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USA

# Reparations for Police Torture

- IV Online magazine - 2021 - IV558 - July 2021 -

Publication date: Saturday 31 July 2021

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**Chicago has admitted that its police were involved in systematic torture of civilians, formalizing this with the passage of the Reparations Ordinance on May 6, 2015 and the establishment of the Chicago Torture Justice Center two years later. This victory occurred through the grassroots organizing campaign by those who had been tortured, their families and communities along with sympathetic lawyers and investigative journalists.**

**According to testimony, at least two police precincts, under the commanding officer Jon Burge, engaged in a program of torture from 1972 to 1991. Flint Taylor's *The Torture Machine*, reviewed by Linda Loew in this issue, chronicles the story, the torture techniques that police used and the decades-long struggle to expose them and win justice for victims.**

Dianne Feeley and Linda Loew interviewed Aislinn Pulley for *Against the Current* on April 30, 2021. Aislinn Pulley is co-executive director of the Chicago Torture Justice Center, co-founder of Black Lives Matter Chicago, former organizer of We Charge Genocide and founding member of Insight Arts.

**Linda Loew: With the sixth anniversary of Chicago's historic and unprecedented Reparations Ordinance, what is your evaluation of how the reparations have been implemented? What is the struggle that remains in light of the continued police violence we see across the country?**

**Aislinn Pulley:** May 6 will make six years to the date of when the Reparations Ordinance was passed unanimously by City Council. It also will mark the fourth-year birthday of the Chicago Torture Justice Center. I think both have similar but distinct things to celebrate and learn from. With the Reparations Ordinance, it's six years since the ordinance was passed and we still don't have the memorial.

The five main tenets of the Reparations Ordinance were:

- Creation of a center located on the south side to deal with the psychological effects of torture. This is the Chicago Torture Justice Center.
- Free access to all city colleges for survivors and the family members, including their grandchildren.
- A monetary compensation for selected torture survivors. The city budgeted \$5.5 million, and that's been distributed to 57 survivors, so it amounts to roughly \$100,000 each. It's not a lot of money, and only for an exceedingly small number of survivors.
- Implementation in all Chicago public schools of a curriculum that teaches this history in the eighth and sophomore Social Studies classes. This is the third year that this has been taught. It is an extraordinarily important victory. Implementation has varied along the lines that you could expect. The whiter, more affluent neighborhoods where cops live have put up resistance and have protested. In one case, it resulted in a principal being removed. Other areas of the city where there's less resistance, and especially where the fight against policing is more vibrant, have welcomed it. The Center has developed deep relationships with certain schools and teachers, but implementation is disparate and reflects the politics of the city.

- The public memorial has not been built, and the city has delayed implementation. Former mayor Rahm Emanuel rejected meeting about the public memorial, refused all proposals. Mayor Lori Lightfoot has met or had people meet with the Memorial Committee. The delay, though, is a red flag. A site location hasn't been confirmed, nor has the funding, so all those things are still in motion.

The Center has been created, and we exist, which is great. We're the first and currently only center in the country dedicated to domestic torture. Federal regulations limit the 14 other torture centers in the country to accept only international torture survivors. We have been able to bypass that federal restriction because of the movement and because of the Reparations Ordinance. That's significant and important.

The city, however, continues year after year to threaten us by saying that they have fulfilled their reparations duty and therefore we're not owed any continued funding. Of course, the ordinance doesn't say that the Center will be funded only for three or four years. It says you will create and fund.

Our position is that the Center needs to continue to be funded until either no more police killing exists and the generations afterward have healed from the trauma, or other such radical transformations have happened in society so that these services are no longer necessary.

## Survivors in the Lead

**Dianne Feeley: How did the ordinance come about? You mentioned earlier that survivors were involved in shaping it. What were their concerns?**

**AP:** The survivors have been involved and leading the way through every single step. The ordinance initially developed out of an exhibition that called on artists to answer the question, "What could reparations look like for survivors of Chicago Police Department (CPD) torture?"

This took place after Jon Burge, who implemented the torture, was tried and convicted of perjury and obstruction of justice in 2010, although he'd been suspended in 1991 and fired in 1993. Because the statute of limitations had expired for the crime of torture, those were the charges. He was sentenced to four years in federal prison. Survivors and their community felt "This is just another example of there not being justice."

