Life and Death
in a Carceral State

Narratives of Loss and Survival

Texas After Violence Project
Texas Justice Initiative
Life and Death in a Carceral State

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Life and Death in a Carceral State: Narratives of Loss and Survival is a collaborative project of the Texas After Violence Project and the Texas Justice Initiative that documents, archives, and shares the stories of those whose lives have been directly impacted by Texas’ criminal justice system. In 2017, we documented the experiences of people whose loved ones died in police, jail, or prison custody, as well as stories of formerly incarcerated people about their confinement and life after prison. This year, we will continue to document the stories and experiences of the loved ones of people who died in state custody and are beginning a new documentation project on the health impacts of incarceration.

TAVP and TJI are dedicated to using qualitative and quantitative research toward creating criminal justice systems in Texas that value restorative justice and community healing over punishment and revenge. We see Texas as a carceral state not only because of its high jail and prison incarceration rates, but also because our politicians and policymakers have, for many decades, embraced a carceral state of mind, the false and misguided belief that only policing and punishment are the most effective ways to address violence and crime.

TAVP’s mission is to use oral history and digital multimedia to document and study the impacts of interpersonal and state violence on individuals, families, and communities. Since 2007, TAVP has collected hundreds of hours of stories that serve as resources for community dialogue and public policy. We hope these resources will help prevent future violence and promote restorative, nonviolent responses in the aftermath of violence. An open-data initiative, TJI’s mission is to build narratives about who is dying in Texas’ criminal justice system, bring attention to the lives that have been lost, and provide a foundation for research to implement solutions that will save lives. In 2016, TJI launched an online interactive database documenting close to 7,000 deaths in police, jail, and prison custody in Texas between 2005-2015. Since the database debuted, researchers, advocates, lawyers, journalists and loved ones of people who have died have all used it to learn more about the fatal impact of Texas’s criminal justice system. Formerly housed in the Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis (IUPRA) at UT-Austin, this year TJI is transitioning into an independent nonprofit organization.

Recognizing the limitations of perspectives based solely on government numbers, our goal was to create space for people to tell their stories in their own words, in their own way, without fear of judgment or reprisal. While we ask storytellers to lead the direction of their interviews, we also identified several areas of inquiry: life history and family background; experiences of loss, grief, trauma, and healing; interactions with police, investigators, prosecutors, corrections officers, victims’ advocates, and others in the criminal justice system; how criminal justice systems succeeded or failed to meet their needs; what could have prevented these tragedies; victim survivors’ visions of justice in aftermath of tragedy; and what the public needs to know.

We hope our documentary project plays some small role in recognizing and honoring the experiences and dignity of everyone affected by interpersonal and state violence in Texas, experiences that are all too often co-opted, silenced, or ignored by criminal justice systems and mainstream media. We believe these narratives of loss and survival teach us important lessons about the real impacts of current law enforcement and criminal justice policies and practices. Although we only feature a few selected quotes from the interviews here, we encourage you to watch the full, unedited interviews, which are available online through the UT-Austin’s Human Rights Documentation Initiative.

Gabriel Solis  
Texas After Violence Project

Amanda Woog  
Texas Justice Initiative
After serving six years in prison for crimes committed as a direct outcome of addiction, Doug Smith is a dedicated advocate for criminal justice reform. Doug is currently a Criminal Justice Policy Analyst for the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition.
“Texas was on fire. Literally on fire.”

“We would wake up in the morning barely able to breathe because of the smoke. The heat was brutal. Those old units were like ovens because it was all masonry. You can’t put your back against the wall because the bricks are hot. The unit decides to have a lockdown in July. In a lockdown, you’ve got to put all of your belongings into a potato sack, pile up all of your bedding and somehow walk all the way across the yard to the gym for them to go through everything piece by piece, in July. There were 70-year-old men in those groups. Men with heart conditions, men with diabetes, having to carry their stuff across the yard and back in 100 degree heat. During that time, the shakedown crew goes through the dorm searching mattresses and crevices for contraband... 

