

## Going Back Inside: Reflections - Denzel Burke

While co-authoring this report, I turned 21. Even though I was on COVID lockdown, it was the first birthday, since I turned 14, that I celebrated as a free person. I spent five years locked up in youth prisons and detention facilities in Illinois. Birthdays 15-20 were behind bars, and only due to a change in the law regarding the transfer of juveniles to adult criminal court in 2017, I was able to spend my 21st birthday on the outside.

### In This Issue:

- ❖ Denzel Burke co-facilitated, along with CFJC/ABA Fellow Sarah Silins and Northwestern law students, most of the “inside” convenings at the five youth prisons.
- ❖ Denzel served five years inside Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ) youth prisons.
- ❖ When offered the opportunity to head back inside to work on this project, he courageously went back into the facilities where he had spent so much of his youth. These are his reflections.

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Illustration by Brian Herrera

Sarah, from the *Reimagining Youth Justice Project*, called me about a week after my release last summer. She asked if I would help her co-lead workshops for kids inside the five youth prisons in Illinois. I had served time in four of the five facilities. I could not have imagined myself walking back into a prison I used to do time in, for any reason. I knew I would not be a corrections officer, even though I know it is a

job that pays well. I would not be able to sleep at night, knowing I would be participating in locking kids up.

However, the opportunity the *Reimagining Youth Justice Project* offered me was different. I wasn't going back into a facility to play a role in locking kids down; I was coming back to uplift their often forgotten voices. I was excited to bring

even a little joy, happiness, or opportunity for the youth to feel proud of those locked inside. The experience of walking back through the prison doors once I was free was one of a kind. Some youth still inside, I knew personally, and some I even knew well and considered family. Do not get me wrong; I was nervous to walk back through those loud locked doors. I mean, I was worried how the youth would receive me, now that I am no longer in the same situation as they were. I was also worried about how the guards would look at and talk to me. On my way, walking from the car to the facility, emotions came over me, some good and some the remembrance of trauma. Sarah stopped one last time and asked if I was okay, and reminded me that I did not have to go back. I remember feeling a jolt of encouragement, and I was excited to be there to help give a voice to my brothers (and sisters at one of the facilities) inside. Once we were inside walking down the halls, I felt comfortable. I walked those halls for months, and at some places, years. It was my high school, my home, and my family. I know that might sound odd, to feel comfortable in an institution that locked me behind a door each night when I went to sleep. That made coming back feel so much more important, making sure that the voices of those who know what it is like when the hallways that hold your freedom become comfortable can lead us to better solutions to support young people, even when they get in trouble.

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I learned a lot over the 30-plus workshops Sarah and I did together in my first year out of prison. My mind is full of memories and experiences from our workshops. I have tried to highlight some of the most significant for me. The workshops allowed youth to vocalize their experiences, both since being involved with the system and before, and how those experiences shaped their ideas for innovative solutions to better address a future version of themselves. Even though we did something so simple, at

the end of each workshop, we were always, I mean always, asked to come back to have more conversations. They were thrilled to have the opportunity to provide creativity for the future; it was amazing to watch their

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excitement. We always asked to meet with the youth with no guards in the room. We had no issues, no disrespect, interruption, or any disruptive behavior. These kids are supposed to be the “worst” kids in Illinois. We played games, passed around food and treats, and the youth dispersed all we brought amongst themselves and shared. We always ran out of time because there was so much they wanted to talk about. I was shocked to see that very few youth knew much about what rehabilitation meant, even though that is supposedly what the system is trying to provide. They usually could not even give us a basic definition of the word, even though they all probably heard it a million times during their court proceedings. As part of the workshop, we would ask the youth to pretend they were judges, and we would give them a hypothetical young person to sentence. Not one youth participant ever sentenced the “youth” in the scenario, without first asking about the youth’s circumstances, WHY they were there, and what their life was like — they were much more interested in the kid than in the case.

