

Reviews

Book Review

Start Here: A Road Map to Reducing Mass Incarceration

By Greg Berman and Julian Adler,
Publisher: The New Press (2018)
ISBN: 978-1-62097-223-6
(hardback)
Price: £21.99 (hardback)

This book opens with some stark statistics about the American prison system: there are over two million people in US prisons; the system costs \$80bn annually, and; the incarcerated population has increased 500 per cent per cent over the last 40 years. It has, nevertheless, been argued that there is an opportunity for change as recent years have seen a loosening of the grip of popular punitiveness. It has been argued that there are three primary reasons for this.¹ The first is that there is a growing body of evidence that questions the effectiveness of imprisonment and instead suggests that it may be harmful to society as a whole. Second, declining rates of crime, particularly serious violent crime, across developed nations has meant that there is diminishing political capital from tough rhetoric. Third, the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent economic crisis have meant that the approaches of the past are no longer affordable. It is in this context that Greg Berman and Julian Adler, leading figures in New York's Centre for Court Innovation, have published a book that offers practical ways in which

sentencing laws and practices can be altered so as to reduce the use of imprisonment.

Berman and Adler describe the development of mass imprisonment in the US as not only creating warehouses, but '*accelerants of human misery*' (p.4) that make existing social problems worse. Their aim through this book and their ongoing work at the Centre for Court Innovation is to promote crime reduction and alternatives to incarceration with the goal of *demonstrating 'that contrary to conventional wisdom, it is possible to reduce both crime and incarceration at the same time'* (p.5).

There are three key elements to the approach that Berman and Adler advocate: engage the public in preventing crime; treat all defendants with dignity and respect, and; link people to effective, community-based interventions rather than jail or prison. They suggest that such reforms do not take place at the federal level or rely upon the actions of the president, but instead are enacted through local courts, judges and officials.

The majority of the book focusses on real initiatives taking place across America that promote a more progressive criminal justice system. Some of this will be familiar, such as the use of crime mapping to identify high crime areas and the development of preventative, grassroots services including those dealing with

mental health, trauma and conflict resolution. In sentencing, the authors draw attention to the importance of procedural justice, a term that is increasingly being used in UK prisons, on the basis that where people consider they have been treated fairly they are more likely to respect the law, whether or not they get a favourable outcome. There are a number of examples of positive sentencing practices that reduce the use of pre-trial detention, and more imaginative community-based sentencing in drug courts. Even within the felon population, the authors argue that effective community interventions can be effective and they argue that: 'We must give these programs the resources they need so that they can create small group settings that allow for intensive work with participants and encourage individual accountability' (p.139).

Introducing a shift in sentencing and penal policy is not straightforward. The authors acknowledge that, '*...it will demand patience and understanding from the media, elected officials, and the general public, who must have realistic expectations about what alternatives to incarceration can deliver in terms of results*' (p.140). While this comes across as an understatement, the Centre for Court Innovation has been engaged in this task over many years and has had some success.

Readers in the UK, might be tempted to speculate whether

1. Cullen, F., Jonson, C., and Stohr, M. (2013) *The American prison: Imagining a different prison* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

such lessons could equally apply in this country. Recent Secretaries of State for Justice, including Michael Gove, David Liddington and Elizabeth Truss all stated that reducing the prison population was desirable, but wanted this to be achieved through incremental and informed practice, including better community interventions, rather than through a dramatic change in sentencing policy. Recent years have seen a decline in the UK prison population from its height of over 88,000 in 2011 to under 85,000. This has at largely been the result of reduced criminal court cases being processed, lower numbers of remand and recalled prisoners, as well as increased use of early release under the home detention curfew scheme. This modest but important change has therefore resulted from changing practice rather than policy.

A more dramatic transformation has taken place in the youth criminal justice system. The number of children entering the criminal justice system for the first time has fallen 85 per cent in the decade to 2016-17, from 110,817 in 2007 to 16,541 in 2017. Similarly, the average youth custody population has declined from almost 2,914 in 2007 to 868 in 2017, a reduction of 70 per cent. This quiet revolution has been supported by successive governments, albeit without significant fanfare, informed by influential inquiries and reports, and driven by practitioners in the streets, police stations, local authorities, youth clubs and schools of local communities.

The argument of Berman and Adler's book is that change is possible, indeed that change is happening in local jurisdictions across America. There are also examples internationally, not least of which is the youth justice

system in England and Wales. These real-life examples illustrate that reducing the use of imprisonment is not only possible, but also that it does not undermine public safety and in fact can ameliorate social harms.

Dr Jamie Bennett, Governor of
HMP Long Lartin

Book Review

***Unconscious Incarceration:
How to break out, be free and
unlock your potential***

By Gethin Jones

Publisher: Dot Dot Dot Logo

(2018)

ISBN: 978-1-907282-86-7

Price: £10.99

Gethin Jones presents a book that proposes to change lives, support the most vulnerable and 'bring people back from the gates of hell' (p.92), in 93 small pages of clear and concise language. It combines personal drug addiction and professional psychology experience: alongside the extended metaphor of A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. The classic is effectively retold in an instructive self-development style to help people overcome addiction and negative thinking patterns.

It starts with the chapter 'The End Begins', which is a vivid account of a drug addict in dire living conditions where 'desperation is the only thing driving your mind' (p. 5). The authenticity of the author's hardship shown on the synopsis, 'a childhood spent in the care-system' and 'years in prison', allows trust to be developed in his programme. He has been 'there' himself. It gives readers a chance

to connect with their own suffering and can spark the thought 'if he can grow out of that ... then maybe I can too'.

Gethin then declares 'I will introduce you to your Scrooge'. We find Scrooge is symbolic of the part of the mind fuelling life-destroying addictions to: drugs, alcohol, gambling, food, sex, etc (p. 1). The Scrooge behaviours 'fear, disconnecting from others, close-mindedness, suppressing trauma, denial, head in the sand' are described as preventing happiness (p. 9-16). The programme on how to change these behaviours is then presented.

The absence of academic jargon and the direct tone allow this journey to feel accessible to many. Complex theories are not to be found as the reader simply describes psychological concepts of reflection. Like Scrooge, we are able to meet Marley: the inner voice saying 'something must change', connecting us to 'harsh truths' and 'love' (p. 18-21). He brings the selflessness you need to undertake this journey.

Gethin's aim is to facilitate readers to improve analytical thinking, rational judgement and emotional management. He asks you to look back at your experience and use this as hindsight. The character that does this is named the 'Cabbie'. He is symbolic of the 'Ghost of Christmas Past' in *A Christmas Tale* (p. 27-36). The imagery of sitting in a chair self-reflecting ignites emotions through the interweaved anecdotes of a fictional 'you' on a rehabilitative journey. After learning from the past, visualisation techniques are used which encourage you to analyse your present realities with the character the 'Tour Guide' (p. 37-46) then your future goes under analysis with the 'Time Traveller'