

# Can we do better?

Rebecca Roberts reviews *Locked down, locked out* describing it as a useful resource for activists

Many academic papers, political speeches and newspaper column inches have been devoted to the idea that – with a tweak here and a tweak there – the police, courts, prisons and probation services can deliver safety and security. Maya Schenwar's analysis is a welcome antidote to these failed and naïve promises. 'We can do better' is the core message in her recent book *Locked Down, Locked Out: Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better*. The text combines rich personal narrative with a critique of the political, economic and social drivers that have led to high levels of punishment and incarceration in the US. This book offers a helpful resource for UK activists committed to scaling back criminal justice.

Schenwar reflects on the incarceration of her sister and personal encounters with the prison system. What jumps out from the pages is the aching sense of helplessness, desperation and pain felt by those on both sides of the prison walls. Through interviews and written correspondence she relays the multiple ways that prisons damage lives and divide communities. While prison can sometimes offer a relatively 'safe place' for some people who may pose a risk to themselves or others, we need to question the necessity and role of incarceration in doing little more than simply containing people with histories of a range of issues such as drug abuse or mental health problems. There must be other ways to create safety.

The text dips in and out of the author's own personal experiences, the storytelling of others, and social analysis. The result could have been messy, but what emerges is an engaging and simple account of what are complex and challenging issues. The book highlights a range of approaches, programmes and practices that can operate outside of criminal justice – and ultimately challenge the necessity of imprisonment and punishment. There is a mix of campaign ideas and community-based programmes.

## Activism and alternatives

Schenwar explores the potential of pen pal schemes in challenging the isolation of imprisonment. We hear about how useful prison radio has been as an organising tool to bring together families, prisoners and activists. Campaigns around specific cases or defendants have also been shown to be useful in raising awareness about the problems in criminal justice.

The book describes the campaigns that led to the closure of the supermax prison, Tamms Correctional Center in Illinois, as well as other institutions. However, while this may have been seen as a 'win', the point she makes is that as a result of these closures, pressure built up elsewhere in the system when the prison population remained static and more people were crammed into other institutions.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina when the building of a new prison was on the cards, activists came together and pressed for a cap on the prison population. This cap was agreed by policymakers and forced the release of some prisoners and prevented the incarceration of others.

Schenwar provides examples of 'transformative justice'. Transformative practices do not simply seek to 'restore' a situation to that prior to an act of harm (as is often the case with restorative justice). The goal is transform the social conditions that perpetuate harm through community-led interventions outside the realms of criminal justice. There is a whole chapter on the 'peace room' – a high school approach that creates a space for facilitated discussion to resolve conflict between students.

There isn't a neat list or menu of perfect 'alternatives', but what is offered is a promising collection of examples that seem to have potential. Schenwar also resists the temptation to oversell these as ultimate solutions – she highlights the limitations and contradictions that appear. However, her core message is one of optimism and hope:

*All over the country, people are implementing community-based accountability and transformative justice strategies making human connection both their jumping off point and their objective. They're cultivating environments – classrooms, neighbourhood programs, workplaces, homes – that foster anti-racist, anti-classist, pro-humanity approaches to justice. They're combining new models of doing justice with larger movements for change, taking on the deep structural issues that drive the current system.*

## Can criminal justice be 'fixed'?

I found the ideas for activism and direct action inspiring. For example, Decarcerate PA posed the question 'what you would build instead of prisons?' to people both inside and outside of prisons – and then shared the answers online for 100 days under the hashtag #insteadofprisons. They were also involved in direct action to oppose the construction of a new prison:

*In November 2012, members of the group Decarcerate PA assembled a large model of a 'little red school house' and a row of school desks on the grounds of a construction site where the building of two new prisons had commenced. Then they sat at desks and linked arms, chanting 'Tear down the jailhouse, build up the schoolhouse'.*

For those sceptical of the idea that criminal justice can be fixed, *Locked down, locked out*, offers a serious stepping off point for building alternative ways of thinking, acting and organising. ■

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