

**‘You Improvise to Survive’:
HIV Prevention, Survival Strategies
and Queer Cultures of Self-Defence*
*MTL Trans Support Group***

WHY IMPROVISE

I can’t really offer advice about having ‘safesex’. I don’t practice it. I practice ‘being careful’. In my own way. It does not involve use of things, plastic, rubber, etc. Mostly avoid body fluids, which is the main way of transmission. That is tricky, but hey, it’s the life. You improvise to survive. That’s all I can offer.

– Amazon

In two years of coordinating a letter writing program between incarcerated and non-incarcerated gay, queer and trans communities, the Prisoner Correspondence Project’s outside collective – itself comprised entirely of gay, queer and trans folks – forges strategies to support our penpals, friends, contacts and allies on the inside. We aim to intervene on carceral landscapes of structural anti-gay and anti-queer violence. In response to violently anti-queer prison and policing regimes across the U.S. and Canada, and to the sexual and emotional health risks faced by our inside penpals, the Prisoner Correspondence Project has begun to coordinate a series of resources, ranging from educational strategies including literature and information, to physical resources like condoms and lube. Such resources address harm reduction strategies directly relevant to the lives and survival of gay, queer and trans prisoners.

Filling the Gaps

While many critical resources do exist in support of prisoners and prison abolition, there remains a troubling gap surrounding issues that have particular relevance among gay, queer and trans prisoners. Through the coordination of our letter-writing program, the Project affords us the opportunity to identify how the criminalization of homosexuality within the prison system, as well as the targeted policing and incarceration of gays and queers more broadly, poses a daily threat to the physical and emotional well-being of those inside. The work that we do is accordingly rooted in the belief that forging informal, personal circuits of communication and exchange is essential in supporting our communities both inside and out.

Thus in tandem with the penpal program, we organize a library of writing and information related to queer and trans survival in prison, addressing topics ranging from health and harm-reduction (HIV and Hep C prevention, safer fixing, drug and hormone injection, safer barebacking), to broader forms of emotional and sexual survival. Through the dissemination of information about queer health and survival, our anti-prison politics are put into practice by demanding self-determination and sexual freedom for queer and trans prisoners, critical in sustaining broader emotional and physical well-being. As such, the development of these resources is unfolding in close dialogue with the motivations, desires and anti-prison politics of prisoners which are at the root of the project itself.

As we began supplying pre-existing educational and informational resources to our penpals inside, we came to recognize the ways in which these resources – and our interventions – were lacking. Many existing resources – addressing topics including safer sex, coming out and so on – not only failed to account for the realities faced by incarcerated communities, but failed to acknowledge them altogether, effectively writing gay, queer and trans prisoner realities out of existence. Responding to this context of violent erasure and of prison systems failing to meet the most basic needs of those housed within their walls, we decided to facilitate the development of informational resources that were both directly relevant to the needs and which reflected the lives of our incarcerated penpals. Acknowledging this original shortcoming forged an opportunity to build interventions and strategies not only to promote physical health and survival, but also to affirm what it means to be queer or trans behind bars.

These omissions and gaps in resources reflect the lack of discourse and community dialogue about gay, queer and trans prisoners. They reproduce the invisibility of queers inside prisons, and the perpetual violence of anti-gay correctional mandates. We consistently came up against the reality that resources emerging from queer and LGBT community contexts were virtually irrelevant to parts of these communities inside prisons. Similarly, many resources emerging from prisoner support contexts failed to acknowledge realities of sexual desire and pleasure inside prisons. For instance, while a broad spectrum of resources exist concerning HIV-prevention, nearly all of this literature presumes consistent access to condoms – a reality we cannot assume exists in prisons. As a result, we decided to take up the task of creating resources that begin to acknowledge how these gaps and the larger

invisibilities they reflect affect not only safer sex practices, but the very survival of queer and trans people who are incarcerated.

Anchoring the Project in Collaborative Work and Anti-Prison Politics

To anchor these new resources in the lived desires and needs of our inside penpals, we foregrounded the stories, experiences and anecdotes of incarcerated participants in the project. The resources are based on a harm reduction model that acknowledges the presence of risk in everyday behaviour, in stark opposition to models which identify and isolate behaviours upon which to intervene. Our intentions extend beyond the mere distribution of information, reflecting our desires to: a) politicize existing resource and service provision by refusing to assess risk and need as discrete from the structures that create/enforce them; b) anchor the resources in an affirmative politics of (queer) desire and of pleasure, and in so doing, refuse the way that many existing sexual health resources are evacuated of an analysis of desire or the meanings gay and queer communities derive from sex, inside and outside of prisons; as well as c) root the resources themselves in the collaborative *process*, building broader networks of resistance and support through months of sustained collaboration. In doing so, we acknowledge that histories of resistance and organizing among marginal communities – prisoner, queer, HIV positive – have come about through grassroots, by-and-for efforts by incarcerated folks in dialogue with communities outside and with one another, not from efforts imposed from without.

