

INTRODUCTION FROM THE ISSUE EDITORS

Penal Depth, Weight, Tightness and Breadth: Reflections on Aging, Suffering and Death Behind the Walls

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As a leading ethnographer in criminology who has conducted significant in-depth observations and interviews inside prisons, Crewe (2015, p. 51) criticizes ‘big picture’ theorizing of punishment, noting that it often “stops at the gates of the prison, or breaches its surface somewhat barely or briefly, judging levels of harshness or humanity largely by metrics such as imprisonment rates and prison conditions, or official sources and first appearances” (also see Crewe, 2009). Prisoners and their own accounts, whether mediated by scholars such as Crewe or through their own writing and ethnographies, often remain unacknowledged or become an afterthought in penal policy discussions and academic debates (Piché *et al.*, 2014). This tendency is problematic, as the experiences of imprisonment cannot be gleaned from policy rhetoric or from standardized, quantitative assessments of the penal population (*ibid*, p. 52).

Crewe (2015) suggests qualitative literature on penal depth, weight, tightness and breadth provides a better framework through which to understand prisoners’ life experiences. Depth refers to the invasiveness of the prison regime. Weight refers to the sense of being held down or held back. Tightness refers to forms of control in carceral settings, some of which may not be as heavy or piercing as others. Breadth refers to the coverage, the scope, the all-encompassing nature of prisonization (Crewe, 2011). Overall, this literature on penal depth, weight, tightness and breadth tries to provide an alternative to broad, abstract theorizing of penality (Crewe *et al.*, 2014) by putting emphasis on prisoners’ lives rather than focusing on more abstract indicators. Such an orientation affirms the need to hear from current and former prisoners about their experiences of these issues, as well as criminalization and imprisonment more broadly (Pollack and Eldridge, 2015), when studying the prison and its punitive counterparts operating across and beyond the penal system.

Based on the longstanding work of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP), which is now in its thirtieth year of circulation, and the much longer tradition of the penal press and prison writing (see Gaucher, 2002), we take the position that prisoners themselves are uniquely positioned to offer

reflections on penal depth, weight, tightness and breadth that can bring readers closer to making sense of incarceration. As the writers in this issue and previous editions of the *JPP* demonstrate, current and former prisoners do this by bringing to bear their own voices, with their own terminology, about what it is like to be criminalized and imprisoned.

As you read the articles in this volume, you will be struck by the weight thrust upon the writers as they reflect upon aging, suffering and death behind bars. That a collection on contributions has come together at this particular time, a dozen years after the journal published a special issue on “Aging in Prisons” (Nagelsen and Huckelbury, 2006), tells us that questions of mortality and quality of life remain central concerns for many prisoners, particularly those who have been serving lengthy sentences behind bars and/or are facing death by incarceration. That such reflections are still coming to the fore is not surprising, given that there are a growing number of seniors being caged, which is a direct consequence of longer sentences associated with penal intensification in many jurisdictions (see, for example, Williams *et al.*, 2012; Handtke *et al.*, 2017).

In his latest contribution to the *JPP* Gerald Niles reveals the inconceivable, insidious punishment by neglect experienced by people growing old in carceral settings. Prison administrators fail to deliver adequate, even basic care that all people including prisoners require, but that are especially needed by the elderly. Similarly, Charles Diorio reflects on the lack of health care available for those who the system has exposed to Hepatitis C or who are drug users. These contributions are reminiscent of Vaughn’s (1999) discussion of scenarios where ‘correctional’ medical personnel sworn to the Hippocratic Oath – that is to alleviate suffering – are co-opted by the penal harm movement causing deadly denials or delays of medical treatment to prisoners. In his piece, Dirk Greineder questions the morality, costs and community safety outcomes of incarcerating the criminalized into their elderly years, while making the case for an end to life without the possibility of parole sentences and the development of more decarceration measures, including greater use of compassionate release. Taking us into a prison where death by incarceration is an official practice, T.A. Mahon-Haft provides a phenomenological analysis of twisted and unnerving prison sounds and emotions during the day of an execution. Offering a comparative perspective, Shakkir Talib Mujahid exposes myths regarding prisoner re-entry and rehabilitation in the contemporary penal system, highlighting how the prison boundary extends into the community (Morin, 2015) – a piling on

that does great physical and psychological damage over time, contributing to the onset of unnecessary suffering and premature deaths.

In the section entitled “Continuing the Dialogue on Canada’s Federal Penitentiary System” edited by Jarrod Shook, penal depth, weight, tightness and breadth come into view more fully as Nellie Parr, a writer from Mission Institution, 1417, and David Threinen shine a light towards invasive, oppressive, controlling, and life altering Correctional Service Canada policies and practices they experience on a day-to-day basis. As the Government of Canada slowly rolls-out its findings from their consultation on how to transform the Canadian ‘criminal justice’ system (see, for example, Justice Canada, 2018), we concur with our colleague Jarrod Shook that what is needed now is a little less conversation and a lot more action. The recommendations outlined in Volume 26, Numbers 1&2 with respect to sentencing laws, penitentiary policies and practices, and community re-entry were clear (Shook *et al.*, 2017). Given the proven failure of imprisonment (Mathiesen, 1990), a return to penal moderation (Webster and Doob, 2015) is the very least that should be done while working toward more just, humane and effective ways of conceptualizing and responding to criminalized acts (Morris, 2000; Elliott, 2011) in the Canadian context.

The temporal dimensions of the pains of imprisonment do not simply affect individuals who have been behind bars. These pains are a disruptive torture for families, communities, friends, and other loved ones over generations (Clear, 2007). Prison is one of the worst systemic, organizational harms on the planet. For Clear (1994, p. 4), penal harm is “a planned government act” resulting in the physical and/or mental impairment of a prisoner. Penal harm is inflicted, purposefully, from above. What happens inside carceral institutions is not an accident. We must therefore not only reveal these pains and harms, highlighting the contributions of prisoners to knowing about these phenomena, but also actively challenge and resist them.

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