

# Book reviews

## **The Good Prison Officer: Inside Perspectives**

Edited by Andi Brierly

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Thankfully, it is no longer possible to say that lived experience perspectives are entirely peripheral to conversations and debates around prisons and penal reform, although the influence of such perspectives continues to be relatively marginalised. Additionally, there is a consistent growth in literature that analyses the prison officer role, with a recent upturn in research that analyses the complexities of the work that prison officers undertake as well as prison officer cultures more widely. Until now, these two literatures have remained unconnected and lived experience perspectives and insights into the prison officer role have remained surprisingly under-analysed and overlooked within academic literature. However, in a significant contribution to these two fields, the recently published edited collection *The Good Prison Officer: Inside Perspectives*<sup>1</sup>, edited by Andi Brierley, makes a significant contribution. This edited collection, composed of nine chapters, contributes to the growing momentum around lived experience voices and perspectives that are becoming increasingly

prominent within criminology, along with providing original and meaningful insights into the work that prison officers do.

It is important to recognise that criminology is lagging behind other academic disciplines, such as mental health research and disability studies. Within these areas of research, it is possible to observe service user and lived experience voices having a far greater influence than is evident within both criminology as an academic discipline and in relation to the criminal justice system policy making more widely. Within this context, this book poses a series of questions and challenges both to those working within the criminal justice system, along with researchers who have made careers out of doing research in and around prisons, but who don't have lived experience of the systems they research. This collection privileges 'insider' perspectives into the prison officer role, these are perspectives that are essential in order to more fully understand the work that prison officers do.

Fundamentally the book asks, whose voice matters most within discussions of penal reform and penal policymaking, and more fundamentally whose voices are the ones that are listened and responded to? This book is transformative in this sense, it is a book that should have been written some time ago. *The Good Prison Officer: Inside Perspectives* is composed of seven substantive and personal reflections of the role of the prison officer. Each of the

authors contribute chapters that have a lasting resonance and impact on the reader, building from personal experience and insights into experiences prior to prison. Then subsequently moving onto explore in rich, unflinching detail the good, bad and sometimes ugly aspects of the work that prison officers do. The book achieves something profound through the personal accounts of the authors, with the power and clarity of the writing staying with the reader long after the book has been put down. It was rewarding to read this book from cover to cover, something all too rare these days with academic books and edited collections in particular, illustrating strong editing across the chapters.

It is difficult to be critical of such an important book. Despite this, there is a tension relating to a number of the authors writing and speaking powerfully of their experiences of the Scottish prison system, although Scotland being relatively overlooked in the conclusion. The voices of victims are largely absent, as are reflections on the impacts that professionals other than prison officers can have on those in prison are not developed (although of course, this falls out of the remit of the book focusing on prison officers). The book doesn't lack ambition in attempting to support 'the prison system to be more effective in reducing those stubbornly high reoffending statistics'<sup>2</sup>, something few if any academic books have achieved. The conclusion is largely focused on the Prisons Strategy White Paper

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<sup>1</sup> Brierley, A. (2023) *The Good Prison Officer: Inside Perspectives*. London: Taylor & Francis.

<sup>2</sup> Brierley (2023, 2).

(2021), which is very specific to England and Wales, at a particular time. It might have been good to not focus so closely on critiquing and responding to one policy, which is likely to be superseded with a change of minister and/or government. Additionally, the substantive challenge that the book represents to literature relating to prison settings<sup>3</sup> and for criminology as an academic discipline more widely is relatively underdeveloped in the conclusion. Ultimately, the challenge for the editor and authors is not one of finding a voice or writing eloquently, but of the extent to which prison administrators and prison researchers respond to and engage with this important book.

This book will be essential reading for many years to come for

people with an interest in prison settings, the complexities and ambiguities of the prison officer role as well as lived experience perspectives of prison settings. New prison officer recruits might be given a copy, to get an insight into the career they are about to embark on, the potential their job has in supporting both profound positive change in the lives of the people they will work with, along with the potential to restrict and constrain such change. In conclusion, this book makes an important contribution to the body of literature relating to the prison officer role and lived experience perspectives of the criminal justice system. It should be widely read and have impact across the criminal justice system

and within criminology departments. International analysis in other jurisdictions outside of the UK, would make a very welcome future direction in this work, this would make a significant contribution to what we know about the prison officer role internationally. Additionally, lived experiences reflections relating to other parts of the criminal justice system, and insights into the various roles that people do within various criminal justice institutions, would further enhance and enrich criminology as a discipline. This book provides an outstanding example for others to follow, and if any book can move lived experience perspectives to a more central place of influence, this is it.

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3. Earle, R. (2016). *Convict criminology : inside and out*. Policy Press. Ross, J. I., & Richards, S. C. (2003). *Convict criminology*. Thomson/Wadsworth.