These resources, most importantly, continue to develop as a work-in-progress, as they evolve and change based on our still-limited but growing access to the voices of those on the inside. We intend for these resources to link gay, queer and trans people between institutions and across national borders. We intend that these resources act not only as a model for harm reduction and education, but also as an indispensable tool for community building and self-preservation.

NAVIGATING JOINT LEGACIES OF AIDS AND MASS INCARCERATION

I was last out in the end of 1980 – the AIDS virus was not known then, and sex was a lot more prevalent and carefree. At least compared to post-AIDS scare times.

– Amazon

By not providing condoms, it doesn't discourage sexual behaviour and promiscuity, but rather only threatens to give a world-wide epidemic a lot more momentum.

– J.A. Brown

The Early Days of Community Disappearance

While the lived needs and desires communicated through our ongoing correspondence with our penpals have been the central motivation for the development of these resources, they have mobilized entire cultural, political and sexual histories in the process – histories which have directly structured the landscapes of violence faced by gay, queer and trans prisoners. Those historical legacies which have structured queer realities in the most explicit and violent ways remain: the war on drugs – which represented the beginning of massive carceral expansion – and the AIDS crisis.

When we speak of the AIDS crisis, we must understand it not only in terms of the virus itself at play, but as the host of cultural and political forces which occurred alongside the disease: hysteria, quarantining, renewed homophobia, medical incarceration, contact tracing, mandatory testing and extensive surveillance. Each of these instances of structural anti-queer violence cannot be understood as separate from the epidemiological conditions that devastated our communities and sexual cultures.

The war on drugs emerged at the same time as the onset of the AIDS epidemic. While the war on drugs, as a U.S. project, was ravaging communities of colour south of the Canada-U.S. border, it emerged in only a marginally diluted form several years later under Canada's Mulroney government. We must see each of these histories as having unfolded alongside one another, each reinforcing the mandates of the other. Both AIDS and the war on drugs served to: a) target specific communities, working in tandem to ensure the removal and disappearance of the same communities already targeted along lines of race, class, sexual orientation and gender, and b) play a central role in interrupting and demobilizing militant gay and black liberation movements. In revisiting such histories, one can observe how officials in power structured and exacerbated the course of the epidemic by allowing HIV to spread among those same communities already targeted by policing and incarceration, actively nurturing the conditions for “the right people” – to borrow the words of Ronald Reagan – to transmit the virus. Once inside, many among these same communities, jointly devastated by AIDS

and mass incarceration, found themselves without treatment, medication or adequate healthcare.

**This Landscape as it Exists Today:
The Correctional Mandate and Anti-queer Violence***

Here in prison, or at least this prison, there is no such thing as safe sex. It is against the rules.

– Matt Jones

As we received submissions, anecdotes, feedback, and suggestions from our contacts inside, we came to realize the extent to which these histories still represent some of the key narratives structuring their daily lives and interactions in prisons. Today we see these histories as diffuse, naturalized and embedded in our negotiations of queer and trans desire, risk, pleasure, as well as survival. These negotiations are directly structured by expressions of anti-queer violence in carceral settings:

- (a) Sexual expression and intimacy between prisoners is – in almost all cases – explicitly criminal, resulting in punishment, extra-legal beatings, administrative retaliation, solitary confinement / isolation and increased sentencing. In the process, consensual queer sex between prisoners faces the same sanctions as instances of sexual assault, rape and sexual violence.
- (b) Tangible and consistent condom access in prisons – federal and provincial / state, north and south of the US-Canada border – does not exist, revealing the profound discrepancies between institutional policy and the lived realities of individuals. Over the course of the past two years, incarcerated project participants have recalled a spectrum of experiences with respect to alleged condom availability, ranging from condoms being rationed at a rate of one per month, to the nursing station having “run out” for a nine consecutive month stretch, to an array of structurally coordinated disincentives in accessing condoms or lube. In many cases, condoms can only be accessed by asking administrative personnel and in contexts where queer sex is criminal, meaning that condom access hinges upon directly incriminating oneself, or potentially “outing” yourself as

gay or queer. Where in the U.S. the landscape is characterized by almost total lack of access nationwide, in Canada this landscape is characterized by the myth of consistent and unobstructed condom access.

