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SPEAKERS

Sandra Bucerius, Jose Sanchez, Jenn Tostlebe



Jenn Tostlebe 00:14

Hi and welcome to episode 75 of the criminology Academy podcast where we are criminally academic. We are your hosts, Jenn Tostlebe



Jose Sanchez 00:23

And Jose Sanchez.



Jenn Tostlebe 00:24

And in this episode of TCA we speak with Professor Sandra Bucerius about research from the University of Alberta Prison Project.



Jose Sanchez 00:34

Special Topics highlighted in this episode include the Canadian prison system, prison as a temporary refuge for incarcerated individuals, and prison subculture and radicalization.



Jenn Tostlebe 00:44

Dr. Sandra Bucerius is a professor of sociology and criminology at the University of Alberta. She received her PhD from the University of Frankfurt in 2009. Her research is designed to understand criminal justice institutions and those who encounter them, particularly those marginalized by factors related to race, gender, social class, addictions, and other factors. Sandra translates her knowledge and findings into best practices and system changes by

directing the University of Alberta's center for criminological research, and directing the University of Alberta Prison Project, which is a multi year study of life experiences inside prisons in Western Canada.



Jenn Tostlebe 01:25

Okay. Welcome, Sandra, thank you so much for joining us today. We're excited to have you.

S

Sandra Bucerius 01:31

Thank you so much for having me.

J

Jose Sanchez 01:33

Yeah, we're excited to have this conversation with you. And so let's go ahead and just jump right in. So this is a little different for us. And so we really want to set the table for this episode, because we're going to be focusing on the Canadian prison system. And so to open it up. To give you some insight, Sandra, the majority of our audience comes from the United States. So roughly 60% of our downloads are from the United States, at least over the last two years. About 5% come from Canada. And we are talking about research stemming from the University of Alberta Prison Project. So we want to start off by asking you to give us the lay of the land. Can you describe the structure of the Canadian correctional system?

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Sandra Bucerius 02:16

Yeah, of course. So Canada, essentially has two different correctional systems. The first one is the federal system. And the second one is the provincial territorial system, which is divided along jurisdictional lines into 13 separate administrations. And so the federal system detains those that are sentenced to a period of incarceration of two years or more. And there are 43 federal prisons across the country, including four healing lodges for indigenous people and six facilities for women. And the security levels for these federal prisons differ, of course, with some being designated as maximum, some as medium and some as minimum security prisons, while others have multiple levels of security within the same institution. So for example, one of the women facilities in which I did research, that prison had a minimum medium and a maximum security unit within the same prison, essentially. And then the second system, so the provincial territorial correctional systems, they operate 177 institutions across the country. So they're much larger. They hold everyone who is sentenced to up two years, and also those who are on remand, which I think in the US is referred to as the jail population. So people are waiting their trial. Now among the provincial and territorial institutions, there are some that only hold sentenced individuals, some that only hold remanded people--so those awaiting trial--and then some mixed facilities holding both sentenced and remanded prisoners. And the security levels, again, differ, but all remand facilities in Canada are maximum security institutions, and they provide basically very little or no educational and rehabilitative or vocational programming whatsoever.



Jenn Tostlebe 04:20

Yeah, I just thinking about the differences that you're noting between, like the Canadian system and the US system, just kind of that last thing you said I thought was really interesting when reading your work, which is that all of the remand facilities are maximum security. And I do I tend to focus my research within maximum security restrictive housing settings. And so just what does maximum security look like in Canada? Like, is it similar to the US? Is it different? Does it depend?

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Sandra Bucerius 04:53

I think it depends. So we have these 13 different jurisdictional lines in the provincial and territorial system and it depends a bit on the different jurisdictions. I guess, as you would probably say too, if you know one prison, you know one prison. So there are differences across the different prisons. But generally speaking, maximum security obviously implies or has an impact on people having more restrictions with respect to, you know, being allowed to, let's say, attend a family member's funeral, that would be much more restricted in or almost non-existent in a maximum security institution, there's less movement across the different units, there might be different lockup times, though we've been on units, for example, where people were locked up for 23 hours a day in their cells, whereas the minimum security facility, for example, in Canada, there might be the opportunity to even go outside of the prison, potentially have some replacements in the community, etc. So all of that would be severely restricted or non-existent in the maximum security facility.

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Jose Sanchez 06:00

Can you tell us more about the composition of the population that gets incarcerated in Canada, sort of like the demographics, race and ethnicity, sex and gender, age, sentence length, those sorts of things?

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Sandra Bucerius 06:13

Excellent questions. I will have to stress upfront that we don't have as much information publicly available as you do in many states in the US. So we're always pretty envious in terms of what you have in publicly available data. I was having a conversation with David Pyrooz the other day and it was shocking for me to learn that in Texas, for example, you can get the list of names of those that are held on pretrial. That would be unheard of in Canada. Anyhow, what I can tell you is that on any given day in Canada, approximately 38,000 adult men and women are detained in a correctional institution, and with the majority of these 38,000, so about 24,000 being held in the provincial and territorial systems. Now we obviously have a lower population count than you. We have 35 million people in Canada. And so when you're considering the 38,000 added men and women that are detained in a correctional institution on any given day, that we present a national incarceration rate of 127 per 100,000 individuals, so we are significantly under the incarceration rate in the US and our rate has also been relatively stable for many, many years, with the exception of the pandemic, where we did see a bit of a dip like in many jurisdictions. In 2022, more than 70% of provincially incarcerated people were held on remand status. So that's our big problem in Canada, and we have way too many people on remand. What else? You asked about median length, the median length of

custody for all offenses in Canada was 30 days in 2021. And 81% of the custodial sentences were six months or less. So relatively short sentences, only approximately 3% of the custodial sentences were for two years or more. And just as a reference point, our life sentence length is 25 years in Canada. Now with respect to men and women like, in almost all jurisdictions across the world, men are significantly over represented among the prison population. Women make up 5.6% of our custodial population. So that's an imprisonment rate of 7.7 per 100,000 individuals. And I think the US has about 66 per 100,000 women just as a comparison. Now, with respect to ethnic background, Canada is a settler colonial state and 5% of Canada's population is indigenous across the country. Yet indigenous peoples make up 30% of prison admissions in Canada, and their rate of incarceration has increased by 43% over the last decade, and that situation is even worse for Indigenous women, where they now make up half of federal prison admissions for women nationwide. And these disparities are even higher in the western provinces, so in the prairie provinces, where we did our research, with indigenous people making upwards of 40 to 75% of the population, depending on the prison.

