

DEDICATION

The Life and Work of Sarah Speight

Justin Piché

I first met Sarah in the spring of 2018 when she was looking to get involved in a group that began its work over a decade ago called the Criminalization and Punishment Education Project, which aims to reduce the use and harms of policing and imprisonment, as well as build safer communities through research on and advocacy for alternatives. At the time, Sarah was new to Ottawa and, with a background of research and advocacy on overdose prevention sites, she was looking to get involved in community organizing to work in solidarity with people who struggle to meet their basic needs and, in the process, enhance our collective well-being and safety.

Early conversations with Sarah led to the creation of the Jail Accountability & Information Line in December 2018. Sarah played a key role in launching this initiative and running the hotline that took thousands of calls from people imprisoned at the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre in its early years. Through this initiative, Sarah worked with imprisoned people on various human rights and re-entry issues they faced, including getting access to medical care behind and beyond bars. For instance, I recall the early days of the hotline where Sarah literally spent days advocating for a person who had fallen off the bunk in their jail cell to the concrete floor and broke their leg to get transferred to a hospital so that he could get examined and get access the care he needed that was being denied by jail staff and management who did not believe him. I also recall numerous instances where Sarah arranged for doctor's appointments for people coming out of the jail to ensure that their opioid substitution prescriptions would continue once they were released so that they would not turn to street drugs, and potentially overdose and die. There is no doubt Sarah saved lives that through her community organizing and advocacy.

In 2019, Sarah became Dialogue Editor for the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, which is a section aimed at bringing various people with lived expertise of imprisonment in conversation with each other to advance thought and praxis on a particular challenge facing prisoners. Among the contributions Sarah made in this role was the publication of Volume 28, Number 2 of the journal featuring a dialogue on "Prison (In)justice in Canada at the Crossroads", which served as a clarion call for changes to federal imprisonment in the country that remain needed.

By 2019, Sarah had also been fast-tracked through the Master's program in geography at the University of Ottawa to the doctoral program. It is at that point that I, along with geographer Eric Crighton, became her co-supervisors. Of all my doctoral supervisions, I was most excited to be involved in Sarah's project that brought into conversation insights from human geography, socio-legal studies, and critical criminology to make sense of how so few reforms following deaths in custody and related coroner's inquests in Ontario result in meaningful reductions in people dying behind bars. At a time when preventable deaths in custody continue to occur, her study drew on observations and transcripts of coroner's inquest hearings, findings and recommendations, interviews with coroners, crown attorneys and lawyers representing inquest intervenors, as well as news coverage, to generate knowledge on the forces that limit the scope and actors that have standing in these cases and, by connection, how these constraints can lead to inadequate recommendations and barriers to their implementation. In so doing, her doctoral thesis had already impacted policies and procedures for coroner's inquests related to deaths in custody in Ontario that, at least in some cases, extended the gaze of such proceedings beyond jail and prison walls, producing recommendations in the fields of health, mental health, policing, and other human services that could, if implemented, prevent deaths in custody by diverting people away from criminalization and incarceration, particularly those living with mental health and drug use issues. Sarah had completed five of eight of her doctoral dissertation chapters, with three others well underway. She was set to complete and defend her doctoral thesis in September 2023. It is absolutely heartbreaking that Sarah will not finish what I and many others, including researchers and those involved in coroner's inquests, considered to be ground-breaking work.

Sarah had plans to continue this work either as a postdoctoral fellow or professor. Drawing on Political Activist Ethnography, including interviews with supervising coroners and forensic pathologists, formal and informal information requests with death investigation bodies, and discussion groups with people impacted by policing and prison deaths across Canada, Sarah next wanted to explore how death investigations are undertaken, the barriers faced by those seeking information on carceral deaths, and how to ethically manage such information in ways that do not deepen the trauma of people who have lost loved ones in the context of policing and imprisonment. What Sarah had envisioned as her next project was both original and significant as

it sought to generate information ‘from above’ (through research with actors that steer carceral death investigations) and ‘from below’ (through research with the loved ones and communities impacted by these preventable tragedies) to inform how we understand policing and prison deaths, and the possibilities for transparency and action in their wake. This is critical and much needed work to be undertaken at a time when people continue to die in custody. And, again, I am heartbroken that Sarah is not alive to see her vision through.

While Sarah is no longer with us, she nonetheless has left us with a rich legacy, which can be felt and seen in various ways. For instance, Sarah published several works over the years, including an academic journal issue, a book chapter, a journal article, seven reports, and seven op-eds with by-lines in the *Ottawa Citizen*, *The Globe and Mail* and *The Conversation*. Her thoughts will live on, but most importantly the impact she had on all of us will stay in our hearts forever.

As a professor, as someone who supervises the research of graduate students, you understand that they will come and go, that they will start and complete their degrees or sometimes not, and move on to other things, whether inside or outside academia. In rare cases, you forge collaborations and friendships you hope will last a lifetime. That is what I and several other professors had with Sarah.

