

INTRODUCTION FROM THE ISSUE EDITORS

(Beyond) Life in Prison

Kevin Walby, Melissa Munn and Justin Piché

The harms and agony of criminalization and imprisonment defy words; nonetheless, the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* provides a platform for criminalized people to share their stories and analyses in writing. When trying to understand penal and carceral practices, starting with the voices of criminalized and formerly imprisoned people is ethically and politically necessary (Rinaldi and Marques, 2021). This is something the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* has done for more than thirty years (Gaucher, 1988). Grounding the quest for knowledge and struggle for justice in the experiences of criminalized and racialized people is participatory and inclusive (Benson, 2020; Tietjen, 2019), yet it is a step most academic work refuses to take. Most penology and prison studies literature operates from an abstract, Archimedean point that has little resemblance to the everyday / every night lived realities of people behind bars or experiencing community corrections.

Because of prisoners' and formerly incarcerated people's attempts to describe the carceral, to educate, to inform and to resist, we better understand that criminalization begins with police and courts, but continues into imprisonment, probation, and parole (Russell et al., 2021). Imprisoned writers make clear that gendered, sexualized and racialized violence is pervasive throughout the criminal justice system and is found especially in carceral settings (Draper, 2020; Harris et al., 2020; Richie and Martensen, 2020). This should not surprise us given that, for centuries, prisons and jails have been a mechanism for controlling populations labelled deviant or problematic (Clarkson and Munn, 2021). Many of the people incarcerated in the United States and Canada are Black and Indigenous, meaning that prisons and jails are incubators of racialized injustice in multiple ways. For far too long, we have known that prisons and jails are sites of physical violence and that incarceration and criminalization erode community and destroy lives. The longer politicians ignore research findings and voices of prisoners demonstrating the deadly and destructive nature of prisons and jails, the more we will simply be eroding and undermining our own ability to live together in healthy and inclusive communities.

The self-defeating nature of our current approach to 'justice' has been brought into stark relief over the past two years, when prisons and jails have become incubators of the COVID-19 virus (PPP, 2021; Murphy, 2021;

Sapers, 2020; Minkler et al., 2020). With few exceptions, during the 2nd and 3rd waves prisons and jails in the United States and Canada failed to decarcerate in the name of public health (Clear, 2020; Murphy, 2021). Many people needlessly died (Marquez et al., 2021), while many more were made ill by inept penal policies and inactivity. Those who have contracted the disease (prisoners, but also prison staff) may now have long-term health problems as a result of exposure to the virus (Abraham et al., 2020; Barskey et al., 2021). This is a total shame and travesty, which was foreseeable and avoidable. We can only imagine the, sometimes overwhelming, agony and anxiety felt by friends and family of imprisoned people. This viral devastation is another of the ways in which prisons and jails harm people within and outside the walls. Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a prison pandemic that has been raging in our world for too long.

A world without carceral control is possible and is necessary for human freedom to flourish. Chua (2020) argues abolition is a constant struggle and requires seeing connections across social movements and communities as well such as in anti-poverty work and anti-racism work. Chartrand (2021) reveals the inspiring prisoner solidarity and prison activism that took place in Canada during the first three waves of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Abolishing prisons will take concerted effort by people living and working in different sectors and neighbourhoods (Johnson-Long, 2020) and must be led by criminalized and formerly imprisoned people. An abolitionist movement must have the creed, “nothing about us without us”.

The focus of abolition is at the same time not reducible to the prison. For example, Friedman (2021) reveals the private and for-profit networks preying on incarceration that also need to be investigated, contested, and resisted. Criminalization begins with public police, and police abolition therefore is crucial to penal abolition and to creating social justice (Maynard, 2017). The struggle for political freedom and social transformation is only tenable through concerted, coordinated mobilization.

As part of this struggle, the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* will continue to promote the experiences and voices of criminalized and formerly imprisoned people as experts on the violence and pains of state penal and carceral practices. Like all of the preceding issues, this issue features several articles that investigate the harm and pain created by criminal justice institutions. These articles are exemplary of the insights that work by voices of criminalized and formerly imprisoned people can offer if we make space and time to hear their voices and respect their analyses.

THIS ISSUE

In “The Million Dollar Man”, Yves Réal Côté recounts his experiences in dozens of Canadian carceral sites and, along with co-author Alana Abramson, explores the contradictions and paradoxes of life sentences. The authors argue that imprisonment is full of pains, punishment, barriers, and roadblocks. Criminal justice policies and criminal laws cause much more pain than they remedy, and, as this piece reveals, life sentences are brutal and callous practices that impair the human mind and body.

Mark Stobbe tackles violence by guards against prisoners, providing a discouraging, if not shocking, portrait of the normalization of these assaults (“use of force” cases) in Canadian prisons. But, as we argued above, the voice of the ethnographer allows a more nuanced and robust analysis as the author details events he witnessed. In his case study and subsequent analysis, he describes “the sounds of struggle”, the stinging eyes from the deployment of tear gas in the unit, the “collateral damage” to other prisoners, and the audacious idiocy of responding to non-violent protest with state violence – a point which police responses to protests of the past few years have demonstrated extends beyond the carceral milieu.

Charles Diorio’s piece begins by challenging the lexicon employed by the state to reframe the torturous practice of solitary confinement so as to continue its use. He describes his experience locked away in isolation wherein even the basic standards of care (like cleanliness and health care) were unavailable on some of these rebranded units. He extends his argument to consider the other ways that language is employed to brand-manage the techniques of the control apparatus.

Demonstrating that the impact of carceral practices do not end at release, “Swinging Doors” by Lukas Carey, Adam Grant, and Scott Tompkins considers the post-prison challenges and barriers faced by formerly incarcerated people. Rooting their findings in their own experiences on two different continents, the authors examine the impact of the media on reintegration, the impact of stigmatization, difficulty in accessing housing, education, and credit, the inability to find employment and pay fines, and surveillance. The authors close with several recommendations to decrease the barriers previously imprisoned people face and increase access to justice and social goods for all.

James Ruston describes the weight of the Canadian federal parole process and the ongoing testing and surveillance it entails. He argues that

risk knowledges used during the parole process set people up to fail and further blame individuals when in fact it is the system itself that needs to be changed. The litany of conditions and tests make for a near impossible maze of challenges post-release, meaning that many people end up getting thrown back inside for very minor violations, creating much more harm than the ostensive violation itself.

The many barriers to the development of convict criminology in Australia is the subject of Lukas Carey, Andreas Aresti, and Sacha Darke's article. The authors discuss the origins and current manifestations of convict criminology before problematizing the terminology based on the Australian context. The authors also consider other barriers and challenges, while weighing in on the benefits and insights of convict criminology and what it could add to scholarship in Australia in the future.

This volume concludes with a *Response* by Justin Piché, two prisoners' struggles contributions from Dean Roberts and Matthew Feeney that explore conditions of confinement during the pandemic, as well as a book review by Lucas Ridgeway.

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