

zie King in 1947, "...fundamental[ly] alter the character of our population".²⁹ They remained so until the era of multiculturalism in the 1960s. This is popularly proclaimed as the time when Canada moved from a racist state to an inclusive one but, as evidenced by the SAWP and TFWP as well as the issues my co-panelist have discussed, terms of citizenship are still racist.

Throughout the presentation, I have talked a lot about the ways in which Canadian immigration policies restrict the rights and voices of temporary migrant workers, but I also want to make it clear that these policies by no means render these workers without agency. Nor have these conditions been passively accepted by workers. As long as there have been differential rights allocated to temp workers there has been resistance.

I just want to end by saying that the process of developing criteria for McGill's administration has been a frustrating one that has further solidified in my mind the comments made by last nights' panelists. To affect change, it is necessary to target capitalism as the root cause of these issues. •

29. King, William
Lyon Mackenzie. 1947.
Canada's Postwar
Immigration Policy.
Paper read at House of
Commons Debates, at
Ottawa.

demystifying the life sentence in canada *re-con*



MYTH: a life sentence means you are in prison for the rest of your life

During the partial ban on capital punishment throughout the 1960s, an average life sentence meant 7-10 years in prison. Now in Canada, a life sentence is 10-25 years in prison. Convictions that can result in a life sentence include first and second degree murder, manslaughter, treason, bank robbery and multiple escapes. Consecutive and indefinite sentences can also become a life sentence. It is also common for your sentence to be increased due to charges incurred while serving time, for failing to comply with correctional protocol. Finally, if we consider how many people die inside before their sentence is completed, a life sentence can mean you are in prison for the rest of your natural life.

MYTH: having completed your time in prison, you are 'free'

During the partial ban on capital punishment throughout the 1960s, an average life sentence meant 7-10 years in prison. Now in Canada, a life sentence is 10-25 years in prison. Convictions that can result in a life sentence include first and second degree murder, manslaughter, treason, bank robbery and multiple escapes. Consecutive and indefinite sentences can also become a life sentence. It is also common for your sentence to be increased due to charges incurred while serving time, for failing to comply with correctional protocol. Finally, if we consider how many people die inside before their sentence is completed, a life sentence can mean you are in prison for the rest of your natural life.

MYTH: the number of years you are sentenced to is the time you'll be in prison

When given a life sentence, the number of years you're sentenced to is the mandatory minimum amount of time you're required to spend in prison. That is to say that, once you've served your time, you become eligible to go on parole. But make no mistake- being eligible for parole does not mean being granted parole. The National Parole Board is the gatekeeper to the outside world for prisoners. They have absolute and exclusive decision-making power over who is granted parole. This could happen much later than the years to which you were sentenced to without parole. For people sentenced to 15 years or more, there's the 'Faint Hope' clause. This clause means that 15 years after conviction, you can apply to go before the parole board sooner. Since the abolition of the death penalty, this clause has been the most hotly contested part of the Criminal Code.

MYTH: a parole violation means you've committed a crime

Not necessarily. You can be sent back to prison for breaching a standard parole condition or an individually specific one. A parole violation could mean anything from drinking alcohol to not telling your parole officer about a change in your finances. Even if your parole officer merely suspects that you will breach your parole conditions, that's grounds enough for sending you back to prison. Parole officer's overuse of the ambiguous 'lack of transparency' as justification for reincarceration amounts to nothing more than a legalised 'gut-feeling'.

MYTH: when you're sentenced to life, you're the only one affected (you do the crime, you do the time)

Strict parole conditions will not only affect you, but also almost everyone significant to you. Correctional Services Canada is entitled to question, visit, and surveil others in your life - at work, home, and play. Prisoner's families are not only subject to society's stigma, but also the psychological and financial burden of a loved one's longterm imprisonment.

MYTH: prison is easy ('club fed')

Suicide rates for prisoners are nearly 8 times that of those on the outside. However deaths in custody are ambiguous because of the common nature of violence from prison guards and police. And if you fail to toe-the-line on the inside, you are not only less likely to get out on parole,

but also face the threat of solitary confinement – which is akin to torture. In Canada, HIV transmission rates are 10 times higher inside prison. Hep C prevalence is 25 times higher. Parole release rates are at their lowest. Considering that you have severely limited access to resources on the inside, it's not surprising that concerns around health-care make up most of the official complaints from prisoners. Inside the prison walls, you become a kind of non-citizen without many basic rights.

