

# It's hard to imagine the elderly as criminals, but Ron Levine's images from geriatric prisons force viewers to examine the stories of society's most marginalized

BY SAMANTHA GRICE

**I**t's not surprising that most of them are now dead. They say people in prison age 10 to 15 years faster than they would on the outside, and when Montreal photographer Ron Levine began documenting the lives of elderly people living in geriatric prisons across the United States and Canada eight years ago, not only were these people already years above the average prison age population, many were ill and most were contemplating the hopelessness of never leaving.

Levine's haunting photographs and accompanying interviews made their debut in an exhibition, *Prisoners of Age*, at Alcatraz Penitentiary in September, 2000, and in a 208-page companion book. More than 760,000 people took in the 4-foot by 8-foot portraits while they hung in the infamous San Francisco prison and on Sept. 5 the exhibition will make its European debut at Dublin's Kilmainham Gaol and Museum.

And in early October an hour-long documentary, also called *Prisoners of Age*, will air on CBC's *Roughcuts*.

While Levine reminds that he is foremost a photographer, *Prisoners of Age* dredges up a number of touchy social issues.

"After the first day I walked out of there thinking that this situation is insane," he recalls. "Stockpiling these men, using the public funds to pay for expensive health care when there should be some other way to deal with the aging offenders in the system — electronic ankle bracelets, community service, hospice care. I wanted to put these images and stories out there for the people who work in corrections to ponder. And for the public to react, one way or another."

One way to react is with profound sadness for the consistently sad lives of these people who come from backgrounds of violence, illiteracy, poverty, sexual and drug abuse. And in whose frail bodies you recall a glimpse of your own grandfather. Or you could just feel revulsion for the crimes they've committed.

A few years after the book was finished, Levine turned his lens to female prisoners. "Many are in for killing abusive partners, as you may expect, some embezzling, some for drugs, some for habitual offender laws — robbing small stores to get money for a bad habit."

Statistics show that recidivism after the age of 55 is only 1%, whereas at age 22 it's 59%. And, of the more than two million Americans behind bars, it's estimated 35% are on the far side of middle age. Nonetheless, geriatric prisons are now cropping up across the U.S. to cope with problem of elderly inmates.

"And they look like nursing homes."

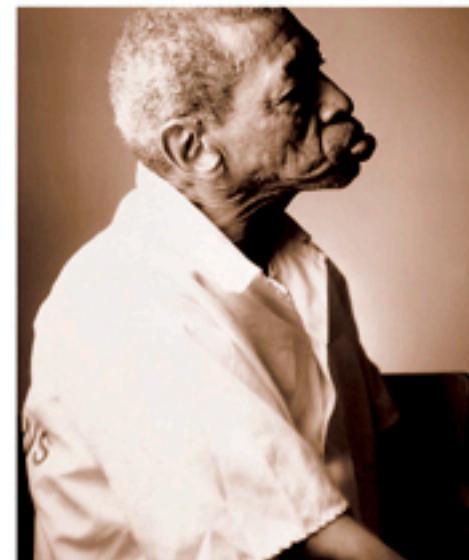
■ Ron Levine's book is available at [www.prisonersofage.com](http://www.prisonersofage.com)



Boyd Edward Whitley, 80 (murder)



