

DISSERTATION

MISSISSIPPI PRISONS AS SITES OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE:  
EXTREME HEAT, SOCIAL DEATH, AND THE STATE

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### MISSISSIPPI PRISONS AS SITES OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE: EXTREME HEAT, SOCIAL DEATH, AND THE STATE

Expanding on existing literature which understands incarcerated people as victims of environmental injustice and states as complicit actors in the production or allowance of environmental harm, I explore how incarcerated people in Mississippi experience extreme heat and how the state of Mississippi manages heat in state carceral facilities. I answer these questions by drawing on data from letter correspondence with people in three state prisons in Mississippi, as well as conducting critical policy analysis on relevant Mississippi laws, policy documents, and Department of Corrections reports. My findings from correspondence show that extreme heat amplifies the experience of “social death” already endemic to incarceration. More specifically, extreme heat intensifies incarcerated peoples’ experiences of social disconnection and isolation, humiliation, and loss of sense of self, all of which produce social death. Moreover, state law and Mississippi Department of Corrections policy do not adequately protect incarcerated people from extreme heat, which I characterize as a state-green crime of omission. Instead, my findings from critical policy analysis demonstrate how the state of Mississippi is centrally focused on turning people in prison into laborers to maintain the state’s carceral arm and provide benefits to counties, municipalities, and state agencies. I argue that these data have profound implications not only for environmental justice researchers and green criminologists, but more broadly for all who are interested in the project of prison abolition.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The funny thing about completing a dissertation is experiencing a sort of dual reality: that you have simultaneously accomplished a Herculean task, one you should be deeply proud of, and *also* that you owe most of your ability to do that to the support of other people.

Without the support of my committee, I would never have been able to conceptualize or complete a compelling, rigorous project. I came to this department with stars in my eyes and it feels remarkable to be nearing graduation with close relationships to some of my intellectual heroes, including Dr. Tara Opsal, Dr. KuoRay Mao and Dr. Stephanie Malin. Tara has been not just a mentor to me but a friend and role model in every sense of the word. She has somehow – much like my own mother – managed to perfectly balance compassion and care with high expectations and discipline. I have grown exponentially from this teaching, and I mean it when I say I can't imagine a better advisor. KuoRay always reminded me that I *was* capable of this, and Stephanie pushed me to be rigorous and attentive. I am indebted to all three of them for making me a better scholar and educator. Dr. Tobi Jacobi, too, provided deeply relevant insight and asked important questions about the correspondence portion of this project, which resulted in me fine-tuning my methodological choices and refocusing on reciprocity.

My family members – and particularly my mother – are the reason I was able to complete this degree. It was my ma who encouraged me to apply for scholarships to go to college, the ones that ultimately entirely funded my undergraduate education, making it accessible and available to me, and landed me in a funded graduate program. She helped me pack up and move across the country when I told her that people in Salt Lake City believed in me and were willing to help me get an M.S. for free. She waited patiently while I completed my coursework in Colorado,

wondering when this larger-than-life educational adventure would bring me back to the Midwest. She reminded me to take care of my physical body while doing some of the most rigorous intellectual work I have ever done in my life. She also gave me some of the most important advice I received about this process: “*Remember, people like us don’t usually get the shot to do this, so you’ll need to work twice as hard as everyone else.*” Everything I have learned about resiliency has come from my ma. I love you, and I owe this degree in its entirety to you.

Perhaps the most emotional part of this achievement is that my late grandfather and grandmother cannot be here to see it. In many ways, my earliest ideas about this project came from things they taught me. Without ever using the word solidarity, my grandfather instilled it in me in my youngest years. When we drove by the pipefitter’s union building, he’d make me and my brother salute it. When we saw people struggling on the streets without homes, he’d remind us that we are *lucky* to be in the position we are in and to have a bed to return to and give them the cash he had. My grandmother, too, taught me the same lessons. She took her Christianity very literally and believed that all of God’s children deserve care and protection. All of this absolutely influenced my interest in and care for understanding what life is like for people who have been cast away and pushed to society’s margins. My grandparents were deeply bothered by this suffering and believed something else was possible. Several decades later, I embarked on a project about the experiences of people living in prison a thousand miles away from me. There is a direct throughline here, and I wish they were still around so I could hug and thank them for making me a more curious and compassionate person.

Luckily, I am able to thank many other family members who are still here. My brother has been able to make me laugh in the deepest and darkest moments of the PhD process. He has supported me unconditionally and, like my mom, waited patiently for me while I romped around

the country pursuing different degrees before coming home. My grandparents, Ginny and Joe, have always believed in me. They've also kept me humble and reminded me of who I am and where I come from, and for this I am eternally grateful. They inspired my earliest care and love for the environment on family camping trips which ultimately led me to a research interest in environmental justice. It's a common story, but a true one; all four of my grandparents sacrificed a tremendous amount to ensure me and my brother had opportunities that they couldn't have dreamed of. My dad, aunts, uncles, first and second and third cousins have all been there for me since the beginning, too. My cousin Becca helped me move through bouts of anxiety directly related to this dissertation. Laura Jean, my grandma's cousin, bought me "proper" clothes for the mountains when I first moved to Salt Lake City for my master's program without a car or, frankly, much of a plan. I couldn't have done any of it without their love, patience, and humor.

During the early stages of my PhD I met the love of my life. In hindsight, it is sort of miraculous that 1) I had the capacity and ability to fall in love amidst \*broadly gestures at everything\* and 2) that Charlie was not dissuaded by my academic circumstances (dating a graduate student in the early stages of their PhD is certainly a choice). Fast forward five and a half years, and if I had to attribute this document to one single person other than my mother, it would be Charlie. Above my desk in our small apartment, I have multiple notes and poems taped to the wall that he has written me over the years to help me maintain motivation and remind me that what I'm doing matters. Everything good about me, Charlie has made better: I am a more effective writer, a closer reader, a more thoughtful teacher, a more confident researcher, a wiser mentor, a more patient friend, and a better person. I sincerely enjoy writing about all of the ways so many people in my life have made this project possible but have accepted that nothing I could come up with would adequately express my gratitude for his love and support. I can't wait to be

life partners while I'm *not* a Ph.D. candidate.

I am tremendously grateful for my beloved community in Minneapolis. Their involvement in this project has ranged from holding my hand while I cried about recruitment failures to cooking meals for me when I was unable to take writing breaks. Bex spent days scribbling on giant poster boards conspiratorially while I connected the dots of the arguments I made in this project. Daniel reminded me of why I adore sociology in my darkest and most despondent hours of reading and writing. Brian, Joelle, Patrick, Fayth, Ryan, Kara, Boone, Macy, James, and Kobie believed in me, loved me, and cared for me in ways that are beyond brief description.

My great joy in life is teaching, and my students deserve acknowledgement here, too. My first college students were at Colorado State and to them I owe much of who I am today. To my TREC students in Minnesota, at Stillwater Correctional Facility and Lino Lakes Correctional Facility, you have taught me so much.

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CHAPTER 1:  
INTRODUCTION

**Mississippi Prisons: “Hell” on Earth**

Morgan, a participant in this study, has been incarcerated in the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) since 2018. Like many others in the MDOC system, she has done time at several facilities across the state. Morgan is now locked up in Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women, a recently renamed portion of Central Mississippi Correctional Facility. If she is lucky, she will be released within the next five years, ideally serving less time than she was originally sentenced to (likely in part because of her involvement in a work program).

In our letter correspondence, Morgan was frank about the conditions she endured in prison. Per my questions, she wrote at length about the unrelenting summer temperatures, noting that, “this year was the worst the heat has ever been.” In her first letter, Morgan described how she and others experienced this heat:

It’s cooler outside than it is in the building but its<sup>1</sup> still too hot to go outside and be out there for long periods of time, so theres no relief. You’re hot & dripping sweat wherever you go. Most nights I couldn’t get to sleep because its so hot I couldn’t get comfortable. It gets to be at least 100 degrees in the buildings. That’s the least. ... The extreme temperatures have increased and made it even more unbearable. If I were to describe it, just from the heat I’d say honestly that this is the closest to hell on earth.

While Morgan’s emphasis here is on temperature, this would not be the first time someone has compared a Mississippi prison to hell. In one letter to me, Mike wrote that “I don’t know what else I can tell you about the heat/temp in here. HELL is the best way to describe it.” Others, outside of this study, seem to agree with this characterization. In a 2020 interview with *The Guardian*, Kelly Mallett, a formerly incarcerated man who spent some of his sentence

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from participants are copied exactly as they were written. In other words, I did not edit or correct participant grammar.

locked up at Mississippi State Penitentiary – colloquially known as “Parchman Farm” – used a similar descriptor: “It is pure hell in there.” Journalist Charles Pierce, in a 2022 article for *Esquire*, used the same language to discuss the announcement of air conditioning installation at Parchman, aptly noting that “a cold day in hell is still a day in hell.” Just a few years earlier, between one and two dozen people<sup>2</sup> incarcerated at South Mississippi Correctional Institution staged a hunger strike over poor conditions, including excessive heat and long lockdowns (Mitchell 2017). The mother of one person participating in the hunger strike described the men in the prison as “caged like animals in a dark, dank, fetid hell,” (ibid).

While these examples are more recent, Mississippi prisons have long been infamous for their hellishness and general brutality. In *The Mansion*, renowned American author William Faulkner refers to one of the state prisons included in this study as “destination doom” (2011[1959]). In fact, historians and geographers have attributed the development of the Delta Blues musical movement in part to the inhumane experiences of Black people imprisoned across Mississippi in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and their resistance to these conditions, including those locked up at Parchman Farm, the state’s oldest facility<sup>3</sup> (Woods 1998; Abdurraqib 2023).

To be clear, *many* prisons in the United States are brutal, and some of the issues described above (and throughout this study) are not limited to Mississippi alone (Davis and Shaylor 2001; Alexander 2010; Saliba 2013; Bauer 2018). Yet, while the aim of this project is certainly not to deny or minimize the atrocities suffered by people in prisons across the United States, there is evidence that Mississippi represents a unique outlier case when it comes to the experiences of

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<sup>2</sup> It is hard to verify how many people participated in this action, in part because MDOC did not recognize it as a formal hunger strike and because journalists struggled to confirm details. As one journalist put it: “the Department of Corrections, as a matter of policy, refuses to allow reporters to visit,”(Amy 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Some musicians who would later be considered the “greats” of the blues genre, including R. L. Burnside, Big Bad Smitty, and Booker (Bukka) White, did time at Parchman (Abdurraqib 2023).

people incarcerated there. For example, for nearly a twenty-year period between 2001 and 2019, Mississippi consistently maintained one of the (and sometimes, *the*) highest mortality rates in the country in its state and federal prisons (Carson n.d.). In 2019, this number was 544 deaths per 100,000 incarcerated people, surpassed only by two other former Confederate states: Alabama and Louisiana (ibid). Recent prison population data also show that Mississippi has the highest overall incarceration rate of *any state* in the United States, or country in the world, for that matter (Carson and Kluckow 2023). Indeed, despite growing support nationally for decarceration (ACLU 2017), Mississippi's state and federal prison populations increased by a higher percentage than any other state in the country between 2021 and 2022 (Carson and Kluckow 2023). While the overwhelming majority of states experienced an increase of less than 6% during the same window (and some states even saw declines in their prison populations), the number of people locked up in state and federal prisons in Mississippi increased by 14% in this timeframe of roughly one year (ibid). Additionally, while Black and Brown Americans are disproportionately represented in prisons across the country, Mississippi has a higher rate of racial minority confinement than almost anywhere else; as of 2018, Black Mississippians made up roughly 39% of the state's general population and 57% of the state's incarcerated population (Vera Institute 2018). As of 2020, 70% of the population at Mississippi State Penitentiary – Parchman – was Black (Innocence Project 2020).

What is behind these tendencies of disproportionate mortality, racial minority confinement, and incarceration at large in Mississippi? While prison scholars have long theorized about the purpose of prisons in the maintenance of capitalism at large, researchers have identified the way state-specific contexts greatly shape prison development and operation (Gilmore 2007; Morrell 2012; Ball 2014; Hagan et al. 2015). The aforementioned trends, then, can be better

understood within the state's unique historical context. For example, in Mississippi, the historical development of prisons – a deeply racialized project – was no accident, but instead the result of a carefully crafted political movement shaped by the plantation bloc following the Union's victory in the Civil War (Woods 1998). As Woods writes of the emergence of Black imprisonment in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Delta region, “Not only did African American labor have to be returned to the fields, it had to be spatially fragmented for the purposes of social control,” and “Prison labor was a political and ethnic policy designed to recapture labor without compensation,” (1998:71,78). Fast forward over one hundred years and some prisons in Mississippi still *resemble* and *function like* slave plantations (Oshinsky 1996). In 2020, an article authored by staff at the Innocence Project aptly observed that, “Parchman's history is rooted in Black suffering.” Recent prison demographics, described in the previous paragraph, show the lasting impact of this ongoing racialized project, an extension of the brutal conditions of slavery: high incarceration rates, high minority confinement, high mortality in prisons, and conditions that are like “hell.”

Entire books can be (and have been) written about the historical and contemporary experiences of incarcerated people in the state of Mississippi<sup>4</sup> (see Oshinsky 1996; Taylor 1999; Rushing 2016). The focus of this project, however, is on one specific – and, until recently, often overlooked – force that contributes to the feeling of “hell” described by Morgan, Mike, and others: extreme heat. While the above political and historical contexts demonstrate the way the state exists as a unique case when it comes to imprisonment, the state of Mississippi is unique in other ways. Namely, it is extremely hot. As the climate crisis looms and temperatures continue to creep up, researchers, government officials, and the public must pay more attention to the way people living behind bars experience the “unbearable” heat of Mississippi prisons, to borrow

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<sup>4</sup> For a collection that explores these experiences through the words of incarcerated people themselves, I recommend the 2014 publication *In Our Own Words: Writing From Parchman Prison*, edited by Louis Bourgeois.

language from Morgan. As I will detail at greater length later in this and the next chapter, the goal of this project was to do just that.

## **Heat in Mississippi**

For as long as humans have documented weather patterns, Mississippi has been hot. Well before the impacts of anthropogenic climate change were felt, folks living in the American South were all too familiar with sticky, humid summer temperatures. And now, as a result of the greenhouse gas emissions trapping excess heat into the atmosphere, Mississippi is getting hotter.

The warmest consecutive five-year interval in Mississippi’s history took place from 2016-2020 (Kunkel 2022). More recently, the summer of 2023 broke heat records to become the hottest summer in history for South Mississippi, according to the National Weather Service; on Wednesday, August 23, the state record for highest temperature was broken when thermometers reached 105° F (Cloud 2023; Jeansonne 2023). Between June and August, the average temperature at the NOAA official climate site for the Mississippi Coast was 85.9° F, beating out 2010’s historically hot season (ibid). Though the state has experienced lower net warming compared to some other parts of the U.S.<sup>5</sup>, temperatures are still on the rise and projected to be unprecedented throughout this century (Kunkel 2022). A higher percentage of the population of Mississippi is vulnerable to extreme heat than any other state in the country; one recent projection suggests the state could have 111 “dangerously hot” days each year (Dent 2022). Crucially, when the state’s average temperatures and “feels like” estimates are already high, even small rises can result in the difference between a heatwave that is manageable and one that has catastrophic consequences.

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<sup>5</sup> While the temperature has thus far risen relatively slowly in Mississippi in comparison to other U.S. states, it has seen extreme increases in precipitation, amplifying hurricane risk.

For prisons without air conditioning, this heat can constitute a form of cruel and unusual punishment – a recent charge made not just by the Department of Justice (DOJ), which found Parchman to be in violation of both the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments (United States Department of Justice 2022), but by a growing number of incarcerated folks who have filed lawsuits over temperatures in prisons across the U.S (ACLU 2004; McGaughy 2024). The DOJ investigation report, released in spring of 2022, found that temperatures inside Parchman prison reached a whopping 145°F. As I will detail later in the findings from this dissertation project, the impacts of this heat are wide-ranging, affecting the psychological, physical, emotional and social health of people locked up without reprieve. And since many of these facilities are quite old and constructed using building materials that *retain* heat rather than release it, it is often much hotter *in* prisons in Mississippi than it is *outside* of them, as participants in this project described at length and the DOJ report details.

Notably, it is not only prisons that are impacted by heat because of inadequate infrastructure. A 2021 report found that nearly half a million school-age children will experience dangerous heat – days over 80°F – in schools, costing districts millions in air conditioning installation and operation (LeRoy et al. 2021). This is despite the fact that as of 2020, roughly 93% of homes in the state of Mississippi used air conditioning, over three quarters of which had central A/C (U.S. EIA 2020). As I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, the fact that public infrastructure lags so dramatically behind private dwellings is not an insignificant detail in this puzzle and may offer us insight into the sluggish nature in which the state could respond to other climate impacts in the future.

### **Mississippi State Prisons are Promised Relief**

In April, 2022, the Department of Justice concluded its two-year investigation of Mississippi State Penitentiary, highlighted briefly above. The 59-page long report on the findings of the Department of Justice’s investigation of Mississippi State Penitentiary paints a grim picture of life at Parchman Farm. From wholly inadequate mental health care – resulting in a shocking *twelve* suicides within the facility over the course of just three years – to widespread violence, the DOJ’s assessment confirmed what incarcerated folks and their allies have been articulating for years about the notoriously brutal prison (Department of Justice 2022). While much of the investigation and subsequent findings focused on the facility’s failure to adequately address mental health needs and protect those incarcerated in the facility from self-harm and external threats of violence from others, the report did highlight extreme heat specifically (ibid). References to high temperatures in the document are primarily made in the context of abhorrent conditions within the facility’s restrictive housing, including temperatures above 100° on a whopping two-thirds of all dates that were logged. It is here that the report describes the shocking (and now infamous) instance of a restrictive housing unit reaching 145.1° on one summer day (ibid).

While references to extreme heat make up an overall quite small percentage of the total report – the word “temperature(s)” appears 14 times in all, largely in the context of the same few paragraphs, including several footnotes – heat is clearly underscored as exacerbating physical and mental health issues of incarcerated people at MSP. The end of the report offers “Minimal Remedial Measures,” including 78 specific requirements to address the observed Constitutional violations. One of those mandates, in the subsection titled ‘Restrictive Housing,’ charges the state of Mississippi with addressing the facility’s well-documented temperature issues: “9.

Ensure sanitary and safe environmental conditions in restrictive housing, including proper temperature regulation,” (Department of Justice 2022).

That summer, months after the release of the DOJ’s findings from its investigation, journalists began covering a massive story: all state prisons in Mississippi would be getting air conditioning, MSP would be the first to receive it, and the process was already underway. The news did not come from an MDOC press release, but rather, from an interview with commissioner Burl Cain. The commissioner told news outlets that at Mississippi State Penitentiary, “Seventy-five percent of [*installation*] is complete, 40% of the population is covered,” (Emery 2022). Central Mississippi Correctional Facility and South Mississippi Correctional Institution were up next (ibid). The air conditioning installation was in direct response to the DOJ’s investigation and damning findings report released earlier in the year, which required immediate action from the Mississippi Department of Corrections. In an interview, Cain remarked: “It feels good to get it done. It’s just the time to do it.” (Corpuz 2022).

At the time of this writing, one unit in Parchman, Unit 29, still does not have comprehensive air conditioning. Portions of that living unit have been closed over the course of the past several years to address chronically depleted infrastructure; today, Unit 29 still houses many people<sup>6</sup> imprisoned at Parchman. Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (including the Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women, a recently renamed portion of CMCF) and South Mississippi Correctional Institute – my other two chosen sites for this project – also lack air conditioning in the zones where people are housed, despite the announcement of air conditioning installation coming nearly years ago at the time of writing. Though the Department of

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<sup>6</sup> Just *how* many is not totally clear. Unit 29 can hold up to 1,500 people, typically those with maximum security designations. However, in early 2020, Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves committed to shutting down Unit 29. There is evidence that some of those imprisoned in Unit 29 were transferred to other units or to a nearby private prison, but, it is estimated that there are still hundreds of people doing time in the unit. Indeed, one of my participants, Mike, was moved back to Unit 29 during the course of our correspondence. In one letter, he told me that the unit was “supposed to be shut down, but they lied to the public.”

Corrections anticipated delays<sup>7</sup>, which Bain described to the press, the state has taken much longer to achieve the comprehensive air conditioning in living units than it had initially stated.

### **This Project**

Given these unfolding circumstances and context, this project was guided by the following questions: 1) How do people who are incarcerated in Mississippi experience extreme heat? and 2) How is the state prepared to mitigate said impacts? Since the IRB approved this research in 2022, I have collected data by writing letters with people in state prisons in Mississippi and rigorously analyzed Mississippi laws, policy documents and DOC reports in an attempt to answer both of these questions.

Why study the impacts of heat in prisons in a state where the rollout of air conditioning is already happening, and some residents already have A/C? Indeed, by the time this work is finished, it is possible the installation of air conditioning in Mississippi correctional facilities will be widespread, though highly unlikely it will be complete. So why is understanding how incarcerated people live through heat, and their experiences of the transition to more comfortable environments with better infrastructure, an important sociological inquiry? Better yet: why should social scientists be critically examining the actions of the state of Mississippi at all when ultimately, it did end up doing the “right” thing, albeit only after the federal government declared the state’s facilities to be in violation of the Constitution?

First, if the state of Mississippi were to perfectly manage all environmental conditions in every correctional facility moving forward, the experiences of those who have endured inhumane conditions up until now are still important. As other scholars have pointed out, letter-writing with people in prison creates an alternative archive to state narratives about prisons and those

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<sup>7</sup> Initial news accounts suggested a year and a half to roll the entire air conditioning installation plan out, meaning air conditioning in all zones in state facilities would be complete by spring of 2023.

confined within them; in the words of Burton, “Prisons are archives in literal and figurative ways,” (2023:50). I agree with this assertion as it is still critical for those who have never spent time behind bars to understand, to the best of their ability, exactly what prison is like. In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Angela Davis writes that prisons have “... become a black hole into which the detritus of contemporary capitalism is deposited,” (2011:16). One consequence of this is that, for those who have been lucky enough to avoid imprisonment, what goes on in prisons is indeed mostly a dark “black hole” to which we have little insight or understanding. This project humbly attempts to shed light on the darker parts of the experience of incarceration by hearing from people who are living through it firsthand.

Additionally, as I will continue to (carefully) assert throughout this dissertation, while these findings are not generalizable – given the unique, and in many ways highly specific context of Mississippi and its correctional facilities – understanding the way states have historically managed the impacts of heat waves may give social scientists insight into how they will handle climate crises and natural disasters in general in the coming decades. In her 2019 address to the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Mezey (2020:606,613) called for sociologists to “focus on what is perhaps the largest social problem: climate change,” including a specific focus on “why governments and individuals are not being more proactive in finding and participating in solutions.” I agree that given the rapidly shrinking window for humanity to act to mitigate catastrophic climate impacts, it is crucial for scholars to understand how states will prepare (or not) for these increasingly inevitable impacts on our infrastructure and our lives, and this project’s engagement with the state of Mississippi’s (in)action in Chapter Four responds directly to this call to sociologists.

Finally, we can learn a lot from state responses to crises in general, but *especially* from the way governments act – or do not act – when it is time to protect their most vulnerable populations. This study affirms the well-grounded assertion (Roberts and Parks 2006; Miranda et al. 2011) that the people living on society’s margins, those who are most targeted and oppressed, will bear the largest burden of the consequences of global climate change, even if some mitigation is ultimately achieved. As I will repeatedly suggest throughout this paper, that is not an accident, but the result of systematic state energy put elsewhere.

### **Literature Review**

This research project was informed by several areas of sociological work, with a few specific theoretical orientations in mind. Here, I understand prisons as sites of environmental injustice, and extreme heat as an example of an environmental injustice felt by incarcerated people. I also contextualize this form of environmental injustice within a green criminological context, which helps explain the state’s role (or lack thereof) in addressing the conditions my participants describe. In the remainder of the introduction, then, I trace the lineages of several relevant bodies of social science literature which provide context to my own inquiry. First, I trace the historical development of environmental justice (EJ) literature to its recent and emergent focus on EJ issues within and surrounding prisons. Then, I review work on experiences of incarceration, focusing on research which has addressed stress and the tolls of imprisonment on the body. Next, I outline research exploring the intersection of prisons and climate change. Finally, I introduce green criminological perspectives and the few researchers within this realm who too are asking questions about the prison-environment nexus. While green criminology has, until recently, been largely left out of many academic conversations about the impact of climate change on prisons, I argue it is uniquely suited to help understand the role of the state in this

research given its theoretical and empirical emphasis on state involvement in – and failure to protect from – environmental harm and exposure.

### *Environmental Justice*

Environmental justice (EJ) literature is vast, encompassing scholarship across many disciplines, including sociology, political science, geography, and urban planning (to name just a few). As such, the brief review offered here will only be able to tell *part* of EJ’s intellectual and social movement story. In order to highlight literature most relevant to this project, and more specifically, to trace the origins of the recent focus within environmental justice on prisons, I will emphasize three key developments within the discipline: 1) distributive justice, one of EJ’s original foci, including not only the distribution of environmental “bads” which produce poor health outcomes, but also *access to* infrastructure and resources, 2) a later, more intersectional expansion in *who* experiences environmental injustices, and 3) a critical examination of the role of the state, the latter two of which come as part of a recent call by critical environmental justice scholars. Together, these three threads within EJ research have ultimately led to an emergent focus on prisons as sites of environmental injustices, a small but growing body of literature that I discuss at the end of this section.

### *Early EJ: Distributive Justice*

To understand how prisons have more recently become theorized as sites of environmental injustice (Pellow 2017; Opsal and Malin 2020; Opsal et al. 2023a; Opsal et al. 2023b), we must return to EJ’s intellectual and organizing roots, where researchers and community members first explored the inequitable (and in particular, racialized) distribution of environmental harms. In 1970, a waste management company attempted to site a municipal solid waste facility in a sleepy, predominately white suburb near Houston. As opposition to the facility

grew and residents expressed concern over potential risks to local health and environmental quality, the project was swiftly defeated by the county board. Less than a decade later, Houston experienced dramatic demographic changes, and the same area – now made up predominantly of black families (82%) – became the target for another solid waste facility (Bullard 1983). Community members again mobilized against the project, citing all the same scary prospects of living so close to a waste incinerator, but the development pressed on. Shortly after, the neighborhood filed a lawsuit against Southwestern Waste Management Corp (ibid). *Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management Corp* was the first court case charging environmental discrimination in the United States, and, by many accounts, marks at least a key part of the development of the modern environmental justice movement and, concurrently, environmental justice scholarship<sup>8</sup>. The framing that emerged from this case and corresponding lawsuit – of the *inequitable distribution* of environmental hazards within the *built environment as a racialized* political project – defines the unique contribution of environmental justice to more typical environmental conversations and literatures at the time.

Prompted by Bullard's (1983) work, and a similar case of a hazardous waste landfill siting in predominately-Black Warren County, North Carolina, early EJ literature which explored distributive justice was often *descriptive* and *exploratory* in nature, attempting first and foremost to establish that environmental harms were indeed distributed unfairly on racial lines beyond Houston and Warren County. It is in this context that EJ helped expand the definition of 'what counts' as an environmental concern by centering environmental health "where we work, live, study, and play," (Braz and Gilmore 2006: 96). In 1983, following pressure from both white-collar experts and various grassroots organizations, the first large-scale study conducted

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<sup>8</sup> As many scholars now note, however, low-income communities and communities of color have been resisting environmental racism and other forms of environmental inequity for far longer than these lawsuits might suggest (Hurley 1995, Taylor 1997).

examining siting inequities by the federal government was published by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO). This report confirmed earlier, smaller-scale findings that Black communities in the south were disproportionately and inequitably bearing the burden of waste sites (USGAO 1983). Just a few years later, the United Church of Christ's (UCC) Commission for Racial Justice conducted an even larger scale examination, documenting the same phenomenon of discriminatory siting based on race, but at the national level (Chavis and Lee 1987). Both studies were groundbreaking in scope and gave much needed legitimacy to expand environmental justice both politically and within the academy. Soon, the discipline began to proliferate, and other quantitative work affirmed these findings about distributive environmental injustices (Boer et al. 1997); this included research which examined exposure beyond hazardous waste siting (Bullard 1996), such as air pollution concentration (Sadd et al. 1999), proximity to Superfund sites (Stretesky and Hogan 1999), and proximity to toxic releases (Bowen et al. 1995).

Yet this early distributive literature was not without debates. In addition to methodological debates about quantitative measurement and scale, two other key disputes emerged within research on environmental justice and inequality at this time. The first involved a complex question: is *race* really a central factor in exposure to environmental hazards, or is it actually *class*? Despite some scholars' initial concerns that the research may be overstating the role of race, and that instead, class might be a more appropriate variable to use when understanding environmental inequity, Brown (1995) confirmed race as the strongest indicator of proximity of toxic hazards to a community. These findings were reaffirmed by various meta-analyses in the field (Szasz and Meuser 1997; Evans and Kantrowitz 2002; Ringquist 2005). Next, Been (1994) controversially asserted that "market forces" may explain inequitable environmental exposures; in other words, Been (1994) suggested that ethnic/racial minorities

move to communities *after* environmental hazards had been placed nearby. This claim – a departure from Bullard and Wright’s (1987:28) assertion that locally unwanted land uses are strategically placed in “Blacks’ Back Yard,” prompted a “chicken or the egg” debate among researchers. However, others debunked this “minority move in” thesis, demonstrating instead that disproportionate *siting* was more prominent than disproportionate minority move-in in various cases (Pastor et al. 2001; Saha and Mohai 2005). Yet other scholars, such as Pulido (1996:142), ledged critiques against the “which came first?” debate in and of itself, asserting that the fixation “reveals a large, pervasive set of misconceptions' ' within the discipline.

It is within this context, where scholars were exploring the unfair distribution of environmental harm, that the notion of LULUs – Locally Unwanted Land Uses – emerged. Generally, LULUs are understood as development sites<sup>9</sup> that most communities do not prefer or actively seek but are on occasion willing to accept (Bullard 1990; Davidson and Anderton 2000; Cole and Foster 2001; Mohai and Saha 2006). Most obviously, LULUs bring environmental risks to air and water quality, thus threatening local public health, though they can also produce stigma and disruption of local community cohesion (Furuseth 1990; Rephann 2000; Pellow 2002). As EJ literature has described, however, the desire to improve a community’s material conditions results not only in the rejection of LULUs (what researchers describe as NIMBY – “Not in My Backyard”) but sometimes, in the acceptance or active solicitation of them (PIMBY – “Please in My Backyard”). This literature is vast (Anguelovski 2015; Mohai and Saha 2015; Nakazawa 2018), and relevant to this project insofar as it informed later research on environmental justice and prisons, some of which explores prisons as LULUs themselves (Eason 2017; Opsal and

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<sup>9</sup> This language is intentional, given that LULUs include, but are more expansive than, a focus on hazardous waste sites alone.

Malin 2020). However, given this project's emphasis on environmental conditions *within* prisons rather than viewing prisons as *external polluters*, I will limit my review of this important work.

To sum up the above research, since these explorations in the 1980s, 90s, and early 2000s, hundreds of studies have broadly supported the thesis that marginalized people (though, in the early literature, this most centrally meant people of color – and more specifically, Black Americans) are burdened with heightened and disproportionate toxic environmental exposures and risks, often from LULUs (Mohai et al. 2009:406). This work includes comprehensive texts like Taylor's (2014), which documents the way industrial pollution and limited residential mobility have combined to produce environmentally racist outcomes for hundreds of communities of color across the country. Following a few central, early debates, environmental justice researchers now firmly state that Black and Brown people especially live near environmental hazards, and that this is not an accident (Downey and Hawkins 2008; Mohai et al. 2009; Clark et al. 2014; Ard 2015; Liévanos 2015).

Yet not all environmental injustices come in the form of LULUs, or even proximity to toxic sites. In this realm, some scholars have highlighted the unequal, and often racialized, distribution of disaster impacts and proximity to risk. One of the more glaring examples of this is Hurricane Katrina, which has been extensively examined through an EJ lens (Pastor et al. 2006; Verchick 2006; Johnson and Rainey 2007; Bullard 2019). While then-President George W. Bush's asserted that "the storm didn't discriminate," researchers and community organizers remind us that inadequate infrastructure, access to transportation, and government responses exacerbate existing racially segregated housing, in turn producing *deeply* unequal experiences of hurricanes like Katrina (Lieberman 2006; McDougall 2007; Bullard 2019; Byrnes 2014). Research observes similar dynamics of heightened risk in the wake of other disasters, many of

which are made worse by climate change (Chakraborty et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2022). Other work asks related questions about the distribution of environmental “goods” and infrastructure such as green spaces, walkable neighborhoods, and bike lanes (Greenberg and Renne 2005; Cutts et al. 2009; Jennings et al. 2012; Jennings et al. 2019). Indeed, all of the aforementioned research is particularly relevant for my project, given that exposure to extreme heat – a distributive problem – is not necessarily an issue of *siting* per se, but rather one of poor infrastructure access and climate management. The above literature shows that unequally distributed environmental exposure takes many shapes and forms beyond LULUs or siting patterns alone, and that *access to* infrastructure and resources is as important as, and deeply related to, *protection from* environmental harms.

In addition to highlighting that distributive inequities exist, EJ researchers have also demonstrated that these disproportionalities result in notable health problems. Here, scholars have shown how disproportionate environmental exposures contribute to health problems (Brulle and Pellow 2006; Johnston and Cushing 2020). Researchers have found inequitable outcomes in reproductive health (Hoover et al. 2012; Hoover 2018; Whitworth et al. 2023), asthma and respiratory disease (Wheeler and Ben-Shlomo 2005; Grineski et al. 2013; Johnston et al. 2021), and cancer and diabetes (Brender et al. 2011), to name just a few. This literature is indeed vast, including work that recognizes environmental health and illness as contested, highlighting the importance of popular epidemiology and social movement responses to environmental health crises (Novotny 1994; Brown and Mikkelsen 1997; Brown et al. 2003; Wing et al. 2008; Brown et al. 2011). This literature, in particular, is useful given that people in prison have contested state narratives about the health and safety of carceral facilities and environmental quality within them

(Mitchell 2023). Clearly, then, EJ literature shows how disproportionate environmental exposure can have measurable impacts on the health of nearby communities.

I have thus far reviewed how the EJ movement and EJ literature have demonstrated profound distributive injustices in environmental exposure. Many of these distributive inequalities come from LULUs, though EJ work has also highlighted other forms of risk from things like natural disasters, and inadequate access to protective infrastructure and resources like green space and parks. Together, these distributive injustices have produced a plethora of health problems for marginalized communities across the country. This literature lays the intellectual groundwork for understanding prisons as sites of environmental justice. Crucially, though, to my knowledge, only one study between 1980-2006 considered prisons as relevant to environmental justice, and this exploration was focused instead on mutual organizing work done by anti-prison and pro-environmental groups in California, but did not necessarily theorize prisons as sites of environmental injustices themselves (Braz and Gilmore 2006). Next, I will highlight more recent expansions and new directions within EJ literature which have ultimately contributed to an exciting new focus on incarcerated people and prisons.

#### *A Critical Shift: Expansions in Environmental Justice*

In recent decades, environmental justice research has proliferated and expanded in several exciting ways. For example, the *scope* of EJ has expanded; scholars like Martin (2013), Downey (2015) and Martinez et al. (2016) have explored environmental justice beyond local issues and siting disputes, emphasizing global patterns of inequity and global resistance movements. Yet EJ has also developed theoretically and in new areas of focus. One of the central ways this has occurred is through an exploration of justice beyond the distributive paradigm, including *procedural* justice and *recognition* (Lake 1996; Hunold and Young 1998; Kickul et al.

2005; Schlosberg 2007; Schlosberg 2013). Briefly, some other areas of thematic and empirical expansion include: studies of mobilized resistance to injustice (Pellow 2001; Nixon 2011; Little and Lucier 2017; Neville and Martin 2023), as well as “sites of acceptance,” (Malin 2014; Lapegna and Kunin 2022; Malin et al. 2023); a focus on climate change and climate justice (Roberts and Parks 2006; Wilson et al. 2010; Schlosberg and Collins 2014; Anderson et al. 2018), and the linking of environmental injustices to broader structural forces of capitalism, racial capitalism, colonialism, and neoliberalism (Bell 2015; Pulido 2016; Pulido 2017; Malin and Ryder 2018; Gilio-Whitaker 2019; Malin et al. 2023). Taken altogether, one can see that environmental justice has certainly embarked on a more critical turn, both before and after Pellow’s (2017) call for a critical environmental justice studies, which I discuss in more detail later in this section. For the sake of a focused review of the literature most relevant to this project, next I review two trends in EJ’s broadening scope and more critical orientation: first, an expanded notion of *who* is victimized by environmental injustices through a focus on multiple demographic and identity categories, which ultimately led to the inclusion of incarcerated people within EJ, and second, a reckoning with EJ’s successes and failures, as well as its orientation to the state. These two shifts signaled and paved the way for the emergence of *critical environmental justice studies*, which offers a crucial framework for this project that I highlight at the end of this section.

The early EJ movement and corresponding academic literature proliferated in part in response to mainstream environmental movements, which were largely white, male, and middle- or upper-class (Taylor 2000). Early research within EJ, then, refocused environmental issues within a Civil Rights context that centered the experiences of Black Americans in the American South. This research was important, but this framing meant that other people who are targeted,

marginalized, and oppressed were often left out of the first few decades of EJ scholarship (Ryder 2017). For example, in North America, indigenous people have experienced environmental injustices since the first colonists arrived, when food sources were disrupted and destroyed, disease proliferated, and lands were stolen (Deloria Jr. and Lytle 1983; Whyte 2016; Gilio-Whitaker 2019). However, explorations of indigeneity, colonialism, and EJ were largely absent from early work (Vickery and Hunter 2016; Ryder 2017); only recently have scholars begun to empirically and theoretically explore these issues (Hoover et al. 2012; Whyte 2016; Hoover et al. 2018; McGregor 2018; Gilio-Whitaker 2019; Whyte 2020).

Research has also demonstrated the way other forms of marginality shape disproportionate exposure or proximity to environmental harm. In this realm, a growing body of EJ literature documents how extractive industries and natural resource dependencies contaminate poor, rural, predominantly white towns (Malin 2014; Bell 2016; Malin et al. 2019). Indeed, class *is* and *has been* central to experiences of environmental injustice (Rauh et al. 2008; Mohai et al. 2009; Wilder et al. 2016), this is particularly apparent in the case of Appalachia (Hendryx 2010; Engle 2019). Research examining the intersection of environmental injustices and gender has also proliferated (Bell 2013; Taylor 2014; McKinney and Fulkerson 2015; Bell 2016; Mashhoodi 2021), though the origins of that work can be traced back to Taylor (1997). Others have charged that disability ought to be considered relevant to EJ work, asserting that this form of disadvantage amplifies existing environmental hazards by putting this community at heightened risk (Nocella II 2017; Jampel 2018). More recently, scholars have called for a more concerted examination of the way LGBTQ+ folks experience disproportionate environmental risk as well (Goldsmith and Bell 2022). Crucially, these calls and findings— do not diminish or negate early (and continued) work on the centrality of race in environmental exposure. Rather, this more

recent work helps “emphasize multiple social locations,” to use the language of Malin and Ryder (2018). As I highlight later, scholarship which considers how people sitting at different identity intersections experience environmental hazards has paved the way for a focus on incarcerated people within EJ literature, which has historically been absent.

Another emergent theme in EJ work has been a critical examination of the movement’s successes and failures, which in turn have produced calls for a fundamentally different orientation to research: one which is critical of the state. While EJ literature and the corresponding social movement have yielded important victories, scholars have highlighted the limits of these successes. In *Toxic Waste & Race at Twenty*, Bullard et al. (2008) present a sobering assessment of the status of environmental injustices in the new millennium. Their findings show that not only are racial and socioeconomic disparities in the distribution of hazardous waste facilities persistent, there are actually *higher concentrations* of people of color living near those facilities than previously shown (Bullard et al. 2008). As Brulle and Pellow (2005:294) pointed out nearly two decades ago, the environmental justice movement still lacked a coherent national or international strategy, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act had not yet realized major legal victories for environmental justice activists, and perhaps most importantly, “structural, political, and economic changes that would produce environmental justice and sustainability have not yet materialized;” these assessments remain true today.

