

Prison is a Trap

K WoodZ

As a 19-year-old Black, queer, young adult – because I was a kid at that time mentally, I had no understanding about anything with respect to my rights or how the federal prison system operates. I was thrown into a federal prison with many barriers already, such as systemic racism, oppression and mental health to name a few. I was left to swim or drown depending on how I operated as an “inmate”. This was my first charge at that. Yes, I did the crime and was punished by the law. When you are raised in a low-income neighbourhood with barely any community resources or jobs available to you, the survival instinct kicks into place to sustain and feed yourself. I could go on and on about what it means to be a Black, queer, woman in Canada or the world for that matter, but I will not.

I never expected to come out of prison a few years later as a drug addict, institutionalized, scarred from self-harming and just completely lost. There was no rehabilitation or reform for that matter. I was another statistic in the prison system. I was released and completely fell-down, flat on my face, set-up to violate my parole, reoffend and end right back where I was just released from. If you cannot control them, hey, why not cage them like animals?

I was more educated on how to further self-destruct. I had no support to get a job with a federal criminal record or to find a place to live. I was told to do anger management as a part of my parole as I was a danger to “society”, but no one considered my mental health nor was I aware I was suffering from mental health issues and addiction, or even offered support or direction to sustain myself. I had a federal criminal record with violence, but was I violent? Absolutely not. I was a young adult, growing-up in poverty and was a product of my environment. I was trying to find a way to survive and made the wrong choices. If I did not have my family putting up with my shit for the next few years, I would be dead or back in jail – and that’s exactly where I ended up, back in jail. Where is the rehabilitation for incarcerated people that offers sustainability once we are released?

Black and Indigenous people are mass incarcerated in Canada. This is borne out in the statistics, which in 2020-2021 revealed that “9% of offenders under federal jurisdiction (in custody or under community supervision) were Black, despite only representing about 4% of adults in Canada”, while “Indigenous people make up about 32 per cent of the federal prison population, despite accounting for less than five per cent of the total

population” (Zinger, 2021). That year, Indigenous women accounted “for 48 per cent of the population in women’s prisons” (Zinger, 2021).

The systemic racist system targets Black and Indigenous people, who in Canada are marginalized, oppressed and in poverty, with the government enforcing extreme measures to house us in prison. For example, examine the history of the Prison for Women (P4W) where seven women died by suicide between 1988-1993, due to the harsh conditions inside. Six of the seven women were Indigenous (Arbour, 1997; Hansen, 2018). We can also examine the police murdering Black and Indigenous people – the same police who lock-up Black and Indigenous people they are killing them (Maynard, 2017). This is the same system that has racially oppressed us for over 400 years and this is the same people who control and run the prison system!?! Who do these slave masters answer to? No one, but themselves. Who do the correctional officers answer to when a situation happens? What is the policy and procedure when a prisoner suffers from mental health issues and is killed at the hands of “corrections”? Who is held accountable for the fragile at-risk lives of these human beings who are incarcerated?

I was targeted upon arrival to prison. Another statistic set-up for failure. The prison had no Black culture representation groups, classes or education at the time. If I ordered too many Black hair products for my hair we would get raided and the dogs would come in, assuming we had drugs. I was randomly piss tested for being high all the time until eventually I started to become what they wanted me to be. They projected and I accepted – again the “trap”. Set-up for the colour of my skin assuming the worst and acting upon it. I had institutional charges coming out my ass. I had my visits and phone calls taken away at one point, until I stopped communicating with the outside world that I was no longer a part of. If they could not use that against me, they could not control my mind and my spirit. I became young Black and did not give a fuck. The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) was trained to breakdown the mind and spirit of those locked-up by doing the bare minimum to support them, while treating them like animals.

They did not even have the respect to call you by your first name, like the ADULT they classified you as upon conviction and sentencing. These harmful treatments break the spirit and control the mind, if you allow it. They did not care if you had lived in poverty or had addictions and had been abused, raped, starved, and lacked education as to why you ended up there in the first place. To them you were just another number. They opened

those wounds you came in with and spit on them to force you to become worse. They did not see you as a human being. You were on the other side, and you were there to be controlled and punished by an outdated model of prison rehabilitation.

The dehumanizing treatment by CSC made us feel like caged animals. This treatment created a danger of turning a wounded animal into a predator upon release. The system and especially the prison system has always been a trap designed to keep the oppressed poor, lost, and on the road to death. The attitude seems to be “just lock them up and hide them from society”, instead of finding an inclusive equal solution for all people and not just the wealthiest one percent. The prison system that is enforced by the judicial and police institutions is designed to keep people in poverty, deeming them as a threat to society. The common adage is “You do the crime, you do the time”, but what about the effects of trauma, segregation, institutionalization, marginalization and isolation? Is the prison system not contributing to the trauma, mental health issues, addiction and psychological, mental, physical, and emotional abuse of those it is locking-up? If the purpose of locking-up an individual that is convicted for a crime is to punish them while removing them from society if they are considered a threat, how does it make any logical sense to inflict more trauma upon the individual without reform or rehabilitation?

How do CSC cognitive behavioural programs, lack of cultural programs and limited employment inside a Canadian prison help an individual’s reintegration back into society? Without the necessary therapeutic healing, education and economic support until people gain employment and eventually secure a record suspension, community re-entry is extremely challenging. Without these crucial steps for survival, an individual is set up for failure and returned to a pattern of the same cycles of poverty and crimes of survival that led them to prison.

Prison is a trap for you to return to that cage. In 2024, prison is like modern day slavery. Nothing has changed from 400 years ago until now. As Malcolm X once said (cited in Clarke, 1995):

If you’re born in America with a Black skin, you’re born in prison, and the masses of Black people in America today are beginning to regard our plight or predicament in this society as one of a prison inmate... While I was in prison, I was indulging in all types of vice, right within the prison.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kamilah "K WoodZ" Haywood is an active speaker, panelist and facilitator. Writing is part of their purpose, having published four books with Kya Publishing since 2014. K WoodZ is co-founder of The International Writers Workshop, Find Your Voice and Warrior Women Winning workshops with Toronto Urban Book Expo. Find Your Voice is currently being facilitated in the correctional institution Grand Valley Institution for Women as a literature program for the women currently incarcerated there. They are also founder of W.A.R productions as a Producer and Director with five music videos to date. In 2023, K WoodZ released their first song "Drowning", a song about suffering with addiction and mental health, featuring Kalyssa. Their second single was released in 2023 called "I can't breathe", which is a song about suffocating from mental health, addiction and suicide. Currently, they are a member of the board of directors at both Rittenhouse and the Elizabeth Fry Society of Toronto, as well as the Canadian Coalition for Children with Incarcerated Parents Advisory Committee based at the University of Ottawa. As a person with lived experience of mental health, addiction, homelessness, incarceration and trauma, K WoodZ uses their work as a form of therapy, expression, and to raise awareness and give a voice to anyone who has or is living with these social issues.