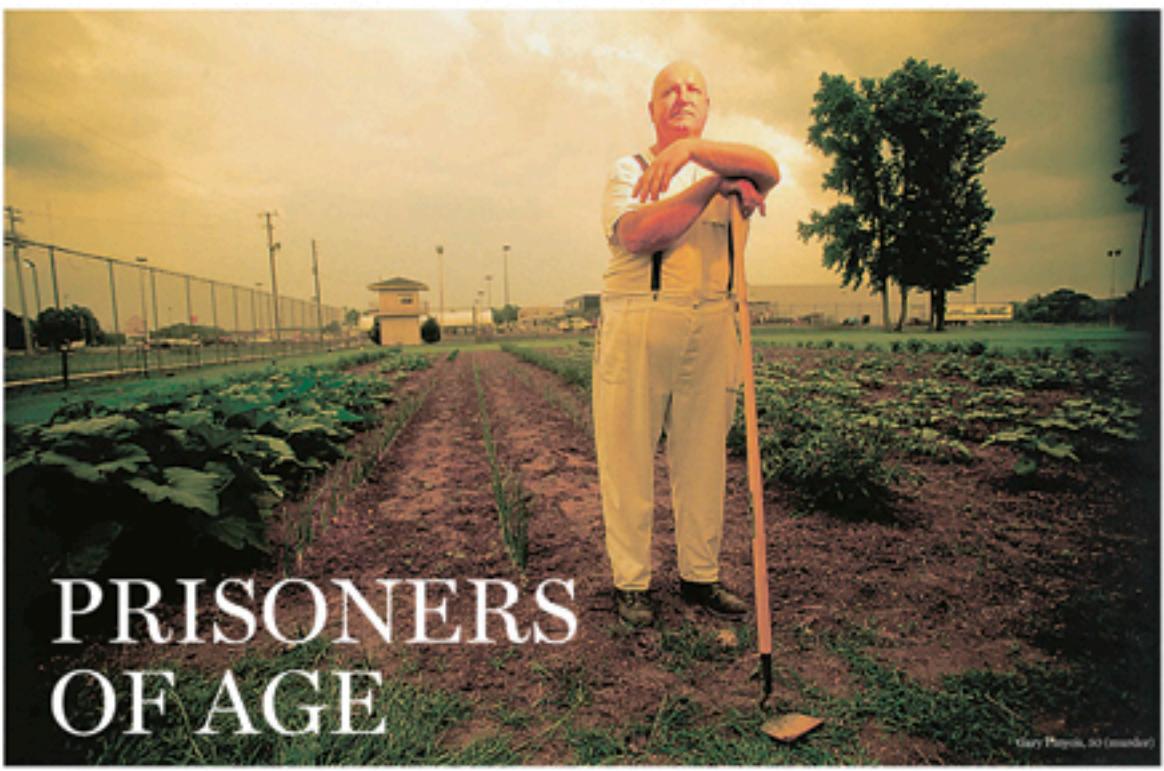
Consuelo Munoz Rivera, 63 (spousal abuse)



Walker Smith, 76 (murder — stabbed his mother 47 times over a laundry dispute)

# AVENUE

*Arts, Culture & Society*



## PRISONERS OF AGE

Gary Phillips, 60 (murder)

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Levine's haunting photographs and accompanying interviews made their debut in an exhibition, *Prisoners of Age*, at Montreal Penitentiary in September 2000, and in a 248-page companion book. More than 250,000 people took in the 4-foot by 6-foot portraits while they hung in the installation at Penitentiary and on Sept. 11 the exhibition will make its European debut at Dublin's Kilmainham Gaol and Museum.

And in early October an hour-long documentary, also titled *Prisoners of Age*, will air on CBC's *Frontline*.

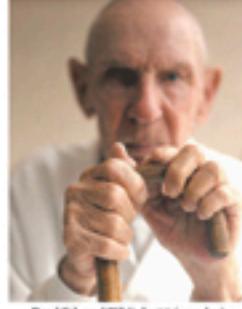
While Levine reminds us he is foremost a photographer, *Prisoners of Age* dredges up a number of touchy social issues. "After the first day I walked out of there thinking that this situation is insane," he recalls. "Stacking these men using the public funds to pay for expensive health care when there should be some other way to deal with the aging offenders in the system — electronic ankle bracelets, community service, hospice care. I wanted to put these images and stories out there for the people who work in corrections to ponder. And for the public to react, one way or another."

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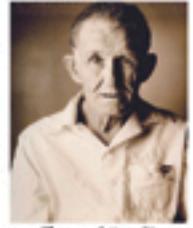
Walker Smith, 76 (murder - stabbed his mother 47 times over a laundry dispute)



Delinda Edith May Swanwick Sanders, 82 ("They say I beat the children and that I beat the children ...")



Ethel Iverson, 63 ("I was accused of murdering my husband...")



Thomson Jettson, 63 (murder - life sentence)



Maxwell Cuartero, 79 ("My first sentence was in 1987 for robbery. But I came back often after that [19 times]. All small sentences. The one I'm serving now is for murder. It's my second murder conviction.")

