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The Everyday Life of Drugs in Prison

ABSTRACT

Prisons disproportionately confine people who have extensive histories of illicit drug use and tend to hold groups of people who continue using drugs, albeit in different forms and amounts. Prisoners' desire or physical compulsion to use illicit drugs fundamentally structures almost all aspects of everyday prison life. This extends to individuals who do not use illicit drugs and is felt even in prisons in which drugs are not readily available. Architectural features of prisons and logistical regimes are designed in ways meant to curtail the drug trade. Nonetheless, prisoners persistently strategize about how to acquire, transport, and consume hard drugs such as opioids (heroin and fentanyl), methamphetamine, cocaine, and alcohol. Prisoners display considerable ingenuity in modifying the prison's physical environment to advance their drug-related agendas.

Widespread presence of drugs means that prisoners sometimes are in close proximity to individuals who are intoxicated or experiencing withdrawal. The prison context helps determine which drugs prisoners deem desirable. Some substances mitigate distressing aspects of prison life, while

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others produce heightened risks of illness or interpersonal violence. The drug situation can alter relationships, reconfigure traditional prison hierarchies, and give informal drug-related meanings and uses.

Illicit drugs are a persistent presence inside prisons, but we know little about how they structure institutional routines and prisoners' everyday lives. The considerable literature on drugs and prison consistently offers two basic findings (e.g., Cope 2000; O'Hagan and Hardwick 2017; Kinner and Rich 2018; Mitchell 2022). First, prisons tend to be populated by people with more extensive histories of severe illicit drug use than is the norm in the general population (Taylor et al. 2003; Carpentier et al. 2018). Second, people tend to use illicit drugs while in prison. Use is quite common and includes people who initiate serious drug use while incarcerated (Boys et al. 2002; Bucerius and Sandberg 2022).

Most studies of drugs in prison concentrate on prison safety and governance, the health of prisoners, or drug programming and treatment. Works focusing on how drugs inform the daily life of prison are barely a disciplinary footnote. This neglect is curious, given that, as Kolind and Duke (2016, p. 89) rightly recognize, "everyday life in many prisons is dictated by drug-related issues." An impressive archive of "drugs and prison" materials could be compiled without finding much that gives a nuanced sense of how the drug situation in prisons looks, feels, or smells.

Ben Crewe (2005) has done the most to advance understanding of how drugs influence prison life. He draws on a 10-month ethnographic study of a men's medium-security training prison in the United Kingdom conducted when it was experiencing a rapid influx of heroin. He observed that heroin was particularly appealing because its sedative properties helped assuage the harsh conditions of prison life and showed that the increased presence and commercialized sale of heroin in the prison's informal economy destabilized existing hierarchies and relationships among prisoners. Heroin users were often stigmatized, notably because their substance use contributed to behavior that violated long-standing prison norms. Relationships among prisoners that were previously more solidaristic and based on ethnicity, region, or lifestyle became more instrumental, precarious, and low trust as interactions became more oriented to the drug trade. The illicit commercial drug trade created respected, valorized identities for dealers who accrued considerable power and status by virtue of their control over the heroin supply.

Research in a Norwegian high-security prison by Mjåland (2014, 2016) confirms several of Crewe's findings. The prison contained a significant number of individuals who regularly consumed a steady supply of diverted buprenorphine. Mjåland interviewed 23 prisoners in an 8-month ethnographic study. The men were typically ages 25–45, and most had considerable experience injecting heroin or amphetamine. They identified prison-specific factors that shaped the dynamics of in-prison drug use, indicating why such drugs were appealing or beneficial. Mjåland's participants like Crewe's saw drug use as a way to alleviate anxiety and reduce stress and boredom. Some portrayed smuggling and dealing as ways to acquire higher status in prison; others accentuated that such practices could provide an appealing defiant identity.

In contrast to Crewe's description of a commodified system of in-prison drug exchange, drug use among Mjåland's participants was embedded in an informal gift economy in which sharing drugs among friends was an integral part of social life and an effective way to forge an in-prison community. Individuals rarely refused to share, and those who did could be excluded and humiliated by others.

A recent study by Slade and Azbel (2022) in a markedly different setting affirms and qualifies some findings about in-prison drug sharing and its connection to prisoner solidarity. Their case study of a prison in Kyrgyzstan builds on interviews with 19 individuals incarcerated in the 1980s through the 2000s and a related study of 40 currently incarcerated respondents with histories of injecting drugs, many of whom had participated in methadone treatment. Because heroin moving from Afghanistan to the rest of the world often passes through Kyrgyzstan, it was comparatively common in the broader society and was often used by prisoners. As citizens of a former soviet socialist republic, prisoners displayed a collectivist orientation that structured the drug trade. Unlike in Crewe's UK study, heroin was not exchanged as part of a commercial enterprise but involved more reciprocal relations that limited market competition. However, unlike the situation in the Norwegian prison, the prison drug trade in Kyrgyzstan involved a universal system of exchange centrally operated by influential prisoners.

It was a long-standing practice for all prisoners to contribute to an "inmate fund" (known as the "thieves' fund") run by the most powerful prisoners who distributed cash and other goods to needy prisoners. The heroin trade was an extension of those activities. Everyone who smuggled heroin into prison was expected to surrender it to the highest stratum of prisoners, who then distributed it as a handout. Kyrgyz prisoners who received drugs were thus not "customers" but members of a prisoner-run mutual aid society. One consequence was that heroin did not, as it did in Crewe's study, disrupt established prison relationships. Instead, the system of centralized heroin distribution drew on and reinforced established prisoner hierarchies. Slade and Azbel (2022) conclude that their findings suggest that drugs are not an inevitably destabilizing force in prison. Any socially fragmenting consequences are related to the forms of control prisoners exert over the trade.

In this essay, we build on those findings, providing fine-grained details about how drugs shape the everyday dynamics of prison life. We draw on ethnographic and interview-based research conducted as part of the University of Alberta Prison Project, a multimethod initiative examining prison life in Western Canada. We detail how drug-related dynamics are manifested in the social order of the prison and explore material aspects of the prison/drug nexus. We aim to better appreciate this critical aspect of the incarceration experience and demonstrate that drugs offer a productive and ultimately unavoidable entrée for any effort to comprehend the lived realities of incarceration. Between 2016 and 2020, our research team interviewed 734 prisoners and 177 correctional officers in four provincial and two federal correctional institutions. Although we do not draw on quantitative data in this essay, we also conducted surveys of prisoners at four of the six institutions, collecting systematic information on demographics, victimization histories, and attitudes toward harm-reduction measures. Here we focus on prisoners' accounts and refer only occasionally to the experiences of correctional officers, as their views and experiences warrant a separate analysis.

In prison, all drugs can have important effects on daily life, irrespective of their potency or legality. We focus on more serious drugs such as opioids (heroin, fentanyl), cocaine, methamphetamines (meth), and alcohol and make only passing reference to less severe drugs such as tobacco and caffeine. Most of our participants had regularly used some combination of severe drugs in the community; such substances could be found to varying degrees in all the prisons we studied.

Any single story about how drugs shape prison life would be highly artificial, as it would convey an impression of levels of stability, coherence, and uniformity that do not exist. We acknowledge and embrace such complexity, taking a page from the analytical approach used by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his 1993 book *Weight of the World* (Bourdieu 1993). He and his colleagues reproduced extensive excerpts from interviews with individuals from France's underclass to demonstrate the social suffering and hopelessness they experienced as they navigated everyday life. Rather than try to present an overarching account that risked obscuring the complexity of his participants' lives, he sought to develop a cumulative appreciation for his participants' kaleidoscopic experiences.

Attention to kaleidoscopic human experiences resonates with our orientation to the roles of drugs in everyday prison life. Consequently, we present vignettes and observations by our participants, to demonstrate the pervasiveness, breadth, complexity, and distinctive nature of the lived reality of drugs in prison. These examples do not remotely encompass the multitude of ways drugs shape prison life. However, we hope they cumulatively demonstrate the degree to which drugs are a structuring force in prison, leaving few things untouched (see also Crewe 2005).

Our overriding ambition in this essay is to demonstrate that drugs touch almost all aspects of everyday life in prison. Our vignettes about withdrawal, consumption, carrying, and overdoses were chosen to show the reality that drugs touch every aspect of prison life and all incarcerated people. An important additional finding is that the influence of drugs extends to individuals who do not use them (generally, or while incarcerated) and is felt even in prisons containing comparatively few drugs. Officials have shaped architecture, routines, and relations in prison to limit or eliminate illicit drug use and sales. Many prison spaces, including chapels, solitary confinement cells, and school classrooms acquired drug-related meanings and uses. Drug regulation and interdiction efforts did not effectively eliminate drugs but typically modified people's established drug use routines, producing cascading organizational and interpersonal consequences throughout the prison. Prisoners felt the effects of drugs at even the most intimate levels of personal experience.

The types of drugs available at any particular time profoundly informed the mood of a unit, with the prison context influencing which drugs were deemed "good" or "bad." Such assessments were informed in part by whether substances might help mitigate distressing aspects of the prison experience or increase risks of violence or death. Finally, prisoners' agency was often manifested in and through mundane physical objects, for example, in ingeniously refashioning mundane objects to advance drug-related agendas.