- (c) Prisoner-led organizing, including the emergence of prisoner-run HIV prevention and peer-health education programs in the late 1980s and early 1990s, has been criminalized inside prisons over the course of the past twenty years across the U.S. and Canada, most explicitly under the purview of alleged ‘anti-gang’ reform. This shift demobilized an emerging prisoner AIDS prevention movement, ensuring the continued rise in infection rates among communities on the inside.
- (d) Queer or explicit safer sex information, literature and resources are routinely censored, seized or returned under the purview of anti-pornography policies. Just as the U.S.-Canada border obstructed the passage of such materials in the 1980s when AIDS was decimating our communities on the outside, prison mailrooms and administrations continue this role of censorship and gatekeeping as diffuse borders mapped onto existing national ones. As a result, prevention and health knowledge on the inside is now often five, ten or even fifteen years behind what is on the outside, further inhibiting queer survival.
- (e) There exists a lack of consistent access to HIV medication and anti-retroviral drugs among HIV positive communities who become incarcerated, as well as among prisoners who contract the disease *while* incarcerated. These intentional and structural gaps in access create new and more virulent strains of HIV that are medication-resistant in the bodies of queer, trans and other HIV positive prisoners. This last instance of the bodily management and regulation of prisoners comprises an instance of structural anti-queer violence that *not only* mobilizes historical legacies of entire communities being permitted to die, but which actively nurtures the conditions for a second cohort to the epidemic that may prove itself even more resilient than the first.

In our desire to revisit each of these intertwining narratives, not only do we situate ourselves historically, but we come to understand that the

realities we face today reflect the lived effects of legacies of 30 years of AIDS decimation and carceral expansion. That these knowledges emerge through our correspondence and resource development reveals the extent to which, in becoming naturalized, these histories exist in people's very bodies, emerging in the most minute and daily negotiations of violence, risk and sexual safety.

Navigating the Spectre of Death

Men who died I never knew, just saw here every day, no longer here, vanished in a single breath. It rubs off from the way cops think about us, like cattle. We start thinking of ourselves that way too. It just happened that last night I heard another one of my best friends and cellmates died of O.D., a real beautiful young transsexual woman.

– Amazon

Alongside this array of structural and policy-level conditions lie personal negotiations of histories of death, mourning and disappearance. These are experiences that cannot be assessed discretely from the material conditions of incarceration to which gay, queer and trans communities are subject. As such, they directly impact the form and content of the resources and the resource development process. For many among our community on the inside, this negotiation of death presents itself as a second cohort of mourning, loss and disappearance. While gay, queer and trans communities were decimated from AIDS on the outside throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, many inside today are experiencing a second wave of death from suicide, overdose, medical negligence, along with AIDS. We must ensure that our work is directly informed and impacted by these overlapping traumas.

While few of these negotiations of death, trauma or history emanate directly from carceral structures, they interact with people's experiences of incarceration, and are actively reproduced through the material conditions of queer/trans incarceration and punishment. These encounters with anti-queer violence are not only reproduced in the omissions of existing HIV/AIDS prevention discourse and materials that fail to account for the lives of communities inside prisons, they are also reproduced through much of existing abolitionist and prison activist agendas, as well as their

discourses which fail to account for the lives and realities and desires of gay, queer and trans communities inside prisons. We cannot assess the lack of relevant prevention resources as separate from the lack of discourse or discussion about sexuality, gender or queer desire. In the process, these very omissions, silences and erasures become folded into the very landscape of anti-queer violence coordinated by the prison system itself. As such, the very navigations of loss, trauma and community decimation are reproduced, unfolding alongside the invisibility that characterizes incarcerated gay, lesbian, queer and trans experience.

FACILITATING COLLABORATIVE RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT ACROSS PRISON WALLS

Safe sex is always important in or outside of prison to me. But the only difference is, on the outside, I have a choice. I, for one, am particularly glad you mentioned the issue of barebacking, because it is – without doubt – long overdue.

– J.A. Brown

Dialogue with Communities on the Outside

The initial impetus for the development of resources emerged directly from acknowledging the gaps and omissions in existing resources, along with the series of in-depth personal statements sent to us by a host of inside collaborators, outlining their negotiations of risk, safety, survival and their encounters with anti-queer punishment. To this end, by foregrounding these encounters and ongoing realities, we hope to acknowledge and honour existing discourses emanating from inside communities on these negotiations, while at the same time bringing these experiences to dialogues within communities we are a part of on the outside – prison abolition, gay/queer/trans and so on.