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# ron levine

by James A. Cotter

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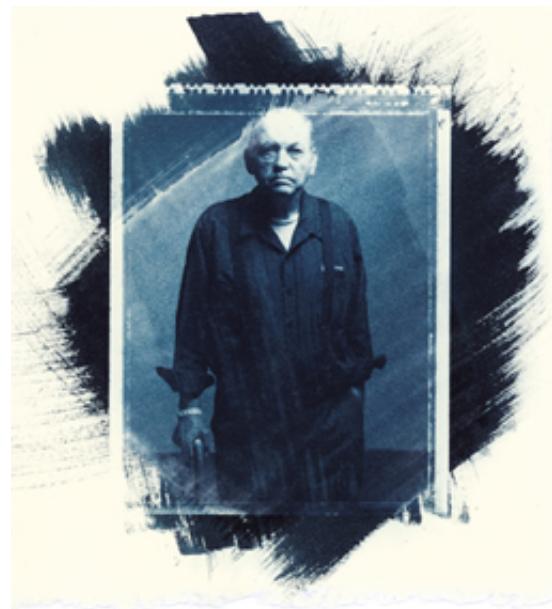
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**Get Exposed**

Law enforcement officials, victims rights groups, and proponents of harsh sentencing measures have a legitimate concern recidivism (repeat offenses). In some states the amount is as high as 85 percent, especially in drug and sexual assault cases. The emotional damage of a violent crime affects more than the individual; it strips away the confidence that our society is orderly, safe, and governed by laws that are fair and just. It is easy for us to rationalize the idea that if someone takes a life and is not given the death penalty, they should never be allowed into the general population again. And yet, what we are only now beginning to realize is that incarcerating criminals for life, or keeping them on death row through a flawed and lengthy appeals process, takes a heavy toll on the system, both in dollars and in the swelling numbers who crowd our jails. If, for instance, a person receives a life sentence at age 25 and lives to see 75, the cost to the state is, on average, \$60,000 per year. Compare that figure with the per-pupil spending rate at an inner-city high school such as Newarks Central High School (one of the poorest in New Jersey), which is about \$7,500 per year, and one can start to see how the cycle of poverty, crime, and corrections is rapidly becoming the nations top social problem of the new century.



From this environment comes a surprising new book entitled *Prisoners of Age*, self-published by photographer Ron Levine and designer Michael Wou. The premise is simple. It asks the question: What becomes of an inmate when he is too old or too ill to stay in the general prison population? Of course, the answer put forth in the book is a complex, often disheartening combination of social commentary and visual poetry. Levine asserts, We thought it



would be fascinating to photograph these aging and sick prisoners. Our hope on a

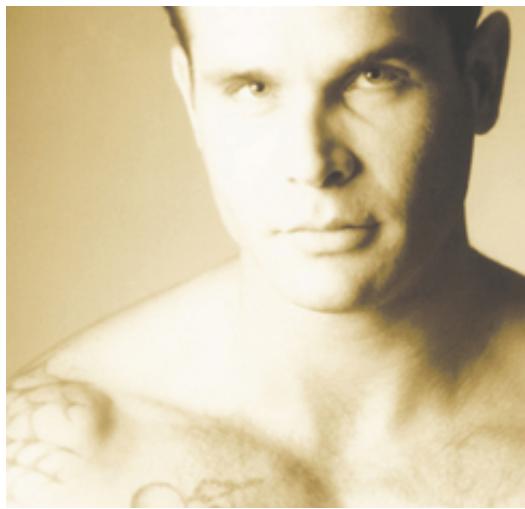
visual/creative level was to make it thought provoking. Four years in the making, *Prisoners of Age* is the brainchild of Levine, a Canadian who has built a career on photographing the Deep South. He is intimate with the region, having examined the people and places with two major exhibitions, *South of the Mason-Dixon* in 1996 and *Portraits of Florida's Alligator Hunters* in 1995. For *Prisoners of Age*, Levine had access to the McCain Geriatric Prison Hospital in North Carolina, the Hamilton Institute for the Aged and Infirm in Alabama, as well as other smaller facilities that house aging and sick prisoners. The photographs depict many of the prisoners in an angelic, almost ethereal light. Indeed, its not hard to envision some of the figures presented in a lush fashion spread until one begins to read the countless interviews Levine and Wou conducted with their subjects over the course of their journey. The chilling accounts of murder, rape, and violence are astonishingly similar.

