The Pains of Mass Imprisonment

Benjamin Fleury-Steiner & Jamie Longazel

Contents

Series Forward

Preface

I. Introduction: Penal Oppression

II. Containment

III. Exploitation

IV. Coercion

V. Isolation

VI. Brutality

VII. Conclusion: Desperation

Appendix: Prisoner Rights Organizations

Notes

Glossary/Index
Preface

We have taught undergraduate courses on prisons for many years and are always struck by the pedagogical challenges. Many students hold strong beliefs of crime and deviance as the problems of individuals in the absence of broader societal and institutional failings (e.g., “You do the crime, you do the time”) and punishment as a matter of course (e.g., “You make made your bed, and now you have to sleep in it”). Such preconceptions make it difficult to facilitate critical thinking in the classroom. How can we get students to think about these issues in a broader social context? To address this challenge, we have used a variety of readings in our classes, many of which document in rich empirical detail the U.S.’s harmful embrace of decades of mass imprisonment. One might then expect that challenging students to question their conventional wisdom would not be difficult. Yet even in the face of the evidence many, if not most, students struggle to see beyond their deeply held beliefs. And even students that come to see the problem of mass imprisonment as beyond individuals view it as a kind of hopeless tragedy of individuals who have been dealt a bad hand in life.

One approach that we have found effective in the classroom—although, until now it has been loosely organized and largely anecdotal—is to supplement empirical data on relevant imprisonment trends with the detailed experiences of actual prisoners. In this way, the observation of a leading sociologist of race relations, Joe R. Feagin, has been especially germane to us, “There is a tendency in sociological theory to see human beings as determined by social forces and restrictions, yet people work in many individual and collective ways to try to bring change in the structures and institutions that oppress them.”¹ It is from this perspective that we present prisoner’s experiences as first documented by advocacy organizations that have long fought to expose their often-needless pain and suffering behind bars. We situate prisoners’
experiences in the context of broader conditions of penal oppression. In this way, we hope the material presented here fosters a more critical awareness of the challenges faced by disproportionately oppressed groups on the inside who confront these harsh conditions on a daily basis. We also hope this book will allow readers to see life behind bars as far more complex than individuals facing the consequences of their actions. Perhaps through this critical engagement some readers may even become involved in one of the organizations we detail in the book’s appendix.

Notes