

RISK and PRISON

by Bridget and Liam

Put together by folks working with the Prisoner Correspondence Project - a Montreal based project intended to support queer, trans, and other sexual minority and gender nonconforming people behind bars.

"Two people I know got caught having intercourse in the prison church by two other inmates. They beat the holy living crap out of both of them. The guards looked on."

- incarcerated participant in the Prisoner Correspondence Project, January 2008.

"The DOC [Department of Corrections] knows there are gays and people like us. They know there are people having intercourse. The state will not provide rubbers or condoms for safer sex; their hope and their goal is that all gays and bi's - all the people like us - will get HIV and die before parole or discharge."

- anonymous person seeking resources from the Prisoner Correspondence Project, April 2008.

Risk for me - here in prison, and being gay - has many different types. I celled up with a guy - both of us gay. We would mess around and have sex. The risk is disease, contracting AIDS or Hepatitis due to lack of protection.

Part 2

Our queer bodies are policed. By the cops and security guards that criminalize us for fucking in bathrooms and parks. Our queer bodies are regulated and quarantined. With every doctor that tells us we're irresponsible to not be monogamous. With every healthcare practitioner that escorts us out of blood drives. With every professional that tells us we don't have agency because our bodies are a matter of "public health." Our queer bodies are patrolled. Through queerphobic and transphobic age-of-consent laws. Our queer bodies are imprisoned. In youth detention centres, behavioral correctional facilities, in federal and provincial prisons across Canada. Sexual minority - and especially transsexual, transgender and gender nonconforming communities - are imprisoned at higher rates, serve longer sentences, are less likely to get paroled, more likely to get raped in prison, face severe retaliation for speaking out against assaults in prison, more likely to contract HIV while in prison. More likely to die in prison before parole or discharge.

When in prison, queer people are subject to being charged and having their sentences increased for having sex. If condoms or dams are available at all, they often can only be acquired through highly criminalizing circumstances: you must seek permission, or, the dispenser is monitored 24 hours a day. Queer and trans prisoners are isolated from communities and necessary support. They are forcibly removed from both incarcerated and non-incarcerated partners and lovers. They are wrested from their social and sexual ties.

Throughout the 1980s and early 90s, queer and transsexual/transgender communities were decimated by HIV/AIDS. For more privileged sectors of our communities, this crisis waned. For many of us, it is a history we don't have access to, or a public history we've forgotten. For many of us, we can't fathom what it looked like to see so many friends and partners dying around us.

The only protection we have is to share each other's HIV / HEP blood test results to show we are clean. The next risk is being caught by staff. Staff could walk by your cell at any time. Each person would be sent to the "hole" for 180 days, plus lose some of your "good time". Plus being in the hole and having to tell why you are there. Being gay you always run the risk of being beat up or stabbed, but if you keep your sexuality to yourself they won't mess with you. Which brings me to another risk: Cellies. Being gay makes it hard to find cellies. We basically have to live with sex offenders or other gays. I have had two close calls where I almost got beat up and raped. Some guys here will try to be your friend. Help you with things like give you candy or loan you envelopes, hang out with you on the yard. They build up a relationship with you then ask if you want to move in once you're behind a locked door. They take out their dick and tell you to suck it and if you refuse they get pissed and threaten to kick your ass if you don't. So I would have to keep him talking until the next line movement, which means the door opens. Then I would have to refuse to cell, in which case I'd be sent to the hole. Once there, I have to go through the same thing. Luckily now the staff know me. Another risk I have is penpals. I have met a few guys from the streets and all but two just stopped writing altogether with no warning. One guy I was starting to fall in love with and became very close with. He even filled out a visit application to come visit me. One day he just stopped; I wrote him back a few times looking for answers but got no response. My risk is putting my heart out there for someone and then they step on it and throw it away. To this day I am trying to recover from it. It is harder in here when you have no one. Now I'm trying to meet new people (again), which is putting myself at risk again for failure. I want to thank L.O. for his ongoing friendship and Christopher who is a FTM transsexual who has become a true friend also. I hold them both close to my heart.

-- Matt Jones, 2008

This crisis never ended in prisons. Instead, it deepened.

This history is part of a larger legacy, made up of specific practices of imprisonment, regulation, and forced isolation: from mid-1980s calls to quarantine HIV-positive communities to age-old sodomy laws redeployed as part of more recent age-of-consent legislation. What would it look like to begin to map out these histories?

Queer bodies, gender nonconforming bodies, are quarantined and incarcerated, sometimes out of existence. This is the landscape for transsexual/transgender and queer folks in prison. It's a landscape rooted not in some vague identity category, but corresponding to how we present, and what our bodies look like. Because of who we desire, who we fuck, and who we get fucked by.

What kind of bases of support might be achieved between incarcerated and non-incarcerated folks?

And how might we begin a conversation about RISK within such a landscape, and remembering such a history?

Talking about this, we kept coming back to one point. Talking about 'high-risk' activities, and 'at-risk' communities assumes that, with the right resources and education, affected people can manage to avoid the situations and behaviors that put their lives at risk.

For trans and queer people, life in prison is structured to ensure that routine aspects of life are directly and necessarily unsafe and harmful. Prisons are structured to enable sexual violence. Prisons refuse to allow access to resources so that people might live out their lives safely. Prisons subject queer people, transsexual and transgender people, to conditions that quarantine, isolate, inflict violence on, disable, and ensure exposure to epidemic disease. The "risky" behavior that incarcerated folks undertake is to simply exist within the prison system.

What kinds of harm reduction can we work toward as we constantly remind ourselves that prisons are about punishment? That sexual assault, rape, torture, abuse, deprivation, disease and isolation are not accidents or gaps in the system, but the lived reality of incarceration? How might we begin to address risk within a structure that ensures it? And how can we help build bonds of support running inside, which work against a landscape that ensures violence, risk, and harm?

Part 2 was put together by Bridget and Liam. Neither of us is incarcerated. Most of the people reading this aren't incarcerated. Many of us can't conceive of violence of this scope. A few folks in prison beside Matt wanted to submit something for this issue, but because of obstacles faced as a result of being imprisoned (for instance, being in solitary, being refused access to pens and paper, or having outgoing mail censored) it was very difficult for them to do so. This is, in some ways, appropriate, given the topic of the article; the structures and policies that further isolate, and that restrict and regulate communication in this way, are part of the same landscape of violence and harm in prison.

The PRISONER CORRESPONDENCE PROJECT coordinates a direct letter-writing program for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, gendervariant, queer, 2spirit & intersexed inmates in Canada, linking these communities with people who identify similarly who are outside of prison.

The project also coordinates a resource library on harm reduction practice (safer sex, safer fixing, safer drug use, clean needle care, safer tattooing, etc), HIV and HepC prevention, homophobia, transphobia, etc. The intention of the project is not to match people up romantically, but to create accountable friendships where those involved can support and learn from one another.

As an organization, we try to be allies to prisoner struggle, and reject the ways that people apart of these communities are targeted and criminalized.

(Please note, we are looking for folks that identify along these lines to participate as penpals in this project.)

THE PROJECT IS ALWAYS LOOKING FOR NON-INCARCERATED FOLKS TO ACT AS PENPALS WITH INCARCERATED PEOPLE IN CANADA. For more information, or to otherwise get involved, please contact queertrans.prisonersolidarity@gmail.com

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