The Howard League for Penal Reform organized and hosted the conference to develop the case for the abolition of prison and to rethink penal policy. Presentations and discussions addressed the impact of the penal system on prisoners and communities, and the ancillary, fiscal and human costs of pursuing a failed crime control agenda in the 21st Century. Speakers provided suggestions for alternative non-punitive approaches, including custody and community interventions. Other key themes included the intersection of politics, prisons, and poverty, the role of privatization and capitalism in penal policy, and penal abolition in relation to the media and public perceptions.

Speakers from a variety of countries, including Brazil, Trinidad, Canada, Australia, USA, Belgium, and New Zealand, joined academics from across the United Kingdom, making ICOPA XII a truly international conference. Our Nigerian delegates Ernest Ogbozor and Adamoh Mustapha were blocked by immigration bureaucracy at Lagos despite the efforts both in Nigeria and London. The conference was aimed at an audience of practitioners, penal abolitionists, policy makers, penal reformers, NGOs, academics and concerned individuals.

The King’s College venue provided accommodations in close proximity to meeting rooms and a large auditorium. The organizational work of the Howard League was appreciated and acknowledged widely.

ICOPA XII ranged over three days, and included four plenary sessions, a variety of workshops and themed panels, a performance, and a boat cruise on the Thames.

Speakers included:

- Professor Thomas Mathiesen, University of Oslo
- Professor Joe Sim, Liverpool John Moores University
- Frances Crook, Director, The Howard League for Penal Reform
- Stephen Nathan, Editor, Prison Privatisation Report International
- Moazzamm Begg, Former Guantanamo detainee and spokesman for Cageprisoners
- Raphael Rowe, Journalist, BBC
- Professor David Wilson, Birmingham City University and vice-chair, The Howard League for Penal Reform
- Professor Barry Goldson, The University of Liverpool
- Professor Harold E. Pepinsky, Indiana University, USA
- Professor Phil Scraton PhD, Queen’s University, Belfast
- Louise Christian, solicitor, Christian Khan, UK
- Peter Collins, Prisoner, Author, Activist
- Sophie Harkat, Justice for Mohamed Harkat, Canada
- Professor Mary Corcoran, Centre for Criminological Research, CESSW
- Imran Khan, leading human rights lawyer, UK
- Julia Sudbury, Mills College, co-founder, Critical Resistance, board member Justice Now
- Pat Magill, Facilitator – Napier (NZ) Pilot City Trust
- Brett Collins, Justice Action coordinator
The spirit of the conference was vibrant, with presentations from a variety of speakers, ranging from current and former prisoners to academics, whose texts underpin the abolitionist arguments. Professor Thomas Mathiesen emphasized this balance between activism and academia, which has long characterized ICOPA. He spoke about the importance of fostering power from below, and of maintaining a focus on abolitionist goals.

A recurring theme was deaths in custody, including suicides and killings, phenomena that starkly represent how governments have failed in their duty of care to the whole community. This focus was fitting in a country where the Howard League had recently drawn attention to a 37% increase in suicides in English and Welsh jails between 2006 and 2007.

The scandal referenced in the theme of ICOPA XII was well expressed by Professor David Wilson of Birmingham City University and Chair of the Commission on English Prisons Today, when he told participants that in a private prison contract exposed during an inquest, the company GSL lost one penalty point for a prisoner death compared to the finding of a weapon as being worth 50 penalty points.

The Universal Carceral Colloquium, a set of linked panels within ICOPA XII organized by affiliates of the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, ranged over two days. See below for a full report on the Colloquium.

The conference generated a debate on abolition in the Guardian on line, which has a worldwide audience and eighteen million hits a month. http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree

ICOPA conferences have been held since 1983 across the world every two years in places including Toronto, Nigeria, Poland, US, Spain, New Zealand, Costa Rica and Australia.

Several possible venues were mentioned for ICOPA XIII. These are: north of Ireland/Northern Ireland, Trinidad, and Ottawa.

Tribute to Pauline Campbell

Deborah Coles of Inquest referred to the tragic case of Pauline Campbell. Pauline, a trustee of the Howard League and one of the UK’s leading prison campaigners, was scheduled to speak at ICOPA XII but sadly died aged 60 just before the conference took place. Pauline had campaigned for the cause of women in prison after her only daughter, Sarah, died in Styal prison near Manchester aged 18 in January 2003.

