

Foreword

The growth in incarceration in the United States has been so sustained and long-lasting that virtually all readers have spent their entire academic lives, if not their entire lives, in the era of mass imprisonment. During this time, the count of inmates behind bars rolled forward much like the odometer on an automobile—clicking upward relentlessly toward the next round number: a few hundred thousand in the 1970s eventually surpassed the 2 million mark and then moved beyond 2.4 million in 2008. In the past five years or so, it is as though policymakers have finally come to their senses, awakening to the reality that this mindless embrace of locking up fellow Americans was an astounding policy failure that has created a correctional nightmare. As Travis Pratt noted, the nation had become “addicted to incarceration.” The recovery process will not be easy.

In this context, it is perhaps understandable that scholars have focused an inordinate amount of attention on the sources, scope, and impact of mass imprisonment. We have learned much about the “culture of control,” “governing through crime,” “the punitive imperative,” “the prison experiment,” and similar concepts that have illuminated the nature of the incarceration movement. Indeed, criminologists did their best to form a collective Dear Abby, advising all who would listen that using imprisonment to deal with crime was expensive, of limited effectiveness, and often racially unjust. For a long time, nobody seemed to listen; fortunately, many policymakers from both ends of the political spectrum now are.

In short, it was difficult, if not impossible, for scholars to ignore the elephant in the correctional room—mass incarceration. But doing so came at a price: they gave far less attention to what was going on inside the nation’s prisons and, with a few notable exceptions, remained silent on how to improve the experience of those who, day in and day out, resided within the

society of captives. This neglect was to a degree inadvertent. Time spent focusing on one issue—the policy issue of mass imprisonment—is time not spent focusing on another issue—in this case, how to reform the internal quality of correctional facilities. But this neglect—this turning a blind eye to the plight of the incarcerated—also was a conscious choice rooted in criminologists’ professional ideology.

A core belief, held explicitly or implicitly, by most criminologists is that prisons are inherently inhumane and thus beyond reform. There can be no such thing as a “good prison.” This idea can be traced to first part of the 1970s. In 1971, Philip Zimbardo and colleagues conducted the famous Stanford Prison Experiment in which psychologically normal undergraduate students placed within a mock prison quickly were transformed into oppositional inmates and coercive custodians. The fact that the experiment had to be halted to prevent further harm to the participants sent a powerful message that prisons, by their nature, had a brutalizing effect on all inside. Shortly thereafter in 1974, Robert Martinson published a famous essay in *The Public Interest* claiming that prison rehabilitation programs were, by and large, ineffective—a conclusion soon known by the shorthand phrase, “nothing works.” Taken together, there seemed to be incontrovertible scientific evidence that the total institution of the prison was inhumane and that even the most well-intentioned efforts to help reform inmates could not work within its walls. Other events of the day lent credence to this view, including the lethal suppression of the Attica prison riot (which occurred in the month following the Stanford Prison Experiment), revelations of inhumanity in other total institutions (especially mental hospitals), and the broader abuse of state power within criminal justice and in other domains (e.g., foreign policy).

This conception encouraged many criminologists to abandon the social world of the prison as a valued object of investigation. Why study correctional institutions if it was an established truth that they were hopelessly coercive and brutal? Those scholars who still bothered to examine prisons did not question this truth; instead, their project was to document the ways in which institutions were violent, victimizing, disorderly, dehumanizing, and otherwise deleterious. They also held out little hope that this disquieting social order could ever be otherwise. Efforts to improve prison life were thus seen as a fool's errand—destined to fail. Worse, trying to make prisons less brutalizing would achieve, at best, minor incremental improvements that would come at the high price of lending legitimacy to the prison enterprise. Scholars who dared to align themselves with prison officials risked being labeled “administrative criminologists” and as “tools of the state.” Wishing to avoid such stigmatizing labels, most correctional scholars rejected a reform agenda and settled instead for a different policy: oppose putting all but the most violent, predatory offenders behind bars.

