

# 6

## Women Behind Bars

*Vulnerable women paid poverty's price.*

by Ceci Thunes

---

Poverty is not a crime, yet many people today face criminal punishment for acts that stem from being poor. Municipalities across the country incarcerate citizens for their inability to pay traffic violations or for sleeping in public places, embroiling them in a cycle of debt to the state that jail time will never erase. Even though debtor prisons were banned under an 1833 federal law, people without resources continued to be confronted by the threat of imprisonment.

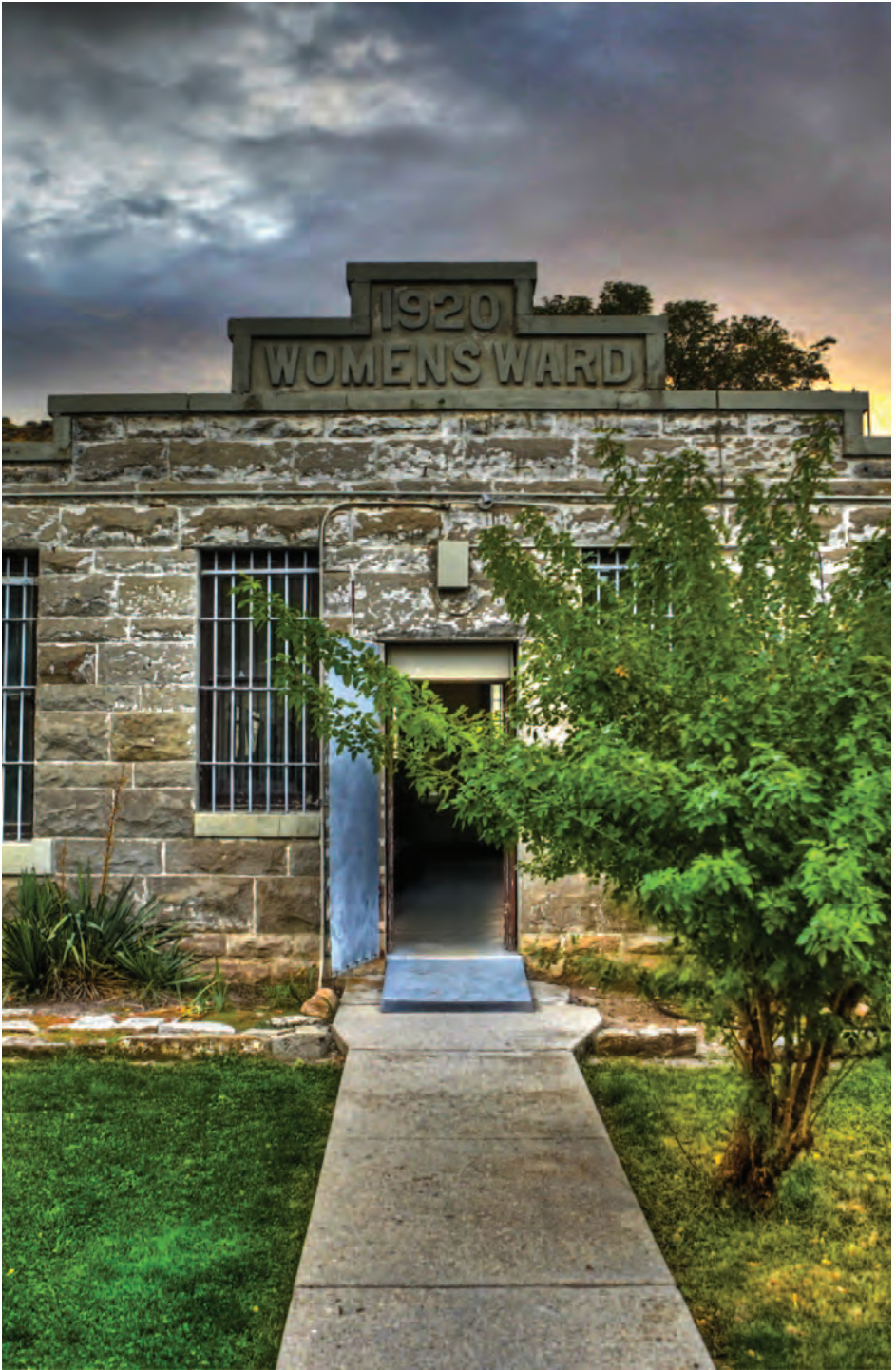
The women's ward at the old Idaho State Penitentiary was built out of necessity, when women could not reasonably be separated from men in the main facility. The original wooden structure housed the warden and his family, but concrete blocks subsequently encased the structure for security. The male prisoners next door quarried, transported, and cut from the nearby foothills the sandstone that formed the perimeter of the cell house, building an 18-foot high wall that enclosed a space of less than 10,000 square feet.

