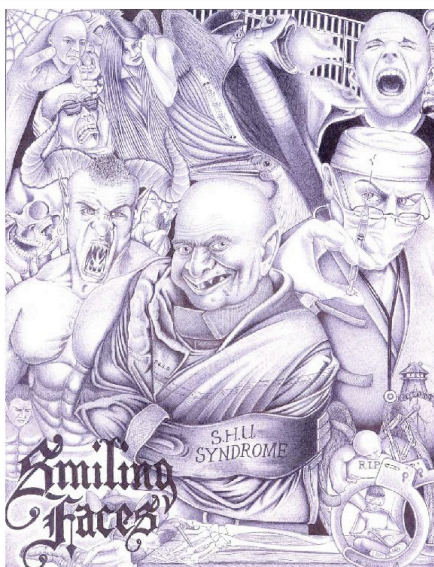
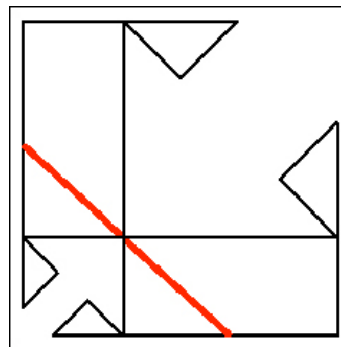


# Magazine Reviews



68

**California prison focus** (Also known as *Prison Focus*). Published quarterly. Summer 2009, Spring 2009, Summer 2008, Spring 2008. Edited by Leslie DiBenedetto and Ed Mead. 1904 Franklin Street, Suite 507. Oakland, CA 94612. \$20

*Prison Focus* is a vehicle for the advocacy organization California Prison Focus with short news articles and editorials focusing on California's incarcerated. California's prison situation is one of the worst in the

country. A 2008 *AP* article reported that though California's thirty-three prisons have a total capacity of 100,000 inmates, they are currently holding 170,000. One out of six prisoners in California is serving a life sentence, in part due to the state's Three Strikes Law. *Prison Focus* draws special attention to the Special Housing Units (SHUs), which are used to shelter 5,000 men and women in California's prison system. The SHUs are 9' x 6' cells where prisoners who are being isolated or punished for breaking rules, such as anti-gang regulations, are assigned to stay for twenty-three hours per day, including meal times. There are no work, education, or vocational training opportunities for these inmates, and many have no radio or television. No religious services are available to them.

California Prison Focus and the paper, *Prison Focus*, have the following mission: "to abolish the California prison system in its present condition [and to] investigate and expose human rights abuses with the goal of ending

long-term isolation, medical neglect, and all forms of discrimination." The organization is comprised of "community activists, prisoners, and their families educating and inspiring the public to demand change."

**California Prison Focus and the paper, *Prison Focus*, have the following mission: "to abolish the California prison system in its present condition [and to] investigate and expose human rights abuses with the goal of ending long-term isolation, medical neglect, and all forms of discrimination."**

The paper solicits articles, stories, editorials, news reports, poetry, photos, and artwork from prisoners and other writers. Every cover features a piece of artwork with a political or social message. Many articles are written by the incarcerated, including a feature section called "Writings

from Inside and Out," with stories from prisoners in high security institutions in the US about their lives and conditions in the prison system. The paper also conducts investigative journalism, with a strong history of interviewing prisoners. They have published over 1,000 prisoner interviews conducted over the course of forty-three prison visits by the California Prison Focus organization.

Some of the articles in the publication are excerpted or reprinted from other sources. Unfortunately, most of them do not cite sources, which would be helpful not only for verifying news stories but also for learning more about the stories reported there. In some of the most important news stories, there is coverage of recent lawsuits on behalf of

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prisoners for institutional misconduct, including sexual abuse, assault, rape, and torture. In a recent issue (Summer 2009), a story covered the rape of LGBT prisoners as a hate crime. Many of the articles feature a call to action on a particular issue, and with the paper's dedication to advocacy and change in the California prison system, there are often vehicles mentioned for protesting conditions and laws.

