



March 13, 2023

Dear Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, Senator Kissel, Representative Fishbein, and Distinguished Members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Amy Smoyer and I have lived in New Haven, CT, since 2002. From 2003-2015, I worked at the Yale School of Public Health on research that explored the impact of incarceration on HIV risk behavior. Since 2015, I have worked in the Department of Social Work at Southern Connecticut State University. I am currently a tenured Associate Professor of Social Work. My teaching and research practice focuses on community-engaged research about the impact of incarceration on women's health and psychosocial outcomes. I have facilitated groups at York Correctional Institution and taught college courses at Manson Youth Institution. I have also been involved in New Haven re-entry initiatives for over 15 years. My qualitative research about incarceration has been shared at national and international conferences and in peer-reviewed journals. For more information about my work, please visit my website: www.amysmoyer.com

In solidarity with Stop Solitary CT, I stand in support of **S.B. 1196, An Act Concerning Procedures of the Department of Correction Relating to Strip Searches and The Transfer of Persons Who Are Incarcerated Between Correctional Facilities**. In this letter, I will exclusively be providing testimony on the part of the bill that addresses strip searching.

- Most incarcerated women are survivors of interpersonal violence who are living with addiction and/or mental health issues. The use of strip searches inside the York Correctional Institution further traumatizes this already vulnerable group, undermining the institution's rehabilitative goals.
- Other state jurisdictions successfully use scanners that promote community safety without violating the individual person. These tools can be used with both staff and incarcerated people to ensure that contraband is not brought into secure settings.
- The young men at Manson Youth Institution who participated in the college courses that I taught from 2017-2019 were required to undergo strip search at the end of each class meeting. This was a humiliating deterrent to their education that reinforced the narrative that they were lawbreakers who could not be trusted, rather than scholars seeking to learn and improve their lives.

In the United States, only incarcerated people can be strip searched without a warrant. This policy denies the humanity of incarcerated people and causes further harm and trauma. Your support for S.B. 1196 will promote safety inside prison and within our communities by reducing the harm produced by criminal-legal systems.

Sincerely,
Amy B. Smoyer, MSW, PhD
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Women's Experiences with Strip Search at York Correctional Facility (2011)

The following narratives come from interviews that Amy Smoyer conducted in 2011 with formerly incarcerated women about their experiences at York Correctional Facility (YCI) in Niantic, CT.

- All participants were living in New Haven at the time of the interviews and had been released from YCI in the last year.
- The interview questions asked about women's experience with food while incarcerated at YCI. There were no specific questions about strip searches, but this topic did arise over the course of the interviews.

Dr. Smoyer is an Associate Professor of Social Work at Southern Connecticut State University. Her program of research explores women's lived experiences of incarceration and the impact of these experiences on their health and psychosocial outcomes. For more information, please visit www.amysmoyer.com or email her at SmoyerA1@southernct.edu

1. All women are strip searched at ENTRY the facility.

Participant 17

I: What was it like going out to Niantic? What were you thinking about at that point?

P: At first, it felt like I was going to camp. (laughs) **When we got there, everybody got off the bus, they did strip search.** I didn't end up getting a bed until probably 2:00 in the morning. And then wake up is at 4.

I: So that was in the medical unit, in the intake? So why did it take them so long to get you into a bed?

P: Because there was so many new people coming in. And they have to give you your clothes and your sheets and...

I: So you're just waiting in the line and that's how long the line...

P: They have to do all the paperwork and... **it takes forever.**

Participant 21

I: Did you stay with your friend like when they first got you into the intake...

P: No, they separate you. Yeah, they separate you, they do. **Um, you go through A&D and they, like, search you, they strip search you. They make you take off all your clothes, pull up your butt cheeks and wash your hair out with this stuff that ruins your hair, and stuff like that, they just give you.** They just give you baloney sandwich when you get there, and that's it.

Participant 24

I: So when you went to, Niantic again, did they put you through the regular intake?