As Pulido (2017) notes, these limited successes may be in part because of the discipline and movement’s liberal orientation to the state, despite research that understands environmental racism as a function of racial capitalism and broader state-sanctioned violence. Pulido (2017:525) suggests, instead, that “the state must become a site of opposition,” and that “In order to move forward both as a movement and scholarly field, we must rethink environmental

justice.” This is necessary because historical strategies, such as lawsuits, Title VI complaints, Executive Order 12898, and regulatory enforcement have not yielded promising results.

Reflecting on the state of the movement and literature, Pulido (2017:526) argues that, “Failure on such a scale cannot be resolved by tinkering with policy.”

Amidst this general shift happening in the discipline – one which expands who is considered relevant in the field, how injustices manifest, and more critically examines the state – Pellow (2017) made the call for a critical environmental justice studies. The four pillars of Critical EJ Studies include an emphasis on the intersectionality of all forms of oppression and social inequality (echoed and expanded upon by Malin and Ryder (2018), who call for a ‘deeply intersectional’ environmental justice), a focus on the role of scale in understanding environmental harms (related to, but not quite the same as Rob Nixon’s notion of slow violence – see Nixon 2011), an understanding of the way social inequalities are “deeply embedded in society and reinforced by state power,” and finally, a framing of marginalized communities as *indispensable* rather than *expendable* (Pellow 2017:54). These pillars prove essential to expanding the scope of traditional environmental justice scholarship to include work on prisons, explicitly named by Pellow, as I detail later. They also, as I demonstrate above, serve to synthesize and formalize the new directions already occurring within the discipline at that time.

For the sake of this dissertation, I want to especially highlight the third and fourth pillar of the CEJ framework and identify their relevance to my own project. First, Pellow (2017) argues that both the environmental justice movement and adjacent academic fields have continued to reinvest energy into state-based solutions, despite decades of evidence of the state’s failure to meaningfully prevent, or generate reparations for, environmental harms. While some scholars disagree with Pellow’s particularly anarchist orientation to the state (Purucker 2021; Harrison

2023), EJ researchers are indeed beginning to reckon with the discipline's tendency to look to the state to achieve the "justice" at the heart of EJ studies (Pulido 2017) by critically examining state power (Mao et al. 2021). My current research was directly informed by the third pillar, which is particularly relevant for those considering the way prisons perpetuate environmental hazards (both for nearby communities and those locked up inside them). Despite a recent public focus on private facilities, most prisons in the United States are public and thus operated by the state. Additionally, the state apparatus is not only responsible for physically incarcerating people, but for directing and upholding the entire carceral project, including the police, parole officers, and courts which lock people up in the first place.

In CEJ's fourth pillar, Pellow (2017:26) asserts the importance of indispensability, or what he describes as "the perspective that excluded, marginalized, and othered populations, beings, and things – both human and more-than-human – must be viewed not as expendable but rather as *indispensable* to our collective futures." This aspect of CEJ is also vitally important for research examining prisons as sites of environmental justice, given that people locked up in prisons and jails in the United States face rampant dehumanization, and, as this study and others have shown, are often treated as expendable. By exploring their lived experiences and centering them here, researchers can affirm the indispensability of incarcerated people in our society and movements for justice.

### *Prisons and Environmental Justice*

Above, I traced the development of EJ research, from an initial focus on distributive injustices, through to more recent, critical, and exciting expansions. Many of these threads – from early EJ foci on distribution and risk, to a broadened consideration of *who* suffers from environmental injustice, to recent critiques of the state – have together laid the groundwork for

an emphasis on prisons and incarcerated people. Despite these developments, only a few researchers have begun to explicitly identify incarcerated people as victims of environmental injustice. This is troubling for a number of reasons. Perhaps most importantly, incarcerated people are among the most marginalized people in our society; they are disproportionately Black, Brown, and Indigenous, disproportionately low-income, disproportionately disabled, and experience political disenfranchisement (Uggen et al. 2005; Rabuy and Kopf 2015; Marushcak and Bronson 2021). In addition, this reluctance to study the experiences of people living behind bars demonstrates a general sluggishness in EJ's ability to pick up on connections that social movements have been identifying for years (Braz and Gilmore 2006).

Of this small (albeit quickly growing) body of EJ work, nearly all of it has been produced in just the past decade (Pellow 2017; Perdue 2018; Opsal and Malin 2020; Pellow 2021; Schept 2022; Opsal et al. 2023). Here, Pellow's (2017) *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* has been seminal. In his book, Pellow (2017) began to theorize prisons as extractive sites themselves, asserting that "The prison industrial complex is *mining* our homes and neighborhoods for human resources that fuel the carceral system, and prisoners, their friends, families, and our communities are paying the price," (99). He also highlights some of the many troubling environmental conditions that incarcerated people deal with in prison, from exposure due to their work or even, simply poor water and air quality from local polluting sites. Pellow (2017) identifies a few other main points of intersection, including prisons as population control and the link to overpopulation discourse within environmentalism, and sexual violence within prisons as an act of stripping bodily autonomy, much like toxic pollution itself. More recently, Pellow (2021) has echoed many of the claims identified in this chapter and notes several additional examples of environmental injustices taking place within U.S. prisons. Taylor (2024), one of the

more prolific researchers in the field for the past several decades, has also amplified this charge, calling for environmental social scientists to generally pay closer attention to the link between prisons and environment. In many ways, this current project is a direct response to both of these calls for further, more empirical investigation.

Since the publication of *What is Critical Environmental Justice?*, several scholars have explored the prison-environment nexus; specifically, several EJ scholars have examined prisons as sites of environmental injustices. In their review and call to the literature, Opsal and Malin (2020) argue that the LULU framework – borrowed from environmental justice literature – is precisely the tool worth using for examining prisons as sites of both resistance and acceptance. Additionally, Opsal and Malin (2020) identify the fact that prisons, also like conventionally defined LULUs within historical environmental justice frameworks, are indeed laden with environmental issues that burden both the incarcerated people confined to their cells as well as the external communities that surround them, echoing the earlier concerns of Pellow (2017). Interestingly, this can make prisons a form of “historically layered” LULU, in which prison siting happens on top of a former extractive site or vice versa (Opsal and Malin 2020). Later work finds that carceral institutions that have recorded noncompliance with federal environmental standards are indeed more likely to be “layered” on or proximate to Superfund sites, as well as that these facilities are more likely to be located in or near communities with a higher percentage of Black, Brown, and/or Indigenous people (Opsal et al. 2023). While these articles offer a substantive EJ-based framework and grounded, empirical assessments of the linkages between EJ and critical prison studies, they are largely focused on siting patterns. This is important work, yet the question of the experiences of incarcerated people remains.

In addition to Pellow (2017), Opsal and Malin’s (2020), and Opsal et al. (2023)’s work, Perdue (2021) and Schept (2022) have also drawn links between environment and prison, with an emphasis on Appalachia. Emphasizing the extreme class-based marginality of the region, both scholars have asked questions about the way the region serves as a dumping ground for “trash” – and how this has contributed to the layering of environmental harms, which specifically in the case of Appalachia involves prisons being placed atop former mountaintop removal coal mines. While these papers indirectly discuss climate change, given their focus on the extractive industry at large (like Opsal and Malin’s 2020 work), the focus of this body of research is, too, primarily on *siting* rather than impacts felt by incarcerated people specifically. This siting-based literature builds on a long history of spatial explorations of environmental inequities (Bullard 1983; Bullard 1990; Bryant and Mohai 1992; Szasz & Meuser 1997), which in many ways serves as the foundation of EJ scholarship. Yet for the most part, research examining the distribution of environmental harms – including prisons themselves, or toxic hazards *near* prisons – does not engage directly with incarcerated people to understand their perspective or experiences. More specifically, none of this research uses qualitative methods to understand how people who are incarcerated experience environmental hazards firsthand.

Other recent work has examined – and called for – an anti-prison movement with an emphasis on prison ecology and climate, an important contribution to CEJ studies. Oviemhada et al. (2023) interview community organizers directly to better understand their movement strategies and the barriers to accessing geospatial data for campaigning. Meanwhile, Purdum et al. (2021) charge that abolition of prisons will help mitigate disproportionate environmental harms felt by marginalized communities and particularly communities of color – with a particularly astute observation of the relationship between the prison industrial complex and

disasters. Downey and Mark (2021) too draw connections between racialized policing, prisons, and environmental impacts, highlighting the ways various forms of power intersect to perpetuate violence against Black lives in the United States.

So what, if any, environmental justice work examines the impact of environmental hazards within and near prisons on incarcerated people themselves? Above, I describe connections drawn between environmental harm and the criminal justice system at large. I also note a growing literature that examines prison siting and local public health impacts. While community impacts are important, these siting patterns indicate heightened risk for those living *within* prisons, not just near them. Here, the Prison Ecology Project and other EJ-oriented nonprofits and organizations that support prisoner rights have led the way, examining prison proximity to Superfund sites and other internal environmental hazards. For example, in 2007, Prison Legal News reported that sewage and sanitation violations occurred in prisons in at least 17 states (Dannenberg 2007). In Pennsylvania, coal ash exposures at one prison have led to related skin, respiratory, and gastrointestinal issues felt by over 80% of inmates<sup>10 11</sup> (McDaniel et al. 2014). The 2020 Annual Report of the Environmental Justice Project outlines these and many other instances of egregious and deeply troubling health consequences of environmental hazards on inmates themselves.

### *Experiences of Incarceration*

Above, I traced the lineage of environmental justice through to critical environmental justice studies, finally describing current work on the intersection of EJ and prisons. However, research outside of EJ is vital for understanding how people who are locked up experience the

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<sup>10</sup> Notably, this report was compiled using a variety of data sources, including letters from people living at SCI Fayette in Pennsylvania. These letters served as direct inspiration for this project and, more specifically, for me to explore this issue using the correspondence method.

<sup>11</sup> Despite widespread coverage of these horrific conditions, SCI Fayette is still open.

day-to-day reality of prison life. Given the sheer enormity of the prison system in the United States, it is easy to think of the over 2 million folks who are locked up as simply statistics. Yet a central contribution of criminology is to ask questions not only about the criminal justice system which produces mass incarceration, but also of the conditions of those incarcerated. This is particularly important for my project, which seeks to understand the many tolls of prison heat. Here, I trace some relevant literature on how prisons impact the daily lives of the incarcerated.

An extensive body of social science work examines the experiences of incarcerated people. There are considerable barriers to researchers accessing prisons in general, and especially prison populations (Moser et al. 2004; Apa et al. 2012), making reaching incarcerated people even more difficult. Yet despite these barriers, research in prisons on incarcerated people has been a staple of sociological and criminological investigation.

Some of the earliest research on the experiences of incarcerated people emphasizes, perhaps most obviously, a lack of autonomy felt in prisons (Sykes 1958). Goffman (1961) famously described the prison as a “total institution,” in which inmates are stripped of their prior identities and roles that they maintained in life before incarceration. One way that autonomy is stripped is by forced isolation, which can contribute to extreme loneliness (Haney 2019). Much of this early symbolic interactionist work emphasized the experience of imprisonment as socially degrading, focusing on not the material conditions of the prison but the ways that interactions with staff, other inmates, and visitors perpetuate feelings of otherness and extreme loss of previous identities (Sykes 1958; Goffman 1961).

It is well-documented that incarceration is stressful for most people locked behind bars. Prison ethnographies have repeatedly demonstrated how straining day-to-day prison life is (Sykes 1958; Irwin and Cressey 1962; Zamble 1992). Research shows that interactions with

correctional officers, medical staff, and other inmates can all lead to a heightened sense of stress, lack of safety, and general anxiety in prison (Porter 2019). While formally reported incidents of violence in prison – data collected by prison officials – are rare, Lahm (2008) found that 17% of inmates reported assaulting another inmate in a 12-month period. These stressors have real, material impacts on incarcerated peoples’ quality of life. Biomedical research on the general population demonstrates that consistently high levels of stress can produce various forms of “wear and tear” on the body, potentially contributing to or exacerbating other illnesses or disabilities (McEwen 2012). Chronic stress can lead to heart disease, depression, memory loss, and worsened immune functioning, to name just a few of many associated risks (Lupien and Lepage 2001; Epel et al. 2006; Reed and Raison 2016).

In one of the most groundbreaking and lasting studies on the experiences of incarcerated people, Sykes (1958) observed and theorized the “pains of imprisonment.” Here, Sykes (1958) identified five central characteristics of prison life, which function as *deprivations* and cause suffering for those living behind bars: the deprivation of liberty, deprivation of goods and services, deprivation of heterosexual relationships, deprivation of autonomy, and deprivation of security. While some rightful critiques have been levied against this initial approach (in particular, against the minimization of queer pleasure as a “prison paradox,” per Vasiliou (2020), the overall framing has persisted as a staple of criminological literature. Indeed, this work has for decades stood at the center of the study of prison life, with dozens of scholars developing it further and offering various iterations of its initial arguments. Some researchers highlight the psychological pains of imprisonment, with an emphasis on identity and the “mortifications of the self” observed by Goffman and others (Crewe 2011:510). More recently, Fleury-Steiner and Longazel (2013) identify the way contemporary imprisonment – particularly in a time of

racialized, punitive mass incarceration following the War on Drugs and decades of tough on crime policies – takes on additional and uniquely modern pains. Here, the authors include five additional pains to Sykes’ original framework: pains of containment, pains of exploitation, pains of coercion, pains of isolation, and pains of brutality (Fluery-Steiner and Longazel 2013). This project seeks to understand the role of extreme heat in the lives of incarcerated people – and, to that end, situates high temperatures within other pains of incarceration. More specifically, this research expands on existing prison literature that has yet to focus on the impacts of extreme heat/climate change.

### *Health and Incarceration*

In addition and perhaps related to the heightened levels of stress while behind bars, incarcerated people in the United States are disproportionately likely to be disabled, either with physical or mental disabilities. Crucially, many people who are incarcerated enter the prison system with compromised physical or mental health conditions. In fact, so many people report disabilities upon entering the prison system that some scholars and community organizations have described this phenomenon as the “criminalization of disability” (Disability Rights Oregon 2021). As of 2016, nearly 2 out of every 5 people in state or federal prison was diagnosed with at least one disability, a 38% (Maruschak and Bronson 2021). This makes incarcerated people roughly 2.5x more likely to report a disability than the general population, which is disabled at a rate of approximately 15%. In 2016, 40% of state and 33% of federal prisoners reported currently having a chronic condition (ibid). Cognitive disabilities, including autism, Down syndrome, dementia, and learning disorders are some of the most often reported disabilities in prisons and jails; incarcerated people are approximately four times more likely to report a cognitive disability than the rest of the population in the United States (Vallas 2016). Crucially,

these statistics typically represent those with formal diagnoses, failing to capture the many other people living behind bars who experience undiagnosed pain or have not received adequate medical attention. Mental illness, which is notoriously more difficult to diagnose than say, heart disease or diabetes, is likely quite underreported by state and federal agencies. In 2016, roughly 27% of state and 14% of federal prisoners reported being told by a nurse or physician that they had a major depressive disorder, just under a quarter of state prisoners reported being told they had bipolar disorder (23%) or an anxiety disorder (22%), and 14% of state prisoners reported being told they had post-traumatic stress disorder (Maruschak and Bronson 2021). Experiences of mental health problems are also gendered; in both state and federal prisons, women are more likely to have experienced serious psychological distress within the past 30 days (*ibid*). Even with issues of reporting and data validity, these numbers tend to be higher than the general population, and are more likely to co-occur, given that health diagnoses can compound.

Evidence also suggests that those who enter the U.S. prison system without a disability are likely to leave with chronic health concerns. The daily stress of confinement, close living quarters, and a lack of autonomy over one's life have all been identified as compounding factors which worsen health outcomes for incarcerated people (Nurse, Woodcock and Ormsby 2003; Edgemon and Clay-Warner 2018). In fact, research has found that incarceration can dramatically increase the likelihood of depression (Turney et al. 2012). Additionally, psychologists have identified the ways in which separation from family can cause distress; in fact, rates of depression increase when people are put in prisons more than 50 miles away from their family (Edgemon and Clay-Warner 2018). Other studies have found that even years after release, formerly incarcerated people experience symptoms of Potentially Traumatic Events and Post

Incarceration Syndrome, which share many similarities with the more commonly understood diagnosis of PTSD (Liem and Kunst 2013; Piper and Berle 2019).

### *Prisons and Climate Change*

Thus far, I have reviewed literature on 1) environmental justice, tracing the development of CEJ and a recent focus on prisons and 2) experiences of incarceration, with an emphasis on the pains of incarceration and the impacts of incarceration on health. Next, I overview the literature on prisons and climate change. I chose to first emphasize experiences of incarceration because much of the prison-climate literature, too, deals with health.

Prisons, like every other institution and form of built environment on earth, are subject to the impacts of climate change. As global temperatures continue to climb and most major nations fail to meet emission reduction goals, the planet will continue to experience crippling heat waves, destructive wildfires, rising seas, and increased risk and intensity of natural disasters (IPCC 2023). Indeed, 2023 was the hottest year on record (NOAA 2024). While scientists have historically tended to avoid attributing specific heat events to climate change, the correlation is becoming more and more clear; for example, climatologists now estimate that climate change made the devastating 2022 heatwaves in Pakistan and India by at least thirty times more likely (Zachariah et al. 2022). In fact, the climate crisis is so dire that the IPCC suggests that only a few crucial years remain to begin to decarbonize the entire planet before irreversible damage is done to ecosystems around the world. And, regardless of future policy or attempts to reduce greenhouse gasses, the impacts of climate change are indeed already being felt. Journalists have shed light on the devastating instances of individual incarcerated people experiencing extreme health consequences or even death as a result of extreme heat in U.S. prisons (Burnett 2016; Salhotra and Melhado 2024). Paradoxically, given that many incarcerated people have been

intentionally shut out of the political process, prisoners remain disenfranchised voters who often cannot support candidates who may attempt to combat climate change and thus reduce impacts felt by incarcerated people (Manza and Uggen 2006).

Outside of sociological work, research tells us that climate change can have potentially dire consequences for the health of those living behind bars. First, it is worth noting that extensive literature confirms that a warming planet will impact public health at large (Levy and Patz 2015). Yet much of the work which links the impacts of climate change to the health of incarcerated people is made up of reviews of the literature and hypothetical predictions for *likely* future impacts. Maner et al (2022) highlight the dearth of planning for climate impacts within the Department of Corrections. Indeed, new reports have confirmed multiple instances of southern states failing to evacuate their prisons while bracing for intense hurricane impacts (Gross 2018; Prashar 2021). More recently, Skarha et al. (2022:1) demonstrated an association between temperature and mortality in Texas prisons, finding that as many as 13% of deaths in state facilities during warm months over a 19-year period “may be attributable to extreme heat days.” Research conducted at the national level also found an association between increased mortality and heat, particularly among the elderly (Skarha et al. 2023). Similarly, Cloud and colleagues (2023) found an association between extreme heat and increased suicide-watch incidents.

Other work echoes these findings by giving us insight into the impacts of heat waves on public health broadly, which is still useful for understanding how extreme heat may impact incarcerated people. Research suggests that extreme heat events can increase the likelihood of interpersonal violence (Anderson 1989; Anderson 2001), self-harm (Burke et al. 2018), and debilitating symptoms from physical disabilities (Vasquez 2021). Heat has been shown to exacerbate existing illnesses and increase risk of death (Zhao et al. 2019). In the public at large,

heat waves have famously been linked to mass casualty events (Klinenberg 2015; Lewis 2021) and increased rates of domestic and community violence (Sanz-Barbero et al. 2018). Given that disabled people are disproportionately represented in U.S. prisons, and heat poses a greater threat for people with disabilities, these risks are especially relevant for those examining incarcerated people and prison infrastructure more broadly. Regarding a recent heat wave in Texas, Keith Cole, serving time at the Wallace Pack Unit outside of Houston, told one journalist (Burnett 2016):

My age, with the medical conditions that I have, the medications that I'm on, extreme heat can kill me... So it's not a comfort issue with me. It has nothing to do with that. This is a serious medical issue.

Clearly, there are potentially dire consequences for incarcerated people who have disabilities and are repeatedly exposed to extreme heat. Despite this, a few scholars, to my knowledge, have utilized a sociological lens to understand the risks suffered by incarcerated people in the face of climate change. In this realm, Gribble and Pellow (2021) explore the many dimensions of potential climate impacts on prison conditions and incarcerated laborers. Prins and Story (2020), who discuss the interconnected and mutually reinforcing logics of climate emergency, health inequity, and mass incarceration, articulate abolition as a way to address the multiple interrelated crises. Terwiel (2018), too, draws attention to rising temperatures and invokes Foucault to problematize the prison itself, echoing the limits of “humane treatment” discourse in favor of a critique of carcerality and imprisonment altogether. These papers make important theoretical contributions to this realm of research, and indeed all informed my orientation to this dissertation. Yet these studies share a largely theoretical orientation, drawing on and summarizing specific examples and contexts. My work, then, attempts to add a necessary data-based assessment to this small body of environmental justice literature, as well as aims to

center the voices and experiences of incarcerated people rather than rely on secondhand accounts or descriptions. Further, my project aims to link the firsthand accounts of incarcerated people with a structural examination of the policies, or lack thereof, which will mitigate climate-induced heat impacts.

### *Understanding Environmental Injustices in Prisons: A Green Criminological Framing*

In this final section, I will overview green criminology, another literature that significantly informed the direction of my own research. This area of research is still quite new; the terminology of ‘green criminology’ itself did not experience wide usage until the early 2000s (Ruggiero and South 2013). Whereas EJ came about in response to failures of the field to examine the role of inequality and injustice – in particular, racial inequality – in the production of environmental harm, green criminology builds on existing, but marginal and infrequent, threads within criminology that recognize and emphasize what could broadly be conceived of as “crimes against the environment.” Green criminologists assert that including a variety of environmental harms – not just formal crimes – within the scope of criminological research is necessary, given that so many environmentally hazardous or injurious actions are still perfectly legal under state, domestic, or international policy and regulation (South 2008; White and Heckenberg 2014; Lynch 2020). This comes, in part, from the fact that green criminologists emphasize the construction of what is and is not defined as criminal, and the way those decisions – political in nature – are inextricably bound up in power. This tendency towards a broader and more critical examination of *who* determines *what* is deemed illegal and *why* they do so is the continuation of a long trend within critical criminology. For decades, critical criminologists have asserted that the law itself is socially constructed and that powerful people play a key role in the policy-making process (Quinney 1970; Quinney 1977; Reiman and Leighton 2016). This broad

framework is exceptionally relevant for my research, given that many harms experienced by people who are incarcerated are fully within the realm of the law. In fact, as I highlight in the findings of this dissertation, Mississippi's laws offer very little concrete guidance about standards of treatment or the prevention of harms so many incarcerated people experience on a regular basis. As such, green criminology's central emphasis on an expanded definition of environmental harms and crimes helps scholars first and foremost center environmentally harmful events and consequences that may be overlooked if the focus is limited to explicitly "illegal" acts.

More specifically, green criminology provides useful tools for examining state preparedness for climate impacts on prisons, given that the discipline too centers governing institutions in its assessments of environmental risk. Broadly, green criminologists have explored how state policies fail to adequately protect the public from environmental hazards – from point source pollution to climate change (Stretesky et al. 2014; Lynch 2020). Additionally, green criminologists assert that including a variety of *environmental* harms – not just formal *environmental* crimes – within the scope of criminological research is necessary, given that so many environmentally hazardous or injurious actions are still perfectly legal under state, domestic, or international policy and regulation (South 2008; White and Heckenberg 2014; Lynch 2020). In this way, green criminology is directly building on the work of earlier critical criminologists. Heat waves are especially relevant here, given that high temperatures in many facilities have historically not technically broken laws.

Like CEJ, many green criminologists center the state in their analysis. Here, green criminologists' examination of the role of the state in producing, or allowing for, environmental hazards is deeply rooted in a Marxist political economic framework. At the center of this

tradition is the *treadmill of production*, which green criminologists have adapted and reimagined as the *treadmill of crime* and the *treadmill of law* (Stretesky et al. 2014; Lynch et al. 2020). Others have continued to expand on these treadmill frameworks, theorizing the treadmill of taxation (Mao 2018) and the way the treadmill of production incentivizes the killing of indigenous activists (Lynch et al. 2018). Like Pellow’s critical view of the state, treadmill theorists do not see state failures to prevent environmental harm as an accident, nor do they imagine the state as an empty vessel of public opinion and desire. Rather, these researchers argue that given capitalism’s pressures to eternally expand production, the state will oppose strengthened environmental regulation (facilitating state-corporate crimes if necessary to ensure that these regulatory statutes are not passed) and strategically fail to enforce existing environmental laws that would significantly impact production capacities and practices (Lynch et al. 2018). Fitting prisons into this framework is complex, given that most prisons are publicly operated and a large percentage of prisoners do not participate in prison labor. However, many scholars have documented the key role prisons play in benefitting capital – from upholding racial capitalism, to offering spatial “fixes” to crises, to managing “surplus” populations (Adamson 1984; Gilmore 2007; Calathes 2017). Assessing states’ climate plans using tools offered by green criminology thus allows scholars to frame the lack of climate preparedness as not a failure of the state, but the state indeed functioning as intended.

Green criminological frameworks are also well suited to be used in conjunction with an environmental justice lens; indeed, green criminology has been using environmental justice to understand green crimes and victimization since its earliest years as a field of study. Early on, Stretesky and Hogan (1998) and Stretesky and Lynch (1999) challenged criminology to take seriously the claims of environmental justice literature and consider the ways that race shapes the

criminal justice system and may create unequal outcomes for environmental crimes. Later, green criminologists began to apply these concepts to more empirically driven work. Some of the literature echoed the early methodologies of environmental justice scholars themselves, emphasizing siting practices and disproportionate community-level impacts (Stretesky and Lynch 2002; Stretesky 2003). Other research examined regulatory bodies and infractions. Lynch, Stretesky, and Burns (2004) demonstrate that the average penalty for noncompliance at petroleum refineries is lower in census tracts that are predominately Black than those that are predominately White. Different studies examining the petroleum industry arrived at similar conclusions (Jarell and Ozymy 2010). Green criminology has also extensively examined the way environmental harms and green crimes disproportionately impact indigenous people around the world (Goyes and South 2016; Lynch et al. 2018).

While green criminology has clearly at least begun to take seriously the contributions of environmental justice work, prisons have received even less attention from GC than within EJ. Of the few researchers investigating this nexus, some ask about the experiences of incarcerated people, especially those who live near highly polluted sites such as Superfund sites (Bradshaw 2018). Others have continued to develop these threads, asking questions about the frequency of prison siting near high polluted areas (Leon-Corwin et al. 2020). McGee et al. (2021) document how prisons contribute to climate change, making a useful connection between environmental sociology and critical criminology, but ultimately fail to develop a thread that links this issue to environmental justice literature explicitly. With the crucial exception of Opsal and Malin (2020), the literature which explicitly links prisons, critical (green) criminology, and environmental justice is lacking.

As aforementioned, only a few researchers link green criminology to environmental justice beyond theoretical engagement (see Bradshaw 2018; Leon-Corwin et al. 2020; McGee et al. 2021), and none use critical policy analysis to understand the state's role in allowing widespread climate change-induced harm through inadequate prison policy and infrastructure. This despite the fact that both subdisciplines are well-suited to explore the state's role in the tacit acceptance of harm which could certainly be mitigated, and especially how that harm disproportionately affects already marginalized groups.

### **Where does this dissertation fit in?**

The prison-environment nexus in social science research has become a new intellectual terrain for scholars to investigate after overlooking the relationship for several decades prior. Yet despite this burgeoning interest from both social movements and the academy in recent years, many connections between carceral institutions and environmental justice remain unexplored. More specifically, most literature which examines prisons as sites of environmental justice has not examined the pre-emptive role of the state in the allowance of environmental harms, and only a small body of academic research considers how climate change will impact the millions locked up in U.S. prisons and jails within an environmental justice framework. A small but growing realm of literature uses empirical data to thread green criminological frameworks with an environmental justice perspective. However, of the little scholarship conducted in this area, none, to my knowledge, relies on firsthand, qualitative accounts from incarcerated people themselves. This work begins to ameliorate some of these gaps.

This research project investigates the ability – and desire – of the state of Mississippi to accurately perceive and ready their prisons for the impacts of intense heat waves, which are increasing in frequency given rising global temperatures. Expanding on existing literature which

understands incarcerated people as victims of environmental injustice and states as complicit actors in the production or allowance of environmental harm, I explore 1) how incarcerated people in Mississippi experience extreme heat, and 2) how state policies in Mississippi manage heat in state carceral facilities, particularly given that high temperatures are associated with increased violence and mortality, and that at the time of writing, no state prison has A/C in all of its living units. With this research, I illustrate that climate preparedness in Mississippi prisons is not only an issue for criminologists, who closely examine carceral institutions and the way that the state manages them, but is also deeply related to environmental justice.

Crucially, though, this work is not only attempting to fill a meaningful gap in academic literature. It is also responding to increasingly dire climate projections and a crisis of mass incarceration in a country doing little to mitigate the impacts of either. At the beginning of this chapter, Morgan and Mike, two participants in this project, described their experiences enduring summer heat in MDOC facilities without air conditioning. The picture they paint is grim: for both of them, and thousands of other people incarcerated in facilities without adequate temperature management infrastructure, prison is like “hell.” In that vein, I hope that this project not only pushes along important academic and intellectual conversations about the nature of environmental harms felt in prison, but also helps tell a story— one about what daily life is like on a warming planet for people who the state has pushed to the margins – from their own perspective.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODS AND DATA

To conduct this research, I employed critical policy analysis and the correspondence method over a period of approximately 16 months. In this chapter, I will explain and provide rationale for my methodological decisions in this qualitative, mixed-methods research project. I begin by overviewing my broad research goals and questions. Then, I offer an in-depth articulation and discussion of both methods. For each method, I first justify my research design and highlight the benefits and drawbacks of these decisions. Then, I describe my data collection process and data analysis strategies. I conclude this chapter by addressing a few of the limitations of this study given these methodological choices.

### **Research Design & Study Overview**

Criminologists have used a wide array of methods to interrogate the criminal justice system at large and understand the experiences of those confined within jails and prisons. These have included both quantitative and qualitative methodologies – from surveys (e.g. Nijhawan et al. 2010) and data of re-entry rates (e.g. Mitchell et al. 2016), for example, to interviews with people living behind bars (e.g. Condon et al. 2007) and even ethnography of prisons themselves (e.g. Gadd et al. 2012). Qualitative methods, however, help researchers uniquely achieve “rich” data as opposed to the often-limited scope of hypothesis-testing that is typical within quantitative research (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Whereas quantitative surveys, for example, offer *breadth*, interviews and other forms of qualitative correspondence give researchers *depth*. Moreover, a qualitative approach allows participants to answer questions in their own words, including providing data beyond what may otherwise be pre-determined by the researcher as a possible

response in quantitative projects. In fact, some argue that these benefits (and others) make qualitative work uniquely suited for criminological research (Tewksbury 2009).

Additionally, mixed methods studies which rely on triangulation have a variety of benefits which are well-documented, including compiling a deeper, fuller, and more holistic understanding of complex relationships, as well as validating data through the use of multiple vantage points to examine a particular set of questions (della Porta 2014; Ayoub et al. 2014). In this vein, I conducted a mixed-methods project, using two qualitative methods to examine heat waves in prisons. My goal was to answer the following two research questions:

- 1) How do people who are incarcerated in Mississippi experience heat waves? *and*
- 2) How is the state prepared to mitigate said impacts?

I concurrently used two methodologies to answer the above research questions.

Following approval from Colorado State University's IRB, I conducted letter-writing – more formally known as the correspondence method – with incarcerated people to better understand how they experience heat and what impacts, if any, it has on their daily life and autonomy living behind bars. Additionally, I conducted critical policy analysis to better understand how, if at all, the state is preparing for or acknowledging climate-induced temperature risks to prisons in Mississippi.

## **Correspondence Method**

### *Rationale*

Environmental justice research has a rich history of documenting environmental harms from the perspective of those who experience them (Mohai et al. 2009; Taylor 2014). Indeed, by simply asking affected community members how they feel, how their environment impacts them, and what could be different, environmental justice researchers were able to prove that

marginalized communities have been disproportionately harmed in the first place. Beyond environmental justice research, autobiographical accounts have played an important role in research which promotes the health and well-being of LGBTQ+, Black, Latinx, and other marginalized communities in the past (Kehily 1995). Letter-writing in particular is well documented as a tool of historical and present anti-prison social movements, both serving to create a narrative counter to the official claims of the state and helping develop solidarity between those living behind bars and people on the “outside” (Garcia 2016; von Moltke and von Moltke 2019). For example, members of the Black Panther party wrote letters and used them to both maintain and build solidarity with both other prisoners and people in the free world (Foner 1970; Jackson 1994); formed into collections, these letters offer an alternative history of the purpose of the prison in the United States and highlight the injustices the incarcerated – particularly Black people – face behind bars. More recent abolitionist scholarship has built on this very tradition, demonstrating the capacity of letters to produce solidaristic relationships even between researchers and participants. Burton, describing the process of letter-writing, writes that he and a participant in his study “began to think of [*letter-writing*] as a form of community building, grassroots intelligence gathering, collective theorization, and mutual aid,” (2021:5).

In the vein of this environmental justice and abolitionist research and movement building (Mohai et al. 2009; Burton 2021; Chalit Hernandez 2022; Maycock 2021) my intention with using letter-writing as a methodology was to center the experiences of those who live in prison and experience climate impacts firsthand and allow them to tell their own story. Interviews with incarcerated people have historically been extremely difficult to conduct (and include a slew of well-documented ethical concerns; see Moser et al. 2014), and given the widespread and devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on U.S. prisons and jails, the barriers to

accessing prisoners through qualitative research are arguably more numerous than ever. Yet as Lawston and Lucas (2011) note, it is *especially* important to allow incarcerated people to speak for themselves and document their own experiences, because mainstream portrayals of those incarcerated— particularly women – are often skewed and not representative of the lived reality of incarceration. Moreover, while conducting a survey could in theory still center the voices of those living behind bars, this method did not align with the goals of my project, as I wanted to ensure that my participants were not confined in their responses to answers predefined by a researcher who has never been incarcerated.

The correspondence method offers many methodological benefits to researchers. On one hand, letter-writing is a strong methodological alternative in settings where interviewing may not be safe, private, or possible at all (Harris 2002). All the above risks needed to be considered in my project. It is notoriously difficult to access incarcerated folks for interviews, and even on rare occasions when researchers have been able to conduct interviews, issues of privacy and confidentiality remain tantamount (Patenaude 2004; Lucic-Catic 2011). For example, in their review of the use of qualitative methods in prison settings, Abbott et al. (2018:8) highlight the ways issues of prison privacy and confidentiality can impact the research data itself, as well as create “potential repercussions for prisoners if data were collected under surveillance of prison staff,” which can happen formally with an officer in a room or informally with prison employees nearby.

Particularly in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic which has brutally hit people in carceral facilities across the country, I felt strongly about collecting data from a distance, which aligns with other researchers’ suggestions in the midst of public health crises (Maycock 2021). At the outset of this project, data showed that people in prison were disproportionately likely to

be infected with COVID-19 and more likely to die from it – by one early study’s account, the case rate for COVID-19 among people in prison was 5.5 times higher than the general population (Saloner et al. 2020). Finally, other prison scholars have pointed out the potential heightened privacy and safety risks associated with interviews (Chalit Hernandez 2022), and given that the topic area of this project invites direct and/or indirect critique of the facilities my participants were incarcerated in, I agreed that correspondence could potentially draw less institutional attention to my participants. Letter-writing is thus lower stakes than interviews – in many ways – while still providing an outlet for those who are among the most marginalized people in our society to document their lives and experiences.

Other scholars, however, have identified correspondence as a uniquely useful method *in and of itself*, not merely a substitute for face-to-face interviews (Kralik et al. 2000; Chalit Hernandez 2022). The benefits of the letter correspondence method of data collection are well documented by Kralik et al. (2000), including that it is less intrusive, allows participants the opportunity for deep reflection, and operates over longer periods of time. The latter is especially relevant for this project. Some of my participants were transferred to different living units over the course of our correspondence, moving from a section of the facility with air conditioning to one without it. If I had simply interviewed them once, this longitudinal data component would have been lost. Additionally, the longitudinal aspect of letter-writing created the possibility of different pacing in our letters, directed by participants themselves. With this method, participants could opt in or out at any time and take breaks from our written interactions if needed. Given the potentially triggering nature of this project, which asked participants to describe, often in detail, their experiences of intense physical discomfort from heat, I felt strongly about collecting data in a way that would allow participants to decide *how, when, and to what degree/in what capacity*

they wanted to participate. Interviews, on the other hand, may not have given participants this level of autonomy or space to process. This decision aligns with a feminist approach to research methods; feminist researchers highlight the importance of participant autonomy, and more specifically, participant control over how the research process plays out, to the extent possible (Kingston 2020). Crucially, though letter writing is less common in the United States than it was in the past, letters also occupy a place of unique significance in prison life and culture. Thus, letter writing can potentially offer a more accessible and familiar mode of communication for many incarcerated people, as this modality is still present in their day-to-day life, in addition to giving them more control over the process by which they participate more broadly.

Moreover, my impression of participants' willingness to be open with me about their life and time in prison seemed to deepen over time, a strength of longitudinal data collection that other qualitative researchers have highlighted (Carduff et al. 2015). I experienced this both implicitly (participants' letters tended to get longer after corresponding back and forth several times), and explicitly (participants wrote that they were "glad to hear from me again," or that they "hopefully keep getting your letters," even though "you never know with this place"). Qualitative researchers consider trust paramount to collecting rigorous and trustworthy data (Burkett and Morris 2015). Yet many qualitative scholars are charged with building trust in a single face-to-face interaction, a potentially Herculean task for those researching emotionally difficult or traumatizing topics. Indeed, books about qualitative interviewing include strategies to create rapport and openness in the limited time shared with participants during an interview (Weiss 1995; Rubin & Rubin 2012). Continuing to correspond with my participants over time appeared to help build trust between us and created more space for open dialogue in our letters. Later letters from participants not only tended to be longer and more detailed, they often asked

more questions about me and my life as a researcher, too. In this way, over time, power hierarchies were reduced and there was more mutual sharing – both important components of research ethics and strong data collection, as highlighted by feminist methodologists (Oakley 1981; Thwaites 2017). Interestingly, while many of the initial letters I received were written in formal ways, participant language tended to become more informal in later letters. I attribute this to the extreme formality of recruitment materials (while I reduced jargon as much as possible, the initial letter, consent form, and questions still sound quite academic – some IRB required language is difficult to simplify). In my responses after their initial recruitment, I also wrote by hand and used more informal language. For likely a number of reasons, my consistent impression was that letter writing over time facilitated a more personal and trusting relationship between myself and my participants.

Finally, the correspondence method can help mitigate researcher impacts; given that responses are given through letter and not in the physical presence of a researcher, my own positionality may have been less of an imparting factor on the letters themselves, as other scholars have pointed out (Kralik et al. 2000)<sup>12</sup>. Yet somehow, despite the many aforementioned benefits, the correspondence method is relatively uncommon in the social sciences, including sociology (Kralik et al. 2000; Harris 2002). Burt (2021) has more recently documented the benefits of using the letter-writing method in prisons specifically, reminding researchers that autobiographical accounts are an especially important method used when documenting the experience of targeted populations. In the case of my project, I found the correspondence method to offer *unique* methodological benefits insofar as it allowed me to 1) center the experiences of incarcerated people in their own words, 2) ethically access a difficult-to-reach population that is

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<sup>12</sup> It certainly, to some degree, obscured my identity; many respondents initially believed I was a man because of my name. My best guess is that my handwriting changed their mind.

both at high risk for COVID-19 transmission and lacks the privacy or security available in typical interview settings, 3) minimize the impact of researcher positionality, and 4) center the autonomy of my participants by allowing them to decide *how, when, and in what capacity* they wanted to respond to my inquiries.

