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"A prison is no place for a pandemic": Canadian prisoners' collective action in the time of COVID-19

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Abstract

Since the onset of COVID-19, social protest has expanded significantly. Little, however, has been written on prison-led and prison justice organizing in the wake of the pandemic—particularly in the Canadian context. This article is a case study of prisoner organizing in Canada throughout the first 18 months of COVID-19, which draws on qualitative interviews, media, and documentary analysis. We argue that the pandemic generated conditions under which the grievances raised by prisoners, and the strategies through which they were articulated, made possible a discursive bridge to the anxieties and grievances experienced by those in the community, thinning the walls of state-imposed societal exclusion. We demonstrate that prisons are sites of fierce contestation and are deeply embedded in, rather than separate from, our society. An important lesson learned from this case study is the need for prison organizing campaigns to strategically embrace multi-issue framing and engage in sustained coalition building.

Keywords

prisoners, prisons, protest, collective organizing, COVID-19, Canada, porous prisons

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted a host of structural inequities (Etowa and Hyman, 2021). In response to the vulnerabilities exacerbated by COVID-19, a significant rise in social activism occurred during the early months of the pandemic, much of which was characterized by multi-issue and cross-sectoral framings of social grievances (Grant and Smith, 2021). Prisons and jails were among the many sites of protest and social conflict (Hanan, 2021; Vance, 2021). While under normal circumstances, it has been easy for the public to ignore prison issues as "outside" of their concern, the very nature of the pandemic forced a reckoning with the fact that, despite all pretensions, prisons and prison conditions are woven into the fabric of society (Jahn et al., 2020). During the first year and a half of the pandemic, prisoners in Canada, their families, and allies organized 74 collective actions, including hunger strikes, work stoppages, and other forms of protest. This activism challenges the idea of the prison as a "total institution" (Goffman, 1961). Rather, prisons are sites of fierce contestation and are deeply embedded in, rather than separate from, our society. The pandemic has highlighted what scholars and activists have referred to as the porous nature of prisons, which we argue bears important on our understanding of prison activism (Ellis, 2021). Specifically, activism in the COVID-19 era demonstrates that prison protest is not exclusively the result of internal prison conditions but is also informed by broader social grievance and struggle. These findings speak to the importance of "infrastructure of dissent" in thinning prison walls and building coalitions that can integrate prison grievances into broader movements for social justice.

This article analyzes prisoner organizing in Canada throughout the first 18 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that the pandemic generated a discursive bridge—which linked the grievances raised by prisoners, and the strategies through which they were articulated, with the anxieties and grievances experienced by those in the community. While only achieving modest wins, prison protests during COVID-19 pointed to potentially fruitful strategies that could serve as templates for the prison justice movement.

In the first sections, we outline our methodological and theoretical approach before taking stock of the existing scholarship addressing prison protests. We then examine the impact of COVID-19 on broad social grievance, as well as the parallel groundswell of activism around anti-Black racism and colonialism. Next, we document the quantitative volume and distribution of prison-oriented protests that occurred and discuss the issues and demands raised therein. Our analysis focuses on the strategic framing and coalition building that aligned "inside" grievances with the overarching zeitgeist of discontent that was circulating in the general public. We close by considering the outcomes of prisoner organizing throughout the pandemic, and point to important developments that bear consideration for the future of prisoner activism.

Data and methods

Given the opaque nature of correctional institutions, prison protest is a difficult phenomenon to study. While some forms of prisoner collective action are documented by officials

or journalists, others go unrecorded. Given these difficulties, it is likely that our count underestimates the actual occurrence of prison protests in this time period. To get the clearest picture of activism within Canadian prisons during COVID-19, we have relied on a variety of sources to compile our data. These sources include interview data, media reporting, documentation by prison justice groups, as well as government reports and communications.

Interview data for this article were generated through a study designed and conducted in collaboration with former prisoners, alongside the Prisoner HIV/AIDS Support Action Network, a community-based prisoner health and harm reduction organization. In total, 19 semistructured interviews were conducted with individuals who had been incarcerated at some point since March 2020 in either federal or provincial institutions in Ontario, Canada.[1] Interviews were then collaboratively analyzed through an inductive, open-coding process, generating a master list of 15 core codes. We draw on interview data to provide qualitative content and context to the quantitative data compiled.

In total, seven cis-women, eleven cis-men, and one trans woman were interviewed.[2] Ten spent time in a federal institution and 13 spent time in a provincial institution. In Canada, individuals awaiting trial or serving sentences under 2 years are held in provincial or territorial institutions, while those serving sentences greater than 2 years are held under federal custody. In several cases, the individual interviewed spent time in both provincial and federal institutions.

