

## **‘YOU IMPROVISE TO SURVIVE’: HIV PREVENTION, SURVIVAL STRATEGIES & QUEER CULTURES OF SELF-DEFENSE**

Thank you to Amazon, Matt Jones, Toddles, J.A. Brown, Patrice, and Denzial, whose stories, submissions, anecdotes, and ongoing feedback in the face of mailroom censorship, punitive surveillance, administrative retaliation, and anti-gay, anti-queer violence, have been the core of this project, and which continue to be the inspiration for our organizing.

### **I. WHY IMPROVISE**

*I can't really offer advice about having "safesex." I don't practice it. I practice "being careful." In my own way. It does not involve use of things plastic, rubber, etc. Mostly avoid body fluids, which is the main way of transmission. That is tricky, but hey, it's the life. You improvise to survive. That's all I can offer. -Amazon*

In two years of coordinating a letter writing program between incarcerated and non-incarcerated gay, trans and queer communities, the Prisoner Correspondence Project's outside collective (itself comprised entirely of gay and trans folks and queers) has consistently tried to forge strategies to support our penpals, friends, contacts and allies on the inside. In the process, we have tried to intervene on carceral landscapes of structural antigay and antiqueer violence. In response to violently antiqueer prison and policing regimes across the US and Canada, and in response to the sexual and emotional health risks faced by our inside penpals which directly threaten their survival, the Prisoner Correspondence Project has begun to coordinate a series of resources addressing harm reduction strategies directly relevant to the lives of gay, queer and trans inmates.

### **Filling the gaps**

While many critical resources do exist in support of prisoners and prison abolition, there remains a troubling gap surrounding issues that have particular relevance among gay, trans and queer prisoners. Through the coordination of our letter-writing program, the Project affords us the opportunity to identify how the criminalization of homosexuality within the prison system as well as the targeted policing and incarceration of gays and queers more broadly, poses a daily threat to the physical and emotional well-being of those inside. The work that we do is accordingly rooted in the belief that forging informal, personal circuits of communication and exchange is essential in supporting our communities both inside and out. Thus in tandem with the penpal program, we organize a library of writing and information related to queer and trans survival in prison, addressing topics ranging from health and harm-reduction (HIV and Hep C prevention, safer fixing, drug and hormone injection, safer barebacking) to broader forms of emotional and sexual survival. As such, the development of these resources is unfolding in close dialogue with the motivations, desires, and anti-prison politics which are at the root of the project itself.

As we began supplying pre-existing resources to our penpals inside, we came to recognize the ways in which these resources – and our interventions – were lacking. Many existing resources (safer sex, coming out, etc) not only failed to account for the realities faced by incarcerated communities, but failed to acknowledge them altogether, effectively writing gay, queer and trans prisoner realities out of existence. Responding to this context of violent erasure, and of prison systems failing to meet the most basic needs of those housed within their walls, we decided to facilitate the development of resources that were both directly relevant to the needs, and which reflected the lives, of our incarcerated penpals. Acknowledging this lack forged an opportunity to build interventions and strategies not only to promote physical health and survival, but also to affirm what it means to be queer or trans behind bars.

These omissions and gaps in resources reflect the lack of discourse and community dialogue about gay, trans and queer prisoners. They also reproduce the invisibility of queers inside prisons, and the violences of antigay correctional mandates. We consistently came up against the reality that resources emerging from queer and LGBT community contexts were virtually irrelevant to parts of these communities inside prisons; similarly, many resources emerging from prisoner support contexts failed to acknowledge realities of sexual desire and pleasure inside prisons. For instance, while a broad spectrum of resources exist concerning HIV-prevention, nearly all of this literature presumes consistent access to condoms, a reality we can not assume. We decided, as a result, to take up as a central focus of our project, the task of creating resources that begin to acknowledge how these gaps in resources, and the larger invisibilities they reflect, affecting not only the safer sex practices, but the greater well-being and survival of queer and trans people in prison.