### *Sampling*

To conduct correspondence with participants, I relied on a population list of all people who were incarcerated in the state of Mississippi. This list was created and posted publicly by the Mississippi Freedom Letters Campaign as part of an effort to write a letter to every single person in prison in the state in early 2020, and was tremendously helpful, serving as an invaluable resource for my project. However, given that I embarked on data collection in fall of 2022 – over two years after the list was created – it did not perfectly reflect the population list of those in jails and prisons throughout the state. Some people, of course, had been released since the creation of that list. Many others had been newly locked up in that time and were unaccounted for on the 2020 document. And, perhaps most importantly for my case, a large number of incarcerated people had moved units or facilities in the time between the list’s creation and the beginning of my project, meaning the address information included on the document could not be counted on for accuracy. There was a solution to this, however: Mississippi, like all U.S. states, has a Department of Corrections inmate search feature that allows anyone to look up people based on their name and/or MDOC ID number (which was included on the Mississippi Freedom Letters spreadsheet). Getting new addresses for hundreds of potential participants was painstaking, as the MDOC inmate search feature lagged and required me to type in each individual piece of information at a time. In a stroke of luck, a close friend of

mine saved me potentially hundreds of hours of work by creating a program that used the name and ID information I had to retrieve updated location information very efficiently<sup>13 14</sup>.

Initially, I planned to only include incarcerated people who 1) had received “life” sentences and 2) were incarcerated in one of three state prisons in Mississippi: Mississippi State Penitentiary (known, famously, as “Parchman” or “Parchman Farm,” nicknames I will use interchangeably throughout this paper), South Mississippi Correctional Institution (SMCI), or Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (CMCF) in this project<sup>15</sup>. Crucially, though, the CMCF grounds now include the newly-named Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women (MCIW), though, on the MDOC website, both are considered CMCF. Throughout the paper, I will try to clearly delineate if my participant is housed in CMCF or CMCF – MCIW. The decision to focus on the above facilities was a methodological one that aligned with my research question by focusing on the *state* level of management and experience of prison conditions.

I chose to narrow my focus to people who had been sentenced to life because I was initially interested in hearing if prison conditions had changed over time, as well as if participants were feeling the impacts of hotter temperatures and longer heat waves as a result of climate change. “Life” sentences vary greatly, even within one state; some of the folks I initially recruited would be eligible for parole, and others would not. However, as the project evolved, I ultimately decided to include participants who had not received life sentences; in other words, any person incarcerated at one of the aforementioned state-run facilities was a potential

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<sup>13</sup> I would highly recommend this approach for those combing state Department of Corrections websites for participant contact information/addresses.

<sup>14</sup> Within a few months of my friend creating and helping me run this program, I noticed that the MDOC had updated their inmate search feature and website. This is likely entirely coincidental, but the first time we attempted to run the program, we seemed to ‘overwhelm’ the server and continued to get error messages. It was only when used the program sparingly – breaking our population list into small chunks – were we able to get the data we needed. Not long after, the entire MDOC website got a redesign and became more functional.

<sup>15</sup> I chose not to deidentify the prisons in this study. There are specific operations that take place at prisons in this study that would have made them identifiable even with deidentification (for example, the agricultural operations at MSP are unique and well-known; CMCF is the only state-level public facility that incarcerates women).

participant. I wanted to maximize the number of people whose voice could be captured in this project, which meant expanding my sample.

### *Recruitment*

Before beginning formal recruitment, I first decided I would not seek approval from prison administrators at the facilities I chose to sample from. This conflicted with the IRB's initial suggestion to obtain a letter of support from wardens at each facility, though ultimately, after articulating my rationale, the IRB approved my project. I made this decision for several reasons highlighted below.

First, I had well-founded concerns that contacting prison officials to obtain a letter of support may draw unnecessary attention to those who opt into participating in the project. The project is asking questions about the preparedness of prisons to handle environmental impacts such as heat, which could potentially invite critique of the institutions themselves. As the IRB has identified, incarcerated people are a vulnerable population. Part of this vulnerability comes from their position in the prison, where administrators and authorities have control and power over almost all aspects of their daily life. This is no secret to critical criminologists, who have extensively documented the inherent power imbalance between those living behind bars and those working in and managing prisons themselves (Marquart 1986; Ibsen 2018). While I do not worry that this project put any incarcerated people at risk, I did strongly believe that drawing less attention to their participation would benefit them by further protecting their privacy to the extent that that is possible given their institutionalization. Further, seeking permission from authority figures, in the case of this project, would not have added any additional layers of benefit or protection to potential participants. Given the letters I received from participants, which included narratives highlighting their deeply suspicious of facility administrators and staff, I believe this

was the appropriate decision for my project. In fact, one participant referred to the project itself as an act of resistance against the Department of Corrections, writing, “I appreciate your department at the university taking up this fight.” Indeed, many participants felt comfortable sharing their deep and long-held grievances with all levels of prison employees – from guards and COs, to facility administrators, all the way up to the Mississippi Department of Corrections itself. Rather than notifying prison officials, I chose to incorporate additional safeguards in my recruitment flier and consent form which reminded participants that participation in the study may be monitored by prison officials, as well as that they would not receive a sentence reduction or parole benefits from their participation.

I also wanted to ensure that I did not add another barrier to the consent process or to participants in general which could have resulted if I had gained institutional approval through the prison itself. Given that one of the central aims of the project was to understand how extreme temperatures impact incarcerated peoples’ daily lives and autonomy, I aimed to respect participants as autonomous individuals capable of deciding on their own about their participation in this project rather than relying on prison administrators to facilitate that decision making for them. This was, and remains, particularly important to me given that a key benefit of qualitative research, especially that which allows for autobiographical narrative accounts, is that the process can potentially be empowering and allow for deep reflection (Kralik et al. 2000; Opsal et al. 2016; Burt 2020). My research is guided by the people experiencing and living in the circumstances I want to understand – namely, heat and the resulting environmental conditions in prisons – and it is crucial that these conditions are understood from the ground up, centering incarcerated people in the analysis (Huffman 2017). As such, I did not want to create an additional barrier to consent and participation – which inadvertently strips autonomy away from

the incarcerated – by allowing facility administrators to potentially make decisions about who was allowed to participate in the study and who was not. This decision aligns with both the theoretical and methodological goals of the project.

Since I was not seeking approval from prison administrators and thus could not rely on prison staff themselves for recruitment purposes, I needed to be extra diligent to ensure my letters would reach potential participants at all. First, I hand-wrote all the addresses (and return addresses) on my envelopes. There is no official Mississippi Department of Corrections policy against electronically printed addresses, but well-seasoned letter writing organizations suggested handwritten envelopes to ensure letters not being thrown out, so I heeded their advice. This was a tedious process, given that I sent out many hundreds of envelopes of recruitment materials. Additionally, I chose to stagger the sending of my letters. My “first batch” of letters totaled at 400, but rather than sending them all at once, I dropped them at various post boxes in intervals of 25 letters at a time. Given the risk of mail being dumped by staff or administrators – sometimes inexplicably, according to organizers – I wanted to reduce attention brought to the recruitment letters I sent out. In all, it took me 8 weeks to send all the letters: beginning in November of 2022 and ending in January of 2023. Yet two weeks after I sent my final batch of letters, I had still not received a single letter in return. Dismayed, I consulted with my advisor and tried to troubleshoot. I recount these obstacles below in order to both 1) demonstrate how my methods and recruitment decisions changed over time, and 2) to offer new details on the barriers to the correspondence method specifically, which are related to, but distinct from, existing observations about recruitment difficulties in prison settings.

First, shortly after sending the entirety of my first batch of letters, it became clear that my letters *were* indeed getting into the facilities, so the outreach was not the issue in recruitment per

se. Moreover, I learned that at least two participants had tried to write me letters back that I never received.

In December of 2022, I received an email from a participant asking some general questions about the study and where I had found their contact information. I replied, answering their questions in full. This confirmed that if nothing else, people in one of the facilities (Mississippi State Penitentiary) were receiving my letters. Yet even after our email correspondence, and what I perceived to be interest from this person, I did not receive a physical piece of mail from them in the weeks following.

Then, during a phone call with a contact I have that works alongside various prisoner-led and community-led groups in late January, I found out that one of my potential participants who had received a recruitment letter *had* in fact written me a response – and told this person about it. It was purely coincidental that a potential participant in this study happened to also be connected to the same organizer as I was. They had mentioned to this person, unknowingly a contact of my own, that they had received an invitation to participate in a study about heat waves in prison, and had written a letter back to the person “addressed to Minnesota,” according to my source. This connection of mine also noted that they had this conversation with the potential participant in early December, meaning that it had been at least 6 weeks since they had attempted to write me back.

This alarmed me, but alone was not a strong enough anecdote to necessitate dramatically changing my project or amending my IRB. It was still possible, of course, that the overwhelming majority of recruited participants simply did not have an interest in participating in my study, or that participants were unclear about how to reach me (perhaps some of my recruitment materials were still too ambiguous or confusing). However, this incident prompted me to follow up with

the recruited participant who had emailed me with questions about the study in early December. I had responded to them via email, but never received a letter back. Had they opted out of the study once they had more information, or was it another incident of a failed attempt to respond to my recruitment letter? After responding again to their original email, I received a reply, including the following: “Ms. Luzbetak, Happy New Year to you too! I returned that paperwork after you responded to my previous email. I don't know why you haven't received it yet :( . . . . I really hope you get my letter. Otherwise they are reading my mail. :(.”

At this point, I had strong evidence that at least two recruited participants who had tried to reach me had been unable to. While I will never know exactly how many other participants tried to reach me, this information alone is important for other prison researchers, particularly those interested in using the correspondence method. In the past two decades, journalists and advocates have highlighted the barrage of new restrictions and limitations on prison mail across the country – from the complete elimination of original, physical copies of mail, just like in state facilities in Mississippi (Dholakia 2022; Abolafia 2023), to restrictions on what type of material can be sent to and from prison, to the privatization of prison mail services altogether (Wang 2022). It is impossible to determine why the letters from participants never reached me in my initial batch. However, it would be careless to not consider these recruitment issues within a broader political context at the national and state level, which has resulted in changes that have severely altered the prison mail landscape. Researchers, especially those conducting recruitment in prisons with highly restrictive mail practices, should be mindful of this context and prepared for additional barriers beyond those typical of qualitative research.

To address some of these issues, I began troubleshooting aspects of my recruitment and amended my IRB to include participants who offered written consent in emails rather than an

attached consent form. I did this because I wanted to be sure I could include data from my participant who I was able to exchange emails with, but who could not attach documents to emails in response. Expanding the study to include emails was not something I had anticipated needing to do, because as far as local organizers could tell me, most of the state facilities used extremely outdated infrastructure and the vast majority of those incarcerated there, at least at the time, had no access to email or internet whatsoever<sup>16</sup>. I also opted to expand my study to include data from phone calls, should participants opt into participating in that way. At this point, I was trying to expand the project's recruitment strategies in whatever ways that I could to increase potential participants' access to participation. Despite these adjustments to recruitment methods, with the exception of the emails I received, all of the data I collected from participants was gathered from letter correspondence. Though this project ultimately involved multiple amendments to my original IRB protocol, I have only included documents from the original approved protocol and the final amendment, given that the intermediate amendments did not result in more participants (see Appendices A-H).

### *Second and Third Rounds of Recruitment*

It was not until I sent out my second large batch of recruitment materials, beginning in spring that same year, that I began to receive letters in return. I was never able to concretely identify why letters sent to me earlier that year did not make it to me. Yet even when I began receiving letters in return, I was still alerted of issues. One participant told me they had not received any consent forms in the recruitment envelope I sent them, despite the fact that every

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<sup>16</sup> It is still unclear to me *who*, exactly, has access to computers at these facilities, and *how*. I was less surprised to receive letters that were typed and printed (which other participants sent), because this form of contact doesn't necessarily require internet access, just access to a computer. However, the emails continue to confuse me; even in other states, facilities that do allow computer use typically have strict limitations on 1) how the internet is used, 2) what it is used for, and 3) communication in and out of facilities more broadly. This detail may help readers just understand how confusing and inconsistent rule enforcement in facilities is, particularly in ones with chronic staffing issues.

envelope was double- and triple- checked to have included *two* consent forms. This was likely the result of mandatory scanning practices in state facilities, which, as I highlight above, are increasingly common across the country (Wang 2022; Abolafia 2023). It took me three tries to get a consent form to them that they were able to send back. Another participant wrote to me that they had included the consent form in their response, but it was not there when I received their letter. In both cases, I had to resend consent forms to participants. Multiple participants also claimed that others in their unit had either 1) gotten my letter and responded, now waiting for a reply, *or* 2) had sent me a letter unprompted when they found out about the study through others in the facility. Despite hearing of multiple instances of this, I only received one letter from a participant who had been snowball sampled, and never received letters from the others described by participants. Finally, another participant told me that she received some pages of a later hand-written letter I sent to her, though not all of them. I offer these anecdotes to demonstrate just how much of this project was marked by issues with prison mail, despite extensive efforts to ensure all materials I sent to participants fell within facility rules and regulations.

My final batch of letters was sent in summer of 2023 and included my amended project materials. In total, I sent 600 recruitment letters.

### *Respondent Characteristics*

I received 61 total letters from 13 total participants. These letters were received over the course of roughly 15 months, beginning in December of 2022 when I was contacted through email by my first participant through March of 2024 when I received the last letter I included in this study. The most letters I received from a single participant was 10.

Demographically, my participants were relatively diverse. Of my participants, 5 identified as men and 8 identified as women<sup>1718</sup>. Just under half of my participants were white (6 out of 13), while the remaining 7 participants were people of color. 4 of my participants were incarcerated at Parchman at the time of their participation in this study, 8 were incarcerated at Central Mississippi Correctional Facility *or* Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women (the same physical address/location, but a recently renamed distinct building). Finally, 1 participant was currently incarcerated at South Mississippi Correctional Institute. Though, crucially, every participant had at least one transfer during their incarceration, so many had experiences at multiple facilities, and most of the men in this study had been incarcerated at at least 2 of the 3 state-operated facilities at some point. All of the above information was available publicly via the Mississippi Department of Corrections website's 'Inmate Search' feature. A chart of participant demographic information can be found in Appendix I.

### *Data Analysis*

To analyze the letters I received over the course of my research, I chose to code all correspondence manually. For some projects, the size of the data set can be prohibitive to coding by hand. As I will discuss later in this chapter, that was the case for the critical policy analysis portion of this project. However, given the deeply embodied nature of letter-writing (Goldsmith et al. 2023), I felt it was appropriate for me to engage with the data in the same way it had been collected – with pen and paper.

My analysis of the letters I received over the course of my research can be categorized into three main phases: 1) initial coding, 2) second round coding, which included “playing” with

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<sup>17</sup> To my knowledge, this study does not include any transgender or gender non-conforming participants.

<sup>18</sup> This gender breakdown was surprising to me, given that women are only incarcerated at one of my facility sites, and represented an overall small number of the people I sent letters to. My hunch is that, for whatever reason, letters get in and out of this particular facility more successfully than the others.

codes and connecting codes to literature to create broader categories, and 3) final coding and development of analytic concepts. First, I began making initial observations about my data as soon as I began receiving letters. While I was careful to limit these observations to memos, as I did not want to hone in or focus prematurely on specific themes that emerged so early in the data collection process (this was especially important for me to formally limit given how eager I was to conduct analysis because of recruitment delays; I did not receive my first *physical* letter until 6 months after I had sent my initial batch), I still envisioned this memoing process as *directly related* to code generation. In the words of Saldaña (2021:51): “cyclical collection, coding, and analytic memo writing of data are not distinct linear processes.” I approached data analysis accordingly. As such, though I did not begin a formal initial round of coding until I received 15 letters, I was already analytically engaging with my data. In fact, some of my most central emergent themes were reflected on, albeit briefly, in some of my first memos for this project.

After this first step, I developed two sets of broad categories from my codes: ten which described *what* was discussed in letters, nine which described *how* these topics were being discussed. For example, my topic-based categories described the things (or, the “what”) that participants focused on when describing the impacts of heat on their lives, including mental health, violence, correctional officers, and family. In addition, my feeling-based categories described the ways (or, the “how”) participants articulated their experiences of the aforementioned impacts, including, but not limited to: frustration, discomfort, fear, and humiliation.

While I collected more letters, I continued to work with the categories and codes that inspired them to understand emergent themes. I spent a long time in this phase and explored many different possible thematic directions for my data. Per Saldaña’s (2021) advice, I

approached my categories and codes like I would decorating a room: I tried a few arrangements, stepped back to observe, then continued to reorganize. On one hand, my letters confirmed the existing (albeit small) body of literature on the impacts of extreme heat in prisons without air conditioning. For example, most of my participants described the physical and mental health impacts of heat, or the way heat tended to increase violence in facilities – both of which have been observed in other studies (Mukherjee and Sanders 2021; Skarha et al. 2023). Yet I felt strongly that there was more to this story, and I wondered how to connect the codes I had developed analytically beyond simply confirming that negative outcomes from heat exist.

After spending months deep in several bodies of literature – most centrally, that which explores experiences of incarceration – I realized that what my participants were describing was not just how heat impacted their physical health, for example, or their energy levels or violence in facilities, but how in turn, these immediate heat-related impacts had *broader implications for their identities and relationships*. Looking back, this hunch was even reflected in one of my first analytic memos, where I observed how heat compounded the social disconnection inherent to incarceration by creating more barriers to letter-writing, something my earliest participant described to me in his first letter. As such, this theme was already reflected in my codes and categories; they just required some reframing. Ultimately, I arrived at the following analytical concepts, which became foundational to the analysis offered in Chapter 3, the section which draws most centrally from my correspondence-based data:

- Relationship (outside of facility)
- Relationship (within facility, with others who are incarcerated)
- Relationship (within facility, officers or staff)

- Relationship (with self)

In my last informal “round” of correspondence (October 2023-March 2024), I was able to ask follow-up questions and inquire about these emergent themes specifically. Since all of my participants discussed relationships and identity in some capacity, this process was quite natural – I was simply responding to their own descriptions and seeking more detail in order to clarify these themes, per Saldaña (2021).

### *Ethical Considerations*

Scholars have noted and problematized the way white academics conduct research on communities of color, and the role of race in researcher subjectivity and positionality more broadly (Milner 2007). This methodological conversation exists within a broader struggle in qualitative research: the insider/outsider dynamic (DeVault 1999). Given that the criminal justice system in the United States – and particularly in Mississippi – disproportionately incarcerates people of color, it was clear to me from the outset of my research that my identity as a white woman could shape not only my participants’ trust or willingness to correspond with me, but the data itself and my ability to ask thoughtful questions relevant to my participants’ lives<sup>19</sup>. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our lived identities can also shape data *analysis* (Darawsheh 2014; Berger 2015). In order to combat these tendencies and potential biases, researchers are increasingly relying on formalized strategies which incorporate reflexivity into the data collection and analysis process (D’Cruz et al. 2007; Ahmed et al. 2011; Meyer and Willis 2019). Sometimes mistaken as a synonym for simply reflecting on ways to reduce bias, reflexivity is better understood as the process of a “continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of

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<sup>19</sup> Although, as aforementioned, the correspondence method may have in some ways rendered my identities less visible; for example, as I mentioned in a footnote earlier in the paper, some participants initially thought I was a man because of my name.

researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome," (Berger 2015). In order to formally integrate reflexivity into my research design, I made note of my positionality and potential impacts on my data in each of my weekly, longer analytical memos during the data collection process. Particularly during the process of exchanging letters with participants, I was aware of my own position in the world and how foreign so many of the experiences I was hearing about were to me. Incorporating reflexivity "checks" such as this one, and others at later stages of the data analysis process, was not only essential for the potential ethical impacts of communities I am examining, but also to make my research credible and rigorous (Horsburgh 2003). In fact, reflexive journaling has proven to be a particularly effective tool at helping reduce researcher bias and illuminating collected data in new ways (Meyer and Rosalind 2019).

In addition to incorporating reflexivity as a formal practice, I used a few other strategies to familiarize myself with my target population and increase my understanding of the experiences of incarcerated people in general. To do so, I was lucky to be in communication with several on-the-ground community groups and organizers in Mississippi, who tremendously helped me understand some of the key issues and needs of my participants before reaching out to/corresponding with them. My work teaching in multiple prisons near my home in Minneapolis also proved invaluable to this project, both formally and informally. I was transparent about my dissertation research when I began teaching at two Minnesota facilities in January of 2023. As a result, my students often provided (unsolicited, but very useful) advice about understanding facility bureaucracies and prison mail commonalities as I recruited participants. They also directly and inadvertently taught me about prison culture, language, and ways to be mindful of

my participants' well-being in my framing of the project. As I noted in the acknowledgements section, I am deeply grateful for and indebted to them for these contributions.

Feminist research has emphasized the extractive nature of qualitative and quantitative methods, which have historically tended to take information out of communities without reciprocity (Fonow and Cook 1991; Walsh 2021). Achieving reciprocity in research is particularly difficult when working with incarcerated people for obvious reasons. Sending money or reimbursement to folks behind bars is not only increasingly complex, given new contracts to companies such as JPay which manage inmate finances; it also presents ethical dilemmas for researchers. To combat this, I attempted to embed reciprocity into my research design by communicating a clear willingness to continue exchanging letters after the project ended with any of my participants. Not only did I repeatedly emphasize that I would be happy to hear anything they would be interested in sharing with me about their time in prison, I also stressed that I was willing (and eager!) to continue writing outside of the scope of the project if they were interested. Several of my participants took me up on this offer, to varying degrees. Two participants sent me information about their case that they felt strongly about sharing, noting that they did not feel heard by the criminal justice system. Another wrote me extensively about their life before being incarcerated, focusing on their hobbies, interests, and family life before arrest. My intent with offering additional correspondence was to recognize the limited communication that many incarcerated people have and offer myself as an ear and pen pal of sorts to those who had participated in the project.

I also found, more broadly, that my participants were eager to participate in the study. While much attention has been given to protecting qualitative participants from the potential harms felt by discussing triggering or traumatic conversations (including institutional attention in

the form of the IRB handling biomedical and social science research similarly in terms of risk assessment), some researchers have pushed back, arguing that there are substantial *benefits* to participants in qualitative research projects, not just risks (Opsal et al. 2016). I too found this to be the case. My participants overwhelmingly expressed gratitude in various ways. Almost every participant thanked me in some way; a number thanked me specifically for conducting the study, some expressed broader gratitude for being interested in prison conditions whatsoever. In one of my last letters with one participant, they remarked,

I am glad that I have been able to help with your study. I am happy to answer your questions. Thank you for writing to me in the first place. I hope I didn't go into too much detail, I just feel as though most people have no idea what it is like in here, and most never think about it.

Other participants commented that participating in the study was a welcome break from the monotony of daily life: "I appreciate you writing me. Getting a letter can change the whole day." And, as described earlier in this chapter, some participants saw the fact that I was interested in prison conditions whatsoever as an inherently political act that put me in solidarity with them. In one of the letters I received from Darius, he wrote, "I appreciate you being a part of our struggle from the outside. I look forward to your response..."

Though I was naturally thrilled to see that my participants were enthusiastic about participating in the project, I still honored a commitment made at the outset of this research to donate to the Mississippi Prison Reform Coalition. I did this to continue to reduce the extractive tendencies of much academic work. While this form of reciprocity is indirect and imperfect, I saw this as an additional way I could give back to the community which I am studying and gaining information from.

## **Critical Policy Analysis**

### *Rationale*

Scholars within both environmental justice and green criminology have highlighted the role of governing bodies in the creation and perpetuation of environmental hazards, and for good reason. Particularly recently, Pellow (2017) and Pulido et al. (2016) have called for a closer examination of the state, including a more critical and anarchist orientation to this research. In green criminology, scholars have for decades argued that global political economic structures push states into roles of complicity toward environmental hazards, largely framing the state's role through the Treadmill of Production and Treadmill of Crime theories (Stretesky et al. 2014). Given this emphasis in both literatures that were central to the development of this project, I decided that my research should not only involve corresponding directly with those in prison who experience the dire consequences of unmanaged heat, but also looking closely at state policy and ability – or desire – to address the ongoing crisis. This, indeed, is how I arrived at the second of my two research questions: How is the state prepared to mitigate said impacts?

However, traditional policy analysis alone would be an insufficient way to answer my research questions. As others have noted, traditional policy analysis in the United States is deeply imbued in a neoliberal cost-benefit analysis model (Pasquale 2021). This approach, mandated for use by regulatory agencies under the Reagan Administration, was framed as “objective” and bipartisan, but in reality, attempted to curtail regulatory expansion by pinning quantifiable costs against sometimes unquantifiable benefits (Pasquale 2021). Yet in the social sciences, traditional policy analysis has too viewed the creation of policy as a process of the “facts” of a case being rationally analyzed in order to achieve the “best” policy solution (Bacchi 1999). This approach is laden with assumptions about the political process; namely, it views policy creation as value-neutral. This is in part due to its theoretically narrow orientation, which has been rightfully described by others as functionalist and rational (Marshall 1999; Diem et al.

2014). I and others argue that traditional policy analysis is, as a result, deeply ideological, and often unknowingly misses the role of power which is embedded in the legislative, and consequently policy making, process (Hankivsky et al. 2014). Critical policy analysis (CPA), on the other hand, emphasizes the sociocultural and political context of policy-making, and CPA methods help to better “acknowledge policy as a political and value-laden process,” better representing the complex reality of policy-making (Chase et al. 2014: 673). CPA scholars span a variety of social science disciplines, but particularly emphasize how policy problems (and solutions) are rhetorically constructed, framed, and conceptualized (O’Connor and Rudolph 2023). Levison et al. (2009:769) articulating the value of the CPA approach, write that researchers who employ, “critical approaches to policy research have as the imagined horizon of their analysis a picture of the possible.” This methodological decision, thus, aligns theoretically with both critical environmental justice and green criminology, which, as aforementioned, have fundamentally critical orientations to the state and are centrally interested in “the possible.”

#### *Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria*

I used the following inclusion and exclusion criteria to determine what documents would be relevant for inclusion in the critical policy analysis portion of my project. My goal was to analyze documents related to 1) Mississippi’s legal management of its prisons and jails and 2) conditions of the facilities themselves, and in particular, state reports of these conditions.

##### *Inclusion criteria*

- o Current Mississippi law related to prisons and jails
- o State-level reports on environmental conditions in Mississippi prisons, 2018-2022
- o State-level annual reports from the Department of Corrections and its task forces, 2018-2022

- o State-published resources for “inmates” and family, 2018-2022
- o Documents related to the 2019 Department of Justice investigation into Mississippi prisons

#### Exclusion criteria

- o Documents that are not publicly available

I used NexisUni to search for documents and ensure I was not missing anything publicly available, but everything I analyzed for this project was relatively accessible via state and federal government websites. Altogether, I ended up including 376 documents in this study – though, crucially, a numerical *n* does not adequately capture the scope of data analyzed for this project. For example, some single documents were hundreds of pages long.

#### *Analysis*

I began my analysis by looking at state law itself, then moved on to other government documents and reports related to policy-making to better understand how state law is constructed and how Mississippi’s laws on prisons and jails are executed. This decision aligned with other critical policy analysts, who are interested in the difference between what policy emphasizes rhetorically and what is actually practiced (Diem et al. 2013). In other words, I began my analysis by focusing first on the state’s claims about its own values and priorities, demonstrated through state law (more specifically, the Mississippi Code). Then, I intended to code and analyze reports and investigations to see how these political values were being executed/implemented.

I was eager to code all of these documents by hand, too – it was working quite well for me in the correspondence portion of this project. However, I quickly realized that was too ambitious of a data management undertaking and encountered many of the issues of large-scale manual coding highlighted by Mattimoe and colleagues (2021). So, I opted to conduct an initial

round of coding of state law by hand, and all other documents were analyzed using NVivo during this round of coding. In all remaining rounds of coding, everything – including state law and all other documents – were analyzed using NVivo.

Generally, my coding phases for these documents followed a similar progression to my letters: a multi-step, non-linear and reflexive approach, outlined above and based centrally on Saldaña’s advice (2021). The strategies I deployed within each of those steps differed for this portion of the project, though. Rather than allowing the codes to emerge fully from the data, I approached these documents with three specific questions in mind, coding based on how my data related to these questions. In other words, whereas my analysis of the letters I received was focused on participant experience – and thus, grounded entirely in participants’ own words – my critical policy analysis was more targeted from the start. Informed by a critical policy analysis perspective, I coded the above documents using the following questions: a) *what do these laws say about environmental conditions in prisons?* b) *what is absent from these laws regarding environmental conditions in prisons?*, c) *what does this absence mean?*, and d) *what else is prioritized/emphasized in this absence?* More specifically, though, critical policy analysis is interested in how state decisions – particularly around prioritizing *one thing over another* – reflect state interests and goals. Put another way, one of the ways critical policy analysts understand government decision-making is by examining policy skeptically, in part because the method emerged from the critical and conflict perspectives within social theory (Diem et al. 2013). More specifically, these scholars ask what the policy was *intended* to do (ibid). This particular question helped me make sense of the lack of state law on environmental conditions in prisons and provided a useful framing for what was emphasized in its absence—a theme and paradox I unpack at length in Chapter Four.

In this stage of the process, to my surprise, the codes came together quite quickly and clearly – in other words, my analysis here required less “playing” with codes, categories, and relationships. The following themes emerged not long after early codes and categories were developed and, even after dynamic analytical engagement of reflexivity, renegotiation, and reframing, they remained central throughout the entire analysis process.

- Prison labor
- Efficiency
- Cost-savings
- Maximized benefit to state or county

These themes are described in more detail in Chapter 4. Yet, while the coding and generation of categories and themes in this portion of the project was much more straightforward, the links between my data and other theories were more complex, as I will describe in more detail in that chapter.

## **Limitations**

### *Literacy & Language*

Literacy, and particularly English language literacy, is a notable barrier when conducting research on incarcerated participants. I addressed this limitation in two ways. First, I included an addendum in Spanish in my first round of recruitment letters that offered the materials entirely in Spanish upon participant request. While Spanish language speakers are less likely to live in Mississippi than other states, it is still the second most commonly spoken language in the state, and I wanted to increase the accessibility of my project in whatever ways possible. However, when I expanded my recruitment methods to include phone conversations, I eliminated the Spanish addendum; while I am confident in my written translation abilities (which give me time

and space to check grammar and verbiage), I am not a fluent Spanish speaker and thus could not reasonably include data from verbal conversations in a language outside of English in my study. Given that I did not receive any letters after my first round of recruitment, no Spanish speakers were included in this project. The fact that all of my participants spoke English as a first language certainly limits the scope of the story my data is able to tell.

Additionally, before sending out my recruitment materials, I ran each document through a Flesch-Kincaid readability test to ensure that they were written at no higher than a tenth-grade reading level (see Appendix C). The decision to aim for a tenth-grade reading level was made after consulting with members of my university IRB. It was quite difficult to include information required by the IRB in terms simpler than those a tenth-grade reader could understand. However, by the measure of one 2003 survey, as many as 70% of incarcerated adults cannot read past a fourth-grade level (National Assessment of Adult Literacy 2003). Thus, while I made efforts to increase the accessibility of my project, it is certainly possible that my sample was skewed by high rates of illiteracy in prison.

Despite my efforts to increase the accessibility of the project to participants of varying literacy levels, all of my participants seemed highly literate in their written interactions with me. Aside from a handful of insignificant spelling/grammatical errors, everyone who wrote to me over the course of this project was able to communicate their experiences very effectively – and many also asked me thoughtful, precise questions back about the nature of the project and my work overall. It is thus likely that my sample skewed towards more educated participants; I did not ask anyone who participated about their education level prior to/during incarceration, so this is purely hypothetical.

There are several implications of this skewing of my sample. First, as Gibson-Light (2022) has demonstrated, labor in prisons is often stratified. None of my participants were currently working in outdoor positions, such as the farm at Parchman, which inspired much of my original interest in this topic. My participants largely worked *indoors* (though one described, at length, his previous work on the farm at Parchman many years ago), possibly a direct result of their higher education and literacy levels. As a result, I heard very little about the impact of heat on outdoor work, an unfortunate gap in the research given that those issues will persist even after air conditioning is installed at all state facilities.

#### *Number of Participants*

This study's total number of participants was smaller than I had hoped when I initially embarked on this project (though, crucially, I did receive a higher number of total letters than I anticipated, just from fewer total participants, which added notable strengths to the data and analysis as discussed above). As outlined above, the recruitment process for this research was difficult and fraught with at times inexplicable barriers. Had I opted to receive institutional approval from the correctional facilities for this project, I may have been able to communicate with a higher number of participants more easily. If the Mississippi Department of Corrections – or individual wardens at each of the three facilities – had approved this project, they could have helped with recruitment, increasing my total number of participants. However, I decided that it would be both unnecessary and potentially counterproductive to the aims of the project to attempt to obtain a letter of support from the wardens or other prison authorities for reasons outlined above. Also, while this strategy may have increased my total *n*, it may have also resulted in more limited and less reliable data that was less critical of the prison itself or prison staff, particularly given that these critical perspectives became central to my findings.

### *Critical Policy Analysis & Public Access Issues*

In addition to some of the limitations I encountered in the correspondence method portion of my project, I also acknowledge that my critical policy analysis could have been strengthened by better access to data. Whereas many states make committee meeting minutes and notes publicly available and easily accessible online, I was unable to access additional information about the prison policy making process despite numerous attempts to contact legislators and their offices directly, as these are not publicly accessible on Mississippi state websites as is common in other states. In the future, with more time and funding, I aim to utilize FOIA requests to access more information about the policy making process and strengthen my dataset overall.

CHAPTER THREE:  
EXTREME HEAT AS AN AMPLIFIER OF CARCERAL SOCIAL DEATH

Marissa was one of the last participants who reached out to enroll in this study. She had been incarcerated for years, and like many of my other female participants, was transferred between CMCF (now MCIW) and other facilities. I appreciated writing with Marissa for many reasons, but one of the things that quickly struck me about her was how candid she was about her experiences and her overall willingness to share quite personal details of her life. In her last letter to me, Marissa wrote:

After a while it gets lonely. ... My mom died a few years ago and she was the main one in my family who tried to look out for me and check in with me. We would talk on the phone a lot. At the beginning, I talked to a lot of people when I first got in here, family. I always made sure to be talking to them. I didn't wanna end up like everybody else in here. Alone. But it happens no matter how hard you try to stop it.

Alonzo, a participant who has been locked up for over twenty-five years, described a similar fading and fizzling of familial relationships. For him, this was a natural and understandable progression for incarcerated people, because relationships with folks on the outside take work for them to manage, and both of his parents were aging: “My mom and dad are elderly. They both came to visit me over the years of my incarceration, but, now, I asked them both to relax and take care of themselves.”

Alonzo expressed pride in this decision and his ability to take care of himself without the support of others. He repeatedly stressed to me that after two decades in prison, he has learned how to become “strong in spirit” and “very strong mentally.”

Marissa and Alonzo's approaches to the isolation that incarceration creates – particularly long-term incarceration – differ. Yet both fundamentally identified the way imprisonment cuts

social ties. And, crucially, what both participants described in their letters to me is not unique for folks behind bars. As George Jackson (1994:45) wrote in a letter to his mother from prison just a few years before his death, “My life here is slowly becoming one of complete alienation.” The phenomenon of extreme loneliness, isolation, and alienation is so widespread in American prisons that many organizers and scholars have adopted the language of *social death* to describe what happens to the millions of people sent to prison in this country.

In this chapter, I show that while social death is widespread among people behind bars – including my participants – extreme heat dramatically amplifies this feature of prison life. To begin, I overview the literature on social death and describe how the concept is relevant to the study of heat in prisons, as well as how I operationalize it in this study. Then, I demonstrate precisely how extreme heat acted as an amplifier of these existing tendencies in the prison’s examined in this study. To accomplish this, I draw on participant narratives to show that extreme heat intensified social disconnection and isolation, humiliation, and loss of sense of self, all of which are already endemic to the carceral project. From there, I identify the many ways that the Mississippi Code and MDOC policy actively constructed conditions constitutive of social death, including a brief discussion of how recent reforms that could potentially eliminate or redress social death in the state still ultimately render pregnant women socially “dead.”

### **Incarceration as Social Death: An Overview**

In this dissertation, I use the concept of social death to understand the experiences of my participants, and in particular, the way heat *amplifies* and *worsens* social death. Here, I trace the intellectual roots of the relatively recent concept of social death. Then, I show how this concept has been operationalized in studies of prisons and jails, as well as in other, non-carceral settings. Next, I demonstrate how the term is used differently among different scholars, highlighting three

core themes across social death literature, which have in turn informed my own conceptualization and operationalization in this study.

Sociology has, since its origins, been interested in the relationship between individuals and society, and has thus played a central role in the development of the concept of social death. Two of the most prolific sociologists in history, Durkheim and Goffman, both contributed directly and indirectly to its later theorization. For Durkheim (1897[2005]), the connection between individuals and society (or lack thereof) was paramount, ultimately informing his theory of suicide. Durkheim's finding that social integration was related to suicide rates confirmed that relationships between people and groups do not simply matter, they are so *central* to life that without them, people may resort to a form of self-imposed death, what he describes as "egoistic suicide," as a direct result of "excessive individuation," (Durkheim 1897[2005]). Nearly a century later, Goffman (1961) explored the mortification of the self in asylums from an interactionist perspective, describing the way personal identity becomes replaced by the "patient" role. According to Goffman, this experience led to a complete loss of self-identity and self-esteem as a direct result of living within a total institution; his work also emphasized how people manage these stigmas (ibid). Taken together, we can see how sociology has from its origins been fundamentally interested in the impacts of extreme social isolation, alienation, and identity loss – and how both perspectives ultimately inform modern conceptualizations of social death, including my own, as I will discuss below. Moreover, these theoretical underpinnings are well-suited to help us specifically understand the experience of people in prison, a total institution itself.

One of the few things that traditional and critical criminologists, prison reformists *and* abolitionists can all agree on is that the experience of incarceration in the United States is deeply

isolating and alienating in many ways. For example, in the vein of both Durkheim and Goffman, researchers have examined the way imprisonment disrupts family connection and relationships (Braman 1997; Schliehe et al. 2021), impacts a person's sense of self (Hulley et al. 2016), and even produces lingering stigma post-incarceration, resulting in barriers to workforce re-entry (Pager 2003; Looney and Turner 2018). Overall, the experience of incarceration – as well as the period following it – tends toward isolation, alienation, and shifting identity.

However, as Sowle (1993) and Davis (2003) demonstrate, the literal spatial *and* symbolic distance between incarcerated people and civilians is an *intentional part* of the carceral project. Indeed, if we return to the development of the modern penitentiary in the nineteenth century, we see that one of the defining purposes of the prison was to segregate “the criminal from society... by placing him (if only for a time) beyond the gaze of society and outside the web of social relationships,” (Sowle 1993:556). In fact, reformers at the time argued that in order to depart from the brutal and highly public spectacle of public punishment (which often included drawing and quartering, whipping, branding and burning alive), those deemed criminal must be punished in isolation (Davis 2003). Even those who saw the purpose of incarceration as *rehabilitation* rather than punishment, such as early Protestant penal reformist John Howard, argued that this ultimately was best done through “disciplined self-reflection” (Davis 2003:46). Isolation – which often included solitary confinement – was seen as playing a central role in this process. Many social scientists have undertaken the task of examining the history and purpose of the prison in society; there is widespread agreement that one of the effects is extreme isolation felt by incarcerated people (Schliehe et al. 2021; Pageau 2022) and that this is not an accident (Sowle 1993; Davis 2003; Price 2015). My work affirms this observation.

