



## SPECIAL EDITION: Prison Issues in Pennsylvania

### Mandatory Life Without Parole for Juvenile Offenders Abolished: The Fight Continues

By Robert Saleem Holbrook and Dr. Kristi Brian

Movements struggling for the abolition of prisons received a much needed boost of optimism on June 25, 2012, when the United States Supreme Court's ruling in *Miller v. Alabama* and *Jackson v. Hobbs* finally struck down mandatory life without parole sentences for juvenile offenders. This long-awaited first step towards the elimination of one of the most unforgiving tendencies of mass imprisonment has created a hopeful stir. Yet in Pennsylvania, which has more juvenile lifers than any other state, much is yet to be determined. There still exists a vocal and aggressive opposition comprised of certain victim rights advocacy groups and "law and order" politicians who are afraid of being labeled soft on criminals. These opponents vow to maintain the sentence in spirit by attempting to deny the retroactive application of the ruling to hundreds of juvenile lifers in Pennsylvania and seeking to enact draconian sentences that would require juveniles to serve a minimum of 40 years in prison before being considered for parole.

Furthermore, while states can no longer administer *mandatory* life without parole sentences for juveniles, in practice states still have the option to impose life without parole sentences on juvenile offenders so long as an alternative sentencing scheme exists. Thus, the sentence in its entirety has not been abolished. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court heard arguments on September 12, 2012 to determine how the U.S. Supreme Court's decisions will apply in Pennsylvania, but has yet to reach a ruling.

There is no doubt that the decision is a victory for prisoners and our advocates and allies; however, there is much more work that remains to be done to ensure that the Court's ruling is applied retroactively and that the state does not adopt a sentencing scheme for juvenile offenders that essentially guarantees they will die in prison under a de facto life without parole sentence. To stay updated on this issue, please email the Pennsylvania Coalition for the Fair Sentencing of Youth at [pacfsy@gmail.com](mailto:pacfsy@gmail.com) and request to be placed on their update list.

The struggle continues,  
Robert Saleem Holbrook and Dr. Kristi Brian

*\*The article above was guest written and co-contributed by Robert Saleem Holbrook and Dr. Kristi Brian. Holbrook is an active member of the Philadelphia-based Human Rights Coalition and frequent collaborator of BTB. He is also a politicized prisoner serving a Juvenile Life Without the Possibility of Parole sentence in PA. You can join his Facebook page at: [www.facebook.com/groups/freesalim](http://www.facebook.com/groups/freesalim). Dr. Kristi Brian is the Director of Diversity Education and Training at the University of Charlotte in North Carolina.*

#### LETTERS TO BTB

*Thank you very much for working so hard to reach us prisoners with an alternative solution—education—to help make our futures more promising.*

– CC, a prisoner in MD

*I'm happy there's an organization out there like yours, because it keeps people like me striving for more...*

– JM, a prisoner in PA



*Barbara Hirshkowitz, a founding member of Books Through Bars and a core member of the organization for many years, passed away in 2007. We are pleased to share with you that the Mariposa Food Co-op will honor Barbara by giving her name to a new library it is creating. The Barbara J. Hirshkowitz library will be located on the second floor of Mariposa's new building at 4824 Baltimore Ave., and will include books related to food justice, anti-oppression, diversity, and more. For more information, visit [www.mariposa.coop/events](http://www.mariposa.coop/events).*

## Communities Rally Against Prison Expansion



On July 17, 2012, community members from Philadelphia and Montgomery County gathered to protest the construction of two new prisons on the grounds of SCI Graterford in Montgomery County. Part of a growing campaign against the controversial prison expansions planned in Pennsylvania, the demonstration called on Governor Corbett to cancel the construction while in its early stages and to instead reinvest the remaining tax dollars in institutions that strengthen communities. At a time when many other states across the country are exploring ways to shrink their prison population and close unnecessary facilities, Pennsylvania is moving in the opposite direction. Governor Corbett intends to spend \$685 million to expand the state's already massive prison system. The rally was organized by Decarcerate PA, a statewide coalition of organizations and individuals seeking an end to mass incarceration and the harm it brings our many communities. Decarcerate PA is demanding

that the state of Pennsylvania stop building prisons, reduce the prison population, and reinvest money in our communities. To learn more about their campaign and/or to sign on to their 3-point platform, see [www.decarceratepa.info](http://www.decarceratepa.info).

## LEGISLATIVE UPDATE: Bill SB100 takes steps toward prison reform in PA, but leaves more work to be done

A new state law takes important steps toward prison reform in Pennsylvania. Senate Bill 100 (SB100), which received bipartisan support and was signed into law by Governor Corbett on July 5, 2012, includes several provisions, among them:

- Allowing more low-risk, nonviolent offenders to enter alternative sentencing programs;
- Allowing parolees who commit technical parole violations to enter community corrections programs, rather than returning to state prisons (note: technical parole violations would not be considered crimes in the general population; examples include missing appointments with a parole officer, changing address without notifying a parole officer or having a positive urine test for alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs).
- Decreasing the number of low-level offenders with short sentences placed in state prisons (which are often far away from family and community support).

