

INTRODUCTION FROM THE EDITORS

Voices from the Inside, Voices from Beyond: Reflections on the (Prison) Pandemic *Kevin Walby and Justin Piché*

THE COVID-19 AND PRISON PANDEMICS

As we write, it is the middle of July 2020. In the contemporary pandemic moment, public health authorities have put in place a number of measures in a stated effort to prevent and manage the spread of the novel coronavirus, which range from limiting the size of public and private gatherings to isolation orders and complete lockdowns. Despite the restrictions, COVID-19 has nonetheless spread – to a greater or lesser degree – in different parts of the world. To date, there have been over 14.5 million confirmed cases of the disease (WHO, 2020). Over 600,000 people have lost their lives (ibid). The looming threat of contracting and potentially dying from disease, along with the significant disruptions in all aspects and spheres of life, have no doubt generated profound uncertainty and anguish for many. This is especially the case for those pushed to the margins by colonialist, capitalist, racist and white supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative, ableist, ageist and other violent structures of inequality in the world that generate water, food, housing, income, health, mental health, environmental, and other forms of insecurity.

In examining who has been rendered disposable during the present crisis, that is who has been made most vulnerable to COVID-19 transmission and death, it becomes clear that human beings who are made to live in congregate settings like prisons are at heightened risk (Oladeru *et al.*, 2020). From where we write in Canada, there have been 600 prisoners and 229 prison staff members who are confirmed to have contracted the disease (Ouellet and Loiero, 2020). Three prisoners have died (ibid). If testing was more readily done inside sites of confinement, the number of COVID-19 cases amongst people held in provincial-territorial and federal prisons in Canada would likely be higher (Blair *et al.*, 2020). Preliminary data suggests that in Canadian provinces where COVID-19 cases have been linked to prisons, transmission rates are at least five times higher amongst prisoners than the general population (Ouellet and Loiero, 2020). In the United States, over 70,700 prisoners have tested positive for COVID-19 in federal and

state prisons, and over 700 have died (see Marshall Project, 2020). These numbers do not account for cases and deaths in jails or other carceral spaces across the United States.

Recognizing this risk in the midst of a longstanding prison pandemic, when it is estimated that there are over 11 million people held in sites of human caging around the world (Walmsley, 2018), has prompted at least some jurisdictions to devise a series of COVID-19 prevention and management measures that have had both liberatory and repressive outcomes for prisoners, in keeping with longer contradictory and volatile patterns in penal policy and practice (O'Malley, 1999). For instance, Canadian provinces and territories – who incarcerate people awaiting trials and serving sentences of two-years-minus-a-day – have reduced their prison population by more 7,000 prisoners (Ouellet, 2020), representing more than a 25% reduction since the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. At the same time, they have suspended visits, programming, and other activities within their facilities to limit movement in and out of sites of confinement. They have also employed lockdowns frequently in the name of promoting physical distancing and used segregation in the name of quarantining new prisoners upon admission, as well as medically isolating captives that test positive for the coronavirus or are symptomatic.

For its part, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) – who incarcerate people serving federal terms of imprisonment of two-years-plus-a-day – have been criticized for imposing many of the restrictions noted above with few releases (e.g. OCI, 2020a, 2020b) in the name of public health and safety. CSC continues along this path despite having poorer public health outcomes with more confirmed COVID-19 cases amongst their prisoners and personnel than their provincial-territorial counterparts who imprison more people (Piché, 2020). Moreover, CSC continues to cage people with the knowledge that imprisonment undermines public safety (Mathiesen, 1990). That many jurisdictions across the world are not heeding to basic public health and safety knowledge by diverting people from custody and decarcerating prisoners is both dangerous and reprehensible.

Sites of confinement disappear people, while operating as incubators of disease (Drucker, 2011) and death (Razack, 2015) at alarming rates even in 'normal' times. The COVID-19 pandemic has further entrenched these realities of incarceration. During this crisis, we have been unable to maintain

contact with many of our contributors, in part because the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP) office at the University of Ottawa was closed for months and written correspondence in prisons has been significantly slowed. In the bleakest of scenarios, it is also possible that some *JPP* contributors have contracted COVID-19 and been placed in solitary confinement by another name, have been hospitalized or have lost their lives. More optimistically, we hope *JPP* contributors we have been unable to maintain contact with during the pandemic have been released from prison with community supports in place. It is for these reasons that this introduction is dedicated to the “Voices from the Inside, Voices from Beyond”. While the COVID-19 and prison pandemics result in the suspension of liberties and other life-affirming activities, the journal remains committed to providing a platform for currently and formerly imprisoned writers to shed light on how human caging harms, maims, and kills people. Their writing communicates the palpable sense of loss and despair that imprisonment engenders – violence that ought to come to an end so that every person is treated like a human being.

