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Planning for precarity? Experiencing the carceral continuum of imprisonment and reentry

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Abstract: Drawing on qualitative interviews with formerly imprisoned people in Canada, we show that most prisoners experience reentry into communities with little to no pre-release planning, and must rely upon their own resourcefulness to navigate fragmented social services and often informal supports. In this respect, our research findings contrast with U.S. punishment and society scholarship that highlights a complex shadow carceral state that extends the reach of incarceration into communities. Our participants expressed a critical analysis of the failure of the prison to address the needs of prisoners for release planning and supports in the community. Our findings concur with other empirical studies that demonstrate the enduring effects of the continuum of carceral violence witnessed and experienced by prisoners after release. Thus, reentry must be understood in relation to the conditions of confinement and the experience of incarceration itself. We conclude that punishment and society scholarship needs to attend to a nuanced understanding of prisoner reentry and connect reentry studies to a wider critique of the prison industrial complex, offering more empirical evidence of the failure of prisons.

Keywords: reentry, imprisonment, precarity, penalty, structural risk

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Introduction

Prisoner reentry—both as a policy practice and a personal experience of relocation from confinement to the community—has been conceptualized and empirically examined from various standpoints. The unsustainable financial, political, social, and cultural effects of mass incarceration, particularly in the United States (U.S.), have disproportionately affected and disenfranchised poor and racialized men and women, their families, and their communities (De Giorgi 2017; Fox 2014; Miller 2014; Nixon et al. 2008; Wacquant 2010), leading to a resurgence of interest in reentry. The scale of imprisonment in the U.S. is unparalleled to that in other countries (Wildeman 2016) and has consequently produced a sizeable population of released prisoners reentering their communities. Building on the notion of the ‘prison industrial complex,’ some scholars have pointed to the emergence of the ‘prisoner reentry industry’—a set of related penal systems tasked with managing the release of prisoners into their communities and the policing of ex-prisoners therein to ensure ‘successful’ reintegration, thus ‘now parallel[ing] the prison system itself in terms of its political-economic spread’ (Thompkins, Curtis, & Wendel 2010: 428). Other scholars have similarly drawn attention to processes of ‘carceral devolution’ by which ‘the state has devolved the authority and responsibility to rehabilitate prisoners [and facilitate reentry] onto local community-based actors and organizations’ (Miller & Purifoye 2016: 208). The growth of reentry services is thus understood as reflective of the expansive reach of criminal justice to govern, at a distance, the lives of society’s most marginalized members (Miller & Purifoye 2016).

Although the U.S. is a clear outlier in terms of penalty, Canada faces comparable challenges with its use of and reliance on imprisonment in the field of criminal justice, albeit at a much smaller scale. For example, the country has experienced continued increased rates of pretrial custody (Canadian Civil Liberties Association and Education Trust [CCLA] 2014; Gartner, Webster, & Doob 2009; Myers 2017; Webster, Doob, & Myers 2009). Statistics Canada reports that in 2015–2016, remand prisoners accounted for 60% of all prisoners—an increase of 35% over the past decade (Reitano 2017: 4). Additionally, correctional authorities in Canada (nationally and provincially/territorially)¹ have been reprimanded by various human rights organizations, the Auditor General of Canada, and Correctional Investigator of Canada for the significant and ongoing over-representation of Indigenous male and female prisoners (Roberts & Reid 2017).² There has also been intensified prison construction to replace aging infrastructure and enhance static security (Piché, Kleuskens, & Walby 2016). Conditions of confinement in Canada continue to be the subject of litigation and inquiries as a result of deaths in custody, use of force, the reported mismanagement of prisoners with mental illness, and the institutional reliance on segregation and other forms of seclusion to manage an increasingly complex prison population.³ Oversight offices, advocates, and scholars have also asked pointed questions about the correctional system's commitment to community reintegration programming and planning (e.g., Doob & Webster 2012; Office of the Correctional Investigator [OCI] 2014, 2016). Most centrally for the purposes of this article, Canada's Auditor General and Correctional Investigator have repeatedly reported that federally sentenced prisoners—especially Indigenous prisoners—continue to be released directly from maximum or medium security institutions with little release planning, as well as being released at their statutory release date with no gradual community reentry.⁴

Despite the intensification of penal regimes in Canada and systematic disregard for prisoner reentry, release and reentry processes and experiences have not been subject to much conceptual and empirical analysis in the Canadian context. To address this gap in Canadian penal scholarship, and to contribute to a wider comparative discussion of prisoner reentry, this article presents the preliminary findings of qualitative data collected from a multi-year, multi-site study examining the experiences of incarceration amongst former prisoners in Canada. Between 2015 and 2017, semi-structured interviews were conducted with former prisoners in four Canadian cities. The aim of the larger project is to systematically document the conditions of confinement through the accounts of diverse women and men who were previously incarcerated. Drawing on preliminary findings from 60 semi-structured interviews with former prisoners in Toronto, Ontario, and Vancouver, British Columbia, this article captures participants' reflections on their experiences of release planning and reentry.

