UNLOCKING GRIEF

Incarceration and Non-Death Grief

ABRPO

AIDS Bereavement & Resiliency Program of Ontario

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ABRPO

AIDS Bereavement & Resiliency Program of Ontario (ABRPO)

ABRPO is a small provincial organization that serves workers and organizations working in HIV and Harm Reduction to affirm and strengthen their capacity to respond to multiple loss grief. We offer education, workshops, trainings, grief circles, impact debriefs, management coaching, and Peer networking.

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This zine accompanies ARBPO's Non-Death Grief e-learning module: https://abrpo.org/resources/non-death-grief-module/

Check out our Resource Library (https://abrpo.org/resources/) for more grief and wellbeing resources related to HIV and Harm Reduction.

INTRODUCTION

This zine accompanies our Non-Death Grief e-learning module released on International Overdose Awareness Day 2026. This module aims to bring awareness to the sources of non-death grief that are commonly encountered in HIV and Harm Reduction work. We cover grief related to substance use, an HIV diagnosis, colonization, immigration, incarceration, systemic oppression, houselessness, and within non-profit workplaces. In this zine we explore non-death grief experiences related to incarceration, including losses of safety, belonging, privacy, relationships, healthcare, identity and much more. We look at how these losses are present while incarcerated and also upon release. Grief related to incarceration increases the risk of drug toxicity and HIV transmission / complications because of the things people have to do to cope with their grief and traumas. We recommend you print this zine and have copies available for yourself or your program participants.

This is not a complete accounting of the experiences of non-death grief related to incarceration. We hope this will create or increase awareness among workers in HIV and Harm Reduction about the experiences of their program participants and community members, as well as their own incarceration-related grief.

In this zine we focus on the experiences of people who are or have been incarcerated. However, workers in HIV and Harm Reduction also experience grief when their participants are incarcerated. This might involve grief of not seeing their participant for long periods of time, or anticipatory grief when they know incarceration increases the risks associated with HIV and drug toxicity.

DEATHS IN CUSTODY - THE IMPACTS OF DRUG TOXICITY

Though this zine is about some of the non-death losses that are common among people who have been or are incarcerated within the harm reduction and HIV communities, it is important to address deaths within the incarceration system. Analysis conducted by the Tracking (In)Justice Project, drawing on several sources, demonstrates that deaths in custody continue to rise despite persistent limitations in transparency and public reporting. The findings show that 763 deaths in custody have been documented in Ontario since 2000. These include deaths in provincial and federal correctional facilities, immigration detention, forensic mental health facilities, and youth justice facilities.

The Ontario Chief Coroner's expert panel report, An Obligation to Prevent (2023), found that acute drug toxicity was the leading cause of death among people who died in Ontario provincial custody between 2014 and 2021, accounting for approximately 40% of all deaths reviewed. **People use substances as a way to cope with their grief and trauma from before and during incarceration.**

The harms associated with incarceration extend well beyond deaths that occur inside correctional facilities. Incarceration is associated with a dramatically increased risk of opioid toxicity death following release (Butler et al. 2023). The highest risk of death occurred between four and seven days following release, making that first week a critical period for intervention. Individuals who were recently released from jail/prison saw their risk of dying from a toxic-drug overdose increase as much as 50%.

Other key findings related to post-release opioid toxicity (Butler et al., 2023):

- 1 in 4 drug toxicity deaths between 2015 and 2020 occurred among people who had experienced provincial incarceration.
- People with a history of incarceration were 31 times more likely to die from opioid toxicity than the general population.
- Women with a history of incarceration experienced 77.7 times higher risk of opioid toxicity death than women in the general population.
- People who died from opioid toxicity had more repeated incarcerations and spent more time in custody than those who did not die, suggesting that repeated exposure to incarceration compounds the risk of premature death.

Incarceration increases the risk of overdose death by disrupting opioid agonist treatment, reducing opioid tolerance, interrupting continuity of healthcare, and returning people to communities where housing instability, poverty, stigma, and an increasingly toxic unregulated drug supply create profound barriers to survival.

These deaths while incarcerated and upon release cause immeasurable grief for the families, friends, and community members who grieve their loved ones. Incarceration also comes with many non-death losses such as privacy, autonomy, identity, community & family connections, health and healthcare, and much more, which will be the focus of this zine.