J Jose Sanchez 09:34

Can we start getting into a little bit of why these indigenous populations are over incarcerated?

S Sandra Bucerius 09:41

Yeah.

J Jose Sanchez 09:41

I know you mentioned that Canada's a colonial state, but can you tell us a little bit more about that?

S Sandra Bucerius 09:48

Yeah, sure. So Canada is always thought of as this beautiful, amazing Wonderland internationally, but I think that's because Canadians have done a pretty good job at hiding their dark history from the rest of the world. There are many reasons that contribute to these disparities that I cannot get into all the details now, but I will mention a couple. So Canada has a long history of colonial policies essentially designed to destroy indigenous cultures, which today is recognized in Canada as cultural genocide. So there are many overtly racist policies that we can point to such as Indian reserves where in Canada early policies essentially forcibly relocated indigenous peoples into these spaces. And we are also just learning more about a program called the Path system that the government essentially introduced secretly and illegally where they regulated when indigenous peoples could come and go from reserves and essentially prevented them from leaving. So all together, Canada's reserve system was a textbook example of racial segregation that, for instance, greatly influenced South African apartheid. Canadian policymakers, many people don't know that, helps South African politicians figure out how to go about separating by colonizing South Africans from the indigenous black South Africans. And most reserves today are below the poverty line, many don't have clean water, and there's still lots of issues around that.

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Sandra Bucerius 11:17

Then there was the Indian residential school system, which recently received international coverage because they discovered various mass grave sites of children at these locations. So what is an Indian residential school? That's when the Canadian government forced children into classrooms to be assimilated, essentially taught by the church to become westernized and Christian or white in order to destroy the native culture. And this system lasted until 1996. So it's not even 30 years ago that the last school closed. Thousands of children died in the schools, typically due to disease from poor living conditions, malnourishment, and so on. And there are also well documented instances of physical and sexual abuse by the church staff who ran these schools.

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Sandra Bucerius 12:07

Then the last policy I'll mention is the 60s scoop that I think the least people know about. And that is where the Canadian government essentially gave sweeping powers and incentives to Child Services to scoop Indigenous kids from their homes and put them up for adoption with typically white families in order to assimilate them. And sometimes they will even change the children's names so that their birth families couldn't find them.

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Sandra Bucerius 12:33

So what does this all have to do with crime and prisons? Well, these policies that I mentioned, from residential schools, to the scoops, etc, they obviously devastated entire communities, leading to a much higher rates of poverty. The policies separated and essentially destroyed families, which has led to a serious mental health crisis in those communities. We see that indigenous peoples in Canada have as a consequence of that suffer from higher rates of depression and suicide, substance abuse, we see a higher prevalence of youth joining gangs, and so on. So all of these things together, the historical and contemporary policies have led to the current situation where again, almost half of people of the people in prison are indigenous, despite representing only 5% of our population.



Jenn Tostlebe 13:21

You're a wealth of knowledge. Let me just say that, but that history really just goes to show I mean, that's a massive disparity 5% of the population, about half of the prison population. That is crazy.

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Sandra Bucerius 13:35

Yeah, you even see it across the different security levels. So in the women's prison we did research 100% of the women held on maximum security were indigenous. 100%. I've never met a woman who is non-Indigenous on maximum security. So that's a disparity that because

we don't release those numbers publicly. We can only ever get a sense of if we actually do on the ground prison research.



Jenn Tostlebe 13:59

Right. Yeah.



Jose Sanchez 14:00

Wow.



Jenn Tostlebe 14:01

So important.



Jose Sanchez 14:01

That is shocking.



Sandra Bucerius 14:03

It is shocking. Yes, it is shocking. And the world that really doesn't we focus a lot on disparities in other countries. Canadians are pretty quiet on the disparities in their own country here.



Jose Sanchez 14:14

Yeah, like, before I started reading some of like the research done in Canada, mostly, you know, martyr Banik. Some of that work. Yeah. Like I was, you know, we always talk about, oh, Canada's like this great place. We should all be more like Canada. But yeah, it seems like Canada's a lot better about, you know, kind of keeping its dirty laundry behind closed doors, whereas, you know, your neighbors to the south, we kind of tend to like the spotlight, and we get ourselves making headlines like every other day. So we like to air out all of our dirty laundry for the whole world to see. So that probably, you know, helps take the attention away a little bit also.




Sandra Bucerius 14:54

Yeah, I think we're getting there. We're trying to highlight more of the disparities and the issues but again, a lack of empirical data has really contributed to this problem, I think.



Jenn Tostlebe 15:04

All right, so that kind of helps set the ground floor there as far as the Canadian system goes. Let's dive more into your role as, are you a co director now of the University of Alberta Prison Project or you, Director. I saw, like conflicting information online.


 Sandra Bucerius 15:24

That's, it's an interesting question. So my colleague, Dr. Kevin Haggerty, and I have essentially started this project together. So we call ourselves co directors. For official purposes, I'm the director because the research agreements are all in my name.




Jenn Tostlebe 15:39

Okay, perfect. So can you just tell us more about the University of Alberta Prison Project, including its background, some of its goals, why did you decide to create the project and the center.