In this article, we make three main arguments. First, our analysis reveals that rather than being released into further carceral webs of control and surveillance or into the helpful branches of the 'shadow state' (Kaufman 2015), the majority of our participants experienced reentry into nowhere and with nothing. Most were simply released from the prison with little to no assistance or support, either prior to release (in terms of reentry planning) or afterwards. We suggest this reentry into nowhere can be viewed as a further effect of decades of neoliberal devolution of community-based third-sector help (see also De Giorgi 2017). Second, those participants who were able to access post-release support typically did so of their own accord, often relying on prior knowledge of available services. Many participants depended on 'private resources' (Anonymous & Dombrowski 2010): the financial and psychosocial supports provided by friends and family. Third, confirming others' findings (e.g., Haney 2006; Gaes & Camp 2009; Carlton & Segrave

2010), we show that carceral environments—particularly the witnessing and experiencing of violence—play a central role in a person’s reentry experience. Thus, we concur with other critical prison scholars that the prison experience can itself be a criminogenic risk factor for those attempting reentry. In making these arguments, we do not advocate for greater expansion of the shadow carceral state (Beckett & Murakawa 2012) to meet the reentry ‘needs’ of prisoners. Instead, we suggest that the study of reentry processes and experiences in Canada should become part of a wider critique of the prison industrial complex, offering more empirical evidence of the failure of prisons (see also Byrd 2016).

After imprisonment: A conceptual framing of reentry

Much reentry scholarship in the U.S. has focused on the implications of the carceral expansion of rehabilitation (self-change and discipline) delivered through the shadow state of NGOs (see McKim 2008, 2014; Kaufman 2015; Miller & Purifoye 2016). Other scholars have focused on the individual, emotional, and structural barriers to successful reentry (e.g., Petersilia 2003; Bushway, Stoll, & Weiman 2007; Hattery & Smith 2010; Ekunwe 2011), as well as on the detrimental effects of a criminal record when attempting to access paid and volunteer work, housing, and education (Mauer & Chesney-Lind 2003; Uggen, Vuolo, Lageson, Ruhland, & Whitham 2014; Uggen 2016; Vuolo, Lageson, & Uggen 2017). A smaller body of work has shown how individuals’ carceral experiences are intertwined with their post-custody experiences (e.g., Haney 2006; Gaes & Camp 2009; Carlton & Segrave 2010). Theorizations of ‘successful’ reentry generally contend that a re-writing of one’s narrative or biography is essential (Maruna 2001), typically in ways that are linked to faith, family, or community (Hlavka, Wheelock, & Jones 2015). These narratives of redemption and reconstruction provide a means of distancing oneself from the shame and humiliation of

incarceration, loss of family, or inability to find work. Woods, Lanza, Dyson, and Gordon (2013) and Byrd (2016) suggested that policy-makers and service providers should re-conceptualize prisoner reentry not as a series of programs to completed, but as a prevention model that considers multilevel impediments to, and facilitators of, ‘successful’ reentry.

By focusing on reentry, many authors have reframed the study of life after prison from the individualized motivations of formerly incarcerated people, to the role of state actors and community agencies involved in the lives of prisoners after release from custody. Importantly, the reentry paradigm grapples with the disarray associated with high numbers of former prisoners returning after years of institutionalization to already marginalized and impoverished communities. Morenoff and Harding (2014), for example, suggested that prisoner reentry is shaped by the effects of mass incarceration that are felt by communities disadvantaged by poverty, weakened human and social capital, residential instability, and stigmatization. Miller (2014) argued that reentry work further entrenches the carceral sphere by re-imposing a dizzying array of program completion requirements that expose ex-prisoners to additional forms of regulation. He concluded that reentry processes are techniques of institutionalization levied upon already disadvantaged men and women.

Collectively, this body of literature suggests that prisoner reentry is far from the end of imprisonment, or decarceration. Miller and Purifoye noted that reentry is ‘a normative social arrangement in the lifeworlds of the urban poor’ (2016: 197), given that reentry systems perform the task of returning racialized and disadvantaged men and women to communities that exist in a perpetual state of precarity. They also argued that reentry services represent the devolution of carceral control, from the prison onto the third sector for the provision of employment skills training and adult education programs. Similarly, Byrd (2016) observed that reentry, as part of

penal reformism, is ‘punishment’s twin’: a set of strategies embedded in surveillance and control that is unhinged from meaningful return to one’s community, thus making reincarceration almost inevitable. In a different vein, De Giorgi recently found that reentry, at least in one post-2008 recession jurisdiction, is characterized by a complete absence of devolved carceral control and a lack of the shadow state; instead, released prisoners constitute ‘a surplus humanity reproduced more through institutional neglect and abandonment than by any concerted effort by the social and penal arms of the state to subjugate them’ (2017: 89). As we discuss below, the devolved social arm of the state operates as a structural and, indeed, criminogenic risk in the lives of former prisoners.

