

09.21.2017



COMMENTARY

Making Sense of Senseless Violence

A Harvard sociologist on
a recent story from The
Marshall Project and the ways
violence begets more violence.

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THE MARSHALL PROJECT RECENTLY published [the story of Michelle Jones](#), a woman who spent 20 years in prison for the murder of her 4-year-old son. During her incarceration, she earned a

bachelor's degree and conducted original historical research on Indiana's penal system where she served her time. Earlier this year, she applied to be a Ph.D. student at Harvard. The history department admitted her but was overruled by the university. Michelle Jones will not go to Harvard.

The murder of a child triggers inexhaustible outrage. That outrage echoes over decades and seeps through the walls of remote places, even a graduate school at Harvard. Harvard, however, got it wrong. Jones's case, like many acts of terrible violence that yield long prison sentences, was rooted in a vicious and chaotic kind of poverty. These cases are morally complex, resisting easy judgment about guilt and accountability.

READ OUR STORY, [From Prison to Ph.D.: The Redemption and Rejection of Michelle Jones.](#)

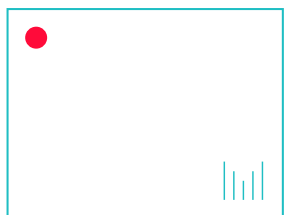
As a sociology professor and researcher at Harvard, I learned about such violence by talking to men and women who were leaving prison and returning to neighborhoods around Boston. Violence shrouded this research. Many people I spoke to had explosive tempers, delivered beatings, stabbings, and shot at their assailants. As teenagers, they got in brutal fights. And after prison, in their thirties and forties, some continued to raise hell among their partners, children, and neighbors.

But just as striking, most of those I interviewed were victims of serious violence and witnesses to violence since early childhood. I constructed life histories for a group of formerly-incarcerated men and women and found that 40 percent had witnessed a violent death as a child, and over half had lost a close friend or family member to accident, suicide or murder.

The people I met talked about how they were beaten as children until their teenage years when they got old enough to retaliate. Domestic violence and sexual abuse were also common in their childhood homes.

Like Jones, who says she became pregnant as the result of a rape and who was beaten with wood planks while carrying her son, the women I interviewed suffered brutal victimization. Most of the women in my study described rapes and histories of sexual violence that often began before adolescence and continued throughout their lives. Certainly not all victims of violence go on to be

perpetrators, but victimization greatly increases the likelihood, and serious victimization is an everyday reality for women who are incarcerated.



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The violence described to me grew out of poor and chaotic homes, and disorderly high-crime neighborhoods. Untreated addiction, mental illness, homelessness, and deep poverty combined to produce environments in which the respondents were often victims one day and offenders the next.

Violence and the abuse of children, in particular, prick our moral reflexes. We shrink away and demonize the abusers. But violent environments rarely present a bright line between victims and offenders. People who commit the most horrifying crimes have often suffered the darkest victimization.

And for all this, Michelle Jones is much more than all the violence she has known in her life. Her emergence as a student and historian is a great and sustained act of anti-violence. We join the project of anti-violence when we support her remarkable renewal, and abandon it when we pile on punishments of our own.

Violence is seldom simple and those who judge it should be sure they understand it.

Bruce Western is a professor of sociology at Harvard and a visiting professor at Columbia University.

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