

Book review: What Are Prisons For?: Themes and Perspectives For Policy and Practice (What Is It For?)

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Book Review: Hindpal Singh Bhui (2024) *What are Prisons For?* Bristol University Press. ISBN: 978-1-5292-2689-8. Pbk: £8.99

As someone who has worked in and around the criminal justice system for 20 years, I have a deeper knowledge than most about what prisons are for. However, it is always good to refresh one's thinking to avoid taking knowledge and concepts for granted and to challenge one's own ideas. In this respect, this book – written by erstwhile editor of *Probation Journal* Hindpal Singh Bhui – was a fascinating read. The 'What is it for?' series from Bristol University Press seeks to cast light on 'the most important aspects of our society' by 'looking closely at what they do'. To this end, this book is highly effective, striking a balance between being accessible to a general audience through the use of personal anecdotes, vignettes and clear explanation of prison policy and conditions whilst extending knowledge around the function of prison, drawing on academic research and analytic concepts throughout. The combination of experience, research and theory provides a novel and highly accessible way of thinking about the complex nature of the purpose of the prison.

The first chapter sets the scene and the author's own background and motivations for writing the book. Chapter 2 - the first of two history chapters - is, at its heart, a chronological account of the history of imprisonment in 'the West'. It includes discussion of key actors and helpful quotes that illustrate the changing nature of prison over the last 400 years. That said, the chapter has sufficient depth to appeal to a more knowledgeable reader by including critical analyses based on theoretical perspectives espoused in works by, for example, Dickens, Foucault, Marx and Davis. The chapter also includes discussion of the gendered nature of imprisonment, reflecting on some of the reasons behind why women are much less likely to end up in prison than men.

It is always helpful to be reminded of Foucault's argument that prison – and probation – is part of a network of power that ostensibly rejects violence in favour of systems of control which rely on techniques of surveillance and assessment to 'define how people should behave' (p. 29). Indeed, much of the book can be summed up by the idea that whilst prison and prison reform may look benign it often ends up being 'harnessed to a wider purpose of sophisticated social control' (p.32). Chapter 3 takes a more global look to enable the reader to learn about the history of prison in one place by 'understanding how it developed in another' (p. 40). Specifically, the chapter explores imprisonment in Kenya, Japan and Russia. I found the discussion of the link between colonialism, racism and the place of the prison on postcolonial absolutely fascinating.

Mass incarceration has become a prominent theme in criminological research in recent years and Chapter 4 focuses squarely on this all too - if not exclusively - American phenomenon. The chapter describes both the nature of mass imprisonment as well its proximate causes: the war on drugs, penal populism and racism. Throughout, Bhui makes connections between what is happening within prisons with wider social forces such as neoliberal political economies, racialized systems of social control and the relationship between imprisonment and changing crime rates.

The two subsequent chapters explore life in prison to question the extent to which prison does and should be used to punish, deter or rehabilitate people who have been criminalised. Covering themes that will be familiar to readers of *Probation Journal*, Chapter 5 deals with the prevalence of poverty, trauma, mental ill health, neurodiversity and traumatic brain injury to demonstrate the difficulties that people in prison present with. This is done – with great effect – to call into question the reliance on rational choice theories of crime to develop penal policy which are based on the ‘image of the calculating and faceless criminal who deserves swift and long prison sentences’ (p. 81). Chapter 6 homes in on the lived experience of imprisonment, specifically examining the ‘operation and emotional world of prisons’. Covering themes such as the difficulty of the first night, the challenging sensory nature of prisons, suicide and indignity that is endemic within the prison context the chapter makes a compelling case for understanding prison in nuanced ways. By drawing on examples of how prison is inherently painful but can also – for some people – be transformative, Bhui set things up for the final chapter which considers ‘alternative visions of behaviour management’ (p. 117).

In the final chapter, the discussion returns to the arguments around whether we should be reforming, abolishing or expanding prisons. It will come as no surprise that Bhui is not an advocate for expanding our use of imprisonment although he raises some important points about the expressive role of imprisonment and its function in responding to instances of widespread societal breakdown (such as the recent riots experienced across England in the summer of 2024). The book does not come up with a definitive solution to the problem of imprisonment (at least as we tend to use it in western capitalist societies), but this was never the aim. Rather, Bhui concludes with some insightful reflections on what we (society, politicians and – for the sake of this review – academics and practitioners) should be asking when thinking about what the purpose of prison *should be*. Importantly, he suggests that prison ‘itself should not be the starting point for this venture’ and I cannot but wholeheartedly agree with such a sentiment.

Although the book is squarely focused on prisons, it raises important questions for those with an interest in probation. For example, questions around the extent to which prison is primarily about ‘managing marginalized and unwanted people’ (p. 14) should also be applied to probation, however uncomfortable that might be for those who believe in probation as the humane face of the criminal justice system. In light of evidence about the harms of probation (Hayes, 2018), lack of evidence on its effectiveness (Lopoo et al., 2023) and models (Fazel et al., 2024) we need to be subjecting the purposes of probation to same level of scrutiny contained within this book. To sum up, this highly engaging, accessible and well researched book will most likely be of interest to probation practitioners and students with an interest in prison as well as a general reader who wants to know more about the hidden and all too often taken for granted social institution that is imprisonment.

References

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