

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ARTICLE

I was asked by a friend of mine to write a piece on “Abolition”. To be completely honest, I am not that well-informed on the whole concept of abolition, aside from the obvious – putting an end to incarceration. Since my friend’s request, I have spent much of my time considering the possibilities and trying to understand exactly where abolitionists are coming from. I appreciate where their hearts are at, but I am not quite sure they even fully understand how to achieve this goal. Maybe my opinion is premature due to my lack of knowledge on the subject, but I stand by it, since everything I have read regarding abolition favours the adult prison system. Has anybody considered first putting an end to youth custody?

Allow me to paint a picture for you. Let my experiences be the brushstrokes that lead to the completion of a masterpiece we can title, “Abolition”.

My Indigenous father grew up in a violent household that practiced alcoholism and lacked culture. His intergenerational impacts became mine, which momentarily damaged our relationship and affected my upbringing. I vividly recall the kind of child I was, and my parents had more than their hands full. Nothing they did worked, so when I was four years old, they sought “professional help” from psychologists and psychiatrists. According to the doctors, I was hyper-active and defiant, but what toddler is not? I was then prescribed medication such as Ritalin and Risperdal to calm me down. It did not work, though. When I stopped taking it, I would find the medication crushed up in my peanut butter-jam sandwiches! My parents continued to struggle with me, but little did they know their first-born son was also being molested, which only enhanced my acting out.

A few years passed and things only got worse, to say the least. In grade three, I was being bullied and was constantly a victim of racism. My behaviour in school deteriorated and I was in trouble every day of the week. When I was pressed by my parents, my truth was never believed and my father began to discipline me through physical abuse. I got sick

of getting my ass beat, so I chose to run away every chance I could to avoid the physical pain, but also the mental and emotional pain followed me everywhere I went. I felt unloved and unwanted, so I distanced myself from my family. In turn, I was introduced to the system. I was in and out of group homes and foster care, meeting like-minded peers I could relate to and bond with through similar interests and misbehaving.

As a child I played Ring & Run, threw rocks at cars and houses hoping to get chased, and stole candy from the convenience stores. My life of crime really began at the age of 13 after my first arrest in 2003. A group of classmates surrounded me after school, so I pulled out a Swiss Army knife and fought back. The knife was not used in the altercation, but I ended up getting charged with assault causing bodily harm and weapon concealing. I remember being court ordered to participate in a Healing Circle with my “victims” and the charges were subsequently withdrawn.

The ceremony was facilitated by an Indigenous organization, and we were to discuss the event that took place, what we were thinking, feeling, and what we have learnt from the incident. It was an extra-judicial sanction that took a couple hours to complete and was not taken seriously by those involved. I learned nothing and continued my path of defiance.

As time went on, my involvement in criminal activity and drug abuse became a regular pattern. I was absorbed by the streets, disregarded the importance of education, and developed an obsession with establishing a reputation that was both feared and respected. I entered the Paul Dojack Youth Centre (PDYC) for the first time at the age of 14. My five-day stay was sad and lonely, but for some obscure reason, I returned eight more times. During every stay I became more familiar with the staff. Some were kind, while others were assholes, and there was not much mentoring between the staff and the youth. There was structure such as designated times for school, meals, chores, physical activity, showers, laundry and leisure time, but there was not much effort put into rehabilitation.

While in the PDYC the youth were expected to write essays on their anger, drug abuse, and family relationships, and were to present them to their peers and staff. This did not necessarily help the youth gain insight, rather it gave them the opportunity to boast about their violence, gang involvement, what drugs they used and the crimes they have committed. On a spiritual aspect, interactions with the Elder were sporadic and it did not seem like facilitating ceremonies was a top priority for the PDYC. Furthermore, when

it came to programming, the only youth permitted to participate were the ones serving a secure sentence, which excluded the remanded youth from receiving any potential benefits the programming might have had.