INCARCERATION, INCREASED HIV RISKS & GRIEF

There are higher rates of HIV within the incarceration system than outside, and there is also an increase in the risks associated with HIV (HIV Legal Network & CAAN, 2023). Incarceration increases the risk of HIV transmission in part because of barriers to obtaining harm reduction supplies like condoms, lube, dental dams, and fresh drug use equipment (HIV Legal Network & CAAN, 2023). Incarceration creates barriers to receiving preventative medications that reduce the risk of HIV transmission such as PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis), and PIP (PEP-in-pocket) (WHAI, 2026).

Access to preventative medications are only part of the lack of comprehensive HIV-related medical care in the incarceration system. Incarceration can create gaps to timely HIV testing, and the stress of re-integrating into society upon release can also create barriers to HIV testing (WHAI, 2026). Being incarcerated can create an interruption of HIV treatment including medication and access to medical professionals (HIV Legal Network & CAAN, 2023). Once incarcerated, access to HIV specialists can be extremely difficult, creating risks of health complications in complex medical cases, especially when there are health co-morbidities.

Incarceration can also create HIV-related grief around losses of privacy when pursuing testing, receiving medical care, or accessing harm reduction supplies (HIV Legal Network & CAAN, 2026). This loss of privacy comes with stigma and discrimination that create barriers to medical care and increase the risk of HIV transmission.

This impacts some communities more than others. In terms of gender, HIV rates are higher among women within the incarceration system (HIV Legal Network, 2025). There is also a lack of culturally-grounded HIV-related health care and harm reduction services, especially for racialized people in prisons (HIV Legal Network, 2025). Knowing that incarceration increases the risk of HIV transmission and creates barriers to treatment, colonization increases this risk for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis who represent roughly 32% of people in prison, despite making up around 5% of the national population (HIV Legal Network & CAAN, 2023).

Keep these facts in mind as you read through this zine. The grief of incarceration-related losses around stigma, privacy, safety, healthcare, supportive relationships, and identity can become deepened in people living with HIV and may compromise medical treatment.

PRISONER JUSTICE DAY - LIVED EXPERIENCE RESISTANCE

Prisoners' Justice Day (PJD) is widely recognized as Canada's longest-running prisoner-led human rights movement. Unlike many advocacy campaigns initiated by outside organizations, it was conceived, organized, and sustained by incarcerated people themselves. It emerged as a day of both memorial and a collective non-violent act of resistance against deaths in custody, segregation, inadequate health care, and institutional violence.

On August 10, 1974, Edward Nalon, a 35-year-old prisoner at Millhaven Institution, died by suicide while held in segregation. On August 10, 1975, prisoners at Millhaven Institution held a 24-hour hunger strike and work stoppage to honour the one year anniversary of the death of Eddie Nalon. In 1976, prisoners at Millhaven organized a 110-day strike to protest the death of another prisoner in segregation, Bobby Landers. Since then, prisoners across Canada have observed Prisoners' Justice Day by refusing food and/or work.

"*We do not intend to ever forget his [Eddie Nalon] dying, just like we do not intend to forget all of the other deaths that have taken place. That is what August 10th is all about. Remembering our friends, our comrades, our brothers and sisters who have died in prison" (Odyssey Newsletter, 1978:3).*

Original Prisoners' Justice Day Demands

The right to meaningful work with fair wages
The right to useful education and training
The right to proper medical attention
The right to freedom of speech and religion
The right to free and adequate legal services
The right to independent review of all prison decision making and conditions
The right to vote
The right to form a union
The right to adequate work and fire safety standards
The right to open visits and correspondence
The right to natural justice and due process

PJD continues to be observed every August 10 in correctional institutions and communities across Canada. Inside prisons, incarcerated people continue to mark the day through moments of silence, fasting, work refusals where possible, or personal acts of remembrance. Outside, families of those who have died in custody, formerly incarcerated people, researchers, community members, and advocacy organizations hold vigils, educational events, and public demonstrations to honour those who have died and call for greater transparency and accountability. It is also a space where people with shared lived and living experiences can gather together to speak the truth of the non-death grief they are carrying, and have it met with understanding, compassion, and solidarity.

INCARCERATION AND NON-DEATH GRIEF

Incarceration brings many forms of grief and loss that are often invisible to others.

People may grieve losses related to:

freedom & autonomy & privacy

connection to family and/or community

relationships with loved ones

identity and sense of self

fresh air, sunshine, nature, land

repeated denials for parole

a sense of control over the future

comprehensive healthcare

People may miss the births of children, the deaths of loved ones, holidays, graduations, and everyday moments that help people feel connected and valued. When you are incarcerated, you are completely disconnected from the people and things that matter most.