Sarah was abandoned by her father when she was four. She was sexually abused over a period of several years as a small child. At age 15, she was raped. When she was 17, her GP committed suicide. She became clinically depressed and was addicted to drugs.

Pauline wrote of Sarah’s death: “When Sarah arrived at Styal, she was strip-searched twice, and taken to the segregation/punishment block. The following day, she swallowed a quantity of prescription antidepressant tablets, but then told staff what she had done. Unbelievably, prison staff, including a nurse, walked out of the cell, locked the door and left her alone. There were ‘avoidable delays’ before the prison called an ambulance. When paramedics arrived, they were stopped at the gates for eight minutes before being allowed through. Sarah was unconscious when they reached her. She was taken to hospital, and died several hours later without regaining consciousness.”

From 2004 onwards, Pauline campaigned by taking direct action against the deaths of women in custody. Whenever a female ‘self-inflicted death’ occurred, Pauline held a demonstration outside the prison gates - blocking any transportation carrying new prisoners from entering the jail on the basis that it was not a place of safety. Over four years, Pauline conducted 28 demonstrations and was arrested on several occasions, charged with public order offences that never lead to convictions.

Her campaign ended tragically this May, when Pauline’s body was found by a passer-by close to Sarah’s grave. A section of the conference’s final plenary session was dedicated to Pauline’s memory and a celebration of her campaigning spirit.
ICOPA XII: The Universal Carceral Colloquium

Overview

In the summer of 2007, several Canadian academics affiliated with the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons (JPP) began work on the project that would develop into the Universal Carceral Colloquium, a set of four linked panels within the 12th International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA XII). The goal of this undertaking was to create a space for focused discussion - within an abolitionist framework - about the changing and expanding dynamics of imprisonment, and about those aspects of the carceral experience that seem to remain constant across geography and time. In his introduction to the first panel, Professor Robert Gaucher of the University of Ottawa described the central theme of the colloquium as “the relationship between the universal carceral and carceral universals”. This focus on both change and continuity, and on the relationships between the two, made for a wide-ranging but unified agenda, covering issues from mental health in prisons to the indefinite detention and deportation of non-citizens as part of anti-terrorism agendas.

In keeping with ICOPA traditions, abolitionist principles, and the mandate of the JPP, efforts were made to place the voices, perspectives, and stories of prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families at the centre of the colloquium program. Five of the thirteen papers presented were authored or co-authored by current or former prisoners, or family members of prisoners.

Over the course of the colloquium, the many-layered nature of the carceral archipelago - and its integration with various systems of control and processes of normalization - was demonstrated. Beginning with the first panel, and continuing throughout the colloquium, the participants engaged in a discussion about how penal abolitionism can and should respond to the universal carceral. Many suggested action along the lines of Mathiesen’s (1974) “Unfinished” theory, aiming at short-term negative reforms: the closing of a particular institution, elimination of a particular policy, or implementation of a specific non-punitive, non-system program. Discussions of targeted action intersected with broader debates about abolitionist theory and practice, ranging from Justin Piché's historically-informed presentation on “carceral eradication strategies” to Claire Delisle’s remarks on the need to strategically engage “the rest of the left” in penal abolitionism and Peter Collins’ emphasis on public engagement and civic responsibility.

Another thread running through the panels concerned the net-widening nature of many reform strategies, and the resultant need to re-emphasize the importance of undiluted abolitionism (defined by Thomas Mathiesen in the opening ICOPA plenary as an ideal-type perspective and stance; a way of relating to issues characterized by the will to say “no” to the penal state). Susan Nagelsen & Charles Huckelbury, Jen Kilty, and Peter Collins drew particular attention to the disastrous consequences of using carceral spaces as sites for mental health ‘treatment’ - a widespread phenomenon that has led to system expansion, the criminalization of mental health issues, and the proliferation of sub-standard treatment. At a different end of the spectrum, Mike Larsen and Sophie Harkat addressed the consequences of the trend to use immigration law as a proxy for national security law. The “make it up as you go” reforms that have accompanied such policies have had deleterious consequences for the rights of detainees and their families, and allowed the state to extend its capacity to imprison well beyond the traditional confines of the criminal justice system. In light of the proven failure of imprisonment and the demonstrable consequences of carceral ‘tinkering’, the call for a renewed commitment to abolitionism - in spirit and practice - was echoed throughout the colloquium.

Panel-by-panel Summary

ICOPA Session D: What is the Universal Carceral?