MYTH: harsher sentences prevent people from killing others

Until 1976, a conviction of murder was punishable by death. Since the process toward the formal abolition of the death penalty began in the early 1960s, the life sentence has shifted from 7, to 10, to 20, to now up to 25 years in prison without parole eligibility. Presently, there continues to be a push for longer sentences in hopes of deterring people from committing murder. Yet, studies repeatedly show that harsher sentencing is not necessarily the cause of a decreasing homicide rate. By focussing on the need for retributive justice, the root causes for why one might kill another get lost in the shuffle: how social and economic oppression structure people's lives and life choices.

MYTH: anyone who kills someone ends up in prison on a life sentence

Our society condones – even honours – many different kinds of killing. From the military to the police, murders are often justified as necessary. The State and corporations are also commonly responsible for less visible violence that can result in death (ex. poor labour conditions or denying refugees asylum), but are not stigmatized in the same way as those who commit interpersonal violence.

MYTH: if you're sentenced to life you're nothing more than a criminal

Being sentenced to life does not automatically mean that everything you've done in the past is now worthless, nor that you have no potential to contribute to the community in the future. One choice should not necessarily determine the rest of your destiny. Being a son, daughter, parent, friend or citizen cannot be disregarded or erased. When prison staff look down at you as though they are morally superior, it becomes ironic that you must be 'good' or ultra compliant yet you are inescapably assumed 'bad' and the guards are viewed as inherently 'good', while their disrespect and contempt for prisoners makes for routine violence on their part, from their positions of authority.

MYTH: the people incarcerated are the reason prison is dangerous

Lifers spend an extensive amount of time inside a system that is defined by heavy regulation, control, and punishment. The dangers lies in the destructive and restrictive environment of the prison, not in the prisoners themselves. According to the office of the Chief Coroner, between 1986 and 1995 only 9% of all the deaths in custody in Ontario were attributed to homicide. This statistic also does not distinguish between who committed these homicides whether it was guards or other prisoners. According to the same stats, prisoners were 4 times more likely to commit suicide than to be murdered. By concentrating on the “inherent” dangerousness of prisoners sentenced to life, the focus of public discussion often veers away from the brutality and violence of the prison system and its personnel.

MYTH: the people incarcerated are the reason prison is dangerous

If you have been sentenced to life you will be routinely categorized by the Canadian state as a “risk” to this conception of the “public” which you are now excluded from. You’re inevitably assumed to be a threat, yet parole conditions mean you have to be perfect: a kind of super-citizen. However, lifers on parole accounted for only 0.5 percent of the reported homicide deaths in Canada during the past 31 years. In contrast, in Montreal over the past 23 years, 60 people have been killed at the hands of the police. None of them have been convicted of either voluntary or involuntary manslaughter (this is called police impunity). Yet, who are we still encouraged to trust, and who are we lead to stigmatize and outcast? •

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subverting higher education: teaching environmental justice

kathryn lennon & asha philar

We are students in Environment and Resource Studies at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, who developed and led a student-driven seminar course on environmental justice. This presentation will address the process of planning and facilitating an environmental justice course. It will also focus on the challenges and successes we’ve encountered, and how to start discussions about difficult topics in an environmental studies context. We also hope to share resources and ideas with interested participants.

how and why we created the course

As students in Environment and Resource Studies at the University of Waterloo, we encountered the assumption that everyone comes to environmental studies with the same understandings of the environment. As women of colour, we found this frustrating, and were especially concerned about the lack of discussion of race in relation to power and environmental decision-making.

We began with the questions: How can we talk about the “environment” as something universal when there are so many different ways of seeing the world”? Why is discussion of race issues absent in our environmental classrooms?

From here, we decided if nobody was teaching such topics, we would have to teach ourselves. We created Environmental Justice, ERS 475/675 as a student-led, for-credit seminar course. It ran at the University of Waterloo from January to April 2010. We had 15 students in the class, and one faculty supervisor. Our class met for 3 hours sessions, once a week.

course description (excerpt from our syllabus)

Environmental justice explores the way that environmental actions, policies and perceptions interact with social inequities. Environmental justice calls for an examination of the way that individuals and communities with less power are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation, and are left out of environmental decision-making.

lennon & philar: subverting higher education

this article is taken from a workshop given at Study in Action 2010, Montreal.