In the Canadian context, a question remains unexamined: how do we untangle the relationship between incarceration, neoliberalism, and prisoner reentry (see Rose & Clear 1998; Bushway, Stoll, & Weiman 2007)? Although much reentry literature has considered the impact of incarceration on communities, Shantz, Kilty, and Frigon (2009) noted that the discourse of reentry suggests a pre-existing acceptance of the concept of a ‘criminalized Other.’ Reentry processes are part of a deeply entrenched, nonlinear carceral continuum that has various nuanced racialized, stratified, and gendered effects on communities and populations (see Nixon et al. 2008; Olusanya & Cancino 2012). Reentry processes are penal in ways that are distinct from custody and are suggestive of a continuation of punishment in the community.

In Canada, with few exceptions (see Maidmont 2006; Munn & Bruckert 2010, 2013; Munn 2011), there has been a lack of critical scholarly focus on prisoner reentry, particularly how custodial experiences and structural conditions are complicit in former prisoners’ post-imprisonment lives. As a result, penal settings, programming, and opportunities presented by correctional authorities are generally considered to offer meaningful opportunities for change that

contribute to reentry, if and when sought out by prisoners. By responsabilizing criminalized subjects and expecting them to navigate highly precarious post-release environments through ‘good choices,’ ‘prosocial decisions,’ and cognitive reorientations that align with most reentry narratives, governments, policy-makers, and criminal justice actors (police, judges, courts, penal institutions, community corrections agencies, parole and probation officers, etc.) are largely de-responsibilized (Byrd 2016; Miller & Purifoye 2016). These issues need to be clarified, as do the effects of witnessing traumatic events, victimization, and other forms of coercive custodial experiences on reentry, specifically whether they reinforce and compound the challenges that prisoners face as they transition to their communities (see e.g., Carlton & Segrave 2010; Daquin, Daimler, & Listwan 2016).

The following five sections present analytical themes emerging from our interviews with former prisoners in Canada about their experiences of release and reentry. This empirical work both resonates with and differs from some of the U.S. reentry literature, thus underscoring the need for local, on-the-ground analyses of contemporary penalty.

‘They just dropped me off’: Reentry into nowhere

One of the key assumptions of reentry as a criminal justice practice is that prisoners are connected to community organizations—the ‘shadow state’ (Wolch 1990, cited in De Giorgi 2017)—prior to their release from custody. These organizations typically include NGOs that provide information about available resources, make referrals, assist with transportation, and help arrange housing. Yet, in the Canadian context, numerous external reviews and reports have commented on the absence of institutional pre-release planning for prisoners eligible for parole or being released on bail (see e.g., Auditor General 2015, 2016; Ontario Ombudsman 2013). Although the provision of

correctional programming has reportedly improved in federal corrections, these programs are often not completed by the first parole eligibility (OCI 2016) and are not focused on reentry. Furthermore, at the federal level, use of temporary absences and work releases from federal prisons is decreasing (OCI 2016). These programs are viewed as critical to release planning and increasing the likelihood of positive parole decisions because they provide prisoners with an ‘opportunity to leave the institution for short periods of time to obtain work experience, strengthen connections in the community, maintain family contacts or pursue rehabilitative opportunities not available in the institution’ (OCI 2016: 53). At the provincial/territorial level, often due to shorter sentences, confinement is often characterized by boredom and limited programming opportunities, including inadequate access to release planning. Few Canadian facilities continue to employ discharge or release planning staff, and when such ‘planning’ is offered, participants report it to be wholly inadequate and, in some instances, inhumane. Consequently, ensuring an uneventful transition to the community is typically the responsibility of the prisoner, who must overcome multiple institutionally imposed barriers to create viable plans and put them into action.