P: **I had to go through all that, yes. Strip, everything.**

2. Women are searched before leaving on a COURT RUN

- *COs are looking for contraband, including food.*
- *Women are not allowed to bring any snack or candy with them, even though they are usually gone all day. They are served a bag lunch with baloney sandwich and juice in court holding cell.*

Participant 3

P: Court runs, you also get up at 3:30 in the morning, to go over to what they call A&D. God knows what that means, you know, but my whole time in there I was like, "I'm not gonna retain this stuff cause I'm not going to ever come back here." You know, I'd say the last two months I was trying to learn what everything meant. Um, but this is the place for me to go where they process you in to strip-search you to go sit in another room to go on the bus to go to court. Mind you now, they wake you up at 3:30 to leave our unit by to go there. Okay, let's say there's 30 women in the whole, okay. We're waiting there from 4:00, after your little strip search, till 5:30, till the bus comes. And you know like I know, court don't start till... figure it takes an hour, by the time we get there, 6:30. We sit there till about 8:00, 8:30. Another van comes, takes the women to the different courts they got to go to... You sit there until you see the judge. Now mind you, if you don't even see the judge it's actually a seventeen hour day— for nothing... You're just sitting there all that time, till about 3:30. 3:30 you go back to Union Avenue, you sit at Union Avenue from that point till about 7:00 waiting for Bridgeport, cause for some reason Bridgeport's always the last bunch of girls that come back, to go back to York to be processed back in, another strip search to go back to your unit. Now, let's talk about the food they feed you on your court runs. Okay, now, it's bad-- Being in there the food is terrible, but the court runs, Oh- my- God; I didn't eat. Actually a girl, actually, you know, told me, what you need to do is just eat the bread. Cause I wouldn't eat nothing. They give you bologna.

...I used to try to get everybody's fruit and pile it in my sock. They would always be like, "You're not supposed to do that," but I would tell them, I said, "I don't eat nothing. Are you actually going to take the chance of me eating nothing for them seventeen hours?" I mean, you know, "You want to hold my oranges or my apples, or whatever it was? You want to hold them? I'll let you hold them." I said, "But don't even try to think that..." I said, "You don't know me. I will fall out. I will get the academy award on y'all bus. Don't try me."

I: And how would you get that through a strip search?

P: It's about handling it. You know, it was a job. It was hard. Sometimes I'd get-- Sometimes they would catch me and they'd be like, "You got to eat that." So I would put 'em-- But I would always take just two or three. You never try to get ridiculous. I would take them and put them all in my mouth and then when I would get out and get my little cereal, and like I said, I'd pour it in. I would take it out my mouth and wrap it up in the plastic.... Jolly Rancher. You know, I'm really going to do something dangerous with that.

Participant 27

P: Yeah, and um, I would not eat another baloney and cheese sandwich ever again, 'cause it just make me sick to my stomach, and headache, brain was throbbing, throbbing down, I was real sick.

I: So you avoided it for awhile and then when you ended up eating it you got –

P: I got sick.

I: You had a really bad reaction. Yeah. Did you end up having any more court runs after that time wher you got really sick?

P: Um, that's the one I just told 'em, "You know what, I'll take the two years." I don't want to go on a court run because, you know.

I: Were you nauseous already when you went in front of the judge? Like, did you already feel sick, or was it more like after it?

P: Yeah, I was feeling sick yeah. Um, they wake you up at 3:00 in the morning, you know, bring you to the, um, what do they call it? They bring you to where they, you know, strip search you and get ready to wait for the court run. They give you a bag of cereal, a little bag...They give you a little bag of cereal. They give you a fruit and one milk. To hold you down. And then, when you get to the lock up, they give you the baloney and cheese. And it's like, no good.

I: Does that have fruit with it too, or is it just the warm juice?

P: I think it's – yeah, they usually give you an apple or an orange.

I: So knowing how much you don't like that baloney and cheese, when were you were doing those runs, is there any way to bring food with you from the Tier?

P: No, you can't bring nothin' with you.

I: Because they do the strip search?

P: Mmm huh (affirmative)

I: Yeah. Do people try to bring stuff with them?

P: Yeah and if they get – they either throw it away or hurry up and eat it. You know?

3. Women may be searched leaving the CHOW HALL.

- COs are looking for food that women may try to smuggle out, which is not permitted.
- COs may randomly search women or pick out women who they suspect have food.
- The searches can be “pat down” over clothes or strip search.

Participant 3

P: Oh, no. And then, understand something. Not only that, when you [incarcerated women] would walk out [of the chow hall/cafeteria] they [COs] would do body searches...

I: And would the women get a ticket for that also or they just confiscate the food?

P: No, no, no. Only if you got stopped and they ask you a question, and then they searched you and seeing that you did have something. Sometimes they would give you a ticket or sometimes they would actually make you stand up against the wall with your head against the wall. “Stand up, stand up with your head against the wall.” A humiliation thing.

I: To search you or afterwards? After you got caught?

