

# Florida State University Libraries

---

2012

## The Prison Experience: Introduction to the Special Issue

Daniel P. Mears



PRINT VERSION CITATION: Mears, Daniel P. 2012. "The Prison Experience." Journal of Criminal Justice 40(5):345-347.

PRE-PRINT VERSION

**The Prison Experience: Introduction to the Special Issue\***

Daniel P. Mears

\* Direct correspondence to Daniel P. Mears, Mark C. Stafford Professor of Criminology, Florida State University, College of Criminology and Criminal Justice, 634 West Call Street, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1127, e-mail ([dmears@fsu.edu](mailto:dmears@fsu.edu)), phone (850-644-7376), fax (850-644-9614).

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Daniel P. Mears, Ph.D., is the Mark C. Stafford Professor of Criminology at Florida State University's College of Criminology and Criminal Justice, 634 West Call Street, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1127, phone (850-644-7376), fax (850-644-9614), e-mail ([dmears@fsu.edu](mailto:dmears@fsu.edu)). He conducts basic and applied research on a range of crime and justice topics, including studies of sentencing, juvenile justice, supermax prisons, homicide, prisoner reentry, and public opinion about crime and justice. He has published in *Criminology*, the *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *Justice Quarterly*, and *Law and Society Review*, and, most recently, authored *American Criminal Justice Policy* (Cambridge University Press 2010).

## **The Prison Experience: Introduction to the Special Issue**

### **Abstract**

This special issue draws attention to the need for greater scholarship on the prison experience and its implications for prison order and society. To this end, it presents ten research articles that investigate different aspects of the prison experience. The articles draw on different theoretical traditions and use different types of data and methods to investigate such topics as inmate misconduct, victimization, visitation, race and gender differences in the experience of prison, changes over time and across places in incarceration policies and rehabilitative programming, views inmates have about their prison experience and reentry, prison culture, and more. Collectively, the articles underscore the many possibilities for advancing research and policy on incarceration and its effects.

**KEY WORDS:** prison experience special issue

## **The Prison Experience: Introduction to the Special Issue**

The phenomenon of mass incarceration stands out as perhaps the most dominant policy trend in American criminal justice in recent decades. As of year-end 2010, the latest year for which national data are available, over 7.1 million individuals were under some form of correctional system control (Guerino et al. 2011). In that same year, the national imprisonment rate was 500 inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents, with over 1.6 million individuals in state or federal prisons and 708,000 individuals released from prison (Guerino et al. 2011). From the early 1900s until the 1970s, the incarceration rate hovered around 100 per 100,000 residents and the number of individuals incarcerated was roughly 200,000 (Cullen et al. 2011). In the next four decades, “the incarceration rate for state and federal inmates rose more than fivefold from 96 per 100,000 in 1970 to 501 at year-end 2006” (Nagin et al. 2009:117). The increased rate of incarceration and number of individuals imprisoned and released annually is historically unprecedented and places the United States in the unique position of arguably being the toughest country in the world, if incarceration is the measure (Mears 2010).

These changes have contributed to a considerable increase in scholarly attention to prisoner reentry. Notably, however, the bulk of studies have focused on what happens when individuals leave prison despite the fact that pre-prison and in-prison experiences may affect the likelihood of a successful transition back into society (Visher & Travis 2003, 2011). This insight assumes greater importance given the finding in Nagin et al.’s (2009) review, which found that incarceration—with few exceptions (see, e.g., Bhati & Piquero 2008) and contrary to what policymakers have assumed—typically either has no effect on recidivism or actually increases it. Their review drew attention to the fact that criminological studies have long suggested that prison is criminogenic and to the corresponding fact that little empirical research exists that describes the prison experience or how it affects inmate behavior, whether in the short term

(while in prison) or in the long term (after release). Other scholars have emphasized this problem, noting that much of what occurs in prisons does so within a “black box” (Mears 2008). That is, the day-to-day experiences, the programming and services, the treatment of inmates, the abuse of inmates or of staff, the effects of incarceration for inmates’ families, and more—these all remain understudied or unstudied. Accordingly, it not only is difficult to say what the typical inmate experience is, but it also is difficult to say how any of a range of experiences may affect the behavior of inmates during incarceration and after release.