We have limited our scope to focus on protest actions involving two or more prisoners that occurred between March 2020 and September 2021. These include hunger strikes, work stoppages, riots, and other acts of collective disobedience. Due to limitations in the availability and transparency of data, we are only able to calculate the number of actions, not the number of participants. Based on media reports some prison protests involved only a handful of prisoners, while others involved hundreds. The lack of transparency around prison protests (and therefore data) indicates an urgent need for more research.

"Porous" prison protest

This article draws from—and adds to—a growing body of research which challenges the categorization of prisons as "total institutions" and instead conceptualizes prisons as "porous." The idea of a "total institution" was first introduced in the work of Erving Goffman. According to Goffman, prisons isolate and impose total control over those within, stripping them of their individual identity and instead shaping them anew in accordance with conformity to institutional norms and rules (Ellis, 2021; Goffman, 1961). While this model has often been the taken-for-granted conceptualization of prisons —from which a great deal of prison scholarship has been shaped, it is not without its contestation. We follow scholars such as Crewe (2009), and most recently Ellis (2021) who assert that prisons are more accurately characterized as porous for both practical and conceptual reasons. Practically, the doors of prisons are revolving. Prison staff regularly enter and exit the institution—as do prisoners and volunteers—bringing with them their own histories, politics, and cultures. This constant exchange of people between prison and community,

therefore, problematizes ideas of prison culture as formed through isolation and deprivation alone. Prisons are inseparable from broader social institutions such as the economy (i.e. the prison industrial complex), politics (i.e. penal populism), and community not-for-profits (i.e. harm reduction agencies). This suggests that, following Ellis (2021), prisons are infused with (and in turn infuse) the norms, rules, and values of exogenous institutions. Our research compliments this body of scholarship by demonstrating that prison activism during COVID-19 was shaped by both endogenous and exogenous conditions, while prison activism was also mobilized to frame collective action in the community. Throughout COVID-19, protestors in the community (problematically) appropriated the language of prison protest, calling Canada the "world's largest prison," for preventing airline travel without proof of vaccination. These strategies were also taken up in the formal political sphere through the People's Party of Canada, whose candidates regularly drew upon the symbolic language of prisons to contest lockdowns, vaccination mandates, and other public health strategies (LaFleche, 2021; Solomon and Adams, 2022).

This study also follows Goodman et al. (2017) who argue that penal change "is the product of struggle between actors with different types and amounts of power" (8). Prisoners, guards, bureaucrats, politicians, reformers, abolitionists, and others continually engage in processes of contestation. Occasionally, struggle takes the form of open conflict. However, most of the time struggle is less visible and dramatic. The institutional disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a period of remarkable and relatively visible prison protest. Struggles that had previously played out primarily in internal grievance processes, courts, or battles of public opinion suddenly also manifested as organized protests and, in a few cases, riots. Disparate grievances became articulated as generalized opposition to prison conditions and, at times, broad critiques of prison and society writ large.

The concept of "prison protest" captures an immensely diverse array of activities, including the violent and nonviolent, the spontaneous and the planned, and actions small and large. Correctional jargon typically flattens this diversity into the single category of "disturbances" or "security incidents." While there is a considerable amount of scholarship and debate around individual and "micro" acts of resistance in prisons (Rubin, 2017b), this study is concerned with explicitly political collective action.

Scholarly accounts of prison protests have had a disproportionate focus on riots (Useem and Reisig 1999). Scholarship on riots routinely downplays the importance of other forms of prison protest, which only become of concern when they can be understood as "pre-riot" activities. Still, much of the theorization of prison riots applies to broader categories of prison protest.

Scholars have advanced many theories to explain what causes prison riots and other disorders. Several focus on prison conditions. "Grievance," "breakdown," and "powder keg" theories suppose that poor prison conditions, left unchecked, and create conditions ripe for riots. Relatedly, "inmate-balance"[3] theory holds that prison disorder is caused by administrative overreach—new restrictions or increasingly stringent rule enforcement can create powder kegs or otherwise galvanize resistance. Further, "administrative-control" theories assert that disorder is the result of "unstable, divided, or otherwise weak management" (Useem and Reisig, 1999: 735). Such theorizations

essentially argue that if prisoners are given an inch they will, at least in some cases, try to take a mile. Finally, other theories of prison riots focus on prisoner psychology, emphasizing characteristics such as rational self-interest, aggression, or solidarity (Useem and Kimball 1987). While all these theoretical approaches offer some insight, it is also critical to situate prison protests in proper historical context. While a full historical account is not possible here, this study is informed by historical studies of prisoner resistance in Canada and beyond (Clarkson and Munn, 2021; Cummins, 1994; McCoy, 2012).