Many of our participants spoke of reentry experiences that pointed to a lack of release planning and community support. They referred to simply being let out of the institution, which was tantamount to reentry into nowhere. Some were left at a public transport stop, often, but not always, with the necessary ticket or cash to buy the ticket; released into the Canadian winter without adequate clothing for the weather; and/or discharged in a state of opiate withdrawal. In relation to the latter experience, Calvin⁵ explained: *‘They sent me away on a bus to where I had come from. I was really opiate sick and withdrawing. It was shitty. I did not have housing or transportation. I have been homeless for quite some time.’* In another interview, when asked what the prison did to help him prepare for release, C.R., a Metis man, stated:

Not one fuckin' thing. You know what they did for me, they dropped me off at fuckin' [city] bus stop and said, "have a fuckin' good day," that's exactly what the cop said to me, he threw my couple of things with a fuckin' bus ticket and he said, "have a good fuckin' day," and left.

Other participants were simply released without any assistance whatsoever. Bruce, for example, described the challenge of finding his way home from jail with no means of transportation or access to public transit. When asked who helped him, he simply stated *'the bus driver.'* Several interviewees described the unwillingness of the institution to even give them a one-way ticket for local public transit, which they viewed as the bare minimum that could be done to help upon their release.

Being released into nowhere was compounded by the difficulty of retrieving one's belongings or property. Indeed, a number of participants detailed the challenges of being released with just the clothes on their backs. *'I just left with what I was wearing,'* Mecaila recalled, noting that she relied on her parents to bring her some clothes. This practice was particularly troubling in the context of Canadian winters, where a lack of appropriate clothing can be dangerous. Curtis, a former provincial prisoner, observed: *'A lot of the guys that come to the reintegration center have no jacket; one guy was cold, he had no jacket. He walked from jail without a jacket.'*⁶ John commented, *'they walk you out of there, and that's their job done.'* In these moments, the release process works to (re)produce the marginalization and precarity of former prisoners.

When asked about receiving help from community organizations while incarcerated and planning for his release, Ray said: *'It all depends on what institution you're in and what range*

you're on. I found out everything by talking to people on my range. Talking and asking questions. That is the only way I knew.' Similarly, Jeff had to depend on himself: *'I never heard of any volunteers or contact. There's no information about any volunteers. Not that I could see anyway. And I studied all the sheets that were available on the range and stuff.'* Thus, 'successful' reentry for former prisoners like Ray and Jeff was linked to their own resourcefulness, as well as where they happened to be incarcerated.

As the above excerpts illustrate, former prisoners are primarily left to take responsibility for arranging their own release plans. For example, our participants were expected to take the initiative to read brochures (presumably) available in their living units, but with limited access to telephones in many prisons, they were unable to apply for housing, or to arrange transportation to a community resource center. Consequently, for most, the experience of reentry was marked by hardship and precarity.

'Not everybody is that lucky': The variable experiences of reentry

Our participants' experiences of reentry indicate that there was a clear demarcation between their reentry preparedness and post-release experiences. These experiences are not easily catalogued by length of custody: reentry can be difficult for those who experienced only a few days of imprisonment, as well as for those who were confined for several years (see e.g., Munn 2011). Men and women also reported different reentry experiences, which were often dependent on the institutions from which they were released. For example, Sarah, a former federal prisoner, described the level of support she received:

I got out and I got a drive back to the city, and counselling to follow. So [the prison] is really good when it comes to stuff like that. You know for a year after you're out they have a worker that follows you around to make sure you're taken care of. When you get out, they make sure you have proper housing, it's a really good place. They don't just throw you to the wolves.

Curtis, a former provincial prisoner, commented:

Not everybody is that lucky. When I got out, there was a social worker with his car, his personal car, that drove me to the safe bed. So, when I walked out, there was my ride.

Those with 'successful' reentry experiences typically spoke of 'luck' as the key feature guiding their release. Being lucky, for these participants, meant having housing in place, the assistance of support workers, and transportation to help with their reentry. These elements helped them avoid the precarious reentry experiences of their 'unlucky' peers.

The fragmented delivery of reentry supports appears to be influenced by the type of carceral institution, rather than by the needs of those confined, the statutory requirements, or the rights of prisoners. Participants with short sentences or on remand had no access to programming or discharge planning; they were released directly to the streets, often from maximum security conditions. Such experiences had profound implications, as Ray, a former provincial prisoner, explained:

When you have ten people sitting on concrete, cold, hungry, tired, coming off stuff, it's just messed up situation right off the bat. And that is why you have a lot of fights and stuff too because everybody is all cooped up. You just want to get your stuff and get on the range and do your time and get out.

In contrast, provincial prisoners who were sent to a treatment center had access to weekly discharge planning meetings six months prior to their release. This variability points to the highly disparate nature of institutional release planning across the correctional system, which can be conceptualized as structurally produced risks to 'successful' reentry. Based on our participants' descriptions, there was no consistent approach to release planning across all institutions. Prisoners confined to 'super-jails' or treatment centers have very different access to programs and release planning. Instead of release being structured by a provincially mandated correctional model premised on a needs-focused reentry plan, several of our participants went straight from stressful maximum-security conditions to their communities.