Experiences of social alienation and disconnection, as well as the research revealing how prisons have been intentionally designed to isolate those locked up both physically and emotionally, have together led several prison scholars to adopt the concept of *social death* to make sense of the experiences of incarcerated people. Before describing how other social scientists and historians have conceptualized social death, and how I utilize it in this study, it is important to distinguish *social death* from *civil death*, a term often used to describe the loss of political and legal rights by those in prison or formerly in prison. Civil death's roots trace all the way back to Ancient Rome, but can be found in more recent Medieval European history, in which individuals convicted of a crime were deprived of all legal rights (Haase 2015). While the formal practice of civil death faded away in the past couple hundred years, critical criminologists and legal scholars argue that it has "surreptitiously reemerged... a new civil death is meted out to persons convicted of crimes in the form of substantial and permanent change in legal status, operationalized by a network of collateral consequences," (Chin 2011: 1970). Certainly, people who are incarcerated experience civil death; they are banned temporarily or permanently from voting (Uggen and Manza 2002; Manza and Uggen 2006; Belt 2021), from holding political office, and from qualifying for many social programs (Chin 2011). As Miller and Spillane (2012:422) point out, however, these legal restrictions *can* have broader ramifications for a person's ability to reintegrate into society: in their research, 39% of their study's sample "saw a connection between the inability to vote and their own ability to stay clean and out of trouble." Yet, while scholars of civil death sometimes emphasize potential ramifications beyond the legal, the focus of their analysis is fundamentally based on the stripping of civil rights.

Social death, on the other hand, focuses on the way a form of non-physiological "death" is imposed *beyond* a stripping of rights. As Price (2015:19) puts it:

Social death goes beyond the legal realm. It is wider and more substantive, and in some ways more ineffable, but no less powerful, than simply a question of rights afforded to citizens, although social death includes the suspension of those rights. ... The socially dead are not merely formerly full citizens who have temporarily lost some of their freedoms. Instead, their social status has changed much more radically, and in some ways permanently.

For Price (2015), then, social death is something more substantive – it indicates a phenomenon broader than the loss of civil rights an incarcerated or formerly incarcerated person may experience. Yet what *is* social death, exactly, and where does the idea come from?

Social scientists who use the concept of social death to understand prison often rely on the framework offered by Patterson (2018[1982]), whose seminal text *Slavery and Social Death* systematizes the key aspects of social death felt by slaves in societies across history. According to Patterson (2018[1982]), slaves are “nonpersons,” and this social death is defined by several features, including *coercive and violent power*, *natal alienation*, and *dishonor*. Prison scholars have drawn on this conceptualization (Guenther 2013; Price 2015; Stearns et al. 2017), highlighting the direct parallels between experiences of chattel slavery and mass incarceration in the United States (Alexander 2010). This link is no accident; as historians and social scientists have repeatedly demonstrated, immediately following the Civil War, White political leaders and plantation owners in the South worked to subvert the freedom of Black Americans through multiple racialized projects, including debt peonage and the convict leasing system (Woods 1998; Price 2015), two key “tributaries” of the modern prison system (Price 2015:90). In other words, though modern prisons are distinct from chattel slavery, there are clear racialized throughlines between the practices. Drawing on Patterson’s concept of social death, then, Price (2015) rightfully points out how legacies of slavery are evident in contemporary racialized prison experiences. Here, Price (2015) reframes and repurposes these original elements to apply to

prisons, arguing that social death in carceral facilities includes not only *natal alienation*, but also “violence” and “humiliation.”

Other scholars of social death and incarceration borrow this framing (Guenther 2013; Stearn et al. 2017; Do 2022). Yet, among those studying social death in prisons, there is not a clear agreement on what, exactly, constitutes social death, nor on who experiences it. For example, some researchers who study social death in prisons focus on particular or extreme experiences of incarceration; Guenther’s (2013:xx) work describes how solitary confinement produces a form of social death in part through its production of “a whole network of exclusions, interruptions, and violation.” Nga Do (2022) identifies the unique form of social death forced upon minoritized populations in prison, with an emphasis on the experiences of queer and trans folks and people of color. Do (2022:332) identifies how limitations on self-expression in carceral facilities, which specifically restrict gendered and racialized identity performance, ultimately “create a sense of loss.” Stearn et al. (2017) explore social death through sentencing and time spent in prison, surveying the “forgotten prisoners” who have been incarcerated long term and using the concept of social death to describe participant levels of disconnection from the outside world. Others argue that the impact of social death is not exclusive to specific groups in prison, but rather something felt by all who are, or have been, incarcerated (Price 2015). Price (2015) argues that racial and gendered disparities only accentuate and deepen the forms of social death in prison that are ultimately widespread, inevitable and lifelong, leaving a mark long post-incarceration.

Outside of prisons, social death has also been used to understand other social forces, including genocide (Card 2010) and end-of-life care (Borgstrom 2015). In her book on genocide, Card (2010) argues not only that genocide constitutes a form of death, but that this social death is

best understand as the *antithesis of social vitality*. On the other hand, work in the latter topic area describes social death as the process “whereby people are treated as if they are already or nearly dead,” or, framed another way, when they are “not being treated with dignity,” (Borgstrom 2015:3,4).

Together, this body of work contributes to our understanding of the extremely isolating and alienating experiences of loss felt by incarcerated people, as well as the role of the state in actively and intentionally producing these outcomes as a core feature of carceral punishment. Though, as I have highlighted above, while many of these approaches draw from Patterson (2018[1982]), there is not a consensus on what social death is, nor who experiences it. As Králová (2015) asserts, the notion of social death has become widespread in its usage and, unfortunately, has inadvertently taken on quite divergent meanings across disciplines and research focus areas. We can see this directly above – even scholars studying social death within the same institution operationalize it differently.

In this study, I draw on multiple conceptualizations of social death to offer a unique, three-pronged framing based on a synthesis of the above literature. First, as I demonstrate in the literature review above, many scholars of social death focus on social disconnection, isolation, and social alienation – namely, the *loss of relationships*, to draw in part on Durkheim’s early contributions and Patterson’s later work on natal alienation. Additionally, scholars emphasize loss of *identity* and sense of *self*, pulling from Goffman (1961) and more recent work (Králová 2015). Finally, others describe the loss of dignity and honor, a process of *humiliation* that comes from *how those who have power over someone treat them*, something Patterson (2018[1982]) observed in *Slavery and Social Death* and Price (2015) has reframed more recently. In other words, I conceptualize social death as something that occurs in three ways in prison: through 1)

*social disconnection and isolation* (the loss of relationships), 2) *humiliation* (the loss of dignity through mistreatment), and 3) *loss of sense of self* (shifting personal identity).

While Mississippi policy created a generalized experience of social death among all incarcerated people, heat indeed *worsened* all three of the aforementioned components of social death, as I will show in the next section. It directly expedited a person's social isolation, the humiliation that they are subjected to within the facility, and loss of their self-identity. In this way, my findings align with what many other scholars have observed about climate change overall: that it exacerbated *existing* injustices (Roberts and Parks 2006; Islam and Winkel 2017; Sultana 2021). While I describe these as three distinct manifestations of and forces which contribute to social death, they are not discrete categories. Just as Price (2015) finds, each of these manifestations of social death intersects with and amplifies one another. In this way, heat created an interconnected ripple effect of intensifying and expanding conditions of social death. Finally, at the same time that these conditions worked to isolate and alienate people in prison, many of my participants also actively resisted the isolating and humiliating impacts that are fundamental to incarceration by forming meaningful and close ties with one another, echoing the findings of other literature on the way people in prison or formerly in prison subvert and disrupt their marginalized identities (Opsal 2011). As I discuss in this chapter, heat simply added an *additional barrier* to resisting these deeply alienating realities.

### **This Chapter**

The remainder of this chapter will be organized as follows: first, I demonstrate the ways heat *amplified* existing tendencies of social death in MDOC state facilities, focusing on the impact of heat on social connectedness, the way heat creates new pathways for humiliation, and finally, on the way heat contributes to a lost sense of self among my participants. Then, I identify

how Mississippi prison policy created the preconditions of social death my participants describe, even amidst recent reforms, which aligns with other scholarship that describes social death as inherent to the project of incarceration.

### **“Patience is worn thin:” Heat, the Loss of Social Connectedness, and Social Death**

At the center of the concept of *social death* is the notion that social life is borne, in part, from our connections with other people, and that the loss of those connections – more specifically, the stripping away of them because of institutional or cultural practices – can in a way effectively render us “dead.” As Price (2015:25) puts it: “The person who is socially dead has the solitude and solitariness of existence impressed on her.” This isolation and alienation, as I describe at the outset of this chapter and as Price theorizes here, is inherent to the project of incarceration.

As such, extreme heat ultimately worsens the social disconnection that already exists in facilities like those studied here. The majority of my participants described heat as negatively impacting their relationships, creating an additional barrier to social connection. This appeared in two key ways in this project: first, extreme heat created additional barriers between my incarcerated participants and their communities on the outside, primarily through heat adding logistical challenges to the already tedious task of trying to make contact. It also, frankly, made them lack desire or capacity to do much of anything at all on hot days. Secondly, heat further disconnected my participants from other people living behind bars. This was demonstrated primarily through participants’ consistent and harrowing references to increased violence because of heightened discomfort and reduced patience during hot months. In addition to creating more violence, heat also impeded my participants’ ability to spend time with or share

resources with their friends, some of the only people they could regularly communicate with and/or express care for.

### *Heat Amplified Disconnection From The Outside*

As Králová (2015) notes, given the inherent sociality of human beings, the elimination of most (or all) social connections can clearly have profound and lasting impacts. I felt this deeply while conducting research; while reading letters, I was regularly struck with a generalized sense that many of my participants were simply glad to have someone to talk to.

As I show below, heat not only made participants extremely uncomfortable, it also compounded existing barriers to communicating with their loved ones on the outside. This, in turn, compounded the experience of *social death*. Describing the experiences of two people incarcerated in Pelican Bay State Prison in California, Rodriguez (2006:30) writes,

Finally, neither Askari nor Pinell is allowed phone calls, and their mail correspondence is more frequently denied or censored. This is, to invoke the terms of Orlando Patterson, the very picture of an ultramodern “social death,” the virtual liquidation of affective and (extended) familial ties through a historically specific articulation of penal slavery.

Scholarship like Rodriguez (2006:30) provides intellectual precedent for understanding how non-access to letters and phone calls in particular perpetuates the experience of social death – a “virtual liquidation of affective and (extended) familial ties.” In the case of this study, extreme heat added another barrier to participants being able to communicate with those on the outside, which further contributed to their social deaths in prison.

I received the first response to my recruitment materials in December of 2022 over email, from Mike. In that first letter, his description of life in MSP before air conditioning was extreme (“*Even taking a cold shower, within a few minutes you'd be sweating again*”), but largely confirmed most of my suspicions based on what I had read in media accounts and books written about the former plantation. One thing, however, stood out to me in his correspondence that I had

not at all anticipated: his description of writing letters. Mike told me about the impact of heat on one of the few accessible and (relatively) cheap forms of communication for those behind bars before air conditioning was installed: “Writing letters during the summer months would be non-existent. Sweat would be all over the paper. . . . HELL would be the best way to describe it.”

Before I sent out my recruitment materials, I had read the reports on MSP. I knew internal facility temperatures regularly exceeded 100° F, sometimes topping even 120 or 145 degrees (U.S. Department of Justice 2022). Yet I had never considered that these temperatures would impact letter-writing in and of itself. Soon, it became apparent that Mike was not alone – other letters reflected the ways communication became far more difficult during the summer season. As Kayla described to me, “The only reason I can even write you this letter is because it’s so late in the year and the temperature is bearable.” Monica, the participant who wrote to me the most often and typically in the most detail, also relayed that extreme heat will “keep us from writing letters to our loved ones,” though neither of these women articulated *how* in the explicit and clear way that Mike did.

Letter-writing, as community organizers and formerly incarcerated people themselves point out, has historically served as an essential medium of communication for people in prisons. In many states (including Mississippi until recently), it has also historically been cheaper and more accessible than phone calls (Wagner and Bertram 2022). As collections of prison letters and analyses of letter anthologies demonstrate, letters have been fundamental to incarcerated peoples’ ability to maintain contact with loved ones on the outside, as well as to maintain solidarity with people at other facilities (Jackson 1994; Vannier 2020; Lawal and Harris 2023). Researchers have highlighted the way letter-writing is a uniquely intimate and private method of being in touch (Garcia 2016; Burton 2021); despite increased surveillance of mail in prisons, this

form of contact certainly allows for greater privacy than speaking on the phone, which often takes place in relatively public settings of the facility near correctional officers and other “inmates.”

In fact, participants themselves underscored the importance of letters. As briefly discussed in Chapter 2, several of the people enrolled in this study explicitly described being enthusiastic about helping with the project, in part because it involved a letter exchange. As Mike put it: “Getting a letter can change the whole day. And you don’t even know me.” Comments like this one underscore the way letters facilitated a form of social connection that is systematically stripped from incarcerated people upon entering prison.

What my findings demonstrate, then, is that heat made one of the few remaining ways to accessibly contact people outside of prison even harder. In later correspondence, after a participant described missing their family, I responded by asking if the participant used letters to contact them and how the heat impacted that communication (if at all). The response I got further confirmed previous descriptions:

To answer your question, I would only write letters a few times a year. I liked hearing the voices of my family. So I always wanted a phone call. But if I was going to write a letter I would not write letters in the summers. How could I? I can’t describe it but you can’t do anything at all when its that hot.

For this particular participant, letter writing was not a central mode of communication with kin. Yet the heat still reduced her likelihood to engage in an activity of connection. Indeed, writing letters was not the only form of communication that became difficult during summer months as several participants described making fewer phone calls as a direct result of heat. Responding to a question I posed about how heat impacted his day-to-day life at MSP before air conditioning, Carter responded: “One thing is I wouldn’t want to stand in line for phone calls.

The smell of all the guys is really bad when it's hot. And I would be so tired I wouldn't want to stand and wait. ... When it was hot, I wouldn't wanna do anything at all."

Here, Carter was describing three different, albeit related, reasons for opting out of phone calls: 1) general exhaustion, which reduced his capacity to do much of anything, 2) limited facility phones, which meant he would have to 'stand and wait,' and 3) foul smell coming from other people. *Each one* of these factors was either created or worsened by hot conditions – meaning the heat *compounded* already existing barriers to social connection. Monica, too, described the impact of smell and poor hygiene, something I will discuss at great length later in this chapter. For now, she too noted that heat caused disinterest in making phone calls:

The hot temperatures do keep some from using the phone as the phones are close to one another and there are no fans by the phones which are also located right under the large TV's in the dayroom. So on top of dealing with the heat, you will also have to deal with the noise of the TV, among the commotion of the zone, and in our case barking dogs as well.

Similar to Carter's description of his rationale for avoiding phone use above, this excerpt demonstrates simultaneously how calls were already disincentivized in the facility through phone proximity to noisy televisions, dogs, and general "commotion of the zone," *and* underscores the way heat made these conditions worse. A repeated theme in letters I received for this project was how much of a difference additional body heat made when you are already hot without relief – and the lengths incarcerated people would go to avoid physical proximity to others in the facility, something I will discuss more in the following section. It is unsurprising, then, that this meant fewer phone calls in the summer, particularly in a facility where the phones are close to one another and to other activity. Kayla provided much less detail about *why* her phone use was restricted, but offered the same sentiment, noting that on extremely hot days in summertime, "I also would not use the phone as much."

Phone calls, like letters, have also proven to be essential tools for maintaining relationships with family and community. A recent study found a relationship between the cost of a 15-minute phone call at various facilities and the level of “mental distress” experienced by the people incarcerated there (Soderlund 2023). This comes as no surprise to those who have loved ones behind bars or done time themselves; in fact, this reality has sparked a wave of phone call reform in the past few years, which has significantly reduced the cost in jails and prisons across the country (Wagner and Bertram 2022). The rationale for this campaign was simple: phone calls allow people to maintain relationships, and all people are deserving of relationships, even if they have been convicted of a crime.

Prisons produce social disconnection by separating people from their communities and kin, moving them to distant facilities that highly restrict communication (Braman 1997). And, as other scholars have demonstrated, this social isolation and disconnection (from familial and non-familial relatives) is a central feature of carceral social death (Price 2015). As this study shows, heat created additional, and compounded existing, logistical barriers to letter-writing and making phone calls, which are already some of the *only lifelines* that remain for incarcerated people to contact with family and friends.

#### *Heat and Social Disconnection From Others on the Inside*

In addition to creating and compounding barriers to communicating with people on the outside, my findings show that heat produced a similar outcome on *internal* relationships. Yet as I discuss below, heat added new obstacles to maintaining healthy friendships and support networks with others in prison, which participants repeatedly underscored the importance of in their letters. This occurred in multiple ways. Participants’ energy and overall ability to spend

time with their friends was reduced by heat. Extreme heat events also heightened tension, contributed to less patience, and increased the likelihood of violence.

Scholars have demonstrated the role and impact of violence in prisons, with a historical emphasis on aggregate level violence (such as prison riots) and a more recent shift toward explorations of individual level assaults (Wooldredge 2020). As this work has highlighted, violence in prison is widespread, and many factors contribute to both types of violence (Byrne and Hummer 2007; Wooldredge 2020). While considerable research and public discourse emphasizes violence among and between groups in prison, a simultaneous – and often overlooked – reality is that people who are incarcerated maintain positive friendships with others in their facility, too (Larson and Nelson 1984; Schafer et al. 2017). Indeed, researchers have observed cooperation and connection between people living behind bars (Patel et al. 2022), even in the context of an otherwise violent setting. For example, Edison & Haynie (2023) found that in-prison friendships among women helped to mitigate the regular stressors of incarceration; this affirms previous findings on the impact of positive interactions with peers in prison/jail settings and echoes the assertions of feminist criminologists (Laan and Eichelsheim 2013). While both aspects of life in prison – violence and connection – are realities, work in the latter area counters singular narratives of domination and conflict in carceral institutions, which can inadvertently further dehumanize those behind bars. Laws and Lieber (2022) describe the ways care and communal relations manifest in men’s prisons in the United Kingdom, highlighting how older prison mentors make efforts to help newer “inmates” cope with the difficulties of adjusting to an incarcerated life. All these studies are useful, and especially highlight the different shapes and forms relationships can take within carceral facilities. They are also, in a way, simply restating what some of our oldest works of sociology have told us: social relationships with other people

matter (Durkheim 1987[1951]). Finally, this work reminds us of the ways people who are in prison actively resist social death through the creation of social *life*. As Price (2015:129) describes it, “People sustain themselves and struggle to live lives of dignity and purpose when assaulted by the state. They, their friends, allies, and communities, engage in humanizing activity when they otherwise face social death.”

I, too, found examples of care and friendship in my participants’ descriptions of prison life. In one letter to me, Stephanie signed off by letting me know that she would be released from prison soon and would be happy to continue to write to me from home. In her words: “Anything I can do to help the women who will still be there I would love to do so.” Indeed, several participants in this project repeatedly wrote to me about the other people in facilities that they like spending time with and care for. Monica was explicit about her time she enjoyed with her friends, and more specifically, told me a lot about her “best friend.” Others described informal and formal care practices that existed between people in the facility, particularly among friends. These practices often involved demonstrating care by materially supporting one another. One of the ways this took place is through sharing food:

I had a friend in the unit who would buy a lot of food because her family was able to send her money. Not everybody in here has that, but some inmates do, so they can get food more often. You will see people sharing food with each other sometimes. She would share food with me to help me out.

It turns out that this type of mutual support is common<sup>20</sup>, though it technically violated rules laid out in the inmate handbook, as I will discuss later in the chapter. Nonetheless, these examples of food sharing demonstrate a form of social connection and care that can combat

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<sup>20</sup> In Mississippi, like in many other states, many opt into purchasing food from canteen to avoid food provided by the facility that is either 1) repetitive, 2) calorie deficient, 3) under-seasoned/“inedible,” or 4) not provided at regular/consistent hours, according to my participants. This means an additional expense for those who are unsatisfied with “rice and beans almost daily,” as Monica put it. She wrote to me at length about the low nutritional quality of the food, which greatly impacted her life as a diabetic. She was also simply dissatisfied with the taste. In her words, “I get that beans are cheap, but when you don’t like beans, it makes for a lot of meals that you don’t eat.”

isolation and disconnection. Similarly, Monica and her best friend often shared meals to mutually support one another given their shared medical condition. High temperatures made this more difficult: “I do cook for me and my best friend every night, but some nights I have no energy and will feel sick from the heat, but I force myself to cook for us as both me and my best friend are diabetic and we need to eat<sup>21</sup>.”

The above quotations demonstrate that participants enrolled in this study *did* maintain positive relationships with other incarcerated people, and these social networks and forms of mutual support mattered for their well-being. Monica’s example shows how heat potentially threatened some of these forms of mutual aid and care. Yet, as my findings below demonstrate, this was not the only obstacle to maintaining relationships that heat created. Heat also increased feelings of tension, frustration, and discomfort among everyone in the facility, all of which impacted peoples’ day-to-day interactions and threatened their ability to maintain healthy and safe relationships with their peers in facilities.

For example, Monica told me that on days where it is “too hot to breathe,” she feels like it impacts her “ability to connect with others”. As she put it,

Most summer nights we are lucky to get below 75 degrees. We are now in miserable humidity levels. 90+ degrees at 6pm. . . . it will affect friendships as patience will wear thin from being so hot and miserable, being unable to stay cool.

To that end, participants described a generalized increased feeling of tension – between everyone. In one letter to me, Darius wrote about a fight that broke out at the facility, adding: “On [*hot*] days its frustrating and tensions be high in every community.” In a later letter, Darius repeated the same statement, elaborating further: “So tensions are up and you just want to sit and chill all day and stay out of peoples way.” Participants also noted that as a result of extreme

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<sup>21</sup> Diabetes is one of the main reasons Monica cooks for her and her friend each night. In her words, the facility does not help her manage her diabetes well at all, and she is often left to handle it on her own: “We never get our insulin at the same time each day, and rarely before meals like its supposed to be.”

fatigue and exhaustion, they often simply lacked the desire or ability to spend time with friends and communities in the prison. Speaking of her relationship with one of her closest friends, one participant wrote, “I spend less time with [*her*] in the summer because she can barely get out of bed sometimes, there is just no energy.”

Unfortunately, the heat not only impacted peoples’ ability to maintain positive relationships with their peers, it also directly contributed to increased violence. This confirms what research tells us about the impacts of heat on the population at large, as well as in prisons. Among the general public, extreme heat events are associated with higher rates of interpersonal violence (Anderson 1989; Anderson 2001) and, more specifically, intimate partner violence (Sanz-Barbero et al. 2018). Recently, Mukherjee and Sanders (2021) found that this trend applies in carceral facilities, too. In their study of facilities across Mississippi, researchers found that extreme heat increases “both the number of violent events and the probability of any violence,” (Mukherjee and Sanders 2021:1). This project confirms those findings qualitatively.

This increase in violence resulting from heat too constitutes a form of social death, as it *created additional layers of alienation* between people who have no one they can interact with but one another. In this study, violence perpetuated social death insofar as it further separated people from one another, including those they were otherwise friends with/maintained positive relationships with in prison. It also created a dynamic in which many incarcerated people simply spent more time alone to avoid said violence. This imposed form of aloneness, which participants have little to no control over, further contributed to their experience of social death in prison and were directly exacerbated by extreme heat.

In her first correspondence with me, Sasha told me that she thinks “this has been the hottest summer here with temps reaching 105 degrees.” After describing in detail the way this

impacts her physical health and appetite, she discussed the impact these temperatures have on conflict: “There are 100 women housed in each zone that get more irritable when it’s extremely hot so of course there are more arguments and/or fights.” Alex, too, used the language of irritable, writing that “We get so hot that we get irritable and take it all out on our friends and our loved ones.” Later, in that same letter, she told me that on hot days, people’s moods are clearly affected, noting that it “makes us lash out on each other.”

This was a theme among all of the participants who described increased violence due to extremely high temperatures. And, as some participants noted, it was not only the physiological toll of temperatures on the body and mind, which resulted in less patience and more irritability, but also the *frustration with facility conditions*, which led directly to more violent outbursts, too. As another participant put it: “Inmates are fed up with not only being hot but with the other conditions as well so it makes things that more dangerous in the summer time.”

Mike, who has been incarcerated for ten years, was also blunt about the level of violence he witnessed and experienced firsthand at Parchman. After being switched from the part of MSP with air conditioning back to Unit 29 (which does not have A/C installed) after being himself involved in a fight, Mike described a brutal readjustment period. In these letter interactions, we mostly talked about the fight itself and his frustration with lack of protection from staff. Yet he always connected these conflicts back to heat: “Its really hot though. I think the temperature makes it worse with the violence in here. People get mad easier and react more violently over petty things.” What is crucial about this description is that similar to an earlier explanation for making fewer phone calls, Mike and others highlighted how *the preconditions for violence in the facility already exist all of the time*, and heat served as an *amplifier*.

Carter, too, observed increased violence during summer months in all of the facilities he had been in. According to him, the extreme heat caused a kind of contradiction: “It makes you angry and cranky and sometimes more guys will fight, but you can’t defend yourself because you so depleted.” Here, Carter described not just increased risk of violence, but increased risk of bodily injury from violence because of the extreme fatigue caused by high temperatures. This, too, demonstrates how violence induced by heat functioned to harm those in prison in unique ways. In another letter to me, he wrote, “So when there are even more fights in the summer you can really notice because there are already so many.”

Indeed, even if participants were not involved in the fights themselves, they observed them happening more regularly among others during the hotter periods of the year. As one letter described,

I have a few friends in here and we don’t get in fights, I stay away from fights, but we do get more testy with each other when its hot like that. And I know there are way more fights on the zone in general because everyone is crabby and uncomfortable.

Taken altogether, we can see how heat magnified existing tendencies towards violence and social isolation in these MDOC state facilities. By reducing overall patience and causing tension between individuals and communities, heat created a barrier to healthy friendships, something vital to survival and any semblance of well-being in prison, as Laan and Eichelsheim (2013) demonstrate. In addition, it increased the physical risk of violence and heightens tension between groups already in conflict, which in turn both directly and indirectly caused more people to spend time alone. This happened not only through lockdowns and other facility directives following fights, but also through generalized distrust of one another and efforts to stay out of trouble, combined with generalized exhaustion. As Mike put it, “I really don’t have any friends in here. ... I like staying to myself, less problems that way.” Darius, describing hot days, offered

a similar assessment: “When its extremely hot its times when you don’t want to move around or be bothered with anyone. Nobody wants to be bothered with anyone when its hot.”

Yet staying to oneself, or attempting to not “be bothered with anyone,” while perhaps increasing one’s immediate safety, can produce an even more alienated and isolated individual, one who experiences a *death of sociality*. Crucially, though, these tendencies toward isolation and violence already exist in MDOC facilities. As my findings show, extreme heat simply *intensified* them, heightening the experience of social death which is inherent to the project of incarceration.

### **“Some of them do things just to humiliate us:” Heat, Humiliation, and Social Death**

As scholars, reformers, and abolitionists alike have repeatedly demonstrated, prison is in and of itself a humiliating experience. The list of ways research provides evidence that prisons humiliate those locked within them is long, including strip searches (Hutchison 2019), sexual harassment (Robertson 1999) and violence (Wolff et al. 2006), restrictions on gender and racial identity affirmation and presentation (Do 2022), and pressuring folks behind bars to inform or “snitch” on their peers and friends (Price 2015), though this is clearly not an exhaustive list. Indeed, humiliation in prison is “organized, institutionalized, routine, and largely legal,” (Price 2015: 42). Such humiliating experiences are often justified as a means of maintaining safety and order in carceral facilities. For example, officers at jails and prisons are still legally allowed to conduct strip searches of incarcerated people, even with little evidence to support contraband suspicions (Chettiar 2012). Other aforementioned practices, like regular/highly invasive pat downs, are justified on similar grounds. Clearly, then, humiliation is common in prison. But what, exactly, constitutes humiliation, and what does humiliation have to do with social death?

And finally, how do extreme temperatures create new pathways for humiliation in MDOC facilities? In this section, I address each of these questions.

Humiliation is defined in many ways among social scientists, philosophers, and legal scholars. Price (2015: 41), in his study of social death in prisons, describes humiliation as making people “the object of contempt.” Other literature elaborates, offering more specific and unifying features of the experience of humiliation. One of those features is the *loss of dignity*. Gilbert (1997:133), for example, describes how humiliation occurs when one feels “stripped of one’s dignity.” Philosophers, too, underscore this, highlighting that human dignity is derived in part from *safety from humiliation* or violence imposed by others (Parent 1992). Similarly, a legal right to human dignity “protects individuals from humiliation,” and in this way, humiliation can actually be definitionally considered the antonym of dignity (Schultziner and Rabinovici 2012: 107).

Yet the stripping of dignity alone does not constitute humiliation; it also involves *the loss of honor* (Elshout et al. 2016) which is imposed externally (Mendibile 2005). This external imposition of loss is particularly relevant for an operative definition of humiliation, as it helps distinguish humiliation as related to, but distinct from, shame (Elshout et al. 2016). Indeed, the *stripping of autonomy and power* is central to the process of humiliating a person – a distinction from a sole feeling of shame, which is often self-imposed. Elshout et al.’s (2016) participants describe this part of humiliation as coming from a feeling of *powerlessness*. Together, the loss of dignity and honor, achieved through the deprivation of power and autonomy, produces a feeling of *debasement* (Murray et al. 2022). Finally, while not all humiliation is related to dehumanization, they are often interconnected and, in some studies, interchangeable (ibid).

We can understand humiliation, then, as a combination of the loss of dignity and honor, taken by an external force through the imposition and reassertion of power, which ultimately produces feelings of debasement – and sometimes even dehumanization – among the humiliated. This experience of humiliation is a key component of social death. Patterson (2018[1982]), in his original theorization of the way social death is felt by slaves, asserted that “dishonor” was an essential feature of making a person socially dead. In other words, you could not *only* isolate a person from their community and kin; this isolation happens in conjunction with other forms of social ostracization, including humiliation, to produce a “deadening” effect. Price (2015) expands on this original conceptualization to frame social death in prisons as the result of humiliation (related to dignity, as I outlined above). Here, he underscores the importance of humiliation in creating a “nonperson” in prisons: “To face social death, in other words, is not merely to be thrown out of society. It is not merely to face indifference. For social death to work, it is important that the social dead are demeaned and ridiculed.” (Price 2015:41).

I, too, argue that humiliation is an essential component of producing social death in prison, and my own research demonstrates the way my participants were subjected to humiliating experiences. In one of the later letters I received, one participant wrote plainly about experiencing humiliation directly from facility employees: “I do not trust some of [*the correctional officers*]. There are a few that I get along with. Some of them do things just to humiliate us.”

This letter was the only one I received that explicitly used the language of humiliation. However, most other participants used language which invoked humiliation in other words, particularly based on the conceptualization outlined above. Participants regularly described the loss of dignity, feelings of powerlessness and stripped autonomy, externally imposed shame, and

feelings of behind debased. For example, in recounting heat-related conditions, multiple participants described their experiences as a form of “torture,” as “inhumane,” and as “cruel and unusual punishment.” One participant even compared their experience to one of an animal, invoking a form of debasement and dehumanization. In her first letter to me, Morgan described how difficult it was to sleep at night in summer: “Sometimes it was even so hot I’d pant like a dog.”

The above quotations establish that my participants experienced, and described, humiliation in MDOC facilities. Moreover, it is important to rely on the *normative* definition of humiliation rather than an exclusively psychological one—especially when considering the notion of social death. In other words, even if not all participants described humiliation explicitly, their experiences can be characterized as such. As Price (2015) aptly puts it, “One may be humiliated, in other words, without necessarily feeling oneself to be.” This is especially important to consider when examining a total institution like a prison, where the institutional context regularly normalizes and justifies humiliating experiences. As such, below, I will offer both examples where participants understood their experiences as humiliating and ones where they did not express humiliation in such specific terms.

How did heat exacerbate the humiliating conditions inherent to carcerality? Below, I show that this happened in several ways in Mississippi, each of which stripped people in these facilities of their dignity. To start, participants told me about how heat was specifically used as a tool by correctional officers to punish them in humiliating ways – specifically, in ways that they had no autonomy over and reasserted officers’ power over them. Additionally, heat intensified the already humiliating experiences of imposed clothing restrictions by causing participants to

constantly sweat and smell; it also reminded them of their disposability, producing feelings of debasement and dehumanization.

### *Humiliation Through Temperature-Related Punishment*

Here, I demonstrate how participants described prison staff, and in particular, officers/guards, punishing them in ways that produced humiliation. More specifically, these DOC employees used heat as a tool against “inmates,” causing them to suffer and feel humiliated.

In her first letter to me, Monica wrote that “Mississippi prisons tend to use mass punishments.” When I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by this, she described many harrowing experiences, but often returned to instances where prison staff inflicted temperature-related suffering through their decisions:

We have been forced to go outside all day on ‘yard call’ for floors to be painted for ACA inspections, and they will wait to do this until the middle of summer when its 100+ degrees with real feels around 115-120 degrees, and we will literally be outside from 9 am to 6pm or later.

Monica lived in a prison, and was well aware that under the management of the state, she had little control over many of the conditions of her life, including when yard calls happen at the facility. Yet according to her accounts, facility staff and administrators *weaponized* extreme heat against incarcerated people unnecessarily. It produced both immediate bodily injury (such as getting “fried from the sun resulting in bad sunburn,” as one participant put it), and was also a reminder of the *powerlessness* felt by people in MDOC facilities. Recall that humiliation is defined, in part, by the stripping of power by one person or entity from another (Elshout et al. 2016). Unfortunately, this was not the only example of such treatment that Monica wrote about.

Other times, Monica was even more clear about specific correctional officers intentionally inflicting suffering on her and the women she was incarcerated with. In one letter,

she described staff allowing temperatures to increase within the zones, even *against* facility directives:

In the summer months even with the directives in place for the lights to be off during the day from 10 am to 7 pm to reduce heat in the zones, some officers will still leave them on all day. Keeping it hotter in the zones as if it isn't hot enough already.

Since the perspectives of officers were not included in this study, I cannot confirm whether these decisions were made intentionally with the goal of humiliating people in MDOC facilities. However, the evidence that guards are fully aware of how hot and miserable people living in MDOC facilities are, and actively choosing to exert power and control over incarcerated people through the strategic use of extreme temperature, is not limited to data from letter correspondence alone. Examples like those highlighted thus far in this section, which came from participants' own words, align with the Department of Justice's findings from their investigation of Mississippi State Penitentiary. Below, the report (Department of Justice Civil Rights Division 2022: 47). demonstrates another instance of facility employees *actively instructing other employees not to reduce heat* in a hot restrictive housing unit, despite requests from those incarcerated, and specifically, those experiencing suicidal ideation:

One incarcerated individual had been in restrictive housing since his arrival at Parchman in September 2001. During his approximately 20-year confinement on Parchman's death row, there was no indication that he sought or was treated for any mental health issues. Yet, in February 2021, he began expressing suicidal ideation during the weekly restrictive housing rounds, which was captured in the clinician's note as "Suicidal Ideation." There was no narrative to explain this notation nor any suicide risk assessment completed. Approximately two weeks later, he hung himself with a bedsheet. According to one of the unit officers, this individual, along with several others, had been seeking relief from the excessive heat on the unit, which was hot the entire week leading up to his death. When this officer asked if they could turn down the heat, unit supervisors advised not to do so.

These experiences – in which officers' actions created intentionally hotter conditions for those living in MDOC facilities – stripped the dignity of those living in said facilities. Already living under incredibly uncomfortable conditions, participants explained how decisions made by

prison employees (more specifically, correctional officers) make these worse, and they are rendered powerless given the inherent institutional authority officers have over them. This type of staff behavior was not limited to heat waves in summer. One participant described how it was not just extreme *high* temperatures that were used against incarcerated folks:

For instance, in the winter time, guards will turn the blowers on when it is near freezing or even in the low 40s and leave them on all night because a hand full of people won't "rack down." Rather than writing an RVR (rule violation report) on those individuals not complying to the rack down time.

This weaponization of temperature was not simply another form of punishment. If we understand humiliation as a loss of dignity achieved through the taking of power from one person or group by another, these instances of officers strategically deploying extreme temperature to inflict discomfort and strip people of their dignity, become clear examples of humiliation. And, crucially, many participants *described this as such*. Recall that one participant explicitly stated that "some of [*the correctional officers*] try to humiliate us<sup>22</sup>," while others described facility-imposed heat as torture. Yet another compared their experience to a dog on summer days, describing the intense sweating and panting as a result of extreme temperatures. Through the weaponization of temperature, participants were made the "object" of officers' "contempt," to draw on the language of Price (2015).

#### *Clothing Restrictions, Heat, and Humiliation*

A second way that participants pointed to experiences of humiliation relates to mandates on clothing and self-expression. To start, Mississippi policy restricts "inmate" clothing and self-expression. This is quite common in carceral facilities, and in and of itself can be alienating, humiliating, and contribute to loss of personal identity and sense of self, as Do (2022) articulates at length. However, as I describe below, another impact of strictly enforced attire is that

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<sup>22</sup> Distrust of correctional officers was not uncommon among my participants. Others, for example, described guards as bringing in contraband and engaging in discriminatory behavior.

incarcerated people were trapped in excess clothing on hot days, which both contributed to physical discomfort *and* caused hygiene issues. It also meant that many people in these facilities watched their peers and neighbors suffer and die while being forced to abide by uniform rules. Taken together, those who are required to be fully clothed in highly regulated, specific ways – often including long pants – suffered tremendously. In the process, they were also stripped of their dignity and honor and debased. In other words, they were humiliated.

It was only relatively recently that MDOC issued shorts for women to wear. While this is certainly an improvement from requiring pants all year round, there are still stipulations. In one letter, Monica described the miserable discomfort of having to be “fully dressed in a tin building” where “sweat is pouring from your body at 10pm.” When I asked for more detail on the facility’s enforcement of dress requirements, she explained:

In the past few years they have actually issued us shorts to wear during the summer months, however they can only be worn outside on yard call or in the zone, we are not allowed to wear them to visitation, work, school, or the cafeteria to eat.

This means that for long intervals of the day, people were forced to wear clothing inappropriate for the summer season in general, but especially for the extreme heat felt in these facilities. Nearly every participant, in one way or another, described the feeling of being trapped in too many clothes when temperatures soared. Two different participants used the word *soaked* to describe their experiences in summer. Sasha told me that her body and clothes “stay soaked with sweat” all day, and Morgan wrote that “It is too hot to wear much of anything... I sweat so bad my clothes get soaked.” Others described sweat as *pouring* from their bodies. To reiterate just how painful uniforms were in the summer, Monica told me that “even when we don’t have to have our uniforms on in the evening and many wander in sports bras and boxers,” the heat is “unbearable.”

Heat, compounded with strict dress codes, clearly created extreme discomfort for those incarcerated in MDOC facilities without air conditioning. Yet it is not pain or discomfort alone that render a person socially dead, it is humiliation. And, indeed, enforcement of clothing requirements humiliated those enduring these conditions. As one participant put it: “In summer they’ll *make us* wear our full pants to wear in some parts of the facility. I told you what it is like in here when its hot. Can you imagine having to wear your clothes for 60 degrees when its 110?”

The emphasis in the above quote is my own. However, it demonstrates personal frustration and feelings of exasperation and debasement, imposed through rules which “made” (or forced) the people in these facilities to experience discomfort. Unfortunately, the dress code enforcement highlighted above is generally consistent across MDOC facilities. Darius explained his experience at both CMCF and SMCI, noting that “the [*correctional officers*] enforce being fully dressed during the day,” even though “there have been several deaths and inmates having to be rushed to the hospital” at those times due to heat. Alone, experiencing high temperatures or witnessing deaths would not necessarily constitute humiliation. Having a strict dress code enforced while your peers die before your eyes certainly does: it *debased* those in prison, stripped them of their dignity, and dehumanized them. In this way, extreme heat amplified humiliation in MDOC facilities through the constant reminder of “inmate” disposability<sup>23</sup>, something deeply humiliating for them.

Some participants also reported how these requirements caused individuals to smell and, in turn, to result in collectively bad odors at facilities, a deeply humiliating experience for those incarcerated there because it imposes shame and loss of dignity. Recall that earlier in this chapter, participants described how this smell was bad enough to disincentivize them from using

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<sup>23</sup> I do not know the circumstances of the deaths described to me in the letters I received. However, every participant associated extreme heat with general declines in health, and most described increased deaths in summer months. This aligns with research that examines the impacts of heat waves on prison mortality (Skarha et al. 2023).

the phones: they were willing to forgo contact with the outside to avoid proximity to others in the facility/dealing with their stench.