Prison protests during COVID-19 have been remarkably, albeit not exclusively, nonviolent. Given the proliferation of hunger strikes, work stoppages, and other nonviolent prison protests in North America over the last decade (Berger and Losier, 2018; Gatewood and Norris, 2019; House, 2020), scholars have identified a need to further analyze and theorize *nonriotous* prison protest. In recent years, commentators have given some attention to prison organizing in the civil rights era (Berger, 2014), women's organizing efforts (Law, 2009), and prisoner labor organizing (House and Rashid, 2022). This study seeks to bolster this literature by examining the dynamics at play in Canadian prisons as conditions were harshened by the pandemic. While these protests throughout COVID-19 were expressions of prisoner agency, we consider the ways that this agency was structured by a host of institutional, political, epidemiological, and other factors (Rubin, 2017a).

With this context, it would appear, at its face, that the story of COVID-19 prison protests fits neatly within the "inmate-balance" framework—the rapid rule changes, harshened conditions, and restricted rights and privileges that resulted from the pandemic triggered protests. As mobilizations began to occur on both sides of the prison walls, coherent sets of grievances—some new but many long standing—came to the fore.

However, the case presented here also offers a challenge to much of the scholarship on riots and collective action which conceive of prisons as "total institutions" that generate their own internal structure and culture which are responsible for dynamics of conflict. The fact that COVID-19 triggered remarkably similar protests in workplaces and communities as it did in prisons across the country is noteworthy, suggesting that factors beyond prison-specific deprivation can generate unrest in sites of imprisonment (Wilsnack, 1976). Social and political factors in the community in several important instances shaped the protest action and demands articulated by prisoners—in particular, the murder of George Floyd and the discovery of unmarked gravesites at former residential school sites. While many prisoners, like much of the public, expressed outrage and denounced anti-Black racism and colonialism at an abstract level, prisoners also strategically framed grievances and demands in ways that spoke to the public conversation. Our study, therefore, builds upon the inmate-balance framework, while also thinking through its limitations. We discuss how understanding the prison as porous adds to both analytic and strategic considerations of prison protest.

COVID-19 and the landscape of social grievance

The pandemic has been marked by crises spanning politics, economics, and public health, leading to an explosion of activism and protest. Some of this activism and protest is in

direct response to the pandemic; however, much of it touches on issues of broader concern. In Canada, activism throughout COVID-19 has coalesced around workplace health and safety and workers' rights, poverty, opposition to perceived government overreach, racism and colonialism. Prisons are not immune to any of these issues. Racism and colonialism—both historically and contemporaneously—shape the purpose, operation, and philosophy of penal operation in Canada (Chartrand, 2020; Evans, 2021; Maynard, 2017). In fact the racialized character of Canadian incarceration, combined with the public health issues of congregate living during a pandemic, and the authoritarian nature of corrections, make it unsurprising that prisons became hotspots for protest and activism.

During the earliest phases of the pandemic, public social grievances coalesced around access to personal protective equipment (PPE), COVID-19 testing, and adequate safety measures in workplaces. If the general public struggled to obtain PPE during the first months of COVID-19, it was nearly impossible to access in prisons and jails. Through interviews, former prisoners explained they were often required to wear masks which were shoddily constructed from used prison-issued clothing. When adequate masks were made available, they were often expected to be reused for days at a time (personal communication, 2021). Likewise, early on, testing was largely unavailable, which meant that anyone with symptoms was required to fully isolate which, in a prison or jail, meant being confined in conditions akin to segregation.

Prison conditions and prisoner grievances also helped shape how the broader public perceived and interpreted the use of isolation to manage COVID-19. As governments around the world imposed restrictions to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, comparisons between public health "lockdowns" and prisons soon emerged as the general public was forced to endure restrictions on liberty that were publicly associated with punishment (Rao, 2020). However, lockdowns, meaning the suspension of programming and confinement to cells, truly only occur in prisons. If masking requirements and indoor dining prohibitions would result in popular—if not controversial—public protest movements, it is no surprise that inside prisons, reduced privileges and infringements of basic rights would contribute to an environment ripe for rebellion.

The pandemic also saw a groundswell of organizing around systemic racism. The murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers on May 25, 2020, sparked discussions of systemic racism—and protests—around the world. Given the overpolicing and overrepresentation of racialized people in both American and Canadian prisons, it is unsurprising that criticism of prisons as institutions that produce and enforce racial inequality soon emerged (Taylor, 2021). In this light, racial justice organizers in the community drew on long traditions of prison activism and prison abolition to broaden critiques of police brutality and point to the systemic inequalities embedded in settler colonial criminal legal systems. Dialogue around racism and incarceration constituted a two-way bridge, linking the grievances of those inside and those beyond the walls of prisons—prisoners were quick to demand that discussions of systemic racism be broadened to include the disparities and harms caused by incarceration in the United States and beyond (Jones, 2020; Osman, 2020).

