What Else Happened? Injustices in Social Security and Missing Coverage of Anti-Asian Hate Crimes

Kat Jercich: Welcome to What Else Happened, a show for people who want to know what stories this week may have slipped under the radar. I'm Kat Jercich.

Regina Mahone: I'm Regina Mahone, and we're the managing editors at rewire.news, where we deliver evidenced based journalism for people who are passionate about health, rights and justice.

Kat Jercich: This week on What Else Happened, we'll talk about how Social Security is leaving behind people with disabilities, a spike in hate-based violence against Asian people in the United States, and possible new solutions to the domestic violence epidemic.

Regina Mahone: We'll chat with freelance writer Victoria Law about Cyntoia Brown, who was convicted of murder at the age of 16 in 2004. That case has gone viral in recent weeks.

Kat Jercich: Let's get going.

A lot of attention has been paid this week to the new tax bill making its way through Congress and rightly so. To name just a few critiques, the bill would predominantly cut taxes for the rich, leave grad students in the lurch and likely gut a huge portion of Obamacare, but that's not all.

Regina Mahone: It never is.

Kat Jercich: Right? It never is. The Motley Fool points out that hidden in the bill is a provision that could allow the government to give Social Security recipients smaller cost-of-living adjustments. These recipients include elderly people and disabled people.

Regina Mahone: Basically, another blow to a program that's already running out of funds.

Kat Jercich: In October, the LA Times pointed out that the inadequate funding for the Social Security Administration shows up in "deteriorating customer service at every level."

Regina Mahone: Jesus.

Kat Jercich: Yeah, right? This week, we're seeing that play out. The Orange County Register ran a piece revealing that disabled people who can't work and who are waiting to hear back from Social Security about whether they're eligible for disability payments are often made to wait more than two years for a hearing.

Regina Mahone: Two years?

Kat Jercich: Two years for a hearing, often with little to no government aid from things like food stamps or state funds. That means more than a million Americans are being put on hold while they try to pay rent or their mortgages in order to access funds that most of them have been paying into for their whole lives. According to the Register,
more than 80% of people seeking a hearing have to hire outside help, which is even more money. The paper tells the story of one man who applied six years and has yet to receive a single check in the mail.

Regina Mahone: No matter what happens with the tax bill, these kinds of agencies will continue to be underfunded.

Kat Jercich: It was a problem before and it'll be a problem in the future, so long as members of Congress continue to try to cut corners for anyone but the super wealthy.

Regina Mahone: Rewire race and justice reporter Auditi Guha penned this story this week, highlighting how Asian Americans have shared in the increase in hate-based attacks since Donald Trump's presidential campaign launched. The incidents that were documented by the national group, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, are pretty horrendous.

Kat Jercich: Right.

Regina Mahone: Ranging from people yelling racial slurs to houses of worship being vandalized. In one incident, which I mean, it's not just an incident, it was a murder, a 22-year-old Sikh man was stabbed to death by a passenger in his taxi. His family even, when they were quoted in the news report about the incident, mentioned Donald Trump and the hate filled environment we have since the campaign kicked off.

Kat Jercich: Right. I mean, some of those stories were just horrendous and in a way that made me surprised that we don't really hear about them a lot. I think that after President Trump's campaign and election, there's been a lot of coverage about anti-Latino and specifically anti-Muslim sentiment, but not so much anti-Asian and anti-Asian American sentiment as a whole, and of course, many Muslims are Asian but, I feel like there hasn't been a wide look at how that xenophobia has really taken place.

Regina Mahone: Yeah. Even this week, I haven't really seen that story reported widely or as widely as it should be reported and again, it reminds us that Asian Americans are just as vulnerable to attacks as other nonwhite people here, especially Asian Americans with multiple identities. I mean, the fact that there are immigrant Asian Americans who may be in detention centers and things like that ... the attacks that the President has made or other folks have made in their rhetoric against migrants, affects Asian Americans or the attacks they make against trans people, affects Asian Americans.

I will say, one of the biggest challenges that was documented in this new report, which we have up on the site, for Asian Americans in their communities is the fact that there are language barriers when it comes to the police departments closest to them. Even reporting the attacks is a challenge, for any group in this country that English isn't their first language.

Kat Jercich: Right. Of course, police departments may not be inclined to pursue reports from certain communities for all sorts of reasons ranging from the makeup of those
police departments to systemic racism and things like that. Yeah. That's really interesting and I'm glad we're covering it.

