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## INDEPENDENT LENS, LOUISVILLE COURIER-JOURNAL PARTNER TO LAUNCH A MULTIMEDIA SERIES FOCUSED ON KENTUCKY'S PERSISTENT FELONY OFFENDER LAW

**The ground-breaking investigative series will explore one of the state's most polarizing and long-running laws and its lasting impact on Kentuckians**

**(Louisville, KY) February 3, 2022** — Today, the PBS Emmy Award-winning documentary series INDEPENDENT LENS and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Louisville Courier-Journal* launched a multimedia investigative series exploring Kentucky's Persistent Felony Offender (PFO) law, and the role it plays in making Kentucky—the nation's 26th most populous state—in the top 10 for incarceration.

The series will combine the power of investigative journalism and documentary filmmaking in examining the past, present and future of Kentucky's Persistent Felony Offender law. Drafted in 1974, the PFO law (penal code KRS 532.080), allows prosecutors to pursue enhanced sentencing terms for people who have previously been convicted of a felony.

Working alongside INDEPENDENT LENS documentary filmmakers and utilizing exclusive data and analysis from the non-partisan Vera Institute of Justice, *Louisville Courier-Journal* News Director/Director of Investigations Mike Trautmann and reporters Jonathan Bullington, Matt Mencarini, and Chris Kenning investigate the intergenerational impact of the law on Kentuckians, the commonwealth's growing prison population, and the potential for sentencing reform.

The original *Louisville Courier-Journal* series took months to develop in collaboration with sources, including current and formerly incarcerated people, across the commonwealth. The reporting team worked closely with filmmakers including 10-time Emmy Award-winner Marlon Johnson, and Louisville natives Imani Dennison and Evan Mascagni to identify criminal legal system experts and film participants whose personal stories reflect the legacy of the PFO sentencing law. Films in the series include:

- *Persistent* by Evan Mascagni follows a formerly incarcerated man striving to reform Kentucky's persistent felony offender (PFO) sentencing law. As Marcus Jackson fights for change in the offices of state lawmakers, he confronts the intergenerational trauma inflicted on his family by a decades-old statute. Political and systemic forces threaten to

stop his uphill push toward justice on behalf of people convicted of nonviolent drug crimes.

- *Weight of the State* by Marlon Johnson reveals a tight Kentucky family shouldering the burden of incarceration. While Ryan Troxler serves a 15-year sentence under the state's persistent felony offender (PFO) statute amid the pandemic, his loved ones work to keep their bond as strong as ever. Outside their inner circle, his case raises a hard question: Is there a connection between race and PFO prosecutorial decisions in Kentucky?
- *Understanding PFO: Kentucky's Harshest Sentencing Law* by Imani Dennison explains why the persistent felony offender (PFO) statute is a leading contributor to the state's disproportionately high prison population.

"Our goal at the *Louisville Courier-Journal* is to ethically and unbiasedly investigate stories that impact both Louisvillians, Kentuckians and the world at large," said News Director/Director of Investigations Mike Trautmann. "The opportunity to comprehensively explore the history of Kentucky's Persistent Felony Offender law with the help of INDEPENDENT LENS, the incredible filmmakers and ground-breaking data from the Vera Institute of Justice has allowed us to provide an authentic look into the real impact this law has had on the state and its people."

"As someone born and raised in Kentucky, it has been an absolute honor to help fellow Kentuckian Marcus Jackson tell the human stories behind the state's Persistent Felony Offender Law," said *Persistent* filmmaker Evan Mascagni. "Families across the Bluegrass State have experienced generational cycles of incarceration and trauma, and reforming this law will hopefully help in the healing process for so many. Marcus' tireless policy reform work is certainly an uphill battle, but I am hoping our work together will help shift the perception so many have towards people who have been incarcerated, and also help lawmakers understand the importance of this issue."

"The story of Ryan Troxler is an account of an African American man, who is currently serving an extensive 15-year sentence for a non-violent drug offense. His conviction and sentence by an all-white jury happened in Greenup County, Kentucky, where the black population is below 1%; it's a narrative far and wide throughout America," said *Weight of the State* filmmaker Marlon Johnson. "Through my work with Ryan and his family, we hope to bring attention to the racial and economic disparities woven into the fabric of Kentucky's criminal justice system through its use of Persistent Felony Offender laws."

Beginning February 3, 2022, the multimedia series, including the aforementioned films, will be released digitally via the *Louisville Courier-Journal's* [website](#). The editorial stories will also be available in the newspaper's print issues.

To learn more information about Kentucky's Persistent Felony Offender law and to join the civic conversation, audiences are asked to share their feedback via [this](#) interactive tool.

Other INDEPENDENT LENS documentaries exploring the criminal justice system include *Apart*, which examines the impact of America's War on Drugs through three mothers attempting to rebuild their lives after incarceration. *Apart* begins screening communities nationwide beginning January 22, 2022 and will premiere on PBS and the PBS Video app February 21, 2022. For more information about *Apart* please visit [here](#).

#### **About Independent Lens**

INDEPENDENT LENS is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 p.m. ET. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, Action Family Giving, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more visit [pbs.org/independentlens](https://pbs.org/independentlens).

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#### **About Stories for Justice Presented by Independent Lens**

Stories for Justice presented by INDEPENDENT LENS is a public media partnership that grew out of a groundswell of urgent interest in criminal justice issues among storytellers, audiences, local stations, and communities across the country. Steady polling from Gallup, Associated Press, and others shows more than 90% of Americans support some kind of reforms, as more and more people question why the United States is the most incarcerated nation in the world—and why people of color are disproportionately and unjustly affected by the criminal justice system. Stories for Justice brings together the untold stories, missing voices, and community connections needed to help citizens understand our complex criminal justice system, talk with neighbors about local realities, and explore community-led solutions to reduce injustice, violence, racism and harm. Stories for Justice is made possible with the generous support of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Ford Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation and Park Foundation.

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