...My friend Nathan was a young man, but he was on medical care for heart issues. The shakedown crew had taken his mattress. We’re on lockdown so it might be days before he gets another mattress. He’s out of breath. He’s tired. They’ve taken his mattress. The officer berates him. He’s trying to advocate for himself, but that’s taken as being too belligerent. Stress upon stress upon physical exertion in the heat with no access to air conditioning. He had a heart attack. Nathan’s gone. He didn’t die of natural causes. That was pure negligence on the part of TDCJ. There was a bill that they tried to pass this session that said, ‘If you’re going to do a lockdown in the summer months, make sure that that unit is air conditioned.’ The bill failed.”

Doug Smith
I was at the Walls Unit, where executions are performed. The pill line in that unit is the exact spot where Old Sparky used to sit. They built a new death chamber behind the infirmary. I remember realizing what was happening because everything is different on the day of an execution. At noon, they stop movement on the unit so they can bring in the van with the condemned person. Your life changes on those days. Everyone goes to dinner and then at six they hold everything still. I was firmly aware of 6:00 pm coming. Knowing that within a short walk from where I was someone was being put to death. The entire operation was casual and bureaucratic. Six o’clock comes, then a hearse goes in and brings the corpse out.

Doug Smith

“They built a new death chamber behind the infirmary.”
ANGELA BROWN

Angela Brown is the sister of Kevin Brown, who was shot and killed by Austin Police Department Sergeant Michael Olsen in 2007. After the tragic loss of two family members to police shootings, Angela has become an outspoken advocate against police violence and mass incarceration.
How do you experience Kevin now?

I’m trying to be a voice for him. I think that’s how to keep his spirit alive. Hopefully one day, something will actually change so families don’t have to deal with this. I’m hoping to make him proud by continuing to do this.

All this death is, I think, God’s way of saying to me, “Use your voice. This is what you need to do because there are people who are in your situation and can’t handle the stuff I’ve put you through. Just don’t give up. Don’t let death defeat you. Defeat death.”

ANGELA BROWN

A loving father, son, and brother, and an active member of Mount Zion Baptist Church on Austin’s East Side, Kevin Alexander Brown was shot and killed by Austin Police Department Sergeant Michael Olsen on June 3, 2007. He was 25 years old.
Melanie Young (right) is the sister of Vincent Young, who died while in the custody of Harris County Jail on February 13, 2017. Nisha Young (left) is Vincent’s younger cousin. Melanie and Nisha, along with other friends and family members, have been actively trying to get answers from jail and county officials about the circumstances surrounding Vincent’s death. Through the family’s “Justice for Vido” campaign, they have organized several rallies and protests in the ongoing quest for truth and justice.
I went into a blank space for thirty days.

I needed to see him because I know my brother wouldn’t do that to himself. For thirty days I couldn’t sleep. It’s like I was just coexisting. I was moving but I wasn’t aware that I was moving. It took me a while before I knew thirty days had passed, then I snapped back to reality.

Melanie Young

A native of Houston, Vincent Young was a father, son, brother and a valued member of the Fifth Ward community known for his charitable work with the homeless. According to the Harris County Sheriff’s Department, jail guards found Vincent hanging in an infirmary cell. But his family disputes the county’s findings that Vincent committed suicide, pointing to the fact that he was due to be released the following day, and that he had told them that he would be killed if he ever went back to Harris County jail. He was 32 years old.
“People need to know him as a person. Not as a convict. Not what you hear on TV.”

He was a person who was loving and caring. He was a father. He was a cousin. Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and he was there cleaning up and helping. He was a human being. Out of all of this, he was a human being, and he should have been treated as such. He was loved, and in order to be loved you got to give love. He left a legacy and he left loved ones.

Nisha Young

We are not going to stop marching. We are not going to stop rallying until something is done. And if rallying and marching is a circus show to you, then I’m sorry. But to us, this is personal. This is the most painful thing that I’ve had to go through. All I can do is fight.

