

Would You Let the Man Who Killed Your Sister Out of Prison?

By Campbell Robertson

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CINCINNATI — On a drizzly morning last summer, Patricia Jackson opened her door to two strangers. They told her they had come on behalf of a man named Angelo Robinson.

Ms. Jackson grew cold at the mention. Angelo Robinson was the man who had shot and killed her sister, Veronica, 21 years earlier. She told them she wanted nothing to do with him.

“I understand,” one of the women said, as she recalled. “Can I at least talk with you about some things?”

Reluctantly, Ms. Jackson let them in. And they talked about some things: tragic mistakes, remorse, retribution and the possibility of redemption.

Though the United States has the world’s largest prison population, attempts to roll back mass incarceration have largely been limited to inmates convicted of nonviolent crimes. Though more than half of those in state prisons were convicted of hurting or killing someone, their release has been, politically, off limits. Now an effort has begun in Ohio to change that, one case at a time.

Mr. Robinson, 42, the man who killed Veronica Jackson, has spent over half of his life and all of the 21st century locked away. He has stayed out of trouble, earned his GED, learned how to operate a forklift, picked up the guitar and started teaching himself Spanish. His first chance at parole — a long shot at best — will come in 2026.

Prisoners like him are often left out of campaigns to change the criminal justice system, which tend to use the well-tested message that nonviolent drug offenders do not belong behind bars. Last fall, supporters of a measure in Ohio that would have reduced penalties for drug offenses used just that kind of rationale.

It bothered David Singleton, a professor at Northern Kentucky University’s law school who runs the Ohio Justice and Policy Center. Even as he championed the proposal, he thought of Mr. Robinson, whom he had known for years.

“It felt like we were throwing a whole lot of people under the bus,” Mr. Singleton said.

In 1997, Mr. Robinson, 20 at the time, was among several people who had gathered in an apartment in Cincinnati’s West End to sell drugs, a group that included Veronica Jackson, 34. A gang of men in ski masks suddenly showed up, tried to force open the door and fired shots into the apartment. Ms. Jackson fled to a back bedroom where Mr. Robinson was with the cocaine.

Thinking she was one of the attackers, he picked up a gun and fired through the bedroom door, killing her.



The London Correctional Institution in London, Ohio, where Mr. Robinson is incarcerated. Maddie McGarvey for The New York Times

He would have been free eight years ago, had he accepted a deal to plead guilty to manslaughter. But he believed, wrongly, that he could make a case for self-defense at trial.

Mr. Singleton represented Mr. Robinson in a lawsuit over access to health care in prison almost a decade ago and grew to see him “as a good person who no longer needed to be locked up.” But he had been a drug dealer who killed a woman. What could be done?

Last year, Mr. Singleton began thinking more seriously about that question. He conceived of a project called Beyond Guilt, to emphasize that guilt is not an endpoint but the possible beginning of a “story of redemption.” The goal is to push for legislation to provide new avenues for early release, and to create a network of lawyers to take up individual cases.

In other states, advocates have begun to argue for shorter prison terms or “second-look sentencing” that would allow judges to review a prisoner’s record and sentence. Such measures are a tough sell. Last year, bills were proposed in 18 state legislatures that would have allowed some version of earlier release for those serving life or other long sentences, according to Marc Mauer, director of the Sentencing Project. None made it out of the committee process.

Yet the math is clear: There is no way to bring the American incarceration rate in line with that of other countries without releasing some whose crimes were more serious than the low-level drug offenses that politicians like to talk about.

Mr. Singleton knew that his project would require hard conversations with victims and their families, prosecutors and the public.

One night in February, he texted Joseph T. Deters, the prosecutor in Hamilton County, whose seat is Cincinnati. He asked Mr. Deters, an unapologetic law-and-order man, what he might think of a project focused on the possibility of early release for people who had spent significant time in prison, did not dispute their guilt, and had shown strong records of rehabilitation. Mr. Deters said he was all for it.

“I think it’s not often,” Mr. Deters said in a phone interview, “but some people change in prison.”

Word of the Beyond Guilt project has spread. Family members, as well as prisoners themselves, have written to the Ohio Justice and Policy Center, and even correction officers have discreetly suggested candidates.

In June, Mr. Singleton filed Beyond Guilt's first motion, on behalf of Mr. Robinson.

It is based on a procedural rule, usually reserved for civil litigation, that allows for relief from past judgments, arguing that in this case such relief would be in the "interests of justice." Mr. Deters's office has yet to formally respond.

So Mr. Robinson is waiting, as he has been for 22 years. He thinks about Veronica Jackson every day, he said in an interview in prison. He killed her by accident, he said; he is not "an animal," as people must assume. But the drug dealing life that led to her killing — that was his to answer for.

"It's horrible," he said in a low and trembling whisper. "No matter how you look at, it's horrible. I can try, but I know no matter what I do it's not going to change anything. I have to live with it. Everybody else has to live with it. Her family has to live with it."

He has learned over the years that there is a more thoughtful way to live, he said, a quality he studied in visitors from the outside like Mr. Singleton — "the words they use, the way they carry themselves." It was all so different from how he grew up.



Tyra Patterson was released on parole in 2017 after serving 23 years for murder. She now works at the Justice and Policy Center, which had championed her case. Maddie McGarvey for The New York Times

"You don't understand the severity of decisions in that kind of environment," he said. "Because everybody else makes the same decisions."

The conversation with the Jackson family began last summer when two employees of the Justice and Policy Center knocked at Patricia Jackson's door. One of them, Tyra Patterson, had only been out of prison herself for six months, after serving 23 years for murder.

Her case was different from Mr. Robinson's. She insisted on her innocence and a key witness, the victim's sister, came forward years later to back up Ms. Patterson's account. She has not been exonerated but, with the governor's intervention, was freed on parole.

Now she was standing in Ms. Jackson's living room, advocating on behalf of a man whose guilt no one disputed. She walked through the layout of the apartment where the shooting happened, explained how Mr. Robinson thought he was saving his own life and described the difference between manslaughter and murder.

Veronica's only daughter, Princess, pregnant with her second child, joined them, quietly listening. Ms. Jackson began to cry. She just wanted someone to pay for her sister's death.

"Angelo has paid for it," Ms. Patterson recalled saying through her own tears. "He will pay for it the rest of his life."

Well before Ms. Jackson's death, the family had been intimately acquainted with the criminal justice system. Ms. Jackson's brother has been in prison for decades; one of her sisters visited the coffin in shackles. Both are in favor of Mr. Robinson's release.

But one of her five sons, Clifford Jackson, who has also done time, is not so sure. Why start to change the criminal justice system, he asked, with the man who killed his mother? The only indication that the system recognized the family's suffering at all, he said, was Mr. Robinson's imprisonment.

"We were never compensated for anything," he said. "We're only compensated by his time."

Patricia Jackson, 59, got a particularly hard deal with her sister's death, raising two and sometimes three of the six children left behind, all on her teacher's salary. "This has hurt the family tremendously," she told the judge when Mr. Robinson was sentenced. "I want justice to be served."

No one had reached out to her since that trial to offer help or to even talk, she said, until the knock on her door last summer. So she thanked Ms. Patterson for coming. But she said she would have to think about things.

A week later, she called Ms. Patterson. They exchanged pleasantries, and then it got quiet. Finally, Ms. Jackson spoke.

Just get him out, she said.