Joey Mogul, one of the attorneys along with Flint Taylor who litigated the torture cases, is not an artist. She submitted an ordinance as part of her contribution to the exhibit. Survivors said, "Let's make this real." That's how it came out of this imaginative space of "Let's envision beyond the current confines of the system."

Through survivor leadership, the ordinance was revised. Survivors said, "We need housing, we need medical care." The first drafts were really expansive. Through the negotiations with the city, the city knocked down some of the demands, saying "No to housing, no to medical care," but then agreed to the final document. Survivors were in those negotiation meetings with the attorneys. Survivors testified at City Hall about their experiences. They were a part of it every step of the way.

**DF: How many people were tortured over this period?**

**AP:** Jon Burge became employed by Chicago Police Department in 1970 after his army tours in Vietnam and Korea.

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During the Vietnam war he had been engaged in “advanced interrogation techniques” or torture.

As soon as he got on the force, he began applying those techniques to the people in Chicago. His torture ring lasted until he was suspended in 1991. There’s a conservative count that the city has accepted of 120 survivors and has apologized for. That number is primarily Black men, but some were children when they were tortured.

That’s just between those years and just for those who acquired attorneys, had their testimony recorded and where the evidence has been found credible by Torture Inquiry & Relief Commission (TIRC) set up in 2009 by the Illinois General Assembly as well as other entities. That’s a very conservative estimate because it presupposes a whole bunch of things. We can assume that the true number is in the thousands. I believe there are people who didn’t survive, and we don’t even know their names. And the cutoff date is 1991, when Burge was fired.

Torture didn’t begin with Burge or end with him. Burge was a commander and trained thousands of other officers who carried on the torture after he was fired. Some of those who were tortured after 1991 are beginning to come out of prison. Survivors of Kenneth Boudreau, James O’Brien, Jack Halloran, Michael Kill and others who trained under Burge led torturing his way after him. The true number is in the thousands, really. If we look at the specific methods of torture that Burge used, then the number is huge.

**DF: Where does recently released Gerald Reed, whose life sentence was reduced to time served by Governor J.B. Pritzker, fit into that picture? Was he one of the 120 or is he in a different category?**

**AP:** He was tortured after Burge was fired by some of the officers, particularly Michael Kill, who trained under Burge.

**DF: Many of those murdered by police or sentenced to prison are young men and women. Was this true of those who were tortured?**

**AP:** Many of the torture survivors were in their teens. The youngest known one was 13. Mark Clements was 16. I believe Sean Tyler was 16 or 17. Most of them were children, they were teenagers and then sentenced to serve out massive lifelong and inhumane sentences.

Stanley Howard, who was sentenced to death row, was a part of creating and leading the Death Row 10. This group of survivors formed a study group and through their study realized that they were all tortured by Jon Burge and his henchmen.

Then they created the Death Row 10. They led the organizing work on the inside, which eventually led to a moratorium on the death penalty in Illinois. It was implemented in 2003 by former Governor George Ryan and led to commuting 167 death penalty sentences to life imprisonment and pardoning four. In 2011, the Illinois State Legislature officially abolished the death penalty, converting 15 sentences to life.

That abolition is a direct result of incarcerated folks organizing along with folks on the outside. However, Stanley, no longer facing the death penalty, is still incarcerated. He’s been inside almost 40 years; we’re fighting to get him out.

Technically parole doesn’t exist in Illinois, although it operates in obscure ways. There’s a movement led by incarcerated folks called Parole Illinois to re-establish parole so that folks who have life without parole sentences can petition the parole board to be released. They believe that this would be their only opportunity for release.

I've heard many stories of folks who are torture survivors and folks who are not torture survivors. This situation is the result of all the mass incarceration laws that have been passed. Many of these laws criminalized children.

# Still Incarcerated

**LL:** How many other prisoners who were tortured are still in prison? Flint Taylor's book, *The Torture Machine*, states there were upwards of 200 complaints, although only a certain number were able to make it into legal cases and go through the court system.