Regina Mahone: Yeah. I do think what's giving people hope, advocates are increasing their know your rights efforts. The group again, behind this recent news, the National Asian Americans Advancing Justice, they're giving out cards. I think they're in like 23 different languages because there are some people who don't even know that it's a crime, what's happening when people are spewing hate and racial slurs at them or spraying graffiti on their houses of worship and things like that.

Advocates, just documenting these stories, is so powerful and so we'll definitely do our best at Rewire, to continue to stay on top of covering these stories because they're incredibly important and people need to know. We all need to bear witness to these incidents.

Kat Jercich: Right. Like you said, a lot of marginalized and vulnerable communities are seeing the effect of the top-down rhetoric coming from the White House. On Wednesday, Trump started the morning with retweeting those super far right anti-Muslim Facebook posts and I saw folks genuinely concerned that that would play out in their own communities and in their own neighborhoods because people feel empowered to attack basically anyone who our President has himself disavowed.

Regina Mahone: Yeah. No. I'm glad that you brought that up because this week the ... No, actually it was earlier this month, not this week. I saw it this week. Pew Research Center released some new data showing that assaults against Muslims in the United States have actually surpassed the 2001 levels after the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Kat Jercich: Oh my God.

Regina Mahone: Clearly, something is wrong here.

Kat Jercich: Even as journalists and even like we've talked about before, of course journalists are often members of marginalized communities but journalists have also been seeing a lot of that anti-media rhetoric play out in our lives and in approaches to our stories and things like that so it's something to keep in mind, kind of across the board, both as recovering them and also keeping ourselves safe and holding in our minds that many of us are members of multiple communities and have intersecting identities that leave us vulnerable.

Regina Mahone: Absolutely. We'll definitely stay on this story.

Kat Jercich: Yeah.

In 2004, 16-year-old Cyntoia Brown was sentenced to life in prison for the murder of a 43-year-old man. At the time, she told the Nashville Police Department that after the man had solicited her for sex and shown her the guns in his home, he'd reached under his bed. Thinking he was about to shoot her, she said, she shot him, took money from his wallet and fled. Cyntoia's case is reemerging in the media
after several celebrities, including Rihanna and Kim Kardashian West, have drawn attention to the facts surrounding it. But, Cyntoia's story of being convicted for an action she says she carried out in self-defense, is far from unique.

Freelance writer Victoria Law, how has covered issues of prison injustice for more than a decade, joins me now to talk about Cyntoia's case and the other girls and women behind bars who have faced abuse throughout their lives. Hey Vicky, thanks for being on with me today.

Victoria Law: Thanks for having me and thanks for covering this issue.

Kat Jercich: Of course. It's really important. Just to get started, are there any elements of Cyntoia's case that stand out to you as part of these larger patterns surrounding girls and women behind bars?

Victoria Law: Well, I see a few different patterns happening in the case of Cyntoia. First that one of the unusual things that I wanted to point out about Cyntoia or exceptional things about her case is the amount of publicity she is getting now and there are many, I want to stress that there are many, girls and women or women who were originally sentenced as girls, in similar situations with similar patterns of abuse and violence in their histories and in their backgrounds that led them directly to being arrested and being incarcerated, who may languish in jails and prisons for years and years and years and years and never get this kind of attention.

I'm seeing a larger pattern of girls and women having experienced violence and abuse prior to their arrest and incarceration and a lot of the times, that abuse and violence is a direct pathway to prison whether it is picking up a gun or some other weapon and defending themselves or reacting to defend themselves against violence or acting to avert violence in many cases in which a women might be in an abusive relationship and might feel compelled or coerced into illegal actions at the behalf of their abusive boyfriend, spouse or partner. So we're seeing this in Cyntoia's case as well in that she was initially groomed into sex work.

She went to a man's house and thought that he was reaching for his gun and going to attack her and she shot him and she was the one who was criminalized and none of this came up and was put into context during her trial. This did not come into consideration during her sentencing. We see this again and again and again with countless numbers of women in prison whose stories we know and we have to assume that there are many other stories that we just don't know.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. I've seen some outlets claiming the sentencing of a teenager with a history of sexual abuse might be different today. Based on all those other stories, is that something you agree with?

Victoria Law: Actually, I don't. What I think might be different today, given that there is increased awareness around sexual abuse and sexual violence and with the advent of social media, ways for organizers to more quickly identify and connect with people, whether they be teenagers or adults who are in similar situations and provide
organizing and support and draw more media attention to them, we might see if Cyntoia had been arrested today and if her story got the attention of people who were willing or able to organize around the case and draw media to her plight. We might see a different outcome but I want to stress that it's not because we've come such a long way that we're getting girls experienced of sexual violence are automatically deleted and taken into account.

