

THE SWAY

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Q&A Edition Volume 2:



Cover art by D. Craft and J. Spates

This zine consists of questions fielded by the public and answered by individuals incarcerated in Iowa prisons from August-October of 2025. All non-question content was written by individuals incarcerated in Iowa prisons.

Disclaimer:

Please note that responses may vary greatly due to many factors. A major factor is that respondents are located in different facilities across the state, which institute their own rules and enforcement methods, have access to different resources, and may house individuals requiring a specific intervention or treatment. Additionally, Iowa prisons institute a "TIP Level" system which grants people privileges and access to resources and activities on a scale from 1-3 based on behavior. People's experiences are also restricted by protective custody, administrative segregation (solitary confinement), disciplinary detention, or safekeeper status.

Please also note, all publicly accessible Iowa Department of Corrections (IDOC) policies and procedures relevant to the following questions are available at doc.iowa.gov. However, these policies can often be misconstrued, manipulated, or entirely ignored/violated by a facility, their employees, or the agency as a whole to fulfill an agenda. This is vitally important when addressing holding the administration and agency accountable for their lack of diligence, adherence, and unlawful behavior.

Please enjoy this zine and become better aware of the experiences of our incarcerated neighbors!

For people who have never experienced prison, what would you want them to know? What do you think are the most important things for people on outside to know about what life is like for you?

Prison is not what you see on TV shows, and it is not filled with the scum of the earth, rather it's filled with people who are caught up by a moment, a moment most wish never happened, or at least wish it was a moment they could change. Jail is inhumane, and though we have many in here who are of the mindset of rehabilitation, jail itself does not promote it, and many succumb to the false sense of ESCAPING this reality, hence the k2 epidemic, and declining mental wellness...

The most important thing to know for me is this is torture. Can you imagine what it would feel like to have your heart ripped from your chest daily as you lay immobilized, unable to move, but feeling every bit of it? For every day is a reminder of the errors of my ways, and I live every day with the desire to be better, to not be seen as an embodiment of the worst moments of my life. But also, this hurt is strengthening me as a person, because I've realized I'm more than what I thought of Self, and this don't define me, unless I accept it as my definition...

-James W.

Violence is a part of these places, no real revelation there. What I think may be less obvious is the fact that psychological violence -- indeed psychological abuse, which is very much an intentional part of prison management -- generates and fuels much of the physical violence. Fear and anxiety and helplessness and hopelessness and impotent rage, the emotional reactions to emotional abuse, often result in eruptions of physical violence.

-Brad E.

Prison is not the place to come to. The things I go through on a daily basis like dealing with other inmates and guards daily can be stressful.

-Devwon B.

Don't do the crime if you can't do the time. Prison is not about rehabilitation, it's about money.

For me, life could be hard if not for my belief in God the father and Jesus Christ, the love of my wife and kids, and my loving mother. My mind is at peace.

-Dwayne W.

I would like them to know that every prison experience will vary, and it differs from person to person. Prison is divisive and controlling. The first thing you lose is your name. Although they call you by your name, a number is added to it, and when speaking with you, if they need to address you for any reason, they ask for your number and then your name. If you want to survive in prison, understand that no one's going to guide you through it. You have to fight for your survival, your success, your name, and ultimately, your freedom! Here are the keys of prison life, keys that lead to survival: mind your business, never borrow (if you do, pay back what you owe, don't be a prison thief. Stealing from fellow inmates is a jacket you'll wear forever, you'll never be trusted again), don't gamble (people gone want to be paid!), be honest (it's true, snitches get stitches, and then they go to protective custody, PC). If you selling wolf tickets (tough guy or girl) that you-bout-that-life, you best be bout-that-life because you gone get called on it!

The most important thing to know is that you're not always in survival mode. Once you've been on the inside for a while, and if you've done your time the right way (there is a way to do time), then you earn a positive reputation. So no matter what prison I transfer to, it's all good!

-Michael K.

