

**Behind Bars: Surviving Prison**  
**By Jeffrey Ian Ross and Stephen C. Richards**  
**Indianapolis: Alpha Books (2002), 219 pp.**  
*Reviewed by Greg Newbold*

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In the summer of 1997, Jeff Ross and Steve Richards, professors at the University of Baltimore and Northern Kentucky University respectively, became inaugural members of a new subgroup within the American Society of Criminology. ASC is the largest criminological organization in the world, and the new subgroup was named Convict Criminology. Consisting principally of a small group of ex-cons who had moved on to become college professors, the objective of the Convict Criminology group has been to promote scholarly research into crime and criminal justice that is informed by people with first-hand knowledge of their subject. Jeff Ross and Steve Richards both have experience of prisons. Jeff is a former correctional worker, Steve is a former maximum-security federal prison inmate, and it is that perspective that lies behind this book. *Behind Bars* is the first title this pair has produced together, but it has quickly been followed by a jointly-edited volume *Convict Criminology*, a collection of writings by ex-convict criminologists.

*Behind Bars* is a guide to living in prison in the United States. Although primarily intended as advice for incoming first-timers and those at risk of such an outcome, the practical advice the book offers will, of course, be of immense interest to criminologists, correctional workers, and others concerned with the social dynamics of prisons. Consisting of thirteen chapters in four parts, the book takes the reader step-by-step through the incarceration process. Beginning with arrest, the authors tell readers about what is likely to happen if they get busted, about their rights and about how these rights may, or may not, be applied. Sound advice is given about what to do and what not to do if arrested, about various options that may be presented and about the pros and cons of such options. There then follows a discussion of federal and state prison systems, with a particular emphasis on federal custody.

Section Three takes readers behind the wire and tells them what to expect if they ever get sentenced to time. More sound, practical advice is given about how to act in those critical first days, who to speak to, who to avoid, and about various situations that are likely to crop up. The first thing that most novice prisoners worry about is the threat of robbery, assault, and sexual violation. Ross and Richards give candid and valuable advice about what to do *when* such situations occur—because they almost certainly will. There is a

fine line between responding in a way that will earn you respect, and one that may get you killed. They also provide an interesting run-down on gangs, and the types of gangs that exist in various parts of the country, together with some information about the various roles that gangs are likely to play in the politics of an institution.

Finally, there is a section on what it is like getting out: the exhilaration of unaccustomed freedom followed by the trauma, especially for long-termers, of adjusting to a complex, fast-moving, and often hostile world. Perhaps one of the most valuable sections of the entire book, this section gives wise guidance on how to stay out once you have got out. The pitfalls that so many ex-cons stumble into are traversed, along with the problems a person is likely to experience with employers, landlords and parole authorities. The powerful message is clear: staying out is not going to be easy.

The book ends with an interesting glossary of prison terms and a handy catalogue containing the names and addresses of twenty-five prison reform and prisoner welfare agencies.

As an ex-drug dealer who did time in a maximum security prison in New Zealand, the principal impact of *Behind Bars* for me is the essential inhumanity that pervades the American criminal justice system. The book reinforced an impression I have gained from touring at least two dozen American penitentiaries during my career as a professional criminologist. In America, far more so than in New Zealand, you really do lose a great part of your personal identity if you get arrested and sent to jail. Very quickly you become part of the fuel that energizes a great, lumbering machine; it burns you up and spits out your remnants at the end. But the problem does not finish right there. Monitoring usually continues until expiry of the entire sentence, with authoritarian parole structures and draconian recall criteria ensuring that fully half of all prisoners will be reincarcerated within one year of release—often for petty parole violations. To the extent that parolees can be locked up for misdemeanours that no other citizen would be jailed for, it is a system that is geared to assisting ex-convicts to fail. The difficulties that new releases have staying out are exacerbated by a public that is generally suspicious of, and intolerant towards, those who have fallen afoul of the law.

Jeff Ross and Steve Richards have written a useful and interesting book, in simple language that is as compelling as it is engaging. They present a rare and somewhat blunt view of what really goes on inside those high walls and fences that many of us drive past every day on our way to work. *Behind Bars* is an

important addition to modern criminological literature and should be essential reading, not only for potential prisoners, but also for those whose job it is to deal with convicts after their liberty has been taken away.

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