When summer temperatures are at their most brutal, those incarcerated in Mississippi facilities would sweat tremendously, which seriously impacted individuals' personal hygiene. This worsened the consequences of existing state policy, which already regulates the personal hygiene practices of incarcerated people. Monica told me that she often goes long periods of time without any deodorant at all:

Also, they only issue 1 bar of soap per week for state issue. They don't provide deodorant as state issue only on commissary. Indigent offenders can receive a hygiene package through the chapel 1x every 3 months, but in order to receive you cannot have any money posted in your books in that time frame. So, if someone is to be randomly blessed by someone and receive money, that will make them ineligible to receive a hygiene bag.

In and of itself, this is a humiliating experience that stripped people in prison of their dignity. Extreme heat simply made those general trends *even worse*. In a later letter, Monica circled back to her discussion of body odor, writing, "... You can only imagine what the smell is like." Another participant agreed: "You wouldn't believe the smell in summer."

Price (2015: 41) describes humiliation as a process of demeaning someone, which aligns with other theorists' understanding of what it means to humiliate. States across the country do this to incarcerated people in a myriad of ways, and Mississippi, in this study, was no exception. Yet as this section demonstrates, heat created new pathways for humiliation and worsened existing ones. Sometimes, according to my participants, facility employees did this intentionally and consciously, using temperature as a form of cruel and humiliating punishment. Other times, existing facility policy combined with temperatures over 100°F collided to create humiliating conditions, including the enforcement of uniforms. In both scenarios, participants were rendered powerless by authority figures and extreme discomfort and loss of dignity was imposed against

their own wishes and will. These conditions ultimately stripped participants of their ability to maintain basic hygiene, a key component of human dignity, and served as a reminder of their disposability. This, in turn, affirmed and expanded the experience of social death already inevitable to incarceration.

### **“It makes you feel crazy:” Heat and the Loss of One’s Sense of Self**

Social death, as I outline at the beginning of this chapter, is the result of the experience of multiple specific social phenomena which serve to sever a person from the social world. Above, I describe how heat exacerbated two aspects of social death: social disconnection and humiliation. Yet beyond *isolating* and *humiliating* people, prisons also tend to *dramatically alter a person’s sense of self*, which too contributes to social death. Those who are incarcerated, or formerly incarcerated, deeply understand this. In a letter to his friend from prison, Jack Henry Abbott once wrote, “We were sent to prison to be broken,” (1981:153).

How exactly does prison – or jail – impact an individual’s identity, or, to use Abbott’s (1981) words, “break” them? Some of the ways this occurs are related to what has already been discussed in this chapter: cutting most of a person’s social ties, for example, or forcing them to endure deeply undignified and humiliating conditions. However, in addition to losing connections with others and experiencing the effects of a system that strips someone of their dignity, prisons also fundamentally alter a person’s sense of self.

Changes in a person’s identity do not need to be bad per se. A key element of anti-prison movements, for example – including those for transformative or restorative justice – is the notion that people and conditions *should change* in response to/following conflict and harm (Grimsrud Zehr 2002; Nocella and Anthony 2011). However, the hyper-individualized changes that many critical prison scholars have observed within the current “justice” model often involve the loss of

positive aspects of identity and sense of self. As one incarcerated person described to Kazemian and Travis (2015:385), folks that are locked up often lose their “personhood” and “humanity” in the process. Or, as a former student of mine at a local prison put it, “This place changes you, and mostly for the worse.”

How then, is this negative change in self-image and self-identity related to social death? First, the process of social death occurs through the transformation from a human to a “nonbeing,” to borrow language from Patterson (2018[1982]:38). In his study of slavery and social death, he pointed out that the only way slaves exist – both socially and legally – is through their masters. Crucially, through the process of enslavement, slaves are *no longer who they were* before they were enslaved (ibid). As prison scholars have shown, this same process occurs for many incarcerated people (Liem and Kunst 2013; Hulley et al. 2016). In other words, being in prison can result in “fundamental changes in the self,” a key component of overall social death (Hulley et al. 2016). In addition, both the prisoner and slave cannot hope to regain the life they have left, in the sense that they are no longer who they were (Hulley et al. 2016; Liem & Kunst 2013; Patterson 2018[1982]).

As I illustrate next, my research shows that heat amplified a prison’s tendency to make people feel “not like themselves.” In the case of my participants, I observed this in a generalized sense, in which participants themselves described feeling “crazy” or unable to do “anything” until night time, in part due to lack of energy or inability to sustain their bodies on basic levels, including eating and sleeping. Relatedly, participants told me that heat reduced the time they spent doing activities that they otherwise enjoyed. This resulted in less time overall spent doing things that brought them purpose and fulfillment, which as I and others assert, perpetuate identity loss and social death.

*“I don’t really feel like myself in here:” Heat and a Generalized Loss of Identity*

Before I describe how heat impacted participants’ capacity to engage in various activities that they found fulfilling, which constituted their sense of self, I first want to briefly discuss a few examples of the way heat functioned to create general disillusionment and low energy levels among participants, which helps set the context for the later narratives. Throughout the letters I received for this project, participants consistently disclosed to me, both directly and indirectly, that 1) prison in general altered their sense of self and that 2) heat amplified this tendency.

Sam, for instance, described extreme heat as something that makes a person “feel crazy.”

Later, he elaborated:

I don’t really feel like myself in here and I think a little bit of that is just how prison feels anyway. But with the added heat, I feel like all I can do is just hope to survive and get through to the next day. No energy. No relief.

Alonzo used different language to describe a similar experience: “It’s so hot at both facilities on hot days that I stay on my rack until night to do anything.” Sasha, too, echoed the same sentiment: “On really hot days, it’s hard to do anything except stay on my bed in front of the small fan that I purchased on commissary,” as did Morgan: “The heat makes it hard to move around and it drains me. Most of the time I sleep because I don’t have the energy to do anything.”

In each of the above cases, we see how heat produced extreme fatigue that resulted in a generalized loss of energy, or ability to do “anything” at all. Darius, too, used similar language, writing that “it’s a very draining time when it’s hot.” Ava, in her first – and very short – letter to me, said very little about her life in prison except that “heat slows me down, exhausts me.” For my participants, who are already under the “care” of the state and thus have little control over their free time, the consequences of this were severe. And, as Sam stated directly, this heat and

resulting fatigue could make a person feel less like themselves. Other participants, as I show above, described extreme loss of energy and simply spending all day lying on their beds. Sometimes, this was the result of lost appetites due to heat, or inability to sleep due to heat, both of which contributed to extremely low energy levels, which I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter. Two different participants, for example, described having to hug ice to reduce their body temperature enough to sleep in summer. Indeed, most of my participants described temperature conditions so extreme that they inhibited their own ability to meet basic, life-sustaining needs, such as eating food, drinking water, or sleeping.

Participants regularly pointed to ways that heat caused a loss of appetite, nausea, and extreme fatigue. As I demonstrate below, however, in addition to heat producing a general experience of my participants “not feeling like themselves,” it also directly inhibited their ability to participate in activities key to identity formation or maintenance.

#### *Heat and Loss of Recreational & Social Activities*

Sense of self is shaped, in large part, by the things we do and the ways we spend our time. In fact, many of us develop our identities around our hobbies and leisure activities, identifying as “runners,” “bakers,” or “readers.” It should come as no surprise, then, that researchers have demonstrated that how we spend our time outside of work matters and has profound impacts on our own self-identity and well-being (Brajša-Žganec et al. 2011). It should also not surprise us that scholarship on the same topic in prison has produced similar results.

Just like the rest of us, people who are incarcerated suffer when they are unable to do things that occupy their time or bring them personal fulfillment (Nurse et al. 2003; Stephenson et al. 2021). Yet, to state the obvious, hobbies and leisure time become significantly more difficult to accomplish while incarcerated and when an individual’s time management is replaced by *state*

time management. As Bengtsson (2021) points out, youth imprisonment, for example, is in part defined by constant boredom. In a survey that instrumentalized Sykes' (1958) *pains of imprisonment*, Rocheleau (2013) also found that among a sample of adults in Rhode Island prisons, one-third of respondents identified boredom as *very hard* to deal with. Other work examines the impact of increased time out of the cell, which is both vital for pathways to fulfillment and for general reduced boredom, again, perhaps obviously. Focus groups in U.K. prisons showed that a lack of time out of cell was detrimental to the mental health and stress of incarcerated folks (Nurse et al. 2003). In a review of the literature, Stephenson et al. (2021:54) found “consistent evidence of an association between lower TOOC [*time out of cell*] and TIPA [*time in prison activities*] and worse mental health and higher suicide risk.”

As I demonstrate in this section, however, time out of cell and time participating in activities of one's choice – whether formally facilitated through the prison, or informally/on one's “own time” – are not just important for reducing an individual's risk of suicide or self-harm. They are also essential ways that people in prisons reassert and negotiate their own identities, given that they are some of the only aspects of their lives that they have any control over. Describing identity loss, Králová (2015), invoking Goffman (1961), writes:

This is achieved through the ongoing process of disculturation, where the person is not only removed from their natural social setting, causing them to lose their social roles, but is also placed in the institution's degrading environment which initially removes all significant components of an individuals' identity, forcing them to become a ‘non-person.’

Here, I show that heat decreased the already marginal amounts of time participants could spend in their existing “social roles” which affirm their own identities. Letters from participants highlight the ways that unmanaged heat directly decreased time out of cell and time dedicated to prison activities, to use the metrics of Stephenson et al. (2021). Carter, who is now incarcerated

in a living unit in Mississippi State Penitentiary with air conditioning, described how before A/C was installed, he struggled to keep up with his regular exercise:

For me, I would exercise a lot less when it was hot which was hard on me. One of the only things I do in here to stay strong and fit was to exercise. ... I would feel like I got a lot weaker in summer months but when I was out it was the opposite. In summer I'd be fit and I'd lift more weights and do more workouts outside in the past when I wasn't in here. But in here I just would get depleted, nobody has any energy to work out when its this hot. So for me the A/C helps me stay healthy too because I can keep up with my usual exercise.

Prison exercise is in and of itself valuable. Increased exercise is associated with reduced stress, improved self-esteem, improved mental health, and less hopelessness; this has been observed in prisons in the United States (Buckaloo et al. 2009), Australia (Cashin et al. 2008), Turkey (Basaran 2016), and Italy (Mannocci et al. 2015; Mannoci et al. 2018). Yet it is not simply important for participant well-being, it can also be an essential part of one's identity. As De Vita et al. (2019: 70) write in their study of the impact of education and physical activity access in Italian prisons, "The body becomes an instrument by means of which to build one's own identity and increase one's own skills to act in the world." Indeed, as the above letter excerpt demonstrates, exercise was not only important for Carter's health, it was also "one of the only things" he does to stay "strong" "in there," indicating it was one of the central ways he 1) took care of his own body/mind and 2) occupied his time outside of his cell. Carter is also speaking comparatively, offering us useful insight into how his life had changed since he began incarceration. Before, in summertime, he would be "fit." Now, summertime took on a whole new meaning – and with it reduced his capacity to engage in an activity that is meaningful and fulfilling to him. Carter was not the only participant who noticed a decline in physical fitness and a general inability to work out during summer months. Another participant described a similar experience to me: "But, I enjoyed exercising and on hot days it made that totally impossible. The

heat prevents me from doing any outdoor activities at all.” Again, we can see a temporal component in this letter, describing what was historically enjoyed versus how environmental conditions restrict capacity now. Given the role of leisure and hobbies in general identity formation, we can see how reduced exercise opportunities could alter one’s sense of self.

It is important to note that MDOC facilities do not make exercise particularly easy to begin with, regardless of environmental conditions. In fact, the Mississippi Code bans weight-lifting equipment from all private and public correctional facilities, “except when such equipment is used in a work incentive program,” as discussed later in this Chapter. Darius, who was incarcerated at SMCI when he wrote me his first letter, confirmed that this law was indeed still enforced. In a list of issues he took with the facility, included were, “No benches or anything to sit on when outside for recreation” and “There are no exercise equipment to use outside for recreation.” In fact, I never received clarity on what participants meant when they referred to exercise, given the lack of equipment. They were likely referring to body-weight movements, running, and recreational sports. Even so, heat functioned to simply amplify already endemic forms of social death; in this case, it made people less likely to engage in the personally fulfilling and humanizing experience of exercise in facilities that already prohibit exercise infrastructure.

Monica, too, made similar comments in her letters. When she wrote to me, Monica often alternated between drawing on deeply personal individual experiences and describing the experiences of others that she had observed. In one letter, she told me about how heat reduced her and others’ time in the yard:

The temperatures also affect some people participating in recreational activities on the yard such as a basketball game, or a softball game. Some are unable to be in the heat due to medications that prevent one from being able to spend time outdoors. Many people incarcerated here have seizures, and most seizure medications you are supposed to avoid direct sunlight. I personally went to sit outside to watch a game between officers and a building or between buildings, because of excessive heat and humidity.

Here, Monica described the impact of heat on physical fitness/exercise, but also, crucially, its impact on what was otherwise simply *enjoyable social time* through formal activity. Indeed, research shows how even limited sports programming can have measurable positive impacts on attitudes and self-esteem among participants in prison (Meek and Lewis 2014). Additionally, as both participants highlighted above, extreme heat reduced their time outside “on the yard” in general. As environmental access advocates have suspected for many decades – and researchers have recently begun to point out – time outdoors and access to nature are also essential for incarcerated people (Moran and Turner 2019; Reddona and Durante 2019). Given these benefits, we can reasonably conclude that both programming activities and nature interactions can positively shape a person’s identity.

Unfortunately, MDOC facilities already offer relatively limited programming and engagement in general, particularly for “forgotten prisoners” or “lifers.” Darius noted that at SMCI, “People with life sentences or a extreme amount of time has no school programs, no rehabilitation programs or jobs available. For a facility that houses mostly guys with a lot of time.” Rare opportunities to be outside of one’s cell – whether through self-directed exercise without equipment, for recreation and socializing, or simply for the purpose of being outdoors – clearly matter. This is especially true in facilities where, as Darius put it, there are “mostly guys with a lot of time,” but very little programming or opportunities for them. Yet like exercise and time “on the yard,” these opportunities are constrained by heat, especially in facilities that have no heat management. As such, heat again simply *worsened* existing conditions in MDOC facilities. In this case, it specifically reduced time that people can spend 1) exercising, 2) engaging in formal and informal recreational and social activities, and 3) outside and out of their cells in general. What happens when people who are in prison, a place where they are already

largely unable to occupy their time in the ways they would like to, have even fewer opportunities for activity, identity formation, and self-expression? The result is the alteration of one's sense of self, which in turn intensifies the social "deadening" already imposed on people living behind bars.

### **Mississippi Prison Policy and Social Death**

As many of my participants alluded to in their letters, the conditions in Mississippi prisons, informed by state policy and MDOC policy, together already imposed social disconnection and isolation, humiliation, and the erasure of their sense of self. Heat simply amplified those tendencies and created *new* barriers to sustaining relationships, achieving dignity, and maintaining energy for engaging in fulfilling activities, let alone meeting one's own basic needs. Put another way: environmental conditions exacerbated existing injustices against people incarcerated in the state of Mississippi.

Next, I use critical policy analysis to demonstrate the ways social death is created through state law and policy. More specifically, I analyze the Mississippi Code, the *MDOC Inmate Handbook* (which I will refer to as Inmate Handbook) and *MDOC Friends & Family Corrections Guide* (which I will refer to as F&F Guide), which more specifically outline expectations for letter writing, visitation, and interactions within the facility.

Finally, I discuss the recently passed Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act as an illustrative example of the limits to carceral reforms. While this reform indeed immediately and materially improves pregnant peoples' conditions in prison by creating more formal rules around labor and birth during incarceration, it falls short of altering the underlying conditions that produce social death in prison. Similarly, though the policy offers a few concessions for incarcerated families – ones that will increase the frequency with which they can see their

children – it, too, reproduces the basic logic of social death inherent to carcerality, overwhelmingly maintaining separation between kin. These recent policies, which likely materially improve the lives of incarcerated pregnant people and incarcerated parents, still help create conditions where social death is a likely outcome.

I begin by discussing the way MDOC policy and the Mississippi Code together produce conditions that create social disconnection and isolation. Prisons are paradoxically difficult places to spend time: they offer very little privacy, and simultaneously, are profoundly lonely and isolating, too (Schliehe et al. 2022). This is in part because maintaining relationships with people outside of any carceral facility already requires a tremendous amount of work, both for those incarcerated and for those trying to reach people living behind bars (Braman 1997; Dholakia 2022). As I show next, extensive rules and MDOC policies govern when, how, and to what extent people incarcerated in prisons can interact with their friends and family that are not incarcerated, as well as their peers within facilities. Below, by triangulating data, I discuss how these policies specifically impact letter correspondence, visitation, and “inmate” relationships, altogether reproducing extreme isolation and contributing to social death.

#### *Mississippi Prison Policy and Social Disconnection – Letters*

As I demonstrated in the above section, extreme heat impacted my participants’ ability and desire to write letters. It not only reduced their overall energy and capacity, it also caused them to sweat so much that their paper became too wet to write on. While high temperatures clearly made conditions worse for participants, MDOC mail policy in and of itself makes managing relationships with those on the outside difficult to begin with.

The list of restrictions and requirements for incoming and outgoing mail in Mississippi correctional facilities is long. People incarcerated within MDOC are not allowed to receive

polaroids, “photos of loved ones in a bikini except for on a beach or at a pool,” calendars, photos of other inmates, or even tarot cards, to name just a few (Mississippi Department of Corrections 2010). Senders can only include up to seven photographs with each letter; these photos must be printed from one of four companies and cannot be larger than a 5x7. Additionally, incarcerated people are not allowed to receive letter materials (i.e. stamps and envelopes) in the mail, but instead must purchase both directly through canteen (ibid). These examples – just a handful of a tedious list of limitations on mail – are offered to highlight the depth of the state’s focus on surveilling and limiting contact between those who are incarcerated and those who are not.

Many of these rules directly limit the nature of mail incarcerated parents can receive from their children, creating a layer of family separation – or, to invoke Patterson (2018[1982]), “natal alienation” – that extends far beyond literal physical miles. For example, cards sent also must be “signed in ink” and “cannot include glitter or stickers.” Neither incoming nor outgoing mail can include “any crafts,” (Mississippi Department of Corrections 2010). This is despite evidence that most people in prison are parents (Maruschak et al. 2016), and that mail is the most common mode of communication between incarcerated parents and their children (Haverkate and Wright 2020). During a 2021 hearing about proposed mail rule changes in the Florida Department of Corrections, one person aptly noted, “[Parents] are able to touch, hug, kiss, and cry through letters. Their children invite them into their lives every day through letters, and inmates constantly remind them of their love through letters,” (News Service of Florida 2021). Clearly, this form of contact matters. Restrictions like these codify social death into MDOC policy by 1) functionally disincentivizing letter writing, 2) creating new reasons for mail that is sent to or received from facilities to be thrown out for rule violations, and 3) censoring the types of material that can be shared between communities and, more specifically, families.

Yet MDOC rules do not simply limit the type of mail received. As of May 2021, all incoming mail is now scanned, and no one incarcerated in MDOC facilities is allowed to receive original copies. The justification for this is that it helps prevent contraband from entering facilities. However, as one participant noted, "... now everything is photocopied (because of the drugs that come in the mail) ... most of the drugs are brought in by officers anyways<sup>24</sup>."

The aforementioned mail restrictions, combined with new scanning rules, can produce more of the same isolation and social distance that is already inherent to carcerality itself. As David Campbell (2023), formerly incarcerated at Rikers Island, wrote,

There is something about the physicality of paper that matters. When you're a prisoner starved for stimuli, your senses are heightened, and these distinctions are so real they leap out of the envelope at you. ... When you are incarcerated, a physical letter is a small marvel, a message in a bottle, a reminder of who you are, where you came from, who still cares about you, and why you should stay out of trouble and come home soon.

It is also worth mentioning the many informal rules that may or may not be enforced depending on variables such as which staff member is working the mail room, or – according to some local organizers I talked to – if the mail room is staffed at all. For example, I was advised to use black pen exclusively both on my address labels as well as for any letters that I write. Additionally, though postcards are not formally listed as banned on the F&F Guide or website, the Mississippi Freedom Letters Campaign website advised against them, noting they are being "rejected at some prisons."

Indeed, my research experience illuminated the inconsistency and unpredictability of how both incoming and outgoing mail is handled. As I described in my methods chapter, several participants had to send me multiple consent forms because they would attach them and refer to them in their letters, but I would not initially receive them. Others described complex mix-ups

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<sup>24</sup> Evidence supports Monica's theory. Journalists have shown that restrictions on mail do not reduce contraband (Fisher 2022; Krull 2022) and that correctional officers play a large role in contraband getting into facilities (Blakinger and McCullough 2021; Renaud 2018).

that were hard for even me to follow, in which some pieces of my letters got to them and others did not.

As I demonstrate with both letter correspondence data and data from MDOC policy documents, both formal and informal rules in Mississippi facilities together produce meaningful restrictions on mail. These limits are both qualitative and quantitative, restricting the *nature* of materials that can be included in mail, as well as the *number*. If we understand social death as “peculiarly individual, individualized, and individualizing,” (Price 2015: 25), it becomes obvious that these barriers to mail correspondence do in fact further isolate and “individualize” incarcerated people away from their loved ones on the outside. At a baseline, this makes already infrequent contact extremely difficult. Heat, as I show above, simply added a new layer of difficulty.

#### *Mississippi Prison Policy and Social Disconnection – Visitation*

While none of my participants explicitly described high temperatures impacting visitation, it is worth discussing how policy restricts visits nonetheless, since this is something that should relieve isolation, social disconnection, and alienation. Restrictions on visitation both in and of themselves reinforce social death in obvious ways. They also contextualize the importance of letters, phone calls, and positive relationships between people incarcerated in a facility, given that visitations are highly monitored, restrictive, and difficult to arrange. Since all of the aforementioned forms of contact were impacted by heat among my participants, it is useful to think about visitation policy as producing a sort of domino effect. Put another way, restrictions on visitation ultimately increase the need and pressure for other forms of social contact, which as this study shows, were inhibited by heat.

The Mississippi Department of Corrections takes a contradictory position on visitation.

On one hand, in its own words, the department:

... recognizes the importance of visitation in maintaining inmate relationships with family and loved ones. Maintaining relationships will not only make inmates' experience while incarcerated more productive, but will also help inmates have a more successful reintegration into society. As such, visitation is an integral part of each institution...

... per the F&F guidebook. Meanwhile, the document continues, noting that "...

Visitation is a privilege, not a right, for both an inmate and visitors." While lauding the importance of visitation, *actual* MDOC policy on visitations reflects its position that visitation is indeed not a right. First, MDOC designates that all visits fall into one of two categories: contact or non-contact. Non-contact visits typically take place behind a barrier, and in these cases, the visitor will be able to communicate with the person they are visiting through a phone or speaker, as is typical in many states. Contact visits are even more highly regulated, with acceptable forms of affection/intimacy outlined in explicit detail in both the Inmate Handbook and F&F Guide. "Inmates" are only allowed to have "a brief kiss and embrace upon entry and exit," even with life partners or spouses. "Holding hands," "walking or sitting with arms around the shoulders or waist," and "hands resting on any part of the body not considered sexual" are also permitted. Meanwhile, behaviors like "prolonged embracing" are forbidden. This is despite research showing how consensual intimacy has positive impacts on incarcerated people and explicitly helps strengthen their relationships with their partners (Carcedo et al. 2014), including in women's prisons (Einat and Rabinovitz 2012).

Though the state of Mississippi is often credited with introducing conjugal visits to U.S. prisons in the early 1900s, such visits were banned in 2014 (Sanburn 2014). Notably, the practice was not originally intended to offer a uniquely humane approach to incarceration, nor to reconnect families. Rather, in the Jim Crow era Delta, conjugal visits "sought to incentivize

Black prisoners, who picked and hoed cotton under the surveillance of armed white guards, by allowing them to bring women into their camp,” (Hagan 2023). This historical context is important: it serves as a reminder of the way visitation and other relational privileges have been used to increase productive labor of Black men rather than maintain relationships between those in prison and their families on the outside (ibid). This point will be particularly relevant in the next chapter.

No legislative action produced the recent ban on conjugal visits; the decision was instead made by then-MDOC commissioner Chris Epps, who argued that the program was expensive and created single parents (ibid). This is despite multiple surveys showing that over 50% of people incarcerated at Parchman attributed conjugal visits to saving their marriage (Hopper 1989). A bill allowing for conjugal visits between an “eligible married offender” and their spouse was introduced to the Mississippi House of Representatives in 2022 and failed.

Consensual intimacy – including platonic human touch between non-romantic partners – can serve as a tool of resistance to social death; it can humanize, dignify, and center pleasure. As such, we can see how the elimination of conjugal visits perpetuates social death, even if the intention of the original policy was not to foster intimacy or connection in the first place (Hagan 2023). This context also helps us frame the intensely limiting restrictions on visitation overall, which include an elaborate (and particularly gendered) dress code and a ban on the “combing of hair in the visitation area.”

Beyond restrictions on intimacy, MDOC policy also enforces other aspects of visitation. Many of those, again, disproportionately impact young children. Visitors can be thrown out or banned if “children act in a disruptive manner,” or if anyone – child or adult – is engaged in “loud talking or laughing.” Anyone who has spent more than a few minutes with a young child

knows that these behaviors are common, and sometimes out of a parent's control. Such expectations, then, place an unfairly high standard on children of incarcerated people, threatening to further isolate them from their parents and vice versa. While I rely on the more expansive language of *social disconnection* rather than Patterson's (2018[1982]) "natal alienation," it is worth noting how much of this policy ultimately creates barriers for incarcerated parents to have relationships with their children, a direct legacy of slavery. This disconnection – conceptualized by Patterson (1982) in terms of family and kinship, and more expansively by myself and others (Price 2015; Králová 2015) as social isolation and alienation more broadly, is a key component of social death.

Other policies restrict not the *nature* of the visit, but the ability for it to happen at all. 10 people are allowed on an individual's visitation list at one time, and those lists can only be updated annually. Often, in addition to possessing state-issued photo identification, family members are required to show proof of familial relationship. This obviously creates barriers for not just undocumented family members, but for poor and or/unmarried ones, too. A 2012 report found that approximately 11% of eligible voters nationwide lack government issued photo IDs increasingly required for voting, often exactly what is required to enter an MDOC facility or, given "immediate familial relationship" requirements, to get married (Gaskins and Iyer 2012). While these (and all) rules are typically justified for maintaining safety and security at facilities, they perpetuate social death through institutionalizing more barriers to interaction – particularly for already marginalized and disenfranchised communities.

Moreover, convicted felons are only allowed to visit immediate family within the facility; even then, this is only allowed *if* approval is received from facility administrators. The reverse relationship is also true; parole rules prevent convicted felons from associating with other

convicted felons. Given the often-intergenerational impact of the U.S. criminal justice system, this severely limits contact between extended family and friends. In addition, “visitation of more than one inmate is prohibited unless an immediate family relationship has been verified and approved by the Superintendent or his designee,” again adding an additional burden to families with multiple justice-impacted members. These policies have racialized consequences in a state where Blacks are disproportionately represented at a higher rate than almost anywhere else in the country (Prison Policy Initiative 2024), and where 120 years ago, former slaves and descendants of recent slaves often labored *directly alongside their kin* on the Parchman Plantation (Oshinsky 1996; Woods 1998). They also, crucially, have implications for the ability of formerly incarcerated people to organize against inhumane prison conditions or prisons at large. Simply *associating* with other “convicts” can send someone with a conviction right back, given that it is considered a violation of a parole condition.

As illustrated in this section, Mississippi policy on visitation creates additional barriers for visits and severely restricts the nature of visits, both of which can reduce the number of actual visits that occur and the intimacy and support provided during the visits that do happen. These policies lay the foundation for the rendering of “inmates” as social “nonpersons,” to borrow language from Patterson (2018[1982]) and Price (2015). In an interview describing his work on slavery, social death, and freedom, Orlando Patterson notes, “If you go deep into Indo-European languages, the linguistic evidence is fascinating. . . . The most ancient root of freedom is a word that means *beloved* or *belonging*,” (Lambert 2014). Indeed, Patterson’s 2018[1982] theory of social death affirms these linguistic roots; natal alienation describes not only the disconnection from a slave and their relatives, but also the estrangement from cultural and kinship traditions and heritage. While I use the language of social disconnection, rather than natal alienation, to

understand relations beyond familial lineages – including those within the facility – we can see how various policies together create a complex web of difficulties for parents, children, and extended families in particular. Going to prison in and of itself (or, being removed from the “free world,” as it is commonly described) produces this type of estrangement and distance.

Restricting visitation only reproduces and reinforces it. In turn, when people in MDOC facilities who participated in this study turned to letters, phone calls, and one another, heat impeded those forms of connection, too.

### *Mississippi Prison Policy and The Management of Relationships Within Facilities*

As discussed at length in the previous section, every participant, in some capacity, described the way heat impacted their interactions with others in MDOC facilities. From increased violence to less energy to spend time with friends, high temperatures clearly disconnected those in prison from their peers. However, as I will illustrate next, heat alone did not produce these impacts. Rather, MDOC policy itself creates the preconditions for violence and distrust between people living in prison in the state, in part through the explicit restriction of relationships between “inmates.”

There are a number of ways that MDOC policy isolates people living in facilities from their peers. First, incarcerated folks are banned from the borrowing or sharing of items outright. As letters from my participants demonstrated above, this rule is often broken, and understaffing issues likely compound difficulties with enforcement. Yet the policy in and of itself gives us insight into the alienating forms of relationships MDOC expects: one in which “inmates must learn how to get along with other inmates” (per the Inmate Handbook) while, simultaneously, not relying on one another for real care or material support, even in the face of policy-driven disconnection from outside friends and family. In fact, one of the only mentions of relationships

between the incarcerated in the Mississippi Code forbids another “offender” from acting as an “agent, guardian or surrogate for the offender executing an advance health-care directive,” even if the incarcerated person in question has no outside family or friends that could or are willing to serve in this role<sup>25</sup>. Instead, the state intervenes, and the department petitions the “chancery court of the county of residence of the offender to appoint the commissioner as guardian,” per § 47-5-180. This statute is emblematic of the prison system at large. It explicitly prohibits “inmates” from giving one another formalized support and decides that, instead, an employee of the state, who has likely never met the afflicted “offender,” is better suited to make decisions about their end-of-life care.

As discussed in the previous section, convicted felons on the outside are also forbidden from visiting folks who are currently incarcerated in MDOC (except in the case of immediate and proven familial relationships). This policy is compounded by parole restrictions, which typically require convicted felons to not interact with other convicted felons. Taken altogether, these rules mean that *any relationship* made while incarcerated must be effectively severed upon release of either person. If social death is in part produced through the destruction of all social ties, these policies give us insight into the way people in prison in Mississippi are not just disincentivized but *actively prevented* from developing connections with one another.

*The Limits of Reform: Mississippi’s Attempt to Provide “Dignity for Incarcerated Women”*

While Mississippi and MDOC policy are generally restrictive when it comes to incarcerated people and their social ties, recent legislation demonstrates a departure from this trend. In 2021, Mississippi joined over a dozen other states in the country in passing the Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act, a package of legislative reforms attempting to improve the treacherous conditions that pregnant people and people with uteruses face in prisons and jails

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<sup>25</sup> Again, with the exception of immediate blood relatives.

across the country (though the policy itself does not use such gender inclusive language). While reading the policy in the context of the rest of the Mississippi Code, this section undoubtedly stands out. It is far more specific and precise than other policies which vaguely allude to “inmate” or “offender” treatment. The Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act, on the other hand, is highly specific, and makes some of the firmest promises to incarcerated people relative to anything else in the Mississippi Code. More specifically, the Act makes the following commitments: 1) generally improved conditions for pregnant women, including the ban of shackling for the duration of pregnancy and 30 days post labor, a ban on “invasive cavity” searches, and a ban on placing pregnant women in restrictive housing; 2) permission for prolonged contact between a newborn and mother immediately after childbirth; 3) a departmental attempt to place incarcerated parents who have minor children in facilities closer to their kids, and to increase the frequency of visitation between children and their incarcerated parents; 4) the elimination of inspections of women by male correctional officers, 5) guaranteed access to menstrual hygiene products for all women in MDOC facilities, and 6) the development of programming for both MDOC employees and incarcerated pregnant people in Mississippi.

Indeed, this was a legislative victory for prison reform advocates. To date, most states that have passed the Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act are red states, simply because many Democratic-led legislatures already had existing policies that prevented what is widely considered inhumane treatment such as shackling during pregnancy or labor (Xiang 2021). The timing of this policy is no accident. The recent wave of legislation is a direct response to a national crisis: women are the fastest growing population in U.S. prisons and jails, and most of them are mothers (Maruschak et al. 2021). In fact, a 2022 report found that roughly 80% of all women in jails across the country have children, as do 58% of all women in prison (ibid).

This policy has likely already amounted to significantly improved conditions for incarcerated folks who are pregnant since it was passed just a few years ago, though since none of my participants are currently pregnant or have given birth in prison<sup>26</sup>, I cannot confirm its success using my own data. The difference between giving birth in shackles and giving birth without restraints is undeniable, and the precise, specific commitments of the act could make it easier to hold the state of Mississippi accountable in the future. Indeed, these changes have received widespread support from a broad array of organizations, including the ACLU and American Medical Association (House et al. 2021). However, I show that while there is no doubt this policy package will likely produce meaningful material differences in the lives of thousands of people in prison in Mississippi, it simultaneously demonstrates the social death bound up in incarceration and thus the limits of carceral reform. While this policy does not deal with heat directly, it is nonetheless a useful example of the difficulty of producing policy that meaningfully chips away at – or fully eliminates – social death in prisons.

First, the policies above simply *reinforce the social death of incarcerated women and parents*. For instance, the state of Mississippi’s legislative commitments include an *attempt* to keep families within *250 miles* of each other. 250 miles, traveled by car, can take anywhere from three and a half to five hours *one way*. This says nothing of the impacts of such a distance on poor families who rely on public transport, who are disproportionately represented in prisons nationwide (Alexander 2012; Story 2019). Put in perspective, such a distance requirement renders the other commitment within the same policy – which allows for two visits per week between incarcerated parents and their children – possibly irrelevant for many people more than an hour away by car. Similarly, immediately after giving birth, parents are allowed just 72 hours, a mere three days, for direct contact with their newborn. While certainly an improvement from

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<sup>26</sup> To my knowledge.

existing policy (which allows babies to be taken from parents immediately after birth), separation after a mere three days is unlikely to fully counteract the negative impacts of maternal separation overall, which research shows can lead to trauma for parents, increasing the risk of recidivism, and a myriad of poor behavioral and mental health outcomes for the infant later in life, too (Margolies and Kraft-Stolar 2006; National Women’s Law Center 2010). The overall logic and impact of social death, then, remains.

Put another way, Mississippi simply cannot make better commitments than what the Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act offers because the state is operating within the confines of existing carceral logics. As Price (2015:23) observes, “Natal alienation is intrinsic to the modern penitentiary system,” which helps to explain “how the state dictates whether and how one is allowed to parent.” If pregnant people convicted of crimes were not, for example, required to live in one of a handful of existing state prisons, the capacity for them to be located closer to their family would dramatically increase. Given the underlying assumptions required of carceral punishment, however, natal alienation – which, recall, I categorize as one piece of *social disconnection* more broadly – and social death are *inherent*.

Additionally, like nearly all other policies governing the Department of Corrections, the Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act comes with many qualifiers and exceptions. The nine total statutes (three of which simply outline the title and definitions for the policy) are littered with phrases that allow individual MDOC employees or facility administrators to opt out of their commitments based on personal discretion. For example, § 47-5-1511 charges the state of Mississippi with keeping incarcerated parents within 250 miles of their minor children, “to the greatest extent practicable, after accounting for security and capacity factors.” Similarly, § 47-5-1509, titled “Inmate Postpartum Recovery,” requires any facility employee who restrains

the postpartum “inmate” to simply submit a written report to the warden of the facility justifying the use of restraints within 72 hours of their use. All that is required is a “reasonable belief” that the “inmate” will harm herself, another person, or poses a “substantial flight risk.” Even § 47-5-1507, which prohibits “invasive body cavity searches of pregnant inmates,” offers a caveat: these can be conducted if “the correctional facility employee has a reasonable belief that the female inmate is concealing contraband.”

Those familiar with correctional policy know that this type of highly caveated language is common, justified through the lens of security, a central priority of correctional organizations. However, these qualifiers and exceptions give a tremendous amount of discretion to employees – the same ones who my participants described as bringing contraband into facilities and/or weaponizing heat to inflict additional suffering and humiliation. Discretion such as this can be dangerous, possibly resulting in situations in which the word of a pregnant incarcerated person is pitted against the word of an officer or warden, for example. Research showing that wardens have historically downplayed the prevalence and risk of sexual assault within facilities makes a dynamic like the one above – in which the word of someone in prison is pitted against an officer or DOC employee – particularly troubling (Hensley and Tewksbury 2005).

When interpreted in this way, we can understand the Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act as not simply an important carceral reform, but one inherently limited by the social death bound up within carcerality itself. In fact, this set of policies *highlights* the fact that thousands of people in Mississippi are forced to endure pregnancy, labor, postpartum life, and parenthood behind bars. It also illuminates what is still allowed to happen to women in prisons across the state who are not pregnant or postpartum. Though it is possible and even highly likely such a distinct political victory will result in improved conditions for pregnant people and families, the policy is

itself limited by the scope of what is possible within a correctional system focused on carceral punishment. Social death is an inevitability within this project, and attempts to *reform* prison conditions expose this.

## **Conclusion**

I was, admittedly, only vaguely familiar with the notion of social death when I began this project. I had received just a few letters but felt a pull after early coding to better understand the way heat impacted my participants' social relationships, which they all described to me in various ways<sup>27</sup>. While reading an essay written by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, I noticed her reference to Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*. I had one or two times in passing heard organizers describe prison as a form of "social death," but it was not until Gilmore's (2022) reference that I decided to actually explore more deeply. This led me to the work of not only Patterson (2018[1982]), but also Price (2015), and others, all of whom later became instrumental to my analysis in this chapter. I was able to explore this concept further and continue to follow up with participants about these descriptions after engaging more deeply with the social death literature, because of my research design. By conducting analysis in a grounded way, which drew directly from participant language and did not approach the data with any pre-constructed frames, I arrived at a novel theoretical framework previously unfamiliar to me.

Yet it quickly became clear that social death was a powerful framing for what my participants were describing about heat and their lives. On one hand, it helped explain the social disconnection and isolation that they experienced, both in terms of their reduced capacity to contact people outside of the facility through letters and phone calls, but also in the context of increased tension and violence within the facility. In this way, heat put another burden on

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<sup>27</sup> I did not anticipate this finding, let alone the centrality of it in my entire project. Rather than frame this as an embarrassing oversight, I will instead argue it as a testament to the power of qualitative research in new, unexpected knowledge production.

relationships already strained by incarceration. Social death also helped frame how heat functioned to humiliate my participants. Those living in MDOC facilities were humiliated and debased through the weaponization of heat by guards. They also endured the humiliating experience of sweating through clothes, being forced to wear long pants, and dealing with the consequences of poor hygiene within the facility. Finally, social death provides important context for participants' loss of their own social identities and sense of selves as a result of extreme heat. Altogether, then, we can see how heat reinforced and amplified the experience of social death in MDOC facilities.

Crucially, though, heat does just that: *reinforces* social death. It does not, however, create it from scratch. This is evident not only through participant letters, which described heat as an amplifying force of disconnection, humiliation, and making them “feel crazy,” but also through state law and MDOC policy. It is here that we see social death prominently on display, through the close management of “inmate” relationships with external communities and other incarcerated people. Even attempts to chip away at some of these incredibly dehumanizing conditions – such as the Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act – fall short of fully eliminating social death in prisons. As I discuss in greater length in the conclusion, these data have profound implications for those studying prisons, and in particular, environmental justice scholars and green criminologists.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### A STATE-GREEN CRIME OF OMISSION:

#### STATE PRIORITIES FOR PRISONS IN THE ABSENCE OF HEAT-RELATED LAW

“MSP inmates provide more than 100,000 hours of free labor each year to adjacent municipalities and counties, as well as assisting other state agencies.”

