



Newsletter

MAY 2023

Celebrating 6 years of CTJC!

In May of 2017, we first opened our doors as the first and only center dedicated to survivors of police torture. It has been 6 incredible years of growth, healing and connection. To celebrate this milestone with you all and to express our gratitude to our community, this will be a special issue of the newsletter. This issue features a variety of submissions we have received from incarcerated community members this past year that we have not yet been able to publish. Every time we receive a letter in the mail or GTL correspondence from those of you inside, we are reminded of the brilliance and wisdom that comes from our incarcerated community members. The movement that makes our work possible began with voices from inside. Survivors who spoke out about the torture they experienced birthed the reparations movement that led to the historic passing of the Reparations Ordinance in 2015. Individuals on death row who fought for their sentences to be overturned gave way to the abolishment of the death penalty in Illinois in 2011. There is immeasurable strength and power in the words you share. We honor and celebrate all of you as we celebrate another year of CTJC.

How Violence Affects Me

by Jose

How has violence affected me personally? To be honest it has affected me in too many ways. I grew up in poverty and my home was considered a trap house. If you come from this type of home, chances are you probably won't make it. I have witnessed domestic violence, gun violence, and gang violence daily. I literally looked up to my mother and my step-father and their friends, because they were considered to be family. All of them, including my mother, were gang members. To me, they were and still are my protectors.

But let's talk about violence... So from seeing guns being loaded as a child to even watching family members shoot them, even showing me how to load them and shoot is kind of what made me want to own one. My mother and step-father verbally and physically abused each other so I always thought and was taught, "If a woman wants to act like a man, treat her like one". Third, my family sold drugs to provide for my brother and me. So naturally, once I got old enough, about 12 I wanted to make money to be fresh, as they say. Lastly, I only wanted to be plugged with what my peers were because they put that hat on my head and cocked it to the left and told me I was Lil Moe.

Now we got gun violence, gang violence, domestic violence, and drug violence. I was unintentionally taught these different levels of violence from people who at that time hadn't realized what they were doing, sadly.

Here's how these different acts of violence affected me. Once I was old enough to go outside by myself, I took everything I had seen and was taught at home with me. Anybody who wasn't wearing their hate a certain way was automatically my enemy. That led to multiple fights including mob action. If you're from Chicago or any other kind of ghetto, we all know street fights lead to gun violence. Luckily and unfortunately for me and my so-called opps, I had access to guns which I've been taught to use if I can't beat them. I've been shot at, stabbed and put in a coma when I was 15 years old. I've been in jail since I was 17. Before jail, I sold drugs and I didn't go to school due to bringing guns to school. I truly believed that my girlfriend and I would be able to get rich together selling drugs and robbing people. To top this off, we had physical and verbal fights daily.

So now, I went from violence on the streets during my so-called freedom before my incarceration, to getting locked up for 1st degree murder and 3 attempted murders for a drug deal gone wrong.

Violence? How has it affected me personally? Well, I can tell you that I suffer from PTSD. I also feel that when things become too intense, I only feel that a nice stiff left hook is the only answer sometimes. Violence is one thing that is around me 24/7 365, and no matter how hard I try, it always finds a way into my thoughts. I'm not ashamed to say I need help. Violence has taken many lives away, including my brother JMoney literally 5 months ago, which has led me to believe I'm in this all alone, no one to trust. This causes depression.

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There's really no other way to say this but to simplify it: violence has cost me 20 years of my life, and 17 more, being that it's all I knew. Violence has made me have a false sense of identity. For a while I forgot who Jose really is. Today, I'm trying my best to find myself, but I honestly battle with my demons daily. I think that since I haven't been violent, I'm not on anything. "Sad, ain't it".

With that being said, anyone who can relate to this, you're not alone. It's something that was taught to us, and prison makes this no better.

These are just a small percentage of how violence affected me.