In addition to this, as I was going in and out of the PDYC, I had multiple youth workers and continued to meet with doctors for pre-sentence reports and other assessments. The diagnoses kept adding up and, before I knew it, I was diagnosed with the entire alphabet. Overall, I was labelled with anti-social personality disorder and a Level 5 risk of reoffending. As a youth, I was misunderstood more than I am today and nobody took the time to understand me. All those so-called professionals chose to scold me, blame me and tell me how wrong I was. Their initial impression of me was blinded by prejudice, which caused our rapport to be built on distrust, rather than mutual respect. When questioned, it did not matter how I replied, because when I told the truth they assumed I was being dishonest, and when I decided to exaggerate to sound cool, they took me at face value, and subsequently labelled me callous and unremorseful. I never stood a chance against such a corrupt system.

In 2006, at the age of 16, I was arrested for accidentally stabbing a 28-year-old man to death. I have always held myself accountable for my mistake and I have maintained that my intention was never to kill him. Given the unfortunate circumstances, I was remanded to the PDYC for the ninth and final time, tried as an adult, found guilty of second-degree murder, sentenced to Life, and transferred to the Saskatchewan Penitentiary at the age of 18. Upon my admission to the PDYC while on remand, I was placed in solitary confinement. I sat there for 6 months before the Director decided to let me integrate back into the population. He claimed my involuntary placement in administrative segregation was due to my security concerns. Apparently, one of the youth was scheduled to attend my victim's funeral, therefore I was forced to remain in solitary confinement until the youth completed his sentence, even though there were four other units I could have had the option of integrating into.

Finally, in the summer of 2007, I was released from solitary confinement and housed in a unit designated for sentenced youth. Due to the severity of my index offence, I was considered a long-term remand case, which meant I was able to earn some of the same privileges the sentenced youths could by displaying consistent positive behaviour and leadership. I earned the privileges such as wearing my own clothing, having a radio in my cell and

playing the PlayStation 2. Since I know my good behaviour equaled better living conditions, I tried my best to refrain from trouble. For the first time in my life, I was focused on changing my lifestyle. I even approached one of the program facilitators and inquired about participating in her group. She informed me that only sentenced youth can be referred to programming. No matter how much interest I showed, nor the fact that I explained how I would soon be sentenced, I was repeatedly rejected. Nobody wanted to help me when I needed it the most, which is appalling in itself. The worst part of it, however, is that when I went to trial, there were multiple reports stating I have apathy towards programming and refused to participate in it while on remand at the PDYC. The prosecution ate that up and emphasized those reports at trial to prove I was a high risk and an unlikely candidate to receive a youth sentence. My fate was sealed based on flagrant lies. I am just giving you a taste of what I endured while incarcerated in youth custody, so you can consider the injustices for yourself. How can the PDYC rehabilitate youth when they place them in solitary confinement and deny them programming?

Now, when I think about the abolition of the prison system, I cannot help but picture the majority of society ripping their hair out screaming, “Are you fucking nuts!?!” That is because who really wants murderers, rapists and drug dealers roaming free after committing such offences? Sounds insane, right? Even I find it to be a little extreme, and I am currently imprisoned having suffered many injustices and having endured so much oppression throughout the past 14 years, so you would think I would be all for it. But I believe in a way, the prison system does aid in public safety. I do not mean to sound like I am on corrections’ side, because I am not. I just prefer to keep an open mind and consider both sides, because I always want our side to be considered by others, rather than overlooked.

As I sit here, weighing the benefits and consequences, and imagine a country where prisons cease to exist, I cannot stop thinking of a more reasonable solution. Why aim for adult prisons to be abolished when we can target the youth? It makes more sense to focus our time and energy on freeing up the youth, because they will gain more from our investment, which will be beneficial to society and the future well-being of humanity, or at the very least Canada. We adults are responsible for protecting and guiding the youth, which is why I feel it is necessary for us to concentrate our efforts and abilities on the abolition of youth custody. If we target at-risk youth and

create relatable programming to fit their mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual needs, we can ultimately preclude them from becoming hardened career criminals.

In a perfect world, would that not mean there would eventually be no use for penitentiaries in Canada if we can successfully stop the youth from offending before they are declared adults? If we went this route, in time, prisons will slowly but surely become irrelevant, unnecessary and a thing of the past.