

BOOK REVIEWS

Prison Sex: Practice & Policy

by Christopher Hensley (ed.)

Boulder (CO): Lynne Reinner Publishers (2002), 189 pp.

Reviewed by Anne-Marie Grondin

Consistent with attitudes about sex writ broadly, prison sex remains a rather private aspect of life within this *total institution*. Few sexual acts have been deemed worthwhile of study – research in this area has focused mostly on sexual behaviours considered deviant, dangerous and criminal. Highlighting an absence of literature on prisoners' healthy sexualities, *Prison Sex: Practice & Policy* pieces together the available literature on a diverse range of sexual activities occurring within American prisons and problematizes institutional policies seeking to prohibit prisoners from cultivating normative sexual desires. Recommendations are made towards future avenues for research, as well as concrete ways of addressing sexual violence and coercion, sexually transmitted infections, HIV and AIDS, which, the authors argue, arise at least in part from prohibitive policies towards sex. The book is mainly directed towards criminal justice professionals, and aims both to inform and to create awareness.

Divided into ten chapters, *Prison Sex* introduces, in each section, a new form of sexual act or one same act from several different perspectives. Each chapter begins with a review of the literature on a particular topic and points to issues which remain unaddressed. Almost all chapters speak to gender differences in the prison experience as it relates, amongst other things, to sex, and compare experiences in male and female prisons. The first chapter contextualizes prohibitive trends towards sexual behaviours in carceral settings through a discussion of retributive attitudes, fiscal cutbacks and the proliferation of the prison industry, which has led, in turn, to a qualitative shift in the prison experience – now characterized by enhanced levels of sexual violence as well as a heightened threat of sexually transmitted infection. In discussing prisoner subculture, the author of the second chapter provides additional context, this time at the micro-level, to describe how prison hierarchy governs much of the sexual behaviour occurring inside.

Chapters three to six address coercive sexual acts in prison, how staff sometimes contribute to the problem and how to respond. Significantly, this section goes beyond the simple 'community/victim – prisoner/offender' dichotomy to include prisoners as *victims* of sexual violence. While chapter

seven deals with the weighty problem of HIV/AIDS transmission, chapters eight to ten look at pro-social, normative forms of sexual behaviour which occur in prison that the authors conclude should be legitimated so as to decrease the incidence of sexually coercive acts perpetrated.

Evidently, any poorly excavated area can be difficult to tackle. As such, the authors of *Prison Sex* can be commended for their work. While we cannot fault them for having to draw from a limited selection of sources, the paucity of the literature does bear burden on the overview of the problematic provided. Specifically, a minority of studies are cited repeatedly throughout the book, almost as though the same three or four major studies informed every article produced, with little by way of new research evidenced.

With regards to policy recommendations, the authors make a number of suggestions as to how institutional policies could better match the (sexual) needs of prisoners, but seem to propose contradictory, sometimes thorny solutions. While, in chapter three, “increased surveillance” (p. 46) is advocated to address the problem of non-consensual sex, the totalizing aspects of the institution are denounced in the second chapter for their role in delineating rigid behavioural proscriptions that create a hierarchy of power (pp. 13-14). While the authors of chapter 13 argue masturbation can provide prisoners with “an alternative outlet to release pent-up frustrations and stresses” and thus prevent the perpetration of coercive sex (p. 141), the subsequent chapter negates support for this contention. Despite these lacunas, the authors are successful in drawing attention to several important areas for research on a topic in critical need of attention.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Anne-Marie Grondin is currently enrolled in her second year of a doctoral program at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. Both her academic background in Criminology and Sociology, as well as her work experience as a former sexual assault clinician frame her research interests around sexual assault policy and preventive efforts in Canada.