

Book Review

Experiencing imprisonment: Research on the experience of living and working in carceral institutions

Edited by Carla Reeves

Publisher: Routledge (2015)

ISBN: 9781138790469 (hardback)

Price: £95.00 (hardback)

While those who live and work in prisons and other penal institutions are frequently discussed in public spaces, including the media, their voices are less often heard directly and unmediated. Equally the experiences of those people and the complex everyday dynamics of the institutions are rarely given the time and attention they warrant. Even within institutions, different groups often do not fully understand their varying experiences and do not necessarily know entirely what is happening in offices, on landings or in cells when they are not present. It is therefore welcomed that Carla Reeves, a criminologist at University of Huddersfield, has brought together this collection of international qualitative and ethnographic research on prisons and other carceral institutions.

There are a wide range of contributions. They examine prisons, probation and hostels. They address the experience of those being detained, those working within the criminal justice system, and the families of prisoners. They consider a range of developed countries, including United Kingdom, Australia, Portugal, Serbia, Israel, Finland, Canada, Germany, and United States. What the contributions share is an approach that seeks to engage directly with the lived experience of people in the criminal justice system, offering a sense of what it feels like to be within the system, the nature of the everyday social dynamics, and illuminate its entanglement with the wider issues of power and inequality.

The book is divided into three sections. The first is entitled: 'Cultures of imprisonment: stigma, identity and interaction'. It includes work that examines the experience of staff and prisoners. There is a particularly valuable contribution by Jennifer Sloan, who considers how masculinity is constructed and enacted in prisons in relation to work and employment. There is also fascinating work on 'foodways' by Amy Smoyer, showing how women in an American prison use food in order to express themselves, normalise their experience, and build social cohesion. The second section, 'Coping with the pains of imprisonment' includes research on how prisoners deal with a range of problems, including mental health, violence, ageing, and also navigate gender identity in a system designed around the needs of men. The final section is 'The boundaries between the inside and outside worlds', which has some of the most novel work. The chapter on how parents talk to their children about the imprisonment of family members has significance for practitioners, as does a further contribution that analyses and categorises prisoners according to their orientations and attitudes towards prison employment. Two research projects on approved premises, or hostels, including one by the editor, Carla Reeves, open up an area that is not often the subject of such close attention, but is nevertheless a significant pathway for many people being released from prison.

Carla Reeves and the contributors to this book are to be applauded for their shared concern for the human experience of detention. This is a book that has a broad range of material. While inevitably readers will pick and

choose those contributions that are most relevant to them, there is no question that any student, academic or practitioner would find something in this book to interest, excite and move them.

Dr Jamie Bennett is Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill.

Book Review

Voices from American Prisons: Faith, Education, and Healing

By Kaia Stern

Publisher: Routledge (2015)

ISBN: 9781138819870 (paperback)

Price: £26.99 (paperback)

In this distinctive and provocative text, Kaia Stern sets out to 'dispel three myths' about prisons in America: that 'people in prison are not worthy of human rights', that 'people who work in prison are enemies of prison reform', and that 'our crisis of mass imprisonment is not everyone's problem and everyone's responsibility to change' (p.12). Concerning the latter of these two points, we are told, for example, that a third of Americans have family members that have been imprisoned and have worked in law enforcement. It soon becomes apparent that the author is most interested in the denial of human rights to prisoners. Of central importance to the book is the historical dominance of protestant religious orthodoxy. Rather than reject religion as a path to a just penal system, however, Stern invokes Barack Obama's controversial 2006 call for liberal progressives to recognise the existence of common values, and embrace the potential that less conservative religious beliefs hold for spurring positive social change.¹ Stern explains that her underlying purpose in writing the book is to

1. See <http://obamaspeeches.com/081-Call-to-Renewal-Keynote-Address-Obama-Speech.htm>, cited on p.2. Accessed 11 July, 2016.