The most important thing for people to know about prison is how destructive of mental health it is. Long-term incarceration is a slow motion death sentence, where the executed endures years of mental anguish and suffering before death: a life-sentence, without the possibility of parole, is no less inhumane than lethal injection.

-John G.

There are many things I would want someone to know: One is that I would not wish it on anybody. Yes, I do agree there are people who cannot be a part of society, but I still wouldn't wish it on anyone. I feel there are better ways, and we fail to take the time to figure it out. In my personal experience it is a curse that has bared a wonderful gift. The curse is that even if I get some time reduced or completely taken away, I will never be able to get that lost time back that would have been spent with my loved ones. I can't ever get back the life and job that I had. I'll have to start back with no real job experience or rental history for a couple decades. The list goes on and on. The gift is the real key though. Prison is where my life was broken enough that I had lost all hope, but in that I was able to hear God's voice. It's something I never seen myself doing, yet has been the greatest blessing of all. I have, through my faith, been able to be a positive impact in my own life which goes on into the lives of those around me. This is not everyone's

experience. It doesn't give responsibility to those who never had it. They do offer treatment programs that align with your case, but you don't receive treatment until close to the end of your sentence, unless you have a life sentence. This is not helpful because someone should take responsibility for what they have done as soon as possible in able to help them take accountability, rebuild, restore, and become a better person. The way that it is set up makes it seem like a farce and a slap in the face of the local communities because they send people back to the same communities without offering real change while they were incarcerated.

-James S.

There is an entire lack of rehabilitation, intervention, or support offered within the Iowa Department of Corrections! Everything someone does to improve themselves is because of themselves alone. One must take the initiative and advocate for what they need to make progress in their life.

These sequestered islands of living are essentially concrete slave ships where society places people to forget about them and feel justified in doing so. It isn't really about corrections, penance, or rehabilitation It's about confinement and warehousing people for extended periods of time. It ultimately is a bureaucratic machine that devours people from the inside out and no one is fully aware of what really is - or is not - taking place within their walls.

It is a miserable experience of persistent emotional torture and mental hardship. There is no sense of privacy or humility available. Even using the restroom in your own living quarters is often invaded by others peeking in the windows as they walk by, as you are not allowed to cover the window. Similarly, the pat downs, strip searches, and room shake downs are an invasive and unnerving activity even when you have nothing to hide. However, though I entirely disagree with inflicting this pain and suffering by way of confinement, the overall experience can bring about a strong revelation that leads to gratefulness of what we took for granted. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger. I can personally attest to the cliché ideal that this experience has probably saved me from myself, not to mention numbers of others who were directly or indirectly subjected to my self-destructive choices.

Ultimately, prisons oftentimes do not work. It is the individual who chooses to make a change within themselves. Sometimes prison provides a motivation and inspiration for this change by bringing a sense of realization to the magnitude of one's poor choices. More often than not, it does nothing but make resentful and disgruntled returning citizens who have only learned new ways to be more subversive. What do you expect to happen when you send someone to a place to network with like-minded others?!

-Xavier M.

How does the depiction of prisons in the media reflect onto/compare with reality?

The media projects prison as if we are just violent people, irredeemable people who deserve to be here, but there are so many people in here trying to rewrite their story from destructive to constructive. Many are utilizing the minimal resources that they provide and dealing with rejection at every turn trying to elevate into something more positive for the population. The media only reports the stuff that promotes and supports the Department of Correction's agenda. How often is there positive news about what inmates are doing behind these walls? This is the first questionnaire of inquiry for inmates perspectives, because most of society has been conditioned to ingest the legislators' or news reporters' viewpoints. How then could society understand the humanity of the convicted? The legislators don't seek to gather understanding of how to help those committing crimes, they only try to create laws and sentencing guidelines to lock away, rather than create a pathway for prevention. If it is truly about protecting society and "attempting" to eradicate crime, at least that's how I see it...

-James W.