The first panel opened the colloquium by presenting several case studies in the expansion of the carceral archipelago, each built around the experiences of a prisoner or group of prisoners. Sarah Lamble delivered a paper written by Peter Collins, who is presently incarcerated in Canada. Peter’s work situated two contemporary horror stories regarding the management of mental health in Canadian prisons within a historical framework, illustrating the long-standing collusion between professionals from the fields of health and punishment. Mike Larsen presented a vignette of a new development in Canadian immigration penalty - a special prison built to confine immigration security subjects, managed by a contractual arrangement between border security and correctional agencies. Mike raised the question of how abolitionist theory and practice can and should adapt to such exceptional spaces of confinement without presenting the ‘traditional’ system as a ‘lesser evil’
alternative, thereby strengthening it. Claire Delisle told the story of Douglas Gary Freeman, a man who was recently extradited from Canada to face trial in the United States for acts allegedly committed 30 years ago. In reviewing his case, his resistance, and the movement that mobilized to support him, Claire raised questions about the role of transnational cooperation and extradition policy in the operation of penal regimes, and highlighted the thinly-veiled vendettas and political agendas that underpin the legal system. Combined, the three papers illustrated the multi-faceted, pernicious, and inherently political nature of imprisonment as a technology of control.

ICOPA Session E: Experiences of the Universal Carceral I

The first of two panels focusing on the experiences of prisoners and their families, this session brought together themes of health in prison, acts of resistance and agency, and gendered experiences of confinement. Susan Nagelsen delivered a paper co-authored with Charles Hucklebury, who has served thirty-four consecutive years in an American prison. Their paper concerned the systemic denial of medical treatment and provision of substandard care to prisoners, and the public health repercussions this has on their communities of origin. They proposed the outpatient transfer of infectious persons with nonviolent drug convictions into private sector treatment programs as a stepping-stone towards abolition. Jen Kilty presented the findings of a study of self-harming behaviours of federally and provincially sentenced women prisoners in Canada. She convincingly argued that these self-harming behaviours represent acts of individual agency and resistance; strategic attempts to express emotion and negotiate identity. By framing such acts as forms of bio or psy-citizenship, a strong case is made for community-based alternatives to incarceration. Mary Corcoran discussed the ‘contrary states’ of confinement experienced by women political prisoners during the Northern Ireland conflict. Within the prison, their dual status as ‘women prisoners’ and ‘political prisoners’ led to an overlapping of forms of pastoral power and techniques of management geared towards subversives. Coupled with the dynamics of inside-outside relationships between the prisoners and their movements, this layering of multiple forms of penal power presented considerable ramifications for individual and collective acts of resistance, suggesting that resistance itself is a fragmented activity.

ICOPA Session I: Experiences of the Universal Carceral II

The second panel based on the exploration of carceral experience provided a particularly powerful illustration of the link between the Universal Carceral and Carceral Universals. The session began with a reading by Phil Scraton of a paper authored by Craig W. J. Minogue, an Australian prisoner. In this short, provocative piece, Craig argued that the standard definition of a ‘political prisoner’ is narrow and unrealistic. In place of a definition based on incarceration resulting from oppositional political activity, Craig proposed a conceptualization of political imprisonment based on conduct during and after imprisonment - and on the state’s response to such conduct. Such a framing reveals a great many ‘political’ prisoners, providing a basis for wider engagement by progressive movements in prison issues. Erin McCuaig presented detailed findings from a study of the experiences of female partners of imprisoned men, particularly as regards visitation. Framing her analysis in relation to the literature on structural and interpersonal stigma, Erin discussed the dehumanizing effects of the carceral on the families of prisoners and reviewed the methods of resistance adopted by her respondents in the face of the carceral. Erin’s research focused on the traditional criminal justice system, but her findings were echoed in the remarks of the final panelist, Sophie Harkat, who is herself the female spouse of Mohamed Harkat, one of Canada’s “Secret Trial Five”. While Mohamed’s imprisonment was pursuant to immigration law, and had nothing to do with criminal justice, Sophie related the same acts of dehumanization and resistance reviewed by Erin, highlighting some of the universal aspects of the carceral experience. Sophie’s own presentation recounted her ongoing struggle as the spouse and, through the imposition of unprecedented bail conditions, jailer of a husband subject to a secretive and exceptional form of state power. She discussed the negotiation of multiple roles (wife, guard, prisoner, activist), and the importance of maintaining forward momentum in an abolitionist campaign.
ICOPA Session J: Abolition and the Universal Carceral