Most of the articles are short editorials or news pieces, but occasionally the paper features more in-depth studies on topics such as "Beyond Attica: The Untold Story of Women's Resistance Behind Bars," "What You Voted For: Marsy's Law," or "A Winter Visit to Pelican Bay." Many of the articles are excerpted from famous writers or pundits such as Eduardo Galeano, Bill Maher, or Mumia Abu-Jamal. Some stories are picked up from *The Associated Press*. While the focus is the California penal system, the paper's range covers prison and torture in Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, and Abu Ghraib.

The strength of *Prison Focus* is in providing succinct coverage of a variety of news stories and opinion pieces relevant to California's prisoners. Also noteworthy is the inclusion of prisoner art and poetry, with strong contributions coming to the paper in these areas. The paper would be an excellent addition to public libraries and academic libraries in California and surrounding states. It is a good, quick read for library patrons with an interest in criminal justice or political science to keep up with incarceration news and opinions around the country.



Photo from Wikimedia Commons

Recommended for libraries in California and for public and academic libraries with a patron interest in the prison system.—*Georgie Donovan*

## PRISON Legal News

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Dedicated to Protecting Human Rights  
October 2009

Texas Prisoners Still Dying in Houston Jails, Among Other Problems

by Gary Hunter

Freeman's foot struck someone to be his death warrant after it landed in his arrest and incarceration at the Harris County Jail in Houston, Texas, where he was fatally stabbed by a guard.

On New Year's Day in 2008, Freeman worked a double shift passing out meal trays at the jail. For his efforts, he was granted an extra day for himself.

When the extra day wasn't forthcoming, Freeman complained and said he wanted to file a grievance. In response, jail guard Yuhua Harfield accused Freeman of an infraction and said he could fill out a grievance form.

Harfield claimed that once at the cell, Freeman became aggressive.

called him a racial epithet and struck him with force, according to Harfield, he had to physically restrain Freeman.

Freeman's written account of the incident, given shortly before his death, described an entirely different scenario.

Freeman insisted that Harfield had no control over his own body functions.

"You're not locking the officer out of his hands around my neck to throw me to the ground," Freeman stated.

Freeman was in the hospital for a week.

The fact that Freeman had remained unharmed during the altercation was noted to Harfield's report. Harfield also admitted to using a chokehold, and noted he was not trained in applying such holds.

Consequently, there were no surveillance cameras in the area of the jail where the incident took place.

Another Harris County jail guard, Travis Vaughn, arrived on the scene in time to see both men on the floor. According to Vaughn, Freeman was on his stomach when he arrived. Vaughn helped handcuff Freeman, and the two guards then escorted the injured prisoner to the jail clinic.

Freeman complained of difficulty breathing, and medical staff took him to the Lyndon B. Johnson Hospital.

Shortly after giving authorization for treatment, Freeman developed a blood clot behind his head and was placed on life support. On January 3, 2008, doctors declared him brain-dead. A blood clot resulting from respiratory failure due to compression of his neck.

In his original report, Harfield stated that Freeman had become unresponsive and did not receive an extra meal tray, and Sgt. Harfield ordered him to eat. Freeman's means to an institution will then be considered a grievance. Sgt. Harfield's written version of events.

However, investigation learned that Harfield had been outside the jail taking an off-duty shift at the time of the incident, and therefore had no idea what actually happened. Both guards normally admitted that they had had.

Harfield and Harfield were fired on July 14, 2008. Yet after nine months of investigation and in spite of the medical examiner's homicide finding, a Harris County grand jury declined to indict either former guard in connection with Freeman's death. Instead, Harfield was only charged with lying in investigation.

Quonell S., a local Houston community activist, expressed outrage at the grand jury's decision. "It's a disgrace that the Harris County grand jury system once again has allowed murderers to go free. It is a gross violation of the Bill of Rights. African-American men remain nothing to the Harris County grand jury system. The jail has become a place to go to die."