P: You got caught. After, you know, “You have anything?” “No, no, no, no.” Then they search and they find it. They’d be like, “Get against the wall, you’re not standing in line to be searched (?).” It’s about humiliation; it’s about their satisfaction. You have to realize you’re dealing with COs; they’re not normal people so a lot of them are a little freaky. You know what I mean? A lot of them are strange. They’re up on power trips. You know, a lot of them, it’s about humiliation. But, I always said, they go as far as you allow them. You know what I’m saying? I would have never done that. I don’t care if you’re-- I mean, I don’t care if I had to empty out. Give me a ticket. You know what I’m saying?

Participant 4

P: [Women who work in the kitchen will try to smuggle food out of the kitchen] They’ll do it, they’ll get away with it but sometimes they’ll do a search and you won’t know they doin’ it. So I seen a lotta people who throw-they got like tons of turkey in their pants, the baked potatoes, the oatmeal and they was checkin’ her and she got fired and went to seg. A lotta people was getting’ caught....you could get in serious trouble. Like in the chow hall like in the west side. They-the guards, you never know if they gonna check you. People sneak food and they check you going out. You should see all the food that they take out and put on the table. People tryin’ to sneak commissary to other people. They get checked and get ticketed and thrown in the garbage.

I: So why do you think people do that? Why do you think they sneak the stuff out even if they know they can get caught?

P: You be starving in there. You be starving.

Participant 5

P: Yeah, like I was going to say, when you are in the cafeteria, I would bring a napkin or a bag from my room with me and I would take the raisins or the cherries or the cake and I would wrap it up and then sneak it out, put it in my pants or my bra, whatever, and if you are lucky they don't search you on the way out.

I: What was your experience with that, did they ever search you?

P: Yeah, I have been searched a few times. Like I kind knew I was going to be searched like you just kind of feel it or tell and I would throw my stuff out before I leave because you get a ticket if you get caught with food. Or sometimes they would just throw it out, but most of the time they give you a ticket...

A lot of people sneak the hard-boiled eggs out too because they can't search your private areas They are not allowed to do that. So, a lot of girls would put them in their bras cause they are not allowed to pat your boobs down, they are not allowed to touch you there so that can touch around there but they can't actually touch your bra so a lot of girls would put the eggs in their actual bras, so it would look like their boobs and that's how they would get away with it and they would do the same thing with the apples. So they would say to their Bunkie "Give me your apple" so they could make it even and then when they got back to their cells and give her back her apple. Which is fine, cause it has skin.

Participant 15

P: Yeah, and you know you're gonna be hungry. You know you're gonna be hungry later and you've got like your 15 minutes to eat and 50 COs standing over you and, telling you to hurry and you're not allowed to talk while you eat. It's really horrible habit. You know, everybody just learns to shovel it all in, but, if you could even have a half hour, you wouldn't eat that much. And you'd feel full, you know. Then everybody tries to steal their bread and everything [from the cafeteria], to bring it back to the cell. I understand why, you get hungry later on. But you'll get strip searched leaving, just randomly, if they think you grabbed something, or just randomly. That's a bitch to get strip searched to see if you have some bread. I mean really, it's white bread, dude, leave me alone.

Participant 21

P: And, ok, say we had like slop, bread, vegetables and a fruit and I would have, I would have less than 5 to 10 minutes to eat that. And I have my fruit left, I would have to sneak my fruit. Like, either put it in my bra, or put it in my pants, so I could go back. Because if they, 'cause if they seen you with it in your hand, they would make you throw it away.

The first time, I was like, "How do I bring this?" And then the girl did it for me and showed me how to do it and then she just put it in her bra and that's it. And some girls just put it right here, in their pants.

I: And so, how do you know that the COs aren't looking at you when you're doing that?

P: Just wait 'til they look over, like wait 'til they look away or wait 'til they're distracted and just do it.

I: So were you nervous when you did it the first time?

P: Of course, I was nervous! Because I seen like. The first time I did it, I was really, really nervous. 'Cause like I did it and then like the person in front of me got caught doing it and then, so they penalized them and I guess they went into seg or something. Well. I think that's kind of messed up, like, if you have food that you want to save, just let them save it. Why not let them save it and throw them away, let it go to waste?

I: So that first time you did it, you had the orange, you had put it in your bra, and the woman in front of you got caught? So when it came for you to, like, exit past the CO, did they look at you or anything?

P: Yeah, they were looking. They would point out like, I don't know, **it was just up to their discretion to figure out whether you had it or not, to search you or not.** Just had to act like you weren't doing nothing...

I: So, do you think people trying to sneak out the food and take it across and everything. Because they're really hungry and stuff or because they're trying to kind of, play a game, you know, just because it's something to do...