While some politicians, such as Ontario Premier Doug Ford and Quebec Premier François Legault, downplayed the extent to which racism and discrimination could be found in Canada, this "Canadian exceptionalism," (Gismondi, 2017; Kwak, 2020) was soon forced to confront Canada's colonial past. In May 2021, The Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation announced the discovery of 215 suspected gravesites at a former residential school in British Columbia. In the weeks and months that followed, thousands of suspected gravesites were found at former residential school sites across the country (Hopper, 2021). The discoveries set off a flurry of outrage, sorrow, and demands for accountability. Vigils and rallies took place throughout the summer of 2021, including in Canadian prisons. Indigenous commentators, prisoners, and prison justice advocates were quick to link residential schools to historical and ongoing issues of colonial policing and incarceration, weaving calls for decolonization into organized prisoners' demands (Evans, 2021; Stadnyk, 2021). We argue that these are examples of the two-way discursive bridge between prison and community grievance and organizing. Prison discourse was mobilized to frame grievances around lockdown issues in the community, while racial justice discourse was mobilized by prison organizers.

Collective organizing through the prison pandemic

It is within this context of social grievance and collective action that we situate prisoner-led activism throughout the pandemic. Prisoners and their allies pursued a number of important strategies to draw attention to these issues, using the pandemic as a focal point to highlight long-standing concerns around safety and human rights.

We have documented 47 collective protests by prisoners between March 2020 and September 2021. This figure includes 14 actions in federal prisons and 33 in provincial ones. Additionally, we have documented 27 separate actions[4] taken by outside supporters. The most common method of protest, by far, was the hunger strike which constituted 48% of all documented prisoners' actions for a total of 36. Work refusals were undertaken by federal prisoners in two cases. Federal prisoners also engaged in three peaceful demonstrations and one suicide pact to contest conditions under COVID-19. There were four minor riots in provincial institutions, alongside the more common hunger strikes. Outside supporters organized a total of 24 protests and three coordinated phone call campaigns.

Lockdown conditions limited communication between prisoners and the outside world and each other, impeding their ability to organize. One interviewee noted COVID-19 protocols created "a prison within a prison" (Personal correspondence, 2021). And yet, prisoners develop forms of resistance that suit the "modes of imprisonment" in which they find themselves (Berger and Losier, 2018: 7). Most institutions suspended the majority of prisoners' work, making work stoppages an ineffective—if not impossible—course of collective action. Without the ability to apply economic pressure, prisoners adopted other forms of action, particularly hunger strikes.

These barriers to organizing and communication prisoners face must be understood in terms of what Hanan (2021) refers to as epistemic injustice—the process by which excluded and marginalized groups are prevented from engaging in and contributing to

public discourse—with particular emphasis on how such exclusions limit the input of marginalized groups to public policy. Because of the social stigma and physical isolation that comes with incarceration, prisoners are almost entirely erased from the "public" and, therefore, discussions of public policy. The importance of epistemic justice for prison protest was highlighted by one interviewee. Discussing an organized effort to obtain adequate cleaning supplies, he noted that this media coverage was important in validating prisoners' concerns: "… they didn't end up giving us a second bottle of sanitizer until it hit CTV News … we're always going to be the liars" (Personal correspondence 2021).

The efficacy of a hunger strike lies, primarily, in the wider attention and concern it can generate. Because prisons stifle communication, community relationships were integral in generating and sustaining public attention and scrutiny of prison-led actions. Throughout the pandemic, many grassroots organizations operated "jail hotlines" which allowed prisoners to make calls free of charge to a team of volunteer hotline operators (CPEP, 2020; TPRP, 2021). These hotlines became intermediaries for prison activists, facilitating the flow of information both into and out of jails, prisons and detention centers. Additionally, jail hotlines allowed for proxy communication among prisoners at different institutions, and in some cases led to coordinated hunger strikes. These jail hotlines punctured the fabric of censorship and control which are fundamental to prisons and facilitated the development of new infrastructure of dissent.

