

## **From Childhood Scars to Prison Bars** **by Curt Douglas and Dr. Eric Sandras**

### **How This Article Came to Be**

I (Curt) never imagined that I would spend twenty years of my retirement working with incarcerated individuals, helping them find hope, healing, and freedom. My original plans revolved around golf and fishing. Yet here I am, two decades later, filled with gratitude for the life God has called me to live and for the transformations I have been privileged to witness.

After spending four years in Arizona, I returned to Colorado Springs and joined a small church called The Sanctuary Church (TSCwest.org), with a deep commitment to serving the marginalized. One of their outreach efforts included support sessions for newly released inmates, both at the church and a local community corrections facility.

Recognizing the need for deeper engagement, church leadership approached me about adapting their 13-lesson program into a structured communication course specifically for inmates in Colorado. With the invaluable support of Dan Robinson from Hook Ministries, who had been speaking in six prisons across the state, we developed a customized version of the program. After receiving approval from the Colorado Department of Corrections, we officially launched the initiative in May 2022.

This program operates as a correspondence-based study. Inmates receive a lesson, complete it, and return it for feedback before progressing to the next one. What began in four Colorado prisons has now expanded to nine of the state's eighteen facilities. Through word of mouth and church connections, participants from other states have also joined. To date, 160 inmates have engaged in the program, with 45 successfully completing all lessons.

Through this journey, I began to notice a consistent pattern in how inmates responded to lessons on emotional wounds. As I analyzed the data, a clear process emerged—one that I will outline in the following section. This pattern reveals how deep-seated wounds lead to false self-belief, which then spiral into negative emotions and, ultimately, destructive behaviors that often result in incarceration.

Understanding this cycle has allowed us to better support the individuals we serve. However, I also realized that these insights could benefit others, which is why I compiled this report.

A special thanks to my brother in Christ, John Thurston, for his wisdom and guidance in helping me shape these findings.

I hope this report provides you with clarity and encouragement as you continue moving forward. If you'd like to connect, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Curt Douglas

## **Section one -The Problem**

### **Understanding the Path to Prison and How You Can Help**

For many behind bars, the road to prison didn't start with a single bad decision. It began much earlier, shaped by deep wounds from childhood pain that was never healed, never addressed, and never understood. This doesn't remove personal responsibility, but it does shed light on why so many people make choices that lead to incarceration.

If we want to help break this cycle, we must first understand it.

### **How Childhood Wounds Shape a Life**

Trauma isn't just about what happens to us, it is also about how we respond to it. In this context, trauma and emotional wounds are the same thing: deep, unresolved pain that alters a person's sense of self.

We often hear the phrase "Time heals all wounds", but that is simply not true. Wounds only heal when they are faced and resolved. Unfortunately, many people who end up in prison never had the tools to process their pain. Coping skills aren't something we are born with; they have to be taught. But for many, the very people who should have been teaching them: parents, caregivers, role models, were the ones causing the harm.

Without healthy coping mechanisms, many develop a distorted sense of identity. In working with inmates through correspondence courses, a heartbreaking pattern emerges when they are asked to describe themselves. The most common response?

"I'm not good enough."

This false belief doesn't just stay in their thoughts, it affects every area of their lives:

- **Forgiveness:** Many say they can forgive others far more easily than they can forgive themselves.
- **Guilt vs. Shame:** Guilt says, "I made a bad choice", which allows for reflection and growth. But shame says, "I am bad", which traps a person in hopelessness. Shame is toxic, convincing people that their mistakes define them.
- **Destructive Coping Mechanisms:** When people don't know how to process pain, they look for escape through substances, harmful behaviors, or emotional walls that shut others out. These coping mechanisms often create even bigger problems, leading them further down a dangerous path.

When these wounds go unhealed, people try to cope in life-stealing ways, through substance abuse, destructive behaviors, or building emotional walls. But none of these truly help. Instead, they deepen the pain.

## **Key Findings from Inmate Surveys**

Among 96 inmates surveyed, the most commonly reported wounds were:

- 47% experienced abandonment
- 29% experienced sexual molestation
- 28% lost a family member
- 28% experienced rejection
- 25% suffered physical injuries
- 16% grew up in poverty
- 16% Bulling
- 13% girlfriend cheats
- 13% domestic violence
- 10% parents divorce

## **The Source of Wounds**

For many inmates, trauma begins early, often within their own families. My correspondence data highlights the following:

- 15% of wounds stemmed from environmental factors, such as poverty, creating long-term stress and insecurity.
- 28% were linked to life events, like illness or disability, which impacted self-worth.
- 57% of wounds resulted from how someone treated the individual, including abandonment, rejection, or abuse. Abandonment is when someone you need in your life leaves you. Rejection is when someone you need your life, remains but degrades your sense of self-worth.