But because there's more visible organizing, there are ways to facilitate organizing and communication and connections across the country and around the world that weren't available even in 2004 and these are the factors that come into play when we talk about reducing sentencing. If we look at the case of Bresha Meadows who is a survivor of family violence, who shot her abusive father and was arrested and immediately incarcerated and was facing possibly being charged as an adult. This was a 14-year-old little girl who had experienced violence in her family for her entire life, had tried again and again to seek help, and was not getting help from the adults in her life.

She ran away twice. Her aunt tried to bring attention to the fact that there was domestic violence happening in the house. The police ignored this. When foster care workers showed up, they interviewed both parents together so of course her mother could not say anything about the violence and the abuse with her abusive husband sitting right next to her. Bresha Meadows eventually, was able to plead true, which is the juvenile equivalent of guilty in juvenile court so she was not tried as an adult, life in prison was taken off her table. Being in prison or juvenile prison until she was 18 or 21 was finally taken off the table and she was able to plead to spending time in a juvenile residential mental health treatment facility because there was an outpouring of support, because there was an outpouring of pressure and organizing around her case.

That organizing breathed awareness about the effects of violence and family violence and a person's right to self-defense, to defend themselves and their families. These are facts that did not come into play until Cyntoia's case and may not have come into play in many other cases that don't make the news. We don't know how many other times teenagers of with histories of sexual abuse are arrested and threatened with lengthy sentences.

Kat Jercich: Given all those intersecting factors, the fact that we don't know how many girls and women are still behind bars. The fact the Cyntoia won't be eligible for parole until her late 60's, what can people do to help?

Victoria Law: I guess there are several ways that people can help. First is to read about her case, get educated about her case and understand that first, while it's horrifying and it's heartbreaking, it's also not exceptional. It's not just that after Cyntoia's case fades away from the news or if she is released early from prison or if something else happens in her case, the work is not done. Understand that what happened to her, happens to many different people across the country. Maybe their circumstances differ slightly but they are still in similar situations and then get involved in organizing.
There's a network called Survived and Punished that works with survivors of violence who are criminalized and behind bars, to work on their freedom campaigns but also to connect the larger issues of interpersonal violence and domestic violence. Why are people incarcerated for defending themselves? Why are people being punished when they survive violence? If people are looking to do something about cases like Cyntoia Brown's and the many other people in similar situations, they should get educated, they should read about these cases, they should join up with Survived and Punished.

They should see what they can do if there are advocates and networks in their areas. Because it is the holiday times right now, there are several events going on around the country in which people are writing holiday cards to incarcerated survivors to let them know that they are not alone, they have not been forgotten. There are some online drives and campaigns for incarcerated mothers to be able to send their children gifts during the holiday season.

There are ways to get involved that make a very concrete difference in people's immediate lives in the coming month and then also, there are longer term campaigns to help free survivors behind bars.

**Regina Mahone:** Housing is often cited as the primary reason for why people stay in abusive relationships. Some victim's advocates argue that policies aimed at expanding affordable housing to everyone, could do more to address the issue than other solutions such as mandatory arrest laws.

**Kat Jercich:** According to the most recent report from the National Network to End Domestic Violence, which tracks the types of services sought by victims of intimate partner abuse and the unmet need, the majority of requests not met due to lack of resources were for housing. Meanwhile, a 2012 survey of 25 cities listed domestic violence as a leading cause of homelessness among families in the United States.

**Regina Mahone:** Right and that includes children. It is in this context that we share our good news story this week. The office of Maryland State's Attorney, Angela Alsobrooks, in Prince George's County, recently secured $1.5 million from the state to provide people looking to escape an abusive situation with housing aid for up to six months, with the possibility of an extension of up to a year.

Lynh Bui of the Washington Post, who reported the story, noted that people can apply for the funding before they've even filed a protective order, which is a game changer. It's the first time funding is available without such a requirement. Bui also reported that the funding can be used to cover services like therapy sessions or counseling for the victims and their children too.

**Kat Jercich:** That's amazing. In that news report, Carolyn White-Washington, who runs a local nonprofit called Sisters 4 Sisters, which works to empower women to leave abusive relationships, told the Washington Post that the $1.5 million wind fall is a long time coming. She said, "I cannot emphasize how many women have stayed in abusive
relationships because they have nowhere to go and far too often, those who stay are forced to endure more abuse, violence, incarceration or death."