The relevance for theory and policy is considerable. The large-scale changes in incarceration reflect the fact that states have undertaken numerous macro-level and micro-level experiments with incarceration. In some states, there have been dramatic cuts to rehabilitation. Many states have had to train large numbers of new staff to manage the increased numbers of prisoners. Mass incarceration has led to an increase in a new cadre of prison wardens, in turn creating the possibility for new administrative strategies, within and across states, for running prisons or, conversely, for seeking recourse in some of the tried, but not necessarily, effective approaches used in the past. Norval Morris’ (2002) fictionalized account of Alexander Maconochie’s efforts at Norfolk Island in the mid-1800s provides but one example of this phenomenon, one where a new warden decides to try out “progressive” ideas for running a prison and where his replacement decides that, no, a return to a lock-down approach to controlling inmates is best.

All of these changes have implications for social order in prisons and for the individuals in prison, their families, and the communities to which they return. As such, theories of prison order (Bottoms 1999), including accounts of prison cultures and communities (Clemmer 1940; Sykes 1958), and of recidivism (Nagin et al. 2009), as well as theories of community effects on reentry (Clear 2007), all may benefit from a closer investigation of what is termed here, the “prison experience.” Policymakers and the public have a vested interest in understanding the prison experience for similar reasons. Greater understanding allows for greater accountability by

shedding light on what actually occurs in prisons. As importantly, it holds the potential for identifying ways to structure prison experiences in ways that improve social order and outcomes for released prisoners, their families, and their communities.

The goal of this special issue is two-fold. On the one hand, the broader goal is to draw attention to the need for more scholarship on the prison experience and its implications for prison order and society. On the other hand, the more specific goal is to contribute substantively to understanding the prison experience. Collectively, the articles in the special issue cover considerable ground, using a diverse range of theoretical perspectives, data, and methodologies. This diversity itself is important—it underscores the need for research that leverages existing data but that also creates the kind of data that provide a richer understanding of prisons and their impacts on inmates and society. The articles are briefly described here and, again, suggest the diversity of prison experience dimensions that warrant investigation.

We begin first with Bales and Miller (2012), who undertake a study of inmate misconduct rates before and after enactment of a truth-in-sentencing law in Florida. Their analyses suggest that the more determinate sentences contributed to the unintended effect of increasing rather than decreasing rates of misconduct. Given the plethora of similar laws in other states, this effect, if generalizable, raises concerns that mass incarceration has adversely affected prison systems and the inmates within them.

Cochran (2012) focuses, too, on misconduct, but from a different perspective. Building on different theoretical traditions and recent research, he uses trajectory models to examine whether visitation and misconduct patterns are associated. A central finding is that consistent visitation, not just being visited once, contributes to a substantially lower likelihood of engaging in misconduct

Wooldredge and Steiner (2012) examine inmate victimization rather than misconduct, and focus in particular on racial differences in the correlates of victimization. Their analysis of

Kentucky and Ohio inmates from public and private prisons shows that the likelihood of two types of victimization, assault and theft, were greater among whites and that several victimization correlates, such as age, sex, education, family status, and perceptions of officer legitimacy, differed by race. Notably, they undertake multilevel analyses that point to the potential of facility-level factors to affect victimization and to do so in ways that also vary by race.

Worrall and Morris (2012) turn our attention to a long-standing problem in prisons—gangs and their role in contributing to violence and disorder. They undertake multilevel analyses using data from prisons in a large southern state and found that the percentage of confirmed gang members in a facility and a measure of facility-level gang integration predicted inmate-on-inmate violence. The latter measure is especially noteworthy because it goes beyond prior work in providing a more nuanced perspective on gang and prison dynamics. Their paper, like Wooldredge and Steiner's, underscores the importance and the challenges of undertaking analyses that include multiple levels of analysis and measures appropriate to a range of theoretical arguments that have been made about the factors that contribute to prison order.