 Sandra Bucerius 15:52

That's an excellent question. So originally, we call it the UAPP. So University of Alberta Prison Project. It started as a project in the provincial prisons to investigate whether prisons are spaces in which radicalization splits and radical prisoners find ways to recruit others for their purposes. And this was kind of sparked by discussions in Europe at the time, suggesting that there might be a link between prisons and radicalization. And I think we can maybe talk about this aspect later on. However, because as I just mentioned, on the ground Canadian prison research, talking to a broad range of currently incarcerated people was essentially non existent at the time in Canada, very different from the US or the UK or Norway, for example. We were also very much aware that we have a chance to really increase our knowledge base on prisons in Canada.

 Sandra Bucerius 16:48

And just how this came about was a total serendipitous situation. I had an MA student at the time, William Shultz, with whom I published many of the papers that are now out, and he wanted to do his MA thesis on how correctional officers think about radicalization in prison. And knowing that there had never been prison research in Canada, or empirical on the ground, in depth qualitative work, I said to him, this is probably not possible, but let me call the solicitor general who's in charge of granting research access, because I had just met him in a meeting and he in that meeting had suggested that maybe there's a chance or there's room for prison research. So I called him basically, by chance, more or less, and said, you know, we're interested in doing this work, and you had suggested maybe Canada or correctional institutions might be more open in the future. Are you interested? And he said, Yes. We did not expect that at the time. So it was, we became prison researchers, essentially, overnight. My background is as an ethnographer. I'd never thought about prison research before. So but we obviously knowing the situation, knowing the lack of data in Canada, we had to take this chance and run with it.

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Sandra Bucerius 18:03

So because there was very little known about experiences of incarcerated people in Canada, we asked people once we had access, we asked people about their general experiences in prison. And as a consequence, we learned about a lot of topics unrelated to radicalization such as you know, relationships with correctional officers, drugs, gangs, our participants life and victimization histories, race relationships, their stances on solitary confinement, their stances on sex offenders and others. And as we were doing these interviews, two main things really stood out to us. One was, and two unexpected things. One was that the what is now called the drug poisoning crisis, it's formerly been known as the Fentanyl crisis, really hit the ground in prisons as we were there with staff being more way more concerned about fentanyl than radicalization, for example. And the prisoners being very concerned as well. So for example, they were telling us that having fentanyl on the unit significantly changed how they related to each other. For example, some prisoners told us that they would not share food anymore because they feared someone could put fentanyl into their food, or correctional officers were telling us that they'd sometimes forego properly searching cells because they were concerned that they could inhale fentanyl by accident and potentially have a reaction. There was also not much knowledge about the substance at the time when we were doing research. So I interviewed for example, on one unit when nine people had overdosed just the month prior. And the other topic that stood out to us was that many participants talked to us about their victimization experiences very openly. I always start off my interviews by saying, Tell me whatever you want me to know about yourself and then we will start the formal questionnaire, just as an icebreaker. And just to give you a quick example, one of my participants, let's call him Joe, he started off by telling me basically right off the bat that he had been in 13 foster homes and three group homes settings growing up before he had even reached the age of 15, which is when you turn 15, he essentially continued living his life on the streets, and then joined a gang for protection and a sense of belonging, and so on. And so his earliest childhood memories was being sexually abused by his foster brother and foster dad. And he said he, throughout his life, he only experienced two foster homes in which he wasn't sexually abused or beaten. And so his story was very, very common among the population that we met in prison, also related to the history of colonialism that I mentioned before. And it was especially pronounced for our indigenous participants. So then these two things, these two findings or unanticipated findings, completely unrelated to radicalization really hit a nerve with us. And we then applied for research access, where we started to pursue two main line of inquiries.

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Sandra Bucerius 21:15

And so overall, then, and then I'll stop, when we're looking at both of these datasets combined, there are two perhaps unanticipated findings that are highlighted because of all of the interviews we've done so far. One is that prisons tragically, are often seen as a place of temporary refuge for people who get incarcerated. And maybe you can get into this later. And the other aspect is that drugs shape almost all aspects of prison life, and Kevin Haggerty and I believe that drugs actually need to be understood as a structuring force in prison. We're currently working on a book making this argument or maybe I will not talk more about this right now. But you also have a piece coming out in climate justice that will speak to the influence of drugs on everyday life in prison.

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Sandra Bucerius 21:15



Sandra Bucerius 21:15

The first was to compile baseline data about the realities of the victim offender overlap for people held in Canadian prisons, as sort of part of an effort to encourage organizations working at multiple levels of the criminal justice system to implement trauma informed programming and really get a sense of the life histories and victimization histories of people. And then the second related to the drug poisoning crisis was to develop an empirical understanding of the consequences of the drug poisoning crisis on prison life and the prisoner relationships, how correctional officers performed their duties, and all of this by creating a knowledge base for best practices and advocating for harm reduction measures within the prison system.



Jenn Tostlebe 22:49

Thank you for sharing. The project sounds really interesting. And I'm looking forward to reading more about it.



Sandra Bucerius 22:55

Thank you.



Jose Sanchez 22:55

Yeah, me too. And so you've kind of started to hit that this a little bit. When you mentioned, you're an ethnographer and you've done interviews. Could tell us a little bit more about how you're collecting the data or like these survey interviews, qualitative interviews, are you doing like a mixed methods approach?



Sandra Bucerius 23:12

Yes. Yeah, good question. So it is a mixed method study. We conducted in depth interviews lasting between one and three hours. So very long interviews. And we sort of tacked on a survey asking more systematic questions around life course victimization, and drug use and stances on harm reduction, three prisons into the study. So because we originally had set out the study as a study on radicalization, the first two prisons that we went to, we didn't have a systematic survey on victimization experiences or the drug situation. So that came at a later point into the study. But overall, it's a mixed method study. So we did in depth interviews, as well as surveys essentially, with incarcerated people in four provincial prisons in Western Canada. So two of these prisons were remand institutions, one was a mixed facility, and one was sentenced institution. And then we also conducted interviews and surveys in two federal prisons, one that housed only men and one that housed only women.



