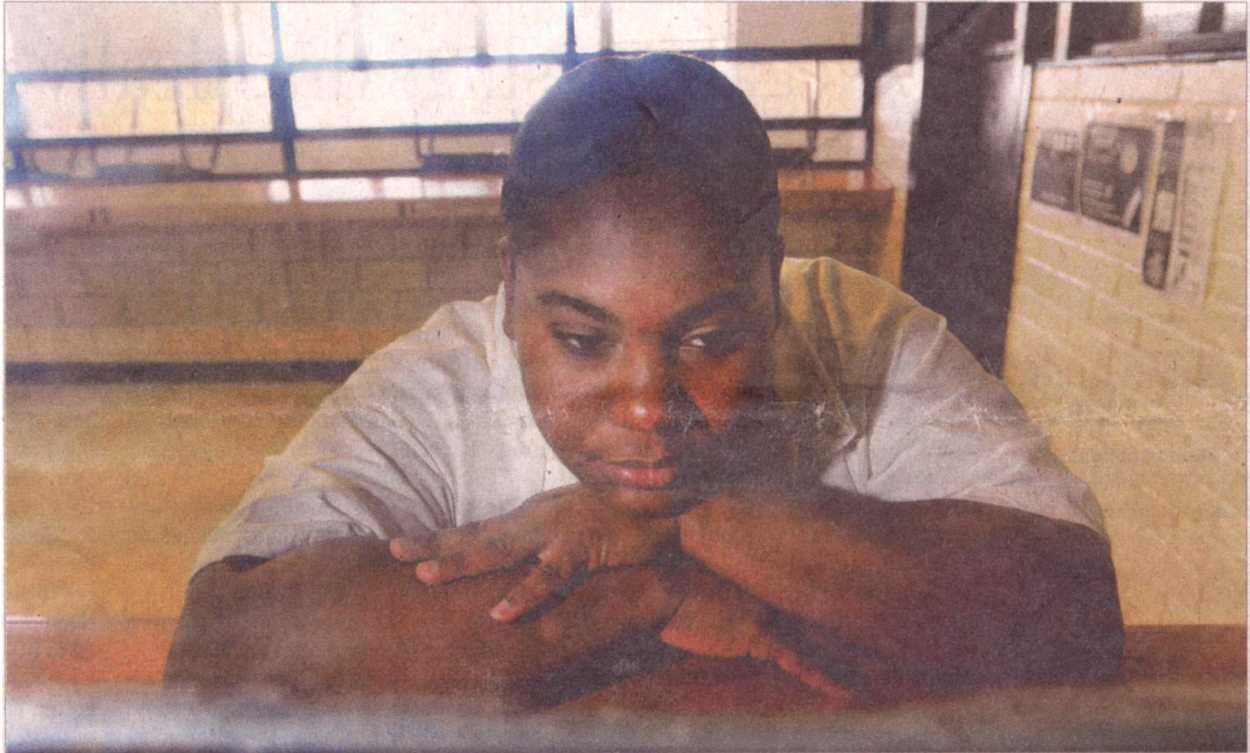


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KIDS OR CRIMINALS? | GROWING UP AND GETTING OUT

'Prison is not for rehabilitation. I know that's what they say, but it's not. It teaches you to be a better criminal.'



Rose Baca/Staff Photographer

Anisha Walker, 32, is imprisoned in Gatesville. At 14, she was certified to be tried as an adult on a murder charge in Tarrant County and received a 35-year sentence. She was denied parole in May and will be eligible again next year.

COMING OF AGE

BEHIND BARS

Society pays for raising young offenders in prison system

One in an occasional series

By JENNIFER EMILY
and DIANE JENNINGS
Staff Writers

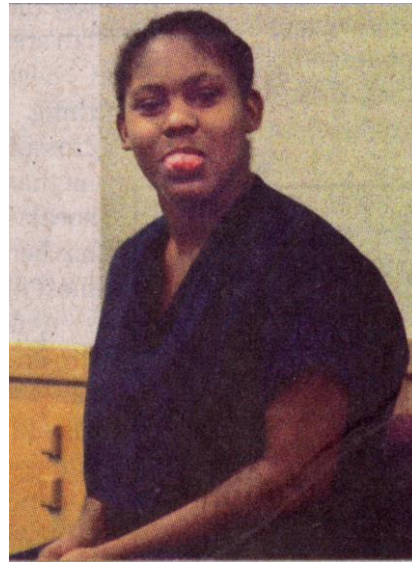
When Anisha Walker showed up at a Texas prison, her hands were so tiny she could slip out of her shackles. She looked like a child because she was a child — 14 years old and still in puberty.