Here is how the essay is organized. In Section I we outline our analytical approach that accentuates individual agency and the critical roles of material objects and artifacts. Section II describes how, where, and with whom the study was conducted. Section III presents our major findings on the effects of drug use on everyday prison life, focusing on human dimensions of the drug situation in prison, particularly withdrawal, consumption, transportation, and overdosing. Section IV emphasizes the prison's material infrastructure. In particular, we explore innovative arrangements prisoners crafted to smuggle drugs into prison ("flail mail"), produce a smokable concoction ("banacco"), and be able to light it so that it could be smoked ("wicks"). These arrangements provide compelling evidence of the malleability of objects in prison and how prisoners modify them to consume drugs. We also discuss organizational and interpersonal details relating to smell, a material phenomenon that prison scholars have largely overlooked (but see Martin 2021). Section V discusses some of the broader theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of our findings and concludes with suggestions for future research.

I. Studying Everyday Life and Materialities

Two traditions in the social sciences inform our analysis. The first is the sociology of everyday life (De Certeau 1984; Kalekin-Fishman 2013; Duke and Kolind 2020). As the name suggests, studies of everyday life focus on the day-to-day lives and behavior of different groups. Some work in the everyday life tradition concentrates exclusively on producing close descriptions of the challenges different social groups face (Kalekin-Fishman 2013, p. 718). Some use insights from everyday life to draw conclusions about larger political or structural dynamics. Irrespective of the perspective, both kinds of analysis tend to study marginalized and otherwise socially invisible groups and are most compatible with ethnographic methodologies (Berardi 2022; Bucerius, Haggerty, and Berardi 2022).

Underscoring the everydayness of drugs in prison allows us to develop an appreciation for opaque institutional, material, and interpersonal aspects of prison. Dominant strands in the contemporary literature on incarceration unpack some of those processes, paying particular attention to how prisons produce a multitude of injustices and "pains" for prisoners (Sykes 1958; Haggerty and Bucerius 2020*b*). Such studies draw invaluable attention to the alarming and coercive aspects of prison. However, they cumulatively convey an image of a prison population composed of comparatively passive individuals or "docile bodies" (Foucault 1977) resigned to their fate and compliantly yielding to the often oppressive actions of prison officials. Sometimes such writings assume a fatalistic or vaguely conspiratorial air, with all prison-related activities and initiatives appearing cunningly preordained only to entrench diffuse forms of power and reproduce hierarchies.

What can be missed in such accounts are unpredictable forms of agency operating even in the most controlled spaces. Much of an incarcerated person's day-to-day life involves straightforward efforts to "make do" (De Certeau 1984) in ways that oppose or defy the prison's explicit rules and expectations. Rubin (2015) calls these illicit acts "frictional" in that they rarely rise to the level of direct politicized confrontation and contestation but instead tend to entail low-visibility forms of subterfuge, evasion, or avoidance undertaken by prisoners trying to advance specific localized aims and interests (Scott 1985; Bosworth 2017). As Erving Goffman (1961) noted, individuals engage in such acts to modify aspects of an institutional regime to improve the conditions of their confinement. Examples include lying to medical staff to obtain a preferred medication, feigning a fight with another prisoner to be transferred to a more desirable unit, or building improvised contraband tattoo guns (Bonnycastle 2011).

Studies of everyday life are rewarding because they lean toward a type of microanalysis focused on particularity, agency, and experience (Highmore 2001, p. 5). Most analysts would acknowledge the vital importance of such on-the-ground details, but they can be missed or glossed over if not the explicit research focus. One distinct benefit of studying the lived reality of drugs in prison is that prisoners' agency, creativity, and craft knowledge are recurrent reference points.

Our analysis is also informed by studies of material culture (Miller 2010; Fox 2016). We aim to better understand the institutional and social implications of the material dimensions ("materialities") of different objects incorporated into drug-related agendas in prison. Such an approach commences from recognizing that substances have mass, weight, scent, magnetism, flammability, and other characteristics. Drugs also produce predictable consequences on the human body and psyche when consumed. In prison, as elsewhere, drug use, sale, and transportation presuppose specific material arrangements. We examine how some objects become incorporated into such processes and how they provide opportunities for creative agency. Foregrounding how such objects are used and manipulated is a valuable complement to the study of everyday life, given that humans live their lives in relation to assorted things, and human agency routinely entails using, manipulating, and transforming diverse objects.

II. Setting, Methodology, Data

Federal prisons in Canada detain people sentenced to terms of 2 years or longer. Provincial and territorial prisons, in contrast, detain remanded prisoners (waiting to be sentenced) and those serving a sentence of up to 2 years. In Canada, remand facilities ("jails" in the United States) hold individuals charged with a wide range of offenses. A remand facility might contain individuals who violated parole conditions, along with those accused of multiple homicides or terrorism-related offenses.

Two of the four provincial prisons in our study were remand facilities. Most provincially detained participants in our sample were remanded prisoners (426 of 734). One provincial facility held only sentenced individuals, and one contained about 70 percent remanded individuals and 30 percent who were sentenced. One federal prison contained men, the other women. Three of the four provincial prisons were mixed, detaining men and women in separate units. Our interviews in the six prisons included 576 individuals identifying as men and 158 as women.[1]

The prisons varied in many respects, as did the people we interviewed. Our participants had diverse backgrounds regarding race and ethnicity, gender, age, the charges they faced, and much more. Tables 1 and 2 show breakdowns by age and race in the six prisons. The institutions had different security designations; the prisoners we interviewed ranged from people facing short-term stays to people sentenced to life. We drew participants from all units, including those with minimum-, medium-, and maximum-security designations and protective custody, segregation, and gang units. That diversity is one strength of our data set, allowing us to identify persistent themes across a sizable heterogeneous sample.

We conducted one-on-one interviews with prisoners using a generalized prompt guide. These discussions averaged approximately 95 minutes. We digitally recorded the interviews with our participants' permission and offered everyone strict anonymity. Individual names used in this essay are pseudonyms. Interviews usually took place in a visiting area or a program room. Correctional officers were interviewed in the correctional facilities or more commonly in coffee shops outside the prison.

We did not initially set out to study drugs in prison. Our original focus was on the dynamics of radicalization in prison (Schultz, Bucerius, and Haggerty 2020*a*, 2020*b*; Bucerius, Schultz, and Haggerty 2023). As part

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[1] Two individuals self-identified as transgender and were housed in the federal prison for women.

TABLE 1
Study Populations, Provincial Prisons, by Age and Gender

	Male					Female			
	All	R1	R2	M	S	All	R1	R2	M
N	492	199	125	55	113	95	27	39	29
Age:									
Mean	34.1	35.0	32.7	37.1	32.1	31.0	29.1	31.1	32.8
SD	8.9	9.1	8.2	10.0	8.1	9.1	9.3	7.9	10.2
Race (%):									
White	48	35	56	42	52	40	33	49	35
Indigenous	39	46	31	58	38	55	67	41	62
Black	6	7	8	0	4	3	0	7.5	0
Other	7	12	5	0	6	2	0	2.5	3

NOTE.—Provincial data. R1 and R2 are remand prisons; M is a mixed prison, holding remanded and sentenced prisoners; and S is a sentenced prison.

of the process of building trust and rapport, however, the interviews typically commenced with more relaxed participant-driven discussions about things they were particularly interested in or concerned about. By allowing their unique perspectives and experiences to shape the initial conversation (Maxwell 2013; Charmaz 2014), we ensured they could bring their knowledge and opinions to the table, allowing us to garner a broad range of insights into their biographies and the day-to-day realities of incarceration.[2] Such discussions often touched on relations with correctional officers, life histories, ethnic relations, parenting, and drugs. We asked a broad range of questions about "radicalization," but the topic of drugs spontaneously arose routinely regarding an extraordinary number of issues. Our work in the federal system was not centered around radicalization but focused directly on drugs and victimization.

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[2] After completing the data collection, we transcribed each interview verbatim and assigned randomly generated pseudonyms. To ensure analytical rigor when coding and analyzing the data, we drew on the principles and heuristic devices of grounded theory (Charmaz 2014; Glaser and Strauss 2017). We used basic tabular data to identify similarities and differences and verify the data patterns' overall strength. Five research assistants examined the tabular data to identify the most common themes and then used them to create a consistent coding scheme. We then tested this scheme against a set of six randomly chosen interview transcripts to determine whether it needed to be further refined. We eventually reached 85–90 percent overlap on the six randomly chosen interviews through a repeated process of tests and edits, thereby establishing interrater reliability. We then line coded each transcript using NVivo 11 software.

TABLE 2

Study Populations, Federal Prisons, by Age and Gender

	Male	Female
N	84	63
Age:		
Mean	40	37
SD	12	10
Race (%):		
White	68	30
Indigenous	17	60
Black	1	0
Other	14	10

NOTE.—Federal data.

