

# EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

## Why Prisons? Why JPP?

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In a recent address to the world's largest criminology association, the American Society of Criminology, David Garland (2013, p. 506) suggested that excessive punishment and use of penal power is inconsistent with liberal democracy. The claim here is that the expansion and strengthening of the penal state and its mechanisms (prisons, jails, police supervision) is somehow illiberal or has been extended in the United States and elsewhere without any "effective liberal counterbalance" (ibid, p. 508). Garland's position assumes that any small reduction or decrease in the use of penal power would be a major win for liberals and for society more generally. He accepts that the operation of prisons and jails is a necessary, if not good, feature of a modern liberal society.

Garland's position is not progressive or new. It is as old as liberalism. Most criminological scholarship becomes knowledge for "the inquisitor, the policeman, the state attorney and the prison administrator" (Ruggiero, 2015, p. 10). Such work fails to recognize how it subtly supports the status quo in the penal field. It fails to acknowledge that the exercise of penal power relies on and is simply an extension of state power. And that the problems we find with the operation of prisons and jails – the violence, the arbitrariness, the collateral consequences for captives and staff and their families, the waste of resources – are evident in the military, in the police and in other state organizations.

For almost three decades, the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP) has been a venue in which those subject to the atrocious authority of the penal state can present arguments against their control and captivity. The journal showcases prisoner writing demonstrating how the inquisitor, the policeman, the state attorney and the prison administrator are engaged in an inhumane, tragic contest of control. These arguments are often substantiated with ethnographic evidence about the pains of imprisonment. The *JPP* is thus a venue for prisoners and fellow travellers to articulate arguments against the penal state and state organizations generally. The standpoint of prisoners is at the centre of the publication and it will stay that way. Who better to critique the state than those persons who have been most brutalized by it?

Criminal justice agencies and criminologists try to make the violence of the state invisible (Chartrand, 2015, p. 12), and part of the purpose of the *JPP* is to make visible and knowable the violent, corrupt, inhumane

practices that go on in prisons and jails. The journal will remain a platform where genuinely ethnographic and truly critical inquiries into punishment and criminal justice can appear in print. We will continue to be a venue that inspires some small hope for prisoners, and that resists the liberal and conservative assumptions about what the state calls crime and punishment echoing vainly in the bourgeois halls of academic criminology. As the prison and penal abolition movement continues its struggles against penal power (see Ryan and Ward, 2015; Maryl, 2013) with any luck more synergies between critical work about prisons from both inside and outside can inform one another. Penal abolition is about creating social practices that resist institutionalized punishment, rather than continuing “to assume the necessity of a set of practices that have always been and will always be, as long as they are in use, harmful, targeted at certain populations because of processes of racialization and gendering, rationalized through patriarchy, ableism, settler-colonialism and white supremacy” (Stanley *et al.*, 2012, p.122; also see Mogul *et al.*, 2011).

While a critique of prisons and jails is needed, it is worth thinking about whether criticism of these aspects of penality should go hand in hand with a critique of the overall operations of the state. Closing a few prisons does not even come close to penal abolition. As Liat Ben-Moshe (2014, p. 18) puts it, the “problem of chipping at the margins of the system is that the centre remains intact”. Perhaps this argument should be applied broadly to other state organizations rather than simply criminal justice agencies. While prisons are an inherently violent state response (Scraton *et al.*, 1991), other state entities routinely enact violence (Chartrand, 2015, p. 5).

There are incredible challenges in presenting “feasible, realistic and viable alternatives to existing dehumanising practices” (Scott, 2013, p. 90) and coming up with a “genuine alternative” (*ibid.*, p. 98) to the criminalization process. The *JPP* is a place we can think through such ideas and try to understand the nature of justice and perhaps more importantly, devise how we can do things differently.

One thing is certain. Just as the standpoint of prisoners is at the core of what the publication is all about, criminalized persons must be at the centre of any social movement to decrease or eliminate our reliance on penal power in North America. Prisoners who wish to publish in the *JPP* do not need to adopt an abolitionist position to inform their work. For those who do wish to articulate radical critiques from the inside, the journal is a venue for you.

But, just to be clear, it is for you too if you are committed to descriptive and ethnographic narratives about life and death in carceral spaces.

## THIS ISSUE

This issue contains several pieces that are critical of imprisonment and punishment. In a research essay, Craig Minogue investigates the ethics of research on prisons, including the issue of gatekeeping. He shows how current arrangements reproduce power imbalances and hierarchies. In a similar vein, T. Lamont Baker explains how criminological arguments neglect the standpoint and experiences of prisoners, and the implications for theorizing state power and control without their input.

In a narrative piece, Victor Becerra reflects on the degradation and arbitrariness of drug testing in prisons, while Jeffrey Bliss contemplates the impact of lengthy imprisonment on his ability to reintegrate after release. Charles Diorio also adopts a narrative approach to describe daily life, routinized violence and neglect in an American prison. Likewise, David Riley describes the haunting existential torment of being behind bars. In a research essay, Cathy Marston makes an argument about the contradictions of a criminal justice system that arrests and punishes women who are abused by their spouses and partners. Jarrod G. Shook reflects on the similarities and differences between his life and that of Omar Khadr, a Canadian who was detained in Afghanistan at the age of 15 and then held in Guantanamo for a decade.

In a reflection piece and essay that serves as the *Response* for this issue from outside prison walls, Natasha Brien explores the collateral consequences of incarceration and punishment for the families and friends of prisoners. Finally, in the Prisoners' Struggles section, we offer an update from Prison Legal News and from the National Jericho Movement, as well as a piece by Daniel Lamoureux on prison art in Québec.

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