The guard figured the kid must be in the wrong place.

“She got on the phone and said, ‘I’ve got an effing 14-year-old here at the back gate,’” Walker recalled in an interview, sitting behind streaked glass in the Crain Unit in Gatesville. She’s in for murder.

“She wouldn’t let me on the unit. They said, ‘Yes, she’s supposed to be here, let her in.’”

On any given day, more than 2,100 Texas inmates like Walker are serving time in adult prison for crimes they committed between the ages of 10 and 16, according to a *Dallas Morning News* analysis. If Texas counted 17-year-olds as minors, like most states do, the number of those imprisoned for childhood offenses would grow to nearly 8,000.



1997 File Photo/Tom Fox

Before she was sentenced to prison for murder, the 14-year-old Walker stuck out her tongue in court as a photographer snapped her photo.

VIDEO: Inmates talk about growing up in prison.
[dallasnews.com/
kids-or-criminals](http://dallasnews.com/kids-or-criminals)

Raised by the prison system

Some go in before they outgrow their first bras or their voices change. Friends on the outside learn about life through the messy trial and error of growing up. Those behind bars never really grow up and are oblivious to real-world expectations and opportunities.

Not that those sent to prison at an early age don’t deserve to be there. Khristopher Hood bawled like a baby his first night behind bars inside a juvenile facility at age 11. But that was after he sexually assaulted two younger relatives.

Walker, a ninth-grader, went to prison for killing a man after selling him cocaine. So while other kids read Harry Potter, Walker worked in the fields, picking and planting fruits and vegetables.

Judy Brumbelow, whose 13-year-old daughter, Kelly, was stabbed to death in 1989 by a 12-year-old neighbor in Round Rock, said no amount of time behind bars is too much for a kid like that.

“It doesn’t matter if he was 12, 22, 42 or 82,” she said of the killer, who’s still serving 30 years. “My child is just as dead.”

So maybe you don’t feel sorry for kids who grew up behind bars. But you should feel sorry for everyone else, because those kids are coming out as adults, often as ill-prepared for life beyond the razor wire as they were when they went in. No programs exist in Texas prisons specifically geared to those about to be released after coming of age on the inside. They come out more likely to commit new offenses and have mental health issues.



CHRISTINA MELTON CRAIN worries about the implications of children coming of age behind bars.

“The real question?” said Michele Deitch of the University of Texas at Austin, who studies juvenile offenders. “Is putting them in that cage with virtually no treatment or services going to change them in a way that’s for the better?”

Even the person once charged with overseeing Texas’ prisons worries.

“We have been raising minors, raising children, in our prison system, in our adult prison system,” said Christina Melton Crain. She oversaw the Texas Department of Criminal Justice’s board as an appointee of former Gov. Rick Perry.

“These people are coming back to be your neighbors, to be your grocery sackers, to be washing your cars. ... They’ve been incarcerated since they were 14, and now they’re 40, so what are you going to do with something like that?”

Anisha’s downfall

Anisha Walker’s struggles began long before she went to prison.

Now 32, she grew up living with various relatives. Her mother had her at 15 and struggled with drug use. Walker eventually went to live with her paternal grandparents and thrived. They loved her and she loved them. They tried to shelter her from the world.

At age 11, a visit with her mother altered Walker’s life.

Her mother said the man Walker believed to be her daddy wasn’t. The revelation meant that she was not biologically related to those loving grandparents.

“I kind of got rebellious after that,” said Walker.



Inmates work on the “hoe squad” outside a Texas prison unit in Huntsville, where they plant and pick produce.

Rose Baca/Staff Photographer

She was held in local juvenile detention after running away and was detained by police in 1996 for car theft. Juvenile authorities released Walker to her mother, who Walker said was still using drugs. Their reunion was brief.

“We went our separate ways, and I started selling drugs so I could survive,” Walker said. “It was either that or sell my body.”

