

INTRODUCTION FROM THE ISSUE EDITORS

From Systems of Abuse to Circles of Care

Kevin Walby and Justin Piché

One place to look for the damage that prisons and the criminal justice system cause in our world is the hospital. Specifically, intensive care units (ICUs) are places where the obvious harms of carceral spaces and criminal justice practices show up on the bodies of so many people. The following are stories relayed to the first author by ICU nurses in Canada. Recently, two guards from a jail accompanied a prisoner who was suffering from a severe allergic reaction of unknown origins to the intensive care unit. The prisoner was shackled to the bed and restrained, while guards lurked over his semiconscious body. The nurses attempting to begin care asked the guards for the man's baseline. A baseline is a set of figures representing someone's health. It could include blood pressure and other figures. When asked for his baseline, the guards responded, "His baseline? Idiot". This gives the reader clear insight into how some guards think about imprisoned people, as well as their health and their well-being. Instead of conveying some kind of useful information to assist with the person's health and treatment, the guards simply stood there vigilantly, intermittently reporting back to their superior at the jail.

A more tragic story happened a few months earlier. A prisoner was transported from a different jail. The prisoner was totally unconscious and was bleeding from several orifices. The emergency room doctors thought that due to the loss of blood the prisoner patient required a transfusion, which they did perform before sending him to the intensive care unit. When arriving at the ICU, the patient was sent for several scans. It was found that there was incredible damage done to the internal organs of the prisoner. Catastrophic damage was done to the intestines of the patient. Once again, two guards stood coldly and silently in the room. When the nurses explained to the guards that they had to call the family due to the catastrophic nature of the injuries, the guards protested and said that could not happen. The nurses resisted and called the family members to the hospital. When the family members arrived, the guards prevented the family from entering the room citing security concerns. The nurses explained again to the guards that the prisoner had suffered catastrophic organ damage to the extent that he was bleeding from all orifices and his death was imminent. The guards continued to protest and called their supervisor at the jail. The nurses again

pushed back and told the guards to leave the family members alone. The family members started to enter the room. This was an Indigenous man and it was important for the family to be there if the man was about to pass and enter into the spirit realm. The guards started to collect personal information from all persons entering the room, as if the persons in the room were security threats simply for wanting to be close to their family member as he was passing. The guards shared all that information with their supervisor. The prisoner suffered some brutal and sustained beating behind bars, and instead of showing some kind of care or concern, the guards simply displayed callous, merciless characteristics too often seen in carceral spaces and criminal justice practices.

A few months before that, a man who had been in an argument with his wife was agitated in front of his home, pacing back and forth on the sidewalk in the neighbourhood. Someone had called the police to respond to the scene. The police arrived and fairly soon after, upon further escalating the situation, attempted to restrain the man and tasered him several times in the chest. When this man arrived unconscious at the intensive care unit, he had severe burns on his skin, white and black charring, and destruction of the tissue on his upper torso. His heart had stopped due to the tasing. Not a single police officer performed CPR prior to paramedics arriving. The police continued to guard the man during treatment in the ICU as nurses and doctors attempted to resuscitate him, as they insisted he remained shackled to the bed as to them he was a suspect. The man could not be resuscitated as too much time had passed without CPR being administered since his cardiac arrest. Once again, a lack of care or concern by criminal justice personnel, even in the aftermath of harm directly caused by criminal justice personnel, can be observed.

Time and time again, the criminal justice system responds to transgression and everyday life with violence and adds harm to the equation. These kinds of scenes in intensive care units and emergency rooms are so prevalent that there are now doctors and nurses in the United States and in Canada that explicitly identify as penal abolitionists or carceral abolitionists (Paynter et al., 2022; DiZoglio and Telma, 2022). They have formed organizations to reveal that one of the main sources of harm to the bodies of the people they see in hospitals are police officers and prison guards. What kind of a society would continue to fund such an egregious form of harm that our most intelligent and most caring people (doctors and nurses) have explicitly

flagged as destructive? What kind of a society would continue to promote that harm? Given such examples, what kinds of myths are necessary to sustain the idea that police and prisons promote order or safety and security in our world?

These scenes, which are just a few vignettes that could be drawn from any ICU in a major city from across Canada or the United States, point to a society whose priorities have been hijacked by powerful political interests such as police and guard unions (Ben-Moshe, 2020; Wang, 2018; Weaver and Lerman, 2010). There are so many forms of abuse, neglect, and harm that the criminal justice system causes in our world (Laniyonu, 2022; Skinnis and Wooff, 2021; Harkin, 2015; Hancock and Jewkes, 2011). Carceral spaces are designed to deprive, maim, and dehumanize (Moran et al., 2018; Moran, 2012). There are many stories of people surviving detention, people surviving imprisonment, and people surviving criminal justice system surveillance too. The *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP) exists to give voice to those survivors of system contact with criminal justice agencies, of the pains of policing and imprisonment, of the injustices of the so-called justice system, as well as the crimmigration control system and other parallel systems of control.