'Everything is difficult': Overcoming the barriers to reentry

The barriers to reentry are well documented in the literature (e.g., Mauer & Chesney-Lind 2003; Petersilia 2003; Ekunwe 2011), and unsurprisingly emerged consistently in interviews with participants. As noted above, it is telling that most participants did not have pre-release assistance, nor did they encounter much in the way of a 'prisoner reentry industry' or community-based networks of control or surveillance. The only exception was prisoners who were released to some form of supervision (i.e., federal parole or provincial probation)—and these participants noted that,

in many instances, the amount and type of conditions attached to their release or probation worked to *'make it impossible to fully reintegrate into society'* (Craig, former federal prisoner).

The majority of participants, however, were left to navigate reentry on their own, often drawing upon informal networks and private resources (e.g., friends and family) rather than the shadow state. Participants commonly linked the lack of pre-release planning and community supports with various barriers to reentry, including difficulties accessing housing, finding employment, dealing with addictions, and adjusting to life outside. One interviewee said that prisoners struggling with substance abuse have little to no access to safe housing or treatment upon release; instead, they are dependent on the shelter system to provide them with housing:

If you got a guy that is struggling with substance abuse, the proper thing to do would be maybe get him ready for treatment when he gets out. That would be, when he gets out the door, to the treatment center. That would be good. Straight to the safe bed. There should be more safe beds. Because let's face it, guy gets out he don't have anywhere to go. He got no family? What happens where he ends up? Going to the shelter. One institution to another. That weighs on you right? (Curtis, former provincial prisoner)

Curtis also made an interesting distinction between the various times that he has been incarcerated and attempted reentry before finally succeeding, commenting *'my last time I went in, I had things in place.'* His comments suggest that reentry is a social practice requiring structural and interpersonal supports, not simply self-discipline or luck. Another participant echoed this need for preparation for life on the outside:

I didn't receive any help when I got out. But, um, the main difficulty was just getting used to being around people again. Trying to get rid of that worry that somebody is gonna attack me. (Matt, former federal prisoner)

Some comments revealed that adjusting to one's humanity again was also difficult and not addressed prior to release. Eagle, an Indigenous ex-prisoner, said:

You're feeling [like] somebody again, like it's just you're coming back to be a human again 'cause I lived a sub-human life for eleven months, so that's, you know, the going in and then actually transitioning out, there should be something a little more information about that.

Eagle also said that *'almost a year out of my life without hugging somebody affected me when I came back out.'* He was unprepared for this experience, which had significant effects on his reentry. Many of our participants described being isolated and withdrawn for some time and relying on informal social networks for support to overcome such psychosocial challenges.

Some interviewees pointed to the collateral consequences of their criminal records in preventing or limiting employment opportunities, as well as volunteering. One participant said he was unable to continue with his profession because of his criminal record, while others were barred from volunteer positions, preventing them from gaining valuable experience. Some interviewees said they needed help to overcome this particular barrier during reentry. As Alexandra explained:

So, if a woman gets released, even getting released to a halfway house, wouldn't it be great to help that woman get a job? So instead, they dump you and they say, "go find a job." Well, you don't have a lot of confidence after coming out of prison. First of all, if you are even lucky enough to get a resume done in there, do you feel comfortable walking in? There is always that dark cloud about [whispers], "do I have to tell them about my criminal record? Do I have to say I just got out of a prison? Am I lying if I don't put it in or if tell, do I get prosecuted for?" So, it's a tough dynamic.

Not knowing how to deal with the consequences of a criminal record—that 'dark cloud' hanging over release—was a key obstacle to reentry.

Many ex-prisoners described their reentry experience simply in terms of survival. When Terry, a former provincial prisoner, was asked about his return to the community, he responded: *'I don't know, I'm still alive.'* He continued, *'just let me out. I was only there for one week. I was about to go crazy though. I don't want to go back.'*

Several of the above excerpts illustrate complex interactions between institutional experiences, structural constraints, and policy contexts (e.g., high unemployment, barriers to employment, access to affordable housing, access to mental health care) that affect an individual's ability to make choices about meeting their basic needs (e.g., financial, housing, and health). Importantly, these barriers to reentry must be conceptualized as structural and connected to broader intersecting systems of disadvantage (Byrd 2016) that differently penalize and privilege along familiar lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, Indigeneity, ability, and so forth.