The Connection Between State and Intracommunal Violence

In March, we published an article about the connection between state and intracommunal violence. The piece was written collectively by our team in an effort to start a more expansive conversation about the root causes of violence in our communities. The article asserts that the conditions of disenfranchisement and deprivation in our communities are often the places shootings, assault, and robberies frequently occur, which begs the question: what happens when resources and opportunities are scarce? And more importantly, what are some long-lasting, transformative, and real solutions? We acknowledge that these conditions are no accident. We invited people to continue this conversation and write in with any reflections or responses that came up upon reading. The following are notes sent to us from a discussion facilitated by the Dixon Performing Arts.

The majority of the fights in prison happen over access to the phones.

All the staff know this, they also know that inadequate access to the phones is something the IDOC can rectify.

Three decades ago the cost of a single phone call, depending on what time of day it was, ranged from six to nine dollars per hour. Based on those high cost the competition to use the phone wasn't nearly as aggressive as it is today.

Three years ago prison officials made some welcome changes to how our phone system works. They allowed us to manage our own phone accounts and they reduced the cost of a call to one cent a minute. Those changes gave us greater access to our families, but what they failed to do was increase the number of phones to an adequate number to handle the increased competition to use the phones. This is why there has been an increase in violence. The ratio between phones to bed space in my unit is; eight phones for one hundred and forty eight bunks.

Many of us believe the reason why the IDOC haven't added access is because the violent fighting that erupts over phone access drives home a narrative that more security is needed. The union uses that narrative as a tool to push for more funds to spend on security equipment, and staff, both reduce the funds used to run programs.

The mission statement of the IDOC states: To serve justice in Illinois and increase public safety by promoting positive change for those in custody, operating successful reentry programs and reducing victimization. It appears as if the IDOC isn't living up to its mission statement, but is instead promoting violence.

Earlier, I said inadequate access to the phones is something the IDOC can rectify. Here's how: activate the phone app on the tablets we have already paid for when we purchased our tablets.

-Jesse

The lack of access to an education for long-term incarcerated people in prison is an insidious form of violence that slowly erodes hope and mental wellness. It is a form of torture to leave a person ignorant, often-times for the rest of their lives, depending on the length of their sentence.

The rationing of educational opportunities increased in scale when the 1994 crime bill eliminated Pell Grants for incarcerated people. It is not a coincidence that the state prison population boomed during the same period. Those two factors made the wait times to enter the Adult Basic Education (ABE), a program that teaches basic reading and writing, even longer. The wait could last decades sometimes.

Imagine yearning to learn and constantly being told to wait. You feel your hope slowly fading, and your will power eroding. You never get the opportunity to learn the skills you need to earn a trade certification, and you can't provide an employer with a record of accomplishment. You are just here in prison, year after year, walking past the school wishing you could enter.

Prohibiting a person from receiving an education is an example of state sponsored violence, and because people from the black community are disproportionately incarcerated, this creates the conditions for intracommunal violence.

-Sherman

For decades the IDOC has been assessing incarcerated people to determine if they have leadership qualities. They even developed a point system to quantify a person's leadership status. If you score high, you are considered a threat to security. That dubious distinction can cause a person to be prohibited from work assignments and in some extreme cases people are placed in what's called administrative detention, isolation from the rest of the prison population for very long periods of time.

The problem with that is incarcerated people have always worked together to improve living conditions, educational opportunities and fight against criminal justice abuses. Creating and sustaining these kinds of movements require someone to take on leadership responsibilities. Historically, the IDOC has cast a wide net, and almost any form of leadership activities can get caught in its webbing. Once a person is labeled, the chances of removing that label is almost impossible.

Fewer and fewer people are stepping up, and it's hard to lead from the rear. It seems like a coordinated effort to suppress leadership amongst the most marginalized and disenfranchised people in modern day America is underway. Add it up, and it is easy to discern that Co-intel pro hasn't gone away, it was passed on from the FBI to the IDOC. Unfortunately, this kind of state sponsored violence establishes causality in the struggle to find leadership from those returning from prison to reside in Chicago's under resourced communities.