- Mississippi Department of Corrections Annual Report 2021

Mike was the first person to reach out to participate in the study. He did not have a record before he was charged with multiple counts of Felony DUI Causing Death, which led to his current incarceration. Mike was quite open with me, enthusiastically sharing his grievances about the facility and those locked up in the zone with him, as well as some of his plans for post-release life (he was thinking about moving north). He often ended his letters telling me to take care, or “enjoy the weather while it’s nice out,” since he knew I was living in Minnesota.

Mike, like many other people locked up at MSP, had a prison job, which he told me about in our correspondence. His work fluctuated, and sometimes he would get a handful of days off in a row. However, for the bulk of the summertime he was working “everyday from 7am to 7pm.” He described the nature of his work to me as mostly a facility maintenance job: “fixing something, putting up fences, painting and even cutting grass and weed eating.” This, of course, often involved being outside in the heat and sun. In one letter, Mike told me he had never been paid for his work: “They are supposed to be paying us with money they make *[off]* the commissary sales, but nobody has seen any funds added to their account yet. Basically I’m working for free, just to have something to do with my time.” Mike was not the only participant who described making no money at their job. Monica, too, told me she had never seen any

payment for her work at MCIW within CMCF: “I’m actually not sure how much I’ll be getting paid, as of last night I still haven’t received a paycheck. So if I ever get paid. I probably won’t know how much I’m getting paid until I receive pay.”

This emphasis on work and pay in early letters intrigued me. While I was familiar with the poor conditions, long hours, and exorbitantly low pay for incarcerated people in Mississippi, I had not been able to find great publicly available data on exactly how many people in state prisons work, how often they work, or what they’re paid<sup>28</sup> (if anything). However, I initially tabled the theme of work altogether for future investigation in a potentially larger scale or even quantitative project. Before diving deep into my critical policy analysis, I did not think much about how prison work would be relevant to this dissertation, since I was first and foremost asking about experiences of heat and state preparedness of heat impacts. Yet shortly after beginning to analyze Mississippi law and MDOC policies and reports, I realized that prison labor is, indeed, a big part of the picture. As I discuss in this chapter, prison labor is closely related to my initial research question in two central ways: first, in the *absence* of meaningful state law or MDOC policy on prison heat, temperature, or climate, which I characterize as a state-green crime of omission (Moloney and Chambliss 2013), the Mississippi Code focuses on incarcerated people as *laborers*; secondly, extreme heat actually inhibits the creation and efficient maintenance of a prison workforce, which state law and MDOC policy demonstrate is a central priority.

## **This Chapter**

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<sup>28</sup> As of a 2013 report, the state clarified that at least the following workers were unpaid at South Mississippi Correctional Institution: “dining hall workers, tutors for literacy, chaplain workers, unit maintenance, gym workers, administrative workers, central kitchen, and infirmary workers, among others,” (Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review 2013: 11).

The second of my two research questions asked: How is the state of Mississippi prepared to mitigate the impacts of extreme heat? In this chapter, I answer that question. Here, I use data from critical policy analysis to make two central claims. First, I highlight how the state lacks adequate law and policy on temperature regulation within facilities. Drawing on literature in green criminology, I characterize this as a *state-green crime of omission*. Then, I highlight how in the absence of temperature-, climate-, or heat- related law, Mississippi instead focuses on prison labor, and more specifically, the strategic deployment of prison labor to maintain the carceral apparatus and benefit counties, municipalities, and the state overall. I contextualize these data within existing literature on the political economy of prisons and prison labor. Then, I put critical policy analysis data from MDOC reports, the DOJ investigation, and state law in conversation with data from letter correspondence to show that extreme heat actually inhibits the state's ability to turn people in prison into laborers, despite this being a central state goal.

### **A State-Green Crime of Omission: Extreme Heat in Mississippi Prisons**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, very little of Mississippi's state law – only one single section out of 299 total sections within Title 47 – deals explicitly with temperature regulation in carceral facilities, and none mention extreme heat or climate change (let alone mitigation strategies). Here, I will describe §47-5-124 (the singular law within the Mississippi Code that addresses temperatures in prisons or jails) and show how participants managed extreme heat given a lack of state commitments around temperature. I then demonstrate how this absence of political attention paid to temperature or environmental conditions in prisons overall, and more specifically, lack of state commitments to manage extreme heat in prisons can be characterized as a *state green crime of omission*, affirming the findings of green criminological research more broadly.

Upon a cursory glance at §47-5-124, one could easily miss the mention of air conditioning altogether. §47-5-124 is titled “Uniform designations for offenders; restrictions on possession of radios, televisions and similar electronic devices; restrictions on weight lifting program,” and indeed, the section is primarily focused on the above issues. The final two sentences of the law<sup>29</sup> 1) prohibit “inmates” from possessing individual air conditioners, and 2) charge the Department of Finance and Administration (DOFA) and Department of Corrections (DOC) with the task of determining “the feasibility and cost effectiveness of heating and refrigerated air conditioning equipment for the cooling and heating of a correctional facility constructed after August 23, 1994.” It is important to note that all three state facilities in this study were constructed prior to 1994<sup>30</sup>, meaning they are excluded even from consideration of A/C installation by the DOFA and DOC. State law, then, has left the question of A/C at older facilities – where thousands of people are incarcerated – unanswered.

In practice (both historically in prisons before air conditioning, and presently in those still without it following 2022 DOJ requirements), the result is that incarcerated people become responsible for dealing with temperature in their own cells. Given that the law prohibits possessing an individual air conditioning unit, this left those in prison with only a few options to mitigate heat. For many, this meant purchasing fans from the commissary. Most of my participants described buying one or more fans for their cells while simultaneously acknowledging that the fans themselves did little to reduce overall heat. The Department of Corrections commissary listed these fans at \$35<sup>31</sup>; multiple participants noted that this cost was a barrier for those without access to income or financial support from people on the outside. As

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<sup>29</sup> In my first round of coding policy-related documents, I was struck by how the law reads as if air conditioning is an afterthought.

<sup>30</sup> MSP – Parchman, the state’s oldest facility, was constructed in 1901. CMCF and SMCI were both constructed during the prison boom of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, built in 1986 and 1990, respectively.

<sup>31</sup> Though, participants (likely having bought them at different times over the course of their incarceration) described the cost of fans as anywhere between \$29.95 and \$35.

Mike, who had been at Mississippi State Penitentiary for over ten years at the time of writing, put it: “Majority of the day, I would lay in bed with my fan blowing on me. ... It really really sucks if you can’t afford one. During the summertime, before air conditioning was installed, I’d try to have at least 2 fans.” Alex, too, described how fans are inaccessible to some people at the facility by underlining some words in her letters for emphasis: “And if you make canteen you can buy an 8-inch fan to set on your bed to keep cool.”

Participants also, however, acknowledged that the fans did virtually nothing to actually reduce cell temperatures. To paint a picture of the relief provided by these commissary options, Monica described them as “basically nothing but a tiny little 8 in. personal fan;” Mike wrote that they are “like the small fans you find at the dollar store.” Morgan, a participant who is incarcerated at the same facility as Monica, told me that “the fans we have that have to be bought off canteen feel like they’re just stirring around hot air.” Darius, too, wrote that he had managed to buy three fans over the years, but that “its still not enough... some days you have to lay on the floor in front of the big state fans they put on the zones during the summer. Usually 2 on every zone. 100 people to a zone here. Imagine that.”

Given how ineffective personal fans were, some used other strategies to try to address extreme heat. For example, one participant described how she and her neighbors made use of leftover pieces of cardboard to block out the sun or try to stimulate air flow in their cells, often to no avail. These insights from participants confirm what Mississippi law inadvertently states: that ultimately, mitigating extreme heat in facilities constructed before 1994 was the responsibility of incarcerated people rather than the state itself (§47-5-124).

Above (and throughout Chapter Three), I demonstrated how the absence of state law protecting people in prison from extreme heat meant the responsibility for temperature

management fell on incarcerated people themselves. Given how limited they are in the scope of what they can possess in their own cells, these efforts often made little difference. The consequences that resulted from extreme heat in Mississippi prisons for my participants, then, can be attributed directly to an absence of state law and policy. Absence – that which is not there – is in and of itself a useful thing for sociologists to observe and analyze. As Avery Gordon notes, “that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for granted realities,” (2008:8). The Mississippi Code is marked by an *absence* of commitments to temperature-, heat-, or climate-related issues which in turn produces a *presence* of extreme heat and resultant suffering, described in more detail in Chapter Three, where I characterize one of the many impacts of heat as a form of social death. Here, I assert that this absence, from a policy analysis perspective, is analytically important. More specifically, drawing on Moloney and Chambliss (2013) and other green crime and state crime works, I show how an absence of adequate temperature, heat, or climate-related law in Title 47 of the Mississippi Code can be characterized as a state-green crime of omission.

First, a state-green crime of omission operates on an expanded notion of crime. This framing, distinct from traditional criminological analyses, draws on what other green and state crime scholars have highlighted about 1) the social construction of the law (Brisman 2012; Brisman and South 2013; van Uhm 2018), which necessitates a focus on 2) harms that are not necessarily illegal (Stretesky et al. 2014; White and Heckenberg 2014), and, in particular, 3) harms perpetrated by *powerful* actors like the state (Quinney 1977). In their paper, Moloney and Chambliss (2013) synthesize the green and state crime frameworks to show how the nineteenth century bison slaughter – a cumulative event that in some states involved breaking no laws

whatsoever, and in others, broke some laws and went unpunished – is a state-green crime of omission.

According to Mullins and Kauzlarich (2000:276), quoted from Moloney and Chambliss (2013:325), crime is “an illegal or demonstrably socially injurious act, process, or *policy of omission*,” (emphasis my own). As Faust and Kauzlarich (2008:87) describe in their study of the state’s response to Hurricane Katrina, which they too frame as a state crime of omission, “While crimes are usually thought of as harmful acts, they can also be conceptualized as harmful failures to act.” By emphasizing *failure to act* and *omission*, these scholars (Faust and Kauzlarich 2008; Moloney and Chambliss 2013) recenter state responsibility for harms that could otherwise have been prevented through legal definition and enforcement. This, too, emerges from state crime literature (Quinney 1977; Green and Ward 2000; Bassiouni et al. 2010), but the emphasis on state failure is reflected in green criminological work as well (Opsal and Shelley 2014).

State-green crimes of omission also highlight victims traditionally overlooked within criminology. Moloney and Chambliss (2013), for example, demonstrate how inadequate law and inadequate enforcement regarding bison hunting created two groups of “green” victims: the population of 15 million+ bison that was reduced to less than 1,000 by 1890, and the American Indian tribes whose livelihoods and cultures were inextricably tied to the well-being of the bison species. Here, Moloney and Chambliss (2013:325) center a “harm/injury based conceptualization of criminality” to include people seriously injured by an event but historically overlooked within victimological research. This work is adjacent to and directly builds on green criminological literature which utilizes an expansive understanding of victimization (Spencer and Fitzgerald 2013; Hall 2013; Hall 2014). Other scholars of state crimes of omission emphasize, for example, the failure of the state to make lynching federally illegal despite over 4,000 lynching deaths in

less than a 90-year period (Zier 2021), and the failure to prevent occupational exposure to asbestos (Gerkin et al. 2010). Interestingly, these two examples are particularly relevant to this study insofar as they focus on the state's failure to prevent a form of racialized violence and protect people from health-related impacts, both of which my participants experienced.

Building off of this precedent for an expanded notion of victimology (Hall 2013; Moloney and Chambliss 2013; Hall 2014), my data reflects the need to include incarcerated people as victims of state-green crimes of omission. Mississippi law and policy categorizes incarcerated people as “offenders,” “convicts,” or “inmates” rather than potential victims themselves. Yet, they are also the *legal responsibility* of the state, too. Per § 47-5-10, which outlines the general duties and responsibilities of the Mississippi Department of Corrections, the department is required to “provide for the care, custody, study, training, supervision and treatment of adult offenders.” Certainly, then, the failure to protect incarcerated people from harms related to extreme heat can and should be characterized as a crime of omission, and incarcerated people as victims of said crime.

Given that only one section out of 299 total under Title 47 mentions air conditioning, and nonetheless makes no formal commitments to A/C installation for facilities, Mississippi is indeed *omitting* rules on extreme heat and heat management. Moloney and Chambliss (2013) and Faust and Kauzlarich (2008) usefully remind us of how people can be victimized by being *deprived of protection* by the state. In Mississippi prisons, as I have shown, incarcerated people have too been deprived of necessary protection from hazardous environmental conditions; namely, extreme heat. Additionally, throughout this dissertation, and particularly in Chapter Three, I demonstrated that the consequences of the political omission of temperature-, heat-, and/or climate- related policy are indeed “demonstrably socially injurious” to people in prisons (Mullins

and Kauzlarich 2000:276). For example, my participants described how heat impacted their ability to engage in meaningful recreation, to contact their loved ones, to spend comfortable time with friends in the facility, and even to sustain themselves on a basic physiological level. They described these experiences in ways that illuminate the severity of the extreme heat problem, using language like “painful,” “hell,” “inhumane,” “torture” and “cruel and unusual.” None of these consequences of heat break the law, but that does not make these participants less victimized by state inaction, particularly given that they were under the formal legal care of the state.

Of state law that focuses on prisons, only one section – and more specifically, two sentences – even acknowledges temperature regulation in Mississippi facilities. This section makes no state commitments to manage extreme heat; instead, it outlines restrictions to incarcerated people by limiting how they can manage heat in their own cells. We can understand this as a state-green crime of omission (Moloney and Chambliss 2013) which produces serious social injuries for those locked up in one of the hottest states in the country. This framing builds on existing green criminological literature to help contextualize the way states deprive people (and non-human animals) of protection from environmental harm (Stretesky et al. 2013; Opsal and Shelley 2014; White and Heckenberg 2014), through an *absence* of law and policy.

### **In Its Absence: Prison Labor as State Priority**

Above, I demonstrate the dearth of state law and MDOC policy on temperature, heat, or climate in Mississippi prisons and jails, framing this absence as a state-green crime of omission. Yet, per a critical policy analysis approach, it is important to observe not only absence, but what exists in its place. If the state did not take care to manage extreme heat in prisons, what *are* the priorities of Mississippi?

One of the most immediate and obvious emergent themes from this data set was the sheer amount of political space dedicated to managing the labor of people in jails and prisons in Mississippi. In total, *over 23%* of the sections under Title 47 of the Mississippi Code deal in some capacity with prison labor.

In this section, I use critical policy analysis to demonstrate that, in the absence of law which commits attention or resources to managing extreme heat in carceral facilities, the state of Mississippi is focused instead on turning incarcerated people into laborers. First, I overview relevant literature on prison labor, situating this type of unfree work within the political economy of the prison. Then, I use the Mississippi Code, MDOC annual reports and policies to show that the state of Mississippi was centrally focused on maximizing the use of prison labor to efficiently maintain the carceral system and to benefit municipalities, counties, and the state of Mississippi itself. Just over 22% of sections under Title 47 focus on maximizing the correctional system's efficiency and/or benefitting counties, municipalities, or the state itself; of these sections, most deal with prison labor. This aligns with other data showing the centrality of prison labor in upholding prisons themselves and subsidizing other state responsibilities (ACLU 2022).

### *The Political Economic Landscape of Prison Labor*

Labor has been a key component of incarceration since the earliest days of the prison and has taken on different shapes and forms regionally. In early penitentiaries in the Northeast, imprisonment at “hard labor” was considered necessary for the development of moral character and overall reformation of those convicted of crimes, indeed bound up in notions of self-sufficiency and reduced idleness<sup>32</sup> (Lewis 1965; Rothman 2006; Reich 2024) that mirror the spirit of the Protestant Ethic present in the early colonies (Angevine 2009). In the South, the

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<sup>32</sup> Language like “idle” is still used in Mississippi law. Per § 47-1-9: “The board shall establish regulations for the discipline of convicts on said works, and on county farms, when a convict is persistently idle or refractory, and may enforce such regulations by penalties.”

emergence of work-centered penitentiaries is racialized and connected to pre-Civil War slave arrangements (Oshinsky 1996; Woods 1998). This link is made most obvious by the rapid proliferation of Black imprisonment in the region following the Emancipation Proclamation (Sellin 2016), a dynamic abetted by the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which outlawed slavery in all cases except those convicted of a crime (Alexander 2010). Certainly, the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment opened “the door for mass criminalization” (Browne 2010:79).

While states justified prison labor in different ways in different parts of the country – to preserve racial hierarchy in the South, for example, or to improve moral character in the North – prison labor was nonetheless centrally related to profit and accumulation. For example, capitalist industry and its need for cheap labor became embedded in the Northern penal system as early as the 1800s (McLennan 2008). On the other hand, in the South, former plantation owners could “literally purchase prisoners to live on their property and work under their control” under convict leasing arrangements (Browne 2010:79). This dynamic helped to effectively maintain the economic control of what Woods (1998) calls the “plantation bloc.” Given the interconnected logic of anti-Black racism and the profit motive that justified convict leasing, scholars have urged us to understand prison labor then and now as itself connected to, or an explicit form of, slavery (Blackmon 2008; Browne 2010; Taylor 2011; Hammad 2019; Hart 2023). Importantly, while prison labor in the South is often centrally – and rightfully – linked to white supremacy, it is also inextricably tied to the desires of capital, and more specifically, the accumulation of land and economic power (Woods 1998). Indeed, prison labor in the region enriched corporate giants like U.S. Steel (Mason and McDowell 2022).

States, too, had something to gain from these arrangements. For example, Northern states benefitted handsomely from the relationship between the penal system and private industry.

According to LeBaron (2012:333), “Through the contract system, states sold their property right in convicts’ labor to some of the period’s largest corporations in exchange for substantive revenues—often up to 150 percent of the costs of carceral administration.” In other words, the sale of convict labor to companies not only virtually eliminated the costs of incarceration but also generated states a profit. In the South, states also experienced gains. Here, prison labor was vital to the project of industrializing the region (Lichtenstein 1996). Incarcerated workers helped construct and maintain railroads, roads, and mining operations (ibid). This literature is particularly relevant for this project, because, as I provide evidence for later in this chapter, Mississippi law and MDOC policy prioritize the strategic deployment of prison labor to the state’s own benefit.

Yet in the past century, and the past 50 years in particular, the prison system in the United States has fundamentally changed. First and foremost, it has expanded in scope and scale; today, there are more people in prison in the United States than farmers (Huling 2002). Scholars offer a variety of explanations for this era of mass incarceration: a racialized project culminating in the War on Drugs (Alexander 2010; Schoenfeld 2012), the collapse of the welfare state alongside a turn to the neoliberal state (Wacquant 2009), and the management of crises induced by capitalist surplus of land, labor, state capital and financial capital (Gilmore 2007). Crucially, the notion that this expansion occurred due to increased crime has been thoroughly debunked (Davis 2003; Alexander 2010); as Gilmore (2007: 18) notes, crime had begun to go down in many parts of the country by the time “the great prison roundups began.”

In terms of work specifically, recent survey data suggests that in a modern context, just under two-thirds of people incarcerated in the United States have some type of job in prison. As a percentage, this number has gone down since the early development of penitentiaries in the late

1800s – for example, one 1887 report found that 94% of incarcerated people were working in some way, whether that be manual labor in for-profit factories or prison upkeep (Commissioner of Labor 1887). Yet while the *fraction* of people working in prisons and jails is much lower today, the *sheer number* has skyrocketed alongside mass incarceration. Approximately 800,000 incarcerated people work out of the roughly 1.2 million people currently locked up in state or federal prisons (ACLU 2022).

The nature and implications of modern prison work are also radically different than in the past. For example, there is a much smaller market for prison labor products for various reasons. Small businesses and organized labor opposed the free or cheap labor used by large corporations, reformers and advocates discouraged the practice on moral grounds, and in some cases, convict leasing simply became less economically advantageous due to decreased productivity (Blackmon 2008; McLennan 2008; Reich 2024). Reich (2024:131) describes the result of this shift:

... whereas “productive” prison labor (i.e., labor used for the production of things that could be sold on the market or to other state agencies) was, in 1885, managed by a mix of private businesses and state government, by 1940 it was managed entirely by state administrators.

Thus, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the nature of prison work had fundamentally changed. While some prison workers still engaged in labor that was directly tied to industry and profit, the number was—and is—far lower than before. Importantly, though the landscape of exploitation of prison workers by private industry has changed, prisons still facilitate the flow of capital, demonstrated perhaps most obviously by the massive profits prison contractors reap annually (Fulcher 2011; Thompson 2012). However, most of this money does not come from prison labor itself, but rather, from the contracting of goods and services into prisons. Given the reduced use of prison labor by private industry, some scholars argue that prison work now centrally functions to instill a form of social discipline (LeBaron 2012), or more specifically, market discipline

(Reich 2024). This work helps us understand the complicated role prison labor plays under modern capitalism.

If the 800,000+ people working in prison today are less likely to be working directly for a private company, what *are* they working on and who for? Regardless of what purpose the U.S. prison serves under capitalism, it is massive in scope – and costly. As a result, most incarcerated workers now contribute to labor that simply keeps the facility running (Zatz 2008). In fact, over 80% of people in prison who work are working to maintain the facilities they are incarcerated at (ACLU 2022). In the past several decades, because of the enormous growth of the prison population, the demands on state budgets and infrastructure have too increased. Using prison labor to shrink state-operated budgets saves governments “billions of dollars a year” in prison upkeep (ACLU 2022:38). As the same report put it, “The more prisons use incarcerated labor, the more the prison system can expand without having to increase budgetary allocations from state and local governments,” (ACLU 2022:38). If prisons, in part, function to maintain surplus populations (Shelden and Brown 2000; Rehmann 2015) or instill market discipline (Reich 2024), then prison labor makes those goals possible by keeping facilities running at a lower cost.

Additionally, a tremendous amount of modern prison work functions to provide free labor for counties, municipalities, and states (ibid). This labor is wide-ranging, including doing maintenance work on police cars, digging ditches, cleaning up highways, filling sandbags, or even working for non-profits or churches, as is the case in Mississippi. In fact, the appropriate question may not be to ask what type of work incarcerated people do for local and state governments, but rather, what type of work they *do not* do.

We can understand this trend within the broader context of neoliberalism, which has contributed to general state retrenchment (Waquant 2009; Lobao and Adua 2011; Lobao et al.

2018). The widespread dependence on people in prison to do the equivalent of public-sector manual labor has caused employees of the criminal justice system to oppose sentencing and parole reforms, openly citing that reducing the number of people in prison will also mean reducing a vital free workforce that states and counties depend on (O'Donoghue 2017). States also purchase penitentiary-made goods at low cost for other state agencies, which save state governments millions of dollars (ACLU 2022). Finally, in 30 states – including Mississippi – prison labor is included in state emergency plans to manage disasters (Purdum and Meyer 2020).

As I have reviewed thus far, since the development of the penitentiary in the United States, prison labor has served a multitude of purposes: as moral reform and social discipline (LeBaron 2012), as a way to extract profit (Woods 1998; McLennan 2008; LeBaron 2012; Hammad 2019) and incentivize cheap development and the creation of low-cost infrastructure (Lichtenstein 1996), and as a way to decrease prison operation costs (LeBaron 2012; ACLU 2022). We can understand these goals, and trends, as situated within the political economy of prisons more broadly. Indeed, researchers have demonstrated the many (and often interconnected) roles of the prison under capitalism, including to manage racialized surplus populations (Shelden and Brown 2000; Rehmann 2015) and manage crises in the form of penal Keynesianism (Gilmore 2007).

As I highlighted above, more recently, prison labor is primarily operated publicly, and most incarcerated workers are not working in conjunction with private industry (ACLU 2022; Reich 2024). As I show below, Mississippi law and MDOC policy reflect this recent trend. In the case of Mississippi, this has meant the proliferation of people in prison working 1) “housekeeping” jobs to maintain the carceral state, as well as 2) jobs that reduce other county, municipal, and state-level expenditures by providing free labor to the public. Altogether, these

two types of work help maintain a massive carceral apparatus and help meet state needs amidst general state retrenchment (Lobao et al. 2018), and in the case of Mississippi specifically, a period of penal austerity (Cate 2022).

*Prison Labor in Mississippi: An Overview*

As is the case across the country (Hammad 2019; ACLU 2022), incarcerated labor in Mississippi is coercive in two ways. First, it is compulsory. Both those locked up in county jails & municipal facilities (often referred to in state law as “convicts”) and those incarcerated in larger prisons (interchangeably described as “inmates” or “offenders”) are mandated by law to work. There is, of course, one exception to this rule: physical disabilities. At the county level, those designated with a certificate from either the county health officer or board of supervisors-designated physician shall “not be required, during the period of such physical disability, to perform manual labor on the convict farm,” per § 47-1-11. However, all remaining “convicts shall be required each day to do and perform such work as they are physically able to do and perform and which will not impair the health of such convicts,” (§ 47-1-11). In prisons, the state offers a less-detailed description of work requirements: “All inmates, unless physically unable, shall be required to perform such work as may be set out in the policy-making board of the institution,” (§ 47-5-126). In addition to simply being mandated by state law, prison labor is also coercive insofar as it is incentivized through the promise of sentence reductions, should an incarcerated person “render efficient services,” (§ 47-5-142). These parts of the Mississippi Code help us understand, at a basic level, how prison labor operates in the state. Next, I show how the Mississippi Code emphasizes the efficient use of prison labor to maintain its carceral infrastructure and benefit municipalities, counties, and the state of Mississippi.

*“Reducing the reliance of the department upon external sources of supply:” Prison Labor and the Maintenance of the Carceral State*

As I highlighted above, while scholars have rightfully pointed out the role of the private sector in prison profiteering, many have overlooked the fact that most prison labor is the United States – Mississippi included – can be characterized as a form of “prison housework,” to borrow language from Zatz (2008:870). This labor, done for free or at a highly reduced cost, helps shrink the price tag of a bloated carceral apparatus, one insufficiently equipped to manage the sheer number of humans behind bars (ACLU 2022).

In this section I show how the Mississippi Code focuses on the use of prison labor to maintain itself. The state spends less on its prison system than other states in the region, yet has consistently maintained one of, if not *the* highest per capita incarceration rates in the country for years. This reality, along with the fact that Mississippi is currently in a period of penal austerity<sup>33</sup> which began in the mid 2010s (Cate 2022), helps contextualize state law’s fixation with the deployment of prison labor to create an “efficient” and “self-sustaining” criminal justice apparatus, per the state’s own laws.

Per §47-5-1, which outlines the “Policy of state in operation and management of correctional system,” the system must be operated in a manner which is focused on “making the system self-sustaining.” This section (§47-5-1) explicitly outlines the goal of cost reduction, and one of the many ways prison labor plays a part in creating an efficient system:

It shall be the policy of this state that the correctional system shall be operated and managed in the most efficient and economical manner possible. The Mississippi Department of Corrections shall so manage and operate the correctional system in that manner in order to make the system self-sustaining and to conserve state general fund revenues. The Mississippi Department of Corrections shall provide leadership to bring about the earliest possible construction of satisfactory prison inmate facilities, and shall utilize existing state resources, including inmates for prison construction labor, when and

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<sup>33</sup> This austerity was once widely characterized as necessary penal reform (Cate 2022).

wherever practicable, in order to minimize the need for state general funds for prison construction.

The big picture goal of using labor to reduce costs is laid out again in §47-5-303, one piece of the Penitentiary-Made Goods Law of 1978: “To utilize the labor of offenders for self-maintenance,” as well as for reimbursing the state for costs of incarceration.

What type of work, besides prison construction outlined above, do people in prisons do to reduce the cost of facility operation? Some of the work done to sustain prisons and other facilities within MDOC are explicitly outlined in the Mississippi Code, including the permitted use of “offenders” to “drain or improve the drainage of any property belonging to the correctional system,” per §47-5-133. Though the law explicitly prohibits the “use of offenders” as “servants, gardeners, chauffeurs, cooks, baby-sitters or domestic workers of any nature by an employee of the correctional system or by any person in an individual household,” this does not apply to internal prison work itself; in other words, people in prison can *indeed* hold those positions so long as they are benefitting the correctional system overall and not an individual employee within it (§ 47-5-137). Indeed, the same law clarifies that, “the commissioner may use offenders for such work on the grounds of a facility of the correctional system,” per § 47-5-137. This section alone sets legal precedent for the tremendous amount of labor that people who are incarcerated do within facilities themselves, including laundry, cooking, maintenance, yard upkeep, cleaning, and basic secretarial or administrative duties within prison programming. Certainly, of the participants in this study who described work, *all* had jobs supporting the facility itself in some capacity. As I described in the introduction to this chapter, Mike spent long stretches of summer months working “everyday from 7am to 7pm,” in a job that is technically called “special detail;” in a later letter he clarified that this was a maintenance job on facility grounds. Another participant told me she worked “11 plus hours a day 5 days/week” as a clerk in

the facility's vocational school. Yet other participants in this study described doing other secretarial/administrative work within the facility, working for MCIW's dog program, which trains civilians' adopted dogs for a fee, and working on Parchman Farm. Mississippi imprisons more people than any other state or nation in the world, and this kind of approach to labor allows the state to minimize operational costs, which have bloated in the context of mass incarceration.

One of the key ways the state of Mississippi attempts to make and save money within its correctional system is by deploying incarcerated people to work its penal farms. Prison labor dedicated to the growing, harvesting, and processing of crops, livestock, and other products related to animal husbandry or agriculture is managed through Mississippi Prison Agricultural Enterprises (MPAE). While most of the farming that incarcerated folks do under MPAE takes place at MSP, a smaller agricultural operation contributes to the ag program at SMCI in Leakesville as well. The mission of Mississippi Prison Agricultural Enterprises, per § 47-5-351, is:

(a) To reduce the cost of state government by producing and processing food for use by inmates; (b) To operate the program primarily with inmate labor; (c) To serve the security goals of the department through the reduction of idleness of inmates; (d) To produce and market agricultural products that will aid in maintaining a profitable agricultural operation to the extent possible.

Describing the legal complexities of prison labor, Cao (2019:34) writes that "The work done by people in prison is simultaneously punishment, rehabilitation, and production." Yet, based on the above description of the goals of the prison agricultural program that the state itself articulates, rehabilitation is not a central priority – reduced costs is.

Consistent with this law, other data analyzed illuminates that MDOC pays close and detailed attention to its total agricultural output. For example, in the department's annual reports, the efficiency of the program is measured each year, including data on the types of plants grown,

number of crops grown per acre, non-cash sales, and, crucially, total “hours worked” (Mississippi Department of Corrections 2020). In 2019 alone, incarcerated Mississippians contributed 67,000 hours of labor to Prison Agricultural Enterprises, most of which went to the production of soybeans (ibid). In FY 2020, incarcerated workers generated approximately \$1.06 million through the production and sale of cash crops such as soybeans and corn. The value of food farmed and consumed by people in prison in the state amounted to less than \$34,000, meaning the state profited over \$1 million (Mississippi Department of Corrections 2021). Clearly, then, my analysis of policy relevant documents shows that Mississippi Prison Agricultural Enterprises depend on thousands of hours of penal labor each year to keep facilities operational and sell crops to profit MDOC. In fact, the Mississippi Code indicated that superintendents are ultimately responsible for ensuring that the program has “sufficient inmate labor” to achieve its farming goals, and the director of the program may “enter into joint venture with private enterprises” as “he” sees fit in order to guarantee that production is “self-sustaining” (§ 47-5-355, § 47-5-108).

To end his letter to Mississippians in the MDOC 2022 Annual Report, Commissioner Burl Cain wrote, “We are continually moving as fast as we can to put all the pieces in place for the Mississippi Department of Corrections to be a viable, productive, economically sound, and efficient agency.” I have shown in this section using critical policy analysis that Mississippi law and MDOC policy reflect this goal, which is explicitly and primarily focused on the prison system maintaining itself. Specifically, I highlighted that Title 47 focused on the strategic deployment of free labor of incarcerated people, and this work, as in other states, is central to maintaining Mississippi’s carceral project (which recall, per capita, is consistently the largest or second largest in the world). Beyond a focus on the use of prison labor to maintain the prison

system, though, I found that the Mississippi Code also emphasized the use of prison work to benefit counties, municipalities, and other state departments, as I demonstrate in the next section. Through this analysis, I posit that this is a key part of MDOC's attempt to make a massive carceral apparatus "economically sound" and "efficient."

*"Where it is clearly more advantageous to the county:" Free Labor and Cost-Savings to Counties, Municipalities, and Other State Agencies*

Certainly, prison labor in Mississippi contributes to far more than simply sustaining the criminal justice system. Indeed, my data provides clear evidence that counties, municipalities, and the state overall benefit greatly from the unpaid work of incarcerated people. As the 2021 MDOC Annual Report boasts, "MSP inmates provide more than 100,000 hours of free labor each year to adjacent municipalities and counties, as well as assisting other state agencies," (34). In addition, as the same report describes, residents at community work centers "perform a wide range of labor at no cost to city, county, and state government agencies and school districts," (ibid:21). In 2021 alone, community work centers "provided municipalities and non-profits in eight (8) counties with 381,008 total hours, valued to equal \$2,328,334 (at minimum wage - \$7.25) in free labor," (ibid:23). Clearly, if state law and policy accurately reflect the goals of MDOC and Mississippi—which they should—free labor is a central goal of MDOC and Mississippi at large.

The state allows incarcerated people in the state to do a wide range of labor for local counties: clean up abandoned or neglected cemeteries (47-5-452), work on public roads (§ 47-1-9), work for 501(c)(3) non profit organizations that provide food to charities (§ 47-1-19), and even work for churches, if approved by the Department of Corrections (§ 47-1-19). Regarding some road work, state law is highly specific: for example, Sunflower County "shall

have the use of not over thirty-five (35) offenders six (6) workdays of each week” and Quitman County “shall not have the use of over twenty (20) offenders from the Parchman facility for five (5) workdays each week,” (§ 47-5-129, § 47-5-131). On a “voluntary basis,” the commissioner may authorize incarcerated folks to work “in support of Habitat for Humanity, Inc., or the Fuller Center for Housing, Inc.,” however, they can “only be used to work on construction projects,” according to § 47-5-134.

While the Mississippi Code goes into quite specific detail on the many types of ways that incarcerated people – to use the language of state law directly – can “be worked,” MDOC reports help fill in the gaps of other approved penal labor not explicitly outlined in state law. For example, incarcerated people and people under supervision have together contributed to beautification projects; the department’s annual report from FY2018 boasts that over “3,000 bags of trash” had been removed before June 30 of 2018 (Mississippi Department of Corrections 2019). They also work on vehicle maintenance, landscaping, sanitation, and bridge and road repair projects, to name a few (Mississippi Department of Corrections 2018, 2020, 2021).

The Mississippi Code, however, also offers precise limits regarding what inmate labor can look like. To start, “inmates” working in public service “can’t displace other workers,” (§ 47-5-411). One way those incarcerated at the county- or municipal- level are worked, in accordance with the above stipulation, is on what the state describes as a county farm or convict farm<sup>34</sup>, distinct from the agricultural operations that exist at large state facilities. In this context, if an incarcerated person fails to render “sufficient services” on the convict farm, they can receive punishment, though such punishment is left up to county boards and never described in

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<sup>34</sup> One county farm in the state came under heightened scrutiny in fall of 2023. Over 200 individuals were buried behind Hinds County Penal Farm just outside of Jackson, Mississippi, allegedly without family notification. The story broke when multiple families described waiting for weeks, months, or even years to hear what had happened to a missing loved one. They later found out that their relatives were buried in a field behind the facility. Graves were marked with a number.

state law. In fact, the local board of supervisors is required to “establish regulations for the discipline of convicts... when a convict is persistently idle or refractory” (§ 47-1-9). The Mississippi Code lays out specific plans to be sure these convict farms are functioning efficiently. In order to avoid a county farm operation where there are “not a sufficient number of convicts,” the board of supervisors may approve joint ownership of a penal farm by contiguous counties (§ 47-1-7). Yet, sometimes, particularly for counties with small populations, even this may not generate a “sufficient number of convicts,” in which case one county can contract with another “to have its prisoners worked,” per § 47-1-7. If there is still a “lack of convict labor,” counties can “employ free labor at current prices to work on a county convict farm until such time as the convict labor may become sufficient to complete and gather the crops started on such a farm,” according to § 47-1-37. Per § 47-1-45, municipal facilities are technically allowed to incarcerate county prisoners, and work them on such farms, too; however,

... In agreeing to take and work such convicts the board of supervisors shall not agree to pay more per day for the labor of any municipal convict than in its judgment the labor of such convict is worth to the county... in order that in the working of such municipal convicts the county shall not do so at a loss to the county.

Given that the state documents county-level losses and gains across the policy-related documents and annual MDOC reports in my sample, certainly, county losses and gains are important to the state. For example, annual reports offered tables documenting the total free hours worked and calculated cost savings for each county that used prison labor; in 2019, ten counties saved a total of \$8,558,523.50 (Mississippi Department of Corrections 2020). The Mississippi Code, too, reflects this focus. For example, state law offers a detailed plan for how counties can move forward with the sale of land from county farms that are “operating at a loss to the county for a period of 5 years or more,” according to § 47-1-35. Additionally, the working of some incarcerated folks – including those who the state has not yet indicted or convicted –

remains ultimately dependent on the county's need and desire. Per § 47-1-13, "But if it appears that it is not to the best interest of the county to work such prisoners, the board may decline at any time to employ them."

Mississippi also depends on the sale of prison made goods, and the production arm of MDOC primarily benefits the state itself, demonstrated by Mississippi Department of Corrections Annual Reports. One of the main purposes of the Penitentiary Made Goods Law of 1978 is "to utilize the labor of offenders for self-maintenance," however, all articles/products that are manufactured or produced by prison labor must first be devoted to "fulfilling the requirements of the commissions, departments, institutions and agencies of the state" before they can be sold to the public, in order to "best serve the economical and efficient operation of state agencies," (§ 47-5-301, § 47-5-315, § 47-5-327). A complete list, including descriptions, of each article or product made in MDOC facilities must be cataloged and made available to "all commissions, departments, institutions and agencies of this state," and at any time, the State Fiscal Management Board may "request the State Department of Corrections to manufacture or produce additional articles or products," (§ 47-5-311, § 47-5-313)." The Industries Division of MDOC determines the prices for such goods (§ 47-5-317), and all profits earned go into the Prison Industries Fund, the fund from which the department makes purchases necessary to execute production (tools, equipment, and/or buildings and infrastructure) (§ 47-5-323). However, the Penitentiary-Made Goods Law also allows for the leasing of buildings at Parchman to the private sector to establish and operate factories for commercial enterprise (§ 47-5-331). The program is annually audited, and is overseen by the Prison Industries Advisory Council, appointed by the commissioner (§ 47-5-319, § 47-5-329).

Beyond county and municipal work and the production of penitentiary made goods, the Mississippi Code also outlines plans for prison labor to be used to the benefit of state agencies. This includes the lawful use of incarcerated workers in road construction, the repair of highways, or any other project of the State Highway Department, as well as the use of “offenders assigned to duty at the Governor’s Mansion (eight (8)),” in which case “the Governor may order offenders to work to avert or control” a “calamity or disaster,” (§ 47-5-133). Ultimately, though, “The commissioner may authorize the working of offenders in support of any aspect of Mississippi state government where such work would be appropriate and useful,” (§ 47-5-133). This single section sets the precedent for the use of prison labor in virtually any capacity deemed necessary by the commissioner.

It is well-documented that the Mississippi prison system is bloated and reaching its capacity (in the past it *has* exceeded capacity, resulting in state laws – which are still on the books – outlining emergency powers for prison construction). In a 2022 interview with Mississippi Today, Eldon Vail, a prison inspector, told reporters that the state’s exploding prison population was like “pouring gasoline on top of a fire that is already raging.” Despite widely heralded prison “reforms” passed in the 2010s, which defunded the prison system and promised to reduce the number of incarcerated people in the state, Mississippi has not seen meaningful reductions in its prison population (Cate 2022), meaning the number of people in captivity has not changed despite general disinvestment. These political changes marked an era of penal austerity within the context of mass incarceration, which have had severe consequences for prison operations (ibid). In addition, the prison system is still extremely costly. In FY 2021, the Mississippi legislature appropriated the Mississippi Department of Corrections with

\$323,552,322 from the general fund and \$30,045,036 from special funds (Mississippi Department of Corrections 2023).