Sandra Bucerius 24:16

And in each of these institutions, we essentially walked onto each prison unit. So our agreement said that we could talk to any incarcerated person across the province. So that allowed us to go on to every single prison unit in these six different prisons, including general

population units, protective custody units, so in Canada, they house predominantly sex offenders or people who have informed on others, or who can't live in the general population. So for example, ex gang members who left their gangs. We also interviewed on solitary confinement units, on units that were specifically designed for indigenous people with indigenous programming, bootcamp units, gang units, so on. And we announced our study to the incarcerated population on these units. On most units between 75% and 100% of the incarcerated population at the time signed up to participate. So it is self selection, and we then randomly selected participants from those who had signed up. So now because we don't have any lists with names given to us from the institutions, as is common in some of the US studies, we can't create a true randomized design as it's often common in the US. But I think working within the Canadian restrictions that we have, this is probably the closest we can get to a randomized sample. So more than half of our sample was on remand. And we interviewed people who were on remand because they had breached conditions such as alcohol use, or they did not pay their speeding tickets. But we also interviewed those who had committed multiple homicides or heinous sex offenses against children, and they were waiting their trial. So in other words, we really spoke to an extremely broad range of people. And in each of the six prisons, we interviewed between a half and a third of the population that was housed there at the time of our data collection. So 734 people in total with 158 women. And just to give you a reference point of the 734, 576 were interviews in the provincial system, which comes to about a fifth of the total population that was held in the provincial prison system at the time in the province where we conducted our research, because our numbers are obviously lower than in the States. So it's a pretty large number of people we interviewed in comparison to the total population that is incarcerated in the province. We also interviewed correctional officers and other prison staff and managers in all of the prisons. And we were also able to conduct organization wide surveys with correctional officers in the federal institutions. I hope that helps.



Jenn Tostlebe 27:04

What a huge undertaking. Considering it sounds like there, this really hadn't been done before.



Sandra Bucerius 27:10

Yeah, yeah. No, we were novice prison researchers, for sure.



Jenn Tostlebe 27:16

So you sent along to us your TEDx talk, which anyone who's interested in the topics we're discussing, it's great, go check it out. We'll post a link to it on our website. But in this talk, and you've also mentioned this, I don't know, five minutes or so ago, you get to this idea of prison as a temporary refuge for incarcerated individuals. Again, we just wanted to take a quick setback from that. And you've already discussed Joe, and some of his very traumatic, negative experiences early in life. But can you just describe, like, overall, what are some of the common background experiences many of your participants described going through early in life, maybe even prior to committing crimes or having criminal justice contact?



Sandra Bucerius 28:06

Yeah, of course. So some of the common background characteristics are that a great majority, and I mentioned this in my TED talk that you just mentioned, in fact, 95% of the incarcerated men and 97% of the incarcerated women have experienced sexual and/or physical victimization, often long before being in contact with the criminal justice system. And many of the women have experienced continuous victimization throughout their life course. Another commonality is the prevalence of past and/or current drug use often, I think, to numb the traumas that they have experienced throughout their childhoods, and throughout their lives. And I think given what I've already said about the histories of colonialism, it's probably not surprising that our indigenous participants experienced more abuse in their lives, but also have higher rates of substance abuse. So for example, just to put some quick numbers to this, 100% of the indigenous women in our sample use drugs outside of prison, in contrast to 63% of all white female participants, and 50% of those have other racial backgrounds. Another common reality is the experience of homelessness at some point in their life. So when we ask our participants whether they have ever experienced homelessness, 81% of all indigenous female participants answered this question with yes, 61% of the white participants, and 40% of those of other racial backgrounds. So we're looking at a population that is often deeply marginalized across multiple factors.

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Sandra Bucerius 29:49

I vividly remember one of my first participants who had spent his entire life institutionalized so residential schools and foster homes and then in and out of prison. And the longest he had ever been outside since reaching the age of 18 was 36 days at a time. And he was 47 when I spoke to him, so I met him in a provincial prison. So I asked him how his time there in the provincial prison compared to the time that he had done at the pen, so at the federal institution, and his eyes lit up, I will never forget how he looked at me. And he told me verbatim that his time in the federal prison was the best time of his life. So he had learned how to skate there, he had made friends there, and he said, the quote from the interview, "Nothing will ever compare. I wish I could go back." So as a researcher, it is super hard to hear this and not be incredibly sad about the tragic state of our society. This participant went on to tell me that life outside was just too hard for him that he had no intention on trying to stay out of prison in the future. He was somewhat of an outlier, I'd say to openly suggest that he is now too old to learn how to navigate life on the outside because society had never given him a chance to do so he'd been bounced around in institutions and foster homes since his early life. However, he was certainly not alone in saying that life in prison is to some extent, better than on the outside. And as I said earlier, unfortunately, for the majority of our participants, prison was a refuge from the traumatic and dire life circumstances that they had experienced on the outside.

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Jose Sanchez 31:31

Yeah, that's really interesting, because when you read a lot of the research in, in corrections, a lot of it kind of starts to tie in to this idea by Gresham Sykes, you know, the pains of imprisonment. And that's even led a lot of people to push for the abolishment of incarceration and prisons. But it really sounds like you're like a lot of the participants that you're talking to, are not necessarily kind of falling in line with that this is it's like this weird, juxtaposition of this thing that's supposed to be a negative, but humane, although it's very arguable, like how humane it actually is, but still negative consequence, as opposed to being like, back in their communities that supposed to be not this negative consequence, but we're seeing it kind of

switch places. So I was wondering, like, how prevalent was this? And I know, you mentioned a lot of them, but then maybe them being the exception and not necessarily the norm. So I was wondering, can you give us like a sense of how prevalent this actually was within your study?