Interviews with correctional officers lasted about an hour. Topics included their daily routines, use of discretion, perceived risks associated with their jobs, and, in the federal system, their views on harm reduction and drug interdiction. Coding the data further confirmed our sense that drugs profoundly influence the everyday life of prisons for all people housed and working there, independent of their drug use patterns.

III. Drugs and Everyday Life in Prison

Prisoners are usually physically close, often extremely close, to other people directly affected by drug use. This is not different from their situations in the community. Still, in prison, the percentage of people with drug histories can be much higher, and the pressures of living together under confinement produce distinctive challenges, stresses, and institutional ramifications.

The incarcerated population consists disproportionately of people with a history of drug use. Research in the United States has found that 63 percent of sentenced individuals in jail have a substance use disorder, compared to 5 percent of non-incarcerated adults (Bronson et al. 2020). Being in prison does not necessarily preclude drug use. They can be a common and sometimes pervasive feature of incarceration. A study of in-prison drug use in 15 European countries found that usage ranged from 2 to 56 percent (EMCDDA 2012, p. 10; Mjåland 2016, p. 154). This generally holds in prisons in other countries (Boys et al. 2002; Rao et al. 2016; Wheatley 2016; O'Hagan and Hardwick 2017; Slade and Azbel 2022).

Consequently, prisons tend to be populated with individuals with diverse connections to drugs, including as users, sellers, manufacturers, and transporters of illicit substances and others with more subtle or tangential linkages.

Our participants were wrenched from their communities when they were arrested—often with little or no warning (Pelvin 2019). In the process, their drug consumption patterns were disturbed. Prisoners approached this disruption in markedly different ways. A first group we interviewed framed this aspect of their incarceration as beneficial. Their consumption in the community was so high risk that they saw their arrest and the attendant break in their drug habit as having saved their lives (Bucerius, Haggerty, and Dunford 2021; Schneider 2023). Lucy gives a sense of the situations facing such individuals: "I've been doing heroin since I was twelve. . . . I was so messed up with my mom passing away [recently] . . . like I overdosed four times in one week. So, I really think that if I didn't come to jail when I did then I probably would've overdosed and died. . . . I was doing like four grams a day before I came in here."

A second group provided less dramatic accounts but still characterized their drug habits as harmful. For them, their arrest presented an opportunity to better manage or entirely cease their previous pattern of drug use through some combination of self-directed commitment to sobriety or seeking out whatever assistance might be available in prison. These individuals often referred to being incarcerated as a "wake-up call."

A third group generally preferred to continue using drugs or felt physical compulsions to do so. Such individuals were usually able to continue using to some degree, as the prisons we studied did not manage to eliminate drugs but are best understood as spaces where previous drug consumption routines were transformed in many respects. Some prisons in our sample had a steady inflow of drugs, while one was known as a relatively "dry institution," that is, a place into which not many drugs came. However, accessing drugs was generally possible but more complicated than on the streets. At times, the processes for obtaining and using certain illicit drugs were quite involved.

Individuals who wanted to use drugs at their discretion but lacked access to their preferred substances faced a material deprivation they described as one of the many pains of imprisonment (Sykes 1958; Haggerty and Bucerius 2020*b*). Our discussions and interactions showed that acquiring and using drugs were regularly on their minds. Using drugs or returning to consuming a preferred intoxicant was prominent among the litany of things prisoners looked forward to after their eventual release. Indeed, some individuals portrayed leaving prison as involving a drug-fueled "party." Tony gives a sense of such reverie in his exuberant response to our question about what he planned to do upon release: "Man, the first thing I wanna do when I get out is eat a cheeseburger, drink a milkshake, and smoke some meth!"

A. Withdrawal

Many individuals physically depended on opioids, meth, alcohol, or other drugs and quickly experienced withdrawal symptoms after arrest. Such symptoms could be acute, depending on the specifics of a person's habit. Withdrawing from opioids, for example, could involve flu-like symptoms such as muscle aches, nausea, vomiting, sweating, diarrhea, and seizures. Someone withdrawing from meth could have disturbed sleep patterns, headaches, anxiety, depression, paranoia, and hallucinations. People withdrawing from an alcohol use disorder could have headaches, nausea, vomiting, and loss of appetite, with some experiencing potentially fatal delirium tremens. Our participants often also had to undergo a forced period of "cold turkey" abstinence and withdrawal from tobacco, as smoking is not allowed in Western Canadian prisons (Sourry et al. 2022).

Debilitating in any context, detoxing from serious drugs in prison could be particularly harrowing (Milloy and Wood 2015; Brico 2018). Bystanders, too, were affected. Confinement in a small cell with someone going through withdrawal could be alarming and traumatic. Maria's experience exemplifies this pointedly:

> I was in remand, the day that I went in to the prison. I was alone by myself, for 2 nights, and on the third night they stuck a dope-sick chick in with me. I had no idea what dope-sick was, but holy cow do you learn fast! I was mortified. I was bawling! . . . She came in, she was shitting herself, she was pissin' everywhere, she was throwing up everywhere, she was sleeping on the floor, she was moaning, groaning. Kept me up all night. And then she was in the shower, then she was shitting in the shower, and then, then, finally, she puked on the floor and it was like bright yellow and she said "call the nurse!" and I'm bawling, and I'm like "Oh my alright!" and I pushed the button and said "She needs a nurse!" They already knew what she needed, like, they can see what's going on in the pod with me, or in the little room with me. So, finally, the nurse comes. They take her but they

> left all of it there for me to clean up. I was like, "Are you kidding me?! I have to clean this shit up or what? All her puke and everything." Oh well they'll get you a bucket and water and a mop. Frick.

Individuals who were withdrawing could also alter a prison unit's overall mood and interactional dynamics, as they could be sullen, edgy, or aggressive. Such emotional states presented interpersonal complexities and heightened risks in an occasionally stressful and often dangerous environment.

The personal consequences and unit-wide implications of withdrawal varied with the drugs involved. For example, the large population of individuals who used meth extensively in the community would often enter prison exhausted after extended methamphetamine binges ("meth runs") that had kept them awake for several days straight. Immediately collapsing into their beds, those individuals would often sleep for extended periods. Brooklyn, who had a repeated pattern of drug-related arrests, gives a sense of this:

> *Brooklyn:* Yeah, so, like I sleep a lot when I first come in because I'm coming down off drugs and I haven't slept in a very long time. So, it's like I sleep for a week or two, and then I'm just like, "Ok, now I'm fine."
>
> *Interviewer:* You sleep for a week or two at a time?
>
> *Brooklyn:* Yeah! Like you wake up for meals, you go back to bed. You wake up for meals, you go back to bed. [On the street] like you're up for like three or four days at a time. . . . Yeah, like you're fucked right up. It's that cycle every day. For three or four days at a time, and then you sleep for like, what? A couple hours? And then you wake up again, do the three or four days at a time. And then it's like, how many days have you really not slept? Then you come in here and catch the fuck up. . . . That's what fuckin' meth does to you.

Perhaps most alarmingly, participants repeatedly emphasized how unpredictable individuals can be when coming off meth. Thomas shared the most extreme experience in this regard. When initially arrested, he was in a cell with another individual. As he went through withdrawal from meth, Thomas became violent and assaulted and killed his cellmate. As he recounted: “I don’t remember a thing. I just don’t remember at all. It’s awful.” Thomas’s behavior was remarkably similar to that of another person in the same prison who also murdered his cellmate while withdrawing from meth. These murders were widely discussed among prisoners (and staff) and significantly contributed to our participants’ angst about sharing a cell with people who had substantial histories of meth use.

Whether they were themselves withdrawing from drugs or not, being in prison and housed in close proximity to people who are withdrawing significantly influenced every prisoner. Being double, or sometimes triple, bunked and having little choice in whom they shared a unit with also meant that prisoners had to expect that the dynamics on a prison unit or within their cell could change on a moment’s notice if a new person undergoing withdrawal was admitted to their unit or placed in their cell.

B. Consuming

The prisons themselves provided access to some substances, such as caffeine in coffee or cola sold in the commissary. In some locations, nicotine patches or gum were also available, as were methadone or suboxone for those who had it prescribed to manage their opioid dependency. The profile of intoxicating substances available illicitly in the prisons generally resembled what was sold in the local community, although availability varied.

Consuming substances while incarcerated alters the user’s behavior and mental state and, by extension, could profoundly affect a unit’s dynamics. Drugs that help manage addictions, by extension, could ease tensions and hostilities that might otherwise arise. What prisoners deem a “good prison drug” was informed by the drug’s properties in relation to the prison environment and routine (Crewe 2005). Consequently, the prisoners in our study tended to prefer drugs with sedative properties. Perhaps the most sought after was marijuana (and derivatives), which is prized by prisoners in many other locations. However, some prisoners also saw the calming properties of opioids as appealing because they helped reduce boredom and alleviate disturbing aspects of incarceration (Crewe 2005; Mjåland 2016). Such properties are one reason why some individuals who had never previously used injection drugs would first try them in prison (Bird et al. 1992; Martin et al. 2005). One gang leader we interviewed noted that this posed a significant recurring problem for him, as members of his gang would enter prison without an opioid addiction but acquire one while incarcerated: “So, you get all these guys in there, and they get all doped up.