**AP:** We have a list of about 100 survivors who are still incarcerated. It's a contested number, so not definitive by any means. It's a number that reflects people who have been in contact, been working and speaking out. This usually means they are working with attorneys on their own individual cases. They have a consciousness around how to fight while incarcerated. It may sound odd to say, but these survivors have accepted that they were tortured.

There's a lot of repression and denial with torture survivors that mirrors other forms of torture such as rape. We don't really define rape as torture in the United States, but it is internationally qualified as a form of torture.

As with rape and sexual assault survivors, there's the denial that it could happen to them. There is the repression of memory and all those survival mechanisms kick in. That happens similarly with torture. People may not be ready for a wide variety of reasons to be public about having experienced torture. Also, there is the gendered aspect of who has been able to come out as a survivor as well.

There are women who were tortured and consciously do not want to be publicly known. La Tanya Jenifer-Sublett, who is now on staff at the Center organizing our Peer Reentry Program, is the only public woman survivor of torture. There are just many factors that play into people not wanting to be public.

**LL:** I remember reading in *The Torture Machine* that either a relative or a friend was brought into an adjacent interrogation room and forced to listen to the screams throughout the night. But are you talking about women who endured physical infliction of torture on their own bodies?

**AP:** Yes and were then incarcerated. Your point is important because if we look at the effect, that's a form of psychological torture, where that person was forced to listen to their loved one experience these pains, excruciating pains that bring you to the point of death. Some people died and came back like Anthony Holmes, a torture survivor who talks about how they electrocuted him. He died and then came back over the 24-hour period he was being tortured.

Listening to that is a form of torture, but the way that the construct of survivorhood has been commonly framed it doesn't include those people. When we include that, then we understand its much larger impact, much larger on the family.

**DF:** We know something about the role of the survivors in organizing and defending themselves but what about their families? Where did they find their support?

**AP:** The moms have really led the organizing work on the outside. In the early days, it would just be the moms fighting for their child or trying to advocate for one of the others in prison. People like Mary L. Johnson whose son is

still incarcerated and has been fighting for over 30 years. In the early days, she was the only one who would show up to a court date.

Mark Clements's mom, while he was incarcerated, would be out there fighting for him. Even as she was battling cancer she was still out there fighting. Rosemary Cade, who's fighting for her son Antonio Porter to be released, is undergoing cancer treatment now.

These moms have been the ones on the front lines leading this and aren't given enough credit for their work and their tenacity. Mary L. Johnson talks about how she suffered two breakdowns. The toll of this work has just been so massive on their bodies. Because of moms like Armanda Shackelford, Gerald Reed's mom, the community successfully rallied around him.

Continuing Trauma

**DF: You say that the Center is open to not only the immediate victims but also to their families. Could you talk about trauma, especially in the light of the Chauvin trial? I think many of us did not understand the trauma those witnesses suffered as they saw George Floyd being killed. For the world, it was a deeply moving experience to witness the trauma that they're suffering a year afterward. Dealing with trauma must be a big part of the Center's work. How do you do that?**

**AP:** That is so important. In hearing the witness testimony at the Chauvin trial, viewers across the world and in this country were able to see a real-life example of how pervasive the consequences of police violence are. They could see the ripple effects of terror and trauma that then reverberate beyond the individual who experienced torture.

The trauma and the violence are also experienced, in different ways of course, by the witnesses and then by family members and community at large. That gives us a better understanding of the true breadth of who is affected by state violence and police violence.

It is way more than just the one individual. Part of the families were also doing time. The families were also affected by the incarceration. That trauma is being held in multiple ways that our dominant society makes invisible and then erases from consciousness.

The Chauvin trial and witnesses' testimony and experiences give visibility and language to acknowledging the real consequence of policing in communities. This one example is being constantly multiplied. Just during the trial, an average of three people a day were killed by police. Magnify that by the number of people affected and the trauma reverberating across the country. That's a lot of people experiencing trauma, experiencing the psychological, the socio-emotional effects of state violence and state terror. We can draw on our popular knowledge of rape survivors to find the many implications of how this continues to play out.

I return to the case of rape because it's so similar as a form of torture. We understand that rape survivors develop survival strategies to protect themselves from a variety of situations ranging from being able to be emotionally intimate to sleep disturbances, panic attacks and anxiety, depression, and becoming a hermit, scared of the outside world (agoraphobia). All those consequences are then reverberated and magnified if we think about the true cost and social effect.