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Sandra Bucerius 32:37

Yeah, it's a great question. And you said many super important things. So first of all, it is very, very important to highlight all the negative implications that incarceration has. We know the literature is very solid on that. We know incarceration has deep negative impacts on mental health, destroys communities, destroys families, has negative implications on children, and negative implications on mental health, on employment chances, and so on and so forth. So we really, really, really cannot forget that. And, as a researcher, I often feel super uncomfortable talking about this idea of prison as a refuge because it's so easy to get misunderstood. To first answer your question, how prevalent was that. It was the great majority of women who expressed this view over close to 70%. And it was the majority of men, though, that was more split around the 50, like a little bit over 50%, but more split than the women so it was more prevalent for women. Again, it needs to be understood in the context of the life circumstances of our participants and the history of colonialism. Our participants often don't go back to the communities in which they have grown up in. They have often grown up in multiple foster homes, multiple group homes, etc. They have often been removed from their families, and so on and so forth.

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Sandra Bucerius 33:56

I also need to be super, super, super clear here because I don't want to get misunderstood when I say prison can act as a refuge. I'm certainly not telling a story about prison as a fantastic place. Far from that. The living conditions even in Canadian prisons are very hard. They are often horrendous. I think I mentioned in my TED Talk that we've been on units where three people sleep in cells that are designed for two. So one person sleeps on the floor, and there's really no room to move around. People are sometimes locked up in the cells for 23 hours a day. When you sleep on the floor, you can only make the decision whether your head or your feet touches the toilet. That's sort of the space you have to move around. So we're not talking about conditions like we see in documentaries from Norway where people have their single cell and maybe a fridge or a desk or whatever. Our prisons I probably more like the US prisons than any of the other jurisdictions we hear about, at least from European places. As I also said there were overdoses in prisons, their gang politics, violence, and so on. And so I am certainly not talking about prison as a good place. But when our participants said things like, I quote from one of my interviews, "when I was finally sitting in the back of a police car, I sighed a sigh of relief. Finally, I go to remand." One other participant who said, "I will punch someone out to be able to stay longer." What they are talking about, reflects, essentially the failures and the limitations of Canada's welfare system. So the lived reality of many of our participants is one where perversely prison starts to look like a place of refuge from otherwise intolerable and unhealthy situations. So it becomes a place where they can sleep relatively safely, or it becomes a place that offers food or maybe some distance from an abusive partner or some medical services that they can't access on the outside as easily. It's a sad, and it's a tragic reflection of Canadian society.



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Sandra Bucerius 36:07

And perhaps also not surprisingly, Sveinung Sandberg and I recently compared the experiences of incarcerated women in Norway, Mexico, and Canada in a piece that has the super original title of "Women in prisons" and it's in Crime & Justice. Anyhow, we found that Canadian women lean more into the prison as a refuge theme than Norwegian women, for example, which I think isn't surprising, and can be explained by the fact that the social welfare system in Norway is much more advanced than in Canada. So marginalized people are much better taken care of outside of prison. And in Mexico, we found that prison conditions were a lot poorer than in Canada. So making the rhetoric that prison becomes a refuge much less likely as well. So I think what this tells us is that it's always super important to remember that how people experience imprisonment and incarceration is related to the conditions of their lives outside of prison and to the nature, extent, and quality of available social welfare services. So it's something that I think is absolutely key to remember, when we do research on prison experiences. We can't understand how people experience prison if we don't have a sense of how their life looks like outside of prison.



Jenn Tostlebe 37:31

Absolutely. You know, you mentioning here, this lack of resources in the community, whether that's educational, medical, government, police, etc. And so what do you think needs to be done or changed in Canada to kind of get rid of this narrative of prison as a temporary refuge? What can we do? Is this even possible? Yeah, those questions?

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Sandra Bucerius 37:59

Yeah, I'm laughing because I'm thinking, How much time do you have?



Jenn Tostlebe 38:02

Right? Yeah.

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Sandra Bucerius 38:03

But seriously, I mean, obviously, there's a predictable set of answers that I can give you here. I'll try to make that quick. Our participants were, for example, asking for long term drug treatment options, something that is notoriously hard to come by in Canada, I mean, almost non-existent, right? Access to proper medical care and mental health care in the community, if and when people need it, not in months down the line, right. Like, oftentimes, participants would tell us well, I was ready to make a change in my life. I wanted to start drug treatment, I need access to mental health care, and then I got an appointment five months down the road. Well, that's not really helpful. Affordable housing yet another issue, big issue. One thing you need to remember in the context in which we're doing our research in Western Canada, temperatures in Alberta in the winter and minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit, not at all times, but some weeks during the year. And that obviously has a serious impact on where people go. Survival on the streets is impossible in these temperatures, it's not San Francisco.

S

Sandra Bucerius 39:07

Anyhow, truth be told, we do not have any systematic data in Canada that could give us a concrete evidence base as to what exactly is needed and how this differs among different sub populations. So I know we have a much better idea how reentry works and what is needed in other contexts, the US being one of them. In Canada, there is literally no systematic data. So this leads to my new project, in which some of my colleagues and I are about to just about to hit the field to longitudinally examine the factors that might contribute to successful reintegration into Canadian society, or alternatively, the factors that might contribute to why people may return to prison. And of course, we know, the UAPP answered why people return to prison or why prison is refuge, however, what we do not know is what exact programs would actually help to create a situation where a refuge can be found elsewhere. One of the issues here in Edmonton is, for example, that we're putting \$7.5 billion every year into social services. But we have zero idea whether these programs are successful, whom they help, et cetera, et cetera. There's no evaluation, no accountability whatsoever. So we designed the study this future study in a similar fashion, design wise to the Boston reentry study with starting our interviews and surveys during incarceration, and then following up at several points throughout the first year post prison. And I think to really answer your question as to what would need to change, we need these systematic data showing us precisely what works and what does not when people reenter Canadian society so that they don't return and that prison does not become a refuge again. And our study, I mean, you could say, why not just look at the American findings and implement them here. But I think our study will be able to pay close attention to the unique circumstances of the western Canadian prison population. So for example, indigenous people will be integrating into reserve communities, often super remote fly in communities, they will have vastly different experiences than people reintegrating into Boston. Or other aspects that we often forget about and that I think you need to experience to truly understand are the unique contextual factors relevant for life here with respect to the severe temperatures in the winters. I mean, as I said, minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit, it makes survival on the streets impossible. So we can't look at studies conducted in Texas and say, Okay, let's implement similar programs. Related to this last topic, by the way, in our correctional officer interviews, we had several staff comment on the fact that they see a huge increase in the population in winter months, where people are literally fighting for survival on the streets, and they need a warm place to sleep. And some don't want to go to shelters, because as they told us, shelters are often informally run by gangs or they want to avoid certain people in those spaces. So for many, the only option becomes finding a way to go to remand. Anyhow, we hope that our new study will shed some light on what is needed and what exactly would work for different subpopulations to alleviate some of these pressures, and we hope to create a good evidence base for our context.