This anti-prison stance—with the prescription to divert as many people from incarceration as possible—was ideologically comforting but ultimately foolhardy, for two reasons. First, policymakers did not listen to criminologists or read their books. Instead, they continued to embrace get-tough rhetoric and to lock up massive numbers of Americans—as the Pew Charitable Trusts calculated, a figure that by 2008 reached 1 in 100 of us. Second, it placed these scholars in a position of having nothing to say about the internal regimen of prison. Their lack of involvement simply opened the way for different voices to be heard—those who favored a mean-spirited corrections in which increasing prison austerity was trumpeted as a way of exacting retribution and of teaching offenders that crime does not pay.

In 1987, John DiIulio sought to counteract this dominant view in his controversial book, *Governing Prisons*. A political scientist by training, DiIulio argued that similar to other organizations, how prisons were managed shaped the quality of institutional life. Wardens and other correctional staff were not pawns who reacted in predetermined ways to the prison's structural arrangements. Rather, they were managers whose decisions and treatment of inmates produced either orderly, safe, and reformatory prisons or disorderly, unsafe, and criminogenic prisons—or something in between. It is not clear, however, why DiIulio's thesis was so controversial. To be sure, his particular ideas about how best to govern prisons were speculative and clearly deserving of further empirical scrutiny. But objection in many quarters occurred simply because DiIulio challenged criminological orthodoxy in suggesting that prisons could be made more decent.

It is within this context that *Hard Time* was initially published, also in 1987. When I read the first edition, I was struck by Robert Johnson's intellectual courage to reject the reigning professional ideology that prisons were unredeemable institutions. He detailed meticulously the harsh realities that made prisons as bad as the critics claimed them to be. But he also unearthed the promising sides of this social world and articulated pathways to make prisons more decent places—issues I return to shortly. I was so taken by this analysis that I immediately assigned the book as required reading in my course titled “Prisons and Jails.” Indeed, I believed that *Hard Time* was a contemporary classic. Now, three decades later and entering its fourth edition, I can attest that, like fine wine, the book has improved with age. In part, I suspect this is because Professor Johnson has had the wisdom of adding quite capable coauthors, Ann Marie Rocheleau and Alison B. Martin. This scholarly trinity has succeeded in creating a volume that is wonderfully written and deeply researched (with 1,775 footnotes!). But its pages are infused

with something more: an abiding belief that prisons can be made more humane and effective—and that the people within them are not beyond redemption and do not have to live in immiserating conditions.

Hard Time is replete with a lengthy roster of special insights, each of which enriches our understanding of prison life. Accordingly, it is difficult to identify core themes that necessarily supersede in importance others on this list. Still, I can share the two key ideas in the volume that have long had a major impact on my thinking about corrections.

First, Johnson and colleagues document the public cultures that flourish in prison—one held by the inmates and the other by correctional officers. In many ways, these beliefs and actions—often involving violence, hyper-masculinity, coercion, and demeaning rhetoric—are precisely what infuse the orthodox view within criminology that prisons are inherently inhumane and beyond genuine reform. These public cultures are real and affect the unhealthy choices that prisoners and their keepers make. But Johnson, Rocheleau, and Martin also unmask another set of cultures—the private cultures of inmates and correctional officers—that are rarely identified or understood but that are crucially important in the lives of prison actors and as a basis of reform.

Among correctional officers, there is a fair amount of pluralistic ignorance, where most guards assume that their compatriots all embrace the public culture of the tough custodian. But in private, the silent majority gives lie to Zimbardo's portrayal of them as invariably transformed by the keeper role into brutes. Unlike the subjects in the Stanford Prison Experiment, they are not a random selection of psychologically healthy students—empty vessels of plasticity to be shaped by experimental contingencies. Instead, they choose correctional work as a career and come to their occupation with a view of inmates that is, in the least, complex. They typically

disavow that they are mere hacks whose job is to warehouse the wicked. Rather, as John Klofas and Hans Toch showed in the early 1980s, they seek to enrich their officer role through a human services orientation that involves, where possible, assisting their charges to better themselves. Correctional officers thus are a potential invaluable resource in making prisons a more decent place in which to live.

In a similar way, prison inmates have their own private world in which they seek to escape the dangers of the more predatory public culture. As Johnson and his colleagues reveal, most inmates want to avoid trouble and to live in prison in relative peace. They carve out “niches” that provide them with relationships, activities, routines, and material possessions. These niches are one way in which inmates survive—finding meaning, identity, support, and a measure of autonomy in an otherwise depriving and controlling environment. The pursuit of niches points to the larger challenge faced by all inmates: how to cope with what Gresham Sykes in *The Society of Captives* described as the “pains of imprisonment.”

