

We're not all in this together

Lesley Wood, 14 April, Canada

As CoVid19 cases in shelters and Long Term Care facilities soar, the police in Ontario are ramping up their enforcement of physical distancing bylaws. They ticket those gathering in groups, people standing closer than 2 metres apart, and those using closed park facilities. They can be fined \$1000. In addition, police have the right now to ask anyone to show identification with their name, address and date of birth. Those who don't comply can be fined up to \$750.

The goal is to limit the spread of CoVid19, but the choice to provide the resources for police enforcement (not to say bailing out the oil and gas sector), while neglecting the most vulnerable reveals the ways that state strategies reflect longstanding inequalities. Our identities and networks offer different pandemic experiences. The virus hits institutionalized, immigrant, poorer, indigenous and racialized communities harder. Neighbourhoods where there are more longstanding health problems, more crowded housing and transportation spread the virus. Shutting things down, or forcing people to separate when some people lack access to clean water or medical help or harm reduction services, means some are sacrificed for the greater good.¹ In this way, decisions like that of Toronto Public Health's CoVid closure of the city's largest supervised injection service, led to a massive spike in overdoses.²

In her new blog post, Alexis Shotwell cites Ruth Wilson Gilmore in her discussion of these effects of state logics. Wilson Gilmore defines the operation as racism as "The state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group- differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death." Such operations shape the distribution of sickness and death from COVID-19."³ ⁴ As Shiri Pasternak and Robert Houle note, such inequities compound disaster.

¹ Shiri Pasternak and Robert Houle. 2020. "No Such Thing As Natural Disasters: Infrastructure And The First Nation Fight Against COVID-19," *Yellowhead Institute* 9/4/2020 <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2020/04/09/no-such-thing-as-natural-disasters-infrastructure-and-the-first-nation-fight-against-covid-19/>.

² Jason Altenberg. 2020. "CITY "Since Covid began, we've seen the highest number of overdoses since 2017": What happens when the opioid epidemic meets a global pandemic?" *Toronto Life* <https://torontolife.com/city/since-covid-began-weve-seen-the-highest-number-of-overdoses-since-2017-what-happens-when-the-opioid-epidemic-meets-a-global-pandemic/?fbclid=IwAR3MVGpGFOqWHoQH3zmWrDEFBfyFEObLorW2UGlViXesdTeQxrTeG3QcSdc>

³ Alexis Shotwell. 2020. "Survival will always be insufficient but it's a good place to start," March 25, 2020 https://alexisshotwell.com/2020/03/25/survival-will-always-be-insufficient-but-its-a-good-place-to-start/?fbclid=IwAR1wKibb77LHOsuUzoteDxEge_lXAMuvMMaz-oAKIT7KakYywp2rOShsvfc

⁴ Ruth Wilson Gilmore. 2007. *Golden Gulag* (University of California Press), p. 28

Dr. Nanky Rai, a Toronto based family physician working closely with people experiencing homelessness and people who use drugs explains how prioritizing enforcement over care is hitting her clients. She says, "The clients I work with are already disproportionately impacted by policing and are already starting to experience heightened racial profiling by police under COVID19... Increasing police and punitive enforcement will not protect public health but it will threaten the health and safety of people, especially Indigenous, Black and other racialized people, those with precarious immigration status, sex workers, drug users and those experiencing homelessness. If these measures go through, it will be made very clear who the government does and doesn't consider as part of the "public" in public health."

Governments vary in their definition of the 'relevant public, as well as their capacity to take coordinated action. Wealthy, powerful countries have more ability to protect their populations. But they choose to protect only parts of the whole, and then unequally.⁵ Most authorities develop policies that favour those like them, the wealthiest and most powerful. Prisoners, the homeless, disabled people, non-status folks or indigenous communities are simply left out of the conversation, unless there is a ruckus. When powerholders pass laws, and policies that don't recognize the vulnerability of these excluded populations, they are likely to harm them, they are likely to distort our understanding of social life, and push us towards police enforcement; transformations that will, if unchecked, harm prospects for a more just society.

So what do we do? Most of us want to do the right thing. And we want others to do the right thing. There is a real sense of a shared challenge right now. However, our individualist moral framework can make our belief in distancing and enforcement tactics evangelical and fundamentalist. Like the Protestant Ethic that infuses capitalism, we evaluate our moral worth on our commitment to physical distancing. Our fervour is justified by stories of Frisbee players and picnickers, just hanging out. Now, feel free to give me the emails of these scofflaws and I'll shame them. But they aren't the only ones still outside. And they definitely aren't going to be the ones most affected by new police powers. That burden will be borne by those who law enforcement traditionally see as risky – people of colour, particularly Black and indigenous folks and youth. Those without identification and options will be hit hardest, such as undocumented and homeless people.

The virus version of our social lives makes it harder for many of us to see the larger social implications of these policies. Physical distancing limits our connection to those we do not know. In the lockdown, most people rely most on their more homogenous strong ties of close family, friends and co-workers. Middle class people connect with other middle class people. Often, the media reflects those stories. Even more so than in 'regular time', people become siloed by class and race. This fortification amplifies those who are more resourced. Other voices are not heard. This social distortion is buttressed by journalists,

⁵ Charles Tilly. 2007. *Democracy*. Cambridge University Press

who are using fewer sources, as many work from home. They reprint wire services, government updates and police information. We tune in to the news from the front lines – but the voices we hear are fewer. Hunkering down at home isn't enough. We must address this imbalance, in ways that tip the scales.