**Jenn Tostlebe 42:39**

Awesome. Well, good luck. I hope you are able too, because it sounds like it's sorely needed.

J

Jose Sanchez 42:45

So I think we can start moving into discussing your paper. And so you have this paper that you co authored with your colleagues, William Schultz and Kevin Haggerty. It was published in Criminology earlier this year, 2023. They used a subset of data from the University of Alberta

Prison Project. The paper is titled, "That shit doesn't fly: Subcultural constraints on prison radicalization." And has perhaps noted by our advisor David Pyrooz, we believe that's the first paper published in Crim that includes a swear word in the title. And so this paper draws on 148 interviews with incarcerated men and 131 interviews with correctional officers in four prisons in Western Canada to examine how normative subcultural codes inhibit prison radicalization. And so we want to start off with, you know, here in TCA we're known for our definition of questions, and I think we're a little overdue for one. So when we say radicalization, what exactly do we mean, in this context?

S

Sandra Bucerius 43:51

Yeah, thank you. And I love that David pointed that out. The title is a good one. So yeah, radicalization, you're right, it seems to be understood differently, depending on the institutional setting. For our purposes, we employed the definition of radicalization that is used by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or the RCMP. And they say and I'm going to read this. So radicalization is the process by which individuals are introduced to an overtly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate mainstream beliefs towards extreme views. So radical thinking becomes a threat to national security when it leads an individual to espouse or engage in violence as a means of promoting political, ideological, or religious extremism, end of quote. So we did this because this definition allows us to include a wide range of groups, including white supremacists that play a prominent role in Western Canada. Religious extremists, so called sovereign citizens. So for example, the freemen on the land that also play a role in Alberta. Ecoterrorists, etc. And we also wanted to stay away from definitions that mostly focused on groups like Al Qaeda or ISIS, as some researchers did at the time, again, because the right wing plays quite a significant role in our research context and we were afraid that we might miss this component otherwise, and we certainly did not want to have a religious or racial connotation.

J

Jose Sanchez 45:31

And so is radicalization like a quick and straightforward process? And what would be some of the implications of radicalization within prison?

S

Sandra Bucerius 45:41

Okay, short answer is no. Radicalization is typically conceived as a cumulative process that affects, you know, a large group of individuals, but essentially, only very few individuals or few groups become willing to engage in violence for a specific cause. And this process certainly does not happen quickly or easily or consistently across individuals or groups. Early research did suggest that radicalization is straightforward and it's linear. But this body of literature is now being critiqued for its lack of empirical solidity. So I think in talking about this, and that would probably hijack this conversation. But maybe it's enough to say that there's some disagreement between researchers and officials as to what factors contribute most prominently to individuals becoming willing to commit a radical act. And some of these factors include personal victimization, charismatic leaders, political grievances that one may hold, a desire for

excitement, influence of matters and so on. One of the more consistent factors apparent among radicalized individuals is a personal attachment to like minded subcultural groups and a related desire for small group solidarity, social cohesion, sense of belonging, that sort of stuff.

S

Sandra Bucerius 47:00

And then I think you said what are the possible implications, right of radicalization in prison. So I think for one, it would speak to the even further failure of the prison system like we are already acutely aware, as I said, of the negative implications of the prison system on the lives of incarcerated people. I know when we talked about prison as a refuge, we talked about prison as the refuge. But as I said, there's also extremely solid evidence to show that incarceration has extremely negative effects on people's lives and mental health, employment chances, their communities, and so on. Now, if we're looking at people becoming radicalized within the prison system, this obviously could also have an effect on radical acts being committed upon release, which is what we had been seeing in some European settings at the time when we conducted our research, for example, the 2015 Paris attacks that killed 130 people, we know that the terrorists committing these acts had met in prison and potentially became radicalized into being willing to commit this act while in prison. And then recent work by Gary LaFree, for example, suggested that individuals who become radicalized while imprisoned are significantly more likely to engage in post incarceration, violent extremist behavior. So I think those are some of the links that we need to keep in mind.



Jenn Tostlebe 48:23

Okay, now that we've got some of these definitional and groundwork ideas out of the way on radicalization, can you describe for us what the impetus or the motivation was behind writing this specific paper?


S

Sandra Bucerius 48:38

That's a great question. As we were reading the literature on radicalization and prison, we found that none of the existing studies really contemplated how radicalization interacts with the broader features of prison life, such as prison subcultures, or whether such features might limit or interrupt extremist messages. And I guess primarily being qualitative researchers, we are particularly interested in how dynamics play out in prison as a whole. So it made sense to us to examine that if subcultural dynamics can help to foster crime or can also help to foster radicalization, then could this distinctive set of norms, beliefs, and behavior expectations, that is part of the prison subculture not also inhibit the radicalization process? And this idea in general, I think goes back. I have this idea because it goes back to my early ethnographic work that I've done with Muslim drug dealers for my book, "Unwanted" back in Germany. So these young men that I spent five years with, they held certain subcultural beliefs that dictated for example, what substances they would sell and to whom they would sell, where they would sell and these sorts of aspects. Other scholars have also written on subcultural beliefs influencing the types of crime people commit or the crimes that they do not commit. So we thought we should definitely examine how prison subculture shapes the dynamics around radicalization. That's sort of like the motivation for the paper.