Regina Mahone: Right, which makes me wonder how, although of course, this is good news, I imagine that it's just a drop in the bucket considering the National Network to End Domestic Violence's numbers. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence estimates that as many as 10 million people per year experience physical abuse by an intimate partner in the United States. Still, we're happy to have a little bit of positive news to share after another long news week and maybe in the future, other counties will follow suit.

Kat Jercich: Here comes the joy, the joy train. Regina, what's bringing you joy this week?

Regina Mahone: What Else Happened?? being back is bringing me lots of joy. It's been a few weeks.

Kat Jercich: Yeah.

Regina Mahone: Maybe even a month.

Kat Jercich: I think it's been a month. Actually a month.

Regina Mahone: Yeah. I'm like, three weeks? I don't know. I can't do math. Don't trust journalists with numbers, unless it's been fact checked. No. I'm just really excited to be back recording with you and our amazing team. I'm also really excited that it's officially holiday music season. We had some conversations among staff about how I like to listen to holiday music before Thanksgiving and some people are like, "Mmm, that might be too early," but it's not anymore and so I'm out and proud about my holiday music. Just saying.

Kat Jercich: Oh. Thank you for being honest with us about that, me and our listeners. I almost said the real we, like us and our listeners. Well, I mean, I like holiday music. Do you have a favorite? I'm definitely not a pre-Thanksgiving person though. I'll be real. That's too early.

Regina Mahone: No, it's not too early. Thanksgiving, there's even like Thanksgiving music.

Kat Jercich: What?


Kat Jercich: Love that one.

Regina Mahone: Christmas songs.

Kat Jercich: The sadder the Christmas song, the better. I don't like any upbeat Christmas music.
Regina Mahone: Wait, what does sad Christmas song ... why would you? No. That's mixing too many emotions.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. It's snowing outside, although it's not right now because of the climate change. The line in, Have Yourself a Merry little Christmas, "We'll have to muddle through somehow until we can all get together again," breaks my heart and makes me very sad but in a delicious way.

Regina Mahone: Yeah. That's pretty real actually.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. Right?

Regina Mahone: That's a really good line. Well Kat, what's bringing you joy this week?


Regina Mahone: As of now.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. I have to go listen to some and just be sad and happy at the same time. I'm also really glad What Else Happened? is back. I missed getting on the mic with you and bringing each other joy.

Regina Mahone: Yay.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. I'm also excited because I'm going to Saint Louis this weekend, for the first time in a while. It's one of my favorite cities. I get to visit one of my favorite people. I don't know if we're going to go to any of the Saint Louis attractions like the City Museum or Tower Grove Park or anything but I just really like being down there and spending time with my friends. Especially with all the hectic traveling and holiday schedule, having that time to kind of get centered, even though it's away from Chicago, it still feels like getting centered.

Regina Mahone: Wait, are you going to Saint Louis for any particular reason?

Kat Jercich: Yes. It's my friend's birthday. It's my friend Anne's birthday so I'm going to go see her.

Regina Mahone: Happy birthday Anne!

Kat Jercich: Happy birthday Anne! Anne is a listener. Oh man, I hope that doesn't set a precedent for birthday shout outs.

Regina Mahone: Yeah. That's a lot for sure. We cannot say happy birthday to everyone. I'm sorry. Happy birthday Ann, I hope it's amazing. Kat's a fun time. You guys'll have a blast.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. I'm pretty excited. I feel like offending ... if we were NPR, a funding question would be like, "If you pay us $100, we'll give you a birthday shout out."
Regina Mahone: We should do that actually. That's good.

Kat Jercich: Share the podcast with your friends, we'll give you a birthday shout out.

Regina Mahone: You also have to tell us when your birthday is because it wouldn't work otherwise.

Kat Jercich: No, it's just random. Have to listen every week.

Regina Mahone: Hey random listener, happy birthday.

Kat Jercich: All right. That's our show for this week. If you liked it, please rate it on Apple Podcasts and subscribe wherever you get your podcast.

Regina Mahone: Thanks again to Victoria Law.

Kat Jercich: You can find her @LVikkiML on Twitter.

Regina Mahone: You can find Rewire @rewire_news and me @byreginamahone.

Kat Jercich: I'm @kjercich on Twitter.

Regina Mahone: Good luck with the headlines and we'll see you next week on What Else Happened?

Kat Jercich: What Else Happened is a Rewire radio production for rewire.news, created and hosted by Regina Mahone and Kat Jercich, the managing editors at Rewire. Nora Hurley is our producer, Marc Faletti is our Executive Producer and Rewire's Editor in Chief is Jodi Jacobson.