Even if they're doing a one-year bit, they come out—they're not the same person. They're strung out. They're addicted. They're junkies now. So, we've got all our patches [gang members] going in clean, coming out junkies. And that's been a fuckin' problem for a long time. . . . And the problem was, people do the needles. People doing needles" (Francois).

Some substances consumed extensively in the community, such as meth, were often characterized as poorly suited to prison life. As meth is a stimulant, for example, it could result in the user pacing their cell and "bouncing off the walls" all night. More disconcertingly (and as Thomas's example above showed), as one manifestation of meth use can be paranoia, some characterized prisons as a terrible environment for use. Introducing individuals prone to meth-induced paranoia to a situation replete with coercion, interpersonal animosities, and general distrust could be a recipe for disaster. Erratic behavior could be even more acute if the individual was experiencing meth psychosis, a condition in which the afflicted person can become delusional and violent: "When I was in remand, the whole unit was high on meth, and everyone's like . . . it's fucked up, man. People are thinking somebody's talking against them and the subtle eye contact in there. Here, you put criminals on crystal meth and just little eye contact, you know what I mean? And you catch eyes with somebody, they think somebody is coming after them. You got guys who would do a room check and come out with fucking shanks. It's a crazy environment. It's fucked up" (Arthur).

Other drugs could also make the unit volatile. For example, prisoners often made and drank homemade alcohol called "brew" or "pruno" (Ifeonu, Haggerty, and Bucerius 2022). As the alcohol content of brew was unpredictable, so were its effects, with individuals sometimes blacking out or displaying dramatic emotional fluctuations. For example, Johnny informed us that "the unit was outta control last night. Everyone shit faced." Such situations could stoke interpersonal hostilities or aggression. As brew was made in unsanitary conditions, drinkers could become extremely ill with botulism or even die (Vugia et al. 2009; Rao et al. 2018). Again, such events could affect all those around them, especially those having to share a cell with a person who is intoxicated or violently ill. Justin, for example, remembered distinctly that 3 weeks before our interview "half the unit was sick from brew. Puking, diarrhea. That was fucked up shit. The ones who weren't sick became sick from the smell. Fucking nasty."

Anyone housed in prison will be in close association with people who consume drugs, unless housed on a functional "dry unit." However, having done research on 72 prison units, we have experienced only a single unit that could be deemed to be an authentically "dry" for a prolonged time. (This was a unit in which one person was held in solitary confinement for more than 3 months, with no additional prisoners present.) Drug consumption at all times significantly influenced the dynamics of prison, as the mood on a unit, aggression, or sleeping patterns were influenced by people who consumed drugs, affecting not only the individual consumers but, by virtue of being housed in close proximity, everyone around them.

C. Carrying

The processes related to carrying drugs shaped such things as personal comportment, institutional routines, and personal interactions. As illicit drugs had to be concealed, prisoners would stash them in informal hiding spots in the prison. Many, however, preferred to keep their drugs close at hand, which meant that an unknowable number of prisoners at any moment might have illicit substances concealed on or inside of them.

Clothing pockets were the most obvious place to hide drugs, but they were not secure and could be easily searched. Consequently, drugs were regularly hidden under clothing and close to the body, often secured near the genitals on the assumption that correctional officers were less thorough when searching private bodily areas. Individuals who made brew occasionally fermented the concoction in cola bottles concealed (and warmed) under their coveralls. Other individuals concealed drugs in their mouths, often obtained by "cheeking" medications designed to manage opioid addictions. These substances were then often exchanged in the prison's informal economy.

The most discussed common method for concealing and transporting drugs was "hooping," which involved inserting drugs into a body cavity. There were many techniques for doing so, but the most common was to stash drugs inside the small plastic receptacles found inside chocolate Kinder eggs. Prisoners would then insert them into a body orifice. In a mixed-gender facility we studied, the incarcerated women played a prominent role in this smuggling, as Lisa recounted: "So, girls got two holes. So, you can fit three in each. Six Kinder eggs, right? And those Kinder eggs, you have 'em bagged. . . . So you can put two ounces, two ounces of pint [meth] in each one. But it's crushed up. Put them in baggies, put them in another baggy. Put them in a Kinder egg, wrap the Kinder egg with, um, saran wrap. . . . And then tape it up."

Correctional officers often commented that women's units were a particular source for concern. Steve told us "that's how the drugs enter the prison. The women bring them in and then they [the drugs] move from there." That said, men also hooped drugs. We spoke with Darius, who bragged about having smuggled a large package of opioids into remand in this manner. He reflected on how astonished he was with the elasticity of the human body, noting that you can "pack up" with a parcel of drugs "the size of a football." The extreme nature of this practice helped make hooping a constant topic of discussion among our participants, who spoke about it sometimes with respect at the dedication involved or dismay at the desperation.

A distinctive moment in the everyday life of prison occurs when a prisoner smuggles contraband onto a unit. As Axel described it, rumors that a package had arrived could produce an animated hum and flurry of anticipation: "A lot more people are hyper and excited. It's like kids in a candy store, you know what I mean? The heavy addicts. That's what they act like, kids in a candy store, like 'Ooh, candy!'" Inconspicuous conversations increased as individuals sought to identify who was "holding" and to assemble funds and call in favors that would allow them to make a purchase. However, the presence of drugs could also lead to violence, as some prisoners would rob people of their substances. That was especially a risk if the victim did not have gang protection or the personal reputation or physical abilities to defend him- or herself.

As drugs circulated, the unit dynamics could change dramatically, as Malcolm noted: "On a regular unit, everybody's fucking high, tweaking out, ripped, smoking, and drinking." Oscar took a detached view of this when reflecting on his time in remand: "It could be awesome sometimes. Just seeing people fucking tripping out and just watch. It's like live television." Having interviewed on units in which drugs had just arrived gave us unique ethnographic insights into this atmosphere. On occasion, we left units and abandoned our interviews for the day because the vast majority of people we tried to talk to were extremely high to the point that having coherent conversations became impossible.

Being surrounded by people who were open to consuming whatever drugs were available made life in prison unpredictable for everyone. Correctional officers had to navigate units when the great majority of prisoners were high, but often they did not have information that would allow them to predict when this might be the case. Likewise, incarcerated people who did not consume drugs had to navigate these general mood swings on units depending on the availability of substances.

D. *Overdoses*

While we were conducting our research, Western Canada was in the early stages of what has become an acute overdose crisis. In April 2016, the British Columbia government declared an opioid public health emergency. The adjacent province of Alberta—with a population of roughly 4 million—experienced 368 opioid-related deaths in 2016, up from only six in 2011 (Public Health Agency of Canada 2017). In May 2017, the Alberta provincial government declared opioids a public health crisis and formed an opioid emergency response commission. At that time, the province of Saskatchewan had been less affected by the opioid crisis than British Columbia and Alberta. Still, the province's capital, Regina, ranked fifth in 2017 for opioid poisoning hospitalizations of all Canadian cities with a population over 100,000. These trends are primarily tied to the emergence of potent new synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl and carfentanyl, as recreational drugs.

People who used opioids tended to see prison as a comparatively safe place to consume. It was easy for them to find a partner who could secure assistance if they overdosed. Correctional offices and medical staff were also close at hand and could respond to medical emergencies with naloxone, a medication that helps reverse opioid overdoses (Bucerius and Haggerty 2019). And while we have not been able to obtain statistics on the number of in-prison overdoses, they appear to have become a regular occurrence in some facilities. In 1 month during our research, two individuals died from fentanyl overdoses at one of the facilities we were studying (Parsons 2022). Nine overdoses occurred during our 3-week stay on a unit containing 60 prisoners. During our fieldwork, the overdose crisis had reached the point that being resuscitated with naloxone in prison or in the community was a familiar experience for opioid users, which they called "having died." One woman we interviewed mentioned that she had "died" in this manner three times in the past 2 weeks. Here, Francois describes the process after he overdosed on W-18, a synthetic opioid that is up to 100 times more powerful than fentanyl (which is itself 50 times more potent than heroin): "There's fuckin' drugs everywhere [here in prison]. I don't do the drugs anymore. That was . . . that was a stupid choice. . . . They gave me four shots of Narcan. The standard is one, maybe two. I was dead for five minutes, six minutes. They found me in my cell. . . . Dying, it's just . . . it's just a dream. It's like you fall asleep and have a dream. A very vivid dream."

That overdosing had become commonplace in prison did not reduce the associated personal suffering or institutional turmoil. When someone overdosed, alarms sounded, officers hustled prisoners into their cells, and staff rushed to deliver aid. As one correctional officer recounted, "It's like, in two weeks, I've probably seen three or four blue bodies come back to life because of Narcan. They were shot three or four times [with naloxone]. I've done chest compressions on a guy who was vomiting all over himself."