 Jose Sanchez 50:12

Okay, so you've mentioned sort of like some of these subcultural dynamics, that they may impact radicalization. And when I think of subculture, I think of its application to street gangs and sort of the theoretical developments that came about to explain the emergence of street gangs. Jenn probably thinks of the convict code. How are you conceptualizing subculture. And how does it impact radicalization?


 Sandra Bucerius 50:38

Yeah, so as you say, criminologists usually think about subcultures when thinking about groups like gangs. Here we're looking at, I think, what systems of meanings, codes and values these groups share. That's the general idea. And when we're looking at prison subcultures, researchers have focused their attention on the content and the operation of the convict code, as you just said, or some say, inmate code or prison code. And this is essentially a code that entails some prescriptions or proscriptions for how incarcerated individuals should behave. So because incarcerated people ought to behave according to this code, it has serious influence on shaping interpersonal and organizational dynamics in prison. Some of these expectations might be to do your own time, to not inform on others, not to speak to or socialize to correctional staff, and so on. And of course, it's important to note that the code would slightly differ depending on the prison context. And then so we thought that looking at prison subculture would be interesting in the context of radicalization because the prison subculture has such an important role in prison dynamics. It shapes how prison life plays out. So for example, in our research contexts, like and many others, I guess the convict code would dictate to jump any sex offender off the unit, so beat them up, make sure they will be placed elsewhere. And we were wondering whether subcultures can also have an influence on radicalization. So what does the code say about radicalization? What does the code say about informing on radicalized prisoners, etc? So in what ways can this distinctive set of norms, beliefs, and behavior expectations that are part of the prison subculture foster or inhibit the radicalization process? That was an open question we didn't know. And so that's where we went for the interviews and with the analysis.



Jenn Tostlebe 52:27

So based off of your interviews with the this was all incarcerated men, correct. For this specific study?

 Sandra Bucerius 52:34

Correct.



Jenn Tostlebe 52:34

Did you find any evidence in support of prior work which had suggested that radicalization is this prominent structuring force in prison? Or that radicals occupy influential positions in prison?

S

Sandra Bucerius 52:49

Yeah, so what you just mentioned, so for example, Allison Liebling, I think, in 2011 in the UK confirmed that radicals occupied influential positions in the prison hierarchy, as new converts to Islam relied on those individuals for spiritual guidance. And then I think in 2022, Williams and Liebling confirmed this again. We did not find such evidence in our context. We have to be careful, however, I want to say this, not to suggest that that doesn't exist in Canada as a whole. We did our interviews in Western Canada, but Canada is a geographically huge country, as everyone knows, and we are studying the dynamics specific to Western Canada. But no, we did not find such evidence.

J

Jose Sanchez 53:31

Okay. So, as you mentioned, your data revealed that there were or so one of the things that you revealed was that your data revealed that there were three specific factors that played a role in making the men in your study resilient to radicalization. Can you briefly tell us about these three factors?

S

Sandra Bucerius 53:47

Yes, so our findings point to three main factors that work against radicalization in our setting. First was nationalist beliefs. The second one was the prison racial profile. And the third one relates to informing. So probably going to talk about that after each other.

S

Sandra Bucerius 54:04

So for the first point, our findings showed that our participants bought into this idea of Canadian multiculturalism, and they held very strong, anti racist beliefs. So the official rhetoric of Canada being a safe haven for people of all backgrounds was the dominant rhetoric in prison, which is so interesting, because when I asked my students in classes, what is the one feature that you know, makes up Canada, everyone always mentions multiculturalism. It's such a dominant rhetoric in our society. And I think this rhetoric, even in present in prison helped to instill a feeling that radicalization has no place in these spaces. So these beliefs about Canadian multiculturalism and anti racism permeated the subcultures of the prisons we studied and I think provided incarcerated people with a degree of resiliency towards radicalization. So when we asked participants, they would often point to the unit, like out of the interview room and say, look how diverse we are, we all get along. We all sit at tables, play cards together, blah, blah, blah. And of course, this is deeply ironic as our participants were housed in the most racially unequal space in Canadian society. As I said, indigenous people make up 5% of the total population, but up to 75% in some prisons. So it is interesting and ironic that this played such a deep role.

S

Sandra Bucerius 55:31

The second point, and related to this, so they didn't only believe in multiculturalism, but the

The second point, and related to this, so they didn't only believe in multiculturalism, but the presence of racial groups, I think, aligned against radicalization. Our participants had opportunities to gather across racial and ethnic groups. And that's a real distinction to the US or what we know from some US research. And I think it may have offered them more opportunities, or we know it has offered them more opportunities to share views, exchange opinions, and probably form mutual resilience against radical groups. So prisoners presented themselves as open and as tolerant to other races and other cultures. And in fact, they made this a constant point of comparison to what they saw on TV about US presence. So they did not congregate along racial lines as is common in the US. And so sharing views and learning from each other, having contact with each other in ways not being used as an institutional separation marker, like Michael Walker talks about for the US really made a difference here. So we know that prejudice is rooted in race or religion tend to decline or tend to diminish when interacting with members of groups against whom you hold prejudice. And so in our data, white participants dismissed neo Nazi perspectives in conversations with black or indigenous people or Muslim participants expressed their discontent with jihadist groups to non Muslim audiences. And our data show that these social dynamics seem to allow for fostering mutual counter narratives that hinder the opportunities for radicalization.

S

Sandra Bucerius 57:11

And then the last point, which I personally found the most interesting and surprising one is that radicalization offered an opportunity for correctional officers and incarcerated people to come together and temporarily align and define a common enemy in a very Durkheimian sense. And I think to understand that, I had a conversation with Ben Crew the other day, and he was very surprised about how adversarial the relationship between incarcerated people and correctional officers is in the Canadian context. In Canada, and I think that's similar to most US prisons, our incarcerated people do not speak to correctional officers at all cost. It is a very, very negative relationship. So they avoid talking to correctional officers at all costs, which seems to be different in many European settings. The prison code dictates that you cannot inform on others. But this code was a lot more flexible when it pertained to communications about potential radical or extremist incarcerated people. And so because institutional cultures disparaged radicalized individuals, other incarcerated people were willing to sort of delicately engage with correctional staff to ensure that officers were aware of such individuals in hopes of having them censored or removed from general population units. So our participants really did not want to live among radicalized people and this truly, I found it the most interesting because it truly showed that the code there was a little bit more flexible.