Melanie Young
After being incarcerated for several years in county and state jails, Lauren Johnson emerged as a forceful advocate for formerly incarcerated people, inmates, and their families. She has worked the Austin/Travis County Reentry Roundtable, Texas Inmate Families Association, the X-Offenders Council, and the Grassroots Leadership Criminal Justice Program. She is currently the Criminal Justice Outreach Coordinator for the ACLU of Texas.
“I’d take my contraband radio and stick an earbud in my belly button...”

...then lie there and listen to music. Being stuck in jail added a layer of depth to that experience, spending the whole pregnancy knowing that I’m gonna be separated from this baby. There’s nothing I can do about it. I was shackled on the way to the hospital. Then I had a little baby. I got to spend two days in the hospital with him. I didn’t set him down. When I went back to jail, my t-shirt I had gotten to wear at the hospital still smelled like baby. I did not wash that t-shirt for the whole rest of the time that I was there.

Lauren Johnson
Vicki Mokuria is the wife of Tesfaye Mokuria, an Ethiopian political refugee who was shot and killed by police officers of the Dallas Police Department in 1993. Vicki was left to raise two young daughters on her own, and fought for years for her daughters to receive access to counseling through Crime Victims Services. After twenty years as a public high school teacher, Vicki is currently pursuing a doctorate in Urban Education.
“This is my story.

This is what happened.

I was calling for help."
Sara Mokuria’s father, Tesfaye Mokuria, was killed in front of her when Sara was ten years old. Sara has become outspoken about the deep social and emotional impacts of police violence on families and communities. Sara co-founded Mothers Against Police Brutality, a multi-racial, multi-ethnic coalition uniting mothers nationwide to fight for civil rights, police accountability, and policy reform.
We all went outside to watch the sunset. It was one of those beautiful Texas sunsets with the really strong magenta, orange, and pink, like a fire in the sky. The last thing I remember him saying to me was “I love you” after we had seen that sunset.

“I started wearing extra large clothing, like men’s sized large shirts and shorts. Looking back, I think I was just trying to disappear. I felt like there was a separation between me and the world. I didn’t know how to engage with people. It felt like the Grand Canyon and I wanted to disappear. I had so much anger from all these different angles and I just didn’t know how to articulate it or make sense of it or why I was so angry or who I was angry at. I was angry at the police officers. I was angry at the system. I was angry at my dad. I was angry at myself. Why didn’t I yell “stop?” Why did I duck down? Why did I survive? I felt like I was saving myself by ducking down instead of standing in front of him. I felt like I was disloyal to my father.”

Sara Mokuria
Many people contributed to this phase of the project, from planning and fundraising, research and coordinating, interviews and post-production, to helping construct the book you now hold in your hands. First and foremost, we’d like to thank the people that shared their stories with us: Lauren Johnson, Angela Brown, Doug Smith, Melanie Young, Nisha Young, Sara Mokuria, and Vicki Mokuria. They are the heart of this project, and we are so grateful to them.

Projects that document violence and tragedy require thoughtful, informed, and compassionate individuals to serve as researchers, coordinators, interviewers, videographers, and post-production staff. We are lucky to work with wonderful people who are dedicated to social justice and human rights. Our core project team includes: Tony Cherian, Jane Field, Matt Gossage, Celeste Henery, Gabriel Solis, and Amanda Woog. We were assisted along the way by TAVP’s exceptional 2016-17 interns: Ariel Alexander, Erin Bajema, Bridget Carolan, Alisa Fayne, Bethany Lacy, Mehdia Mrabet, and Amie Tran.

We also consulted with several advocates and experts during the initial planning phase, including Maurice Chammah, Ariel Dulitzky, Erica Gammel, Cephus “Uncle Bobby” Johnson, Brian McGiverin, Mark Menjivar, Eva Ruth Moravec, Wallis Nader, Lise Olsen, Jorge Antonio Renaud, Gloria Rubac, Eric Tang, and Nissa Tzun.

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