Tragically, some were not resuscitated—a development that gave everyday life in prison a shockingly traumatic dimension:

> I've had, like . . . an inmate died in my cell with me in there. I wake up in the middle of the night, and [the] lady [who] is dope sick above my head is dead. And I'm like, "Hey, hey!" Right? And she's in rig, rigor mortis. I went, "Ahh!!" [laughing]. You press the call button, and they go, "Give her a kick. She's dope sick." And I'm like, "She's not fuckin' dope sick. She's dead, she's dead!" I watched her whole body go up, and her eyes roll back, and foam come out of her mouth. She's dead [laughing]. And I'm standing up on my bunk in the corner, pushing the call button like mad. And they're like, "Well, you're unlocked in 20 minutes." And I'm like, "No, you're unlocking me now, cuz' I'm gonna lose my frickin' mind if you leave me in here with a dead person." Took em about 10 or 15 minutes to even call someone, and then when the nurse came and checked her, she's like, she's like, "She's not lying. She's dead." (Samantha)

Hidden behind the perfunctory observation that prisons contain a disproportionate number of drug users is a world of everyday drug-related human relationships and interactions that touch almost all aspects of these institutions. Given the unpredictable nature of when drugs arrive, what drugs are available, whether newly admitted people will be withdrawing from drugs, and the quality of brew, it is hard to miss how monumentally drugs influenced the day-to-day lives of anyone in prison. This connection extended beyond human beings and implicated scores of material objects as well, some of which we detail in the next section.

IV. Drugs and Prison Materialities

Each prison displays a characteristic and somewhat idiosyncratic arrangement of material objects. The experience of incarceration is itself primarily defined by a person's relationship to this configuration of physical structures, objects, and artifacts. For prisoners, some of these things were commonplace, while others were unfamiliar. Many acquired new uses and meanings in prison. Prisoners also constructed assemblages of mundane artifacts, in creative efforts to advance multiple and often contradictory agendas. In this section, we first focus on the prison's physical infrastructure and then turn to examples of how mundane objects are incorporated into quotidian drug-related agendas. Our focus on the material dimensions of prison concludes by examining some of the pertinent dynamics of smell.

A. Drugs and Physical Security Infrastructure

The security infrastructure of prisons consists of conspicuous walls, fences, and cameras. Such measures are designed to limit escape attempts, deter violence, and check weapons proliferation. However, prison officials regularly conceived of these phenomena in terms of their (admittedly limited and constantly evolving) ability to curtail the use and exchange of illicit drugs (Prendergast et al. 2004; Kinner and Rich 2018; Bell and Leese 2020; Peterson et al. 2021).

Depending on the jurisdiction, prison officials might conduct drug tests on prisoners (Nguyen et al. 2021). Dogs were used to detect drugs in cells and incoming mail and on individuals. Some prisons also incorporate drones, motion detectors, and cellphone jammers into their antidrugs efforts (Link 2022). On a moment-by-moment basis, prisoners confront and are embedded within a physical structure that officials partially justify for their antidrug potential.

Officials presented new technologies as a means to possibly eliminate one of the most conspicuous indignities of incarceration—the body cavity search. Prisoners loathe these physical violations. Most of our participants identified with our participant Jenson's characterization of this experience as "basically rape." As noted above, however, officials must deal with prisoners persistently using their body cavities to smuggle contraband, including weapons, cellphones, and, most commonly, illicit drugs. To address this, one remand center had recently introduced a full body scanner (backscatter X-ray), similar to those used in airports. It was prominently framed as a way to deter drug smuggling by identifying substances concealed under clothes or inside someone's body. Other locations had a body orifice security scanner—a seated metal detector that identifies foreign objects in bodies.

Visitors, a prominent means of drug smuggling (Watson 2016; O'Hagan and Hardwick 2017), are also scrutinized. These examinations can include body scans and searches by drug-detection dogs. In some Canadian prisons, officials now inspect visitors using ion scanners, similar to those used in airports. This entails testing visitors' clothing or possessions for trace amounts of drugs or other suspect chemicals. Such devices have been controversial, given that officers deny visitor access if a test is positive, even though these extremely sensitive machines produce many false positives (Hannem 2019).

One remand center had established even more extreme measures to restrict the inflow of drugs. Officials eliminated in-person visits and replaced them with video visitations. As a result, someone who wanted to "visit" a friend or loved one in this institution had to go to a centralized facility many miles away. There they could book a "virtual visit" using one of the 40 computer monitors. One hardly needs to mention the psychological costs borne by prisoners who, as a result, can no longer touch their children, friends, and loved ones (Comfort 2009; McDonald et al. 2022).

Having illicit substances on their unit could be an unwanted trigger or temptation for those who saw incarceration as an opportunity to manage their drug and alcohol consumption (Giffin et al. 2023). As prison officials mostly acknowledge that it is impossible to eliminate drugs, they have created "dry units" for individuals who want to remain sober. The extent to which such units are truly "dry" is complicated by two familiar factors. First are the usual challenges individuals face in managing substance misuse, which can involve a recurrent pattern of sobriety followed by a return to using. Second, surreptitious drug users occasionally ask to be on such units in hopes that this will be interpreted positively by judges or parole officers.

Specific areas within the prisons we studied had formal and informal drug connections. Individuals suspected of "hooping" were detained in specially configured "dry cells." Officers turned off the water in these cells to stop the toilets from flushing and examined the detainee's excreta for drugs. Vivian describes this experience, which can last several days: "They think you have drugs stuffed somewhere in you, and they basically put you in a room, um . . . with no flushing toilet. And basically, you don't get anything or get any of your property. And make you sit there for three days. And every time you go to the washroom, you have to show the guards what comes out before they turn on the water to flush it. Like, it's pretty degrading [laughing]."

Solitary confinement cells also have drug-related uses and meanings. Typically, such cells detain individuals who have committed disciplinary infractions or must be isolated for their protection. Such spaces are controversial;

international organizations have characterized solitary confinement as torture (Smith 2006; Sprott and Doob 2021). However, a subset of drug-involved individuals preferred these spaces. That is because in solitary the detainee could work through the agonizing and often embarrassing mental and physical manifestations of withdrawal with a semblance of privacy (Brico 2018). Being isolated also meant their cellmate was not forced to witness their suffering. Caleb, for example, had a pattern of being repeatedly incarcerated. In each instance, he had to endure withdrawal. As a result, when he is now arrested, he asks to be immediately placed into solitary confinement: "When I first get there [prison], I tell them I'm gonna be dope sick, so they throw me in the hole for a week. I don't wanna be on the [regular] unit. It's terrible. Puking, sweating, puking."

The chapels, classrooms, and some prison programming events developed associations with contraband drugs. Prisoners attended chapel, for example, for worship or classrooms for programs or schooling. But these spaces were also understood as ideal hubs for distributing drugs throughout the facility (Rowe 2016). That is because prisoners have few opportunities to physically interact with individuals on other units. In the chapel and classrooms, however, individuals from almost all units could congregate, making it easier to exchange drugs.

Drug dynamics are central to the prisons' most basic infrastructure. Architects and increasingly sophisticated technologies produce spaces securitized specifically against the prospect of illicit drug use, smuggling, and sales. Drugs also figured prominently in how prisoners used, manipulated, and experienced otherwise mundane objects.

B. *Mundane Objects: Flail Mail, Banacco, Wicks, and Smell*

People in prison have a different relationship to many of the physical things they use in the community. Some familiar objects are denied to them, while others are available in different forms than they are accustomed to or prefer. Such material restrictions and deprivations can be a source of frustration and distress but also produce pressures and incentives to manipulate the prison's existing materialities. Drugs figure prominently in this process, as a litany of everyday items is incorporated into drug transportation, detection, sale, consumption, and concealment.

To demonstrate this, we draw attention to a tiny sampling of in-prison objects, specifically "flail mail," "banacco," and "wicks," and to some aspects of the smells that permeate prison. In using, consuming, or concealing drugs, prisoners also transform the prison's material dimensions. Such modifications are commonplace forms of “making do” and instances of the covert agency or “friction” exercised by individuals ingeniously using and transforming the objects at hand. While our examples are nowhere near all the material phenomena we could single out, we have selected these because they succinctly demonstrate how profoundly assorted drug-related agendas are manifested in the use and transformation of assorted mundane things.

It is best, however, to start with some missing things. The most glaring drug-related absences in prison are some of the drugs themselves. Their absence or limited availability resulted in prisoners setting a cascading series of initiatives into motion. Without regular access to alcohol, for example, a subset of prisoners drinks hand sanitizer (Thomas 2021). Consequently, even at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, some prisons banned this basic personal protection. In the institutions we studied, prisoners also could not relax with a cup of tea, as officials had banned tea because it is often smoked. Prisoners in one prison had stripped the trees in the yard of all leaves, which they had dried and smoked. Making “brew” also resulted in several physical absences, as officials had removed ingredients popularly used in its production, such as baking yeast and Ovaltine. Fresh fruit at times also temporarily disappeared from a unit—a sign that an incarcerated “brewmaster” was amassing this key ingredient in preparation for fermenting a large batch. Donovan gives a summary of the process:

> *Donovan:* It’s easy. All you need is the juice they give us, sugar . . . and a piece of bread. And an orange.
>
> *Interviewer:* For the yeast? Like a . . .
>
> *Donovan:* Yeah. A little piece of bread for yeast. Just in a pop bottle. Fill it full of juice. . . . I got busted with a brew just—not long ago. I could tell you exactly how to make it. Heh. Take the juice . . . and let it sit for like, couple days in the warm. . . . you’ll see it. It almost starts to separate. That makes it the best. And then you’ll take the fruit, it’s rotten, rotten fruit . . . stick it in there. . . . And dump . . . eh, start with ten sugar in there . . . and just . . . let it sit for like a day and then they’ll start popping off.
>
> *Interviewer:* So it ferments? It starts fermenting, I guess?