'I tried to forget': Coping with carceral experiences on the outside

A recent Ontario Ombudsman's report (2013) examining conditions of confinement at provincial super-jails concluded that these facilities are characterized by the use of excessive force by staff, extensive rotating lockdowns, double and triple bunking, extended periods of segregation, limited access to telephones and visits, and little to no access to education, employment, addiction, or mental health programming.⁷ Annual reports of Canada's federal Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI) (2015, 2016) consistently include concerns about use of force, deaths in custody, the handling of prisoners with mental health issues, the use of segregation, issues of overcrowding, and limited reentry planning. These findings challenge assumptions about how and where prisoners experience the 'pains of imprisonment,' drawing attention to the likelihood of lingering effects of incarceration once released.

Several participants referred to how their custodial experiences affected their reentry, supporting previous research indicating that what happens 'inside' is intertwined with life after imprisonment (see e.g., Gaes & Camp 2009; Carlton & Segrave 2010; Daquin, Daimler, & Listwan 2016). As Anonymous and Dombrowski observed, 'becoming a productive member of society [is] hindered by spending time in prison,' the experience of which shapes 'the resources necessary for successful re-entry' (2010: 476). Our interviewees drew attention to the enduring effects of the violence they experienced or witnessed while incarcerated, along with various 'pains of imprisonment,' medical interventions, and other consequences of being institutionalized. In one case, a young racialized queer man, Eric, poignantly described being held in police lockup for two days as '*extremely traumatizing. Humbling. Telling. Um, scary... And, um, unjust, inhumane, and broken. Broken.*' A former university student, Eric was arrested and detained more than three years ago. He still struggles with the effects of his traumatizing experience of being strip-searched: he

cycles through homelessness and remains unable to work. He clearly specified the connection between his traumatic custodial experience and his ability to make choices that could put him on a different trajectory.

Other prisoners talked about the everyday violence they witnessed or experienced. Ray said that during his time in provincial custody, staff members threatened to send him to segregation if he refused to go to work (serving food to other inmates). He also said that security staff would *'pull you around the corner and give you the business... it happens almost every day.'* When asked about incidents where correctional officers (COs) used force against him, he said:

Unfortunately, I was going through a rough time and was getting arrested every couple of weeks. This one guy recognized me and kind of pushed me around a bit and hit me. Just to let me know that if I came back again, it wouldn't be in my best interest. Everyone knows who this CO is, and he is known to be doing that.

Another interviewee, Red Thunderbird, a Metis man, recounted a similar experience of violence after refusing to go to segregation as a consequence of throwing food on the ground. He was restrained by guards who tied him to a bar in his cell: *'I looked like a hog tied to a big stake.'* Red Thunderbird also described an officer who was well known to prisoners for his use of violence: *'he took my head and whacked it right against the wall. He came into the range, right into the holding cell when you are going to court.'* He continued:

That man killed four inmates... But how do you kill an inmate in the hole? And, it's people without a bed or blankets. How do you kill someone like that that is mentally ill? You killed a mentally ill man. Like do you know what I mean? And he's still a working guard.

Other prisoners, like Jeff, who was also incarcerated provincially, described a personal experience of being threatened by an officer:

There was one incident where I made a comment. I was frustrated. There's a guard there [...] and he's a big bully. He said, "oh yeah, me and you are gonna go for a walk." So, I kind of took it as a threat. But everyone knows him there. He's like a big bully.

Michael, a former provincial prisoner, recounted a similar experience:

They have guards that have killed people. Pretty nasty shit. There was a big guy there and he doesn't take any shit. If he tells you to stand in a spot, he has hurt a lot of people. Not a white shirt, but one of the COs [correctional officers] at the [institution]. He's pretty infamous and well known.

These incidents involving threats and/or use of violence by prison staff represent institutionally produced risks that can affect life after imprisonment.

Curtis, a former provincial prisoner, recalled witnessing a lot of abuse of certain inmates by guards, especially sex offenders:

It's [discrimination] there, the guards will go so far. Like with sex offenders. They're pretty hard on [them]. They sometimes don't give meals. Sometimes they don't open their cells. I've seen them when I was working on A&D [admissions and discharge] how they were treating them. They beat them up. They kicked them. They punched them. They would take them to a different room and beat the shit out of them. Once I seen them put the gloves on... I knew.

Red Thunderbird also described his experience of being strip-searched:

You know what they do? When you bend over and spread your ass, and they tell you, 'I didn't see, that was too fast, do it again and do it slower.' That's sexual harassment. But because I am a criminal I don't get those rights.

Such experiences point to the dehumanization that is embedded within and constitutive of carceral practices and which does not simply disappear from memory once prisoners are released, even though some, as Jake put it, have *'tried to forget.'*

Matt, a former federal prisoner, spoke about being threatened with forced feedings when he stopped eating due to depression: *'they threatened to strap me to a bed and feed me intravenously if I refused to eat. That was after three days of not eating. I did start eating again eventually.'* When asked if he was ever prescribed or forced to take medication, Matt said that Seroquel, a short-acting pharmaceutical typically used to treat psychosis, was generally given out as a sleeping medication in the prison. He was prescribed the drug and developed a dependency on it, and continued to use it after prison:

Interviewer: What is your experience of Seroquel?