As I highlighted at the beginning of this section, scholars have demonstrated that prisons serve a variety of needs under capitalism, including, but not limited to, capturing racialized surplus populations (Shelden and Brown 2000; Rehmann 2015) created by general state retrenchment (Waquant 2009). In order to continue to meet those and other purposes, the prison system needs to be maintained, despite high costs and a massive per-capita incarceration rate – the highest in the world. It is within this context that we can understand the state’s extensive law and policy outlining the ways the state deploys prison labor, to uphold the carceral system and benefit counties, municipalities, and state agencies.

Crucially, Mississippi is not alone in this approach. As other research shows, most people in prison do “housework” or “maintenance” jobs (Zatz 2008) and across the country, states collectively save billions of dollars using free prison labor, from incarcerated people fighting wildfires in California to clearing dead pine trees in Alabama (ACLU 2022). Mississippi law and policy reflect state goals. Given this, the analysis I have provided in this section indicates that one of the state’s central goals is to turn incarcerated people into laborers, and more specifically, laborers they can strategically deploy to 1) maintain the correctional system itself and 2) reduce other state expenditures through free labor to benefit counties, municipalities, and state agencies.

### **Extreme Heat as a Barrier to Prison Labor**

In the following subsections, I explore the ways heat has historically and presently complicated MDOC’s central goal of encouraging prison labor, especially with the goal of maintaining “self-sustaining” facilities which are “operated and managed in the most efficient and economical manner possible,” per § 47-5-1. More specifically, drawing on data from

correspondence, the DOJ investigation into MSP, and other MDOC documents, I discuss the ways high temperatures have 1) contributed to chronic understaffing and high staff turnover, both directly through the general discomfort of working in heat and indirectly through increased violence and safety hazards for officers, and 2) increased health issues and fatigue among incarcerated people, both of which make it more difficult for people in prison to labor in ways that my critical policy analysis indicates the state demands.

### *Extreme Heat and Staff Vacancies*

In this subsection, I tell a complicated story: one of the relationships between heat, understaffing, violence, and lack of healthcare access. As I describe below, heat worsened chronic staff vacancies at MDOC facilities. My correspondence and critical policy analysis data show that understaffing then contributed to increased violence and poorer access to healthcare within facilities. However, these outcomes may also *reproduce* understaffing. Together, understaffing – made worse by heat – impeded facility operations and impacted the state’s inability to turn incarcerated people into workers, which, as I have shown thus far in my analysis, is a central goal of the state.

In recent years, prison staffing shortages have occurred to varying degrees across the country, as has public sector employment in general, including among police (Duret and Li 2023; Heffernan and Li 2024). There are likely many forces contributing to this broad trend of vacancies, particularly in prison security positions. One obvious factor could be that employment as a correctional officer is, put simply, quite brutal: this line of work is associated with a slew of negative health outcomes, such as increased risk of addiction and shorter life span (Tartaglino and Safran 1997). A study of correctional officers in one state found that *over half* had witnessed a suicide attempt by an incarcerated person in a “typical” month at work (Namazi et al. 2021).

Though prison staffing is indeed an issue nationally, Mississippi is an extreme case, and the state has struggled with staffing MDOC facilities for many years. Of the documents analyzed for this study, many – both internal to the MDOC and external to it – demonstrate this. Annual Reports for each fiscal year show sizable staff vacancies at every single state prison for over a decade. In fact, between 2017 and 2018, over 40% of *total positions* at state prisons were unfilled (Mississippi Department of Corrections 2018).

While there is variation between facility staffing, reports show these issues to be chronic and persistent across all state prisons. For example, in the same time frame, CMCF, which had the *lowest* number of unfilled security staff positions among state prisons, still had a shockingly high rate of vacancies at 29.7%. At SMCI, just under 40% of total staff positions were vacant. 919 employee positions were authorized by the state between 2017-2018 at MSP; only 478 – roughly 52% – were filled. Indeed, the notorious “Parchman Farm” has maintained the highest staff vacancy rates of any facility. At MSP alone, between the years of 2018 and 2020, vacancies for *all* staffing positions hovered between 38% and 47%. By May 2021, there was over a 50% vacancy rate in correctional officer positions at Parchman.

To demonstrate just how extreme Mississippi’s vacancy problem is, it is useful to compare Mississippi to other states in the region. In Missouri, Governor Mike Parson signed an emergency bill to increase pay in order to fill vacancies within the Missouri Department of Corrections (Lieb 2023). This legislation came in response to 25% vacancies, a number lower than Mississippi had seen in over a decade (*ibid*). Similarly, when total Department of Corrections vacancy rates in West Virginia hit 27%, Governor Jim Justice declared a State of Emergency (Adams 2023). Recall that the state facility with the *lowest* vacancy rates in the state

of Mississippi was CMCF, which between 2018 and 2019 was still understaffed by 29.7%, higher than both Missouri and West Virginia.

A variety of variables are likely responsible for these high vacancy rates. Mississippi correctional officers are paid significantly lower than the national average (Santo and Neff 2020), and vacancy issues have been persistent for over a decade: in one single year, more than half of all correctional officers in the state of Mississippi quit their jobs (Hager 2015). Yet there is also ample evidence of a relationship between unmitigated heat in facilities, worsened conditions, and high staff turnover. Across a number of southern states without universal air conditioning in their facilities, both prison staff themselves and departmental administrators have explicitly described this link. For example, in Louisiana, a neighboring state with a similar climate and comparable incarceration rate, secretary of the Department of Public Safety and Corrections Jimmy LeBlanc blamed officer staffing shortages directly on high temperatures. In a plea to state lawmakers for funding to install air conditioning at various prisons, LeBlanc said, “Staffing is a real concern for us. That’s our top challenge. ... You got correctional officers changing clothes three times per day,” (O’Donoghue 2022). Clearly, high temperatures create unattractive working conditions. As the executive director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice correctional officers’ union put it, “The heat is one of those working conditions that is causing people to quit, causing the people not to come work there. That’s something we have to address,” (Chandler 2023). Most relevant to this case, however, are the words of Mississippi Department of Corrections Commissioner Burl Cain himself: “Everybody knows we need to hire more people and nobody wants to go sit in a prison, inside the building and you know, burn up all day sitting in one place,” (Emery 2022).

In Mississippi prisons, these vacancies were obvious to study participants, who explained the way understaffing had measurable impacts on their lives in our correspondence. As one participant put it, “Sometimes we will go a long time without even seeing an officer and I know they are understaffed but also I know the guards don’t want to be in the heat.” Alex, incarcerated at MCIW, on the same grounds as CMCF, agreed, writing in a letter that “all buildings are understaffed.” Monica, who lived at the same facility, echoed the sentiment: “There are supposed to be regular checks on the zone, it never happens, sometimes we’ll go hours without seeing a guard.”

As it relates to my own analysis I presented earlier in this chapter, being unable to adequately staff facilities created several consequences that shape the prison’s ability to meet what state law and policy indicate are critical goals: high levels of inmate labor. There are both straight-forward and less obvious ways that chronic understaffing did this, both of which impact prison labor. First, understaffing caused more violence at facilities. As discussed in detail in the last chapter, my participants described the ways that extreme heat was *already* associated with upticks in violence. This was reflected in both my letter data, where participants repeatedly described summer temperatures as producing greater stress and aggravation, often leading to more fights, and is confirmed in existing literature that links high temperatures and spikes in prison violence (Mukherjee and Sanders 2021). Additionally, though, understaffing can make the violence problem – intensified by heat – even worse. This, in turn, negatively impacted facility operations and disrupted the process of turning them into laboring bodies – a central goal of the state that I used my data to show above.

First, though, it is important to identify how all of the aforementioned issues are related and can compound one another. Staffing issues, for example, can be cyclical. Violence produced

in part through staffing issues can in turn produce more staff vacancies as prisons become notoriously difficult places to work. In this way, officer shortages can result in *more* problems and conflicts at the facility, which can make work generally *more* unpleasant, in turn producing *more* staff shortages. The same is true of issues of healthcare access, and in particular, mental healthcare, which the DOJ has established is wholly inadequate at multiple Mississippi facilities. When people in prison do not get access to the mental healthcare they need, they are more likely to hurt themselves or one another, again creating preconditions for more staff shortages as prisons become notorious for chronic mental health issues among those incarcerated there. This makes issues of heat, violence, health and staff vacancies a bit of a “chicken or egg” problem. As I highlighted in Chapter Three, heat directly increased violence as those incarcerated in facilities without air conditioning become more uncomfortable, irritable and less patient with one another. Regardless of which came first, though, all three forces clearly intersected with and reproduced one another in complicated ways in this dissertation. Given that they all disrupted basic facility functions, they in turn threatened the prison labor supply. In Figure 1 below, I visualize this complicated and cyclical relationship.

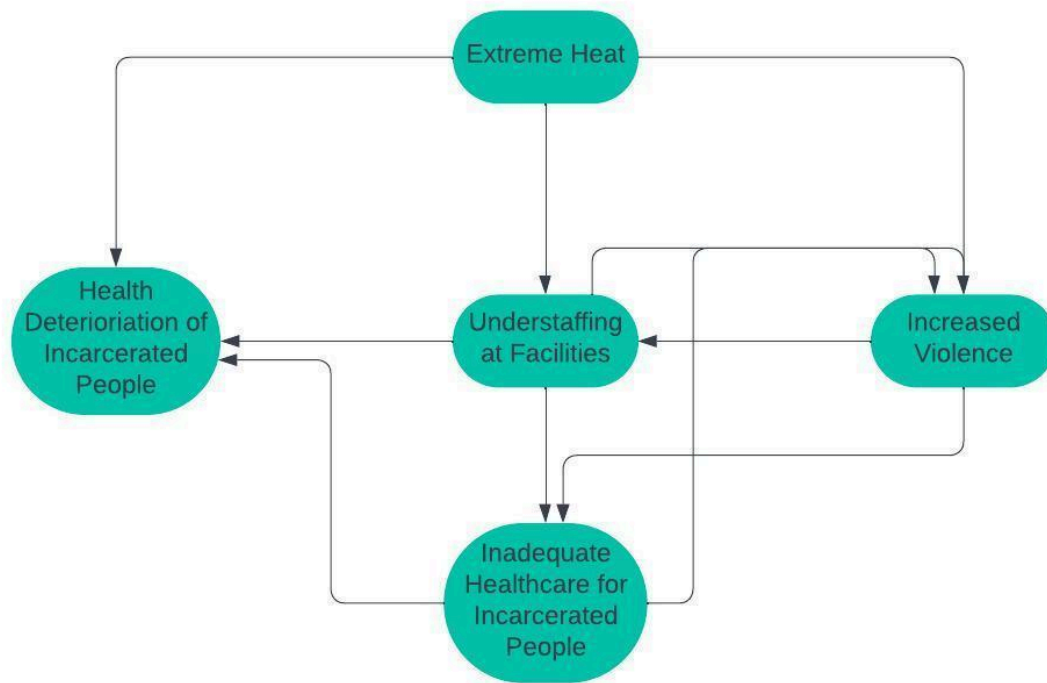


Figure 1: Relationship between heat, staffing, violence, and health of incarcerated people.

First, data from this dissertation show that understaffing increased violence<sup>35</sup>. In my critical policy analysis, this became clear. In its investigation of Mississippi State Penitentiary, the DOJ (2022) found,

... widespread, largely unchecked, violence against incarcerated persons by other incarcerated persons in Parchman. Numerous MDOC systemic deficiencies foster this pervasive violence and create an unreasonable risk of serious harm to incarcerated persons, including: Gross understaffing that results in inadequate supervision.

Participants, too, observed the way staff shortages led to more fights. For example, over the course of multiple letters, Mike chronicled rampant understaffing at MSP. After getting in a fight when another person tried to steal from him, he was moved to Unit 29, the single remaining unit without air conditioning, which he and others described as the place where folks in the

<sup>35</sup> Crucially, this is not to overstate the many ways that correctional officers themselves inflict pain or violence on incarcerated folks; indeed, the last chapter demonstrated participant distrust of these officers and the various ways COs humiliate people locked up in MDOC facilities. However, participants simultaneously felt the impacts of too few officers, which left them unprotected from violence inflicted by other inmates.

facility get moved as a form of additional punishment. Mike blamed the theft itself, the resulting fight, *and* his consequential heat exhaustion after the move from air conditioning to no air conditioning, on inadequate staffing: “My environment now consists of one female officer ‘controlling’ a building full of 170 inmates.” In a later letter, he elaborated: “They are understaffed and mainly have women working here. No offense but I just don’t think women should work at a notoriously violent prison.”

As Mike’s example demonstrated, sometimes these staffing issues led to an increase in fights; additionally, if more guards and officers were patrolling the zone, someone may have been less likely to try to steal from him in the first place. Other participants, too, observed the relationship between understaffing and violence. Describing the constant violence at MSP, one participant told me that heat plays a big role, but “The lack of security doesn’t help either.” Referring to similar problems at MCIW/CMCF, Monica wrote, “With the shortage of officers basically my whole incarceration that means that most nights we are without an officer on the tower. Once they have done 7 o’clock [*count*] they lock us in and we are on our own for the night.” Indeed, other research shows that when understaffing occurs at prisons, facilities use more lockdowns (Cate 2022). Data from correspondence, then, confirm what documents analyzed in this study show, as well as what other research demonstrates: that understaffing has led to more fights in MDOC facilities. More fights and lockdowns are not conducive to producing an “efficient” correctional system dependent on the labor of incarcerated people.

Beyond increased fights and violence, understaffing also contributes to inadequate medical care, which in turn, too, disrupts the prison labor supply. Both data from policy analysis and correspondence demonstrate this. In one instance, a participant wrote to me how an inadequate medical response due to understaffing may have directly contributed to a death: “I’ve

been housed with people who have died in the zone, and we had no tower officer to even get the lady help. All we could do was bang on the wall and yell out the window at another building to send for help.”

Tragically, this was not the only account of this nature offered by a participant. Another letter described how lack of staff meant people in dire medical circumstances went hours without being seen:

Never in my life have I seen such horrible medical care. People have also fallen off a top rack and busted their head open, having to lay there for hours waiting on medical, because we have had to yell out windows and bang on walls in order to get attention of neighboring building to get the tower officer.

Even routine medical care was delayed because of poor staffing. Monica described such an example to me:

A month or so ago I went to get my morning insulin at the clinic where diabetics have been having to go for weeks to get my insulin. I walked in and asked about my insulin and was told that I couldn't receive my insulin because there was only one nurse working. I never received my insulin that morning.

These descriptions, first and foremost, demonstrate the profound injustice of missing healthcare access in Mississippi facilities, painting a grim picture of day-to-day life for those locked up in the state. They also show how understaffing, which leads to healthcare issues among incarcerated people, contributed to violence and facility disruptions. Both violence and disrupted facility operations complicate the state's ability to put people in prison to work, which is a central goal of state law and MDOC policy.

In Mississippi, an extreme lack of initial or immediate care – whether for mental or physical health problems – has resulted in the deterioration of incarcerated folks' health, per documents analyzed in this study. According to the DOJ's (2022:26) findings report from its investigation into Mississippi State Penitentiary,

Parchman has too few mental health staff, and the current staff are under-qualified and lack sufficient supervision. Because of the combination of deficient practices and staffing, appropriate care is delayed, denied, and discontinued. As a result of MDOC's failure to provide adequate treatment to meet incarcerated persons' serious mental health needs, persons incarcerated at Parchman suffer actual harm from further deterioration of their mental health status, self-injurious behavior, and increased vulnerability to harm from other incarcerated individuals.

Understaffing, then, directly worsened the health outcomes of people incarcerated in the state.

This can compound existing violence problems, particularly when it comes to untreated mental health issues.

Staff vacancies are rampant in MDOC facilities, which in turn produce multiple problems that disrupt smooth facility operations and get in the way of one of the state's central goals: putting people in prison to work. While many factors contribute to chronic understaffing problems, scorching temperatures certainly do not help make prison employment more attractive. Prison administrators are aware of this, and prison employees – particularly correctional officers – have themselves said as much. Conditions in southern prisons without air conditioning are indeed so dire that when the families of formerly incarcerated folks who died of heatstroke in Texas facilities filed a wrongful-death suit, the state's correctional officer union voiced support and joined with the cause, marking a rare political alliance (Zimmerman 2013).

The argument I have made in this section drawing on data from both correspondence and critical policy analysis is that understaffing creates and compounds several issues in state prisons, which in turn impact the state's overall goal of utilizing prison labor. First, staff vacancies, particularly in security positions, lead to more violence through a shrunken ability to manage the prison population, increased use of lockdowns and other aggravating security measures, or both. Additionally, understaffing begets *more* understaffing insofar as it worsens prison conditions in a myriad of ways; in turn making this type of employment even less

attractive for potential workers. Finally, understaffing makes it so that incarcerated people are unable to access care immediately when they need it, which can in turn, too, increase violence. Each of these outcomes, exacerbated by heat, ultimately makes prison operation more difficult and complicates the state's goal of turning people in prison into laborers. Moreover, the relationship between heat, violence, understaffing and healthcare inaccessibility is complex and cyclical: each outcome contributes to other outcomes in complicated ways.

### *Extreme Heat and Poor Working Conditions for Prison Labor*

In the first section of this chapter, I describe the state's political fixation on prison labor. Roughly 23% of all state law on prisons and parole is dedicated to prison labor in some capacity, and this directly reflects Mississippi's need to utilize this labor strategically to benefit counties, municipalities, the state overall, as well as maintain individual correctional facilities. As I demonstrate above, however, high temperatures and insufficient facility infrastructure to manage heat may actually *reduce* MDOC's ability to put folks in prison to work, contradicting the explicitly stated goals of the Mississippi Department of Corrections. This is consequential to the state's ability to meet its own stated goals, given that physical disability is one of the only legally mandated ways a person in prison in Mississippi can be excused from labor. Below, I show how heat increases health problems among incarcerated people which reduces their overall capacity to work efficiently, let alone work at all.

Research has already demonstrated that heat impacts productivity. A paper published by the International Labour Organization found that 2% of total working hours worldwide are projected to be lost every year beginning in 2030, "either because it is too hot to work or because workers have to work at a slower pace," (Kjellstorm et al. 2019:3). Heat waves have been demonstrated to produce massive economic losses for cities (Xia et al. 2017), and increased

occupational injury (Tawatsupa et al. 2013). Heat has also been shown to impact cognitive functioning, even in young adults (Laurent et al. 2018). This last study in particular aligns with how folks who wrote letters for this project described their own experiences of relentless summer temperatures. As one participant put it, on hot days without air conditioning, “you can’t think straight.”

Clearly, then, high temperatures have the potential to decrease the productive output of workers in a myriad of ways. But what, if anything, do we know about the impact of heat on the productivity of prison labor specifically? Little academic research has sought to answer this question; of the work in this area, scholars rightfully charge that heat (exacerbated by climate change) can create working conditions for incarcerated folks that constitute cruel and unusual punishment (Pistone 2022). Journalistic accounts, however, provide some insight into the ways heat disrupts work in facilities. In a PBS investigation on prisons without air conditioning in Texas, one parent of an incarcerated woman described temperatures so brutal that people were passing out in the middle of work shifts: “My daughter has been there seven years. She has nine months to go. And she's sweating profusely all the time. Can't sleep. She works in the kitchen. So you know, it's like 120, 130 degrees in there... people are seizing and falling on the floor.” (Yang et al. 2023). This account demonstrates profoundly unjust temperature conditions for those locked up in Texas without air conditioning. It also shows how extreme heat can disrupt the very labor that prisons depend on to exist.

How, then, did heat impact work and productivity in state-operated prisons in Mississippi specifically? In this study, participants described both 1) direct impacts of heat on their ability to labor, as well as 2) generalized health implications of heat, which in turn impacted their working capacity.

One way heat impacted the labor is by directly impeding incarcerated people's ability to work. As described in the first section of this chapter, Mississippi Prison Agricultural Enterprises is responsible for the farming completed at Mississippi State Penitentiary (the notorious Parchman Farm), as well as at South Mississippi Correctional Institution. Together, both farms produce – to rely on language used by the Department of Corrections – thousands of hours of “free labor” each year, which are grown in order to “feed the incarcerated adults to help reduce food cost,” as well as to be sold to reduce the overall cost of the correctional system, per many of the department's Annual Reports.

Of study participants who were currently or formerly incarcerated at MSP or SMCI, only one told me they had direct experience with farm labor. Carter, who had been incarcerated for over two decades, was required to work the Parchman fields at various stages of his incarceration. Sometimes, the extreme heat outdoors, combined with an inability to recover indoors in air conditioning, meant that he and his peers actually had to stop working midday:

Me I have experienced very, very, hot days here at Parchman penitentiary farm it was like torture from 1999-2001 in Unit-32 and 2011-2021 Unit 29 and 30. Back in 2013 I was working in the fields at Unit 29 – I-bldg. The heat was so hot we had to quit working. There was no air conditioning inside the cells we had to live in. During time back then was cruel and unusual punishment to inmates.

As Carter describes it, heat (and, as other participants put it, the complete inability to “cool off” after coming in from being outside) disrupted the state's goal of maximized output from prison farming operations by interrupting prison labor itself.

Other participants who worked outdoors described the way a lack of air conditioning indoors made them feel physically unwell. While these participants did not necessarily describe work stoppages as explicitly as Carter, they nonetheless felt strongly that heat disrupted their ability to do almost anything at all. For example, Sasha, who worked with the dog program at

MCIW on the CMCF campus, spent most of her workday outside. Sometimes this meant having to endure extremely hot temperatures outdoors, and then brace herself to return into the facility where it is *even hotter*. In describing her work to me, she told me it was unfortunate that her “hours never change no matter how hot it is,” even when there was “no relief from the heat when I come into the zone to rest.” In the same letter, Sasha detailed the impacts of having to work outside in the heat and then come back to an even hotter zone, noting how those temperatures affected her overall health: “I would get extremely sick. It’s sometimes hard to breathe and energy levels are much lower. Many days, I’ve had a loss of appetite and have vomited when I forced myself to eat. Its hotter by far inside than out.”

Indeed, Sasha repeatedly said that heat made her “sick.” When I asked Sasha if she felt like the health impacts of heat affected her ability to work or do other tasks, she wrote that yes, they indeed did: “On really hot days, it’s hard to do anything.” In another letter, Monica echoed this sentiment: “The extreme heat makes me not want to do anything but lay on my rack, as its exhausting to function.” Darius put it bluntly: “It’s a very draining time when its hot.”

Sasha, Monica and Darius were not the only participants to indicate to me that heat impacted their overall well-being so severely that it made it difficult for them to complete basic tasks, or “function,” let alone work their jobs. In fact, even participants who worked indoors in parts of the facility with A/C – those who often described themselves as “lucky” to be able to get any kind of temperature relief – struggled to return to the brutal temperatures of the living units when they were finished with their shifts. Stephanie, who had a job in an air-conditioned portion of the facility before her release, described how the dramatic temperature change between work and living unit impacted her health: “I do work where there is air conditioning, but it made it hard to be in the air all day then go into the hot building. I was sick a lot.”

Sasha, Monica, and Stephanie all worked different internal jobs which kept the facility operational to varying degrees<sup>36</sup>. Each of them described heat producing feelings of sickness or the inability to “function.” These descriptions not only indicate an environmental injustice in and of themselves, though; they also speak to the reduced capacity of workers that the state relies on to maintain its own operations.

Furthermore, participants in general wrote at length about the ways extreme temperatures impacted their overall health and the health of others in the facility. As Carter put it, “I was usually a healthy guy but [*heat*] would make you feel sick, dizzy, stomach upset. Sometimes headaches too.” Sasha echoed this sentiment. In one letter, she told me that “Many women, especially the elderly and ones with health issues or dehydrated, have heat strokes.” Regarding the heat before A/C installation at MSP, Mike told me that there were many “people in here who can't deal with it. A lot of the times they take medications that prohibit them from being in the heat. So deaths occur due to it being hot.” Alonzo, too, described how on hot days, he would watch people “pass out and need medical attention.” In her first short letter to me, Ava wrote that she thought the heat had certainly gotten worse over time, to which she elaborated: “Scared at my age – cause I’ve had a mild stroke since I’ve been here and lost hearing in my life ear.” While Ava was not explicitly implying these disabilities are the result of heat, she was nonetheless expressing fear that heat will worsen her health conditions, and for good reason. Even Alex, who told me she did not think the heat affected her body, caveated that pessimistic comment: “Heat has not impacted my health yet, but I’ve only been in this compound about 17 months.” Recall, too, that in Chapter Three I highlight the tremendous impact heat had on participants’ ability to meet their own basic needs, making things like sleeping and eating extremely difficult.

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<sup>36</sup> Even the dog program at CMCF brings in money to the facility; dog training services range from \$100 to \$300.

These accounts – which clearly demonstrate how heat directly harmed the health of my participants and their peers or, at least, threatens their health in the future – align with evidence that heat can worsen symptoms from existing disabilities (Vasquez 2021), exacerbate existing illness, and increase risk of death (Zhao et al. 2019). They also corroborate other studies that demonstrate a relationship between increased mortality and heat in prisons without air conditioning (Skarha et al. 2022), including an observed 30% increase in the rate of suicide-watch incidents on days where people in prison were exposed to extreme heat (Cloud et al. 2023). These health impacts *in and of themselves* constitute a form of environmental injustice. They also, though, disrupt the overall goals of MDOC, which are tied directly to people in prison being able-bodied and at least well *enough* to contribute to a free workforce. Recall, per the Mississippi Code, that labor is required of those who enter the correctional system, with the crucial exception of those who are physically unable to do manual work. This means that extreme heat – omitted from the Mississippi Code and MDOC policy – has in turn made it harder for the state to meet its own goals.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I answered my second research question: How is the state of Mississippi prepared to mitigate the impacts of extreme heat? My findings show that Mississippi is *not* prepared to mitigate these impacts, which aligns with green criminological perspectives emphasizing the unwillingness of states to prioritize the mitigation of environmental hazards (Lynch et al. 2013; Moloney and Chambliss 2013; Opsal and Shelley 2014; Long et al. 2018). In fact, this absence of policy on temperature, heat, and/or climate change can be characterized as a state-green crime of omission. Despite the state of Mississippi having legal custody over people in prison, and being charged with their care and rehabilitation, the Mississippi Code

insufficiently manages extreme heat in its carceral facilities. As a result, incarcerated people were left to fend for themselves, relying on commissary fans and other creative strategies which did very little to mitigate the consequences in summertime.

In the absence of adequate protections from state heat I showed that, state law and MDOC policy are overwhelmingly focused on the use and management of prison labor, particularly in the context of maintaining a cost-efficient and “self-sustaining” carceral system and to benefit local counties and the state apparatus overall. During a time of penal austerity (Cate 2022), this is especially important. Mississippi has a massive per capita prison population and the strategic deployment of unpaid prison labor helps meet a variety of state goals, including reducing overall expenditures. Scholars can understand these findings as related to the broader purposes prisons serve under capitalism, including the management of surplus populations, particularly racialized ones (Woods 1998; Sheldon and Brown 2000; Alexander 2010; Rehmann 2015). In order to achieve these goals, the system itself must be maintained, and the state must reap the benefits.

Yet, as I show in this chapter, despite extensive law and policy dedicated to strategically deploying the labor of incarcerated people, extreme heat actually inhibits the state’s ability to produce efficient incarcerated laborers. Extreme heat compounds staffing and violence issues already endemic to MDOC, which in turn become cyclical. These problems impact the basic function of facilities, making prison labor difficult to operationalize. High temperatures also, as letters from participants show, compounded and created new health consequences, creating a generalized sense of unwellness and fatigue during summer months. This, too, is not conducive to creating productive laborers out of incarcerated people. In the next chapter, I discuss the implications of these findings in greater length.

CHAPTER FIVE:  
CONCLUSION

*“A conspiracy? Not likely. Systemic? Without a doubt.”*

- Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 2007:24

Alonzo, one of the participants in this study, had been incarcerated in MDOC facilities for over twenty-five years. In Chapter Three, I described how like so many people who spend decades in prison, he had become more isolated over the period of his incarceration. I want to be clear, though, that Alonzo asserted his own autonomy in this process, telling me that he encouraged his parents to visit less to take care of themselves. Alonzo also stressed that he was strong and able to handle the poor conditions inside MDOC facilities. He often started his letters or paragraphs with “yeah yeah,” and disclosed that he had “learnt how to deal with the summer heat.” Alonzo was, in his own words, “strong in spirit.”

In Alonzo’s last letter to me, before signing his name, he wrote “Black Prison Lives Matter.” This struck me. Though I expressed sympathy for my participants as they described conditions beyond my imagination, I had not brought up any social movements, and Alonzo had for the most part said very little about his personal politics or his view of MDOC as a whole although other participants were much more forthcoming. Yet this sign-off from Alonzo affirms what Pellow has previously argued: “If Black Lives Matter was founded to challenge state-sanctioned violence then it makes sense to extend the reach of this movement’s analysis and action to the problem of environmental racism,” (2016:10), particularly given that this form of environmental racism is occurring at a state-operated facility.

Since receiving this final letter, I have thought a lot about Alonzo's sign off. More specifically, I've reflected on what exactly this project might be able to offer to an academic project or social movement which values and protects the lives of Black people, and more specifically, Black people in prison.

In this concluding chapter, I review the contributions of the study and grapple with that question. First, I summarize the two findings chapters from this project, highlighting central themes that emerged from the data. Then, I embed these findings within a broader theoretical and empirical context, describing where the findings fit in, what other research they affirm, and how they contribute to the overall goals of critical environmental justice and green criminological scholarship. Next, I highlight possible future directions for researchers based on this project, noting where lingering gaps remain. Finally, I put these findings in conversation with existing abolitionist perspectives and consider how scholars might move forward in solidarity with those who are suffering the most brutal consequences of prison heat. The latter discussion is especially important for those interested in immediately alleviating the suffering of people in prisons while being careful to avoid reinvestments of money and/or resources into the carceral project.

### **Summary of Research**

In this dissertation, I make two central, albeit complex and multi-faceted, claims based on my data. First, I draw on qualitative interview data collected through letter writing with 13 people who are incarcerated to show how extreme heat intensifies and worsens the experience of social death in Mississippi prisons. Second, using critical policy analysis, I unpack the ways that Mississippi law and MDOC policy prioritize incarcerated people's laboring capacity over their physical well-being, neglecting heat, even though heat ultimately interferes with the project of prison labor. I review both findings in more detail below.

In Chapter Three, I reviewed literature on social death and showed how heat serves to intensify the existing condition of carceral social death in Mississippi prisons. Drawing on existing conceptualizations of social death – namely, Patterson (2018[1982]) and Price (2015), though this project also took inspiration from other scholars who explore social death beyond carcerality or slavery (Králová 2015) – I offered a three-pronged approach to understanding carceral social death. Here, I emphasized social death as occurring through 1) *social disconnection* and *isolation* (the loss of relationships), 2) *humiliation* (the loss of dignity through mistreatment), and 3) *loss of sense of self* (shifting personal identity).

How, then, does heat fit into this picture of carceral social death? First, heat heightened feelings of social disconnection and isolation among my participants, both in terms of their reduced capacity to contact people outside of the facility through letters and phone calls, but also within the facility, where violence and tensions increased, and energy levels plummeted, causing people to spend more time alone. Participants also explained that heat also created new pathways for experiences of humiliation and worsened existing forms of prison humiliation. In particular, my participants described guards weaponizing temperature against them, in addition to being highly constrained by clothing restrictions, which kept them sweaty and uncomfortable for months on end during summertime. Lastly, participants described heat as contributing to a loss of – or change in – their own social identities and senses of selves. Heat made them exhausted and was at times physically and energetically debilitating, preventing them from being able to participate in recreational activities or exercise, let alone take care of themselves in basic ways.

Yet heat does not create social death from scratch, it reinforces it. Participant letters themselves articulate this, and state law and MDOC policy reflect this, too. By looking to the Mississippi Code, state-wide reports and MDOC policies and guidelines, we find mechanisms

that create social death on clear display: MDOC policy itself creates social disconnection and alienation through closely monitored and restricted relationships and amplifies humiliation through strict enforcement of the presentation of the self via the MDOC dress code.

In Chapter Four, I reviewed literature within green criminology and critical criminology that explores how states tacitly allow environmental harms to persist, and more specifically, why governing bodies fail to regulate such conditions or enforce existing regulations (Faust and Kauzlarich 2008; Gerkin et al. 2009; Long et al. 2018). This research operates on an expanded, extralegal definition of what counts as a “crime” (Lynch et al. 2013; White and Heckenberg 2014) and who counts as a “victim” (Hall 2014; O’Connor Shelley and Opsal 2016). Within this work, scholars have demonstrated how state failure to prevent serious injury or harm can be characterized as a state-green crime of omission (Moloney and Chambliss 2013). I draw on this framing specifically and argue that the failure of the state of Mississippi to adequately monitor and prevent extreme heat exposure in state facilities is indeed a state-green crime of omission. For example, as I emphasized in my analysis, only *one* section of Title 47 of the Mississippi Code (the part of state law that focuses on prisons and parole) addresses facility temperatures or temperature-regulating infrastructure whatsoever.

Yet while the absence of temperature-, heat-, and climate-related policy in and of itself tells us something useful, what the state *does* politically prioritize is also illuminating. In Chapter Four, I reviewed research on the political economy of prisons (Lichtenstein 1996; Shelden and Brown 2000; Gilmore 2007; LeBaron 2012; Rehmann 2015) to highlight the centrality of prison labor across time, as well as the way prison labor has become increasingly focused on facility maintenance and other public projects (Zatz 2008; ACLU 2022; Reich 2024). My work affirmed this scholarship. More specifically, I presented data to show that, in lieu of a focus on heat,

Mississippi state law and MDOC policy prioritized the creation and maintenance of laboring bodies, both for the maintenance of a carceral system that is efficient and reduced spending as well as one that benefitted counties, municipalities, and the overall state apparatus through free labor. In turn, participants described ways that unmitigated heat could interfere with the state's ability to turn people in prison into laborers. Heat compounds existing illnesses and creates new health problems for otherwise physically healthy people living behind bars. These heat-related health problems are made worse by rampant understaffing, which in and of itself is also worsened by heat.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Contributions**

#### *Critical Environmental Justice*

As I describe in the introduction, a small but growing number of researchers have begun to consider prisons within an environmental justice framework (Pellow 2017; Perdue 2018; Opsal and Malin 2020; Schept 2022; Opsal et al. 2023). This emergent realm of study has developed alongside, and in direct response to, a call by EJ scholars to engage in more *critical* and more *deeply intersectional* environmental justice work (Pellow 2017; Malin and Ryder 2018). This project is in part a response to those bids to the discipline.

In 2017, Pellow proposed a Critical Environmental Justice Studies (CEJ) framework made up of four pillars. The purpose of this perspective was to address the “important limitations and tensions” (Pellow 2017:14) within earlier generations of EJ scholarship, many of which are highlighted in Chapter One of this dissertation. Perhaps most obviously, this project responded to CEJ's (Pellow 2017), Opsal and Malin's (2020), and Taylor's (2024) call for scholars to more seriously consider prisons as sites of environmental injustice. As Kojola and Pellow (2021:112) suggest, “... we might revise and expand that definition of the environment so that it reads,

where we ‘live, work, play, learn, pray ... and do time.’ This research demonstrates that people “doing time” do indeed carry a burden of disproportionate environmental exposure; in this case, extremely high temperatures amplify the experience of social death already endemic to incarceration.

Yet this project’s engagement with CEJ is not limited to the fact that its area of focus is three prisons. My research draws more directly on the CEJ pillars offered by Pellow (2017), too. In particular, as I discuss below, the third and fourth pillars of CEJ – which focus on the way social inequalities are “reinforced by state power,” as well as the concept of “indispensability” – both directly informed this project’s methods *and* are clearly linked to this project’s findings on social death and the state’s ability and desire to manage extreme heat.

The third pillar of CEJ focuses on the role of state power in creating, upholding, and reproducing violence and injustice. What makes this proclamation particularly novel within an environmental justice context is the discipline’s historical tendency to look to the state for justice – whether that be procedural, distributive, or in the form of “recognition,” (Schlosberg 2014) (though, crucially, Schlosberg himself agrees recognition can come from elsewhere). As EJ scholarship demonstrates, that strategy has garnered limited results (Pellow and Brulle 2005; Bullard et al. 2008; Konisky 2015) despite widespread research and public attention. In that vein, this project’s examination of the role of the state in the tacit allowance of environmental harm drew its origins directly from CEJ.

Moreover, as both letters from participants and critical policy analysis data showed, Mississippi prisons – modern manifestations of a long project of racial domination and exploitation that began with slave plantations in the Delta (Woods 1998; Oshinsky 1999) – *already* created the conditions for those incarcerated in the state to experience social death, heat

simply created new pathways for social death to occur (and amplifies existing ones). As I showed in Chapter Three, recent reforms offered by the state of Mississippi are insufficient in actually mediating or eliminating the impacts of social death. Indeed, social death is inherent to the project of carceral punishment. This complicates solutions typical to both traditional criminology and earlier waves of environmental justice research, such as relying on policy changes to improve conditions. In this vein, Pellow (2017:22-23) charged EJ researchers to ask “how we might build environmentally just and resilient communities that can exist *beyond* the state” rather than “how we might do so with a different model of state intervention.” While my critical policy analysis demonstrated that state laws and DOC-level policies *do* matter, insofar as they have measurable impacts on incarcerated peoples’ day to day lives, it simultaneously showed the inability of the state to deliver just outcomes, which would include reversing social death and creating social life.

In other words, the data in this project show that while heat exacerbated the process and experience of social death, the prison *itself* produced social death, too; thus, the elimination of social death in a carceral context is inextricably bound up in the abolition of prisons and carcerality itself. Participants’ own descriptions of their day to day lives in this study identified this; that is why so many of them described heat as something akin to a cherry on top of an already massive problem. My project, then, highlights 1) how extreme heat – a more regular occurrence, given state inaction on climate change – worsens conditions already created by a state entity, and 2) why we might look beyond carceral reforms to address this crisis.

To that end, this study redirects attention to the state’s active facilitation of social death and outright neglect of the conditions that worsen it. In fact, my analysis highlighted that there are already tangible examples of the limits of reforms over abolition, including recent legislation

passed in Mississippi to provide “dignity” for incarcerated women. While Mississippi State Penitentiary has already had air conditioning installed in most of the living units in the facility, the impacts of carceral social death persist nonetheless. Drawing on the tenets I offered to frame the notion of social death, being slightly more physically comfortable while writing censored letters to family, in the isolation of a cell, is not social vitality. It is social death still. Social *life*, rather, would involve not just air conditioning access – but air conditioning access near community, protected from state violence and humiliation, where one can form their own sense of self.

In addition to the state creating the preconditions for social death, my findings showed that Mississippi law and policy was more focused on turning incarcerated people into laborers than it was in protecting them from extreme heat in summer months. Indeed, over 20% of sections I analyzed under Title 47 of the Mississippi Code dealt, in some capacity, with prison labor, while only a single section briefly mentioned the banning of individually owned air conditioning units and made no comprehensive commitments to A/C installation in the future. While Mississippi law outlined, in detail, the many ways people in prison can be used to work to the benefit of local counties, the correctional system, the state as a whole, and the private sector, Title 47 offered little by way of concrete descriptions of working conditions or rights. This reality – that Mississippi was *centrally* interested in the strategic deployment and use of prison labor – might give pause to historical environmental justice approaches, which have assumed that a “*different* model of state intervention” is possible and can be used to our advantage in seeking justice (Pellow 2017:22-23).

Moreover, through its prison management, the state of Mississippi had created a dynamic of fundamental contradiction. On one hand, the state was clearly invested in maximizing the use

of productive prison labor; state law, MDOC policy, and various reports demonstrate this. On the other, extreme heat increased mortality and created and compounded illness and disability among people in prison, making it harder for them to labor efficiently. Though I do not theorize about this contradiction at length, which is a useful focused endeavor for another project, identifying it is nonetheless useful because it serves as a reminder of the way the state's execution of its own goals may undercut its efficacy or legitimacy. Though this project does not call for the total abandonment of engagement with the state – as long as prisons exist, that is simply not possible – its critical exploration of the state affirms the Third Pillar of CEJ.