Additionally, the law includes a provision called the Safe Community Reentry Plan, which requires the DOC to take measures to reduce recidivism, including pre-release planning and cooperation with parole officers, local government programs, and community-based organizations.

*(continued on page 7)*

## Address This! (continued from page 1)

*Reading the responses of the participants has been a rewarding experience. You can literally see their struggles with the questions and then, a flash of discovery, as they reach inside for a personal experience or reflection to share in the course of fashioning an answer. Whether in a maximum security prison cell or in the hole/isolation, for a moment they cease being prisoners and their humanity and individuality surfaces.*

– Address This! co-founder  
Robert Saleem Holbrook

one participant wrote, “I have read a good number of books over the years while in solitary confinement, but I was really never challenged to clearly express my thoughts in writing.” Another participant spoke of the intellectual fulfillment and personal transformation that he had experienced from reading the materials, stating that, “The readings I’ve received are very informative and insightful. All the info is of cultural, personal, ethical, and moral interest to me and my growth in becoming a better me.” Robert Saleem Holbrook, the project’s co-founder, believes that the courses are just that: designed not only to educate but to “invoke critical thinking in the hopes that the participants in the course will emerge from it with a new outlook on their lives and their present situation, believing that they can change not only themselves but also their circumstances.”

*Address This!* is now well into its second round of courses. Ask Abendroth what has been most exciting about the project, and she responds that it is the enthusiastic and dedicated efforts of its many collaborators and participants, especially the combined spirit of imagination and gravity with which people have taken up the challenge to create an educational project that not only imparts information but empowers individuals and builds community. In her words, “While the U.S. Prison system seeks to break existent ties of affinity and community through policies of isolation, censorship and silence, *Address This!* alternately works to contribute to the rebuilding and enlarging of those alliances and support networks.”

*Address This! heartily welcome your support in this endeavor. If you would like to get involved with or provide material/ financial support to this project, please email [info@booksthroughbars.org](mailto:info@booksthroughbars.org) with the subject line "Address This!". In particular, the program always needs volunteers to transcribe the monthly responses to the discussion questions for each course.*



*Long-time volunteers Ben and Sally Fritzson share information about Books Through Bars with members of Main Line Unitarian Church. Thanks to Ben, Sally, and Main Line Unitarian for their support!*

## DONOR SPOTLIGHT: **Barbara Gurley**



### MONTHLY DONOR (“SUSTAINER”) + VOLUNTEER

After working for 36 years as a Library Assistant for the Free Library of Philadelphia, Barbara Gurley retired in 2008 and soon started searching for volunteer opportunities. Two of Barbara's Facebook friends connected her to Books Through Bars and she began volunteering in 2009. Barbara's involvement as a volunteer has grown exponentially over the past three years and she is now an integral part of our organization.

In addition to regularly attending BTB's Saturday book packing events, Barbara also volunteers as a letter-logger, entering individual book requests into our database from her home computer on a weekly basis. Further, the depth of Barbara's support for BTB goes well beyond the volunteer hours she commits to the organization every month. In 2010, Barbara visited our Network for Good donation page and signed up to become one of BTB's first sustainers (monthly financial donors).

Barbara recently reported, “whenever anyone asks me what I am doing since I have retired, I mention Books Through Bars.” And it is in that supportive, enthusiastic spirit that Barbara graciously agreed to have the donor spotlight shone on her, in hopes of encouraging other BTB supporters to become sustainers themselves. Thank you, Barbara, for all you do for Books Through Bars!

**Become a BTB Sustainer!** What is a “sustainer”? A sustainer is a donor who signs up to make a recurring donation to support the work of BTB. A donation is automatically taken out of your bank account or charged to your credit card, at whatever interval you choose (monthly, quarterly or annually), and donated to BTB through our Network for Good online account. Visit our website and click on the Network for Good “DONATE NOW” button to sign up! Any donation, large or small, is appreciated and will be put to good use!