They also experience the loss of autonomy over their own lives, with daily decisions about where they go, what they do, when they eat, sleep, communicate, and access support largely determined by others. While incarcerated, you lose your privacy entirely. There is no door to close behind you when you need to use the toilet, and you're forced to sleep next to complete strangers . On top of that, you are left with inadequate and under-resourced healthcare where serious medical complaints are ignored, sometimes costing people their lives.

To survive a place where everyone is forced into pure survival mode, you have to adapt, often locking away your true self and taking on behaviors just to stay safe, which tears apart your sense of identity and authenticity. This grief is often compounded by isolation, stigma, and limited opportunities to mourn openly, creating a profound sense of loss that can affect emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.

REFLECTIONS

If you don't have lived/living experience, think about the program participants you work with.

What are you grieving from your time incarcerated?

SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE & SYSTEMS GRIEF **A reflection by YL**

“Hey, how’s your brother doing?” “He’s good. He’s still sitting, but he’ll be home soon.” We get asked that question almost every time we run into one of my brother’s friends, acquaintances, or family members. It’s been hard since he’s been gone. Our mother is constantly stressed and worried about his well-being, to the point where she sometimes neglects her own struggles and even ours as the younger siblings. Things have felt upside down since our role model, older brother, father figure, and friend was taken out of the picture. The house feels lonely and sad, and I’m only 14, but I already feel obligated to step into the shoes he left behind because he was the main source of income for our family. Bills are high, food is low, and suddenly I’m looking to my brother’s friends to teach me how to survive.

That’s where the system becomes part of the story. For many young people in communities like mine, the path can start in school and gradually lead into the criminal justice system. We are over-policed, watched more closely, and often punished more harshly than other kids for the same mistakes. Community surveillance can make it feel like you are being treated as a suspect before you have even done anything wrong. Once you are inside the system, you can experience another level of unequal treatment—harsher sentencing, fewer opportunities, and being judged by the circumstances you come from rather than who you are capable of becoming. It becomes a cycle: a family loses an important person, the younger children lose guidance and financial stability, and those children are then left vulnerable to the same system that took their role model away.

This is why the school-to-prison pipeline should be understood as a systemic issue, not simply a series of individual bad choices. When a child grows up surrounded by poverty, family disruption, heavy policing, limited opportunities, and the absence of positive role models, telling them to “make better choices” ignores the conditions shaping those choices. My brother’s absence doesn’t just affect him—it affects my mother, my siblings, and the direction of my own life. When a fourteen-year-old feels responsible for becoming the man of the house because the system removed his older brother, that should make us question the system itself.

GRIEF AFTER INCARCERATION

Incarceration is one wave in the cycle of grief, that does not end upon release. For many people, returning to the community brings a new layer of loss as they confront the time, relationships, opportunities, and experiences that were taken from them while incarcerated. Release can involve the painful realization that family dynamics, friendships, communities, and even one's sense of identity have changed. Grief doesn't just come from a death - we can grieve any losses, changes, or transitions, and coming out to these changes can be a confusing and overwhelming source of grief.

The survival behaviours you had to learn inside carry over, leaving you misunderstood, judged, and deeply stigmatized by a society that expects you to go back to "normal" immediately upon release. When you are living under surveillance due to being on parole or probation, you may become a target by police or bail/parole enforcement teams which instils a constant threat of being locked up again. You never truly feel safe, you're always looking over your shoulder. The system keeps punishing you on the outside, weaponizing your record to block you from housing, decent jobs, and education. This constant rejection brings a heavy wave of shame and makes you feel less than human. There is a grief here of belonging, access to resources, and the right to start over.

It may sound strange, but sometimes upon release you grieve what you had while incarcerated. This can include the friends you made, the community you created inside, the structure or routine that jail offers people. When you are released back to society with no housing, no food security, and no supports, jail may sound safer for some who have nothing on the outside to help them.

REFLECTIONS

If you don't have lived/living experience, think about how you can support service users.

Who showed you kindness and support after your release?

How did you cope with the changes you experienced upon release?

UNRESOLVED GRIEF

Many people leave prison carrying significant unresolved grief. During incarceration, opportunities to process loss are often limited by institutional routines, a lack of privacy, restricted access to supports, and environments that may discourage vulnerability. Some people learn about the death of a loved one through a brief phone call, a letter, or a notification from staff, only to be denied the ability to attend a funeral, participate in cultural or spiritual mourning practices, or be physically present with family. Others experience the gradual loss of relationships, connection, trust, and belonging over months or years without having the space to acknowledge the emotional impact. As a result, grief is often postponed, suppressed, or buried in order to survive the realities of incarceration.