THIS ISSUE

In this issue of the *JPP*, we continue in this tradition of examining the multitude of harms caused by the criminal justice system in general, and prisons and jails in particular.

“Illusion of Parole” by Gordon Pack explores some of the problems with existing parole systems. Through an analysis of his experience of the Maryland Parole Commission, the author examines its history of biased and prejudiced choices, anomalies, and contradictions. He contends that the pains of incarceration continue throughout the parole commission process and when living on parole.

In “Belgian Prison Policy: Half a Century of Broken Promises” by Luk Vervaeke, the author examines some of the contradictions of the criminal justice system and the harms that these contradictions cause in Belgium through an analysis of prison policy at a site of confinement called the Begijnenstraat. The Begijnenstraat was known decades ago to be an overcrowded, harmful facility that did not live up to the promises of the so-

called rehabilitation of the penal state. The author shows that decades after recommendations were made, from 2018 to 2021 a series of journalistic inquiries showed that the health conditions inside the prison continued to be harmful. They also noted that there were pests, mice, and mold in the facility. The author suggests there is no reason to continue to put people in harm's way inside this facility.

In "CSC's Corporate Culture is the Fundamental Problem" by George Fraser, the author argues that CSC has a blue wall culture which promotes secrecy and allows harm to continue unabated behind bars. He further argues that the administration of CSC is largely out of touch regarding what happens on a day-to-day basis behind bars. In Canadian federal penitentiaries, he argues that corporate culture promotes a situation where carceral administrators and bureaucrats try to insulate or isolate themselves from culpability and jeopardy regarding all of the harms that do happen inside. As a result of this blue wall culture, human rights abuses are rampant within Canadian prisons. The author suggests that CSC as an organization has existed and has been doing things in such a poor way for so long that it will be incredibly difficult to change this corporate culture through anything like a standing committee or any of the pithy accountability mechanisms we have within the federal penitentiary system.

In "Restoring Our Honor from Gangs to Garrison", Shon Pernice suggests that prison life is marked by a lot of complex emotions from anger to hate, to resentment, to sadness, and that sometimes prisoners let these emotions get the best of them. However, these emotions can also be harnessed into a form of survival that allows prisoners to focus on the life ahead of them and doing good things in the world.

In "Changing Directions" by Darris Drake Jr., the author focuses on the future and change. More specifically, he writes about how he used to get wrapped up in the hate and the resentment – powerful and complex emotions that the prison in fact fostered. However, the author had to find a way to change to survive prison, and started to take part in education to overcome the inhumane conditions of carceral settings.

In "A Look at Prison Overcrowding from the Inside" by David Fleenor, the author looks at the problems with corrections in Oklahoma. Through examining the extent of prison overcrowding drawing both from official statistics and from his own experiences, the author also makes policy recommendations including a recommendation that the parole board hire formerly incarcerated persons as liaisons to help communication in the

pardon and parole hearing setting. Academic research has long shown that the parole process can be arduous, stressful, and almost impossible for prisoners to overcome (Silverstein, 2001).

In “Reflecting on the Delivery of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program during COVID-19 Pandemic” by Dwayne Antojado, Haozhou Sun and Marietta Martinovic, the authors look at prison education involving inside students studying university courses with outside students. Outside students typically come into the prison to learn in that setting, and the inside-out process can often be transformational for all students. In Canada, this program is called Walls to Bridges (see Pollack and Mayor, 2023). Antojado and colleagues reflect on some of the challenges of prison education during the COVID-19 pandemic, arguing that many of the aims were still met by participants and organizers of the program. Prison education can be a very important confirmation of life for everyone involved and can help people survive prison. As an aside, it is important for scholars and teachers to push for access to education within prisons and jails given that it can be a powerful form of connection and learning and meaning for everyone involved.

In “An Ethnography of a Corrections Education Instructor: Critical Issues” by Robert Elton, the author argues that there are many challenges for people involved in prison education, including time and opportunity, lack of resources, and some of the challenging mental states that arise in a harmful setting such as the prison. As the article illustrates, there are many forms of peer pressure and challenges that people have to face inside such as limited access to simple technology that people on the outside take for granted, which are fairly instrumental in learning in the 21st century. The author suggests if educators and prisons are serious about prison education, they need to not only try to offer some classes, but they need to try to overcome these barriers and these forms of digital discrimination as well.