**THANK YOU to ALL of our donors across this past fiscal year!** While our many generous individual donors are happily too numerous to name, we wanted to highlight our diverse income stream by giving you a small window into its breadth. Some of our recent contributors included:

- Incarcerated Donors (\$292 donated!)
- Broad Street Run Donors to Team Bookin' It!
- Dock Street Fundraiser Attendees
- Dictionary Fund Donors (Over 500 dictionaries purchased!)
- Bread and Roses/Phoebus Fund Grant
- Yale Elizabethan Club
- University of the Sciences
- *Address This!* “Dirty Dancing” Movie Fundraiser

### How Will Your Donation Support BTB?

- \$4** will purchase 1 dictionary
- \$15** will pay for the shipment of 3-5 packages
- \$25** will purchase a full box of books to a prison library
- \$50** will purchase materials for 1 student participating in an *Address This!* correspondence course
- \$75** will pay for a guest speaker fee for a formerly incarcerated person to come share their experiences
- \$100** will pay for the shipment of 25 packages (50-100 books!)
- \$250** will support the shipping and materials cost for a youth service learning session

# EDUCATE

# INCARCERATE

## Education Funding



\$11,110 /YR Per Student  
SUBURBAN

\$8,985 /YR Per Student  
CITY



## Corrections Funding



\$31,900 /YR  
Per Prisoner

7¢ of every tax dollar is used to fund prisons and corrections

United States has 1/4 of the world's Prisoners



PA is ranked 43rd of 50 in educational funding equality among income levels.



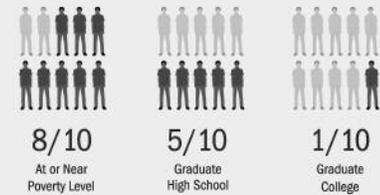
PA is one of the worst funders of education, second only to Nebraska.