-Brian

For those Individuals In Custody (IICs) doing time in maximum and medium security facilities within the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), one of the most significant factors affecting their incarceration is who they occupy a cell with. In the IDOC, IICs do not have the ability to choose their cellmates (cellies). Although there exists some administrative and/or institutional directives with regard to celling individuals together, these directives are vague, rarely observed or blatantly disregarded altogether. The directives mostly proscribe housing individuals together who have extreme disparities in levels of aggression, histories of violent and/or predeceous behavior; especially towards particular groups of individuals as intimated above. IICs are typically housed with complete strangers. In most cases the two individuals are able to peacefully, even if precariously so, co-exist. But, frequently, there are times when conflicts, such as: a person's degree of cleanliness and/or hygiene; sexual orientation; medical issues; penchant for thievery; loudness; criminal charges; snitching and/or working with the administration ("them people"); or even the race of an individual cannot be reconciled peacefully.

Unfortunately, such conflicts are permitted to fester and are even fomented by those tasked with the duty to ensure that such conflicts are resolved peacefully; BEFORE they turn violent. More often than not, disburdening one's self of an unwanted cellie is not always a facile endeavor. I can recount numerous times when an IIC would attempt to either have his cellie or himself removed from a cell - that was full of tension so thick that even Stevie Wonder could see - only to be ignored, given the runaround, or most egregiously, told to "fight or f@#k." Knowing all too well the potential for violence in such situations, instead of fulfilling their obligation to intervene, staff would elect—sometimes with disdainful avidity and levity—allow the violence to occur; often with dire consequences.

Realizing the staff's refusal to assist in a peaceful resolution, IICs are presented with a series of unappealing choices. The most common amongst them are: Deal with it and hope that the situation improves; walk one's self to segregation or fight.

Walking one's self to segregation (refusing housing/refusing to lock up) likely results in a disciplinary violation. This obviously would not bode well for any prospective applications for clemency or other attempts for sentence review. Fighting, if caught, can also result in the same consequences and/or outcome with the added risk of serious injury or even DEATH.

I consider the above to be an illustrative example of the many instances of state sponsored violence as well as intracommunal violence within the IDOC.

CTJC we appreciate the opportunity to be a part of this important conversation.

-Kawaun

A Tale Called The Struggles

by Yusef

As a youth, I had no patience for my parents' guidance, nor did I understand the severity of my grandma's classic wisdom. No end struggle of problems. Until you feel it, only when you feel the struggle. Can you feel the pain of the blood that stains my heart?

The sidewalks were filled with violence, drugs, and crimes to survive life From the lost babies in the crossfire of the insane injustice of a bullet flying by. Crack rocks and rage I carried. Mother's crying from pain, another father gone! Damn, when the struggle going to stop? I never had a chance! I had my head down and turned to the streets for comfort. That struggle led me down a road of destruction. Prison, pain, and loss. It is often in the bellies of these beast that we see hate. I was so consumed by hate, struggles, and drugs. The PCP-laced blunt had my mind. I struggled with depression. Now chained, but not broken anymore.

Yeah, my struggles are real. I refuse to give up now. Stay real and believe in yourself! Collect your own confidence. Tell your struggle, story, and pain within. Peace be unto you. Stay real above all else with yourself about your struggles!

The Enemy

by Arnold

Who's The Enemy, You or Me. Two young Black and Brown people from the poorest community. Who can barely walk down the street, without worrying about The Police, or Someone trying Shoot and Kill me, as if I'm The Enemy.

We're fighting about Facebook, Instagram and some Social Media. When we all suffer form the same stigma. We're a Black and Brown enigma. They don't want to Love and Respect us, not simply understand where we come from.

We're Human Being just like Him and Her. I Love You my Brothas and Sistas. The Enemy isn't You. The Enemy has always been The System and those denying us a legal Sum.

They have a us in a hum-bug for what? When They tell us Both to shut the fuck up. This makes us discuss ways to harm one another after an insult. Yet, this has been the Hand we've dealt.

The Enemy seems to be ourself, because of the things we didn't understand or what we felt. It's Hot in here and I'm about to met. I'm tired of sagging, Someone please give me a belt. We've been treated like a pelt.

The Enemy isn't You nor Me, The Enemy is this Land of Liberty. There's no more Gangs, they're Wannabes. They're inside here with Me, Suffering from a lack of Mental Capacity. They can't Think because they're too weak, and waiting on their boats to sink.