THIS ISSUE

At the *JPP* we believe in promoting the voices and insights of imprisoned and criminalized persons. Other writings such as those of the media and even academics tend to frame the experiences of prisoners in ways that are limiting (also see Fischer-Hoffman, 2020). Several of the papers in this issue of the *JPP* focus on experiences of, and pains resulting from, imprisonment. Lukas Carey writes about the temporal dimensions of imprisonment, and the ‘brain games’ that evenings and nights in the prison can play on people behind bars. Omar Austin provides a unique perspective on harsh treatment endured in the context of youth detention, including at the hands of prison officers who are adults officially tasked with serving as role models for young people with whom the law is in conflict. Jeremiah Bourgeois reflects on the feeling of being imprisoned from his teenage years to adulthood and the courage it requires to take on life challenges such as completing education behind bars. Gordon Melvin similarly reflects on the feeling that prison steals one’s life away from them and the issue of ageing in prison.

Additional contributions in this issue of the *JPP* focus on the idea of being supported in prison or jail and the challenges people face in finding solace and inspiration. Writing about the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre in

Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, Adam Dufresne reflects on barriers he and others have faced in connecting with people in jail and the sense of loneliness that can emerge. Ed Schreeche-Powell writes about the design and possibilities of peer mentoring and support in prison in the United Kingdom, as well as some of the conundrums and contradictions that exist within these programs as currently organized.

Other pieces focus on the drudgery of prison and the forms of punishments that prisoners face on top of deprivation of liberty. Writing from an Illinois prison, George Peter reflects on the penalties, along with the pressure prison writers and jailhouse lawyers face when critiquing the penal system. Charles Diorio writes about the bleak conditions and lack of access to proper food and respectful treatment inside prisons in Massachusetts and across the United States. Sean J. White reflects on the practices of renaming and reframing segregation, and the kinds of suffering that persist in these spaces despite rhetorical name changes. Writing about prisons and courts in Virginia, Jermaine Pickett critically examines the forms of cronyism and corruption that exists in the so-called justice system that pushes people to plead guilty. Mark Zammit reflects on the idea of prison reform, suggesting that the jail and remand system in Ontario is shattered and needs to be replaced. Deepan Budlakoti continues the discussion on the deprivations endured by prisoners through the lens of his experience as a stateless captive warehoused in a jail located in Ottawa, the city in which he was born. The article section concludes with W.E. Roberts offering a triptych of writings on the emotions and sensations of being imprisoned in America today. W.E. Roberts writes on the feeling of being reduced to numbers, on the meaning of colours, and the blurring and loss of memory behind bars.

This volume of *JPP* also offers a book review by Lucas Ridgeway and features numerous Prisoners' Struggles contributions on prisoner solidarity and support work taking place to resist the Canadian carceral state during the COVID-19 pandemic. The section is preceded by a *Response* to the issue from Vicki Chartrand on the rationales behind the initiatives. Nancy Van Styvendale writes about the Inspired Minds: All Nations Creative Writing program, along with the COVID-19 outreach and mutual aid they have undertaken in Alberta and Saskatchewan. The Free Lands Free Peoples group writes about prisoner solidarity in the prairie provinces of Canada during COVID-19 and beyond. The Millhaven Lifers' Liaison Group writes about the work they have done to supporting prisoners and their families

in the Kingston region and beyond. Mothers Offering Mutual Support reflects on their work in Ottawa supporting people who are criminalized, but also their families and friends. Collectif ensemble avec les personnes migrantes contre le racisme, Rencontre Interculturelle des Familles de l'Estrie and Solidarité sans frontières Sherbrooke reflect on the multiple forms of prisoner solidarity and mobilization at work during this pandemic moment, as does Jane Crosby from Books 2 Prisoners Ottawa. For their part, the Termite Collective outline their demands to release people from custody, as well as improve health and safety behind the walls during the COVID-19 pandemic. These pieces, along with testimonials from Hassan Al-Ghazzi, Kevin Belanger, Steven Zehr, Erica Brazeau, Luqman Osman, and anonymous prisoners from Saskatchewan Penitentiary and Edmonton Institution, reveal the devastating impact of COVID-19 on prisoners and their families. Importantly, the contributions also underscore the hope and inspiration that keeps people impacted by imprisonment alive despite the inaction and negligence they routinely observe and face.

