

# CITIZENS FOR PRISON REFORM NEWSLETTER

## APRIL 2019

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### **Books, Articles, Notes**

#### **Kotlowitz, Alex. 2019. An American Summer: Love and Death in Chicago.**

Doubleday. An account of brutality over a 3-month period in 2013 in impoverished, segregated areas of Chicago where homicide is rampant and people grow hardened to atrocities. Only 10 % of the shooters are arrested in these black and Latino areas, and fear of retribution keeps people from turning in the perpetrators. This book is an indictment of a city and a nation where the residents have been unprotected. Although the homicide rate has fallen during the last 30 years, it remains high in Chicago and several other hyper-segregated, postindustrial cities, such as St. Louis and Detroit, relative to other cities, including New York and Los Angeles.

#### **Swenson, Kyle. 2019. Good Kids, Bad City: A story of Race and Wrongful**

**Conviction in America.** Picador Publishing. The author, a newspaper reporter, pursues the case of Ronnie Bridgeman, a.k.a. Kwame Ajuma, paroled after serving 28 years of a life sentence for a murder in 1975 that he did not commit. Ajuma wanted his name cleared and to free his brother, Wiley, and childhood friend, Ricky Jackson, who were still in prison for the murder. All were African-Americans. In 1975, the three men were convicted of killing a salesman in Cleveland, after being identified by a 12-year old boy, Ed Vernon, despite the testimony of several other children that they were not the killers. Vernon later became a crack addict and served 2 years in prison. Eventually a local pastor got him to admit that he had lied. All three men were exonerated in 2014, although not before Jackson had been in prison for 39 years. The number of reporters left to document such injustices has fallen as the number of newspapers declines.

#### **Venters, Homer. 2019. Life and Death on Rikers Island.**

Johns Hopkins University Press. Venters, the former chief medical officer for New York City's jails, explains the health risks associated with incarceration, including neglect, sexual abuse, and brutality. He details how jails are designed to create new health risks for prisoners, while keeping medical staff silent. Prisoners with behavioral health risks and people of color are especially vulnerable. Venters describes alternative strategies to reduce health risks, and presents the case for closing Rikers Island jails for the good of the prisoners.

**The Jail Health-Care Crisis.** By Steve Coll. Criminal-justice failures left a population at risk. Privatization was supposed to help. More than 3000 jails exist in the US, housing some 7000 prisoners, most of whom are awaiting trial because they cannot make bail, or are serving short sentences. Many have medical problems related to addiction. Several studies indicate that nearly half suffer from mental illness, and about two thirds are addicted to or dependent upon drugs. Because of high turnover and lack

of resources, local jails, especially those in rural areas, cannot serve the needs of these persons, and have turned to for-profit companies for “correctional health care.” This trend began in the 1980s and was accelerated by tough sentencing laws passed in the 1990s. The article reports on the effectiveness of these private companies in meeting the needs of the inmates, the effect of economic incentives on cutting their costs, and the legal actions that have been taken against them by civil-rights groups and legislators. The needs of the mentally handicapped and the effects of the opioid crisis are discussed. Four states have contracted prison medical services to their state university systems, with varying results. (*The New Yorker*, March 4, 2019)

**Third time a charm for “Raise the Age” juvenile justice reform ?** By Tyler Arnold. Seventeen-year-olds who are imprisoned with adults are more subject to sexual assaults while in prison, and more likely to commit additional crimes following their release. A bipartisan effort is being made in the Michigan legislature to raise the age from 17 to 18 before a youthful offender can be charged as an adult. Similar bills introduced in the three previous legislatures either failed or time ran out before they could be passed. The main obstacle to passage is the cost of the change. Currently the cost of imprisoning 17-year-olds is shared between the state and the counties; raising the age to 18 would shift the cost to the juvenile justice systems in the county courts. The change will affect about 2700 17-year-olds annually. The bills would allow exceptions to be made for violent crimes such as murder. (Watchdog.org, February 22, 2019; see also Jonathan Oosten, (*The Detroit News*, February 20, 2019)

**Fund grows for wrongfully convicted.** By Kathleen Gray. The Michigan House of Representatives recently passed HB 4286, which would add \$ 10 million to a fund that compensates the wrongfully convicted. This would provide \$ 2.3 million in compensation to Richard Phillips, 73, for the 47 years that he spent in prison for a murder he did not commit. A law passed in 2016 provided \$ 50,000 per year for each year of wrongful compensation. The new bill replenishes the money (originally \$ 13 million) in the fund, the balance of which was \$ 323,800 on March 4. Thirty-nine wrongful imprisonment claims have yet to receive compensation. (*Lansing State Journal*, March 14, 2019)

**One Lawyer, One Day, 194 Felony Cases.** By Richard A. Oppel Jr., and Jugal K. Patel. Data are presented for courts in Louisiana, Rhode Island, Colorado and Missouri, for the numbers of cases assigned to public defenders, which may exceed 194 at one time, requiring 5 years to handle if sufficient time were allowed. Studies by Stephen Hanlon of the National Association of Public Defenders have estimated that the typical public defender had 2 to 3 times the workload he or she should have had in order to provide an adequate defense. This means that, across the country, 94 % of convictions in state courts are from plea bargains. These result in lesser sentence, but a Texas study found that at least 1 or 2 of every 10 felony cases handled by public defenders should have gone to trial. (New York Times, February 3, 2019)

**Day of Empathy Recap.** This national day of action to generate empathy for millions of persons affected by the criminal justice system brought over 80 persons to Ann Arbor

on March 5 to hear 3 panels of speakers and meet more than 20 legislators. This was one of 45 events in the U.S. that reached over 100 million people online. The program focused on Raise the Age, and introduction of legislation regarding (1) Clean Slate and (2) living conditions for the women at Michigan's Huron Valley Correctional Facility.