Someone need to explain The Enemy, because most times, we wouldn't be able to see our Nation's Conspiracy. You may think they don't know You all are in The Community.

Hustling, Shooting, Killing, Drug Selling and other Things. Well, You have a Face and NAmE that rings, and People who say a lot of things. So Criminally, You're The Enemy, and soon You will see my Mom or Me.

Mom's Dead, I'm in The Penitentiary. I've been in here since 2004, Today is the year 2023. All my Crimes are *non-violent*. Still they treat Me as The Enemy.

I'm considered an Excon, Exdrug user, Excommunicator. I was Extracted, Excluded and Expelled because they see me as The Enemy.

About Reentry

by Tarius

Reentry is to exit from prison with a vision of achieving goals, same road with a different plan.

I came to jail because my journey led me to a dead end.

No room to turn around, wishing for a do over.

Too much time for a facility to help, so I decided to save myself.

Education was first on the list, thinking how did my pursuit of the American Dream lead to this.

Then I accepted the things I couldn't change like death and rules.

This opened my eyes to see that life was to be valued.

I was at the top of the game when it came to doing wrong.

Knocking on the hearts door, but love wasn't home.

All alone was where I found self, now aware of my connection to everyone else.

On my square with my actions showing I care.

My dead end has become a fresh start and you no longer have to knock, because just like Kay's jewelers, I haven open Heart.

Where Do I Belong

by Eric

I perspectivevely believe that I belong within a world that sees me for who I am.

Meaning a Pioneer and product of community.

I embrace my own ability to create change amongst environments of peers, so that it may spread in areas that are in need of opportunities.

Such as trade-skill sets and goal oriented guides to help develop purpose.

My ideal space is where empowerment can be cultivated and made a reality among youth.

Built on entrepreneurs investing long term with skill sets that will enable growth and development.

Where do I belong, among communities making an impact.

On the 8th Anniversary of the Burge Torture Reparations Legislation

This statement was collectively written by the Chicago Torture Justice Center and Chicago Torture Justice Memorials in honor of the 8th anniversary of the historic Reparations Ordinance that was passed on May 6, 2015. This historic legislation was an important first step in addressing the harm of police torture. After 8 years, the memorial to honor survivors of police torture that the City of Chicago promised to fund and support has still not been built. Police torture did not begin or end with Jon Burge, and we believe the city must continue to be accountable to the violence inflicted against all police torture survivors.

Today, May 6, 2023, marks the 8th anniversary of the passage of our city's historic Reparations Ordinance for Chicago Police torture survivors in City Council. The legislation was drafted to provide redress to over 125 Black and Latine people subjected to racially motivated torture—including electric shock, mock executions, suffocation and beatings by former Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge from 1972 through 1991.

In passing this legislation, the City of Chicago made history becoming the first municipality to provide redress for racially motivated state violence. It was the first time Chicago acknowledged its responsibility for gross human rights violations—violations that were recognized by the UN Committee Against Torture. It was the first time we committed significant resources to begin to repair some of the harm inflicted on torture survivors, their families, and communities.

The legislation was the culmination of decades of activism, advocacy and organizing, and a concerted campaign led by incarcerated survivors and their families, and waged by Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, Project NIA, We Charge Genocide, Amnesty International USA, and many others.

Where Do I Belong

by Curtis

It's gangstas to the left of me, and squares up front. Democrats are next to Biden, Republicans are by Trump.

Somber minds are staying-smoke-free, while the puffers tryna smoke it up.

People with Knowledge tryna dish it out, those without tryna soak it up.

The "king" of hearts belong with the hearts, and the "Queen" of spades go with the spades.

But, to what suit do I belong if I'm a "Jack" of all trades?

Some consider me a bookworm, yet I still believe in true love.

Menace 2 Society and Boyz in da Hood are the best flick in my opinion.

But give me some Big Bang Theory and Stewie Griffin and I'll show you what I call living.

I'm bumpin' Money-bagg Yo on my way to a tribute concert for the Eagles.