### *Barbara Ann Singleton*

Completed in 1906, the women's ward housed 214 inmates over the following 61 years. Of those prisoners, a handful were incarcerated twice, mostly for minor offenses, but only one returned more often. Barbara Ann Singleton was 24 years old when she left her small child with family and entered the women's ward at the penitentiary in the summer of 1954. After her fourth sentence ended almost 13 years later, 37-year-old Barbara exited the prison one last time, never to return to those sandstone walls. Her repeated offense was passing checks with insufficient funds.

Similar to many women debtors, Singleton was born without means. She lived in many small towns in Idaho, leaving countless bad checks in her wake. In one of her inmate reports, she claims to not remember all of the places she left those checks, but many found their way back to her, through the criminal courts, and altered the course of her life forever.

---



INSHADOWCHASERS.COM

One of her arrests occurred in a grocery store in Twin Falls County, where her parents lived and where she spent much of her non-imprisoned adult life. According to the prosecuting attorney, she “evidently enjoyed writing [bad] checks all over Twin Falls.” Two checks totaling \$15 (roughly \$133 in present-day value) would not normally have landed anyone in the state penitentiary, even in the 1950s and 1960s when incarceration rates for such felonies peaked. But the prosecuting attorney noted that Singleton had passed at least 20 bad checks in the 3 previous years. She had faced prison time and then violated her parole by writing more bad checks.

As the prosecuting attorney told the court, “[Barbara] and her husband . . . just get to drinking and partying and have absolutely no hesitation whatsoever” defrauding local businesses. He added that “several checks” were written to one food and dry goods store alone. But he also believed that



IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Mugshots of Barbara Singleton

“a lot of Barbara’s troubles” were related to her husband, who was also on probation for bad check charges. He expressed a collective concern that the husband was exploiting Barbara by having her bear the legal consequences, not to mention the damage to her status and reputation. The prosecuting attorney also theorized about “the possibility of her having glandular trouble that has affected her rationale.” Judge Martin concurred with the attorney’s suggestion that Singleton undergo a medical examination and possibly psychiatric treatments, but no evidence of this can be found in her prisoner file.

Barbara Singleton's first imprisonment lasted almost 3 years, during which she experienced a brief parole after a year. She violated her parole within months and was forced to resume her sentence in the concrete cell house. During this time, her father, a World War I veteran, died. Toward the end of Singleton's term, in a document reviewed by the parole board, prison matron Mrs. O'Neil remarked that "lately Barbara has been stirring up trouble," calling her "very deceitful." The prison chaplain offered that "liquor [was a] minor factor" for her, but recommended release, which was granted May 13, 1957.

Freedom lasted 17 months. Barbara wrote more bad checks, totaling \$235, left at "grocery stores, service stations, drug stores, and a department store," according to the Twin Falls County prosecuting attorney, Jane Cunningham. Her ultimate conviction rested on a \$20 check to Monty's Oil



IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Women's ward

Company in Hollister, Idaho. The judge imposed a 5-year sentence, but Cunningham had no faith that prison would reform Singleton, believing "if she were released she would do the same thing over again." Her second term was uneventful and relatively brief, about 6 months.

For almost 4 years, Barbara avoided prison. Her clean streak came to a halt just before New Year's Eve 1962. This arrest and conviction indicated that whatever foundation she had was eroding. In her own writing, Singleton admitted she was drunk when, in a Boise Safeway, she attempted to pay with



a bad \$20 check. The grocery clerk called on funds availability; the check could not clear, so the police apprehended her on the spot. The prosecuting attorney remarked that although Barbara had “no bank account whatsoever,” his office possessed 12 other bad checks that she had written in the 8 days prior to her arrest. The *Idaho Statesman* reported that during her trial, Singleton asked Judge Merlin Young for leniency, claiming that she was separated from her husband and had a child at home. Judge Young denied the request, protesting that “her past records as a parolee . . . caused me to sentence her to the penitentiary,” adding that she had never been a “fully satisfactory probationer.”



IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Original women's ward building

With the creation of each new inmate file, the story of the transformations in Singleton's life unfolded. Her surname changed, her weight fluctuated, and by her fourth conviction, she had married three times officially and twice by common law. Her one child was the product of her first marriage. Like more than a third of the women incarcerated at the old penitentiary, Singleton listed “housewife” as her occupation.

She never made it past the eighth grade, and no notes indicated a work history that showed promise of making it on her own.

Oral history from Lulu Rowan, the matron of the women's ward from 1961 to 1967, shed light on the more complicated side of this repeat offender. Rowan claimed that one day she came to work, and "Barbara was scared to death." Despite her heft, Singleton was vulnerable. She had been beaten the night before by another inmate, who dragged her out of her bunk and left her "pretty-well battered." The fight was "over something that didn't amount to a hill of beans," according to Rowan. Barbara also managed to escape from the prison once, "but they brought her back," said Rowan.

Rowan quoted Singleton as saying, "I'm what I am. You know what I am." She was more than a poor, sometimes-single mother who wrote bad checks. According to Rowan, Barbara Ann Singleton spent several years in Japan, serving in the Women's Auxiliary Corps as a secretary "for a general or something." Her life in Japan did not set her up well for the future, as Rowan told it, because at some point Barbara fell into prostitution. Rowan claimed that Singleton was also a prostitute for ladies while in Japan, and she "learned how to take care of women, like she was a homosexual, but she was heterosexual." Perhaps Singleton had fantasized aloud about living overseas, or perhaps Lulu Rowan had conflated the stories of her many wards, but no military service was listed on any of the myriad inmate questionnaires and reports processed at all of Barbara's incarcerations.

Rowan got to know her ward intimately, however, and "never had a bit of problem with Barbara, the one who had the twins." At the time of her final incarceration at the old Idaho State Penitentiary, just before Labor Day 1965, presiding Judge Theron W. Ward forwarded his regrets to Warden Louis Clapp: "Sorry to have to send you this pregnant one, but nature will have its way." Rowan, a licensed practical nurse, was with Barbara at St. Luke's Hospital downtown Boise when Barbara gave birth to a girl and a boy. Records indicate that although Barbara was married at the time, a minister and his wife from Oregon met her in the hospital and took the babies away.



IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Inside a typical cell

For another 14 months after the birth of her twins, Barbara Ann Singleton remained in prison. Her final parole coincided with the year the women's ward closed (1967). All remaining inmates transferred to either California or Oregon. Barbara left the old pen for the last time in spring, with a will to stay sober and a job and husband waiting. While on parole for a year, Singleton found a new life with her family in Nevada, wrote no bad checks, and was recommended for release from parole as a result. It is unknown if that fresh start led to a lasting future, or if she continued to bounce checks and face criminal prosecution, prison, and an ongoing struggle with poverty.

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



The women's ward in the Singleton era, about 1960

### *Check Fraud and Bigamy*

Over the course of 40 years, many other women with families were confined to the old Idaho State Penitentiary for crimes related to insufficient funds and forgery. Such offenses were not uncommon, and the push to incarcerate gained momentum in the late 1940s. Prosecuting attorneys and business associations cited the increase in check fraud

as a growing concern. In an effort to curtail the problem and decrease the burden to the legal system and business community, and with the support of most retail credit associations, the 1949 legislature passed Senate Bill 105, which reclassified insufficient funds checks as a felony and lowered the threshold from \$60 to \$25.

The policy was a failure. Check fraud did not decrease, and the prison population pushed the walls to its limits. Legislation in 1959 reverted conviction to a misdemeanor status, with some calling for more responsibility to be taken by business owners. They considered it to be a civil matter, much as a contract between two parties is handled, and that police should not be involved. Today, issuing checks with insufficient funds is still punishable by jail time, but the punishment is not as harsh as it was in the 1950s and 1960s.