## Philadelphia Poverty and Education

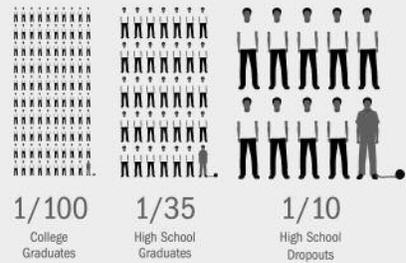
Compared to the Nation's Largest Cities

Philadelphia has the highest % of poor people

Philadelphia has the lowest % of college graduates



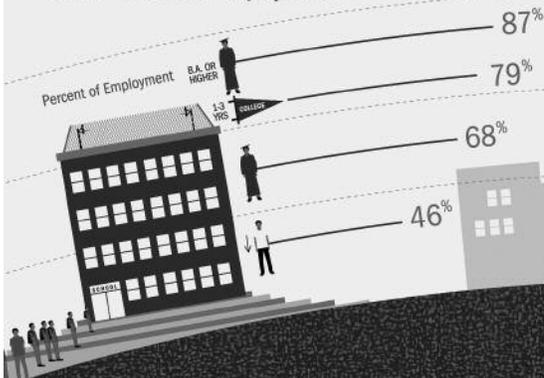
## US Education and Incarceration



## US Incarceration Demographics

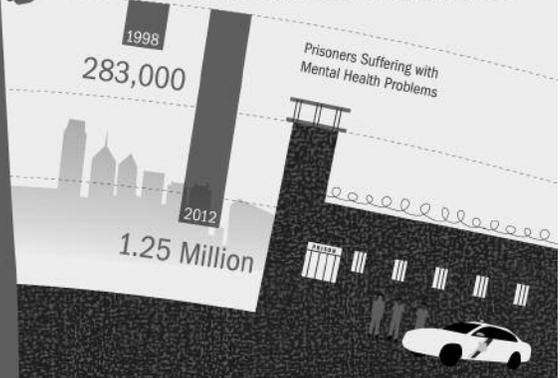


## US Education and Employment

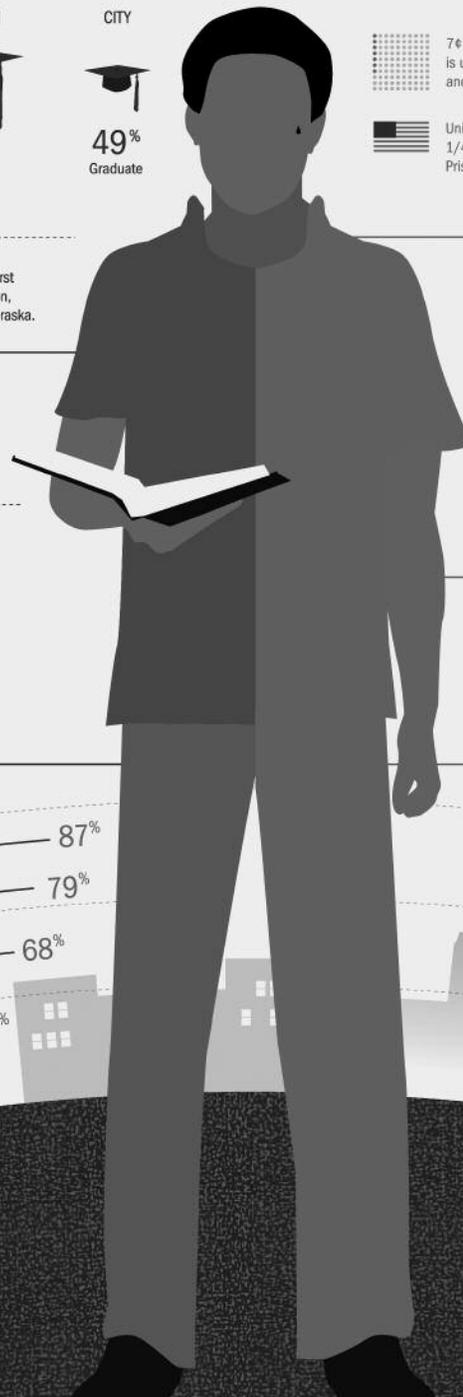


#20 in Education Globally

## US Incarceration and Mental Illness



#1 in Incarceration Globally



## The Philadelphia Prison Library Project

The Philadelphia Prison Library Project, a working group within Books Through Bars, recently stepped forward to fill the need of yet another Philadelphia prison library. At the behest of a reading-friendly warden, we recently donated four boxes of books to the Detention Center, one of six area facilities within the Philadelphia Prison System. A few weeks later, we went to the prison to give the library's inmate workers an overview of how to process and maintain what will hopefully be an expanding collection. One prisoner greeted us at the library, a multi-purpose room with lockers for bookshelves, by exclaiming: "I've been waiting for y'all!" At the time of our visit, the library's holdings consisted of only a few dozen outdated books, although the warden was recently allocated funding and subsequently purchased a large quantity of Islamic material. The prisoners who work in the library were attentive as we explained how to catalogue and organize the books and they asked useful questions afterwards. Currently we only have the capacity to play an advisory role in the library's day-to-day operation, but we're committed to working closely with both the warden and the prisoners to ensure that quality material continues to reach their burgeoning collection.

## LEGISLATIVE UPDATE *(continued from page 3)*

In short, this bill has the potential to divert non-violent offenders and ex-offenders with minor parole violations from stays in overcrowded state prisons. Any move towards reducing Pennsylvania's prison population is a step in the right direction — especially given the fact that, "[d]espite crime rates that have been mostly stable or declining, Pennsylvania's incarceration rate has risen dramatically over the past several decades."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, in the amendment process to the bill, one important program that supports ex-offenders while saving costs was axed. This program allowed some prisoners to serve the final months of their minimum sentences in a half-way house rather than state prison. As Hakim Ali and Layne Mullett of Decarcerate PA stated in a recent op-ed, "[p]re-release gives people the chance to re-enter their communities and begin rebuilding their lives. It also saves the state money without compromising public safety. Eliminating the ability of men and women to earn pre-release is costly and shortsighted."<sup>2</sup>

As this new law takes effect, it will be important for concerned citizens to monitor its progress, particularly in regards to community corrections programs. Ideally, community corrections centers would make it easier for the convicted to maintain ties to work, family, and community, because they'll be close to home, rather than "upstate." However, Ali and Mullett question the nature of community corrections centers, stating:

Sending people to Community Corrections Centers merely shifts the cost to different facilities. If a person on parole commits a technical parole violation...is it really a wise investment of taxpayer money to confine that person? It makes more sense to spend money on programming, treatment, and resources that help people on parole lead successful lives and stay out of prison.<sup>3</sup>

We'll be sure to keep you updated on further legislative developments.

<sup>1</sup>"Managing Population Growth – Budget Presentation 2010." PA Department of Corrections, February 2010.

<sup>2</sup>"True Prison Reform Continues to Elude Pennsylvania." Hakim Ali and Layne Mullett. July 9, 2012.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid

# Donate Books — Get Involved

Books Through Bars is dependent upon your donations of quality reading material. We ALWAYS need the following kinds of books:

- Dictionaries (English, Spanish-English, law)
- Black history and fiction
- Legal resources
- GED study guides
- High-school level textbooks and workbooks in paperback
- Introductory College textbooks in paperback
- Yoga, meditation, and exercise
- Vocational skills
- Money management, personal finance, small business

**For all categories, paperback books are greatly preferred** (many prisons don't accept hardback). We do not need: fiction that is hardback, romance novels, out-of-date texts or reference books, any books that are very old or in poor condition.

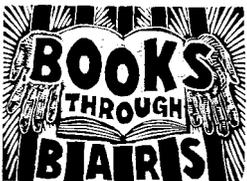
Books can be donated Tuesday evenings 7:30-9:30pm and the 1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month 11am - 2pm at 4722 Baltimore Ave, Philadelphia. Contact us to arrange an alternate drop-off time.

## Volunteer with Books Through Bars!

You can select and package books for prisoners, organize a fundraiser, help with office work, or share your special skills with us.

Visit our website to find out how to get involved:

[www.booksthroughbars.org/get-involved/volunteer](http://www.booksthroughbars.org/get-involved/volunteer) or call 215-727-8170



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