Prison Injuries, Maim, and Kills: Health, Mental Health, Aging and Dying Behind the Walls
A Journal of Prisoners on Prison Thematic Syllabus

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In 1988, the Journal of Prisoners on Prison began publishing articles written by criminalized people who were or had previously been incarcerated. This thematic syllabus focuses on articles written about the experiences of prison health care, mental health treatment, aging and dying while incarcerated. Imprisonment exacerbates and leads to the onset of poor health, mental health issues, and accelerates the process of aging (Maschi, 2014). Prison architecture and design, poor living conditions, inadequate health care and nutrition, and the often-crowded institutional environment all have negative impacts on the well-being of those who are incarcerated (John Howard Society of Canada, 2019). Prisons are not a site of health or healing—they are designed to be a place of punishment, pain and torture.

The physical health of people who are incarcerated is constantly deteriorating owing to medical neglect (Vaughn & Collins, 2004). Poor air flow and sanitation in crowded prisons contributes to the increased spread of infectious diseases within a prison population (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2016; Haney, 2006) made vulnerable by inequitable social structures. Another contributing factor to the deteriorating health of those who are incarcerated is malnutrition. Often nutritional needs are not able to be met by the prison menu alone due to lack of vitamins and nutrients in the food (Leach & Goodwin, 2015). Further, it is clear that there is a lack of quality health care and treatment provided, which exacerbate the suffering of those living with illness in prison (Irwin & Owen, 2005). In sum, sites of human caging provide inadequate care and poor living conditions that further deteriorate the health of those who are incarcerated (Pate, 1999).

Criminalized individuals are disproportionately affected by mental health issues in comparison to the general population. Prison creates a negative environment by perpetuating omnipresent politics of power and control, alongside a lack of proper resources and programming; in so doing, incarceration both exacerbates pre-existing and leads to the onset of new mental health issues. Too often these mental illnesses go untreated and neglected by prison officials, leading to self-harm and deaths by suicide. The rate of self-injurious behaviour is far higher in prison than amongst the general population. For instance, in Canada more than one in five people held in custody have attempted to die by suicide (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2016).

Substance use and abuse is also very prevalent amongst incarcerated individuals, both prior to and during incarceration. Drugs and alcohol can be and often are used as a coping mechanism for untreated and unaddressed mental health issues. What little therapeutic treatment is available within institutions is often misused by authorities. For instance, mental health treatment often becomes reliant on an overuse of psychotropic medication prescriptions. The inappropriate prescribing of high doses of psychotropic drugs is problematic because the practice avoids addressing underlying issues (Griffiths et al, 2012). Another overused false-solution to the mental health epidemic in prisons is segregation. The use of administrative and disciplinary segregation can be detrimental to
the mental health of incarcerated people, leading to psychological effects that exacerbate pre-existing psychological issues (Severson et al., 2020). Incarcerated people are far more likely to have been deemed to have mental health issues and prison life worsens these conditions.

Due to the lack of care and treatment for physical and mental issues behind bars, death by incarceration is common. Mortality rates are higher for persons in custody than for the general population (Krieger, 2019). Mortality rates are so high for those who are incarcerated because these individuals are statistically more likely to suffer from addictions to criminalized drugs and/or alcohol, which—combined with other factors—can contribute to premature and preventable deaths. Such factors include being subject to poor living conditions, malnutrition, accelerated aging, lack of care and access to harm reduction, as well as medical neglect. Far too often, incarcerated individuals pass away due to criminalization, medical neglect and staff failing to recognize presenting health issues (National Academy of Sciences, 2013). Prison staff are often not trained when it comes to carrying out a specific protocol concerning health issues displayed by incarcerated people (Marzano et al., 2012) and tend to prioritize security ahead other objectives of incarceration including care (Mathiesen, 1990). Slow deaths by medical neglect often begin when incarcerated individuals contract serious illnesses while living behind prison walls. The spread of disease itself is another leading cause of death amongst those who are incarcerated and those who have recently been released from prison (Binswanger et al., 2007). Dying while incarcerated is a troubling reality for many individuals.

The prison environment is not compassionate toward the needs of the incarcerated, let alone the older prison population. Not only is the percentage of incarcerated individuals over the age of 50 growing in many jurisdictions, but prison conditions actually accelerate the process of aging when compared to those on the outside. Behind bars, the label of “elderly” is imposed on prisoners as soon as they reach 50 years old; in contrast, an individual within the general population is considered to be elderly at the age of 65 (Maschi et al., 2013). When it comes to the growing population of aging prisoners, there is an increased cost associated with their decreasing physical and mental health, including medical expenses and resources required to accommodate the elderly incarcerated population (Wangmo et al., 2015).

With their health deteriorating along with aging bodies and minds, the older population of incarcerated people are less likely to be recriminalized than their younger counterparts. As such, advocates call for the compassionate release of elderly prisoners and prisoners with terminal illnesses, so that they can receive better care for their needs in the community during their last days (Handtke et al, 2017). This would also provide fiscal relief for already overburdened carceral budgets. Although compassionate release seems to be a great way to avoid problems, save money, and improve the health of the aging prison population, it is rarely used.

The reality, then, is that prison kills. Sites of human caging perpetrate human rights abuses that are rooted and sustained by problematic policies, even as research points towards the existence of humane alternatives such as compassion release. Until the prison system is abolished, the negative and insidious impacts of imprisonment on physical health, mental wellness, and aging will continue to increase the likelihood of dying behind bars.
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