Other crimes not historically related to poverty can still stem from it. In the late 1800s, aggressive anti-Latter Day Saints sentiment fueled a cultural and political environment that welcomed any legal method to eradicate Mormonism. Politicians and opinion writers of the day had no idea how, generations later, laws regarding bigamy would entangle one “unfortunate girl” in the system.

### *Daisy Elizabeth Himm*

Daisy Elizabeth Himm, the only child to older parents, lost her father to a chronic heart condition when she was 11 years old. Thomas Himm left Daisy and her mother with no means of support. Mrs. Isadora Himm received \$18 a month in child welfare from the State of Idaho. “Thank God I got it,” Mrs. Himm wrote in a letter to the prison warden Sam Poarch, “for I keep Daisy in school till [sic] she passed the 8th grade.” Shortly after she finished school, Daisy Himm married Zeff Parsley in Lewiston, Idaho. She was barely 14 years old. Daisy never lived with Zeff, however, and he “never gave her nothing, not even a pair of stockings,” according to Mrs. Himm, who maintained guardianship of her daughter.

Despite her mother’s care and custody, Daisy ran with a rough crowd. Criminal behavior resulted in her first incarceration, in February 1942, at the Washington



IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Daisy Himm



State School for Girls in Centralia/Grand Mound. School superintendent Florence Mohahan characterized Daisy's "crime" as an attempted act of extortion aimed at Daisy's uncle, Roy Rickman, who lived in Spokane. In a bizarre retelling of how the 15-year-old staged a game of "vampire" to lure the unsuspecting Rickman into a compromising situation, Mohahan presented a vivid picture of an intentional juvenile delinquent.

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Guarding the Idaho penitentiary

In this earliest document found in Daisy's state prison file, another image emerges of a girl who left any tangible notion of childhood long behind. In its absence a young woman with a tough persona is documented in the company of older men, late at night, across state lines, fast on her way to prison or worse, and far from the worried Mrs. Himm of Lewiston, Idaho. "We found her extremely masculine," Mohahan offered, adding that her appearance and behavior were "not a fit subject for this school." She also cited the school psychiatrist's assessment of Daisy, about whom he concluded, "It is doubtful that her homosexual tendencies can be changed." Superintendent Mohahan reasoned Daisy would be better off with her mother and sent her back to Lewiston.

Daisy Parsley returned to the Centralia girls school 4 months later, after committing a crime in California that

incarcerated her at the Ventura Reformatory School for Girls, a school that was known for its draconian punishments. So said Mohahan, but a request from the Idaho pardon board to the Ventura school superintendent for background on Daisy provided no record of Daisy's stay there under any of her assumed names.

When Daisy turned 16, she was served divorce papers from Zeff Parsley. Despite the 6-month legal waiting period that began October 14, 1942, Daisy married Paul Hardt 5 days later, in Sandpoint, Idaho. After Hardt left for his army base 9 days later, Daisy joined two young men in an armed robbery in Yakima, an act that sent her back to Centralia. According to Mohahan, "She immediately began to manifest her homosexual [sic] tendencies," created disruptions, and left no room for sympathy in her wake. The superintendent facilitated her next exit after 3 months, reasoning that with the \$50 monthly allotment "from her soldier," Daisy shouldn't need to resort to criminal activity for cash. Under supervision of her mother and the Nez Perce County sheriff, Daisy returned to Lewiston on January 29, 1943.

Three days later, she married for a third time. Carl Joseph Van Moulken was a 52-year-old man who had known Daisy "all her life," according to Daisy's mother, who also described him as a "good for nothing fellow." To make her point, Isadora Himm claimed Van Moulken often posed as an FBI agent (with a "15 cent badge, out of the 15 cent store") and threatened Daisy with "harm" and "could cause her trouble" if she did not marry him. Knowing Daisy was already married, Van Moulken had her use a false name, Ramona Lee Dorsey, on the marriage license. The couple was arrested in Lewiston on bigamy charges. Both pled guilty and were sentenced to the state penitentiary for up to 3 years.