## **Anchoring the project in collaborative work and anti-prison politics**

To anchor these resources in the lived desires and needs of our inside penpals, we situated the development of these resources by foregrounding the stories, experiences and anecdotes of incarcerated participants in the project. The resources are based on a harm reduction model that acknowledges the presence of risk in everyday behavior, in stark opposition to models that identify behaviors upon which to intervene. Our intentions in creating these materials extends beyond the mere distribution of information, reflecting our desires to: (a) politicize exiting resource and service provision by refusing to assess risk and need as discrete from the structures that create/enforce them, (b) anchor the resources in an affirmative politics of (queer) desire and of pleasure, and in so doing, refuse the way that many existing sexual health resources are evacuated of an analysis of desire or the meanings gay and queer communities derive from sex, inside and outside of prisons, as well as (c) root the resources themselves in the collaborative *process*, and build broader networks of resistance and support through months of sustained collaboration, acknowledging that histories of resistance and organizing among marginal communities – prisoner, queer, HIV positive – have come about through grass-roots, by-and-for efforts by incarcerated folks in dialogue with communities outside and with one another, not from efforts imposed from without.

These resources, most importantly, continue to develop as a work-in-progress, as they evolve and change based on our still-limited but growing access to the voices of those on the inside. We hope for these resources to link gay, queer and trans people between institutions and across national borders. To this end, we hope these resources act not only as a model for harm reduction and education, but as an indispensable tool for community building and self-preservation.

## **II: NAVIGATING JOINT LEGACIES OF AIDS AND MASS INCARCERATION**

*"I was last out in the end of 1980; the AIDS virus was not known then and sex was a lot more prevalent and carefree. At least compared to post-AIDS scare times." –Amazon*

*"By not providing condoms, it doesn't discourage sexual behavior and promiscuity, but rather only threatens to give a world-wide epidemic a lot more momentum." –J.A. Brown*

### **The early days of community disappearance**

While the lived needs and desires communicated through our ongoing correspondence with our penpals have been the central motivation for the development of these resources, they have mobilized entire cultural, political, and sexual histories in the process – histories which have directly structured the landscapes of violence faced by gay, trans, and queer prisoners. These histories function as the legacies upon which queer prisoner experience plays out today. Those historical narratives which have structured these realities in the most explicit and violent ways remain: the war on drugs – which represented the beginning of massive carceral expansion – and the AIDS crisis.

When we speak of the AIDS crisis, we must understand it not only in terms of the virus itself or as biomedical condition at play, but as the host of cultural and political forces which occurred alongside the disease: hysteria, quarantining, renewed homophobia, medical incarceration, contact tracing, mandatory testing and extensive surveillance. Each of these instances of structural anti-queer violence can not be understood as separate from the epidemiological conditions that devastated our communities and sexual cultures.

The war on drugs emerged at the same time as the onset of the AIDS epidemic. While the war on drugs, as a US project, was ravaging communities of colour south of the Canada-US border, it emerged in only a marginally diluted form several years later under the Mulroney government. We must see each of these histories as having unfolded alongside one another, each reinforcing the mandates of the other. Both AIDS and the war on drugs served to: (a) target specific communities, working in tandem to ensure the removal and disappearance of the same communities already targeted along lines of race, class, sexual orientation and gender, and (b) play a central role in interrupting and demobilizing militant gay liberation and black liberation movements. In revisiting such histories, one can observe how officials in power structured and exacerbated the course of the epidemic by allowing HIV to spread among those same communities already targeted by policing and incarceration, actively nurturing the conditions for "the right people" (to borrow the words of Ronald Reagan) to transmit the virus. Once inside, many among these same communities, jointly

devastated by AIDS and mass incarceration, found themselves without treatment, medication, or adequate healthcare.

