

Book Review

The Older Prisoner

By Diete Humblet

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Reviewer: **Karen Harrison** is a Professor of Law and Penal Justice at Lincoln Law School, University of Lincoln.

The older or elderly offender in prison is an often-neglected research area, with such offenders described as “the forgotten minority” and having “double minority status” (p. 3) in the sense that they are older and also criminals. This has led many to describe this population as “doubly disadvantaged” (p. 3), as in addition to having to cope with the prison environment they must do so with greater morbidity and greater complex health needs. Despite the existence of some academic work,¹ there is still a huge gap in the literature, and so a book which devotes itself to this subject area is both timely and important. Part of the Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology Series, *The Older Prisoner*, by Diete Humblet is an exploration of how older prisoners experience prison life with a particular emphasis on two prison units in Belgium.

As with many other countries around the world, Belgium has seen a rise in the number of older prisoners and so the author was interested in charting what the prison experience was like for this specific subset of the prison population. In her ethnographic study, she focused on two prison sites spending eight months in prison 1 and four months in prison 2. Described in more detail

in the book, prison 1 is one of the largest prisons in Belgium and integrates older prisoners on the main prison wings. In prison 2, however, “frail, older and ill or disabled” (p. 7) prisoners live on a gero-medical unit and in this way are segregated from the main prison population. Data was collected through the author engaging with 20 older prisoners (of which the majority were men) and speaking to 30 prison officers, 10 nurses and several younger prisoners, including those who undertook a prisoner-servant role. The book, which presents the findings of this ethnographic study, is divided into 7 chapters. The first, the introduction, looks at some of the academic literature which is currently available and outlines the basis of the research project. Chapter 2 looks at the academic literature on how we understand older prisoners, while chapters 3 and 4 detail how older prisoners experience life in prison. Chapters 5 and 6 then look at how older prisoners have integrated these experiences into their lives and then finally chapter 7 concludes and brings the main points of the research together.

Chapter 2 begins by trying to clearly define who the older prisoner is and for the purposes of this study, classifies the older prisoner as being someone who had reached or were above the age of 65. What is really interesting about this chapter, however, is how it looks at age, not just from a chronological point of view but also from a number of other factors. So, for example it talks about

how we can be aged by our biological or physiological factors, our functional age, our social age and/or our psychological age. In short, while it does use chronological age (because that is how the prison system ages people) this can be problematic because you can have a young 75-year-old and an old 60-year-old. The chapter also talks about the “pain quotient” (p. 24) which describes the hurdles that must be overcome to make life in prison bearable. This, it is argued, is dependent on the time left to be served and the time left to live. The knowledge that time is running out, therefore makes the experience of older prisoners distinctive when compared to their younger counterparts. The chapter ends by looking at prison design and regimes and argues that both of these are designed for younger prisoners. In many cases this leads to what Crawley² calls institutional thoughtlessness, when it comes to accommodating older prisoners. When coupled with institutional ageism, which whilst often unintentional, nevertheless negatively impacts on older prisoners, this again makes their prison experience distinctive.

One of the key questions in this study is whether older prisoners should be segregated from the main prison estate, and it is this question which the remainder of the book largely focuses on. In chapter 3, we are introduced to the two prison sites in much more detail, with the chapter focusing on “the lived space” (p. 108) and how this space is

1. For example, see: Chu, V. (2016). *Greying behind bars: The Older Male Offender's Experience of Prison Life and Preparations for resettlement*; available at: <https://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Greying-Behind-Bars.pdf>; Crawley & Sparks (2005). Hidden Injuries? Researching the Experiences of Older Men in English Prisons. *The Howard Journal*, 44(4), 345-356; Wahidin & Aday (2005). The Needs of Older Men and Women in the Criminal Justice System: An International Perspective. *Prison Service Journal*, 160, 13-22.
2. Crawley, E. (2005). Institutional Thoughtlessness in Prisons and its Impacts on the Day-to-Day Lives of Elderly Men. *Journal of Contemporary Justice*, 21(4), 350-363.