P: No, 'cause they're hungry!...People starve in there.

4. Women may be searched before and after WORK.

- *Kitchen workers may be strip searched after work, at the discretion of CO, if they suspect they are bringing food out of the kitchen to the dorm.*
- *Commissary workers are strip searched as they enter and as they leave work.*

Participant 3 (Kitchen Job)

P: Um, I've actually, because I worked in the kitchen, there was a CO, a woman, and I used to call her a freak. I had issues with her and I created the situation with her. Because every time I came back-- She's the one who strip-searched me. And that means basically, you strip naked, you do the bend over, cough thing, spread your butt cheeks...

I: Every time you came from work?

P: Every time I came from work.[...] Oh, they can strip search you anytime they want, but, for some reason she just had a thing about doing that. You know what I mean? She do it with everybody, but it was getting to a point it was getting done too much with me.

I: So how often would you say it was being done? Like daily or twice a week?

P: Every other day. Okay, it actually got to a point I actually told my boss, I said, "Next time she strip searches me, I'm quitting." I said, "Cause you know the woman's a freak.

I: Had she caught you bringing food out of the workplace?

P: Never, never, never, never.

I: So she just started that—

P: She never even caught me with food. Okay, she always caught me with my Motrin.

[Discusses going to DB and charges dropped because panel understood she used Motrin for chronic pain. It was not contraband.]

I: So after that did the strip searches stop from that one woman, or did you—

P: Next time she did the same thing-- She didn't catch no food on me. All I ever had was Motrin. I would always get caught with Motrin. I could actually tell him. I says, "Every time—" Like I told the man--

I: So at that point, pretty soon after that, or, she stopped doing, or?

P: I quit.

I: Oh, you quit your job?

P: I quit my job.

Participant 24 (Kitchen Job)

P: The lady that searched me that morning, she worked a double shift. So that morning, me and her had an argument, 3:30 in the morning. So when they called and said, well, "Search her," she was happy to search me. I almost got away with it [stealing onions from her job in kitchen]. Yeah, she made me go in the bathroom and strip. So, when I went to strip, I dropped the onions in the toilet and I turned around and just pulled off my clothes. And she was like, "You don't have nothing." But something said, look in the toilet. So, she looked in the toilet and she like...

I: So did you end up losing your job from that?

P: Yeah. I lost my job, but...

I: Oh, OK, so it was the 2 tickets and losing the job.

Participant 6 (Commissary Job)

I: It seems like from talking to people that work in the kitchen that there is a fair amount of food that moves out of the kitchen. Do commissary workers try to remove food from their jobs?

P: No, because we get stripped searched. We get strip searched coming in, we have to tell, say I had on a white Tshirt and thermal, that automatically came from commissary. So, if I have anything that I bought from commissary, they write it down. Like when I come in, I have to get in the log...

I: So if you came in just wearing whatever and you exited wearing a shirt..

P: Right, everything is written down and we are all stripped searched, even though they have cameras, the women strip search us. We have to take everything off and put everything back on.

I: So everything including your underwear?

P: No, we're in our bras and underwear

I: So is that a disincentive, does that make you not want to work at the commissary, since you have to be stripped searched?

P: At first I had an issue with it because, I'm like, why would somebody, you know, we were always told that if we needed something, ask. You know, from the big boss. So but everybody is not on the same level, you know, so, I had issues with it because I'm my own individual and I feel that I shouldn't be subjected to something just because you do something, doesn't mean that I have to do it. Just because I feel safe with you, doesn't mean that I am doing the same thing that you do. So, I had issues with that. So, at first I had I would have problems with it, and then when they put the cameras, they just put the cameras in, and I was like "Oh, we don't have to be strip searched anymore." We still do. So, it's like where's the trust there?

I: So it's not even a random strip search, right?

P: Everyday, so like where's the trust and, like I said...

Participant 6 (School)

P: School is on the maximum side so you get patted down when you go through the gates to the low security side so you **are always being pat searched** because we're not supposed to bring nothing from East side.

5. Women may be searched at the DISCRETION of the staff.

- *Women who were pregnant at YCI stated that they were less likely to be searched when pregnant.*
- *Gay women reported that they were more likely to be suspected of illicit behavior and searched.*
- *Women reported that if they kept a low profile, they were less likely to be “bothered” by the COs.*

Participant 28

I: And you would sneak it out [food from culinary class]?

P: And cheesecakes. Oh yeah. Of course.

I: Did you ever get caught for doing that? Or no...