### **This landscape as it exists today: The correctional mandate and anti-queer violence**

*"Here in prison or at least this prison there is no such thing as safe sex. It is against the rules."* –Matt Jones

As we received submissions, anecdotes, feedback, and suggestions from our contacts inside, we came to realize the extent to which these histories still represent some of the key narratives structuring their daily lives and interactions on the inside. Today we see these histories as diffuse, naturalized, and embedded in our negotiations of queer and trans desire, risk, pleasure and survival. These negotiations are directly structured by expressions of antiquesqueer violence in carceral settings:

(a) Sexual expression and intimacy between prisoners is – in almost all cases – explicitly criminal, resulting in punishment, extralegal beatings, administrative retaliation, solitary confinement / isolation, and increased sentencing. In the process, consensual queer sex between prisoners faces the same sanctions as instances of sexual assault, rape, and sexual violence.

(b) Tangible and consistent condom access in prisons – federal and provincial, north and south of the US-Canada border – does not exist, revealing the profound discrepancies between institutional policy, and people's lived realities. Over the course of the past two years, incarcerated project participants have recalled a spectrum of experiences with respect to alleged condom availability, ranging from condoms being rationed at a rate of one per month, to the nursing station having "run out" for a nine consecutive month stretch, to an array of structurally coordinated disincentives in accessing condoms or lube. In many cases, condoms can only be accessed by asking administrative personnel, which in the majority of contexts where queer sex is criminal, means that condom access hinges upon directly incriminating yourself, or potentially "outing" yourself as gay or queer. Where in the US the landscape is characterized by almost total lack of access nationwide, in Canada this landscape is characterized by the myth of consistent and unobstructed condom access.

(c) Prisoner-led organizing, including the emergence of prisoner-run HIV prevention and peer-health education programs in the late 1980s and early 1990s, has been criminalized inside prisons over the course of the past twenty years, across the US and Canada, most explicitly under the purview of alleged "anti-gang" reform. This shift demobilized an emerging prisoner AIDS prevention movement, ensuring the continued rise in infection rates among communities on the inside.

(d) Queer or explicit safer sex information, literature, and resources, is routinely censored, seized, or returned under the purview of anti-pornography policies. Just as the US-Canada border obstructed the passage of such materials in the 1980s when AIDS was decimating our communities on the outside, prison mailrooms and administrations continue this role of censorship and gatekeeping as diffuse borders mapped onto existing national ones. As a result, prevention and health knowledge on the inside is now often five, ten, or even fifteen years behind what is on the outside, further inhibiting queer survival.

(e) There exists a lack of consistent access to HIV medication and anti-retroviral drugs among HIV positive communities who become incarcerated, as well as among prisoners who contract HIV *while* incarcerated. These intentional and structural gaps in access create new and more virulent strains of HIV that are medication-resistant in the bodies of queer, trans, and other HIV positive prisoners. This last instance of the bodily management and regulation of prisoners comprises an instance of structural antiquesqueer violence which *not only* mobilizes historical legacies of entire communities being permitted to die, but which actively nurtures the conditions for a second cohort to the epidemic that may prove itself even more resilient than the first.

In our desire to revisit each of these intertwining narratives, not only do we situate ourselves historically, but we come to understand that the realities we face today reflect the lived effects of legacies of thirty years of AIDS decimation and carceral expansion. That these knowledges emerge through our correspondence and resource development reveals the extent to which, in becoming naturalized, these histories exist in people's very bodies, emerging in the most minute and daily negotiations of violence, risk, and sexual safety.