The closing panel combined conceptual discussion with a review of the history of abolitionism (and ICOPA) and the presentation of strategies and campaigns informed by abolitionist thought. Justin Piché opened with a review of the net-widening nature of the universal carceral, and the “proliferation and normalization of detention as a disposal tactic” utilized by the late modern state. He argued that ongoing trends towards mass incarceration, coupled with the creation of new spaces of - and excuses for - confinement and the co-optation of many well-intentioned reforms, presents a need to re-examine and renew penal abolitionism. Justin concluded by emphasizing the continued importance of Mathiesen’s strategic framework, which uses short-term negative reforms in pursuit of the long-term abolitionist goal. Hal Pepinsky then presented a short, thought-provoking paper based on his recent work on Peacemaking Criminology. He argued that we need to move away from the study of crime, criminality, and just responses, and toward the study of violence, informed by peacemaking goals such as the creation of safety and enhancement of ontological security. In short, he proposed that abolitionist thought move ‘beyond justice’. Sophie Harkat then spoke about the campaign against security certificates in Canada, and the multiple methods and targets of this particular abolitionist movement. Her presentation emphasized the importance of changing public opinion by providing counter-narratives to state discourse and - most importantly - continuously underscoring the humanity of incarcerated persons. These activities require media-savvy abolitionists, operating alongside both a grassroots movement and a committed legal team. While Sophie’s husband Mohamed remains subject to a security certificate, her campaign has won major victories in the court of public opinion and the Supreme Court of Canada. Brett Collins of Justice Action, Australia, made the final presentation. He reviewed several successful ongoing and past campaigns undertaken by Justice Action, drawing out lessons for other organizations. Brett also emphasized the potential combination of media engagement and direct action, and highlighted the importance of a pro-active attitude in the face of the carceral state. He closed by discussing the importance of taking on ‘tough cases’ and bringing a non-punitive alternative agenda to the most controversial situations.

Art in Prisons

The importance of art was a recurring theme. Charlie Ryder of the Anne Peaker Centre described it. When I was in I kept a scrapbook in which I kept poems, short stories, paintings and drawings. During exercise I would put my headphones on, and dance and run and imagine I was playing lacrosse around the prison yard. This form of creative resistance was really important to me while the prison system was using violence and hatred. The arts were keeping me focused on being at peace with myself.

The arts create a space where you are treated with respect, compassion and where you can work through the trauma and abuse you have experienced or you can highlight the barbaric treatment of some of our most vulnerable people. As part of the job I do, I regularly answer letters to prisoners enquiring about funding arts and I have been very moved at the difference it makes to their lives. Through hard work, patient application and imagination they are able to produce beautiful work.

Media Presentation

Media Release July 24, 2008

Professor calls for prison moratorium

At the opening of the International Conference on Penal Abolition ICOPA XII hosted by The Howard League for Penal Reform in Kings College London yesterday, Professor Joe Sim of Liverpool John Moores University said: “There must be an end to the building of new prisons in the UK and the use of academia to justify the expansion of the penal system.”

Thomas Mathiesen of Oslo University said: “Abolitionism is a moral stance to say No to the expansion of the system. It is not about refining the system. It requires the fostering of power from below, effectively acknowledging prisoners as stakeholders in the outcomes.”

The conference will continue over the next two days with other speakers including Moazzam Begg ex Guantanamo detainee, Professor Phil Scraton of Queens University, Professor Julia Sudbury of Mills College California, and Stephen Nathan of Prison Privatisation Report International.
The evening of the opening day featured the play “CUTS” dedicated to Pauline Campbell written by Antoinette Moses about the imprisonment of mentally ill women who self harm.

Contact: Andrew Neilson, 07918 681 094

Media Release July 25, 2008

Indefinite detention without trial exposed

On the second day of the ICOPA conference at King’s College London, former Guantanamo Bay detainee Moazzam Begg said that “the repressive measures that have accompanied the War on Terror disproportionately target refugees and asylum seekers. This continues unabated.”

Wife of Ottawa detainee Mohamed Harkat, Sophie Harkat, exposed the Canadian security certificate process, which has controlled her husband without charge or trial for five years. She said: “this is unacceptable in a democratic society that claims to respect the rule of law”.

