

**The Politics of Prison
Overcrowding: A Critical
Analysis of the Italian Prison
System**

By Simone Santorso

ISBN: 9780367467791

(Hardback) 9781003030997

(eBook)

Price: £100.00 (Hardback)

£31.99 (eBook)

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In *The Politics of Prison Crowding*, Simone Santorso provides an in-depth and documented analysis of the roots and effects of 'demographic transformation' and the neoliberal 'managerial turn' on Italian penal policy and prison working and living conditions from the 1970s. The book guides the reader through global theories on post-war developments in the use and experience of prison and the synergies and peculiarities of the Italian case, as the nation has grappled with a long-term crisis in prison crowding, preceding and continuing after a doubling of the number of foreign national prisoners in the 1990s and the introduction of open prison regimes, dynamic security measures, and minimum requirements of four square metre cell space per prisoner following a 2009 European Court of Human Rights ruling that the Italian prison system was inhumane and degrading. The author explores the manifestation of political, structural, and social forces that have contributed to this chronic problem and delves into its continuing impact on daily prison

life and administration to the present.

A particular strength of the text is the inclusion of the author's own fieldwork, ethnographic and recorded interviews with serving prisoners and prison staff. These testimonies add a human and concrete element to the theoretical treatment, allowing the reader to come into direct contact with the lived reality of prisoners and prison workers. The personal stories and experiences gathered during the interviews contribute significantly to the redefinition of the prison system, highlighting how sentence execution has become more severe and complicated, driven by the contemporary bureaucratic logic.

Considering prison crowding as part of a broader transformation of governance provides a holistic view. The interconnectedness of criminal justice policy and dynamics in Italy suggests a comprehensive and integrated approach elsewhere, offering practical solutions beyond individual policies.

Moreover, the book deftly navigates the intricate web of management policies that shape the Italian prison landscape. Building on this idea, the book delves into the crisis of prison overcrowding, presenting it not only as a legal and constitutional challenge, but also as a significant source of revenue for the State. Decisions taken by the Italian authorities to tackle overcrowding, such as the temporary reduction of the prison population and the increase in capacity, are analysed, shedding light on the management change within the Italian prison system.

Another fascinating aspect is the consideration of prison crowding as part of a broader transformation of State governance and the institutional landscape. The

author deftly links the crowding crisis with the broader dynamics of politics and criminal justice, offering the reader a comprehensive and interconnected view.

The second part of the research, dedicated to the Italian prison landscape, further explores the implications of space and time in overcrowded prisons. The analysis of the economics of prison life and the redefinition of the colour line behind bars add new facets to the overall picture, providing a deeper understanding of the daily challenges faced by inmates.

The final part of the book examines the changing roles of prison security and police officers, highlighting how inmates are losing the habit of being controlled. This change in prison dynamics adds an interesting perspective on security management and the dynamics of the relationships between the actors involved.

In conclusion, *The Politics of Prison Crowding* contributes significantly to the study of prison and justice policies. Its well-organised structure, wealth of data and testimonies and critical analysis of the dynamics of the Italian prison system make the text informative, engaging and stimulating for scholars and students as well as practitioners. This comprehensive exploration, based on real-life accounts and solid research, positions the book as an indispensable tool for understanding the complexities of contemporary prison policies and the administration of justice. The book combines academic rigour with a human touch, offering a nuanced perspective on the challenges faced by those behind bars and those tasked with managing the intricate dynamics of the Italian prison system.