Collective grievances during the prison pandemic

While the sheer quantity of prisoner-led or prisoner-allied protests during this period has been striking, perhaps more striking is the qualitative nature of the demands issued, though they varied considerably in content and scope. Identifying the demands of protesting prisoners is often difficult. In some instances, organized prisoners communicated clear lists of demands to outside support groups. In other cases, prisoners may have engaged in collective actions without issuing demands publicly. The demands that arose from prisoners in Canada during the first year and a half of the pandemic can be broken down into three categories: immediate (COVID-19 specific), intermediate (relating to prison management), and broad (concerning the criminal justice system and society). We note that many of even the most immediate demands prisoners made during this period (access to sanitizer, COVID-19 testing, PPE, etc.) were also concerns felt acutely by the general public. We suggest that the content of these demands during the early COVID-19 period was important factor which facilitated interaction between the prison and the outside world, humanizing prisoners, and breaking down the separation between prisoners from the public. As Ellis (2021) argues, reckoning with the porosity of prisons creates an opportunity for the public to "peer inside" and critically assess how practices of punishment create, rather than neutralize, harm.

Many of the demands issued by prisoners were modest and immediately concerned with mitigating the risk of COVID-19 infection, given that prisons globally were designated hotspots for transmission of the virus (Fontes, 2022; Zeveleva and Nazif-Munoz, 2022). For example, early in the pandemic, prisoners commonly demanded access to cleaning supplies, hand sanitizer, and masks (Brown, 2021). Related demands included

access to COVID-19 tests for prisoners and staff (It's Going Down, 2020), increased communication and transparency around COVID-19 infections and testing results, and mandatory masking of staff (Bridges, 2020).

Another set of demands, which we have labeled "intermediate," emerged in response to the modified programming and lockdowns that were imposed due to public health measures and understaffing. These demands challenged management prerogatives which may or may not have been informed by epidemiological evidence, and included access to recreational and exercise facilities and equipment, access to phones and reduced phone costs, improved canteen offerings, and reduced prices for canteen goods. Prisoners also made demands related to specific programming and services. For example, in October 2020, prisoners on hunger strike in the Toronto East Detention Center (TEDC), a provincial jail in Ontario, demanded "access to appropriate religious programming and spaces, including smudging" (TPRP, 2020a). Access to good quality food, especially fruits and vegetables, was also a common demand (Brazeau, 2020; Rankin, 2020; VOCM, 2021). The issue of food, like religious rites, had clear cultural and racial implications. In addition to calling for better quality food, prisoners made particular demands about improvements to kosher and halal offerings (TPRP, 2021). Furthermore, prisoners demanded the wholesale end of lockdowns or the end of lockdown conditions for prisoners who were not infected with COVID-19 (It's Going Down, 2020).

Finally, a number of broad demands took aim at not only the prison system but also the larger criminal justice system and society as a whole. Some of these were related to the threat of COVID-19; for example, demands for better access to health care services, or for decarceration by expediting bail hearings for those awaiting trial, changing parole eligibility for those sentences, or other means (Canadian Press, 2020; It's Going Down, 2020). While governments and prison authorities gestured toward reducing prison populations to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, prisoners continued to press the issue. For example, prisoners in Bordeaux prison, a provincial jail in Montreal demanded "the release of more prisoners … We should not be playing with people's lives—COVID-19 is a fatal disease. We are not reassured by the measures taken to date" (It's Going Down, 2020). As such, prisoners in Bordeaux insisted that each day spent in the jail should count as 3 days toward a prisoners' sentence and that those with a year left of their sentence remaining to be granted early release (It's Going Down, 2020). In March 2020, immigrant detainees on hunger strike at the Laval Immigration Holding Centre in Quebec demanded that they be released and given medical attention[5] (Henriques, 2020).

In late July 2020, prisoners engaged in a labor strike in the federal Joyceville Institution pushed for CSC to adhere to its own policy regarding the selection of prisoner representatives, asserting their right to "prisoner committees that are voted for rather than warden-appointed" (TPRP, 2020a). The prisoners in Bordeaux, a provincial institution, also demanded the establishment and recognition of a prisoners' committee—which are a formal feature of the federal system. These demands are significant because, despite the well-established limitations of inmate committees, they represent an effort to develop "infrastructures of dissent"—capacities for future organizing and political action (Sears, 2007).

The most wide-reaching demands are related to prisoner representation and structural racism. Prisoners protested racism and colonialism in the abstract but also engaged in strategic framing, connecting more abstract critiques of structural racism to issues specific to the prison. We examine this framing in more detail below.

Strategic framing: The prison as public

Two key framing devices were deployed by prisoner activists throughout the pandemic. The first asserted that the health and safety of prisoners is essential to ensuring public health and safety for all. The second drew upon and added to discussions on criminalization and racial injustice, notably in relation to the Black Lives Matter protests which spread across North America, as well as those addressing settler-colonial injustice. In both instances, prison protests mobilized frames which insisted that prisons are embedded within—not external to—the public. These frames strategically disrupt attempts to hide the prison from public view, instead pointing to the ways in which prisons—as institutions—interface with and are infused by a range of other social, political, and economic institutions (Ellis, 2021).