Liebling and Arnold (2012) shift our attention yet again and investigate how faith identities and fears of radicalization affect prisoner social life. Drawing on observational, focus group, interview, and survey data from 2009-2010, they conduct analyses that both extend and contrast with a similar study of the same United Kingdom maximum-security prison undertaken a decade earlier from 1998-1999. They find that fears of radicalization, as well as transformations in the prison hierarchy and power dynamics, led to greater levels of inmate fear. Reflecting the multifaceted nature of their study, the findings provide a detailed portrait of prison change and its implications for the nature and experience of long-term imprisonment. In so doing, the study highlights both the need for studies that examine change and the complicated array of factors that contribute to prison operations and order.



Phelps (2012) zooms out to a much larger scale, focusing on an issue of central relevance to discussions of the “get tough” trend in punishment—the prevalence of rehabilitative programming. Using data from 1979 to 2005 on state-level variation in inmate services staff, she documents that indeed the provision of rehabilitative services, as gauged by staffing ratios, declined substantially during this time period. She also shows, however, that the variation in rehabilitative staffing varies markedly across states and regions and points to the fact that variation in rehabilitative staffing across places is greater than the variation in such staffing over time. Here, then, we have two papers—Liebling and Arnold’s detailed examination of a single prison and Phelps’ examination across the 50 states—that remind us that variation over time and place exist and warrant scholarly and policymaker attention.

Visher and O’Connell (2012) next lead us to consider how inmates themselves perceive what “life on the outside,” after release, will be like. In so doing, they respond to calls for studies that investigate how inmate experiences and perceptions influence reentry back into society. They intriguingly draw attention to the idea that inmate optimism may play a critical role in producing successful reentry outcomes. The analyses suggest that optimism is influenced by many factors, such as having children and family support, receiving treatment, and serving shorter prison stays. These findings illustrate that family factors and experiences as well as in-prison factors, such as receiving treatment, may affect “the” prison experience and in turn may influence reentry.

Wolff, Shi, and Schumann (2012) also investigate inmate perceptions and experiences. They examine readiness for reentry, focusing on such dimensions as whether inmates felt that they had access to social resources, needed treatment, and housing and transportation. The analyses of New Jersey prisoners take a novel approach at examining the experience of incarceration by developing different measures of time served, including one that captures time spent in prison as a result of a current conviction and another that captures the cumulative amount of time spent in prison since age 18. The latter measure takes into account the fact that many prisoners have had

repeated stays in prison. As would be anticipated, they find that cumulative time served is negatively associated with reentry readiness, suggesting in turn that incarceration, and repeated incarceration stays, may increase recidivism. Such a pattern may help account for why some studies find that incarceration, and longer stays in prison, are associated with either no reduction in recidivism or an increase in it (e.g., Nagin et al. 2009).

Dirkzwager and Kruttschnitt (2012) provide another close examination of inmate views and, in particular, investigate how prisoners perceive officers' behavior. Using a unique research design, they interview Dutch prisoners in England and English prisoners in the Netherlands. As with Liebling's study, they uncover many nuances that stem from use of interview data and, in this instance, from a cross-national comparison. They find, for example, that in England, the inmates viewed the staff as more detached, unresponsive, and likely to punish. In the Dutch prisons, staff were viewed as more helpful and fair and less authoritarian. These patterns seemed to be out of sync with what would be anticipated based on an assessment of the larger political and social context in which the examined prisons operated. That finding alone underscores the need for and importance of empirical research that addresses assumptions about policies, public views, and the nature and operations of prison systems.

Finally, Mears, Cochran, and Bales (2012) examine gender differences in the effects of imprisonment on recidivism. Despite many calls to investigate differences in the experiences and effects of prison on males and females, respectively, few such studies exist. Using propensity score matching, they find that prison is associated with increased property and drug recidivism as compared to three counterfactual conditions: traditional probation, intensive probation, and jail. Notwithstanding theoretical arguments that prison may exert a different effect for females, the criminogenic effect of prison did not appear to be appreciably greater for males or females. As the authors emphasize, there is a considerable need for research that digs deeper into gender differences in the nature of the prison experience and how such differences

may influence behaviors both in prison and after release.