Freeman had been serving a two-year sentence at a state jail on a bad check charge. He was transferred to Harris County to testify in a murder trial, and was due to be released in September 2008.

His wife, Cheryl Bradley-Freeman, suspects a cover-up. "He was not a dangerous man while I was taking care of and loving him in the home. I don't believe it," she said. "Somebody else in the jail

Inside	
From the Editor	2
Harris House	4
Survival in CH Prison	10
Maine Prisoners	12
Quintanaro/Not Chasing	14
Children Transferred Prisons	17
Sacramento Jail Not Settled	22
Florida Community News	25
Moonlight's Paper Jail	28
ROP FORA Fall	30
NEW MODEL FOR HEALTH	31
Los Angeles Prison 7Miles	32
News Brief	36

Prison Legal News

## 69

**Prison legal news.** Published monthly. October 2009, September 2009, August, 2009, July 2009, June 2009, July 2008, April 2008, March 2008. Edited by Paul Wright. 2400 NW 80th Street #148, Seattle, WA 98117. ISSN 1075-7578. Individual: \$25, Institution: \$60, Prisoner: \$18

*Prison Legal News* reports on legal cases and news stories related to prisoner rights and prison conditions at the nation's prison facilities. Because of the sheer number of prisoners in the US, publications that focus on their issues are crucial for libraries to collect.

According to *One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008*, the recent publication by the Pew Center on the States, more than one out of every 100 adults is now confined in an American jail or prison. For some communities, the statistics are staggering: though one in every 30 men between 20 and 34 is incarcerated, for African-American men in that age

group, the prison rate is one in nine. Consider the demographics of the public library, and there are likely many patrons whose lives are directly impacted by the prison system. At the academic library, while the patron demographics may (or may not) be different, there are programs throughout the university or college campus that focus on prison issues. The issues are of primary focus in criminal justice and political science programs, but as states are crippled by the costs—both financial and societal—of high incarceration, impacts show up in business, economics, education, psychology, sociology, and other fields.

*Prison Legal News* covers news and court rulings from prisons and jails around the country. In addition, smart journalists do some investigative journalism for the paper, with typically one feature-length story headlining each issue. Often, the articles make a political analysis of the prison system, for example, with an article about how mass incarceration became typical. The paper's tagline is "dedicated to protecting human rights," and the paper's perspective is that of an advocate for the incarcerated.

The headline article is typically either a historical piece with perspective and details about one aspect of the prison system or a piece of investigative journalism. For a historical piece, they have featured articles on the use of prisoners in medical experiments over the past sixty years, and for investigative journalism, they have made reports about sexual abuse and assault in youth facilities in Texas. Recent front-page headline stories have included: "Texas Prisoners Still Dying in Houston Jails, Among Other Problems," "Judges Benched for Personal Misconduct," and "The Case for Amending the Prison Litigation Reform Act." The September issue featured a guide to successful jury trials in prisoners' rights cases on behalf of prisoner-plaintiffs instead of a typical story. The article was written with the goal of assisting attorneys specifically but would be of interest to those plaintiffs pursuing a prisoners' rights case, as well as others.

The rest of the newsprint-format paper is dedicated to editorials and to news stories. Mumia Abu-Jamal is a columnist for the publication. The news stories cover changes in parole

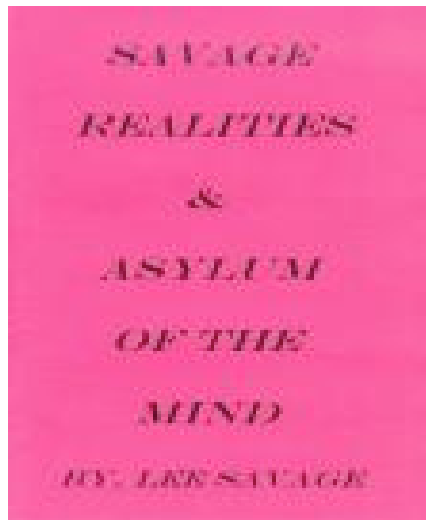
law, stories about guards imprisoned for custodial misconduct and promoting prison contraband, and coverage of prison riots and protests. In addition, there is a section that covers settlements and wins in lawsuits against guards for assault, sexual assault, and mistreatment. Columnists cover hot topics such as problems with prison health care and issues such as “hot bunking,” where prisoners will share the same assigned bed but over different shifts to compensate for overcrowded facilities.

