

Documentary Highlights Sentencing Inequities Among Ohio Inmates

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By [Debbie Holmes](#) • Mar 11, 2019

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Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville, Ohio.

John Minchillo / Associated Press

Discrepancies in sentencing among Ohio inmates inspired a recent documentary on the inequities of the U.S. justice system.



The feature-length documentary [“Invisible Chess: The Jason Goudlock Story”](#) explains how a change in Ohio created a two-tiered justice system—leading to isolation and psychological damage for some prisoners.

In 1994, 18-year-old Jason Goudlock went to prison after his conviction for aggravated robbery and felonious assault. Under Ohio's old sentencing law, he received an indefinite maximum sentence of 25 years. He's among 4,000 inmates in Ohio are serving time under Ohio's "Old Law," which allowed for longer sentences and gave the Ohio Parole Board authority to extend them.

Ohio's new law, “Truth In Sentencing,” was passed in 1996. Under the new law, judges are given greater control: their sentence is the amount of time an inmate will serve. But the new law didn't affect those thousands of prisoners sentenced under the "Old Law."

William Nichols, a professor emeritus at Denison University, received a letter in 2008 from Goudlock, who inquired about an essay Nichols had written on prisons and torture.

“[Goudlock] feels that if he gets in a fight with a new law prisoner, he will have his sentence extended and the new law prisoner won't,” Nichols says. “He feels that puts him in danger, and so he has chosen for much of his time in prison since 1996 to be in isolation.”

Nichols says inmates isolate themselves in tiny cells rather than live among the general prison population to avoid fights that could land them more prison time.

“I felt there was an injustice that really was much more important than just one injustice for one inmate,” Nichols says.

Nichols, who produced the documentary, says newer prisoners consider Goudlock and other “Old Law prisoners” as second-class citizens. He says while Goudlock wrote a novel about his experience, there are not enough opportunities to work on improving life skills while in prison.

“I would like to see a kind of judicial review of 'Old Law' prisoners,” Nichols says. “More broadly, I would like to see kinds of legislation that introduce much more rehabilitative work, including a lot more education within the prisons. Because we know with more education, we reduce recidivism.”

“Invisible Chess: The Jason Goudlock Story” will be screened at Denison University's Center for Black Studies on March 11 at 7 p.m.

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