Though Walker admits to murder, she is “embarrassed” by prosecutors’ claims that she was a 14-year-old prostitute.

When her much older boyfriend was arrested, Walker tried to rob a buyer to raise bail.

On May 23, 1997, she shot Nigerian immigrant Pedro Enemku in the head after selling him crack cocaine at an Arlington apartment complex.

Walker’s case could have been handled in juvenile court. But she became the youngest person at the time tried as an adult in Tarrant County. She wore a red bow in her hair as prosecutors argued that authorities had done all they could to rehabilitate her even though she’d never been to state juvenile lockup.

Before her trial began, Walker wrote to the judge and confessed from jail, where she was isolated from other inmates because of her age. She faced a life sentence.

“God’s going to have mercy on me, and I ask that you please have a little mercy on me, too.”

Minutes before she was sentenced, Walker turned to a *News* photographer and, in a childish moment, stuck out her tongue.

Her sentence: 35 years.

The ‘hoe squad’

Once she made it through the prison gate, she took off her clothes for a strip search.

“The most demeaning thing was getting naked in front of that officer, bending over and spreading my butt cheeks,” Walker said. “She was very concerned about my age, though, and did not search me in front of the other inmates.”

She lived apart from other inmates for two weeks before moving into the general population. A program for youthful offenders that now separates young inmates until age 18 and provides education and counseling was only in its infancy. It didn’t alter Walker’s prison experience, she said.

Once in the dorms with other women, she began work in the fields on the "hoe squad." They planted and picked produce and carried rocks.

The older women noticed her age. They noticed her looks.

"I had a really nice body then," she said.

But that body ached from the field work, and she said she now has arthritis in her knees and hips.

"I'm in pretty good shape and I always have been, so I never passed out or anything," she wrote recently in a letter on pink stationery.

Her first cellmate was in her late 30s or early 40s. Her second was in her mid-20s.

Today, Texas cellmates are within nine years and 40 pounds of each other when possible. Inmates as young as Walker was back then no longer work on the hoe squad.

Breaking the rules

Walker fought and broke the rules throughout her first decade in prison.

"I felt like I was going to have to knock the biggest one out and the rest of them will leave me alone," Walker said. "I came through the door with a big chip on my shoulder. I fought a lot. I bucked the system a lot. So, I got in a lot of trouble."

When guards reassigned her to the kitchen, her reaction was immature. She got in trouble on purpose so she could return to the hoe squad and the inmates she knew.

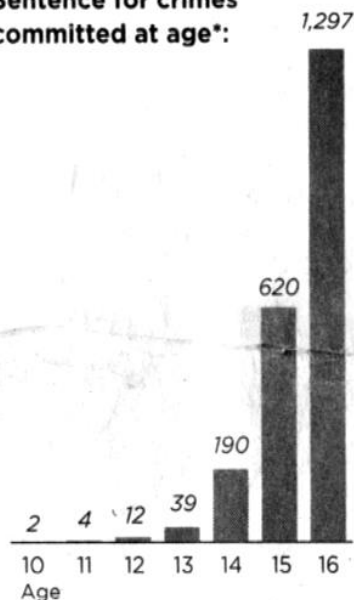
It didn't register that she was hurting her chances for success in prison.

Walker said growing up in prison didn't teach her anything useful for life as an adult — inside or outside.

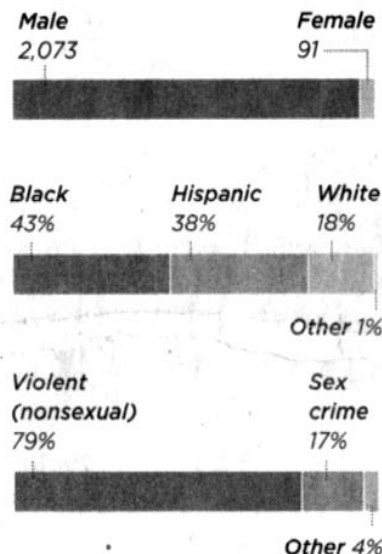
Coming of age behind bars

A snapshot of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice data in March 2015 shows more than 2,100 inmates are serving time in adult prisons for crimes committed when they were ages 10 to 16. Some were released on parole and have returned to finish their sentence. Some have been incarcerated decades for their childhood crime.