Jenn Tostlebe 58:49

Yeah, I also thought that was really interesting. I just did any of your participants talk about, like, for example, when I've talked to people in prison, it's like, you don't even want to be seen saying anything to a correctional officer, because they'll just automatically assume that you're saying something wrong. Like, how did people know that they were talking to a correctional officer because of radicalization topics, and not something else.

S

Sandra Bucerius 59:16

Yeah, it's a perfect question. Because you're right, that's exactly the same. In our context,

when people had identified someone who might be radical, they would be speaking to other prisoners on the unit. So it was clear what that communication with the correctional officers would be about. And obviously, as you know, there's an informal hierarchy within the prison setting, and so would usually be carried out by the person who is sort of at the top of the hierarchy of the particular prison unit. But you're correct. Usually, you cannot talk to a correctional officer. So this was truly a breach of the otherwise very strict convict code that you don't talk to COs.



Jenn Tostlebe 59:58

Yeah, but that's interesting. So like everyone is on the same page for the most part, like they know.



Sandra Bucerius 1:00:03

Well, similar to sex offenders, right? So sex offenders will also not be tolerated on the unit. But in interviews, our participants actually said if I have to choose between jumping off a sex offender or someone who's radicalized, the radicalized person is even lower in the hierarchy. So, you know, not that they would prefer to live with the sex offender, that they would probably not agree with that statement, but they will take care of the radicalized person first. That's what they think said verbatim in interviews. Yeah.



Jenn Tostlebe 1:00:31

Interesting. All right. So given everything that we've discussed on radicalization, this little evidence in support of systematic radicalization, that subculture actually has this kind of constraint on radicalization, at least in Western Canada. What are some of the implications of this study for research and then policy and practice?



Sandra Bucerius 1:00:53

Policy question last? Okay. It's an interesting question, because I've done some work in the radicalization space before, before I started all the prison research. And together with Dr. Sarah Thompson, I've led some studies that looked at radicalization among Somali and Tamil youth and young adults in Canada. And as part of that, we were often in discussions with law enforcement and public safety officials interested in our findings. And the common theme among these officials and stakeholders was always that they wanted to design official anti radicalization initiatives for the community. In prison, it's also the case that in some jurisdictions, officials have introduced policies explicitly designed to confront prison radicalization. And so I think that our findings show that is in contrast to these top down approaches from the outside. Our study really highlights the importance of qualitative research that allows participants to elaborate how they think about specific topics. Our participants cited these local prison subcultures as factors impeding the spread of radicalized messages. And I think that truly urges us to consider whether top down strategies such as anti radicalization strategies imposed on communities, prison or otherwise, again, the same was true in my earlier work with Sarah Thompson and Paul Josie. It truly urges us to consider whether these strategies

imposed on communities are the most effective solution when trying to counter radicalization. Instead, our findings point to the strength of allowing counter narratives to form organically. They're often already present in the communities and these counter narratives should be formed in the community itself. So researchers really need to be attuned to that when thinking through these issues. Again, the Somali youth we studied also had strong and existing counter narratives to Al Shabaab present in their community, it wasn't necessarily that there was a top down approach thinking through anti radicalization strategies for a community that already had these present amongst them. So it makes much more sense, I think, to build on and foster these existing narratives then to develop anti radicalization strategies from the outside.

S

Sandra Bucerius 1:03:22

And then, of course, I think our findings also challenged portrayals of subcultures as predisposing incarcerated people to radicalization. And they support Ben Crew's argument that prison subcultures can vary depending on location and depending on context. So the findings would also really caution us against implementing any strategies, real world anti radicalization strategies, based on research from different prisons or from different social national contexts without considering whether adopting these strategies makes sense contextually. And I mean, that's a message that I think resonates very much with me as an ethnographer. And qualitative researcher can probably be said about all strategies. Context is all that matters. We need to be getting better at paying attention to context, we really need to highlight the importance of context.



Jenn Tostlebe 1:04:17

Excellent. Thank you.

J

Jose Sanchez 1:04:19

Yeah.

S

Sandra Bucerius 1:04:19

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

J

Jose Sanchez 1:04:21

Yeah. Thank you so much for joining us. The those are the questions we have for you today. Is there anything you'd like to plug anything coming out in the near future that we should be on the lookout for?

S


Sandra Bucerius 1:04:31

I think I mentioned a couple things that I am working on right now. I hope that the piece that's

coming out in Crime & Justice on drugs and the influence on everyday life in prison will, I hope it will show some new ideas about prison structures and really the influence of drugs as a structuring force. So hopefully it will be well received and that my colleagues will like it, we will see. I'm looking forward to feedback in the future.

 Jose Sanchez 1:04:58

Absolutely. And where can people find you by email, Twitter, or other social network?

 Sandra Bucerius 1:05:05

So my email is... it's good question. My Twitter is @SBucerius, I think, see and not a social media person. So you're asking me something here. And my email is obviously the Center for Criminological Research at the University of Alberta that I direct has an Email page, and it has a website and my email address is Bucerius at UAlberta.ca. So very simple. My last name and the institution .ca.

 Jose Sanchez 1:05:35

Perfect. Well, thank you again. We really enjoyed talking to you.



Jenn Tostlebe 1:05:38

Yeah. Thank you so much.

 Sandra Bucerius 1:05:40

Thank you so much. I really enjoyed this.



Jenn Tostlebe 1:05:42

Hey, thanks for listening.

 Jose Sanchez 1:05:44

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Jenn Tostlebe 1:05:53

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Jose Sanchez 1:06:05

Or email us TheCrimAcademy@gmail.com. See you next time.