> *Donovan:* Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. That's why you want the fruit a little bit rotten, so it goes faster. And then it'll be just like a soda pop, eh? You gotta keep opening like (chhh-chhh-chhh). And if you don't open it, it'll blow up, and like that's—that's why you gotta make sure you keep burpin' it, it's called burpin' it. Once it quits fizzin' up like that, add some more sugar. 'Cause it's already alcohol, but . . . you're gonna make it stronger, right? You're just gonna add ten more sugar. Burp it for another . . . so in four, four to five days it's gonna be . . . fifteen, sixteen percent alcohol. Yeah. And then you kick that back, and you're good. [Laughs].

Prohibitions on drug use and sales prompted endless creativity by a population of individuals who—sometimes desperately—wanted to consume such substances and had almost limitless time to scheme clever strategies to hide drug production and subsequent use. Correctional officers were attuned to some of these strategies, but officers would often look away out of indifference or to avoid the paperwork nuisances associated with processing disciplinary infractions (Haggerty and Bucerius 2020*a*).

Flail mail was another resourceful example of material modifications. Staff read prisoners' incoming mail to ensure they are not corresponding about illegal activities. However, focusing only on the content of such correspondence ignores that letters, envelopes, drawings, and birthday cards are material objects. Made of paper, they have a distinctive physical composition capitalized on by smugglers. Some individuals took advantage of paper's absorbency by having their associates in the community spray liquefied drugs, typically meth, onto their correspondence. When dried, the paper's fibers became infused with the drugs and were thereby transformed into flail mail, as described by Levi:

> *Levi:* Flail mail, which is like if you bought cotton paper, you can take crystal meth, put it in water. You take cotton paper, right; you write the letters on the cotton paper, right? Write little love letters, "Hey baby, blah, blah, blah," on the cotton paper. And then you fucking put meth in water, and then you soak the fucking paper in the water. Hang them all up to dry. And then the meth is in the paper. That's called flail mail.
>
> *Interviewer:* Then you eat it?

> *Levi:* Then you eat it. Stick it in your ass. Things like that. Put it in your coffee. Just the pieces of paper, right? And that would have the meth in it.

This transformation, in turn, gave rise to further modifications to the prisons' material composition. Aware that prisoners were receiving drug-infused mail, staff opened the post using gloves to avoid contamination. In some prisons, to prevent the circulation of flail mail, these same staff photocopied incoming letters and drawings. The incarcerated person would receive only the copy—transforming the original thing produced by their loved one into a mechanical reproduction (Benjamin 1968).

Another example concerns how the material objects in prison are used and altered in aid of smoking contraband tobacco and other substances. As many people in the remand facilities were withdrawing from tobacco, contraband cigarettes were particularly desirable and costly. Russel noted, "I've seen, since I've been here, some guy came on the unit with a cigarette, and I mean . . . that cigarette was like gold. People would fucking buy a single cigarette for $50 bucks." Todd sold tobacco in prison, claiming to have previously "walked out of the penitentiary with $26,000 for just selling cigarettes and patches. Nicotine patches. Three for $100." Making allowances for exaggerated dollar figures, it is clear from our many conversations that cigarettes, as well as nicotine patches and gum, are an expensive, and lucrative, staple of the prison's underground economy.

The yearning for tobacco inspired ingenious strategies for fabricating a form of in-prison cigarette that aligned mundane objects into a smokable entity. The core ingredient for such cigarettes was the nicotine collected from nicotine patches or nicotine gum. While nicotine substitutes are designed to wean someone off their tobacco habit slowly, they can assume a different, almost entirely antithetical, use in prison. That is because their contents can be modified and combined with other malleable objects to produce a forceful direct nicotine hit. Reid provides a sketch of how this works:

> *Reid:* Like, tobacco patches, right? So, if you take a patch and you peel it apart in half, you actually peel it off. You rub the glue off the one side, and you peel off another sticker—another layer of it, then you got the nicotine. Then you rub the nicotine off, and it's like little rubber. Then we dry out banana peels or orange peels, and you throw the nicotine in, and that's how you smoke a patch.

> Or people are smoking nicotine gum. You boil it in hot water, and then you separate the nicotine, and you smoke the nicotine. People are smoking orange peels and banana peels.
>
> *Interviewer:* Why the orange peels and banana peels?
>
> *Reid:* Just like a filler, right? For nicotine patch, you only get this much [indicates a small amount] of the little rubber stuff, and that's all you need. It's stronger than an actual cigarette. But you need a filler. You're not just going to smoke that, right? So, you space it out. It's like tobacco. So, banacco or orangeacco, they call it.

Reid's description, however, omits the additional material modifications required to consume banacco. As our participants preferred to smoke banacco as joints, they had to craft improvised rolling papers. Prison-issued bibles nicely filled that role, as their torn-out rice-paper-thin pages apparently make divine rolling papers. One then needed a seal comparable to the gum on rolling papers to keep the concoction from falling apart. Prison-issued marmalade worked well as an improvised adhesive.

Having crafted this form of hybrid tobacco, prisoners had to light the concoction in an environment where lighters and matches were contraband. They could turn to the illicit market to fulfill this need, but at a considerable financial cost: "See, girls used to come in, in like, on unit one. For example, there was a girl that came in, she brought four lighters, and she brought tobacco. So, makes cigarettes and sells five cigarettes and, with the lighter, 40 bucks. So, it's not that bad in here. But lighters, everybody needs lighters. If you want to have a cigarette, you need a lighter" (Melody).

In actuality, they did not "need" a lighter. But without one, they had to modify the prison's material composition further to generate fire. They also needed the skills to do so in a controlled environment. In our research setting, this involved routinely making wicks, also known as "chewies." Individuals hid these wicks—essentially a slow-burning ember—in their cells or prison yard. The first step in the process was to generate a spark from the units' appliances or electrical wall outlets. Lighting was often a group effort, with a set of prisoners responsible for distracting the correctional officers. Ethan describes the process: "You get a pencil, and you take the lead out, and break it in half and stick it into a plug-in [electrical socket] . . . to spark the fire. Kind of gets the wick, gets the wick going. And burns like a smoke, right?'" Televisions, vacuums, and the unit's food reheating oven occasionally served as the power source for this process. "Well, there's a vacuum, and you can take a piece of lead from a pencil, you take toilet paper, and you like put it in the socket in the vacuum, and you turn the vacuum on and then all a sudden it lights the fucking thing" (Brooklyn). Physical traces of such sparking were visible on some prison units in the burn marks on electrical outlets and broken television sets shorted out during the lighting process.

The spark was then used to light a one-or-two-foot-long piece of elaborately wound paper towel or toilet paper, which they hid in the yard or a cell. Harvey provides some details about this process and the lengths people went to hide a wick:

> You put a piece of paper towel in your wick, and as soon you spark the lead in between, you take the other piece of paper and, phew! Lights it. And usually, they'll have one guy, pick one guy, and pay him, and he'll suck out his toilet. . . . So, they will hit the flush button on the toilet, and then they'll scoop all the water in the toilet, and they take the pillow and they vacuum it down so all the water will suck out. So, it's negative. So, all day there'll be no water in the toilet, and they won't be able to use their toilet. They will have to piss in the garbage can or bottles or whatever. But, they'll take a piece of toilet paper, from you to me [several feet in length], and they sit there and spin it, so it's a big rope. And you curl it around on your toilet [under the rim], and they'll light one, and, and slow burn it, [how long it] takes to burn a big rope. It will take twelve hours.

Not everyone had a wick at hand when they wanted or needed a light, so further cooperation was required to smoke a joint or cigarette. This, in turn, also involved other creative uses of the prison's materialities. Carson, for example, notes how people would go "fishing" for a light when locked in their cell for the night: "You go fishing. You'll take a little pack of sauce or something, tie a string to it, and out your door it goes. We'll sit there, try to get that line, and pull it in. . . . Whoever has the wick, that's where you send your line down to. He'll take the wick and light it. You pull it back to your cell. If somebody further down the line wants it, you start another one." What Carson describes here is tying a food or sauce packet to the end of a string. The packet was then tossed down the cellblock. Those who were burning a wick in their cell would attach an ember to the string, and the "fisher" would then reel the line back in with the ember attached.