### **This landscape as it exists today: Navigating the specter of death**

*"Men who died I never knew, just saw here every day, no longer here, vanished in a single breath. They were just one of the so many faceless, packaged "inmates" in a prison, nobody. It rubs off from the way cops think about us, like cattle. We start thinking of ourselves that way too. It just happened that last night I heard another one of my best friends and cellmates died of O.D., a real beautiful young transsexual woman." - Amazon*

Alongside this array of structural and policy-level conditions lie personal negotiations of histories of death, mourning, and disappearance. These are experiences that cannot be assessed discretely from the material conditions of incarceration to which gay and queer and trans communities are subject. As such, they directly impact the form and content of the resources and the resource development process. For many among our community on the inside, this negotiation of death presents itself as a second cohort of mourning, loss and disappearance. While gay, queer, and trans communities were decimated from AIDS on the outside throughout the 1980s and early 90s, many inside today are experiencing a second wave of death from suicide, overdose, medical negligence, and AIDS. Acknowledging this forces us to ensure that our work is directly informed and impacted by these overlapping traumas.

In addition, we must equally contend with the fact that the lived effects of people's experience of HIV/AIDS have shifted dramatically over the course of the past decade or so, both inside and out. We must acknowledge that HIV/AIDS among many non-incarcerated communities in North America is now largely viewed with less urgency than when the epidemic seemed to spread unabated in the 1980s and early 90s. While the sense of crisis is now projected onto other locations and populations allegedly outside of our "national culture," this experience of HIV/AIDS as "manageable" and less urgent is then transposed inside prisons in spite of that fact that in many prisons, rates of transmission among inside gay, trans and queer communities are higher than ever among gay, trans, and queer communities on the outside. This is to say nothing of virulent and medication-resistant HIV strains emanating from carceral sites north and south of the US-Canada border. Alongside this, we must equally acknowledge that a number of our contacts, penpals, and collaborators have been inside for ten, twenty, or thirty years. Amazon, a long-term collaborator with the project who is incarcerated in California, was last out in 1980. For those of us on the outside who are younger, we don't have access to pre-AIDS sexual cultures or pre-AIDS queer identities. It is our correspondence with our penpals that provides us directly with the potential for intergenerational dialogue where it has been systematically removed as a possibility, as much of our queer lineage was erased through the devastation wrought by AIDS.

While few of these negotiations of death, trauma, or history emanate directly from carceral structures, they interact with people's experiences of incarceration, and are actively reproduced through the material conditions of queer/trans incarceration and punishment. These encounters with antiquesque violence are not only reproduced in the silences, omissions, and erasures in much of existing HIV/AIDS prevention discourse and materials that fail to account for the lives of communities inside prisons, they are also reproduced through much of existing abolitionist and prison activist agendas and discourses in failing to account for the lives and realities and desires of gay and queer and trans communities inside prisons. We can not assess the lack of relevant prevention resources as separate from the lack of discourse or discussion about sexuality, gender, or queer desire, because in the process these very omissions, silences and erasures become folded into the very landscape of antiquesque violence coordinated by the prison system itself. In the process, the very navigations of loss, trauma, and community decimation are reproduced, and unfold alongside the invisibility that characterizes incarcerated gay, lesbian, queer and trans experience.

### **III: FACILITATING COLLABORATIVE RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT ACROSS PRISON WALLS**

*"Safe sex is always important in or outside of prison to me. But the only difference is, on the outside, I have a choice. I, for one, am particularly glad you mentioned the issue of barebacking, because it is – without doubt – long overdue." -J.A. Brown*

#### **Dialogue with communities on the outside**

The initial impetus for the development of resources emerged directly from acknowledging the gaps and omissions in existing resources, and in the series of in-depth personal statements sent to us by a host of inside collaborators, outlining their negotiations of risk, safety, survival, and their encounters with antiquesque punishment. To this end, by foregrounding these encounters and ongoing realities, we hope to acknowledge and honour existing discourse and dialogue emanating from inside communities on these negotiations, while

at the same time bringing these experiences to dialogues within communities we are a part of on the outside (prison abolition, gay/queer/trans, etc.)