Creating a Ruckus with the Excluded

Social movements challenge the status quo, but they too, often reflect larger inequalities. Those with the most resources or relations to those in power may be most likely to gain traction. As Piven and Cloward noted in their classic book *Poor Peoples Movements*, those outside of that circle gain their power through disruption, most often through visible disruptions of physical space.⁶ We march and rally, we send delegations and occupy roads, offices and squares. This is all a smidge difficult right now. We must use the all the creativity we can muster, to ensure that no one is left behind.

Prisoners and detainees are often excluded from political and social life. They are easily ignored by those in power. Nonetheless, it was these same folks who engaged in some of the first CoVid-era protests. Around the world, prisoners have used hunger strikes, engaged in civil disobedience or rioted. They demand release or at minimum, safety.⁷ Many have succeeded, but some, like those in Iran, have been killed. ⁸ Supporters of those locked inside have used email campaigns, phone campaigns and creative car and bike protests to amplify the struggle. In Australia, detainee advocates drove honking and bedecked cars and bikes through the streets in protest. Although they posed no viral threat to each other or to the broader public, the main organizer was arrested and taken into custody, while 26 individuals were fined \$1,652 each for breaching physical-distancing orders, with a total of \$42,952. Such absurd charges will likely be challenged.

Homeless folks are, almost by definition neglected by the government. Shelters are crowded and don't have the needed protective equipment. As a result, in this CoVid-risky moment, many refuse to go inside. Allies have tried to get the word out and are pressing governments for hotel beds, more space, and better facilities. In Surrey BC, 50 homeless people and advocates occupied a community recreation centre. ⁹ In Toronto, anti-poverty activists risked tickets to hold a carefully spaced out rally at City Hall, using Facebook live to amplify

⁶ Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward. 1977. *Poor People's Movements*.

⁷ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/prisoners-riot-as-coronavirus-tensions-rise-11586469284>

⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/iran-prisoners-killed-by-security-forces-during-covid19-pandemic-protests/>

⁹ CBC 2020. Activists occupy Surrey rec centre, demand safe places for homeless to live during COVID-19 crisis. CBC 2 April 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/homeless-activists-surrey-bc-covid-19-coronavirus-1.5518500>

their message to journalists and the wider public. San Francisco activists used a car protest to demand that the city move more quickly to protect the homeless.¹⁰

Non-status people have been excluded from the state benefits provided to other workers. In a context of economic shutdown, non-status people haven't been able to access the supports they need. So migrant justice advocates have organized press conferences, sign on letters, and days for intense phone campaigns. The Caregiver Action Centre and groups like Butterfly, the Toronto-based Asian and migrant sex worker support network worked with legal allies to organize Know Your Rights in the CoVid era webinars. In places where state lockdowns are more intense, migrant workers are taking to the streets in order to draw attention – in India they rallied at train stations, demanding a way to return home, after trains and busses were cancelled.¹¹

Institutions for older people or people with disabilities are often forgotten about – but with nearly half of the Canadian CoVid19 deaths are people inside such facilities, they hold the attention of many.¹² Care workers demanding Personal Protective Equipment and increased wages, and are walking off the job in Canada, and Mexico.¹³ They are wearing buttons of protest, and their unions are lobbying and petitioning. Groups like the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance are petitioning against a leaked draft of a government document that rationalized denying medical care to people with particular disabilities.¹⁴

This is not yet a new normal. It is both a crisis and an opportunity. It is time to remake the relationship between the powerful and the people. Places and peoples long neglected now pose a threat. This brings attention and possibility.

¹⁰ Dan Kerman. Kron4.com 13 April 2020. "Protesters call on San Francisco to move quicker to protect the homeless from COVID-19" <https://www.kron4.com/news/bay-area/protesters-call-on-san-francisco-to-move-quicker-to-protect-the-homeless-from-covid-19/>

¹¹ Sanjeev Miglani, Rupam Jain. 2020. "India extends world's biggest lockdown, ignites protest by migrant workers," Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-southasia/india-extends-worlds-biggest-lockdown-ignites-protest-by-migrant-workers-idUSKCN21WoHI>

¹² Emerald Bensadoun 2020. "Nearly half of Canada's COVID-19 deaths linked to long-term care facilities: Tam," *Global News* 13 April 2020 <https://globalnews.ca/news/6811726/coronavirus-long-term-care-deaths-canada/>

¹³ Global News. Coronavirus outbreak at Markham home for adults with disabilities causes staff to walk off job. *Newmarket Today*. 10 April 2020 <https://www.newmarkettoday.ca/coronavirus-covid-19-local-news/coronavirus-outbreak-at-markham-home-for-adults-with-disabilities-causes-staff-to-walk-off-job-2245434>

¹⁴ AODA Alliance "Major Disability Organizations Unite to Voice Serious Fears About Supposedly "Draft" Ontario Protocol for Rationing Critical Medical Care – A Patient's Disability Should Never Be Used as a Reason to Deny Medical Care," 6 April 2020. <https://www.aodaalliance.org/whats-new/major-disability-organizations-unite-to-voice-serious-fears-about-supposedly-draft-ontario-protocol-for-rationing-critical-medical-care-a-patients-disability-should-never-be-used-as-a-reason-t/>

It should remind us that an injury to one is an injury to all. The most vulnerable must be at the centre of our solidarity moving forward.

About the author

Lesley Wood is an editor of *Interface*, an Associate Professor of Sociology at York University, and an activist in the anti-poverty movement.