienced prior sexual abuse are among those at greatest risk of being targeted.


Incarcerated survivors of childhood sexual abuse are like every other survivor, but often with less support, fewer resources, and higher levels of re-traumatization. Many have never gotten help. The realities of incarceration can be excruciating for anyone, but maybe especially triggering for survivors of sexual abuse.

Advocates don't always know where to start when serving survivors in detention. It can feel so foreign. The first step always is to listen and center yourself in compassion. The following excerpts are from letters written to Just Detention International (JDI) by currently and formerly incarcerated people about their experiences as adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. These survivors generously allowed us to share their letters with you. Center yourself in compassion now as you take in the words of these survivors.

*I am serving a 30-to-life sentence with little family and almost no support...I never received the right type of counseling or treatment [for years of physical and sexual abuse as a child] and ended up murdering someone when I was 19. I was in prison before I turned 20. My first week in prison, I was raped again by two men. That was years ago, but I never got over it because I never got proper help. It's got my head so messed up still...I'm looking to find ways [to heal] from people who can really help me move past this trauma in my life because it's holding me back in a lot of ways. – **James, Ohio***

I am writing to you because after months of verbal and sexual harassment, I decided to speak up for myself when the offender put his penis into my cell bars and began urinating...The entire incident is on camera, yet the colonel said my charges were unfounded. He said it was at his discretion to look at the camera and he did not think it was needed...I am tired of the abuse. It is affecting me terribly and causing flashbacks and nightmares of the sexual abuse I suffered as a child. I am not a bad person, but I feel so isolated and so very alone.

– Anthony, Louisiana



I suffered all sorts of physical and sexual abuse as a child, as I was processed through various foster and group homes. At the age of thirteen, the juvenile system threw me to the streets to survive on my own. At the age of twenty, I was tried and convicted of armed robbery and other smaller related charges. I was sentenced to a federal prison where I was beaten and survived being raped. I wake up each day now only thinking of ways to end my life. I have nowhere to turn and no one who cares about me enough to want to help me stay alive and get my life on track.

—Socrates, Washington, D.C.

For me, being sexually abused as a child made me an easy target. It was in our file, and the guards can see that. We are easy targets because we learn from a young age to keep our mouths shut. There are repercussions to telling. It is brainwashed into us. It was almost the norm because of how I grew up. I just felt like, 'Well, here comes another one.' — **Robin, Colorado**

*My step-father sexually assaulted me from the ages of 11 to 15. I never knew how to report or if anyone would believe me. The years went by and I was ashamed of what he had done to me. When a man on this [prison] unit kept making sexual advances toward me, it all resurfaced. — **Ken, Texas***

*I experienced the most damaging and emotionally devastating treatment of my life thus far when I was in a youth correctional facility.... I survived threats of violence, unwanted sexual touching, and verbal abuse that were severe beyond belief.
— **Cyryna, Hawaii***

*I'm 44 years old with [a sentence of] life without parole and I've already done almost 30 years. I've no friends inside or family outside. As a child of incest, molested by my own family then raped in prison, it seems that I've been cursed since birth. Kindness from organizations like yours is a lifeline.
— **Danny, Florida***

Many advocates have little familiarity with providing services for incarcerated survivors or survivors of childhood sexual abuse. They may feel wholly unprepared to work with an incarcerated adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Small, rural sexual assault and dual programs, with limited staff and few volunteers, may feel especially apprehensive. But the truth is that advocates already have the most important skills necessary to do this work. The skills advocates use every day in the community are transferable to working behind bars, where many prisoners are survivors of past sexual abuse or interpersonal violence but have never received any support. By providing services in detention, advocates may be offering survivors the first chance they have ever had to receive advocacy services, process trauma, and develop healthy coping skills.

“Letters from Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Survivors”

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