Our first opportunity to share these contributions with members of our communities on the outside came in the context of a workshop we facilitated at the AIDS Committee of Ottawa as part of *Snowblower*, an annual health and wellness festival for gay men. Entitled “Fucking without Fear: Sexual ‘Safety’ Inside and Outside Prisons,” this workshop permitted the space to discuss more concrete ways prisoner support and anti-prison movements, and gay and queer prisoner support initiatives in particular, can be working toward meaningful, collaborative work with existing AIDS service and advocacy organizations. People came to the topic from diverse critical frameworks, including HIV/AIDS prevention and other community health work, non queer-specific prison justice organizing, academic criminology contexts, and gay/queer activist contexts with vastly different levels of familiarity with the realities faced by incarcerated members of our communities. The questions and observations made by those who participated functioned as critical dialogue between folks on the inside and non-incarcerated queers and transfolk. The process itself reflected our investments in: contributing to the creation of outside gay, queer, and trans that acknowledge criminalization, policing, and incarceration as the daily realities among many in our community; insisting that prisoner justice and prison abolition become re-prioritized by gay and queer community organizers; and contributing to queer cultures that resist containment in the broadest of terms.

In both workshop settings as well as other contexts, using the submissions and contributors negotiations of risk, violence and safety as a point of departure, we consistently encounter the continuities which exist between landscapes of antiquesqueer violence inside and outside of carceral sites. These continuities exist within a range of gay and queer encounters with policing and surveilling mandates. The targeting by law enforcement of queer youth, and in particular queer and trans youth of colour, barriers in accessing resources and support among rural gays and queers, and the recent criminalization of HIV transmission in Canada culminating in a recent murder conviction, represent but several instances in which this landscape of isolation and the regulation of gay, queer and trans survival does not begin or end with carceral sites, but travels across them.

Forging space to reflect critically on the continuities which exist inside and outside of prisons where gay, queer, and trans communities are concerned, enable an understanding that the circumstances of incarcerated members of our communities exist as part of larger homophobic and transphobic, as well as racist and anti-poor systems that function beyond carceral environments. Using these reflections on existing continuities, we are able to reflect on how the strategies for survival foregrounded in the submissions – in some cases born of navigating legacies carceral expansion and AIDS devastation – relate to those used in our own lives. In addition to this, we are able to consider what there is to learn from these strategies, and what examples of support and mutual aid we carve out in our own communities that might also be relevant in the context of supporting struggles for survival among gay, queer and trans communities on the inside.

### **Encounters with prevention work: Building relationships between anti-prison and HIV prevention communities**

Emerging jointly from the omissions and exclusions identified in existing prevention materials, and from the negotiations of antigay, antiquesqueer correctional mandates among communities inside, we were then faced with the task of forging partnerships with allied healthcare workers, prevention workers, and nurses, working for AIDS service providers and other community health organizations in Montreal and beyond.

The mandate regarding the content of the resources themselves was established jointly through the experiences recalled to us through the submissions and statements, as well as our own experiences as non-incarcerated gays and queers in encounters with medical negligence, information gatekeeping, and homophobia at the hands of prevention and healthcare workers. These priorities consolidated around ensuring resources which (a) are not overly medicalized and made inaccessible through medical terminology, (b) do not pathologize sexual choices or practices, and that honour the sexual choices made by communities inside, and (c) not de-sexualizing, and that integrate affirmations of queer sexual cultures inside prisons in the face of sexual violence and deprivation. In this regard, passages from the submissions we have received will be embedded within the resources themselves as a means of ensuring that the information necessary for risk reduction and protection is not divorced from community and individual encounters with this landscape.

Through this process, we have been able to forge more expansive and relevant models of risk or harm reduction, understanding harm reduction as it relates both to health and bodily agency, and as it relates to

encounters with the criminal justice system. In short, the mandate at the core of these resources remains: to affirm sexual desire in the context of its punishment, to celebrate sexual cultures in the context of their erasure, to equip people with the tools for survival in the context of being set up to die, and to honour individual and community survival as resistance.

