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## In California, Victims' Families Fight for the Dead

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SAN DIEGO — The other day, at the sprawling state prison here, Linda and Alfred Tay sat in a cramped, windowless room, just feet from the man serving time for murdering their son.

Quarters are close at parole hearings.

They listened as the inmate made his case for parole. And then, exercising their rights as victims under California law, the Tays made their own case, pleading with the parole board not to grant freedom to the man who killed their son. It was the second time they had gone through this painful ritual.

“We constantly have a shadow hanging over our lives,” Ms. Tay told the commissioners. “When you suffer such a horrific crime, there is never closure.”

The rights of families like the Tays to be heard has been a fundamental tenet of a movement since California passed its first victims' bill of rights three decades ago — a model that has been followed by states across the nation.

Until recently, most of these parole hearings — however difficult they may have been for the family members — had little practical importance: inmates serving life sentences for murder were virtually never set free. Even on the rare occasions when the parole board granted a release, California's two previous governors — Gray Davis, a Democrat, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican — almost invariably overturned it.

But now, with a [United States Supreme Court mandate](#) in May to reduce the populations of California's overcrowded prisons, Gov. Jerry Brown has thus far upheld 207 of the parole board's 253 decisions to release convicted killers. Already this year, more release dates granted to killers have been allowed to stand than in any year since governors got the power to reverse them.

As a result, these hearings have taken on a new urgency for victims' family members — many of whom have seen themselves as the last line of defense between a killer and freedom — because inmates are now more likely than ever to be paroled.

For some family members, attending the hearings is cathartic, offering a voice to those who feel powerless in the wake of crimes that have upended their lives.

But even as victims have gained the right to be heard, the laws have also created unintended consequences — sometimes dividing families or resurrecting traumas year after year.

“The emotional experience is beyond words,” said Harriet Salarno, who has spoken at nine parole hearings, beginning in 1993, for the man who killed her daughter 32 years ago. “I’ve thought about not going many times. But I was fearful he would get out.”

Despite an increased possibility of parole, the emotional and financial burdens of attending hearings are too overwhelming for many families. Brandi Cambron, 29, testified last year against parole for her mother, who was convicted of murdering Ms. Cambron’s younger brother. But she did not return this year from her home in Virginia for the hearing near Los Angeles.

“As much as it’s fulfilling to go there and speak and be heard, it also reopened all these old wounds that I’d worked so hard to close,” she said.

California has led the way in passing victims’ rights laws. It became the first state to allow victims’ families to speak at parole hearings, and in 1982 passed a victims’ bill of rights — one of the first major pieces of such legislation in the country. More than 30 states have amended their constitutions to include similar measures.

Parole commissioners and victims’ rights advocates say that victim statements can have a major influence. They put a human face on a murder victim, who is often referred to only as “the deceased” during a parole hearing, and make it that much more difficult for the board to grant release.

Some victims who survived murder attempts show their scars — missing limbs or disfiguring burns — while relatives detail the emotional trauma they have endured.

“You need to be there so the board understands what this has done to your life,” said Nina Salarno Ashford, a lawyer with [Crime Victims United](#), a group that helps represent some victims at parole hearings.

Ms. Salarno Ashford said the increase in parole grants upheld under Governor Brown makes it all the more important for victims to attend hearings.

“The governor seems not to be taking a hard-line stance as Davis or Schwarzenegger did,” she said. “It really highlights the necessity for victims to go to these hearings, so the parole board can feel the full impact of the crime.”

Like many such advocates, Ms. Salarno Ashford’s involvement with the issue is personal: her sister Catina was murdered in 1979. Harriet Salarno, her mother, quit her job and founded Crime Victims United, and the group has been one of the foremost opponents of the plan to reduce prison overcrowding by releasing inmates.

Few victims’ families — around 8 percent — actually attend parole hearings. But for those that do, the process, however painful, can also be restorative.

Some victims eventually even stop opposing an inmate’s release. Katie James, manager of victims’ services for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, said those cases showed how well the process could work for the families.

“When the family goes to multiple hearings over a long period of time, they kind of get to know the inmate,” Ms. James said. “They get to see a gradual change in the offender. They’re never going to forgive what the inmate did, but they can be O.K. with what the parole board decides.”

Most victims, however, never reach that point. For some, the hearings become an obsession. They skip happy events in the lives of their living children — high school or college graduations — to honor a dead child at a parole hearing. For older victims, hearings can take a toll on their health, Ms. James said.

“For some families, the hearings eat away at them, and destroy their other relationships,” she said. “We try to encourage them to have a balance and let someone else go instead. But some feel like it has to be them.”

If nothing else, as the Brown administration allows more inmates sentenced to life to be paroled, more victims will be spared the pain of returning year after year to parole hearings. But more families will also watch killers win release dates, as the Tays did. Ms. Tay said she was considering writing to the governor, in the hope that he would reverse the decision. “I would keep going forever if I could,” she said.

Perhaps no one has gone to as many parole hearings as Debra Tate, the sister of Sharon Tate, who was murdered in 1969 in the Manson Family killings. She has, by her own count, spoken at dozens, perhaps even a hundred parole hearings: almost every one of those held for the Manson killers since the mid-1990s.

So far, only one of the members of Charles Manson’s murderous cult has died: Susan Atkins, in 2009. A few weeks before Ms. Atkins’s death, Ms. Tate spoke at her final parole hearing. On the day Ms. Atkins died, Ms. Tate wore all black, in memory of the murder victims.

“I cried one long alligator tear,” Ms. Tate said at the event. “It’s still a life lost. She had nieces and nephews. It’s never just about one person.”

Over the course of 40 years, the two women had become part of each other’s lives. But Ms. Atkins’s death was not a relief, Ms. Tate said. “There are still so many hearings to go to.”