

Faces behind the Figures

Are we safer because they're behind bars?



Donald Holmes, No. 257234
Crime: Second Degree Murder
Sentence: 10–15 years
First Possible Parole: July 21, 2004

Although Donald Holmes' pre-sentence report listed alcohol/drug abuse as his major weakness, and all his therapist's recommendations for parole indicate that he regards substance abuse as Holmes' greatest risk factor, the parole board continued Holmes in prison for two additional years because, it said, he "blames his offense on his drug use" and shows "no insight into his assaultive behavior."

Donald Holmes was raised in a close-knit family of nine in Tuskegee, Alabama. When he was 24, he followed several of his siblings to Detroit in search of employment. He soon got a job at Kasle Steel where he worked as an overhead crane operator for 10½ years. When he was 33, two years prior to his arrest, Holmes began a relationship with a woman who was addicted to crack cocaine. About that same time, Holmes himself began abusing alcohol and crack.

One night after work in May 1996, Holmes was drinking and smoking crack with his girlfriend. When he had no more money for drugs, his girlfriend became upset and left the house to look for a former boyfriend in hopes of borrowing money from him. Holmes followed her and, as they walked and argued, Holmes pulled a board from a pile of lumber at the curb. By the time they got to the ex-boyfriend's house, Holmes was enraged. Holmes struck the victim in the back with the board. She ran and, when she fell, Holmes continued hitting her with the board. She died almost immediately.

Holmes turned himself in and pled guilty to second-degree murder. The pre-sentence investigation report listed Holmes' strengths as a high school diploma, good physical health, stable employment, job skills, family support, stable home environment and lack of a prior criminal record. It listed only one major weakness - his substance abuse. The judge imposed a term of 10 to 15 years, at the low end of the sentencing guidelines range.

In prison, Holmes has completed several substance abuse classes and has continuously participated in AA and NA. He has received only one misconduct citation – for being off his bunk during count. He has been classified to minimum security since 2000.

Holmes' work supervisor at Camp Tuscola praised his ambition and consideration of others. He wrote that Holmes "needs little supervision and works way above and beyond what is expected." For 21 months, beginning in July 2003, Holmes was a member of a public works crew in Bay County. His crew supervisor called him "one of the best inmates I have had in 14 years of running a crew. He is extremely talented and highly motivated."



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More about the men and women who fill Michigan's prisons

The Director of Hampton Township's Department of Public Works, who observed Holmes for almost two years, sent letters to the parole board supporting his release:

Right from the start, Donald was someone special. He was polite, respected authority and worked well with his fellow crew members. Everyone in my department wanted Donald to work with them. That is the kind of person he is. I would put my reputation on the line to see Mr. Holmes paroled. I feel he has paid his debt to society and would be an asset to the outside world.

With no history of criminal or assaultive behavior until his mid-30's, Holmes viewed his offense as arising out of his drug abuse. In fact, when he entered prison the Reception Center did not recommend that he participate in the Assaultive Offender Program (AOP). Nonetheless, in early 2002 and again in March 2003, Holmes wrote to psychological services to ask whether he would be required to complete AOP before he could be released. In July 2003, a department psychologist determined that he was not a candidate for AOP because he did not see himself as assaultive; Holmes continued to identify his problem as substance abuse.

Holmes has a high parole guidelines score, indicating a low risk of re-offending. However, after Holmes' first parole interview in 2004, the board continued him in prison for two additional years. It gave as its reason that he "blames his offense on his drug abuse" and "has gained no insight into his assaultive behavior." Holmes was then accepted into AOP, which he began in August 2004, one month after his earliest release date.

Although his overall AOP evaluation is only fair, Holmes earned an excellent rating for his ability to manage his anger and his criminal thinking. The therapist concluded that Holmes has "developed a foundation for continued growth and change." His only recommendations concerned Holmes' need to deal further with his substance abuse issues while on parole.

In March 2006, Holmes was continued again - until August 2007. Although he works in the community five days a week, the board says it considers him too much of a risk to parole. It also says Holmes made inadequate progress in AOP. Prisoners get only one chance to complete AOP while incarcerated. The board could, however, require Holmes to continue assaultive offender programming while on parole.

In 2008, Holmes will complete his maximum sentence and the MDOC will be required to release him with no supervision and without the ability to insist on any substance abuse or assaultive offender programming when he returns to the community.