experienced by the research participants. In prison 1, all had their own cell which offered some privacy and space to which they could withdraw. This was in direct contrast to prison 2, where many of them only had the perimeter of their hospital bed, with them having to pull their blankets up over their heads in order to get some privacy. Prison 1 was not adapted at all for those who had mobility problems or were in wheelchairs and there was very little natural light. Facilities were better in prison 2 but not all of these were accessible to those who had mobility issues and often prison officers did not see it their role to help the prisoners move around the unit. Chapter 4 then moves on to look at how older prisoners are perceived and treated by the prison as an institution, prison staff, and also the other prisoners. On the whole while the participants were critical of the system (citing many examples of institutional thoughtlessness), most saw the prison officers as individuals and on the whole were positive about them. For some the lack of conflict was because they held their tongue and knew that going up against the officers was pointless. This was in direct contrast to how the prison officers in prison 1 viewed older prisoners, with them treating them all the same, regardless of functional differences. While this attitude was slightly better in prison 2, even there the men were treated as a "homogenous bloc" (p.140), with for example, most of the activities designed to help those who had dementia or memory problems. Across both sites the good older prisoner was seen as someone who didn't require much attention with older prisoners on the whole seen as second-class citizens. Relationships with other prisoners could also be strained, with older prisoners in the mixed wings often distancing themselves from other negatively constructed groups such as drug addicts, younger prisoners, and

foreign national prisoners. On both units, many kept themselves to themselves, preferring solitude to companionship. Where the participants did find people that they could pass their time with, these were not classed as friends. Importantly, the study refutes the previous literature which suggests that if older prisoners are segregated, they will form strong amical relationships.

Chapters 5 and 6 then look at how older prisoners cope and thrive in prison. In terms of coping, it is noted how on the whole the participants were calmer and more accepting of their situation. Many had few or small social networks outside of prison, with the majority having already lost their parents and some their spouses. While volunteers helped to fill this gap, many remarked on how time passed quickly for them and how when compared to others they weren't that badly off. For some, drawing on previous life experiences of being at boarding school or in the military helped. Some, however, were able to do more than just survive, with the author exploring the concept of generativity, i.e., what is passed onto the next generation. She notes how for some there was a generative motive for taking part in the research, with them knowing that they would not live to see any potential changes. Some took on generative roles such as advice giver, or the parent/grandparent figure; with such roles much more difficult when older prisoners were segregated from the main prison estate.

The conclusions from this book are many but to include some of the most important ones: older prisoners are heterogenous, chronological age is less important than individual factors, there are additional pains of imprisonment for older prisoners and segregating older prisoners takes away their ability to engage in generative activities. This is a really important book, and I would

recommend to all those who work in prisons and those interested in both gerontology (study of aging) and penology. It is well written, easy to follow and will be of interest to academics, practitioners, and students alike.

Doing Indefinite Time: An Ethnography of Long-Term Imprisonment in Switzerland

By Irene Marti

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Reviewer: Lynn Saunders OBE is Professor of Applied Criminology at the University of Derby and a former Governing Governor in England and Wales.

Doing Indefinite Time is a fascinating and powerful exploration of the experiences of people detained in two closed prisons in Switzerland. Prisoners who are considered to be 'dangerous' and of posing an 'undue risk' to society, are likely to be detained for the rest of their lives in secure prisons.

The numerous photographs (some apparently taken by the prisoners themselves) add to the clear and inciteful descriptions of the physical layout of prisoner's cells, their work and recreation areas. The reader can almost envision themselves as a visitor to the prisons.

The author completed this ethnographic study as part of her PhD. It considers the experiences of elderly and ill people serving indefinite sentences and how the uncertainty about their future has an impact on how they manage to survive their existence.

Switzerland, in keeping with many western countries in recent years, has taken steps to detain people convicted of very serious