It seems that something of a negative feedback cycle encompassing the popular portrayal of prison and the actual prison experience has emerged. The news media, Hollywood, reality TV, irresponsible documentaries and the like all sensationalize prison. People who consume this garbage then show up here thinking they have to act like the caricatures of caricatures they've seen on screen which only fuels more sensationalism.

-Brad E.

There's no comparison because they look from the outside in, not the inside out.

-Devwon B.

The media has a false narrative of what prison is really like. Prison is a city with a city of its own. The only way the media can depict prison is to be here for a month or two.

-Dwayne W.

You keep hoping they'll get it right, but they don't. The story is either over-told or under-told. There's always a sensationalism factor attached to it. The story just needs to be about the story and not what would make the story more attractive for a political narrative.

-Michael K.

The depiction of prison is overly propagandized to scare and control the public to support political views. It varies from prison to prison and state to state. In my experience, prison is bad, obviously because you're removed from society, but the only aspect of the danger that is different from the danger in society is that you are in close quarters. There are many aspects that should get better, but because of lack of care and concern, it has gotten worse. The US has become a prison country and the media have dramatized, normalized, dehumanized, and romanticized prison. I was watching TV one day, and I swear everything I watched had someone going to jail or prison. Even the Avengers went to prison, for God's sake. They have made something that should not be normal, normal. They desensitize the public to it, while also scaring the public to not want to go (which it should). It also dehumanizes those who have been incarcerated. I am blessed to be in a prison that only has remnants of what I imagined prison culture to be, but not everyone has had the same experience. I feel that the media does not cover what they don't want people to be interested in, they would rather cover up the reality. No matter what we have done (or not done in some cases), we are still human. We are still someone's son, father, brother, etc. The media does a great job of detaching the humanity and fully replacing it with a more animalistic inhabitant. Don't get me wrong, there

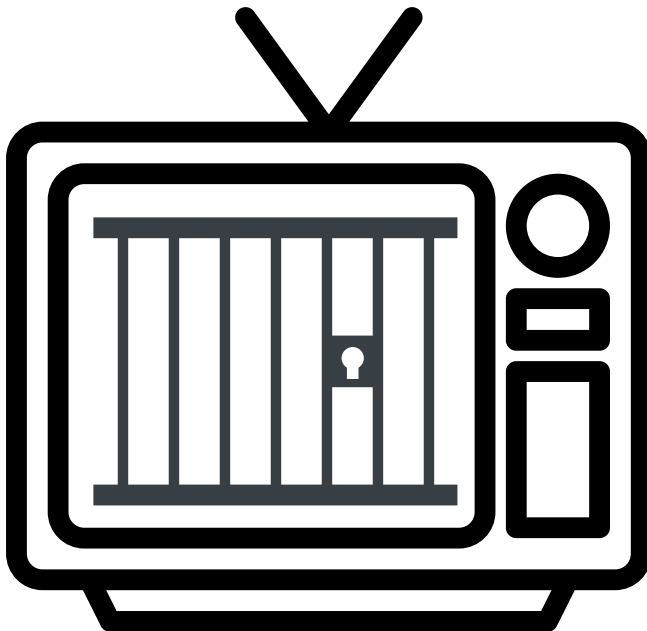
are some people who are not deemed fit for society, but even those are seen as lacking humanity when it's their human mental disability that caused their actions. This aspect also seems to be disregarded by the media, replaced with statements of them being demons/monster or even the devil himself.
-James S.

I can only speak to this particular environment, as every place is different. Though what we see in the media, especially entertainment based media, is rarely an accurate depiction, it can be similar. I believe the old adage is "Art imitates life; life imitates art." With that in mind, where I am is not too similar to what you see. First off, we do not wear jumpsuits, striped clothing, etc. We are provided three sets of blue jeans, blue crew neck t-shirts, three pairs of briefs, and a pair of black leather work boots. Also, there are no bars on the doors or windows, rather they are electronic controlled doors and "slitted" window openings too small to fit through. We are permitted to purchase our own televisions, CD players, tablets (no internet access, only media purchases, i.e. music, limited video rentals, games), personal clothing (select color and variety), and other items of want. We can also make assorted purchases from approved outside vendors from catalogs. These purchases are regulated on what you can purchase