Our first opportunity to share these contributions with members of our communities on the outside came in the context of a workshop we facilitated at the AIDS Committee Ottawa as part of *Snowblower*, an annual health and wellness festival for gay men. Entitled “Fucking without Fear: Sexual ‘Safety’ Inside and Outside Prisons”, this workshop allowed us to discuss more concrete ways prisoner support and anti-prison movements, along with gay and queer prisoner support initiatives in particular, can work toward

meaningful, collaborative work with existing AIDS service and advocacy organizations. The process itself reflected our investments in: 1) contributing to the creation of outside gay, queer and trans resources that acknowledge criminalization, policing and incarceration as the daily realities among many in our community; and 2) insisting that prisoner justice and prison abolition become re-prioritized by gay and queer community organizers. In the process, we seek to contribute to queer cultures that resist containment in the broadest of terms.

In both workshop settings as well as other contexts, using the submissions and contributors' negotiations of risk, violence and safety as a point of departure, we consistently encounter the continuities which exist between landscapes of anti-queer violence inside and outside of carceral sites. Forging space to reflect critically on the continuities which exist inside and outside of prisons where gay, queer, and trans communities are concerned, enable an understanding that the circumstances of incarcerated members of our communities exist as part of larger homophobic and transphobic, as well as racist and anti-poor systems that function beyond carceral environments. The targeting by law enforcement of queer youth, and in particular queer and trans youth of colour, as well as the barriers in accessing resources and support among rural gays and queers, and the recent criminalization of HIV transmission in Canada culminating in a recent murder conviction, represent but several instances in which this landscape of isolation and the regulation of gay, queer and trans survival does not begin or end with carceral sites, but travels across them.

Encounters with Prevention Work: Building Relationships between Anti-prison and HIV Prevention Communities

Emerging jointly from the omissions and exclusions identified in existing prevention materials and from the negotiations of anti-gay, anti-queer correctional mandates faced by communities inside, we were then faced with the task of forging partnerships with allied healthcare workers, prevention workers and nurses working for AIDS service providers, as well as other community health organizations in Montreal and beyond.

The emerging focus regarding the content of the new resources themselves was established jointly through both the experiences recalled to us through the submissions received, as well as our own experiences as non-incarcerated gays and queers in encounters with medical negligence,

information gatekeeping, and homophobia at the hands of healthcare providers. These priorities consolidated around ensuring resources a) which are not overly medicalized and made inaccessible through medical terminology, b) which do not pathologize sexual decisions or practices, honouring the sexual choices made by communities inside, and c) which depart from a tradition of the de-sexualizing of prevention materials, and that integrate affirmations of queer sexual cultures inside prisons in the face of sexual violence and deprivation. In this regard, passages from the submissions we have received will be embedded within the resources themselves as a means of ensuring that the information necessary for risk reduction and protection is not divorced from community and individual encounters with this landscape.

If today we see these individual and collective histories of incarceration, AIDS devastation, and anti-queer violence as embedded in our negotiations of desire, risk, pleasure and survival, then it is these experiences we seek to reflect in our materials and work as a collective. Through this process, we have been able to forge more expansive and relevant models of risk or harm reduction, understanding harm reduction as it relates both to health and bodily agency, and as it relates to encounters with the penal system. The mandate at the core of these resources remains: to affirm sexual desire in the context of its' punishment, to celebrate sexual cultures in the context of their erasure, to equip people with the tools for survival in the context of being set up to die, and to honour individual and community survival as resistance.

**CONCLUSION:
PICKING-UP WHERE THESE HISTORIES LEFT OFF
BY CREATING NEW TACTICS FOR SELF-DEFENSE**

I took a tremendous amount of chances in my day, but never again. I will not test my destiny or fate. It takes experience to be able to navigate the prisons sexually and make the best choices. I have 28 years behind me and intend to stay negative the rest of my life.