Sentence for crimes committed at age*:



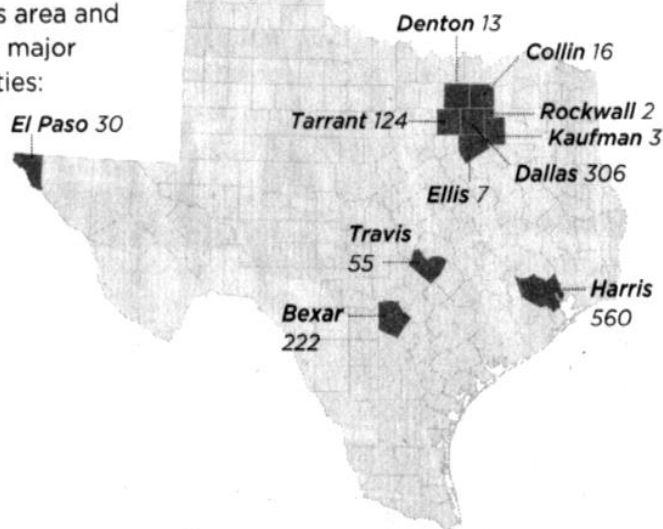
Demographics



*Some inmates are not prosecuted until several years after the crime was committed, such as in sexual assault cases where victims do not come forward immediately.

Where they're from

Inmates serving time in prisons for crimes committed as children in the Dallas area and other major counties:



SOURCE: Dallas Morning News analysis of Texas Department of Criminal Justice data.

Troy Oxford/Staff Artist

Sketches of the offenders



KHRISTOPHER HOOD was detained at age 11 for sex crimes. He says that as a child, he watched his father rape his mother.

Name: Khristopher Hood

Current age: 31

Age at offense: 11

Charge: Two counts of aggravated sexual assault of a child

Sentence: Juvenile sentence of 40 years

Status: Application for parole under review

Prison life: Lives in protective custody at a prison near Wichita Falls. Works on the hoe squad picking up rocks. Studied air conditioning and automotive repair while behind bars.

Life before prison: Had completed fifth grade in Sachse when arrested. Earned GED at a juvenile facility before transfer to adult prison two days after his 18th birthday.

In his own words: "Eventually, I

realized that it didn't matter if I was 21 or if I was 51, sooner or later they were going to have to let me go. ... If they decided to keep me until I'm 51 — I hope not — but I can survive it. I've already done 20. What's another 20?"

Name: Anisha Walker

Current age: 32

Age at offense: 14

Charge: Murder

Sentence: 35 years

Status: Denied parole in May; eligible again in 2016

Prison life: Arrived at adult prison at 14 and put to work in the fields. Earned a GED and an associate degree. Now works as a butcher in the kitchen. Studying culinary arts.

Life before prison: Shuttled between relatives and single mother. Ran away from home repeatedly, beginning at age 11. Placed on probation as a juvenile for stealing a car. Began living on the streets and dealing drugs to make money.

In her own words: "Prison is not for rehabilitation. I know that's what they say, but it's not. It teaches you to be a better criminal. So for my first 10 years that's what I was learning, to be a better criminal — until I made the decision that this place has my body but I'm not going to let them have my mind."

"Prison is not for rehabilitation. I know that's what they say, but it's not," she said. "It teaches you to be a better criminal. So, for my first 10 years, that's what I was learning, to be a better criminal — until I made decisions that this place has my body, but I'm not going to let them have my mind."

Parole denied

The parole board denied Walker's early release in May and will reconsider next year. If she serves her full sentence, she will be released in 2032 at age 49. Once she is released, how well she copes with the setbacks that most ex-cons confront will determine whether she ends up back in prison.

She never learned what other girls learned. She wonders whether she can walk in high heels. She imagines her own Samsung Galaxy S6.

Walker dreams of having a baby, but didn't grow up seeing people raise them. She's never cared for herself, let alone someone else.

She wants to start a catering company. That's the only dream she can feed in prison. She is working on a bachelor's degree in culinary arts. A friend pays tuition for classes behind bars.

Walker is a butcher in the prison kitchen, a coveted job during the summer because she gets to spend time in the freezer. Texas prisons are not air-conditioned.