and the quantity you are allowed. Also, each facility in the state determines what they will and will not allow. For example, we can wash our own laundry on the living units instead of the central laundry, which means we can purchase laundry supplies. However, here we cannot have liquid laundry detergent or fabric softener, yet other institutions in Iowa can. Similarly, we used to be able to purchase hard plastic cutlery sets (fork, spoon, knife); this is no longer permitted here. Hairbrushes and combs at this facility must now have the handle removed for "safety" reasons. This particular facility lacks any degree of true "politics" and therefore the rate of violence and other assaults is minimal. Drugs and alcohol are not commonplace here - though anyone

who doesn't think such exists in any prison is a fool - but several do tend to monetize their prescription medications. This is made more feasible as we are permitted to have what is referred to as SAMs (self-administered medications). Naturally, this precludes controlled narcotics and other notoriously abused items. Prison, in its totality, is not like you see in the movies or even in some documentaries on TV. However, they are relative to how it used to be, can be, and develops into over a period of time in certain facilities and within certain populations. Keep in mind, this is Iowa we are talking about. We are much less active or prone to the stereotypical depiction than most other states or even federal facilities.

-Xavier M.



What things in society would have helped you avoid incarceration?

Relationships are the staples of life, and they play a part in determining its outcome, so healthy relationships could've potentially helped me avoid this extreme incarceration, given relationships bring about opportunity, and maybe, just maybe, an opportunity would've presented itself and put me on a different path. I believe sometimes in life, we have to fight people for them, because sometimes people just be lost or unknowing, and to know somebody cares carries weight, and in this world we are so quick to give up on people, thinking, "I got my own problems," and its been said, "Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care"... and not having those things, I aligned myself with what I thought would bring about the things that I desired, more immediately...

-James W.

Less stigma on mental illness. Better resources and treatment for depression-fueled drug abuse.

-Brad E.

The most significant of all would be the reprisal and carry-over associated to childhood decisions. Once one has turned of majority age (18), all juvenile records and consequences - criminal or civil - should entirely cease and be redacted or otherwise unavailable to everyone except the court themselves.

This would also help alleviate the second major concern I hold when it comes to assimilating to society after being involved with the corrections system...stigma!

Stigma is a horribly incessant monster that infects citizens with a decaying bias that hampers and impedes the ability of good people from making good choices. This shouldn't be misconstrued to mean

that good people can't overcome strife and oppression without poor choices; I am merely stating that it often creates unnecessary complications and hardship. It creates mental health issues, self-worth concerns, and other internal conflicts that often deteriorate a person from the inside, unseen by many. If we don't place a label - stigma - on others for their past choices, and concentrate more on the current person in front of us, healing is much more efficient and probable!

-Xavier M.

I can't blame the things in society for what I've done. I can only blame myself because I had a chance to do right or wrong. I did wrong.

-Dwayne W.

Posting a sign on the highway that says "here's how to avoid incarceration"?

-Michael K.

I believe that had my community had the resources available to provide its members with better opportunities for education, housing, healthcare, and a basic minimum income, it would have relieved many of the major stressors facing the working poor and would've gone a long way towards keeping myself -and everyone else here- out of prison.

-John G.

More outlets for jobs, more community trades to help deal with life.

-Devwon B.

First and foremost, a relationship with Jesus and education. Another thing is not being ashamed to open up about things that I may have been going through and having the right support group to be able to do that. The relationship would have led me to the right places with the right people that hold the right opinions as long as I would have taken it as seriously as I do at the current moment. It would have given me that support, someone to talk to in order to get the clarity I needed in those moments. That would have led me to better decision making skills, which would have led me to avoid incarceration. The education part is like this, the more you know, the better you do as long as you apply what you know. Many of us come from undereducated, undeserved,

underrepresented experiences, just plain under. Many of us know what we are doing is wrong, yet we have not been led to know anything else or haven't been taught that the way we are thinking is wrong, or taught not to react off our emotions. We tend to think that it's too soft to show certain kinds of emotions, yet many of us have made wrong decisions solely based on an emotional state of being. Our communities fail to even acknowledge the severe PTSD that is caused from the lives in which we were raised, including sexual, relationship, gun, and gang violence, and more. How much can we push this trauma aside before we start addressing these things and taking them seriously?

