Planning for abolition

Defining Terms and Building Networks

There are long-standing, disproportionate harms in policing.

In Canada Indigenous Peoples alongside members of visible minority (and specifically African, Caribbean and Black), disability, gender and sexual minority communities, and low income residents are disproportionately incarcerated and otherwise harmed by policing. Harms include physical violence, psychological impacts, incarceration related disease, and damage to social networks. The 2019 National Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls also drew attention to the violence of neglect in policing, where those with responsibility to care, provide service, or protect from harm do not.

Disproportionate harm in policing is also spatial, producing carceral geographies. Spaces outside of jails and prisons governed through the logics of those institutions, including high levels of surveillance, punishment, criminalization, enclosure and banishment. Police forces are just one part of the carceral. Mainstreamed urban and regional planning plays a key role in the production of carceral geographies through a focus on ordering and development in service of capitalist, white supremacist, and white settler values. The starting point of the proposed research is to ask how planning practices can instead play a role in producing more equitable conditions that support community safety and thriving.

To envision a role for planning practice beyond the carceral, we employ an abolitionist framework. Abolition argues for community safety without support for incarceration, increased resources for police, or supports for carceral logics. Two key themes in practices of abolition are 1) restorative justice focused on ameliorating formal policing systems, including incorporating harm reduction and rehabilitation principles, and avoiding imprisonment in favour of community-based programs. 2) Transformative justice grounded in ideals around non-institutional solutions, and community accountability that centres those that have been harmed, while holding space for healing for those who harm. The past decade has seen a flourishing of abolitionist organizing grounded in ideals around restorative and transformative justice while contributing original and inventive practices and theories. The proposed research builds a synthesis of emerging abolitionist theories and practices, and asks what urban and regional planning can learn from them.

There are four stages of research:
1. A synthesis of emerging understandings of abolition using transcripts from independent podcasts and automated content analysis. By prioritizing podcasts produced by formerly incarcerated and otherwise systems-involved creators, the research outcomes amplify understandings of abolition from communities most impacted by disproportionate policing harms.
2. An analysis of the social-spatial networks of podcasts, their creators, guests and references. The social network approach maintains a sense of the contexts in which knowledge is being produced.
3. A survey of Canadian practicing planners to gauge knowledge and understanding of the connections between planning and policing. Survey findings will provide novel understandings from a Canadian perspective.
4. Consultations with planning practitioners and educators to develop resources that translate study findings into recommendations for urban and regional planning education and practice. The translational aspect of the work allows for knowledge mobilization and direct impact on planning practitioners charged with shaping the future of cities and regions.

Taken together, these outcomes directly address topics identified by SSHRC (2018) as emerging global challenges including envisioning governance systems that serve and retain the trust of changing communities and polities.