As Fine (2011) has noted, the moral framing of issues is critical for winning allies and building support for "other more contentious forms of action" (613). More broadly, social movement theorists have emphasized the importance of movement framing as a means through which activists give social meaning to their struggles and actions in ways that align with, and can draw from, the resources (material, social, and emotional) of larger movements. For example, some prisoners adeptly framed "security threat group" classifications as manifestations of the structural racism underlying Canada's criminal justice system. As one anonymous prisoner organizer articulated it:

> The Toronto East Detention Centre (TEDC) is the only centre in Canada that requires inmates that are classified as "STG" (security threat group) to live in designated cells on each unit. Ninety-five percent of these inmates are young racialized men, who are classified as "STG" for various reasons, some as simple as the community from which they come from. This racist practice isolates a person from the rest of the unit and prohibits them from viewing the television. The prisoners on strike are demanding this arbitrary classification be ceased and allow prisoners to live in whichever cell is appropriate based on their behavior (TPRP, 2020b).

The fight against STG classification was only one of several demands striking prisoners at the TEDC forwarded, though it was the only one concretely addressed (and ended) according to organizers (Personal correspondence, 2020).

Similarly, beginning on June 3, 2020, prisoners at the Ottawa Carleton Detention Centre (OCDC) undertook a 31-h hunger strike, issuing a host of demands, several of which were framed in relation to systematic racism. For example, Deepan Budlakoti, as spokesperson for the strike, noted the racially discriminatory diet provided by OCDC which failed to adequately address the nutritional needs of prisoners requiring halal and kosher diets, as well as the lack of appropriate canteen options for hygiene

which Black, Indigenous, and other racialized prisoners require (CPEP, 2020). Shortly after the prisoners went on strike, Indigenous prisoners at OCDC released their own statement noting, "We share our concerns with the wider public with the hopes that the OCDC administration will start respecting our identities and humanity, and accommodate our cultural, spiritual and dietary needs" (CPEP, 2020). Among the demands were respect for culturally appropriate handling of traditional medicines, access to indoor smudging facilities, access to alternative spiritual and cultural activities in light of the COVID-19 restrictions, and access to culturally appropriate diets (CPEP, 2020).

The June 3 hunger strike at OCDC ended after just 2 days when the administration agreed to some of the demands. As it became clear that the administration had bargained in bad faith, the strike was resumed on July 22, 2021, and lasted 5 days, garnering even wider support from both prisoners inside OCDC and across Canada. Once again, intersectional framing was central to the strikers who emphasized racial, gender, and economic inequality. Budlakoti highlighted the state's duty to care for prisoners which includes providing "… for each individual's medical or religious diet … (and) proper skincare products for each cultural background from African to Indian, to different types in general" (CPEP, 2020). From the women's side, a Metis woman flagged the important cultural, gendered, and economic inequities that lay at the heart of their call for better release planning, arguing that prisoners are set up to fail as

> you're not, like, set out into the real world with, like, a proper release plan …. There's no mental health in here, there's no substance abuse, there's no housing help, there's nothing to help you see or talk to your kid …. There's nothing here to teach us to go out and what to do. We just go back out and relapse, or go steal because we can't afford tampons …. (CPEP, 2020).

Alerted to the strike-through networks of prisoner advocates and jail hotlines, prisoners at the Burnside jail, a provincial facility in Halifax, Nova Scotia issued a statement of solidarity. The statement affirmed hunger strikers, condemning the racial, colonial, and nationalist operation of prisons and jails, writing

> We continue to call for an end to racist policing! An end to colonial prisons! An end to building new prisons instead of new housing! An end to punishment instead of healing! We continue to believe that it is not a crime for a person to move from one place to another to be safe. We call for an end to borders, and for status for all (Nova Scotia Advocate, 2020).

Highlighting the gendered, colonial and racial violence of prisons to draw attention to the harms and abuses prisoners face on a daily basis—but especially under COVID-19, facilitated a "thinning" of the walls that divide prisoners from the rest of the community. Grounding their calls for action in a critique of structural inequality functioned to breakdown the long-held myth that prisoners are isolated from broader social currents, creating the basis on which prison issues can be read as *social* issues. Infrastructures of dissent such as jail hotlines facilitated dialogue between prisoners in different institutions.

This disrupts the isolated nature of prison protest and points to the possibility for broader prisoner unity and coordinated action.