-James S.

— Was making friends hard? —

I don't recall ever really having tried to make friends, it always just seems to happen. In fact, I've tried before to /not/ make any friends here and it happened anyway. A related truism: "It is always better to become friends with one's cellie (cellmate) than it is to become cellies with one's friends."

-Brad E.

You don't make friends in prison, you socialize with people of understanding, people who want to do better in life.

-Dwayne W.

Yes, because people are judgmental.

-Devwon B.

Being in a confined environment makes it a lot easier to connect and have associations, because your city or neighborhood is the bridge. Friendships are forged over time, those standards don't change. Being from Chicago, those from Chicago extended their olive branch for me, and once we connected with different understandings of the city, a bond was forged...

-James W.

Making friends wasn't difficult for me, per se. Humans generally are curious, especially in prison. People want to be your "friend" to see what you have to offer, whether it be conversation, knowledge, the same or different perspectives, food, etc. Everybody is not your friend and shouldn't be. There are many levels to this, but I have been around the block and lived through many difficult situations where I can't just be with anybody and call them my friend. My age played a factor, as well as people that you know and who they are related to. I have a lot of family that are incarcerated. In this prison (Anamosa), at one point I had 4 cousins, my paternal uncle, as well as the first friend that I've ever made in my life (I knew him since I was like 2 or 3) in here with me. Also my personality played a factor because I am easy going, but well aware. I have many associates, yet I have only a few friends who I actually call my brothers.

-James S.

Making acquaintances is easy, making good, solid friendships is hard, not made any easier by the fact that the DOC shuffles incarcerated people around from place to place with no regard for the wishes of the incarcerated: at any time, people who have been best friends for years and years can be separated without warning by a faceless government bureaucracy.

-John G.

Not to be glib about the subject, but one does not typically make "friends" in prison. It is far more common to develop acquaintances. Though in Iowa prisons there is often less to worry about as far as danger and politics, it is still prison, and you have to be wise about who you trust and with what you trust them with. This means you rarely make genuine friends. Yes, you can find people you share interests with that help you pass the time. However, we must be wise and protect ourselves from the danger that might be lurking in the darkness.

-Xavier M.



No, it wasn't, and actually, I'm trying to give some away. Any takers? Lol!

-Michael K.

— What has been the hardest part — about being incarcerated?

Being away from my kids and my family, and the losses I've endured that perpetuate the feelings of being a failure... Being incarcerated makes you powerless and subjected to rules of oppression that you consciously welcomed in partiality... Watching how the world moves on without me, it just made me realize how easy it is for the people closest to you get use to living life without you, and how it creates distance that's not measured by space or mileage...

—James W.

The hardest part of being in prison, for me anyway, has been seeing the toll it has taken – is taking – on my family. That's another thing that I'd like people who've never experienced prison to know: Prisons punish the families of prisoners just as harshly, probably more so, than they do those incarcerated.

—Brad E.

Experiencing slavery! As a black man, to be shackled is to re-live what my ancestors lived through. Every time that steel touches my flesh, my heart breaks and the mindset of Nat Turner kicks in!

—Michael K.

Being away from family.

—Dwayne W.

Dealing with fellow inmates and overly active officers have been the hardest due to lack of understanding.

—Devwon B.

The hardest part of being incarcerated has been watching my daughter grow up without me. Until now we were virtual strangers. The second hardest part of incarceration for me has been the fact that I took a person's life.

—John G.