Matt: Well, it's addictive. [...] And after about two weeks, if the dosage doesn't go up, it stops working. So, they have to keep raising the dosage. And it's really unpleasant to deal with side effects from it. [...] It's extremely uncomfortable and withdrawal from it as well which causes nausea and dizziness.

Interviewer: Did you just continue Seroquel when you left?

Matt: Yeah.

Curtis described other tactics of staff intimidation called ‘plan B’ that made reentry more difficult: he was involuntarily transferred to another part of the province shortly before his release.

I remember one time, when I told an officer to fuck off, and they put me on a plan B. Plan B was, they ship me out. They shipped me out from the [institution]. They sent me to [city]. Don't know why they sent me to [city]. But because I told an officer to fuck off and called it a plan B and sent me to [city] and I got out two days later. So, they sent me up there to make it difficult for me to come back.

These stories of participants’ custodial and release experiences reveal the continuum of the ‘violence of incarceration’ (McCulloch & Scraton 2009) comprised of routine practices of degradation as well as physical assaults. Thus, the criminogenic nature of institutional environments—and even some post-release correctional programming and supervision—can create structural or systemic barriers that impede ‘successful’ reentry.

‘You are left to your devices’: The limits of the responsabilized penal subject

We asked participants what the prison could do to better help them prepare for reentry. Although some did not offer suggestions, others highlighted various ways the penal system could better respond to their reentry needs. Common recommendations included help with accessing housing, employment, the return of property, mental health counseling, addictions support, and health care—all key factors typically identified in the literature as related to ‘successful’ reentry and as reducing post-release precarity.

For Collette, a former provincial prisoner, the lack of release planning and support sets people up to fail:

More counseling and preparation instead of just opening the doors and giving the boot. The problem with provincial [custody] is that it is a warehouse and put them there until it's time to go somewhere else. No real benefit but to hold people there. They are not concerned with their well-being or transition back into the world. You are left to your devices. If you haven't had any chance to work through your issues, if you're being returned and have nowhere to go, likely you're gonna end up back there again because you have nowhere to go, you have no money and nobody in the community to care about you, so you go back to what you know. There is nothing there to help people not get back into those situations. Your better judgment knows I shouldn't do this, but I have to eat and sleep somewhere or I have addictions and I have nothing else going on so why don't I just return to that. It's not a helpful situation.

Here, Collette's familiar narrative centers on an experience of a nonlinear carceral continuum—a persistent and somewhat predictable cycling between confinement and the community. The warehousing of prisoners and the lack of both in-prison programming and post-prison support fails to 'help' people, instead returning them to the same conditions and/or activities that resulted in their imprisonment in the first place. Collette stressed the need for counseling and release planning to prepare prisoners for reentry.

Harold, an Indigenous man, also connected the lack of assistance in prison to his inability to 'succeed' during reentry:

You don't just lock somebody up and expect them to get better. Here, go sit in a cage and get angrier and angrier and then go release them back to the system, back out on the streets. That's what happens a lot. The reason that I'm in and out all the time because I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict and I needed to make money so I used to do petty things like steal a bottle of liquor so I could get drunk. Or steal groceries and sell them to people so I could make some money and [buy] drugs. [...] [In prison] I got my three meals a day and served my time and got out without ever getting any help and I back at it again doing the same thing again, stealing, drugging but when I'm on the inside you still need help. Your problems don't go away they just get worse and worse I find. I still struggle to this day with drinking and drugging.

Again, Harold's cycling into and out of prison was the consequence of warehousing prisoners without providing addictions treatment or mental health counseling. Prisoners return, time and again, as their problems remain unaddressed.

Another participant, Kika, an Indigenous woman who was imprisoned federally, noted the incongruity between institutional expectations and being released with ‘nothing’:

I was out on my own, but at the same time when I got there I had nothing. They want you to have independent living but then they don't get you ready for that. It's like I had no dishes, no food, no shower curtain, a bed [that] was like a toddler bed. I'm like what the hell, I'm going to get better beds in prison then. It was just so fucked up.

Like Collette and Harold, Kika placed the onus on the prison to help prepare her for release, underscoring the need for the provision of basic necessities to support independent, post-imprisonment life.