That prisons are social facets of our community was also made clear when prisoners argued that prison health is public health. There is a revolving door between the institution and community owing to the comings and goings of staff, community workers, and prisoners. As a result, the state of prisoners' health has direct implications for the public's health, especially amid a pandemic. In an open letter addressed to the Ontario Ministries of the Solicitor General and of Health and Long-Term Care (among others), the Criminalization and Punishment Education Project argued

> Healthcare in jails and prisons is a public policy consideration for our society as a whole. Since most provincially incarcerated individuals will eventually be released back into the community, it is even more crucial to provide prisoners with the adequate care to maintain their health in custody…. The continuity of healthcare services before, during, and after custody is also essential to protect public health at large (CPEP, 2021).

While the connections between prison conditions and broader community conditions have become evident and urgent throughout the pandemic, prisoners and those who advocate for prisoners' rights have long noted this reality (Culhane, 1985). Prisoners' access to adequate healthcare, education and training programs, nutrition, mental health supports, harm reduction services, and communications are essential to safeguarding both the rights of prisoners themselves and the broader health and safety of communities. Despite prisons and jails attempting to isolate populations deemed "risky," they do not disappear indefinitely and most will return to our communities. In mobilizing a cross-sectoral framing, aligning prison movements with broader social justice movements, and appealing not only to the public's self-interest, prison organizers and their allies have been able to effectively visiblize and legitimize their demands.

Outcomes and discussion

For their part, prison administrators frequently sought to "clog the pores" to stymy prisoner organizing and reassert authority. Responses to prisoner organizing were mixed and included publicly downplaying prisoners' claims, use of force, the implementation of greater barriers to participating in public discourse, and in some cases, negotiation and concession. However, on the whole, administrators were forced into an uncommon position of public oversight and accountability. Widespread media coverage on prisoners' actions over the first 18 months of the pandemic put prison administrators and politicians in the hot seat.

When collective action took the form of either riots or the peaceful disruption of daily operations, the administration often responded with force. Uses of force in response to peaceful protests were reported by CTV News at the federal Donacconna and Collins Bay institutions and are corroborated by interview data (Perkell, 2020). Speaking about an organized refusal to lockdown at Collins Bay, one interviewee recounted, "Basically, the riot squad came right—yeah and boom there (were), you know, flash

bangs and pepper spray everywhere and a couple of people … got really hurt when they were shooting pepper balls and stuff" (Personal correspondence, 2021).

Another interviewee recounted a similar situation in which prisoners refused to lockdown and were met with handcuffs and pepper spray (Personal correspondence, 2021). Still others reported being threatened with a transfer, which would mean a new 14-day quarantine, and a removal from one's established networks of support and communication: "basically, they told them listen … we'll transfer you out … and obviously the inmates got a little scared and they backed off." (Personal correspondence, 2021).

In other cases, prison authorities relied upon existing structures of epistemic injustice —downplaying prisoner grievances and publicly undermining the legitimacy of prisoners' claims. For example in June 2020, 100 prisoners at the Central East Correctional Centre in Ontario went on a hunger strike protesting inhumane conditions such as a lack of potable water, clean clothes, programming, access to communication with family members and service providers, bad air quality and poor nutrition, and the use excessive use of lockdowns. In response, the Ministry of the Solicitor General issued a public statement dismissing the grievances as "unfounded" (CBC News, 2020). At times, public relations management also took the form of bad-faith negotiation, as was the case with the June 2020 hunger strike at OCDC (CPEP, 2020).

In other cases, prisoners won clear concessions. A hunger strike by immigrant detainees in Laval, Quebec, in March 2020, "led to many migrant prisoners being released on bond" (Adams, 2021). At least partially in response to hunger strikes and protests, Ontario's Ministry of the Solicitor General increased canteen and entertainment options and provided prisoners with extra postage in June 2020 (O'Reilly, 2020). There were also concessions related to facility-specific demands. As mentioned, prisoners at TEDC succeeded in forcing the administration to stop arbitrary "Security Threat Group" classifications. Prisoners in Ontario's Hamilton-Wentworth Detention Center (HWDC), undoubtedly the most militant prisoners during the period of this study, decisively won their campaign for access to reading material when, in May 2021, the Hamilton Public Library announced it would provide more than 4500 books to prisoners in the HWDC (Bron, 2021). The jail's administrators also agreed to resume in-person visits in July 2021 (BPSP, 2020).

These outcomes offer some insights. In cases where concessions were won, we have noted a high level of organized outside support. Prisoner organizing was much more prominent in these areas—namely the Prairie Region, Ontario, and Quebec. This may support the hypothesis that prison organizing is most effective when it breaches the material and social isolation that imprisonment imposes. By its nature, imprisonment is intended to conceal, disappear and isolate. As prisoner organizers sustain connections with outside organizers, and as they continue to insist that prison issues are social issues, it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain this fiction.[6] Importantly, the collaboration of prisoners and outside allies highlights the institutional bridges between the prison and community that render it porous, such as media and telecommunications.