The hardest/most difficult part is missing out on my children's lives, missing those milestones and teaching moments, not being able to be there the moment they need me. My son graduated from high school last year and is still trying to find his way through life while battling depression. This is my daughter's last year of high school, and she's trying to figure it out as well. They have some support, but they let me know that they need me. The best I can do from here is pray and offer them the best advice that I have. I really just want to be able to hold them when they are down, letting them feel that it's going to be okay, but I can't physically be there. I had not missed a day of my children's lives until my incarceration. I was there for every moment, from the least to the

greatest. Their lives were secure in the fact that I was always around, always the main person they relied on for everything. This actually made it more difficult for them because all they knew was me being there, then poof, I was gone. I do my best from here, but I can't replace the time I missed. I realized it was like I had passed away, my kids mourned the loss of me due to my incarceration as I was mourning the loss of my whole life (family, freedom, job, etc.). I wrote it in a song where I said, "I'm none the wise, everybody's got a plan until they get punched in the eye, questioning where everybody stands. When I left my son was a boy and now he's grown into a man. I'm confused, I don't know whether to dap him up, give him a hug, or shake his hand, and my little mama's, she ain't so little no more. I hardly recognized her as she walked through the door. I've taken all I can take and I can't take it for sure, something has got to shake because it's breaking my core." I do my best to stay connected by writing letters that detail my life and giving my children advice as well as calling them weekly to check in. I do my best to guide them out or through anything that they may be dealing with in their lives to the best of my abilities. Standing firm in my faith has given me a better perspective to help me, which translates into helping the best I can, giving it all over to God.

-James S.

The hardest part for me was facing myself and my reality from the inside out! I used to be a very broken person. This brokenness, born from childhood trauma, led to my becoming an emotionally distraught individual who utilized several unhealthy and ineffective techniques to address internal struggles. This included drugs, alcohol, sex, and other aspects of distraction to ignore the suffering inside or otherwise lessen its impacts on my daily life. Overall, I developed into an addict who avoided the uncomfortable reality I was too cowardice to face. Eventually this decay manifested in greater complications that led to my incarceration.

Being honest with myself, accepting my true state of existence, taking ownership of my poor choices, and then investing in changing what was broken inside was the hardest part of my incarceration. This meant I had to take responsibility for my poor choices and tear down the facade I had created. I had to openly admit I needed help and wasn't the happy, well-adjusted person I had let the world around me believe I was. Allowing yourself to be that vulnerably transparent is extremely hard! It wasn't the being sequestered from my life as I knew it that was the most disruptive; that was probably the best option so I had no more distractions to avoid myself. It was the opening up about the me which I feared.

-Xavier M.

— How do you maintain hope? —

My kids, looking forward to seeing them have life, and being a part of that gives me hope. I have met good people in support of me today, something I never had; I'm living the worse times of my life, and believing in God, I believe in the promise of having life in abundance, so I know this ain't all He have for me... I lived my whole existence mingling with death, and that's because I harbored no hope, so now that I yearn for life, I know hope in the heart promotes life, and you have to align your self with what you desire, and that's hope... In order to see the good, we gotta outlast the bad, and I'm hellbent on that...

-James W.

I don't really /maintain/ hope; a quarter century in a cage has left me without the emotional strength needed to hold onto something so heavy as hope. That's not to say that I never feel hopeful, but I experience it with the full understanding that it is fleeting. Knowing that I have comrades, that there are people in the world who care enough to ask these questions and listen to the answers gives me hope.

-Brad E.

By never losing it!

-Michael K.

My belief in God and family.

-Dwayne W.

I maintain hope by doing what I can to be helpful to the community I live in and seeing the people I live with support each other in the midst of a very negative situation.

-John G.

By talking to my elders and reading the Bible.

-Devwon B.

I don't mean to sound cliché or speak glibly when I say I lean strongly into my faith (Mahayana Buddhism), in which I am ordained as a Sramanera. We teach about what is referred to as the Four Noble Truths: Suffering exists; There is a causation to suffering; There is a way to end suffering; The way is the Eightfold Path. Please note "suffering" is a bit of a strong word, though it is the most commonly used for English language to translate the work "duhka." In earnest, it is probably far more accurate and relevant translated in English as "incapable of satisfying."