Although these different studies cover a great deal of terrain, the truth is that they barely skim the surface of the research that is needed on what happens in prisons (Adams 1992; Mears 2008) and how prison experiences and prisoner views affect inmate behavior and prison order (Bottoms 1999) and reentry outcomes (Visher & Travis 2011). The studies here touched on inmate adjustment and victimization, visitation, gangs, programming, inmate perceptions, spatial and temporal variation in rehabilitative efforts and prison management, and more. Yet, all of these topics merit much more attention, and additional topics merit more as well. Prison culture, for example, is widely viewed as a factor that can affect inmates, yet it remains notoriously difficult to define and measure. In a period of dramatic transformations in incarceration, prison culture alone deserves substantial scholarly investigation. Still other changes are on the corrections landscape—such as increased prison privatization and use of supermax incarceration—and have yet to be examined in much detail. How do the experiences of inmates at private prisons vary from those at public prisons? What are the experiences of supermax inmates and how does supermax incarceration influence how inmates behave when released back into general population facilities? More broadly, what are the differences in “the” prison experience across different social and demographic groups? What produces such differences and do they influence inmate behavior and reentry outcomes? So many questions, so little time—and the stakes could not be higher. There is no better moment for scholars to begin to systematically shine a light on the prison experience.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, K. (1992). Adjusting to prison life. In M. H. Tonry (Ed.), *Crime and Justice* (pp. 275-379). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bales, W. D., & Miller, C. H. (2012). The impact of determinate sentencing on prisoner misconduct. *Journal of Criminal Justice* (this issue).
- Bhati, A. S., & Piquero, A. R. (2008). Estimating the impact of incarceration on subsequent offending trajectories: Deterrent, criminogenic, or null effect? *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 98, 207-254.
- Bottoms, A. (1999). Interpersonal violence and social order in prisons. In M. H. Tonry (Eds.), *Prisons* (pp. 205-281). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Clear, T. R. (2007). *Imprisoning communities: How mass incarceration makes disadvantaged neighborhoods worse*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Clemmer, D. (1940). *The prison community*. New York: Rinehart.
- Cochran, J. C. (2012). The ties that bind or the ties that break: Examining the relationship between visitation and prisoner misconduct. *Journal of Criminal Justice* (this issue).
- Cullen, F T., Jonson, C. L., & Nagin, D. S. (2011). Prisons do not reduce recidivism: The high cost of ignoring science. *The Prison Journal*, 91, 48S-65S.
- Dirkzwager, A., & Kruttschnitt, C. (2012). Prisoners' perceptions of correctional officers' behavior in English and Dutch prisons. *Journal of Criminal Justice* (this issue).
- Glaze, L. E. (2011). *Correctional populations in the United States, 2010*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Guerino, P., Harrison, P. M., & Sabol, W. J. (2011). *Prisoners in 2010*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Liebling, A., & Arnold H. (2012). Social relationships between prisoners in a maximum

- security prison: Violence, faith, and the declining nature of trust. *Journal of Criminal Justice* (this issue).
- Mears, D. P. (2010). *American criminal justice policy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . (2008). Accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness in corrections: Shining a light on the black box of prison systems. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 7, 143-152.
- Mears, D. P., Cochran, J. C., & Bales, W. D. (2012). Gender differences in the effects of prison on recidivism. *Journal of Criminal Justice* (this issue).
- Morris, N. (2002). *Maconochie's gentlemen: The story of Norfolk Island and the roots of modern prison reform*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Phelps, M. S. (2012). The place of punishment: Variation in the provision of inmate services staff across the punitive turn. *Journal of Criminal Justice* (this issue).
- Sykes, G. M. (1958). *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
- Visher, C. A., & O'Connell, D. (2012). Incarceration and inmates' self perceptions about returning home. *Journal of Criminal Justice* (this issue).
- Visher, C. A., & Travis, J. (2011). Life on the outside: Returning home after incarceration. *The Prison Journal*, 9, 102S-119S.
- . (2003). Transitions from prison to community: Understanding individual pathways. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29, 89-113.
- Wolff, N., Shi, J., & Schumann, B. E. (2012). Reentry preparedness among soon-to-be-released inmates and the role of time served. *Journal of Criminal Justice* (this issue).
- Wooldredge, J., & Steiner, B. (2012). Race group differences in prison victimization experiences. *Journal of Criminal Justice* (this issue).
- Worrall, J. L., & Morris, R. G. (2012). Prison gang integration and inmate violence. *Journal of*

*Criminal Justice* (this issue).