Increasing prisoners' ability to connect with the broader public and external oversight and accountability of prison conditions, therefore, can go a long way to putting prison justice on the public agenda. While this, in itself, does not necessarily lead to material

gains, it goes a long way toward building "cultures of solidarity" and dismantling the public myth of prisons as total institutions (Ellis, 2020; Fantasia, 1988).

This sentiment was articulated by Cory Cardinal, the late Indigenous prison organizer, in an op-ed published six months before his death. Speaking of a hunger strike organized at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre in November 2020:

> The strike lasted for nearly a week. We wanted to prove to the public that the inmates had the capability to take action in a non-violent, respectful way that is upheld in the charter of rights.
>
> We wanted to show that at any given time in the correctional centres there exists a young, bright, ambitious and generous community of inmates that teach each other and protect each other from a system that has dominated, exploited and failed us for more than 150 years (Cardinal, 2021).

Prisoner organizing throughout the pandemic has yielded mixed results in terms of concrete gains. However, protests throughout COVID-19 highlighted the porosity of prisons while also pointing to the possibilities of creating enduring infrastructures of dissent.

Conclusion

The pandemic has both highlighted and exacerbated the harms of incarceration. This acute multiplication of the harms experienced by prisoners has functioned to rapidly consolidate a "culture of solidarity" among prisoners and led prisoners in many institutions to begin laying the foundations for an infrastructure of dissent. Prison issues are issues of broader public interest and concern. Reckoning with this disrupts the "comforting and convenient" myth (Farrington, 1992) that prisons perform public safety through the total isolation of "criminal elements" and force the public to consider how practices of punishment shape realities of social vulnerability and insecurity. While this has always been the case, the link between institutional outbreaks of COVID-19 and broader public health mandates has made this point impossible to ignore. Consequently, some of those who have little interest in the rights of incarcerated people have found reason to support calls for prison justice and accountability—if only from a self-interested vantage point. Finally, the pandemic has highlighted the interrelations between varying forms of social grievance. Throughout the pandemic, greater public and media attention has been paid to issues of colonialism and racial discrimination—including within Canadian carceral systems. At times, these links have been effectively mobilized by prison organizers in order to successfully highlight the interrelation between colonialism, racial discrimination, and imprisonment.

While this study takes stock of protests from March 2020 to September 2021, prisoner-led protests have continued. For example, in January 2022 prisoners at the Millhaven Institution initiated a hunger strike citing concerns over how the movement of prisoners to accommodate construction plans could increase COVID-19 infection rates (Soucy, 2022). The social harms revealed by COVID-19 (both inside and outside

of carceral institutions) remain and it is important that the successes, failures, and insights gleaned from COVID-19-era prison protest do not go unaccounted for. While some factors influencing this recent organizing have been contingent, others are relevant outside of these exceptional times. We argue that prisoner organizing throughout the pandemic adds to theorizations of the prison as porous and highlights the necessity of infrastructure of dissent which connects the community and prisons.

Much of the literature on prison protest fails to account for exogenous factors—demonstrating a misunderstanding of the deep embeddedness of prisons in society. Prisons are a site of continuous struggle and the task for prison activists and their allies continues to be to build intentional and durable infrastructure of dissent.

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Notes

1. Restrictions to in-person visits made it impossible to conduct interviews with currently incarcerated individuals.
2. Trans women are women. We have chosen to identify this individual as trans as they were initially denied access to a women's institution and, consequently, spent time in a male institution, under conditions of segregation.
3. We use the term prisoner to refer to incarcerated populations rather than the term 'inmate', stemming from the political critique that imprisoned people are not equivalent to inmates in other institutions which administer care. However, we include the term 'inmate' when it is used in direct quotes or is affiliated with a formal academic or professional term.
4. Three of these protests contested the inclusion of trans women in women's facilities. We include these in our count of protests as they meet the criteria established. These protests, however, are qualitatively different as they involve bringing the rights of some prisoners into conflict with the rights of others.
5. It is important to note that issues of access to basic medical and mental health services have long been a major concern for prisoners in Canada. There is a vast and diverse literature addressing these issues, which is beyond the scope of this article. See, for example, John Howard Society of Ontario (2021), Kouyoumdjian et al. (2018), Paynter et al. (2021).
6. For example, this conversation between inside and outside activism was highly visible during the fertile organizing period of the 1960s and 1970s. Movements such as the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement were populated by activists who had experience organizing both inside and, later, in the community. These activists drew tools and strategies directly from their experiences of incarceration. Many movement activists in the community would also go on to become prison activists after becoming incarcerated as a result of their political activities (Cummins, 1994; House, 2020).

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