Oftentimes, we must accredit our "suffering" (duhka) as related to one major theme in our lives...grasping, or wanting. This "wanting" is a desire for things to be other than they are, which is delusional. Things can be no other way than what they are as a direct result of cause and effect (karma). For things to be otherwise, something different would have to have taken

place.

When we accept that we cannot make situations other than what they are, that they are all impermanent in their existence and in an ever-fluctuating state of change, it becomes more bearable knowing that this too will end and become something different. We don't want to make it change, we merely acknowledge this too will change. Even the less than enjoyable will cease.

Embracing these understandings allows me to maintain hope that tomorrow is a new day, a new opportunity, and provided the occasion to contribute in bettering the world around me one person at a time. I know that if I can stay mindful and accept reality as it truly is, there is nothing to lose hope over, merely a chance to practice acceptance and cultivate compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, and patience, referred to as the Four Immeasurables.

I highly suggest reading Ven. Dr. Douglas Gentil's book *Finding Freedom to Get Unstuck and Be Happier* for more details and a greater explanation of the ideas discussed about karma, how we cling to our suffering through grasping and wanting, and the fundamental ideals of psychology and Buddhism basics.

-Xavier M.

I maintain hope by my faith. When I was first incarcerated, I was wavering my belief in God or a god in general. I didn't want anything to do with religion. I had very little hope, and the hope I did have dwindled each moment. All the things that mattered in my life were stripped away and I was losing more and more every day. My future was without life. Then God brought a book in my life that changed everything. I had no intention of trying to read the Bible after many failed attempts, but this time it was different. I saw myself and my life. I have not gone a day without reading it since, and my life has not been the same. Every time I mention it I laugh because I never thought I'd be the one to say these things. I've gained a hope I never knew existed and I live according to that hope. My hope has given others hope, and I have hope that no matter the outcome, whether I have something change in court for me or not, even if the most drastic thing I could image happens, it won't shake. I have hope because of my faith which leads me to believe that it all works out for His greater good. I went from being down, depressed, worried, full of anxiety and pain to relieved, happy, full of promise, joy, and hope.

-James S.

— What would your definition of justice be? —

A righteous response to a particular situation, where the outcome satisfies the circumstance. Justice is like truth, it cannot be altered, nor one-sided...
-James W.

I feel there is a definitive difference from what is true "justice" and what is simply retribution. Most people find they want to feel vindicated, "paid back," or otherwise there has been some equal punishment done unto another to extract a means of eye for an eye for wrong done to them (retribution). This is not justice! Justice is more like insurance, it isn't meant to put you in a greater place than you were before, or provide something different than what was. Justice is restoring the status quo by enforcing a means of amends, appreciation for others, and gratitude for contributing to our society in a wholesome and healthy way. Justice is about instilling a sense of empathy for our interconnected experience within those who have gone wayward from their fellow beings into a world of delusional greed and selfishness.
-Xavier M.

Shit, who am I to say? I don't think it's a matter of punishment, it's not vengeful. I guess true justice would maybe be self negating. A truly just world would be one in which the conditions which necessitate the actions of justice simply don't exist. Does that make sense...?
-Brad E.

Justice is not easy to define, at least for me, and I think for most people if they're honest. Justice is the end result of a committed wrong that happened towards a individual, group or affected party. Justice is vengeance, retribution that can be attributed from a derived pain or loss and the affected party seeks relief from the wrong that has caused mental distress. A distress that will always remain. So justice is a false result. It can also be a positive result if one achieves a goal and feels vindicated by the accomplished end result. It does not always have to be negative, but it's mostly used in that way.
-Michael K.