Upon release, these losses frequently resurface. The demands to secure housing, employment, income, healthcare, and reconnecting with family or friends can leave little time to process years of accumulated grief. People may find themselves mourning multiple losses at once while also struggling with trauma, stigma, and the pressure to prove they have successfully reintegrated. Unresolved grief can manifest as anxiety, depression, anger, numbness, substance use, social withdrawal, difficulty forming relationships, or a persistent sense that something important has been left unfinished. Disenfranchised grief, a grief that is not recognized, validated, or supported by society, is woven throughout the experience of incarceration. People in prison often grieve losses that are invisible to others, dismissed as consequences of their sentence rather than understood as profound human experiences. The prison environment rarely provides space to mourn, process trauma, or receive compassionate support. Instead, grief is often punished, medicalized, or expected to be endured in silence.

Unlike grief following a socially recognized death, these losses are frequently minimized because they occur within prison. Society often assumes that incarceration itself justifies suffering, leading people to believe that imprisoned individuals are less deserving of empathy, mourning, or support. Families may also experience "secondary disenfranchised grief," where they feel unable to openly discuss the incarceration of a loved one because of stigma.

As a result, incarcerated people are often expected to continue functioning despite carrying multiple, cumulative losses without rituals, counselling, social recognition, or opportunities to grieve. This unresolved grief can accumulate over months or years, contributing to depression, anxiety, substance use, hopelessness, complicated grief, post-traumatic stress, physical illness, and difficulties with reintegration after release.

From a grief-informed perspective, incarceration should be understood not only as the deprivation of liberty but as an accumulation of profound and ongoing losses. Every prison sentence carries a series of bereavements; of relationships, identity, health, safety, opportunity, autonomy, and time. Recognizing these experiences as legitimate forms of grief is essential for promoting healing, improving health, reducing harm, and supporting successful reintegration into the community.

CARING FOR INCARCERATION RELATED GRIEF

Supporting incarcerated people in a grief-informed way requires recognizing that imprisonment is often accompanied by multiple and ongoing losses. People in custody may be grieving the loss of loved ones, relationships, parenting roles, community connections, personal freedom, identity, health, future opportunities, and control over their own lives. A grief-informed approach acknowledges that grief can manifest as anger, withdrawal, depression, anxiety, hopelessness, or behaviours that are often misunderstood and punished within correctional settings.

Support involves creating opportunities for people to safely express their grief, validating their experiences without judgment, and recognizing the impact of cumulative and unresolved and disenfranchised losses.

It also means understanding that grief does not end upon release; many people continue to mourn lost years, complicated relationships, missed milestones, and the lasting physical and psychological impacts of incarceration. By responding with compassion, dignity, and an awareness of the profound losses associated with imprisonment, workers, organizations, and communities can help reduce isolation and support healing, resilience, and hope.

Reconnecting to familly, friends, community, and culture is also an important part of healing the losses and traumas of incarceration. This reconnection can be difficult when the grief of these losses or changes are present, but finding ways to slowly reconnect can be a way to bring healing to that grief.

Ceremony and ritual are also important ways to care for incarceration-related grief. This might include celebrating milestones that were missed while incarcerated like birthdays, anniversaries, or graduations. It might also mean taking the time to participate in funerals you missed by holding a memorial or celebration of life. Ceremony and ritual can also be a meaningful way to mark release and be welcomed back into family or community.

Time on the land can also be healing for grief, especially if this was a deeply felt loss while inside. This might look like visiting a favourite park, feeling the animals in your neighbourhood, sitting by an old tree, or visiting the water. Time in nature can remind us that the Earth is always there to support us.

REFLECTIONS

If you don't have lived/living experience, think about your participants.

How have you started to heal your incarceration-related grief?

RESOURCES

Prisoner Justice Day events happening in your city each year on August 10.

HIV Legal Network
www.hivlegalnetwork.ca/, hivlegalnetwork HIVLegalNetwork,

PASAN (Prisoners HIV/AIDS Support Action Network):
https://pasan.org, prisonharmreduction prisonharmreduction

Incarcerated Voters Ontario
incarcerated_voters_on laceupinitiative

HALCO (HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario)
https://www.halco.org/

Tracking (In)Justice
https://trackinginjustice.ca/

Canadian Prisoner Advocates
https://canadianprisonersadvocates.org/ canadianprisonersadvocates,

Prison Health Now
https://www.prisonhealthnow.ca/

Interrupting Criminalization
https://www.interruptingcriminalization.com/ interruptcrim interruptcrim
Canadian Newsletter

REFERENCES **Click each link for more learning**

Lived and living experiences of our zine contributors.

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