

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

May 2018 No 237



Special Edition
50 Years of the Parole System
for England and Wales

Reviews

Book Review

On the Parole Board: Reflections on Crime, Punishment, Redemption and Justice

By Frederick Reamer

Publisher: Columbia University Press (2017) ISBN: 9780231177337 (paperback) £24.95 (paperback)

Few people experience life inside of prison. Even fewer are charged with the formidable responsibility of deciding whether inmates should be released. F.Reamer

The working practices and day to day experiences of Parole Board members are somewhat shrouded to those outside of this distinct group. This book lifts the lid on the Rhode Island Parole Board and allows the reader to gain a glimpse into the decision-making processes involved. These weighty parole decisions impact the inmate, victims, their families, and the public. Here Frederic Reamer draws on his 24 years as a member of the Rhode Island Parole Board in the United States (1992-2016) to offer his insights on the inner workings of the board and his experience of this challenging decision-making.

Professor Reamer's background includes a career as a social worker in prison and mental health settings, with subsequent academic university appointments conducting research in to professional ethics. He draws on his rich research and social work background extensively in this, his latest book. The book includes thoughtful consideration of contentious issues that he

recommends anyone who must 'decide the fate of prison inmates had better wrestle with'. These include consideration of rehabilitation versus retribution, the origins of criminal behaviour, blame, shame, tragedy and hope, and although he offers no answers to these debates the book acts as a catalyst for their careful thought.

Throughout his overview of the US criminal justice system, Reamer illustrates key points with 're-created' case examples, anonymized accounts from hearings and poignant victim accounts. He also interweaves his own individual opinions, offering deeply personal reflections on his philosophical position regarding some of the recurring moral issues. In the first chapter Reamer discusses free will. He outlines the opposing positions of those who see crime as a choice, 'deliberately, willingly and rationally' taken, weighing up calculated risks, in stark contrast to determinists, who posit that offenders are 'essentially victims of errant genes, trauma or toxic environmental circumstances that have led them down life's wayward paths'. Reamer suggests that how people respond to offenders is often a direct function of their beliefs about the extent to which the offenders sitting before them are, or are not, responsible, in the free will sense of the term, for their misconduct, and that this extends to parole hearing decisions.

Reamer's work he states was influenced in part by a longstanding relationship with a multiple life-sentence serving inmate, Dave Sempstrott. Dave, who had faithfully attended weekly group meetings led by Reamer, for nearly two years, barely spoke during these sessions. However,

when Professor Reamer left the Missouri State Penitentiary to work in Rhode Island they began a personal relationship which lasted for over 30 years, until Dave's death. It is clear this relationship had a profound impact on Reamer's view of criminality and he acknowledges its 'influence on [his] approach to the decisions [he] made as a member of the Parole Board'. Reamer expresses compassion for the lifelong challenges faced by prisoners often with severe trauma histories, mental health difficulties, and 'out of control' issues with substances. This compassion is in turn extended to the victims, who may face lifelong grief and torment at the hands of crime. Likewise, in a later chapter, he discusses the resilience and 'grit' of many victims and inmates, who demonstrate 'an indomitable spirit and ability to persevere in the face of daunting circumstances'.

Alongside these personal reflections and case vignettes, Professor Reamer underpins his criminal justice analysis with well researched, historical data. For example, in his chapter on Punishment, Retribution and Shame he draws upon research into the probability of offenders receiving the death penalty. Currently, capital punishment is used as a legal penalty in 31 US states, within the federal government and US military. The US is one of 57 countries worldwide, and the only western country, to apply the death penalty. He knowledgeably discusses this and the data on wrongful convictions, and proudly affirms that Rhode Island was one of the first states to abolish the death penalty (despite its later revocation). However, this academic context acts as an aside to Reamer's principled debate and

personal standpoint on the purpose and moral acceptability, or not, of the death penalty. This balance of fact and opinion makes for an engaging read which would be of interest to those from criminal justice backgrounds and readers intrigued by the workings of the Parole Board. Clinicians and academics will also be interested in the book for its balance of insights in to victim experiences and synthesis of relevant literature.

Whilst reading the book it is difficult not to draw out the parallels and distinctions between the Rhode Island Parole Board and that of England and Wales. Indeed, differences exist even across the US, as each of the states with a Parole Board has their own laws and criteria pertaining to parole. One of the five criteria that needs to be considered by the Rhode Island Parole Board is 'that there is a reasonable probability that the prisoner if released, would live and remain at liberty without violating the law'. This compares to the England and Wales Parole Board test that *'the board must be satisfied that it is no longer necessary for the prisoner to be detained in order to protect the public from serious harm'*. There also appear to be clear distinctions in how the oral hearings are run, although specific details are not offered. On the morning of hearing days, the board meet with any victim who wishes to engage, these meetings are scheduled at half hour increments. The afternoons of typical parole hearing days then involve the conduct of around 25

hearings in comparison to the two conducted per day in English and Welsh prisons. The Rhode Island board also have a clear policy that inmates must have at least six months without disciplinary action in custody to be seriously considered for parole. Whereas prisoners with adjudications can still be considered for parole in England and Wales, (however the seriousness and frequency of these will of course be included amongst the myriad factors considered to inform the parole decision). Of note too is that Reamer refers to all Parole Board members being 'on call to issue detention warrants if police and or parole officers had reason to believe a parolee had violated conditions of their parole', this work is not done by Parole Board members in England and Wales.

Common ground between Reamer's experiences of Parole Board work and those of Parole Board members in England and Wales can also be identified. 'Parole Boards everywhere examine mounds of shifting, sometimes elusive, data. They use historic patterns to forecast a future that will be shaped by many complex variables. They deal with odds and probability not certainty'. England and Wales Parole Board members will identify with the 'hours and hours poring over the records' that Reamer describes before each hearing. Also, the weighing up and balancing of the recognition of inmates' progression in custody with the gravity of their offence(s) alongside the past, current and

hypothesized future risk of causing further harm. Not to mention, the scrutiny and security protocols at the gates of prisons, and the curious glances from prisoners in the grounds at the Parole Board members 'dressed in civilian clothes and cradling our laptops'.

Professor Reamer attributes his interest in understanding crime to having his curiosity piqued by the striking cover of a library book on one of his many childhood library visits. He chose a book off a shelf and describes the cover, which he still remembers, with a photo of a prison cell on the front jacket. Reamer's book may have the same impact on those who see its starkly contrasting orange uniformed, hand-cuffed, segregation prisoner in an austere prison corridor. He describes how the photographs in the book he kept returning to on future library trips impacted on him; 'my questions were endless, as was my fascination', he describes how to this day this curiosity has persisted. Readers of Reamer's book may feel the same. Whilst it offers a personal view on several complex issues, it sparks further debate, both internally and for conversation with others about the value we place on freedom, the complex actions leading to those who lose theirs, and the difficult decisions of the Parole Board in granting that freedom back to those who are felt to warrant it.

Georgina Rowse is a member of the Parole Board.