These fine-grained ethnographic insights into the everyday nature of the drug/prison nexus accentuate the plasticity of objects in prison. The material qualities of different things (weight, flammability, permeability, conductivity, adhesiveness, absorbency) were capitalized on in transporting, concealing, and consuming drugs. Garbage bags were used to store brew. Cola bottles served as urinals when someone had a wick hidden in the toilet. Dried orange peels became filler on improvised cigarettes. Kinder eggs were ready made and served as easily concealed drug containers. Toilet paper was transformed into a burning cinder, and nicotine patches were reassembled into a smokeable form. Televisions sat disabled from lighting wicks. Marmalade-sealed joints were forged from bible pages, and sauce packages became weights for wick-fishing. The closer one looks, the more one sees an abundance of hybrid physical concoctions incorporated into the prison/drug nexus.

One final material phenomenon tied to drugs deserves special consideration: smell. While we often overlook the physical qualities of scent, prisoners could not easily ignore the odors in prison. Instead, they persistently and passionately drew our attention to the lived realities of smell, which, much to our initial surprise, had multiple connections to the everyday experience of drugs.

Prisons have distinctive smells. Depending on the location, this aroma combines the smell of disinfectant, body odor, trash, sewage, and cafeteria food. People, including researchers, who enter prisons carry "outside" smells on them derived from shampoo, soap, detergent, and food not available in prison. Steven brought this to our attention in one of our first interviews: "I can smell the outside of prison on you. Yeah. Do you know what I mean? . . . You're not from here [prison], and I can smell it on you." The drug/prison nexus could also conspicuously manifest in the prison's ambient scent.

Familiar smells associated with life in the community could poignantly remind people of what they were deprived of while incarcerated. Hunter, for example, complained that to aggravate the men incarcerated on his unit, correctional officers deliberately brought in strongly aromatic coffee from Canada's iconic Tim Horton's restaurants. As prisons provided only instant coffee, the aroma of one of their preferred legal drugs (caffeine) could be particularly maddening: "There's guards that stopped at a . . . a what's it called . . . Timmy's, just to buy coffee and just make us smell it or whatever. Just to be . . . you know that's how they are."

Smoke from tobacco or marijuana burning in the yard or on a unit could also linger in the air. Individual officers differed in how useful it is to pursue illicit smokers (Haggerty and Bucerius 2020*a*). Officers who ignored moderate drug smoking would comment about how marijuana helped calm a unit. Prisoners generally agreed (Wilson et al. 2007). At times, the level of smoking was extreme. For example, officers and prisoners drew our attention to "weekend unit" in a dedicated building outside the main prison walls. Individuals serving their sentence intermittently over several weekends would often "pack up" with concealed drugs before they entered each Friday night. Officers recounted how some individuals would park outside, consume drugs in their cars, and then check in for their weekend sentence. As one officer pointed out: "They try to be high enough that it lasts all weekend, so they spent the entire weekend sleeping it off in the tanks." These are the sparse "drunk tanks" where officers placed individuals who arrived at the prison severely intoxicated for their Friday check-in time. The tobacco and marijuana smoke on this unit would get so thick that officers opened the doors to the outside to let in fresh air.[3] Correctional officers in Staffordshire, England, reported that their uniforms would often smell like marijuana smoke at the end of their shift (*Economist* 2013).

Officers who were motivated to police such behavior could have a hard time identifying who was holding or smoking the drugs. Connecting with the previous discussion about drugs and the prison's security architecture, it was apparent that a unit's spatial arrangement influenced detection. In particular, officers on some prison units spent most of their shift working behind a large desk on a slightly elevated platform open to the unit. Such an arrangement differed from other units where officers monitored the cells and common areas from a station enclosed behind plexiglass. Officers on the more open units had a better sense of a unit's mood and more direct contact with its sounds and smells, including the smell of drugs: "There was no, with guards, they're inside a bubble [enclosed officer station], right? Now they're open, so they know everything. They see everything. They smell everything. They know everything. You spill a brew; they know there's a brew on the unit. Smokin' weed or smokin' cigarettes, they know it's there. They smell it. They give us shit. Try to catch people doing things. Cat and mouse game" (Blake).

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[3] Serving time on the weekend was seen as a privilege. Officers indicated that they were generally unconcerned if prisoners simply walked out this open door and "escaped," as they believed such individuals would eventually be rearrested. They assumed that the prospect of serving their time continuously in the main prison would deter them from walking away.

Mike observed how a recent spate of drug charges on his unit was due to sellers neglecting how their bodies and clothes had become permeated with the smell of marijuana. Correctional officers were drawn to the scent: "Because they're [the drug sellers] getting sloppy. They're getting sloppy, and they're carrying either too much, or they have a certain smell to them. Because if they're bringing weed, mostly it's weed, weed always smells." Ava pointed out an example of what such "sloppiness" could look like: "Where people fuck up is when they go and hoop their shit they don't wash their hands. So, your hands smell like the drugs. And, well, that's where the dogs will smell it."

The lingering scent of burning toilet paper could also be distinguished as it wafted from hidden wicks. Theodore suggested that as many as 20 wicks might be smouldering on a unit containing 60 individuals. Simultaneously igniting so many wicks was a type of group insurance against losing access to the fire needed to light cigarettes or joints. As searches by correctional officers were time-consuming and disruptive, they tended to be infrequent. Even if officers confiscated some wicks, others were still available. Theodore consequently urged our research team to encourage the officers simply to let the prisoners on his unit burn wicks in the yard to curtail this ongoing "hide and seek" dynamic: "And you [the research team] got to tell the guard, you know, straight up, honestly. 'If you guys [correctional officers] let our wick burn in the yard or wherever it was, or, you know what I mean, we wouldn't have 20 wicks going in the unit. Because we don't want to get them busted [confiscated]. Because you keep busting all our wicks. So, we're going to make more and more just to keep them going. You know?' If there's something [drugs] on the unit, we're going to find a way to light it. There's no doubt about it. Right?"

Rather than engaging in an often futile attempt to locate all the wicks on a unit, most officers appeared to tolerate the practice if the smell was not overpowering. Theodore, who had been repeatedly incarcerated, elaborated. He noted that as he had detailed knowledge of prison culture, officers would ask him to inform other prisoners of the informal rules about burning wicks: "Because, they say, because I'm a veteran. Because I've been around, I know what to do and stuff. So, they [correctional officers] just ask me to tell the guys to keep it on the low, keep it, you know. . . . Don't have the place stinking like the wick. And the fire alarm's going off. They don't like that shit. Right?"

For some, the everyday craft knowledge of incarceration extended to developing skills in concealing drug-related smells. Individuals who wanted to smoke drugs in their cells had first to learn to direct the smoke through the vent in a way that did not set off the adjacent smoke detector—a process that apparently involved using shampoo to mask the smoke smell. Individuals who smuggled drugs into prison sometimes smeared the package with potent-smelling substances, such as pepper, to try to hide the drug scent. Alternately, they could rely on the powerful ambient funk on some units to conceal drug-related smells. King, for example, noted that it was hard to make brew on his boot camp unit because it was exceptionally sanitary compared to regular units. It lacked the pungent odors that usually masked the smell of fermenting alcohol: "It's too clean on boot camp. You'd be able to smell it. It wouldn't work. You can smell homemade brew as soon as you walk on range. If you get a whole bunch of BO and dirty stuff around, you can't smell it, like the normal ranges."

Smell might seem like an arcane academic concern considering the many ostensibly more serious hardships people face in prison. However, a moment's reflection on the realities of living in extremely close quarters with individuals who have highly variable hygienic practices reveals why so many of our participants were preoccupied with the smell of people on their units or with whom they shared a cell. Our conversation with Joey, for example, started with us casually observing: "So there's like 50 guys in here?" to which he replied, "Yeah. And fuckin they stink." Or, as Grayson noted, "There's a little vestibule, probably half the size of this room, with 18 guys compacted into it. One bench. We're in prison. Like, people get violent. People stink in this place. People don't shower. You're gonna get fights." Chance, for example, describes how people could be forced off a unit because of their smell: "I've seen dudes who had to leave units because of how untidy they are. Like, dude, you've been here for a month, and you showered once. You stink. We have given you soap. We did everything we can for you. You need to leave." Indeed, given how regularly people spontaneously complained about the prison's noxious smells, it is surprising that the "olfactory pains of imprisonment" has yet to be added to the prodigious list of "pains of imprisonment" that now populate the scholarly literature (Sykes 1958; Haggerty and Bucerius 2020*b*).

The connection between personal scent and drugs occasionally had particularly distressing dimensions. Given that many individuals would become "dope sick" soon after entering prison, their cellmates would find themselves in proximity to someone undergoing withdrawal. In an article in *Vice*, Beth Thompson describes her experience of detoxing in an

American prison. Her strongest recollection was the smell: "The small, communal toilet was in the corner of the pod, enclosed by a short stall that did nothing to keep the smell of diarrhea, vomit, and blood from overtaking the unit" (Brico 2018). Jack had shared a cell with individuals in this condition: "I had guys that come off the street that are dope sick and puking." Having been previously housed with such individuals, Violet complained: "I hate fucking new people that come in. Because they're coming off shit [drugs]. Like they're withdrawing. So, they just . . . so it's coming out of their pores. They stink. Some of them don't know how to go and take a shower."