Professor Julia Sudbury of Mills College, California, and co-founder of Critical Resistance, said “penal abolition is becoming a mass movement, along the lines of the anti-slavery and anti-death penalty movements”.

The conference will continue today with a focus on the role of privatization and capitalism in penal policy. Speakers will include Stephen Nathan, Editor of Prison Privatisation Report International, Brett Collins of Justice Action, Australia, and Richard Garside, from the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, King’s College London.

A media conference will be held following ICOPA, at noon on Saturday July 26, at the Waterloo Campus, Franklin-Wilkins Building, Stamford Street, King’s College London.

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Media Release: July 27, 2008

Deaths in Custody – a community outrage

On the third day of the ICOPA conference at King’s College, London, Stephen Nathan of Prison Privatisation Report International said: “the penal system is growing without pause with governments throwing money to private corporations whilst refusing to take responsibility for the outcomes. There is no evaluation or public accountability in the process, with those in charge adopting the typical business practice of expansion and corporate growth.”

The last plenary session returned to the dominating issue of deaths in custody, and specifically to those in the UK.

“Deaths in custody are prison violence in the form of suicides and killings, and show the total lack of responsibility by prison authorities” said leading human rights lawyer Imran Khan.

“The isolation and blocking of the support of prisoners’ families was indefensible” said Frances Crook of the Howard League for Penal Reform when presenting a dedication to the life and work of Pauline Campbell.

The Guardian

Not all our material was expressed. One letter by Dr Bob Johnson, Consultant Psychiatrist for many years dealing with the highest security UK prisoners wrote: SUPPRESSING PENAL DEBATE.

“Nick Herbert the Conservative Shadow Justice Minister unthinkingly condemns a conference he did not attend, and whose title he lazily misquotes – not prison abolition but PENAL abolition – “Abolishing jails is lunacy, The Guardian, 28 July 2008”. The rest of us should be deeply troubled by three ominous facts reported there – (1) rising prisoner numbers relate, not to increasing crime rates (which are falling here), but to widening wealth gaps between rich and poor (which are not). More equitable nations imprison fewer of their citizens. (2) The current murder rate in prisons is double the national average. (3) The £139 billion we recently spent on the self-styled Criminal Justice System vastly exceeds the cost of crime. A growing (privatised) Penal Industrial Complex thrives at our expense.
Worse – every criminal I have examined since 1991 was motivated by revenge – for some earlier injustice or abuse. Remove this revenge and crime evaporates. Retribution – a euphemism for statutory revenge – could not be better designed to exacerbate criminality, which it does. Herbert’s ill-digested clichés serve only to delay a sensible adult debate that becomes increasingly urgent with every chilling prison statistic. "

ICOPA XII RESOLUTIONS

First Resolution of the 12th International Conference on Penal Abolition.

Guiding Principles adopted:

In planning conferences, ICOPA has as a guiding principle, the objective to reach the widest number of activist groups, people who experience discrimination, youth and recipients of the carceral, and encourage their participation as organizers, keynote speakers and presenters.

ICOPA is committed to having a regular space in the plenary at the end of each day, in order to reflect on the themes of the conference.

ICOPA is committed to including a range of voices and strives for a balance between personal testimony, the arts, activism and academic presentations.

ICOPA is committed to mobilizing the delegates to participate in action such as marches, prison visits, and other types of concrete gestures to promote the aims of the conference.

Among its abolitionist objectives, ICOPA seeks to connect with local pressing issues, in order to bring support to those concerned and maintain relevance.

Second Resolution of the 12th International Conference on Penal Abolition

Be it resolved:

We reject the use of incarceration and other penal measures to deal with community problems. We call on governments to dismantle the prison industrial complex, and we support the development and implementation of non-punitive community-based alternatives.

In light of the Dennis Ferguson case (note), ICOPA XII calls on the Queensland government to accept the Circles of Support/JA Mentoring offer made by Justice Action, as an alternative to imprisoning him. This measure will satisfy the need of the community to feel and be safe. (note: accused of child sex offences in Australia)

Third Resolution of the 12th International Conference on Penal Abolition

ICOPA XII gives its ongoing support to building The Robson Collection housed in the Napier (NZ) Public Library, as proposed by the late Ruth Morris at ICOPA IX in Toronto. ICOPA will assist where possible with speakers, books and expertise.

The Conference supports the statement of the former Social Development Council of New Zealand that the city of Napier with under 60,000 citizens is an ideal pilot city to show cooperation in “developing its community and not prisons.”