**Volunteer Court Watching Program Begun in District Courts in Lansing - E. Lansing.** To date 15 volunteers from Edgewood United Church of Christ in E. Lansing and the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lansing have interviewed more than 150 of the accused, focusing primarily on how bail is used in arraignment and how fees are imposed at sentencing. Judges cooperated with the volunteers by answering questions about procedures, and the data are being analyzed by Street Democracy, a Detroit organization with similar goals for the poor and vulnerable. Results to date indicate that release on personal recognizance is underused for those unable to pay bail, and that people of color are over-represented.

For additional articles, see the webpage of the Vera Institute, <https://www.vera.org/research>, and the fall newsletter of Safe and Just <http://bit.ly/SJMFall18> .

### **Coming events**

**February 1 → May 19, 2019. States of Incarceration.** This exhibit, put together by Rutgers University, is currently on display at the Michigan History Museum, 702 W. Kalamazoo St., in Lansing. It includes a panel about the history of incarceration in Michigan. The program plan includes several movies and discussions. Cost is \$6.

**Monday, April 1, 9:00.a.m. Race in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century America Conference: Race, Democracy and Socialism.** 11<sup>th</sup> Race in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century conference designed to examine systems of power and privilege in the US, especially the impact of these "systems" on communities of color. Keynote addresses and discussions involving, leading scholars and MSU students. Kellogg Center, MSU. For information, contact Justin Burkett [burket16@msu.edu](mailto:burket16@msu.edu). **Conference registration:** <https://msuraceconference2019.evenbrite.com>.

**Tuesday, April 2, 1 p.m. – Sixth 54<sup>th</sup> District Drug Court Graduation Ceremony.** The public is invited to attend and witness what is possible for persons struggling with addiction. Courtroom A, City Hall, 101 Linden St., E. Lansing.

**Saturday, April 6, 9 a.m. – 3 p.m. – Panel and Workshop on The Ethics of Prison Work.** An exploration of the ethics of researching or working with carceral institutions and communities affected by incarceration. A morning panel will address the ethics of research, teaching, non-profit work, and other activities. Breakout sessions will follow in the afternoon to discuss questions raised by the panelists, who include Dr. Liat Ben-Moshe, Asst. Prof. of Criminology, Law and Justice at the Univ. of Illinois, Chicago; Aaron Sugunamu, Exec. Director of Brighter Way and Nation Outside; Ashley Lucas, Assoc. Prof. of Theater and Drama, and Director of the Prison Creative Arts Project;

and poet and musician Cozine Welch. Angell Hall Rm. 3222, Univ. of Michigan, Ann Arbor. For information, contact Elizabeth Tacke, [etacke@umich.edu](mailto:etacke@umich.edu).

**Thursday, April 11, 8:30 a.m. – 12 p.m. Why Cash Bail Criminalizes Poverty.** A forum to discuss how reforming bail will reduce the difference of outcomes between poor and wealthy defendants and provide many other benefits to the community. Keynote speaker: Rodd Monts, Feld Director, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Presented by the Out4Life Steering Committee. Room D, The Salvation Army Eastern Divisional Hq., 16130 Northland Dr., Southfield, MI 48075.

**Tuesday, April 16, 1 p.m. – White Boy and the War on Drugs.** Mass Incarceration Awareness. 1-2 p.m. – Prison Art Show; 2-3 p.m. – War on Drugs panel; 3-4 p.m. – Keynote by Seth Ferrani, a one-time drug king-pin who spent over 12 years in prison and is now a successful writer; 4-6 p.m. – Screening of film “White Boy and the War on Drugs.” The Criminology and Criminal Justice Collective. UC/Kochoff Hall A, Univ. of Michigan, Dearborn. For more information, contact Prof. Aaron Kinzel, [atkinzel@umich.edu](mailto:atkinzel@umich.edu).

**Friday, April 26. 6:30 – 10:00 p.m. MCCD’s Annual Gala: “Reclaiming Childhood.”** An evening of inspiring and uplifting stories, delicious food, wonderful entertainment, and an opportunity to surround yourself the friends – old and new – who care passionately about justice. Tickets \$ 150, event sponsorship \$ 500, table sponsor \$ 1500. Information: [www.miccd.org/gala](http://www.miccd.org/gala). For silent auction donations, contact Tara McManus [tmcmanus@miccd.org](mailto:tmcmanus@miccd.org) or 857-231-6180.

**Wednesday, May 29, 9:30 a.m. – 4 p.m. Making Family Inclusion A Priority. Citizens for Prison Reform’s 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Legislative Education Day.** Presentations by legislators and persons representing organizations devoted to improving the criminal justice system and conditions for prisoners and their families, and opportunities for meetings with legislators. The program begins with a press conference on the Capitol lawn at 9:30, followed by registration at 10. Former state representative Joe Haverman, will give the keynote address at 10:30, followed by other speakers and a lunch with legislators. Attendees will have an opportunity to speak with their representatives from 1 to 4 in the afternoon. [www.mcpr.org](http://www.mcpr.org).

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**Citizens for Prison Reform (CPR).** [www.micpr.org](http://www.micpr.org); [micpr.org@gmail.com](mailto:micpr.org@gmail.com). 269-339-0606. P.O. Box 80414, Lansing, MI 48908. Lois Pullano, President. A grassroots family-run organization whose purpose is to educate, support and unify loved ones of prisoners within the state of Michigan. CPR works to inform legislators and create awareness as to the need for greater prison reforms.

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