In CEJ's fourth pillar, Pellow (2017:26) asserts the importance of indispensability, or what he describes as “the perspective that excluded, marginalized, and othered populations, beings, and things – both human and more-than-human – must be viewed not as expendable but rather as *indispensable* to our collective futures.” This assertion prompted this study in the first place: I sought to examine the way extreme heat impacts people in prison because I believe them to be indispensable members of our communities and society at large. Social death in and of itself involves the intentional outcasting and marginalizing of “racially expendable” members of the population at the behest of the state. This study attempts to highlight the way people in prison are treated as expendable so that movements can demand a different arrangement.

By demonstrating the ways that heat functions to *further disconnect* people in prison from their kin, as well as how the state conceives people in prison, centrally, as *laborers*, I showed how incarcerated people are treated as expendable. In the case of Mississippi, environmental conditions compounded this existing injustice. Yet, as I highlighted in Chapter Three, my participants are *not* expendable, nor are they simply passive actors who experience oppression and nothing else. Rather, my data show that they are indispensable members of our

community, despite the state's best efforts. As the letters they wrote to me demonstrate, like all people, my participants have hobbies and interests, goals and plans, friends and enemies. They have made mistakes. They are complicated. They also, perhaps most relevant to this particular discussion, resist the imposition of social death and the state's fixation on prison labor through attempts to recreate social life. Some did this by developing networks of friends who support one another within the facility. Others did this by extending care, to the best of their ability, to family on the outside. Yet others simply remembered who they were and what they were able to do in the free world.

The purpose of exposing this social death and state focus on exploiting prison labor, as well as the way heat worsens both state projects, is to help imagine an alternative for my participants and their peers in prison – one of social life. It is also to learn from the ways people in prison attempt to resist social death in real time. This is especially important given the way that, as Pellow (2017:27) writes, "... indispensability demands dramatic change but does so from the perspective that all members of society and socioecological systems have something to contribute to that process and to our collective futures."

#### *Other Implications for Environmental Justice Research*

While CEJ and its pillars were central to the development and direction of this study, my findings contribute to other EJ literature as well. Namely, by emphasizing the way extreme heat contributes to carceral social death, I am building off of – and adding something novel to – other work which focuses on the role of *social relations* and *relationships* within EJ-impacted communities.

Early EJ work on community experiences of environmentally induced health problems highlights the interpersonal and psychosocial toll that prolonged fights for justice take on

community members. Much of this literature is focused on environmental justice social movements. Brown and Mikkelsen (1997) and Brown et al.'s (2011) research describes how groups contesting state narratives of illness must mobilize, noting that the health consequences of the original illness combined with high demands in the fight for justice have lasting effects on families and communities. Other research, too, highlights the impact of EJ organizing on families and relationships (Bell 2013). Anson and Paulson (2016) demonstrate the important role of social relationships in organizing by focusing on how social capital and social networks operate among environmental justice activists. Finally, in the realm of climate change, Torres and Casey (2017) suggest that one of the central ways climate migration operates as an environmental injustice is through the disruption of social ties, which has serious consequences on migrants' mental health. These examples all explore the impacts of environmental hazards on social relationships, something my findings, too, show.

More broadly, recent work to indigenize EJ emphasizes relationality (Ulloa 2017; Gilio-Whitaker 2019; Whyte 2020). As Whyte (2020) highlights, indigenous struggles for environmental justice emphasize the repair of kin relations between and among humans and non-humans. Ulloa (2017), in her work on indigenous struggles for environmental sovereignty and justice in Latin America, describes these efforts as a form of *relational indigenous environmental justice* and *relational water justice* (Ulloa 2020). Indeed, as Whyte (2020) highlights, to adequately combat climate change and the disproportionate impacts of climate change on indigenous people, relations between native and non-native communities must fundamentally change. In his (Whyte 2020:4) words,

First, relational qualities are crucial for cross-societal coordination. Societies with high levels of trust, strong standards of consent, and genuine expectations of reciprocity will be able to work together to ensure that forest conservation or resettlement programs can

be enacted quickly and justly when they are needed. In the absence of these qualities, speediness is likely possible only if consent or reciprocity are violated.

Here, Whyte (2020) is asserting that specific *relations* between and among societies are necessary for climate justice. Clearly, indigenous EJ literature, alongside the aforementioned work on EJ movements and impacts of hazards on community and familial ties, is interested in social relations. My work, then, adds something novel to existing threads in EJ by focusing on how environmental hazards disrupt *interpersonal social relationships* in the context of a total institution.

### *Green Criminology*

First and foremost, this study contributes to the little academic literature examining the intersection of green crimes and prisons (Bradshaw 2018; Opsal et al. 2023). As Stephens-Griffins (2022) notes, the discipline is well suited to research the prison-environment nexus and, in particular, to do so through an “abolition ecology” approach. Despite this, little green criminological work has explored the way people in prison experience environmental harms, nor how the state perpetuates said harms. This study responds to the dearth in the literature.

My work demonstrates the necessity of a green criminological approach to environmental harms insofar it centers the very *legality* of the harms felt by people in prison. While the DOJ found all three sites included in this study to be in violation of the Constitution, there are still no laws that explicitly and formally code maximum allowed temperatures in prisons or jails into law. The many consequences of extreme heat that my participants suffered through – social disconnection, fatigue, illness and disability, loss in personal identity – were, and are, all within the realm of the law. This affirms the many pieces of green criminological scholarship that

highlight 1) the social construction of the law by powerful actors and 2) how environmental harm within the realm of the law persists (South 2008; Stretesky et al. 2013; White and Heckenberg 2014; Lynch 2020). More specifically, green criminologists remind us that environmental harms are an inherent part of capitalist production, making them unlikely to be regulated or prohibited until said harms are no longer as central to the production process (Stretesky et al. 2013; Lynch et al. 2020).

Moreover, traditional victimology literature has long maintained an emphasis on victims of *formally defined* crimes (Hall 2014). To complicate this, green criminologists note the ways the legalistic approach to victimization is problematic, calling for an expanded notion of victimhood and victimization (Spencer and Fitzgerald 2013; Hall 2013; Hall 2014). Specifically, Hall (2014) asserts the need for a “green victimology,” wherein people of environmental harms are counted and studied as victims even if the environmental degradation or pollution they suffer from was created legally. Not only does this project affirm that people are clearly victimized by legal extreme heat, it also flips the traditional notion of victimology on its head by emphasizing the victimization of people traditionally and singularly understood as *perpetrators* of crime. That people in prison can and do experience harms – both those prohibited by law and allowed by it – pushes back against the singular idea that those convicted of crimes are simply “perpetrators,” a notion crucial to upholding and maintaining the carceral state. By demonstrating how people in prisons without air conditioning experience extreme heat, this project contributes to green criminology’s goal to “green” the notion of victims and critical criminology’s broader goal of expanding “who counts” as a victim altogether.

This project also affirms other work which demonstrates states’ reluctance to prioritize environmental policy. Perhaps more than any other subdiscipline, green criminology – and its

various treadmill theories, which explore the political economy of environmental harm – help to explain not only why environmental laws often go unenforced (Opsal and Shelley 2014), but also why so few laws and regulations exist in the first place (Long et al. 2012; Stretesky et al. 2013; Long et al. 2018; Lynch et al. 2020). This dissertation, too, found a lack of state interest in environmental conditions in prisons, despite state inspections confirming an overwhelming evidence and awareness of issues like extreme heat. Crucially, my findings show that states resist regulation *even* in cases where the overall operation of the prison system may be improved or made more efficient/less costly by the implementation of stronger environmental rules. This aligns with other research which demonstrates contradictions within the state apparatus, and more specifically, the state’s ability or desire to meet multiple contradicting goals (Lynch et al. 2020).

### **Future Directions**

While this study responds to gaps in existing literature and offered novel findings on how environmental injustices such as heat are experienced by incarcerated people, as well as how states neglect to prioritize environmental mitigation in policy, it also illuminates new concepts worthy of further exploration.

Within prison research, scholars can and should continue to explore how extreme heat (and other disasters) impact prison labor. Though my study began to tackle this exploration, and other researchers have recently done deep qualitative (Gibson-Light 2022) and mixed methods (Reich 2024) investigations on the nature of prison work, future scholarship should explore the way heat shapes labor behind bars. While my study began to shed light on the implications of heat on outdoor agricultural labor, this is an important area for researchers to continue to explore. Even in states where facilities have air conditioning, outdoor heat risks will persist and increase,

and outdoor prison labor is widespread across the country, making it an important realm of study for social scientists. Additionally, scholars should continue to explore prison reforms by highlighting their victories and limitations.

In this realm, scholars should also continue to explore the way people in prison resist environmental injustices, dehumanization, and create solidaristic relationships against – to put it frankly – all odds. Other research which highlights the importance of care in prison settings has begun this work (Burton 2021; Patel et al. 2022; Edison & Haynie 2023); asking questions about these positive relationships within the context of extreme heat, climate change, and/or other environmentally hazardous conditions could expand on existing literature in exciting ways. More specifically, work on resistance, care, solidarity, and support among and between people in prison can also help fulfill Tuck’s (2009) call for desire-centered research rather than damage-centered research. Though this certainly came up in my data, as I discuss briefly in Chapter Three, a more thorough and concerted investigation is warranted.

Within environmental justice scholarship at large, this project illuminates a gap in research: little EJ work has explored how environmental injustices, such as exposure to extreme heat, impact peoples’ *interpersonal* relationships. Certainly, a number of scholars do research adjacent to this (Brown and Mikkelsen 1997; Bell 2013; Gilio-Whitaker 2019; Whyte 2020), as I highlighted in the previous section. Yet for the most part, this work emphasizes community dynamics or individual psychosocial health consequences rather than interpersonal ones. Continuing to explore how environmental injustices such as extreme heat affect social relations between people, families, or in small group settings (rather than at the city- or community-wide level) is important. This work also aligns with a multi-scalar approach advocated for by critical

environmental justice scholarship by highlighting micro and meso level social impacts (Pellow 2017; Mao et al. 2021).

The findings of this study also raise important questions about procedural justice and how it can be achieved for incarcerated people — or, rather, if it is possible for procedural justice to exist within a total institution like a prison at all. As early as 1998, Hunold and Young (82) observed a limitation to EJ literature’s emphasis on distributive justice, noting that “justice requires a participatory communicative democratic process for siting hazardous facilities.” Indeed, many scholars have emphasized the role of democratic decision-making in creating justice and environmentally equitable communities (Lake 1997; Schlosberg 2007; Schlosberg 2013). Yet, as EJ and CEJ work expands to include incarcerated people within the realm of EJ analysis, the question of how to achieve procedural justice for people in prison remains unanswered. On one hand, the carceral project as a whole inherently limits the political capacity and rights of people in prison to make decisions about their own lives. This, most obviously, includes the loss of voting rights for many people in prison or with felony records (Uggen and Manza 2002; Manza and Uggen 2006). However, as my findings affirm, incarcerated people are also restricted from participating in decision making about *how the institution they live in operates*. Moving forward, then, it is important for EJ scholars to continue to expand on existing theorizations of procedural justice, and fine tune those frameworks to consider if procedural justice is possible to achieve within the carceral state.

Green criminologists, on the other hand, should continue to explore the role of the state in producing environmental hazards that are not directly related to private, capitalist production. Much green criminological work focuses on the environmental and social harms resulting from extraction and production (Stretesky et al. 2013). This work has examined a wide range of large

disasters and slower forms of negligence in *private* extraction and production, ranging from studies of the BP Oil Spill, Exxon Valdez Oil Spill, Dow Chemical's pollution violations, and even green crimes in Canada's tar sands mines (Cruciotti and Matthews 2006; Katz 2010; Ruggiero and South 2010; Smandych and Kueneman 2010; Bradshaw 2014). Treadmill of crime scholars refer to problems arising from rampant extraction as issues of ecological *additions* and *withdrawals* (Long et al. 2013). However, much of this literature centers the role of private, for-profit operations.

Yet, while prisons have indeed been compellingly theorized as sites of extraction (Pellow 2017), and while private corporations certainly still profit from publicly operated facilities, there is a gap in the green criminological theorization of prisons and in the study of environmental hazards that people in prison are exposed to that are not resultant from production. In the case of this study, climate change (resulting from extraction and production) made hot living conditions in prisons worse; however, as my participants showed (and other work on Mississippi prisons shows, see Oshinsky 1999), heat has always been a problem in these facilities. How, then, do environmental hazards that are not the result of production fit into green criminological understandings of harm?

Additionally, green criminologists should continue to work to clarify where, exactly, prisons fit within existing treadmill theories. While some scholars have explored the political economy of the prison under capitalism (Gilmore 2007; Lebaron and Roberts 2010), integrating this more systematically within treadmill frameworks would help researchers and advocates/practitioners better understand where prisons (and the state) fit into the broader picture of 1) capitalist production and 2) environmental degradation. Opsal et al. (2023) and McGee et al. (2021) usefully begin this work.

Finally, I would encourage scholars in any of the aforementioned areas of focus to replicate the correspondence portion of this study at a larger scale. Increasing the  $n$  on a similar project would allow for researchers to tease out differences in experiences of social death, for example, between and among groups. It is important for researchers to better understand how environmental injustices are experienced differently by different people; one example of this would be to study how heat-induced prison impacts manifest and operate along racialized, classed, or gendered lines.

### **Concluding Thoughts: Beyond the “Green” or “Climate Adapted” Prison**

In his book *Prisons and Social Death*, Price (2015) aptly observes that social death cannot be reformed away. In his own words (Price 2015:19),

Ending civil death would entail restoring (or granting) the rights accorded to citizens. It would mean conferring individual rights. The remedy is consistent with liberal individualism and a civil rights agenda. Ending social death is not so easy or straightforward.

Indeed, the findings of this project demonstrate that addressing the many problems within extremely hot Mississippi prisons – including social death – 1) will not be straightforward and 2) will instead require deep and structural change. Yet while working on this dissertation, I have experienced a complex, and at times paradoxical, relationship to my data and the project overall. For nearly two years, I have consumed thousands of pages of texts on dozens of topics, including the prison industrial complex, the political economy of Mississippi, climate change, racial capitalism, environmental inequality and environmental racism, chattel slavery in the American South, and the War on Drugs, to name just a few. For me personally, the findings of this project, put in conversation with the aforementioned literature, affirmed two seemingly contradictory realities: on one hand, while the carceral apparatus exists, people in prison in the south deserve

immediate access to air conditioning and other climate-control measures. On the other, prisons should not exist at all.

What does it look like to hold both truths at once, and how might scholars – particularly scholar-activists, to use the language of Gilmore (2022) – move forward? Clearly, as my data show, summer months in MDOC facilities are a thing of nightmares. From increased violence to extreme fatigue, my participants described the brutality of heat at length. And, as other research shows, updating infrastructure will likely save lives given that increased temperatures in non-A/C facilities are associated with increased mortality (Skarha et al. 2022). Yet, recall that incarceration *in and of itself* also reduces life expectancy (Patterson 2012) in the United States, and has negative health outcomes on the population at large (Wildeman 2016).

Then where does that leave scholars, organizers, and abolitionists? Should we support infrastructure updates that require further investment in the carceral project, particularly in a state where one of the largest prisons was built on the grounds of a former slave plantation? For one, this dissertation reminds us to be skeptical of state-based solutions, echoing concerns of CEJ scholars (Pellow 2017; Pulido 2017). My data show that the state refused to implement A/C until the DOJ found that multiple state-operated facilities were in violation of multiple Constitutional Amendments, and that the rollout of mandated A/C installation has thus far been rocky and incomplete, failing to meet most of its deadlines. As I describe earlier, as of April of 2024, most people locked up in state prisons in Mississippi still do not have air conditioning in their living units.

To make things even more complicated, findings in this project demonstrate that extreme heat actually *interfered* with the state's overall goals of creating an efficient "correctional" system based on the exploitation of prison labor insofar as it creates and compounds health

problems for many incarcerated people. Air conditioning, then, may not only be a lifeline to the thousands of people locked up in the state, but could *improve* the facility's ability to function and self-sustain in both the short and long term if it keeps its laboring population healthier and less disabled. In this way, the DOJ requirement for MDOC to better manage temperatures does not fundamentally disrupt the central aims of the state's correctional system. Rather, it may increase Mississippi's ability to meet its own goals for its carceral project.

In a 2015 article, Jewkes and Moran argue against the "green prison," charging green criminologists to ask questions about what, exactly, is being "sustained" by the introduction of sustainability programs or measures in correctional facilities. For Jewkes and Moran (2015:465), these improvements ultimately uphold mass incarceration and its many beneficiaries, despite simultaneously producing better conditions for people on the inside:

We would not deny that the incorporation of 'green' technology into new prison builds and retrofits, and the introduction of green care and green-collar training for prisoners may deliver some genuine gains, but our aim here has been to underline that they also usefully function to counteract critiques of mass incarceration. By adopting a pragmatic position in relation to sustainable development which allows limited 'green' savings or rewards to deflect attention from the mammoth costs of mass incarceration, the correctional system marginalizes abolitionist arguments, legitimizing and sustaining its operations.

Certainly, the proactive sustainability programs Jewkes and Moran (2015) describe above are fundamentally distinct from the reactive *mitigation* strategy of air conditioning installation. Yet they raise an important question about the consequences of seemingly improved or "greened" facility conditions. Other scholars, too, have highlighted how efforts to bring "sustainability" into prisons – whether through rehabilitative nature programs or reducing the environmental impact of facility infrastructure itself – may simply be a way to "use carceral humanism to allow prisons to package personal environmental austerity as rehabilitation," or create programming

that ultimately “greenwashes the prisons, making them appear more humanitarian and rehabilitation-focused” (Bohlinger 2019: 1126,1127). While these arguments are distinct from my own and are instead based on analyses of “green” programs, I agree that air conditioning will ultimately not disrupt the overall goals of MDOC, but rather *reinforce* the state’s ability to maintain a cost-effective and efficient carceral system, and possibly even increase its legitimacy as the conditions are made more palatable to the public.

This study raises similarly sticky questions about how those in solidarity with incarcerated people should move forward; or, put another way, about how allies can improve conditions without advocating for “reformist reforms” (Gilmore 2022; Akbar 2023). Burton (2023), too, has characterized this tension between the “urgent need to secure reforms to enable the captives’ immediate survival as human beings and the equally urgent project of abolishing broader systems of oppression” as a “central contradiction of the prison movement and the broader Black liberation struggle.” I agree with this assertion, and certainly do not claim to have a single or simple answer to this contradiction. Even Pellow (2017:24, 25) concedes that there are times when meaningful state-based solutions materialize following concerted progressive social movement organizing, and that “we are likely stuck with states for the time being.” Here, Pellow (2017:24,25) argues that we can learn from instructive cases in which organizers “organized anarchically when necessary but also sought and welcome state support when it made strategic sense for their democratic goals.” The more I read about the lives of my participants, the more certain I was that the project of abolition must be combined with immediate relief, which often implies state engagement and expansion. Certainly, abolitionists point to many different reforms as part of the pathway to a realized abolition. However, given what my findings show about the pervasiveness of social death in prisons, I was interested in solutions that

minimize reinvestment in the carceral apparatus. One way to be in solidarity with incarcerated people in Mississippi without expanding the reach and resources of the state's Department of Corrections is to advocate for aprecedented response to crisis: send people home.

Most Americans support efforts to reform the criminal justice system and reduce mass incarceration (ACLU 2017), and, importantly, there is a fairly recent example of the political possibility of rapid decarceration. For example, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of people were sent home from prison and jail preemptively to reduce the spread of the virus and alleviate stress on the prison system. In August of 2021, the Bureau of Prisons reported that it “has transferred over 30,000 eligible inmates (including inmates who have completed service of their sentence) to Home Confinement<sup>37</sup> since receiving the memorandum from the Attorney General on March 26, 2020.” To be sure, home confinement and other surveillance-based monitoring programs are not necessarily the “abolition” of the carceral project that organizers have hoped for; scholars have pointed out the pitfalls of relying on these strategies to reduce the incarcerated population<sup>38</sup> (Arnett 2019; Pittman 2020). Additionally, these releases represent just a drop in the bucket relative to the size of the overall population of people in U.S. prisons and jails. However, the speed at which so many incarcerated people were sent home signals that mass releases, particularly in the context of crises, *are* possible. And: heat in Mississippi *is* a crisis. As I described at length in the introduction, climate change is increasing temperatures in the already hot and humid state.

Alonzo's last letter to me emphasized, quite explicitly, the value of the lives of Black people in prison. This project has humbly attempted to better understand, and shed light on, the

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<sup>37</sup> According to the Bureau of Prisons, out of the more than 11,000 incarcerated people who were preemptively released, only 17 committed new crimes in the first year, which were mostly drug offenses.

<sup>38</sup> One of them being that these people are still captured by the criminal justice system and at increased likelihood of returning to prison; indeed, some people who were released from prisons or jails because of COVID-19 were then sent back.

intersection of environmental injustice and incarceration in the state of Mississippi by putting the experiences of people living behind bars in conversation with state goals for its own “correctional” system. If scholars want to continue to advocate for the well-being of people like Alonzo – and 25,000+ other folks incarcerated in Mississippi – we must continue to ask critical questions about environmental injustice, green crimes against people in prison, and the nature of the state. We must also use this work to advocate and organize for their release.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### RECRUITMENT LETTER, FIRST IRB PROTOCOL

Austin Luzbetak – Department of Sociology  
B258 Clark Building, Fort Collins, Colorado 80523-1784

Hello,

My name is Austin Luzbetak and I am a researcher and PhD student from Colorado State University in the Department of Sociology. We are working on a research study on how prisoners experience hot days in prisons in Mississippi. The title of our project is Experiences of Temperature in Mississippi Prisons. The Principal Investigator is Dr. Tara Opsal and the Co-Principal Investigator is Austin Luzbetak.

We invite you to participate in a letter-writing research project with the research team. Participation will be flexible, and will take place over time, for as long as you are interested, for up to six months. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may stop participating at any time, and there are no penalties for this.

We will keep all research records that identify you private, to the extent allowed by law, but you should know that your letters may be seen by prison staff. For this study, we will assign a code to your data so that the only place your name will appear in our records is on the consent form and in our document that links you to your code. Only the research team will have access to the link between you, your code, and your data. The only exceptions to this are if we are asked to share the research files with the CSU Institutional Review Board. When we write about the study to share with other researchers, we will write about the information we have gathered overall. When using your letter responses, you will not be identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other information that may personally identify you private. Letters you send us will not be used in future studies beyond this one.

While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge on how high temperatures affect daily life for people living in prison so that the needs of people in prison can be better addressed. There are no known risks to participating in the study. It may be uncomfortable to discuss experiences about life in prison. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researchers have taken steps to reduce all known and potential risks. If you would like to participate or have any questions, please contact Austin Luzbetak by either: phone - [REDACTED], email - kaluz@rams.colostate.edu, or written letter: ([REDACTED]). If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: CSU\_IRB@colostate.edu; 970-491-1553.

If your primary language is Spanish, or you prefer Spanish, you can feel free to use that language in your response to the research team. Then, we can send you a Consent Form in Spanish, and our correspondence can take place in Spanish. *Si su idioma principal es el español, o si lo prefiere español, puede utilizar ese idioma en su respuesta al equipo de investigación. Entonces, podemos enviarle un formulario de consentimiento en español, y nuestra correspondencia puede tener lugar en español.* If your primary languages are neither English nor Spanish, unfortunately, the research team will not be able to correspond with you in this research study.

If you are interested in participating, please send one copy of the signed consent form along with your letter responding to our questions. Both can be returned in the pre-paid postage envelope provided.

Thank you for your time,  
Dr. Tara Opsal  
Associate Professor of Sociology

Austin Luzbetak  
PhD Student of Sociology

## APPENDIX B

### CONSENT FORM, FIRST IRB PROTOCOL

#### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study Colorado State University**

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Experiences of Temperature in Mississippi Prisons

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Tara Opsal PhD. • Department of Sociology • Associate Professor  
• [REDACTED] • tara.opsal@colostate.edu

**CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Austin Luzbetak • Department of Sociology • PhD Candidate  
• [REDACTED] • kaluz@rams.colostate.edu

**WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?** You are being asked to participate in this study as a person who is in prison in the state of Mississippi.

**WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?** Austin Luzbetak is carrying out this study as a part of a PhD dissertation project.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?** The purpose of this study is to understand how people who are in prison in Mississippi experience life in prison and how the prison infrastructure affects them. Specifically, this study is trying to understand how heat and high temperatures affect people in prison.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?** You are invited to participate in letter-based correspondence with the researcher. You will be asked to participate for as long as you feel comfortable, with the option to respond at your convenience, for up to six months.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?** You will be asked to answer questions and reflect on your experience in prison in the state of Mississippi. You will be asked questions about your day-to-day life and experiences in prison, and specifically, how heat impacts you, and if that has changed at all over the course of your time in prison.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

There are no known risks to participating in the study. It may be uncomfortable to discuss experiences surrounding incarceration. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researchers have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential risks.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** There are no direct benefits to the participant for participating in the study.

**DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?** Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Whether you participate in this research or not will have no impact on your status in prison or impact your parole eligibility,

and taking part in this research project offers no special/extra advantage or benefits from prison officials.

**WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?** We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law, but you should be aware that your correspondence may be monitored by prison staff.

For this study, we will assign a code to your data so that the only place your name will appear in our records is on the consent and in our document that links you to your code. Only the research team will have access to the link between you, your code, and your data. The only exceptions to this are if we are asked to share the research files with the CSU Institutional Review Board. When we write about the study to share with other researchers, we will write about the overall information we have gathered. When using your letter responses, you will not be identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other information that would identify you private. Letters you send us will not be used in future studies beyond this one.

You should know that if you describe feelings of harm to self or others, this will be reported to the prison so that you can get assistance and resources.

**WILL I RECEIVE COMPENSATION?**

You will not receive any compensation for your participation in this research.

**WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. If you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Tara Opsal at [REDACTED] or Austin Luzbetak at [REDACTED], or by mail: [REDACTED]. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: 970-491-1553, CSU\_IRB@colostate.edu, or by mail: Research Integrity & Compliance Review Office, Colorado State University, 2011 Campus Delivery, Fort Collins, CO 80523-2011. You have received two copies of this consent form so that you can keep one copy and send the other back to the research team.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document. Please sign and return to the researcher via mail (Austin Luzbetak, [REDACTED]) in the pre-paid postage envelope provided:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person providing information to participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Staff

# APPENDIX C

## FLESCH-KINCAID GRADE LEVEL TEST

The screenshot shows a Microsoft Word document titled "Consent Form 10-24 Edits" with a readability statistics window open. The document text includes:

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**  
**Colorado State University**

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Experiences of Temperature in Mississippi Prisons

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Tara Opsal PhD. • Department of Sociology  
491-5438 • tara.opsal@colostate.edu

**CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Austin Luzbetak • Department of Sociology  
(815)274-2797 • kaluz@rams.colostate.edu

**WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?** You are invited to participate in this study as a person who is in prison in the state of Mississippi.

**WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?** Austin Luzbetak is carrying out this study project.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?** The purpose of this study is to understand how heat and high temperatures affect the health of people who are in prison in Mississippi experience life in prison and how the temperature affects them. Specifically, this study is trying to understand how heat and high temperatures affect the health of people who are in prison in Mississippi.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?** The study will take place in letter-based correspondence with the researcher. You will be asked to participate as you feel comfortable, with the option to respond at your convenience.

The readability statistics window displays the following data:

Readability Statistics	
<b>Counts</b>	
Words	850
Characters	4,430
Paragraphs	30
Sentences	44
<b>Averages</b>	
Sentences per Paragraph	2.4
Words per Sentence	17.6
Characters per Word	4.6
<b>Readability</b>	
Flesch Reading Ease	53.3
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	10
Passive Sentences	29.5%

The right-hand side of the Word interface shows the Editor pane with the following sections:

- Corrections:** Spelling (6), Grammar (3)
- Refinements:** Clarity (checked), Conciseness (checked), Punctuation Conventions (checked), Vocabulary (checked)
- Similarity:** Check for similarity to online sources.
- Insights:** Document stats

## APPENDIX D

### FIRST LETTER/INITIAL QUESTIONS

Hi,

Thank you so much for agreeing to exchange letters with me. All the experiences, information, and perspectives you write about will be so helpful in documenting and sharing how heat impacts life for people in prison. I am very grateful to have your voice be a part of this project.

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. If you're not entirely sure of an answer, that is OK! You can give your best estimate or simply tell me you don't know. You can also feel free to share any other ideas or experiences that you think might be relevant for me to know.

How long have you been incarcerated? Have you changed facilities during your sentence? If yes, feel free to consider the following questions from the perspective of other facilities, too, if you're able to remember.

Does the prison you're in have air conditioning, to your knowledge? If it does, do you know what parts of the prison *do* have air conditioning? How much time do you spend in those areas?

What is it like in prison on extremely hot days? How, if at all, does heat shape what you are able to do and how you spend your time in prison?

Does heat shape the work you do in prison in any way (i.e. how often you work or what kind of work you are able to do)?

Has prison infrastructure (such as air conditioning or fans) changed at all during your time incarcerated at the facility you're in, to your knowledge? Are there any other ways that you feel the prison is helping (or not) you live at a comfortable temperature?

Have you noticed any differences in temperature or the number of heat waves in the time you've spent at your facility? In other words, do you think these extreme temperatures have increased or decreased at all? If yes, how have these changes impacted your life in prison?

Thank you so much for your time, and if you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask them in your reply to me.

Austin

## APPENDIX E

### RECRUITMENT LETTER, FINAL IRB AMENDMENT

Austin Luzbetak – Department of Sociology  
B258 Clark Building, Fort Collins, Colorado 80523-1784

Dear Participant,

My name is Austin Luzbetak and I am a researcher and PhD student from Colorado State University in the Department of Sociology. We are working on a research study on how prisoners experience hot days, and especially heat waves, in prisons in Mississippi. The title of our project is Experiences of Temperature in Mississippi Prisons. The Principal Investigator is Dr. Tara Opsal and the Co-Principal Investigator is Austin Luzbetak.

We invite you to participate in a research project with the research team. Participation will include one of the following, whichever you would prefer: 1) one or more phone calls between you and one member of the research team, *or* 2) emails with the research team, *or* 3) letters exchanged between you and a member of the research team. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may stop participating at any time, and there are no penalties for this.

If you would like to participate, first, please read the attached consent form.

If you would like to participate by writing letters, please reply with a signed copy of the consent form that is attached. Send your answers to the questions and your consent form to this address: Austin Luzbetak, [REDACTED]

If you are interested in participating in this research project via phone, please contact Austin Luzbetak by phone at: [REDACTED]. Austin will ask for your verbal consent over the phone to participate in this project. Then, Austin will ask you questions about your experiences of extreme temperatures within the facility. The questions are attached to this letter. If you choose to participate this way, you will be reimbursed for the cost of the phone call. During the call, the research team will ask you for any necessary information to ensure money can be transferred to your account. The research team will transfer money to participants within 2 weeks of the date of the phone call.

If you are interested in participating in this research project via email, please send an email to: kaluz@rams.colostate.edu. Please include an acknowledgement of having read the consent form and a written agreement to consent in the form of: "I consent to participating." Then, the research team will respond to your email with research questions for you to answer.

We will keep all research records that identify you private, to the extent allowed by law, but you should know that your phone call, emails, or letters may be monitored by prison staff. We will then assign a code to your data so that the only place your name will appear in our records

is on the verbal consent form and in our document that links you to your code. Only the research team will have access to the link between you, your code, and your data. The only exceptions to this are if we are asked to share the research files with the CSU Institutional Review Board. When we write about the study to share with other researchers, we will write about the information we have gathered overall. When using your response to questions, you will not be individually identified. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other information that may personally identify you private. Any information or experiences you tell us about during the phone call, email, or letters will not be used in future studies beyond this one.

While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge on how extreme temperatures affect daily life for people living in prison so that the needs of people in prison can be better addressed. There are no known risks to participating in the study. It may be uncomfortable to discuss experiences about life in prison. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researchers have taken steps to reduce all known and potential risks.

If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: [CSU\\_IRB@colostate.edu](mailto:CSU_IRB@colostate.edu); 970-491-1553.

Thank you for your time,

Dr. Tara Opsal

Associate Professor of Sociology

Austin Luzbetak

PhD Student of Sociology

APPENDIX F

CONSENT FORM, FINAL IRB AMENDMENT

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Colorado State University**

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Experiences of Temperature in Mississippi Prisons

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Tara Opsal PhD. • Department of Sociology • Associate Professor • [REDACTED] • tara.opsal@colostate.edu

**CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Austin Luzbetak • Department of Sociology • PhD Candidate • [REDACTED] • kaluz@rams.colostate.edu

**WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?** You are being asked to participate in this study as a person who is in prison in the state of Mississippi.

**WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?** Austin Luzbetak is carrying out this study as a part of a PhD dissertation project.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?** The purpose of this study is to understand how people who are in prison in Mississippi experience life in prison and how the prison infrastructure affects them. Specifically, this study is trying to understand how heat and high temperatures affect people in prison.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?** You are invited to participate in written correspondence, email correspondence, or a phone call with the researcher. If you choose to write letters, we will write back and forth for as long as you would like, for up to six months. You will only be asked to participate in one phone call, but if you have new insights or experiences you would like to share, you are welcome to call the research team more than once. The phone call will be recorded and then transcribed, and once it has been transcribed, the recording will be deleted. If you would prefer and have access to email, you can email me to participate in the study and I will correspond with you via email.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?** You will be asked to answer questions and reflect on your experience in prison in the state of Mississippi. You will be asked questions about your day-to-day life and experiences in prison, and specifically, how heat impacts you, and if that has changed at all over the course of your time at (facility name).

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?** There are no known risks to participating in the study. It may be uncomfortable to discuss experiences surrounding incarceration. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researchers have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential risks.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** There are no direct benefits to the participant for participating in the study.

**DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?** Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Whether you participate in this research or not will have no impact on your status at (facility name) or impact your parole eligibility, and taking part in this research project offers no special/extra advantage or benefits from prison officials.

**WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?** We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law, but you should be aware that all of our correspondence may be monitored by prison staff.

For this study, we will assign a code to your data so that the only place your name will appear in our records is on the consent document and in our document that links you to your code. Only the research team will have access to the link between you, your code, and your data. The only exceptions to this are if we are asked to share the research files with the CSU Institutional Review Board. When we write about the study to share with other researchers, we will write about the overall information we have gathered. When using your letter responses, you will not be identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other information that would identify you private. Information we receive from you from our phone calls will not be used in future studies beyond this one.

You should know that if you describe feelings of harm to self or others, this will be reported to the prison so that you can get assistance and resources. If participating in this study makes you feel unwell or harms your mental health, please reach out to healthcare staff within the facility so that they can provide you the support you need.

**WILL I RECEIVE COMPENSATION?** You will not receive any compensation for your participation in this research. However, if you choose to participate via phone call, you will be reimbursed for the cost of the phone call. During the phone call, the research team will confirm your inmate ID number and spelling of first and last name for money transfer details and will confirm the GTL for phone funds transfer plan, as well as ask you if you have any questions. The research team will transfer money to participants within 2 weeks of the date of the phone call.

**WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?** If you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Tara Opsal at [REDACTED] or Austin Luzbetak at [REDACTED], or kaluz@rams.colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: 970-491-1553, CSU\_IRB@colostate.edu, or by mail: Institutional Review Board, Colorado State University, 2011 Campus Delivery, Fort Collins, CO 80523-2011.

**WHAT DO I HAVE TO DO WITH THIS PAPER?** This paper about consent is yours to

refer back to or get information from if you have questions. If you decide to participate in this study via phone, you will be asked to give consent verbally. If you decide to participate via email, you will be asked to include text acknowledgement of having read the document and consenting to participate.

---

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study      Date

---

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

---

Name of person providing information to participant      Date

---

Signature of Research Staff

## APPENDIX G

### FINAL IRB AMENDMENT, VERBAL SCRIPT FOR CONSENT WAIVER

Thank you for reaching out to participate in the project titled *Experiences of Temperature in Mississippi Prisons*.

The length of this phone call is flexible. We will try to cover as much information as possible, but I understand your call time is limited, and you can always call me back.

First, I want to reiterate a few key points from the consent form.

You are being asked to participate in this study as a person who is in prison in the state of Mississippi. My name is Austin Luzbetak, and I am carrying out this study as a part of a PhD dissertation project.

The purpose of this study is to understand how people who are in prison in Mississippi experience life in prison and how the prison infrastructure affects them. Specifically, this study is trying to understand how heat and high temperatures affect people in prison.

You will only be asked to participate in one phone call, but if you have new insights or experiences you would like to share, you are welcome to call the research team more than once. The phone call will be recorded and then transcribed, and once it has been transcribed, the recording will be deleted.

You will be asked to answer questions and reflect on your experience in prison in the state of Mississippi. You will be asked questions about your day-to-day life and experiences in prison, and specifically, how heat impacts you, and if that has changed at all over the course of your time at (*facility name*).

There are no known risks to participating in the study. It may be uncomfortable to discuss experiences surrounding incarceration. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researchers have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential risks.

There are no direct benefits to the participant for participating in the study.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Whether you participate in this research or not will have no impact on your status at (*facility name*) or impact your parole eligibility, and taking part in this research project offers no special/extra advantage or benefits from prison officials.

We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law, but you should be aware that all of our correspondence may be monitored by prison staff.

For this study, we will assign a code to your data so that the only place your name will appear in our records is on the consent document and in our document that links you to your code. Only the

The research team will have access to the link between you, your code, and your data. The only exceptions to this are if we are asked to share the research files with the CSU Institutional Review Board. When we write about the study to share with other researchers, we will write about the overall information we have gathered. When using your letter responses, you will not be identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other information that would identify you private. Information we receive from you from our phone calls will not be used in future studies beyond this one.

You should know that if you describe feelings of harm to self or others, this will be reported to the prison so that you can get assistance and resources.

You will not receive any compensation for your participation in this research. However, you will be reimbursed for the cost of the phone call. At the end of the phone call, I will ask for your inmate ID number and confirm the spelling of first and last name for money transfer details and will confirm the GTL for phone funds transfer plan. The research team will transfer money to participants within 2 weeks of the date of the phone call.

Do you have any questions for me about the consent form you received, which I just reiterated above?

Do you have any questions for me about the research project in general?

Do I have your consent to participate in this study, and may I record this conversation?

Great, thank you so much. Let's begin.

## APPENDIX H

### FINAL IRB AMENDMENT, PHONE CALL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long have you been incarcerated?
  - a. Have you changed facilities during your sentence? If yes, feel free to consider the following questions from the perspective of other facilities, too, if you're able to remember.
2. Does the prison you're in have air conditioning, to your knowledge?
  - a. If it does, do you know what parts of the prison do have air conditioning? How much time do you spend in those areas?
3. What is it like in prison on extremely hot days? How, if at all, does heat shape what you are able to do and how you spend your time in prison?
4. Does heat shape the work you do in prison in any way (i.e. how often you work or what kind of work you are able to do)?
5. Has prison infrastructure (such as air conditioning or fans) changed at all during your time incarcerated at the facility you're in, to your knowledge?
  - a. Are there any other ways that you feel the prison is helping (or not) you live at a comfortable temperature?
6. Have you noticed any differences in temperature or the number of heat waves in the time you've spent at your facility? In other words, do you think these extreme temperatures have increased or decreased at all?
  - a. If yes, how have these changes impacted your life in prison?

APPENDIX I

DEMOGRAPHIC TABLE OF PARTICIPANTS

<b>Name/Pseudonym</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Place of incarceration during enrollment in study</b>
Mike	White	M	MSP
Monica	White	F	MCIW (formerly CMCF, same facility grounds)
Alonzo	Black	M	MSP
Sam	Black	M	MSP
Darius	Black	M	SMCI
Ava	White	F	MCIW (formerly CMCF, same facility grounds)
Sasha	White	F	MCIW (formerly CMCF, same facility grounds)
Morgan	White	F	MCIW (formerly CMCF, same facility grounds)
Stephanie	Black	F	MCIW (formerly CMCF, same facility grounds)
Alex	White	F	MCIW (formerly CMCF, same facility grounds)
Marissa	Black	F	MCIW (formerly CMCF, same facility grounds)
Kayla	Black	F	MCIW (formerly CMCF, same facility grounds)
Carter	Black	M	MSP