One section of the paper advertises books about representing yourself, understanding the law, and politics of the penal system. Then, throughout the publication, there are other ads for services such as pen pals, help with legal work, prison calls, and gifts services for prisoners to use to send presents to their families.

**Columnists cover hot topics such as problems with prison health care and issues such as “hot bunking,” where prisoners will share the same assigned bed but over different shifts to compensate for overcrowded facilities.**

The paper does a good job of reporting news that is underreported in the media and difficult to come across—and they consistently report their sources for stories, which include major newspapers and media outlets. The columnists and reporters write clearly, and go to the heart of the controversy with each story. Particularly notable is the coverage of court cases focusing on prisoners’ rights, which has the cumulative effect of offering hope to those incarcerated and to advocates for their rights as well as providing legal fodder on which attorneys can build.

Subscription to *Prison Legal News* is recommended for public libraries and academic libraries, especially those with programs in criminal justice and political science.—*Georgie Donovan*



70

**Savage realities & asylum of the mind.** Written, edited, and published by Lisa “Lee” Savage. 15p 2009

While society is worrying about the economy or wars in the Middle East, Lee Savage is talking to whomever will listen about the suffering of female inmates. Instead of heading a trendy cause such as dog-fighting legislation or global warming, she is asking for people to consider the plights of those that society has deemed too dangerous to be among them.

In *Savage Realities & Asylum of the Mind*, Savage presents letters, speeches, and poems she wrote while she was a prisoner in solitary confinement in the Close Management Special Housing Units (CMSHU), “the highest classification of custody below Death Row.” Most of the zine regards the brutal treatment Savage and other women like her received in CMSHU, which included beatings, deprivation of clothes or blankets, and forced sedation. Women in CMSHU are restricted from their full potential by being brainwashed into becoming submissive and insecure individuals. They are abused until they realize their “rightful place as a sub-human slave.” Savage braves these

**Most of the zine regards the brutal treatment Savage and other women like her received in CMSHU, which included beatings, deprivation of clothes or blankets, and forced sedation.**

tactics, however, and comes out stronger and more willful than before.

While *Savage Realities* is powerful and shows the horror of what people must suffer while in solitary confinement, it leaves the reader with some questions. While Savage states that what placed her in CMSHU was a speech about freedom and anarchy she gave while in the general prison population, the omission of what she and the other inmates of CMSHU committed to get into prison originally is glaringly obvious. Savage is quick to blame her imprisonment on her political beliefs, but it is not a crime to be a feminist anarchist. It makes the reader think that perhaps Savage expected to receive less sympathy from society if she had revealed what her actual crime was or if some of the people in CMSHU had been exposed as violent criminals or repeat offenders. It is a disappointing omission because regardless of the original offense, readers should still be outraged by the degree of physical and emotional torture that our government would subject to any human being.

Even though it is written in an informal format, *Savage Realities* could use more thorough editing. Many simple grammatical errors exist such as opening quotations with no end quotations or misplacing punctuation. The formatting of the works, too, is difficult to read because there are often no indentions or line breaks at new paragraphs, although this was most likely done to save pages.

The poems would have been easier to read if the lines had been broken up more perceptibly. There seems to be an attempt at a rhyme scheme at points, but it’s difficult to grasp because everything is squeezed together to save space.

*Savage Realities & Asylum of the Mind* is an interesting and disturbing view of the American prison system and how women are treated within it. It is recommended for those interested in women’s rights, prisoners’ rights, anarchy, and human rights.

—*Brittany Weissler*