**LL: Over the course of the Chauvin trial, particularly because several police officers — and even the chief of police — testified for the prosecution, Derek Chauvin was portrayed as a “bad” cop. Chauvin's conviction on all charges was a victory, but that doesn't stop the murders!**

**AP:** That's absolutely right. If it's a victory, it's in the sense that we were able to force the legal process to acknowledge the loss of one in its own army, which it is not designed to do. But we know that that doesn't stop police. Just before the trial started there was the killing of Daunte Wright in Brooklyn, Minnesota and just 20 minutes before the Chauvin guilty verdict was announced, police killed 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant in Columbus, Ohio.

We know that even with convictions, police violence is not going to stop. Former police officer Jason Van Dyke was convicted of second-degree murder of Laquan McDonald along with 16 counts of aggravated battery and sentenced to almost seven years in prison. That hasn't stopped the killing — but the rate has decreased.

I try to be scientific about why that decrease occurs. Is it the conviction or is it the movement? Of course, those aren't separate. The movement is why the convictions happen. Scientific American released an article about a month or two ago (March 1, 2021) that pointed to data that suggests in areas where mass movements have been continuous, the result is a decrease in police killings. If we're going to be scientists and look at cause and effect, based on the data, it's the vitality of the mass movement. It's people getting in the streets and organizing to protest systemic killings.

I think we're still as a movement figuring out our demands. For example, what does it mean to call for the abolition of policing? I think the call to defund is a great demand because it puts the system in crisis and it forces a political crisis. I think, but what does that mean — because capitalism isn't going to defund its domestic army. It's always going to need a domestic army to repress the working class and the constituents within it that the government finds threatening.

How are we prepared to address the crisis? I think there are movement questions that I have not even solved, other than, of course, saying we must overthrow capitalism. But in terms of the actual details of what that means, I haven't resolved those answers. These are questions we need to discuss.

**DF:** I think one aspect is that people are now seeing, “Gee, this person got killed because they had an expired license or that person got killed because maybe they passed a phony \$20 bill.” These are petty offenses. Why is society asking uniformed and armed police to handle these issues? If we look at all the people who have mental stress and their family calls for help, they are 18 times more likely to end up dead than other civilians. Is this the army that we send to deal with these issues?

**Let's look at other models. For a decade Eugene, Oregon has had a program of unarmed civilians trained in deescalation methods. Models like this show people we don't need armed guards to be safe. We create problems of homelessness or drug addiction and then we send the cops out to resolve them.**

**AP:** I think you're absolutely right. All these are products of capitalism, all the disparities and unequal conditions that force deprivation and limit options for coping. It has created crises, manufactured crises, producing massive unemployment, racism, segregation, all those things. I think your point about helping people unlayer, unroll and disentangle concepts of public safety is really, really important. The narrative that policing provides safety has been an effective propaganda tool to obfuscate their actual role.

We need to be able to have a conversation around how we create public safety. We need to develop an effective strategy to dislodge public safety from policing. We want people to have what they need so that they don't go from crisis to crisis. And when they're in crisis, they can get the help they need and not be killed.

## Public Health Disaster

**LL: What's been the impact of COVID, not only on survivors but on all prisoners? What's the consequence in the failure to release prisoners? And shockingly, Mayor Lori Lightfoot used COVID relief funds not for building up social services that had already been cut to the bone, but increase the already-bloated police funds. Where does the money for Chicago get allotted when it comes from the state and the federal government?**

**AP:** Mayor Lightfoot put 65% of the Discretionary CARES Act money into policing! That is such an indictment of her craven inhumanity and demonstrates where her allegiance has always been. We, as a movement, have been trying to inform folks that this is who she is. This should not be a surprise. She has always defended cops. She's a cop.

It's been preventable horror after preventable horror as we see the number of folks who have died in U.S. detention facilities due to COVID. Our fragile public healthcare system has been decimated over the last 40 years. We have lost 200,000 public healthcare workers.

Our private healthcare system is not designed to figure out how to provide care for a national population. It's designed around figuring out how to monetize care in a specific area, which means that it doesn't function to prevent a global pandemic from decimating the population.