P: And when you're pregnant, they don't search you as much. They leave you alone, even if they know you've got something. They'll leave you – they'll let you go. If you're not pregnant, they're on you like white on rice. If they catch something on you, “Oh! You get a ticket! [weird noise]” I be like, “Look. I don't get commissary. I needed this food for tonight when I'm hungry. “Oh, OK!”

Participant 6

P: OK, they [CO] do, say if you were a problem person, they [COs] know, because they all talk. Yeah, they harass you. They give you a hard time. You know, like I said, I never had any problems with them. Yeah, I did have problems with the way they talk to certain women. But, that's their mess so I didn't take that on. You know, so, it was a Hi and Bye situation. I have been in jail three times, and they still don't know my name. Some do, because I have worked with them or, they were in the unit that I was in, but other than that, I'm not, my name is not out there like that. Some people, as soon as they walk in the door, they are giving the COs a hard time so they're gonna bother them, they are going to always harass them, they are going always going to search them, they're always going to nitpick, so

Participant 8

P8: And, but I would go to [Bible Study to] see this person, too. Now, Bible Study has ended, OK? Now, I'm...it's the dead of winter and I got the coat on, and I'm standing up talking to a girl who is sitting on the window sill with her back to the window and these two LTs come down in the little truck...they don't know the facilitator is there. So they [COs] come zooming down in

the cart – it’s snowing out – and they proceed to walk right in and pull us out, me and the girl, out of Bible Study. OK. Now, once they see the guy, it’s too late, they’ve already pulled us out. So who’s in the booth? This lady cop is in the booth... But, she’s in the booth so they throw me up against the wall to do a search. Why? Because he, well first thing, before he even said, did the search and threw me up, “Whattayas doing? Where do you live?” And I lived in 1 North at the time and she lived in 2 South. So, he said, “Oh...so you came to Bible Study to meet each other! Oh, you weren’t, weren’t having Bible Study.” I said, “Listen, sir” and I tried to talk, he wouldn’t let me talk. So now he grabs the lady, because he can’t touch us, to come and he throws, has her put me up against the wall and search me because that’s just procedure. Which is very overboard to me.

And now, she’s feeling it, she feels the coffee balls. Like I had cut my coat so they fall down in. And she could feel them and I could tell – she don’t want to tell on me because she’s cool relatively – she’s changed though, now – this is back, a couple of years back. And I’m like, I’m trying to whisper to her, you know, “Come on man, it’s only coffee.” And she keeps going over it, like, you know and she stops then she over here was the 2, and the pies were like 2 for 1 that week, so it’s was like, they look like, um, pies from McDonald’s they’re actually in a box. So, boom, she pulls the pies out, puts them on the ground and now she pulls everything out so its looked like this little, like, “bust”, you know. He has her go and get a camera – true story – and says to me, “You got anything else? and has her take. Everybody’s comin’ up out of Bible Study now, looking at me. It looks like I’m being arrested in jail, like for a drug bust....

But the whole thing was, is that, all I was trying to do was give some food and coffee and creamer and sugar to somebody that had nothing. All that. And I went through that embarrassment of being put against the wall. Searched. Everybody and it ruined my Bible...whether, whether I went to Bible Study or not, I participated, it was over. He didn’t know all that and he didn’t bother to look. So, that is how I was treated for trying to give something to a friend. You know? So, it’s like crazy, what could happen...

He was like, “What were you doing? What was up with the sexual overtone?” He didn’t get it. Because he wasn’t there to see. The way that they came zooming in, though, was so wrong. It was like you said. To me, it was like a bust a street. Because you gotta picture the way me and [Name] were standing there talking... The way that we were there and everything, to him, you know, that’s where his mind went. Which was really sick. #1 it was Bible Study. #2 you know, why did it have to be that way? Because we were talking? Because of the way I was standing in front of her? Maybe the way the way I look? Whatever it was, whether or not, it had no reason to be searched. So, to me it was an illegal search and seizure. #1 you made it sound, you said it just right. #1 the stop was illegal and #2 to search me was illegal and then #3 to take the evidence and change it, the amount. So it was really like, how we get treated on the street, exactly. But the whole thing was...

I: And so, when you say that it was embarrassing, I mean, how was that? The fact that you were searched was embarrassing? What was it that was embarrassing?

P8: The whole thing was embarrassing was the way he was saying um, like I was having um sexual relations with this girl, was the part that was embarrassing. Well, I'm gay. There's no embarrassment on that of my part. But the girl isn't. She's way younger than me. She's a good friend of mine. She's like 20 years old. You know, come on.