This shows that while external circumstances play a role, the most damaging wounds often come from broken relationships and emotional neglect.

3. 66% withdrew or built **protective walls**. Major means were people pleasers (27%) and Isolation (39%).

Each of these responses served as a survival strategy, even if they led to harmful consequences. Recognizing these patterns allows us to support inmates in developing healthier ways to process their past.

### **The Impact of Trauma on the Whole Person**

Trauma doesn't just affect emotions, it impacts the entire person:

- **Body:** Physical responses to trauma can include immediate reactions like fleeing danger, but also long-term effects such as chronic pain or stress-related illness.
- **Soul:** This includes thoughts, emotions, and decision-making. Trauma often distorts self-perception, leading to feelings of worthlessness, shame, or hopelessness.
- **Spirit:** Our soul's connection to God is rooted in love. Trauma can break that connection, replacing it with a false belief that God is distant or judgmental.

True healing requires addressing not just behavior, but the deeper wounds of the soul and spirit.

Soul recovery means shedding the false beliefs created by trauma, such as "I'm not good enough" or "No one loves me."

Spirit recovery involves restoring a view of God as loving and compassionate, rather than condemning.

### **Section five-male versus female**

#### **Gender Differences in Trauma and Coping**

##### **Wounds**

- Women seemed to receive more wounds than men by 4 versus 3.2.
- Women tended to be more affected by death (in family or friend) than men. 57% of them saw it as a wound whereas only 32% of men did. Women have more emotional attachments than men.
- Women tended to be more affected by being abandoned than men. 75% of those responding versus 38% for men.
- Women tended to be more affected by being rejection than men. 39% of those responding versus 22% for men.
- Men receive more physical injury wounds than women, 25% versus 14%.

### **Key Takeaways:**

- Incarcerated individuals experienced an average of 2.6 times more ACEs than those in the general public.
- The average number of different types of childhood wounds (4.8, 4.6) is even higher than the 3.4 found in a separate study. This suggests that people are often hesitant to share deeply personal or painful experiences when their identity is known but are more open when anonymity is guaranteed.
- The most significant disparity between incarcerated individuals and the general public is found in sexual abuse among males. While this was not openly acknowledged in some studies, when anonymity was ensured, rates of sexual abuse among incarcerated men were found to be as high as among women. This challenges common perceptions and underscores the importance of creating a safe space for healing and disclosure.
- Many individuals carry deep wounds, but healing begins with honesty and vulnerability. Jesus took our shame upon Himself, offering us freedom from the burden of hiding our pain. True healing happens when we acknowledge our wounds rather than suppress them.

## **Section Eight -Conclusion**

### **Building a Stronger Foundation: Discovering Who You Truly Are**

At the core of life's journey, there are two essential questions: "Who am I? and "Why am I here?". In this report, we focused on that first question," Who am I?

For many, the world provided the answer. The environment we grow up in, the people around us, and the experiences we face shape how we see ourselves. If those influences are mostly positive, we still have struggles, but we can navigate them with hope and confidence. However, if our experiences are mostly negative, we can find ourselves on a pathway from childhood scars to prison bars.

A narrative is a story that connects events to support a certain perspective. Many have bought into a false narrative, the idea that they are unworthy, beyond help, or stuck in their past. But that's not true. That's a lie sold by the world, by pain, and even by the devil himself.

### **Section Nine -Author Bio**

**Curt Douglas** Curt currently resides in Colorado Springs, CO with his wife of 45 years, Linda. Though they could have chosen the softer side of retirement life after Curt spent forty-two years in the business world, they choose to focus on making a positive difference in the lives of others. Curt has spoken in 40 prisons, administered the Circles Of Support and Accountability program in Colorado, and communicates regularly with inmates including a faith-based eight lesson inmate correspondence program for those stuck in the cycle of addiction and criminal thinking patterns. This article reflects much of what he has learned in his “second season” of life.

**Dr. Eric Sandras** Faith. Sex. Addiction. Three words that swirl around Dr. Eric Sandras’ (aka Dr. E) life and church in very redemptive ways. Currently, Dr. E. teaches at a local university, is the author of four books, and is the founder of The Sanctuary Church (TSCwest.org)—a church focused on the margins and misfits of Colorado Springs’ westside. The Sanctuary has thriving recovery programs, a counseling center, a food pantry, a clothing closet for under-resourced kids, a nationally known arts ministry, actively feed over 200 homeless neighbors each week, has active prison transition programs, and founded The Redemption Project COS, a motel housing up to 30 men in a safe and sober environment. They live by the belief, what if church wasn’t where you went, but who you are.