It's just been example after example of why the United States has been in an uprising over the past year. I think all those factors are threaded together. There was, at the height, 30 million people unemployed across the country. In 2019, official Black unemployment stood at five percent but by January 2021, it was 13.5%, almost triple.

We know that the folks who have been hit hardest by unemployment have been in the service industry. That means people who already were surviving on poverty wages have been forced into deeper poverty. They are struggling to survive off three stimulus checks while Jeff Bezos becomes the world's first trillionaire. It's a slap in the face.

All of this is happening as police continue to kill at a rate that has remained unchanged even though many of us are at home and sheltering in place. There're so many things that point to how this system is not working for us, is not designed to benefit the majority, and is killing us. COVID has probably best crystallized our crisis in a very acute way.

**DF: As you think about the role of the Chicago Torture Justice Center and maybe for the larger movement, what do you see as priorities?**

**AP:** We need to continue organizing and continue being in the streets. Almost with every case, with every instance of the CPD killing someone, there's a protest and there's organization around the case. Protest needs to be a permanent feature, that needs to be what the CPD can expect, and then it should broaden. Now we're seeing the movement broaden to include the demand to end home raids.

This is the result of Anjanette Young, who was forced to stand naked for over two hours when CPD did a so-called botched home raid. But most of these raids are "botched." We're seeing a widening of understanding about the horrors that are being inflicted on people and demands to end them.

The fight to get cops permanently out of the Chicago Public Schools should ramp up. We just got the notice a week ago that CPS voted to remove all police from schools for the rest of the year, which is great, but that needs to be permanent. I think it's very, very realistic that we can win the permanent removal of cops from all our public schools. I think we can do it this year.



My best friend's little brother was killed by CPD. Since I was eight years old, we lived right next to each other and walked to school together, both in grammar school and high school. When we were in our senior year her brother was killed by the police. There was no movement then. There was no protest. No family should experience that and be forced to suffer in silence.

We should be up in arms every time an incident happens and force police to feel they're constantly being watched. We should keep widening the net and organizing around every single instance of police violence. Every time they kill someone, we should be out there.

## Teaching as Healing

**LL: One of my close friends is a teacher in Washington High School on the southeast side. She told me how important it is in teaching the curriculum about CPD torture that the Center can send survivors to talk to the class. The bonds of solidarity and love created, despite the pain and suffering, seem magical. However uneven implementing the curriculum has been, this seems to be an important gift that the Reparations Ordinance has brought forward.**

**AP:** Thank you for sharing that insight from your teacher friend. What I've heard from some of the survivors we send out is that it is a healing experience for them. Many talk about going into the classrooms and feeling rewarded in their sharing their story. For decades, their story was not being heard by anyone — not by attorneys, judges, or even a doctor.

Now, they're able to share it. There's so much power that I have heard them talk about feeling when they're able to tell their stories to students and young folks in other spaces. Just as in any kind of therapeutic experience, when you talk about what has happened, you have those internal realizations: "Oh, I'm teaching them, and I'm teaching myself." They talk about that too, as being a generative experience and part of their healing work.

**LL: Even scaled down, the Reparations Ordinance is still unprecedented. Has it laid the basis for developing reparations as an active reality — not just around torture, but also around centuries of discrimination? I know our neighboring city, Evanston, voted for a reparations program based on its history of segregation and discrimination.**

**AP:** Yes, which is amazing. I was involved myself in the grassroots organizing component of the reparations struggle when we did a targeted push to get it out of committee, where it had been stuck for three years. When the Laquan McDonald assassination video was finally released, Mayor Rahm Emanuel faced a political crisis. We targeted him and used that weakness to force him to get the ordinance out of committee.

Throughout that organizing work, I didn't believe we were going to win. I was used to working on campaigns where you fight, you fight, you fight because it's the longterm struggle. But here we won. It's still amazing that it happened because it's so transformative and it doesn't exist anywhere else. It needs to exist everywhere, and needs to be expanded here in Chicago.

I sit with both realities all the time. I'm still in amazement because it's so trailblazing and should be emulated and expanded.

Source July-August 2021, [ATC 213](#).

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