– Amazon

Within this landscape of violence and omission, there also exist movements nurturing resistance, survival, and queer cultures of self-defence. Alongside

these histories of queer containment and epidemic risk, there exists histories of community resilience comprised of gay and queer solidarities emanating from both the inside and the outside. Organized historical movements include the ACT UP in-prison committee, the Bedford women's prison ACE (AIDS, Counselling, and Education) collective, and AIDS service organizations advocacy for condom access, treatment, education, and clean gear inside prisons based out of Toronto and Montréal. There also exist longstanding histories of prisoner-run peer-health prevention programs and early gay liberation organizing against police entrapment, bar raids, the policing of queer sex, and the criminalization of our lives. It is these histories from which we seek to learn, to honour and to use as a point of departure in forging new strategies for survival against shifting carceral mandates. Archiving our own work, including the stories of resistance and survival emanating from communities inside must remain the core of our interventions, and stands as a refusal of the erasure of queer histories.

It is these intertwining historical legacies – of AIDS devastation, of prison expansion, and the disappearance of entire segments of our communities – that demand we ask questions about what it would look like to integrate our anti-prison or justice work with our prevention work. If we acknowledge the critical role that prisons play in ensuring continued and rising seroconversion rates, what would it look like for every AIDS service organization to integrate as part of its mandate a decrease in the number of people locked up behind bars? To declare a national moratorium on incarceration? Through a process of revisiting these histories and assessing them against experiences of queer and trans incarceration today, we reveal the profound overlaps between anti-prison and AIDS prevention mandates, and the potential for more effective and meaningful resistance among gays and queers. Further, by creating resources and coordinating collaborative projects between inside and outside communities that integrate and honour joint legacies of AIDS and mass incarceration/prison expansion, we move closer to creating gay, queer and trans cultures of self-preservation, community affirmation, and self-defence.

ENDNOTES

- * Thank you to Amazon, Matt Jones, Toddles, J.A. Brown, Patrice and Denzial, whose stories, submissions, anecdotes, and ongoing feedback in the face of mailroom

ensorship, punitive surveillance, administrative retaliation, and anti-gay, anti-queer violence, have been the core of this project and continue to be the inspiration for our organizing.

REFERENCES

Dowsett, Gary (1996) *Practicing Desire: Homosexual Sex in the Era of AIDS*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

ABOUT THE PRISONER CORRESPONDENCE PROJECT

The Prisoner Correspondence Project invites any incarcerated and non-incarcerated people who do work on the inside and who would like to be involved with resource development and outreach – in and out of prisons – to get in touch with us. In particular, we invite incarcerated gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer folks to get in touch with feedback or to collaborate on upcoming projects. We are also always looking for new penpals, inside and out. You can reach us at:

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CALLING ALL GAY AND TRANS PRISONERS

The Prisoner Correspondence Project coordinates a penpal program for all gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgender and queer prisoners. We pair you up with a penpal from these same communities outside of prison, for friendship and support.



The PrisonerCP also coordinates a resource library on gay and trans survival inside prisons, including:

- safer sex
- safer drug use and fixing / clean needle care
- safer tattooing
- emotional coping and survival
- writing by gay, queer, and trans prisoners across the US and Canada

By sharing stories, resources, and learning from each other, we hope to build new strategies for survival and build stronger community between our communities inside and outside of prisons.

Whether you are serving a short or long sentence, please get in touch with us for more information about our resources, being matched up with a penpal, or anything else.

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Artwork by Sha'ul Sa'adawi al-Muzawi, incarcerated in the state of Iowa.

APPEL AUX PERSONNES GAIES ET TRANS INCARCÉRÉES

Le Projet de Correspondance pour Prisonnier.e.s coordonne un programme de correspondance pour toute personne gais, lesbienne, bisexuelle, transsexuelle, transgenre ou queer en prison. Nous vous coupons avec un.e correspondant.e de ces mêmes communautés à l'extérieur de prison, afin de faciliter le support et la solidarité.

Le Projet de Correspondance pour Prisonnier.e.s coordonne également une bibliothèque de ressources sur la survie gais et trans en prison. Les thèmes abordés comprennent:

- la prudence sexuelle
- la réduction des méfaits lors de l'utilisation de drogue / l'entretien des seringues
- le tatouage moins risqué
- l'adaptation et la survie émotionnelle
- des écrits par des prisonnier.e.s gais.e.s, queer et trans du Canada et des EU.

En partageant nos histoires, nos ressources et en apprenant l'un de l'autre, nous souhaitons forger de nouvelles stratégies de survie et bâtir des liens solides entre nos communautés à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de prison.

Que vous complétiez une peine de longue ou de courte durée, SVP rejoignez-nous pour plus d'information sur nos ressources, pour être mis en contact avec un.e correspondant.e, ou pour quoi que ce soit d'autre.

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