Driven by rage, alcohol, drugs, and hopelessness, their damaged lives have, through myriad circumstances, brought them in the latter years of their incarceration to what Levine calls nursing homes with barbed wire. While one cannot help but think that these men deserve to be in prison for the horrific things theyve done, it is equally apparent that the majority of them are no longer physically capable of endangering society. Looking at their worn, beaten faces and crumbling bodies, one almost feels sorry for them. And therein lies the dilemma. By portraying the inmates in a way that is artistically stunning, Levine and Wou have left themselves open to criticism by victims rights groups, as well as the political right, who has once again resorted to the oft-repeated mantra getting tough on crime for this years congressional and presidential election campaign.

One could argue that the photographs, exquisitely lit and composed, along with the accompanying text, evoke sympathy for the prisoners. Yet there is no shortage of horror stories included in *Prisoners of Age*, and the litany of offenses does give the reader pause.



And what would relatives or friends of a victim think if they saw the offender portrayed so beautifully in the book? With- out the perspective of the



feel bad for these guys. At the same time, I dont think they should be out. Its hard. Do we really need a guy in a wheelchair in prison? If the guy killed a member of my family, Id say let him rot in prison. But I was trying to photograph these guys to bring some of their humanity out.

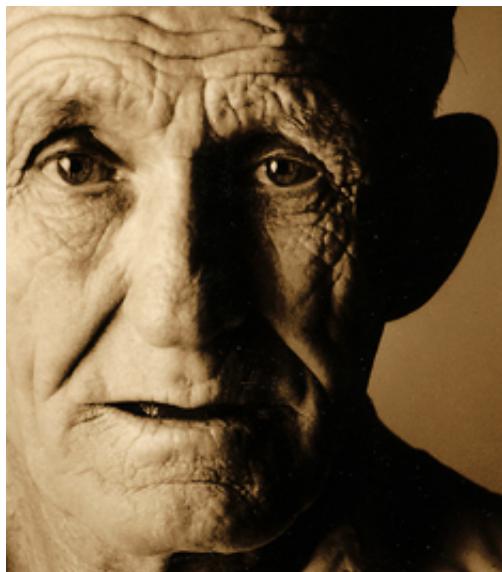
Charles David Stanley, bathed in light illuminating his crumpled face and leaning on a cane, was photographed the way one would take a portrait of a grandfathersolemn and serene, wise and knowing. His story tells another tale:

"I was convicted of killing my wife for harassing me. My trial lasted five days.

Two days to pick a jury, two days to find me guilty of first-degree murder, and one hour to give me the death sentence. I killed her for harassing me, for wanting more money than I did not have. She had me locked up three different times on account that she wanted more money. I was giving her what money I could afford, because I was only on social security and disability. We was getting a divorce, and I says, you can have it all, just let me go and be by myself. And she would not do this because she wanted more money. And I didnt have no more money to give her. Im hoping one day to get into the Supreme Court, but I dont think this will happen because Im now 69 years old, and a man 69 years old, he dont have too many years left."

victims in the interviews that were conducted by Levine and Wou, is the reader getting only one side of the story? It is a dichotomy that both Levine and Wou recognize. We didnt start out to make a political statement, explains Levine. What were saying is that these are images of the future. Wou, whose layout adds depth and meaning to the photographs and text, agrees. First and foremost it is an art book. We arent specialists. We dont know anything about criminal law. The book is designed to demonstrate our talents. Levine adds, Socially, you do

&lt;/div



kill. But now its different. I feel altogether different." Smith's crime--murder--occurred while he was receiving instructions from his mother on how to fix a washing machine. Apparently, it was more than he could handle, and in order to stop her from nagging, he took a kitchen knife and stabbed her 47 timesto death. His photograph, one of the more prominent in the book, shows a sad, old mandoopy, ragged, and hopeless. It is hard to imagine the forces inside the age-worn figure that were unleashed the day he committed his crime.