She indulges her fondness for cooking by "blow frying" meals with 1,600-watt hair dryers.

That's the prison way.

Thinking about life on the outside

Hair dryers are available to female inmates at the prison commissary for \$21.50. Old potato chip bags become mini-ovens. But keeping the bag — which is considered contraband — can mean trouble with the guards.

A cake recipe calls for crushed cookies, cream cheese, a bit of water and a Snickers bar or Honey Bun.

Smash the cookies and add water. Flatten and put the candy bar or pastry inside. Roll it up, put it in a bag and turn on the hair dryer until the ingredients meld. Use cream cheese for icing.

Cooking, Walker said, is how she shows her love for her fellow inmates. Hugging someone who is crying could mean a reprimand.

"I'm not really affectionate," she said. "And, in here, you get in trouble for touching."

The bonds that form in prison provide some comfort. But it's far from the attachments kids learn to make in the free world.

Some have pen pals they turn to for friendship, encouragement and, sometimes, a form of love.

Others "form family units like they had 'play moms' and 'play dads' and 'play brothers' or just really, really close friends," Walker said.

How long these artificial kinships last depends. They typically don't survive once an inmate is released or moved to another unit. Betrayal is routine behind bars.

Walker still has family members who care even though she doesn't see them often. Once released, Walker plans to live with her aunt Tara Roberts in Dallas County.

"I just remember the little child, and I know the adult she has become," said Roberts. "She's going to make it. She needs a chance, and I'm going to help."

Walker believes she'll be able to handle whatever comes her way. She'll have to reconcile growing up not making choices with living in a world of constant decisions and consequences.

"I committed a crime, a heinous crime. I killed somebody. I took a life. So, I deserve to be punished for it," she said. "But I believe I've paid my debt to society and I also believe [with] the skills I've learned ... I can be a productive citizen."

Khri's story

Khristopher Hood sometimes feels four days shy of his 12th birthday. That's how old he was on his first night behind bars.

He's never gone to middle school. He doesn't set an alarm clock. He awakens each day when his cell doors open.

Looking back on the part of Hood's childhood spent in the free world, it seems like the 31-year-old was molded into the person who committed the crimes that sent him to prison.

At 5-foot-2 and 200 pounds, Hood showed up for the fifth grade unwashed and in dirty clothes. It was a metaphor for his home life. What might be horrific to most was routine in the Hood household.

Another child sexually abused Hood on several occasions by the time he was 9.

According to a Dallas County juvenile department report, "the mother and father threatened to beat [Hood] black and blue if he was to tell anyone."

It didn't end there.

Hood said his father taught him to masturbate while they watched porn. He said he watched his father rape his mother.

His father is a registered sex offender in Dallas who served time in prison for sexually assaulting Hood's mother. Neither parent could be reached for comment.

Didn't make 6th grade

In 1995, the summer before he was to begin sixth grade, the younger Hood was detained by Sachse police.

He told them that he used his hand to penetrate two younger family members on several occasions. He said he tried to use his penis but was unable.

Hood said that he was just acting out what he had seen and experienced.

"I didn't know at that particular time what I was doing was wrong," Hood said. "I know that now."

According to court records, he was hospitalized for six days in psychiatric care after he admitted to molesting girls and to "highly sexualized play" with other children. Records show the hospitalization ended when insurance would no longer pay.

Hood questions whether lengthy inpatient therapy would have been more beneficial to him and the public instead of a long prison sentence at his age.

"Keep them there for maybe one to two years, depending on their progress in therapy. Let them go through that for a little while," Hood said. "See if they make any progress there. Keep them longer until they are capable of going out there and surviving on their own."

In the state juvenile facility, and later in adult prison, he went through each day like a robot to physically and mentally protect himself.

It's how he made it through the day in juvenile lockup where, as a part of treatment, he had to admit what he did every day in front of other kids.

"Children arrested for sex of-

fenses were the most hated," Hood wrote in a letter after an interview. The "majority of it was ridicule and insults — calling me a 'child molester,' 'baby raper,' 'sex offender,' 'monster,' etc."

Incident reports from his time in juvenile lockup, released with Hood's permission, indicate that although he would at times make progress, he also made threats.