### **Sustaining and expanding collaborative resource development**

If today we see these individual and collective histories of incarceration, AIDS devastation, and anti-queer violence as embedded in our negotiations of desire, risk, pleasure and survival, then is it these experiences we seek to reflect in the materials we produce. As a collective we see this process as one that is ongoing, and one which continues to shift to include new questions and considerations.

In addition to the safer sex resource pamphlets, including a pilot resource on safer barebacking and sex without barriers for gay, bisexual and queer men housed in men's prisons, we will be producing an anthology featuring each submission we receive in full, both to honour self-representation, and to effectively archive the words and experiences of the contributors. More broadly, the mandate of this anthology is to facilitate dialogue and break isolation amongst gay and queer and trans prisoners with whom we are in touch across the US and Canada.

As a project, it is made expressly clear the extent that the most critical resources and knowledges exist on the inside, as a part of the daily lives of those housed inside prisons. Due to structural factors embedded in prison policy which render prison-to-prison communication – in many cases – a near impossibility, the more we are able to facilitate the exchange of stories and survival strategies amongst those living out these realities on the inside, the more effective our support work will become.

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Picking up where these histories left off: Creating new tactics for self-defense**

*"I took a tremendous amount of chances in my day, but never again. I will not test my destiny or fate. It takes experience to be able to navigate the prisons sexually and make the best choices. I have 28 years behind me and intend to stay negative the rest of my life."* -Amazon

Within this landscape of violence and omission, there also exist movements nurturing resistance, survival, and queer cultures of self-defense. Alongside these histories of queer containment and epidemic risk, there exist histories of community resilience and gay and queer solidarities emanating from both the inside and the outside. Organized historical movements include the ACT UP in-prison committee, the Bedford women's prison ACE (AIDS, Counseling, and Education) collective, and Toronto and Montreal AIDS service organizations advocacy for condom access, treatment, education, and clean gear inside prisons. There also exist longstanding histories of prisoner-run peer-health prevention programs and early gay liberation organizing against police entrapment, bar raids, the policing of queer sex, and the criminalization of our lives. It is these histories from which we seek to learn, to honour, and to use as a point of departure in forging new strategies for survival against shifting carceral mandates. Archiving our own work, and the stories of resistance and survival emanating from communities inside must remain the core of our interventions, in refusal of the erasure of queer histories.

It is these intertwining historical legacies – of AIDS devastation, of prison expansion, and the disappearance of entire segments of our communities – that demand that we ask questions about what it would look like to integrate our anti-prison or justice work with our prevention work. If we acknowledge the critical role that prisons play in ensuring continued and rising seroconversion rates, what would it look like for every AIDS service organization to integrate as part of its mandate a decrease in the number of people locked up behind bars? To declare a national moratorium on incarceration? Through a process of revisiting these histories and assessing them against experiences of queer and trans incarceration today, we reveal the profound overlaps between anti-prison and AIDS prevention mandates, and the potential for more effective and meaningful resistance among gays and queers. Further, by creating resources and coordinating collaborative projects between inside and outside communities that integrate and honour joint legacies of AIDS and mass incarceration/prison expansion, we move closer to creating trans and gay and queer cultures of self-preservation, community affirmation, and self-defense.

*The Prisoner Correspondence Project invites any incarcerated and non-incarcerated people who do work on the inside and who would like to be involved with resource development, outreach (in and out of prisons), etc, to get in touch with us. In particular, we invite incarcerated gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer folks to get in touch with feedback, or to collaborate on upcoming projects. We are also always looking for new penpals, inside and out. You can reach us at*

Prisoner Correspondence Project  
c/o QPIRG  
1455 de Maisonneuve W.  
Montreal (Quebec) H3G 1M8

[www.prisoner Correspondence Project.com](http://www.prisoner Correspondence Project.com)  
[queertrans.prisonersolidarity@gmail.com](mailto:queertrans.prisonersolidarity@gmail.com)