In “The Second Coming (Out)”, Matthew Feeney writes about some of the challenges of being stereotyped and stigmatized within the prison and how people accused of any kind of sexual transgression are often treated heinously behind bars, not only by staff but by other imprisoned people. He argues that his whole experience of policing, being charged, detention, imprisonment, and trying to survive in the carceral setting as an extremely homophobic process, which has been damaging and traumatic.

In “Gender Not Fit For Prisons: On the Incompatibility of Gender as a Means to Segregate Prisoners”, Dwayne Antojado examines the way that gender segregation occurs in prisons and jails, and the problems this and

gender binaries present to persons who experience fluid gender or transgender identity. The author argues that most typical understandings of sex and gender rely on a binary of man or woman or male or female. Persons with gender fluidity, non-binary gender identities, or transgender identities are forced to navigate the criminal justice system and the gender binary system that is superimposed on it in ways that create many harms for their mental and physical well-being. There is what the author calls structural transphobia in prisons, and there is transgenderism and transphobia throughout the criminal justice system. This paper also examines the lack of transgender-specific policies, programming, and housing within carceral settings.

This issue also offers additional content as well, including a *Response* entitled “Moving Beyond the Prison Pandemic”. The piece documents an event that took place in early-March involving people impacted by the punitive injustice system who shared their insights and expertise regarding the impact of COVID-19 on incarceration and community re-entry during the pandemic in Canada.

The *Prisoners’ Struggles* section for this issue features three pieces documenting barriers to rehabilitation and re-entry. In “Agenda: Broken Corrections”, Ken (Salamander) Hammond argues that in the Canadian context there are many contradictions and anomalies that mark the Correctional Service of Canada’s approach to imprisonment. Writing as an Indigenous man who has spent dozens of years behind bars, the author writes about his experience of many forms of neglect during his time inside and the way that this mirrors broader colonial forms of control and neglect in Canada. In “Natural Life”, Steven King Ainsworth argues that laws regarding sentence length and alternative sentences show a lack of humanity and care. The sentences for prisoners for serious felonies are excessive and do nothing to make society safer – they simply punish for the sake of it. The author looks at the state of California where thousands upon thousands of prisoners are doing many more years behind bars than would be fathomable or conceivable in any other purportedly democratic country in the world. In “Impartiality is a Fundamental and Legal Obligation of the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board”, David Fleenor observes how the duty of the board to be impartial when assessing the evidence presented to them for pardons and parole is not evident in practice. The author documents cases where the board seems to display bias and even prejudice against persons with certain kinds of transgressions.

There are also a number of critical and engaging book reviews in this issue. These book reviews address a range of topics from wrongful conviction, to solitary confinement, to restorative justice, to lawbreaking and transgression, to carceral practices in the 21st century, and the lack of humanity in prisons and jails.

This collection of works authored or co-authored by criminalized people is book-ended with artwork created by Peter Collins in 2011 entitled “E.P.I.C” (End the Prison Industrial Complex) and “i-chain”. We selected this artwork to underscore the continued need to resist and build alternatives to carceral control, including in pandemic times where the reach of penalty continues to expand in communities through the growth of technologies such as electronic monitoring (see, for example, Kilgore and Dolinar, 2023).

This general issue marks the completion of the thirty-second volume of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, which we dedicate to Sarah Speight, who was the journal’s Dialogue Editor from 2019 until her sudden death in mid-March 2023. As we note in the *Dedication* preceding this introduction, Sarah was a valued member of our team whose presence and contributions aimed at abolishing deadly criminalization and incarceration policies, practices, and institutions will be greatly missed.

In closing, thank you to all the authors who have contributed their experiences, however painful, to the pages of *JPP*. It takes great courage to write about injustice. Oftentimes, prisoner writers communicate their views at great risk to themselves and at risk of reprimand from guards and prison administrators. Education should be a human right that goes along with freedom of expression. No one should be denied this, and no one should be denied sharing their experiences in writing or punished for doing so. Thanks also to people on the outside who support their friends and family members who are trying to survive inside. We know that prison and jail take a toll on family and friends too. We know that family and friends of incarcerated people feel the surveillance and the scrutiny and the stereotypes that imprisoned people feel (Kotova, 2019). So we offer this issue to you in thanks for all the work that you do in trying to keep one another safe in this world, and for all of the solidarity that you share with one another. People expressing solidarity and mutual aid, you are the ones creating the circles of trust and belonging and care that are replacing the abuse, neglect, and harm of the criminal justice system.

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