By night I'm out hustlin', by day studying to be a Paralegal.

See, I can be down to earth, and grounded, with the terrestrial things.

Or have my head in the clouds amongst celestial beings.

You can put me in a box, or try to rap me in a case. So you can catch me running hard towards that finish line tape.

Cuz the place where I belong is running in the Human Race.

The passage of this unprecedented legislation sent a strong message that in the ongoing struggle for human rights and social justice, organizing—especially led by those who are most impacted—matters.

Rooted in a restorative justice framework, Chicago's 2015 reparations package included: a formal apology from the Mayor and City Council; \$100,000 in financial compensation to 57 police torture survivors; the development of the Reparations Won curriculum that is now mandated to be taught in all of our 8th and 10th grade classrooms in Chicago Public Schools; free tuition or job training at Chicago's City Colleges for survivors and family members;

the creation of a center dedicated to addressing the psychological harms created by racialized police violence—now the Chicago Torture Justice Center; and the promise to build a permanent public memorial acknowledging the torture, honoring survivors, and commemorating the struggles waged and won.

The creation of a public memorial ensures this chapter of racially motivated state violence is not erased from public memory by inscribing it onto the landscape of Chicago. It pushes us to ensure it never happens again. By centering the courage, resolve, and resilience of survivors, family members and organizers, the memorial will also be a testament to the power of our community-led movements and to what is possible as we continue to work towards creating a more just future for all of us in our city.

With the upcoming inauguration of Mayor Elect Brandon Johnson, we are optimistic that he will continue to steward the legacy of the Reparations Ordinance. This includes the full funding and construction of a memorial to honor survivors of police torture, a new reparations ordinance centered around survivors of police officers who were trained under Jon Burge and continued a pattern and practice of torture, and long term funding for CTJC, as he committed to during his campaign and previously when he was a Cook County Commissioner.

Chicago's reparations legislation also enabled the creation of the historic Chicago Torture Justice Center—making Chicago home to the first and only center dedicated to supporting survivors of domestic torture. Six years into its existence, the Center provides lifesaving and necessary services to our neighbors impacted by police violence, directly and indirectly. Among others, that includes survivors of torture, their family members, and mothers whose children have been killed by police.

The 2015 reparations ordinance was a historic and important first step to repair far-reaching and systemic harms.

This is just what it should be: a first step. Chicago Torture Justice Center and Chicago Torture Justice Memorials are fully committed to the hundreds of individuals tortured and abused by officers trained by Jon Burge, and to others harmed by the Chicago police. In the coming years, we will fight for reparations for survivors of police torture committed by disciples of Jon Burge. This is a critical contribution to the national conversation on ending racialized state violence as we continue the work of addressing deep harm and forging new futures for our communities.

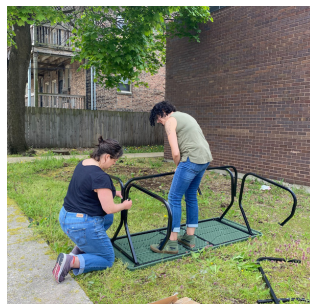
Peaceful communities require active healing from the intergenerational trauma racialized violence creates.

On this anniversary, we honor the persistence, resilience, and courage of survivors, their family members, and all who fought and continue to fight on the side of justice and healing. We encourage all Chicagoans to join us as we continue the work of healing our communities and ending violence in our city.

May Updates

Nurturing CTJC

On May 6, we invited volunteers to come and help nurture and steward our space! Volunteers picked up litter outside the building, cleared out some weeds, built raised beds for a garden, set up the community computer lab and more.



May 20: CTJC's Anniversary Party!

Save the date and invite your loved ones to our anniversary party on May 20! There will be food and music. Come out and celebrate another year with us. We hope to see you or your loved ones there. While we don't require masks, we will have some available for those that want to wear one. If you feel sick or experience any symptoms before the event, we ask that you stay home and rest up! You are welcome to visit the Center another time.

CTJC's Anniversary Party
Saturday, May 20
2-5pm
6337 S. Woodlawn Ave, Chicago 60637