If the COVID-19 crisis is to come to an end, now more than ever we need to put an end to the prison pandemic that serves as an incubator of diseases by working towards abolishing human caging (Maynard and Piché, 2020). Prison abolition also requires defunding the police (Kaba, 2020) and other agencies whose repression in the service of the state and corporations steals peoples' conflicts, time, and lives. The world again finds itself at a crossroads, where various futures are possible. This issue honours the courage of people pushed furthest to the margins, including prisoners, who are leading the struggle towards making the world a more just place.

REFERENCES

- Blair, Alexandra, Abtin Parnia and Arjumand Siddiqi (2020) "Testing Lags and Emerging COVID-19 Outbreaks in Federal Penitentiaries: A View from Canada", *medRxiv* [pre-print].
- Drucker, Ernest (2011) *A Plague of Prisons: The Epidemiology of Mass Incarceration in America*, New York: The New Press.
- Fischer-Hoffman, Cory (2020) "The Voice of the Prison and 'Wars of Position': A Discourse Analysis of a Venezuelan Prison Newspaper", *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 37(1): 15-29.
- Kaba, Mariame (2020) "Yes, we mean literally abolish the police", *New York Times* – June 12. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/opinion/sunday/floyd-abolish-defund-police.html>.

- Marshall Project (2020) “A State-by-State Look at Coronavirus in Prisons”, July 27. Retrieved from <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/05/01/a-state-by-state-look-at-coronavirus-in-prisons>.
- Mathiesen, Thomas (1990) *Prison on Trial*, London: Sage.
- Maynard, Robyn and Justin Piché (2020) “No One Is Disposable: Depopulating Carceral Sites During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond”, in Between the Lines Editorial Committee (eds.), *Sick of the System: Why the COVID-19 Recovery Must Be Revolutionary*, Toronto: Between the Lines, pp. 105-115.
- Office of the Correctional Investigator [OCI] (2020a) *COVID-19 Status Update*, Ottawa – April. Retrieved from <https://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/rpt/pdf/oth-aut/oth-aut20200423-eng.pdf>.
- Office of the Correctional Investigator [OCI] (2020b) *Second COVID-19 Status Update*, Ottawa – June. Retrieved from <https://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/rpt/pdf/oth-aut/oth-aut20200619-eng.pdf>.
- Oladeru, Oluwadamilola T., Nguyen-Toan Tran, Tala Al-Rousan, Brie Williams and Nicklolas Zaller (2020) “A Call to Protect Patients, Correctional Staff and Healthcare professionals in Jails and Prisons During the COVID-19 Pandemic”, *Health and Justice*, 8(17): 1-3.
- O’Malley, Pat (1999) “Volatile and Contradictory Punishment”, *Theoretical Criminology*, 3(2): 175-196.
- Ouellet, Valérie (2020) “COVID-19 in Canadian Jails – Key Findings”, *CBC News* – July.
- Ouellet, Valérie and Joseph Loiero (2020) “COVID-19 taking a toll in prisons, with high infection rates, CBC News analysis shows”, *CBC News* – July 17. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prisons-jails-inmates-covid-19-1.565247>.
- Piché, Justin (2020) “Confirmed COVID-19 Cases Linked to Canadian Carceral Institutions (v7.1)”, *Tracking the Politics of Criminalization and Punishment in Canada* – May 29. Retrieved from http://tppc-canada.blogspot.com/2020/05/confirmed-covid-19-cases-linked-to_29.html.
- Razack, Sherene (2015) *Dying for Improvement: Inquests and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Walmsley, Roy (2018) *World Prison Population List* (twelfth edition), London: World Prison Brief. Retrieved from https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/wppl_12.pdf.
- World Health Organization [WHO] (2020) “Numbers at a glance” – July 21. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>.