An August 1998 report documents that Hood said he wanted to "rape staff and peers." In May 1999, a staff member cited Hood for "masturbating/caressing."

Hood attended counseling sessions with other sex offenders while he was in a juvenile lockup. Eventually, he was kicked out of sex offender counseling. He said he couldn't overcome anger at his father and acted out.

But he still got other kinds of counseling.

An April 2001 report says, "Khris is having fewer problems" and his "mood and affect are appropriate. He verbalizes more and is not withdrawn." Another report two months later states, "it is apparent that he accepts full responsibility for his past behaviors" and is showing concern about what he did to the victims.

His efforts at change came too late. In 2001, a juvenile court judge ordered Hood to adult prison, deciding he was not ready to reunite with the free world. He moved to TDCJ two days after his 18th birthday.

Hood said he now realizes that he needs long-term sex offender counseling. But because of money constraints in the adult system, Hood won't be eligible for that help until he is closer to parole.

"It's kind of messed up," he said.

"I know what it's like to just be left in a cage, to put it politely, to rot for years at a time."

Christopher Hood

Longtime inmate finds replacements for family

No decisions

up behind bars never learn to make decisions — something that will hurt once they're released.

Walk in a straight line. Wear the same white uniform. Stand along a wall while guards count prisoners.

Hood, the grown man, is still shy and awkward. He describes himself as gullible and said he is frequently picked on. His thick-lensed, large-framed eye-glasses are too small for his head but slip down on his nose. He has difficulty maintaining eye contact.

Hood hasn't seen his parents in years but his mother occasionally sends a letter.

Inmates typically keep to themselves, but Hood replaced his absent family with three men he considers friends. After breakfast by 4:30 a.m. and work on the hoe squad, Hood spends as much time with them as he can.

They role-play and develop elaborate story lines — often inspired by *Star Wars* — that take them out of prison to a galaxy far, far away. They create games on paper because they don't have computers or board games. (Chess and dominoes are sold in the commissary.)

In some ways, Hood remains the kid he was on his first night behind bars. He lives in protective custody for his own safety.

Bigger, stronger inmates often ask the weak to "pay" for protection.

But Leonard Ziglar, a parolee who's been in and out of prison since he was a teenager, said inmates should never pay.

It may start with a friendly offer to pick up a treat from the prison commissary, said Ziglar, 54.

"You rather go down in a battle fighting to protect yourself than to fold up and be some-

body's bitch — 'cause then you going to end up wearing somebody's panties," Ziglar said.

Relating to animals

It's easy to feel heartache for the 11-year-old boy who entered the criminal justice system and just as easy to be wary of the 31-year-old man Hood is today.

"It doesn't matter if he was 12, 22, 42 or 82. My child is just as dead."

Judy Brumbelow, whose 13-year-old daughter, Kelly, was stabbed to death by a 12-year-old neighbor

Hood wants to prove he's a different person than the kid who was first locked up. He realizes he'll have to find a job to stay out of trouble whenever he gets out.

Hood, who earned his GED at 16, wants to work with abused animals when he's released because he identifies with them.

"I know what it's like to just be left in a cage, to put it politely, to rot for years at a time," Hood

said. "I know what it's like for them to just be left alone and abandoned and just treated like trash."

The state is considering whether Hood should be paroled. If he's denied, the parole board will review him periodically until 2035 — when he will complete his sentence.

"Eventually, I realized that it doesn't matter if I was 21 or 51, sooner or later they were going to have to let me go. I would rather it be sooner, so I do everything I can to make sure it's sooner," Hood said. "But if they decided to keep me until 51 — I hope not — but I can survive it. I've already done 20. What's another 20?"

Hood no longer cries like he did at 11. He's a grown-up now.

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How this report was compiled

Dallas Morning News reporters Jennifer Emily and Diane Jennings downloaded and analyzed the Texas Department of Criminal Justice database to identify more than 2,100 inmates serving time in adult prison for crimes committed between the ages of 10 and 16. They conducted in-person interviews and exchanged letters with inmates across the state. The inmates represented a mix of those who began their sentences in the juvenile system and those who stood trial as adults. Some had spent decades in prison while others had been released and returned for parole violations or new convictions but are still serving time for the crime they committed as children. The inmates ranged in age from 17 to 58 and committed crimes ranging from aggravated assault to murder.