Letters between Nez Perce County prosecuting attorney Marcus Ware, superintendent Mohahan, and state attorney general Bert H. Miller in March 1943 reveal officials did not know how to negotiate the "peculiarities of the defendant girl" and at times seemed determined to punish her harshly. The superintendent wondered what to do with a ward who was "always falling in love with" the other girls, but she advocated



Newspapers around the state reported Daisy's legal troubles.

that Daisy be sent to prison. She cautioned against sympathy for the minor, as Daisy was “so experienced” and relied on her juvenile status to avoid consequences for her actions.

In his letter to Miller, Ware provided more context for Daisy’s circumstances, emphasizing the feedback from the Nez Perce County jail matron and county physician. According to the matron, “there are periods when Daisy manifests female tendencies and shows an interest in sewing, embroidering, etc., and this is followed by a boy-like cycle.” The physician labeled her “an hermaphrodite,” saying that although “externally she is physically a female, internally she has both male and female characteristics.” This vague language was later contested by the state prison doctor, who determined her to be female, specifically noting no evidence of hermaphroditism. This is confirmed in her body report, which also detailed scars from old wounds above the teenager’s right eye, on her right shin, and just below her ring finger, on her left hand. On the outside of her left forearm was a tattoo “Grand Mound,” whereas inside a tattoo read “T. P. loves S. L.”

In his letter to the state attorney general, Ware expressed compassion, noting Daisy’s youth, her disadvantaged upbringing, and the fact that Van Moulken was more than just a co-conspirator in their mutual crime of bigamy. He requested recommendation for sentencing on behalf of the trial judge, Miles Johnson, who asked which institution was best equipped to handle Daisy—the state industrial school at St. Anthony or the state penitentiary.

Bert Miller’s response was a rambling stream-of-consciousness evaluation. Ultimately he resolved that a sentence at the state school in eastern Idaho would be the most prudent measure to take.

Despite that recommendation—and despite the fact there were no other female inmates currently at the prison and “it would necessitate considerable expense in setting up the machinery for caring for her at the penitentiary”—Judge Miles Johnson committed Daisy to the state prison. He expressed an unreserved lack of faith in her redemption and regarded her as “a menace to society.”

Appeals for pardon began immediately. “I am only sixteen years of age,” wrote Daisy, on March 25, 1943, “and by all rights should be at home with my Mother.” Isadora Himm was 56 years old, alone, and in poor health, which, in part, motivated her persistent campaign for her daughter’s release.



In multi-page, hand-written letters to the warden, state pardon board, and the governor, Mrs. Himm asked that “that poor girl of mine” be released immediately. Daisy had been “tricked into this crime” by an older man who “had her afraid.” Besides, Mrs. Himm wrote, Daisy “is rightfully married” to an upstanding young man serving in the army during wartime. From Mrs. Himm’s perspective, Daisy’s imprisonment was a mistake that could be resolved quickly if the authorities understood the circumstances.

In her final letter to Warden Poarch, 4 months into Daisy’s incarceration, Mrs. Himm’s despondency and need for her daughter were acute. She included documentation from a physician to add credibility to her claim that her deteriorating health left her bedridden. She wrote of the victory gardens, the chickens, and the property she could no longer tend to on her own. “It is to her interest she look after it, as it is hers when I am gone,” Himm wrote. Mrs. Himm vowed she would look after Daisy, and in return Daisy would help her until the

The prosecuting attorney recommended that Daisy serve her time in the Idaho State Industrial School Women’s Dormitory in St. Anthony, Idaho, versus the state prison.



soldier-husband Paul Hardt came home. Isadora Himm sent \$3 to the warden as a deposit for Daisy’s transportation, so that at the moment of her release, she could travel home.

Mrs. Himm also orchestrated correspondence between Paul Hardt and the warden, Hardt and Marcus Ware, as well as with the governor, C. A. Bottolfsen. By emphasizing Paul’s role in providing for Daisy, the broader message was that marriage, not prison, was the most appropriate institution to handle the wayward youth. In Mrs. Himm’s mind, her daughter had only one husband—a soldier who willingly offered legitimacy and a hopeful future.