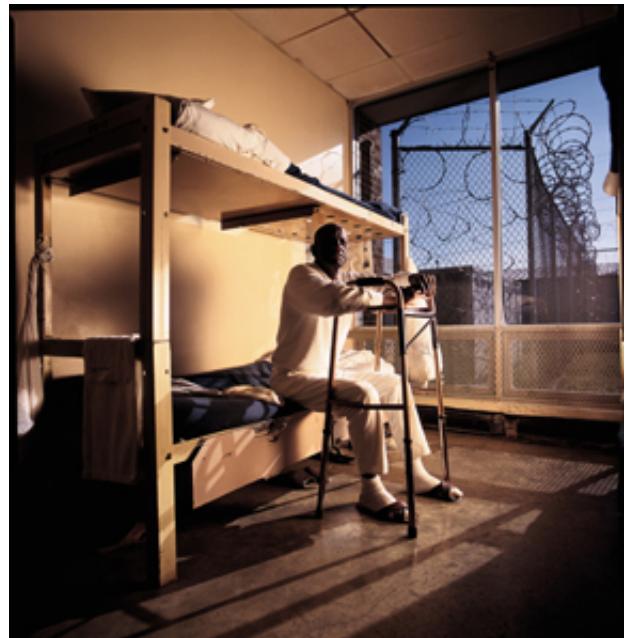
Other inmates who appear in the book are not old, but rather have an ailment that requires special medical attention and thus they are housed with the geriatric population. David Moose Lowry is one such inmate. At age 30, he is incarcerated for murder and attempted murder.

"Its a long story and there are a lot of extenuating circumstances to my crime. In a nutshell, I got sick and tired of being sick and tired. I got into a hellacious argument with him (his brother) and before I really thought of it, I pulled out the gun and shot him. Wasted him and proceeded to shoot everyone else who was in the house.

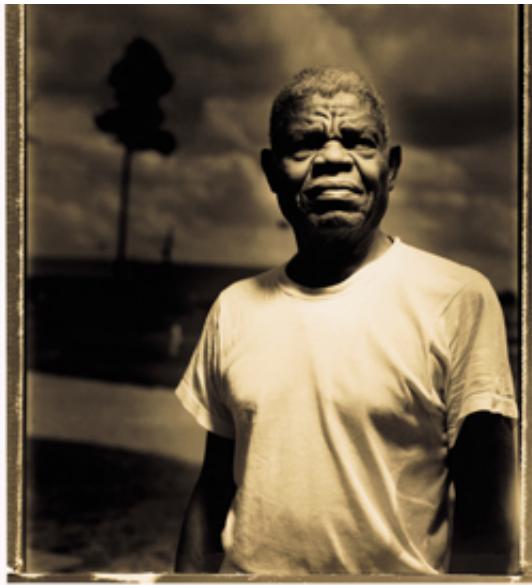
They started screaming and I turned around and told them to shut up. I shot my brother, shot my sister-in-law, shot my niece."

Lowry, like others chronicled in the book, finds the violent life he left has found its way into the prisons. He recalls an incident where his friend was killed over an argument.

"Jeff steps up onto his cell and I heard boom, boom, boom--fighting and everything--and when I look up from the table, Jeffs been ripped across here (pointing to his abdomen). His intestines just hanging down to his knees. I look up and just freak out cause here's this dude who is trying to hold his guts in...and a hand comes out of a steel door and grabs hold of his hair and snaps it back. Wham! And his whole throat fell open.



Twelve years he did in them fucking hellholes, and gets killed for some bullshit."



Among these tales of violence are cases that seem to defy reason. William Howard Tex Johnson, for example, was sentenced to 50 years for stealing \$24. It was 1959, in Birmingham. A lot was going down. We were struggling with the civil rights thing. I snatched the money out of a mans hand. I got 50 years. When they passed it, I didnt even think about it (the racial motive), cause all I was thinking about is, I get the chance, Im gonna escape. And I did. Ive escaped three times. I could go like the wind and they never could catch me. Because of

my stroke and cause of my knee I cant run no more.

*James A. Cotter is a writer from Montclair, New Jersey. He is a frequent writer for Photo Insider, PDN and d Culture.*

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