The last time I saw Sarah was three days before she died. We had a meeting in my office. We made plans for the completion of her remaining doctoral thesis chapters and for a research assistantship this summer. I did not know then, but I know now that when Sarah walked out of my office that Wednesday, she also exited my life before we could finish what we sought to accomplish together – before she could see through everything she had planned to do. We have all lost someone who was absolutely brilliant, who was a hard worker, who was incredibly caring and always put others before herself. It is a tremendous loss. This has been difficult to process.

To Sarah’s family and friends, I am sorry for your loss. I hope that with time that our grief about Sarah’s death can give way to peace in our minds and hearts. Do take care.

SELECTED CONTRIBUTIONS BY SARAH SPEIGHT

Peer-Reviewed Publications

- Speight, Sarah, Jarrod Shook, Justin Piché and Kevin Walby (2020) Special Issue: Prison (In)justice in Canada at a Crossroads, *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 28(2): 1-194.
- Benslimane, Aisha, Sarah Speight, Justin Piché and Aaron Doyle (2020) “The Jail Accountability & Information Line: Early Reflections on Praxis”, *Journal of Law and Social Policy*, 33: 111-133.
- Piché, Justin, Sarah Speight and Kevin Walby (2022) “The Prison in/ as a Pandemic: Human Rights Implications of Carceral ‘Solutions’ in Response to COVID-19 in Canada”, in Alex Neve (ed.), *2021 Canadian Yearbook of Human Rights*, Ottawa: Human Rights Research and Education Centre, pp. 134-141.

Reports

- Speight, Sarah, Aisha Benslimane, Aaron Doyle and Justin Piché (2019) *Monthly Evaluation – Report #1*, JAIL / Jail Accountability & Information Line brief submitted to the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre and the Ontario Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services – January.
- Speight, Sarah, Aisha Benslimane, Aaron Doyle and Justin Piché (2019) *Quarterly Advocacy Report #1*, JAIL / Jail Accountability & Information Line brief submitted to the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre and the Ontario Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services – March.
- Speight, Sarah, Aisha Benslimane, Lydia Dobson, Aaron Doyle and Justin Piché (2019) *Quarterly Advocacy Report #2*, JAIL / Jail Accountability & Information Line brief submitted to the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre and the Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General – August.
- Benslimane, Aisha, Justin Piché, Sarah Speight, Lydia Dobson, Aaron Doyle (2019) *Will You Accept the Charges? The Case for the Government of Ontario to Move Away from the Prohibitive, Predatory, and Outdated Telephone System in its Provincial Jails and Towards Accessible, Free Calling That Promotes Connections Essential to Community Well-being and Safety*, JAIL / Jail Accountability & Information Line report submitted to the Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General – October.

Speight, Sarah, Aisha Benslimane, Aaron Doyle and Justin Piché (2019) *Quarterly Report #3, JAIL / Jail Accountability & Information Line* brief submitted to the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre and the Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General – December.

Benslimane, Aisha, Lydia Dobson, Sabine Seeman, Steph Rychlo, Aaron Doyle, Justin Piché and Sarah Speight (2021) *Inadequate Complaints Procedures at the Ottawa Jail and Recommendations for Change, JAIL / Jail Accountability & Information Line* report submitted to the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre and the Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General – August.

Speight, Sarah and Alex McClelland (2022) *Ontario Deaths in Custody on the Rise*, Tracking (In)Justice Project – December.

Op-eds

Speight, Sarah, Aisha Benslimane, Aaron Doyle and Justin Piché (2018) “Stop jailing people with mental health issues. It kills”, *Ottawa Citizen* – December 9.

Speight, Sarah, Aisha Benslimane, Aaron Doyle and Justin Piché (2019) “Ontario must address urgent health issues at Ottawa jail”, *Ottawa Citizen* – January 25.

Leblanc, Sean, Sarah Speight, Justin Piché and Aisha Benslimane (2019) “Ontario needs to reduce overdose risks behind and beyond bars”, *Ottawa Citizen* – April 8.

Speight, Sarah, Aisha Benslimane and Justin Piché (2020) “A just transition: Moving away from prison construction in Canada”, *Canadian Association for Refugee and Forced Migration Studies Blog* – February 14.

Speight, Sarah (2020) “Canadian penitentiaries: Dangerous for aging and palliative prisoners”, *The Conversation* – March 3.

Piché, Justin and Sarah Speight (2020) “Build communities, not cages: Jails are death traps, no matter how new”, *Globe and Mail* – October 24.

Speight, Sarah and Justin Piché (2021) “Ion scanner rollout in provincial jails: Expensive, ineffective and harmful”, *Ottawa Citizen* – February 17.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Justin Piché, PhD is Associate Professor in the Department of Criminology and Director of the Carceral Studies Research Collective at the University of Ottawa. He is also a member of the Criminalization and Punishment Education Project and Co-editor of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he has been tracking coronavirus infections and measures in Canadian jails, prisons, and penitentiaries as part of the Prison Pandemic Partnership.