Private Paul Donald Hardt was truly smitten with Daisy, whom he called “Tommy,” in a letter sent from a Florida bombing range and addressed to “Mother,” Mrs. Isadora Himm. In red pen that ran out of ink as he wrote, Hardt repeatedly expressed his love for, and commitment to, Tommy. “I will come write [sic] down to Lewiston when I get home and see you and Tommy,” he assured Daisy’s mother. He expressed a sense of duty to secure Daisy’s release and understood his role in providing stability for her. “I think I can get Tommy a pardon . . . if she will be good and live with me,” he wrote.

Mrs. Himm enclosed a copy of Hardt’s letter in her own letter to Governor Bottolfsen. She pointed out that Hardt “is a very good boy” who was coming home on a summer furlough from the military to manage his 160-acre Washington farm. “She would be of great help to him,” wrote Mrs. Himm. “As a Broken Hearted mother,” she implored the governor to exercise his authority to pardon Daisy, reminding him of her young age and the threat she faced from Van Moulken.

The governor replied the same day his office received her letter. In a brief, indifferent response, Governor Bottolfsen offered no explanation as to why he would not grant her request but assured her he would revisit the matter after the next parole board meeting.

Perhaps Daisy relied on her juvenile status and attempted to manipulate authorities in order to avoid harsh consequences for her behavior. In her first appeal for parole, it is hard to



IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Woman stands at the prison entrance.

separate sincerity from desperation. “Truly, I am not a bad girl and I am sure there is a lot of good in me,” she pleaded, adding, “I sincerely promise that you will not hear evil of me again. I will not leave my mother again.”

Daisy Parsley was the only female in the history of the women’s ward imprisoned for bigamy. She was also the second, and last, 16-year-old female to serve time there. What distinguished her from Ida Laherty, convicted of stealing horses in 1903, was that Ida was pardoned after 3 months. After 5 months of appeals and negotiation, on her 17th birthday, Daisy was finally given parole and released to her mother.

Within weeks, she returned to the state penitentiary for violating the terms of her parole. Her offense was having stayed out too late with friends. In her appeal to the state board of pardons, Daisy listed the ways in which her behavior had improved: “I’m letting my hair grow, I wear nice little dresses and wouldn’t think of putting on a pair of slacks, or being tom-boyish,” she wrote.

She became a Christian and vowed to listen to her mother, obey her parole conditions, and settle down with Hardt when he returned after the war. This wait lasted 6 months, during which Hardt and the warden agreed to an arrangement in which he would take his young wife out of state to farm and, more important to the pardons board and Warden Poarch, avoid the distractions Lewiston afforded her. On March 1, 1944, Paul D. Hardt left the state penitentiary with Daisy by his side and a personal promise to Poarch “that they would linger in Lewiston only a few days—just long enough for Daisy to visit with her mother.”

Daisy was charged with vagrancy in Spokane later that spring. Without the foundation needed to pass less painfully into adulthood, Daisy eventually fell back to a life of crime. A month after reaching the age of majority, Daisy Elizabeth Himm Parsley Hardt faced her first in a string of felony charges that would follow over the years, ensuring the threat of imprisonment became the one constant in her life.



IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

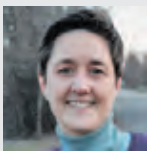
Ida Laherty



Idaho toilet, Old Penitentiary Museum

## *The Cycle of Poverty and Prison*

From a modern perspective, it is hard to understand a culture that did not recognize citizens like Barbara Ann Singleton and Daisy Parsley as vulnerable and worthy of protection, even under the conditions of the time. Today one would point to the inefficiency of such righteous measures, not to mention the degrading effect they have on the social fabric. As a collective outlook on what constitutes justice evolves, proper safety nets are placed under those who need it most, but gaps continue to appear. New classifications of crime bedrocked in poverty pull struggling members of society into a continual cycle of imprisonment. For some it may be the inability to afford the penalties of violating traffic laws that create a spiral of servitude to the state. For others the entrenched causes of homelessness turn victims into criminals. Justice is continually redefined by the social and political models of the time. History shows how, in an effort to fit those templates, legislative and judicial action can lead to the unintended consequence of those living outside the margins paying the price.



**CECI THUNES** has a bachelor's degree in economics with a political science minor from Boise State University. She presented research from this chapter at the 2016 Association for Private Enterprise in Education conference in Las Vegas. She lives in Boise.