Maybe the most important thing I felt the youth shared was their desire to do better when they got out. These young people face huge challenges in their home communities. Violence, poverty, poor education, lack of opportunity, and many other obstacles exist, but to them, it is normal everyday life. The youth in the workshops consistently shared that if there were more to do in the

community, they would be involved in those activities. The streets offer very little other than gangs, and otherwise, you have to have money to access opportunities outside of the community. I always appreciated how they responded to me sharing my story. They asked for me to come back again and have more people with shared

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experiences talk to them about navigating through life once they get out and overcoming the obstacles they face. They need someone to hear them out and listen to what they have to say to understand where they want to go, and the difficulty they faced before coming to prison, and once they get out. So many of them have dreams of where they want to go. How can we provide them with a way to get there, because all we have been providing them with, after making a mistake in the field full of landmines they have to navigate in their communities, is prison. Their willingness to share personal stories that almost anyone would have a hard time sharing in a room with new faces (Sarah and often me) was amazing. Their expressions of gratitude always escorted us out of the room. They repeatedly thanked us for giving them a chance to speak. Our response was to let them know that they were the ones to thank! They were brave, and we wanted to let them know. In every group, emotions were high, and reflections often very deep. There was always a palpable feeling of their desire to create a society that doesn't produce harm, and that society doesn't have prisons, and their sincere wish to have a meaningful path forward.

Going back into prison to listen to young people helped me see my own life, and therefore so many of their lives differently. Most youth in the community don't have the perspective to know that so many people, even those who live a few miles down the road from them, are not facing the same challenges. Youth end up in prison as a punishment for behaviors and actions that is

usually in response to their environment. The environment is normalized for them, but it is anything but typical or equitable. Therefore, their decisions, and so often, the decisions that produce harm, must be addressed within the context of what young people are facing. So often, youth in prison are living in war zones. Being killed or locked up is common; there are bad outcomes everywhere they look.

When they look at the world, it is hard to feel that it is possible to avoid mistakes or find a way to make better choices. Going back inside and talking to youth showed me the impact of how where you grow up, the opportunities you are provided, the regularity of the trauma you face, and what you face in your everyday life shapes your perception of hope and the future. In my first weeks of college, someone showed me a photo of his high school in Florida. It looked like a resort. While I "knew" that not everyone went to a high school like mine, it was only when I went back into prison that I realized how many young people, myself included, cannot imagine outside of the reality of their daily lives.

After doing a couple of workshops, I asked a group of young people if they would know how to get a gun. They all either knew how or knew who to ask. Then I asked Sarah, in front of everyone, if she would know how to get a gun — and I knew what her answer would be — no. At that moment, I understood fully and began to communicate with the youth, how hard it is to understand the challenges they face. Everyone tells young people

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that they should not go down the route of being in the streets (joining a gang). But, since regular life is not so great either, and getting locked up is always a possibility that is looming over your head (that is just what being a black male is these days), dying is possible every day from living in the neighborhoods I and most of these youth

live in, so facing those options every day makes it hard to know what to do. Being locked up can mean you get three meals, a place to live, it is warm, you go to school, and you probably do not have to stay too long. Prison can become a poor kid's version of a Boy Scout badge. You go in, and you get out.

Families call the police on their kids because they hope it will help them learn, stay out of trouble, and be scared. Except, everything is scary. For some, going inside can make you seem tough, or cool, something to idealize. So often, no one is trying to help young people understand what is happening in their lives. Our lives are standard for us. Then even if it is more serious when you are 18, you are used to the system. Maybe because the system kept you safe, you can graduate from high school, and there is more to do inside than outside.

Until going back in, I did not understand the difference in what we provide to kids who do not have the same access to guns or the same proximity to violence. We already know what kids need. To be safe, have fun, have a decent education, have spaces to be with their friends safely. Kids from the hood are doing the best they can to get what they need.

Being back inside and noticing that some of the youth that we talked to didn't even know how to dream about options or opportunities outside of

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their neighborhoods caused me to understand what it means to punish people for lack of opportunity and what inequality looks like after impacting a young person's life and future. We know how to solve this problem – privileged kids get to go to therapy, boarding schools, or have access to programming in their local schools that help to get them on a path to a meaningful future.

Young people in prison do not have those options. So many young people like me are trapped, stuck in the system. They do not feel there is a real opportunity for a future. When I was growing up, I could not think beyond my 21st birthday, so it was hard for things to matter. Youth in prison need role models and things to dream about and look forward to; now is the time to reimagine how we can help them dream again.

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The full analysis and summary of the sessions described in this essay are issued in a companion report:

Sarah Silins, Denzel Burke, Thomas Hagan, and Jennifer Shanahan, *Imagination from Incarceration: Creative Convenings Inside Youth Prisons*, CHILDREN AND FAMILY JUSTICE CENTER, COMMUNITY SAFETY & THE FUTURE OF ILLINOIS' YOUTH PRISONS VOL. 8 (November 2020).