By depriving inmates of a range of material wants, human contact, and personal autonomy, prison life is painful and exposes offenders to chronic strain. As I learned in my graduate career at Columbia University from Robert Merton and my mentor Richard Cloward, strain does not lead ineluctably to untoward conduct. The key issue is how individuals adapt to or cope with the strains being experienced. As seen in the work of Peggy Thoits and others, the stress literature in the sociology of mental health has made the same insight: the worst effects of strain can be avoided if people have the individual and social resources (e.g., support from others) to cope effectively.

This discussion brings us to what I believe is the most significant contribution of *Hard Time*: inmates can survive, if not grow personally during, their prison experience if they engage

in *mature coping*. Johnson, Rocheleau, and Martin describe mature coping as the capacity to “deal with problems, meeting problems head-on, using all resources legitimately at one’s disposal.” It thus involves a sense of self-efficacy and the willingness to attempt to assert control even when it is difficult to do so—as is commonly the case in prison. Immature coping involves reacting to strain by lashing out at correctional officers, impulsive acts of violence against fellow inmates, and even denying that problems exist or are one’s responsibility. Some inmates might be fortunate to enter prison ready to engage in mature coping. But for many others, it is a skill to be taught, modeled, and encouraged by prison staff. Treating inmates decently and fairly—acting maturely toward them—is an essential component of this process. As Johnson and colleagues poignantly conclude, much is at stake: “Mature coping is at the core of what we mean by correction or rehabilitation and, thus, creates the possibility of a more constructive life after release from prison.”

The ultimate purpose of *Hard Time*, I believe, is to make “a case for decent prisons.” Since its first edition published in 1987, the book has rejected the criminological orthodoxy that prisons were beyond reform and that nothing works to assist offenders so long as they are stuck within the society of captives. Johnson, alone and with his coauthors, has refused to accept that the worst-case scenario for prisons is the only scenario possible. Instead, this work has shown that prisons have not only their dreary and dangerous side but also their private and purposive side. Correctional officers and prison inmates are not mindlessly driven to be convicts and hacks entrenched in a coercive battle for control. Rather, they are living beings equipped with agency, the capacity to acquire human capital, and the desire to exercise social concern toward others. The prison environment can be arranged to encourage among guards and inmates this “better angels of our nature,” to borrow Steven Pinker’s term. We only have to make this choice.

Fortunately, we may have reached a unique moment in the history of corrections—a true turning point—where choosing a different future for the nation’s prisons is possible. To be sure, much attention is still paid to limiting the use of imprisonment—now it is called a preference for “downsizing.” But there also is a clear recognition that what goes on inside prisons is of crucial concern. More than 600,000 inmates reenter society each year, about two thirds of whom will be arrested within three years. Research studies, which I have accumulated and analyzed with my colleagues Cheryl Lero Jonson and Daniel Nagin, show that prisons have little specific deterrent effect on reoffending and that, if anything, harsh prison conditions are criminogenic. Indecent prisons simply do not work.

Thus, a bipartisan political consensus appears to have emerged that is recognizing the need both to break the nation’s addiction to imprisonment and, when incarceration is used, to take steps to ensure that offenders return to society with every chance of living an improved life. When first published, *Hard Time* was a warning about the damaging effects that a mean season in corrections would produce; it proved prescient. Now, in its fourth edition, it provides a clear blueprint, rooted in rigorous scholarship, of how to move forward and take advantage of this political opportunity for true prison reform. *Hard Time* makes the compelling case that creating more decent prisons will improve inmates’ lives and, ultimately, contribute to public safety and the larger commonweal.

Robert Johnson, with his collaborators Anne Marie Rocheleau and Alison B. Martin, have done a service in ensuring that this correctional classic remains available to us, offering in this edition, as *Hard Time’s* subtitle promises, “a fresh look at understanding and reforming the prison.” With the authors as their tour guides and individual chapters as important points of destination, readers are about to embark on an exciting correctional adventure. It is a trip worth

taking. Indeed, those emerging from this excursion will be rewarded with a sober but ultimately encouraging view of what the American prison can become. I know that I did.

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