My definition of justice is a process whereby harm is investigated, the party responsible is given a meaningful opportunity to answer, and the consequences for causing harm should focus on healing the parties involved, including the perpetrator. Most crime is traceable to just a few real causes: Lack of resources, lack of education, lack of opportunity, psychological illness or disorder, and uncontrolled impulse. In my opinion, drug crimes aren't real and shouldn't exist, property crimes (outside of vandalism) are the product of a stratified society and a culture of conspicuous consumption and shouldn't exist. Crimes of violence, in my experience, aside from psychological illness and an acculturation to a society that glamorizes those who use force in the acquisition of material wealth and social prestige, are mostly the result of the consumption of alcohol, plain and simple, and only a rare few are the result of a passionate impulse. There are also people who have committed acts of violence as a result of their participation

in the illicit drug trade and organizations funded by the trade (both of which could be solved by legalizing drugs and offering resources and opportunity to those who might see it as a vehicle for participation in a consumerist society). Sexual assaults are the product of a culture that doesn't value all of its members equally, that rests its power on a hierarchy of force, where the use of force is glorified as an ideal male model, in a society where solving problems through peaceful means can be admired, but where use of force is always respected. Serial rapists and murderers, in my experience are people with minds so disordered that they must be sequestered from the general public until their illnesses are fully understood. It is not safe for them to be in the public at this stage in our understanding. Justice requires us to not only heal the injured party, but to heal the person who caused their harm, examine closely what led to the harm, and use our resources to prevent the circumstances that gave rise to the harm in the first place.

-John G.

My definition of justice is not easily defined because of many cultural and biased views that may be given from my position. The definition of justice is to rectify, to make things right, to show impartiality. Making things right should show some form of equality. Because of my position, I feel that I have an understanding of two main justice systems, God's justice which is pure, right, and merciful, and man's justice which is obscure, disrupted, unequal, and convoluted. The American public has been fed so much negative propaganda on criminals, it has brainwashed the communities and dehumanized people that have been or are incarcerated. I was one of those brainwashed people until I found myself on this side. The U.S. justice system is not

just. Lady Justice holds scales in her hand because justice is supposed to be handed out evenly and a blindfold to show equality for everyone, no matter race, gender, status, etc. The reality is that the scales are overly tipped to one side and the system turns a blind eye to inequality. It has been used more as political talking point to gain more votes and is less about justice and keeping the public safe. From the way it looks, all that talk about cleaning up the streets is a one dimensional talking point because it never gets clean when the only solution is to lock people up forever without offering them anything. Politicians tell the public they will be tough on crime to make communities safer, but we fail to wonder how and question whether it works or not. Do people know what justice is or are they only happy with what they think justice is? Is justice when someone makes a mistake or even purposely breaks the law and are not given a fair shot at trial because they don't have the funding to retain an attorney that has the time to represent them? They go through their first trial, are convicted of a crime, and are given a sentence of 25 years with a 17.5 year mandatory, and the only way to go back to court to show they weren't properly represented is to file a relief. Before this takes place, they spend their time incarcerated waiting to get into a court system that is backed up, represented by another attorney who is overworked and

underpaid, hoping to get a chance to argue. Decades have been spent reforming the system to make things more difficult for a convicted person to prove their claims. As the person waits, their kids are growing up, their relationship with their spouse has been strained by the separation, and they've lost many loved ones to death without a real chance to say goodbye. The healthcare does not meet general expectations, and they may die from a life-threatening illness despite not having a life sentence. Even a person who completes a lengthy sentence, had no real run-ins with C.O.'s or other inmates, went to religious services, kept involved in groups and positive activities, added to their life, their family's life, and the lives of those around them, is still denied employment after employment upon release. They are on lifetime parole. They are looked down upon and just want to live the rest of their days as a free person, but every day comes with more difficulties. They do not start with a clean slate, but are starting in the negative. Are any of these scenarios justice? If we don't

remove our humanity, then we can honestly answer, but not without the lack of thought. How do we work to secure a life where we are actually doing our best to understand justice?



This zine was compiled by the Des Moines Abolition Coalition with help from Iowa City Mutual Aid. If you have feedback or further questions for the respondents, please contact us at prisonabolitiondsm@gmail.com