Participants pushed back against neoliberal processes of responsabilization that individualize their reentry ‘problems’ and frame ‘successful’ reentry as simply the result of ‘good choices’ and evidence of ‘appropriate’ cognitive reorientations. Interestingly, their narratives reflect a rejection of the neoliberal, responsabilized penal subject who is expected to prudently manage risk and be accountable for any (individualized) failures to successfully reenter society. These findings differ from those of De Giorgi’s (2017) recent ethnographic work with former prisoners in California who actively embraced this dominant penal subjectivity, viewing the lack of post-release support and various structural barriers to housing and employment as the consequences of their own ‘bad choices.’ The lack of adequate preparation and support for release, as noted by our participants, can be conceptualized as structural and institutionally imposed risks for which they refuse to be held individually accountable.

Conclusions: Impediments to reentry and institutions as risk

The experiences of reentry for formerly incarcerated persons are linked with precarity: the uncertainty of one's survival or safety, both materially and psychologically. At the beginning of this article, we advocated for a conceptualization of reentry as part of a carceral continuum of experiences of punishment. Reentry can be studied separately from imprisonment, but for prisoners these experiences—whether positive or negative—are compounded and not easily disentangled. Carceral experiences from the pretrial context through to sentenced custody affect prisoners mentally and physically, and undoubtedly shape their post-prison trajectories. Our participants' narratives illustrate how experiences of confinement are profoundly transformative, and how the memories, harms, and pains of imprisonment are portable to life after imprisonment. In other words, our interviews illustrate how post-custody experiences are mediated by experiences inside.

Our findings here differ from those in much of the U.S. reentry literature, which tends to describe a diffuse carceral apparatus and attendant shadow state. Instead, most of the participants in our research encountered dismantled reentry processes and reentry into nowhere and with nothing. Such findings also differ from the dominant Canadian correctional discourse that assumes structured release preparation and a strong network of community agencies to support reentry. Some also rejected their framing as responsabilized penal subjects and pointed instead to the penal system as needing to provide the necessary guidance and supports. Our informants described being 'left to their own devices' once returned to the street, often returning to custody several times before 'getting it right.' Former prisoners inhabit a liminal space marked by the carceral violence they have witnessed or experienced and compounded by structural precarity.

In highlighting the need to address the reentry into nowhere, we are not arguing for increased penal surveillance and governance, but rather for opening up ‘the possibility of asking more radical questions about the uses of locking people away in the first place’ (Byrd 2016: 9). Indeed, we should ask whether most of our participants would have ended up in prison in the first place if our society was more equitable and just (see also Baldry 2010).

Institutional reentry narratives are often singularly focused on individual responsibility. Rarely, if ever, do they reflexively examine how the experience of imprisonment constitutes a ‘risk’ that affects a ‘harmed’ penal subject. Confinement involves both extreme and common traumas, which are characteristic, yet elusive, components of the dense carceral networks that prisoners cycle through. These experiences are invisible barriers to ‘successful’ reentry and compound the precarious conditions of life after imprisonment. Reframing and theorizing the relationship between various forms of structural and institutionally produced risks can help us better understand prisoner reentry.

Notes

¹ In Canada, prisoners serving sentences of greater than two years are confined under the federal correctional authority of Correctional Services Canada, whereas prisoners serving sentences of less than two years are held in provincial/territorial institutions, which also serve as remand centers. By far, the largest prisoner population in Canada is provincially sentenced men and women, and those held in pre-trial custody.

² Although Indigenous peoples represent 3% of Canada’s total population, they comprise 26% of the federal prison population. Moreover, Indigenous women are the fastest growing segment of

the prisoner population, 36% compared to 26%. In 2015–2016, the number of Indigenous prisoners grew by 25% (Auditor General 2016).

³ See, e.g., *BCCLA and JHSC v. AG of Canada*; OCI (2016).

⁴ In 2015–2016, 69% of Indigenous prisoners were released at their statutory release dates, with three-quarters released directly from maximum security or medium security. Furthermore, approximately one-third of Indigenous prisoners were released on parole compared to 48% of non-Indigenous prisoners (Auditor General 2016).

⁵ All names of research participants are pseudonyms, most of which they self-selected. The names of cities and institutions have also been removed to protect the anonymity of participants.

⁶ The release of prisoners without appropriate clothing or transportation is sometimes called a ‘starlight tour,’ which in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan is the phrase used to describe the police practice of leaving Indigenous men in isolated areas outside the city limits (Razack 2015). This practice can be (and has been) lethal when such ‘drop-offs’ occur in minus 28-degree Celsius weather and individuals are not appropriately attired with winter jackets or footwear (see Razack 2015).

⁷ According to a more recent Ontario Ombudsman report, ‘complaints relating to correctional services, policing and the provincial justice system consistently account for the largest proportion of cases handled by our Office. Correctional facilities alone were the subject of 4,051 complaints’ (2016: 16).

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