A foundational aspect of the "inmate code" holds that prisoners should keep to themselves and not get involved in other people's affairs. However, this can be in tension with a different aspect of the code holding that people need to take care of their own business, which extends to keeping themselves and their spaces clean and tidy. Sharing a small cell with someone who was withdrawing could accentuate these tensions, as some individuals were willing to "get in the face" of their cellmates to encourage or compel them to address the issue. This is apparent in the comments from both Luke and Grayson, who each describe confronting a cellmate going through withdrawal:

> *Luke:* Like sometimes we can't handle it. Some guys stink. They refuse to shower. They come off the street. They don't wanna get up [out of bed] cuz they're freaking dope sick. "Oh, I'm sick, I don't wanna shower." I got a roommate now that's like that.
>
> *Interviewer:* Do you tell him?
>
> *Luke:* Sure, I tell him, I always give him a warning. I always give him a warning. I'll give him a warning, and I'll give him a time limit. And then after that, I'm fucking serving you up [assaulting you], buddy.

"I woke up one day, and this guy stunk so bad. I woke up one day, I pissed on him to get him outta there. Like, I just got up and started peeing on him. He was like, 'What the fuck are you doing that for?' Well, you got to have a shower somehow, fuck. . . . He finally got up and left" (Grayson).

By no means were all incarcerated people so callous or aggressive toward their "dope sick" cellmates. But even individuals who were sympathetic complained about trying to manage the smell. Rita described one innovative strategy she used to cover the noxious odors—which is another example of how mundane objects can acquire new drug-related uses in prison: “I’m not the type of person who’s going to be like ‘You stink, get out of my cell.’ Like, I’m nice, and I’m just sitting there like wearing Bounce [clothes dryer] sheets under my shirt [laughs]. Because, like, you can’t do anything about it, and it sucks. It really sucks.”

Drawing attention to these unsettling dynamics of smell is not meant to stigmatize individuals who are distressed and struggling through difficult situations. Instead, we focus on these experiential dimensions of scent because they are rarely acknowledged or discussed in the academic literature or in policy circles. That inattention stands in sharp contrast with our participants’ preoccupations, as they regularly and passionately identified the myriad manifestations of scent as among the most visceral aspects of the prison experience and something that could be profoundly challenging. Further, it yet again exemplifies how drugs (in this case, smells associated with drug use or withdrawal) pervade the everyday life experiences of people in prison.

V. Reflections

Mjåland (2016, p. 161) has observed that “exploring the motives and meanings of in-prison drug use has unfulfilled potential in generating knowledge about the sociology of prison life.” The details we provide add more flesh to the bones of that observation by providing empirical insights into the pervasive and multifaceted ways drugs shape prison life. The examples and vignettes we provide are illustrative, not comprehensive. We hope, however, that they advance long-standing ethnographic efforts to develop detailed understanding of incarceration (e.g., Sykes 1958; Goffman 1961; Drake, Earle, and Sloan 2015). Our participants’ fine-grained insights are fascinating and valuable for revealing often unseen routines of prison life.

Such research is particularly pressing in a political and institutional context in which ethics protocols (Haggerty 2021), escalating professorial workloads, and risk-averse correctional officials make it more challenging to conduct ethnographic research in prison (Simon 2000; Wacquant 2002). In Canada, the result has been a conspicuous gap in our understanding, as Canadian scholars have produced surprisingly few in-prison ethnographies (but see Comack [1996] and more recently Tetrault, Bucerius, and Haggerty [2019], Bucerius, Haggerty, and Dunford [2021], Bucerius, Berardi, and Haggerty [2022], and Schultz, Bucerius, and Haggerty [2023]).

We hope this essay leaves readers with a cumulative appreciation that drugs are an inescapable structuring force inside prison. While drugs inform the operation of most institutions (schools, hospitals, military, etc.) and all institutions contain multiple agendas, it is hard not to see drugs as central to the institutional dynamics and day-to-day human experiences of prison. Even in institutions that contain comparatively few illicit substances, prisoners will regularly encounter conspicuous and subtle drug-related forces and dynamics. That is because officials configure prison architecture, spaces, and logistical routines to reduce the presence and effects of illicit drugs. Such concerns are likewise embedded in the minutia of the human and technological scrutiny directed at prisoners and their loved ones. A prison's ambient environment can be filled with drug-related sights, sounds, and smells that, in turn, can condition a unit's mood and people's interpersonal relations.

Accounts of prison life that do not attend in detail to these drug dynamics risk missing important aspects of what happens in prison at macro, mezzo, and micro levels of institutional practice. Appreciating the scope of the influence drugs have on prisons and prisoners requires moving beyond perceiving drugs exclusively as a "social problem." Instead, scholarly understandings will benefit from a more sociological and normatively agonistic orientation attuned to the full range of substances in prison and the breadth of their human and institutional consequences. Indeed, a profitable methodological dictate for prison sociologists is to "follow the drugs." While literally impossible (and ill-advised), this axiom highlights how foregrounding the diversity of a prison's drug situation will lead analysts into almost every facet of the institution.

This essay also demonstrates the value of contemplating the material dimensions of prison and, by extension, other aspects of the criminal justice system. When criminologists have considered the importance of "things," they have often contemplated an object's signifying properties. That is, things have been understood as surfaces onto which meaning is imputed and through which identities are forged. However, as our analysis has suggested, one can learn a great deal about criminal justice processes and institutions by foregrounding how the elemental composition of objects can be manipulated and employed toward different ends. Drugs figure prominently in these processes in prison, as the weight, conductivity, flammability, permeability, scent, and much more are inventively assimilated into drug use, concealment, and transportation.

A casual glance at a prison unit will show groups of individuals compliantly lining up to be counted or walking in the yard. However, extended observation and discussions reveal that behind such scenes are undercurrents of scheming, manipulation, deception, and subterfuge. Drugs are not the only thing that motivates such friction (Rubin 2015), but they are a conspicuous component of these everyday agential forms of "making do." Scholarly reflections on how agency operates in prison would also benefit from recognizing that prisoners' actions operate in, through, and in relation to the material objects they take up, combine, and modify. To be "a prisoner" is to be situated in relation to a distinctive configuration of objects and artifacts.

Our participants' accounts should put to rest any naive sense that prisons are or can be drug-free spaces (Watson 2016). Prisons do not eliminate drugs. Instead, the state punishes illicit drug users by sending them to spaces where they encounter a lot of people using illicit drugs. At best, prisons coercively change someone's drug situation into something different from that to which they were accustomed. This transformation sets in motion a cascade of human behaviors and material modifications that reverberate through the institution in ways that can be unpredictable and counterintuitive.

The conclusions to be draw from this essay are, nonetheless, limited in several respects. We are drawing on a research project conducted in one geographic location in Canada. The drug situation and profile of prisoners in this region are undoubtedly different from other places. As with all social science research, particularly qualitative research, there are questions about whether our participants' observations apply to other institutions in Canada or different countries. The modest but honest answer is maybe. Ultimately, any such assessment will be a function of subsequent work done by researchers examining these issues elsewhere. This study is thus also an invitation for more sustained research on this topic. To be clear, however, our point is not that all prisoners roll a joint with the same improvised materials or smuggle the same drugs into prison using identical techniques. Instead, we have tried to demonstrate the extent and reach of the drug situation as it informs and transforms the everyday experience of incarceration.

We necessarily sacrificed depth for breadth. We deliberately ranged widely inside of prison, singling out myriad interactions, material objects, and operative dynamics relating to the prosaic aspects of drugs and prison. Therefore, it would be invaluable for future research to focus in greater detail on particular activities and objects, as more meticulously detailed examinations promise to reveal even greater nuance and complexity.

Finally, we referred to an undifferentiated group of "prisoners." However, the prison population and people's related experiences can vary according to ethnicity, gender, age, health profiles, and much more. We focused almost exclusively on prisoners, when a comprehensive understanding of the everyday realities of the prison/drug nexus should also consider other individuals and groups. The lives of correctional officers, medical staff, loved ones, teachers, Indigenous elders, program coordinators, and others are conditioned by a prison's drug dynamics. As researchers, we were for a time a part of this picture. We navigated the logistical complexities of prisons locked down because of drug-related violence. We walked onto units where almost everyone was high and postponed interviews when our participants were inebriated. On our first research day, a young woman outside the prison doors asked one of the authors if he would take a "package" for her boyfriend. Some of our participants also occasionally proposed such arrangements, with promises of considerable financial compensation.

Our understanding of prison and drugs would be enhanced if prison researchers examining these issues disaggregated the population of prisoners being studied and expanded the analysis to other pertinent groups. Such inquiries would undoubtedly have the additional appeal of demonstrating peoples' capacities for agency, even in spaces designed to circumscribe, curtail, or crush human flourishing. For that to happen, scholars must first be convinced of Mjåland's claim that knowledge of prison life can be significantly enhanced through such a focus (2016, p. 161). We hope our analysis has helped make that case.

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