

## Explaining U.S. Imprisonment

by Mary F. Bosworth; New York, Sage Publications, 2010, 304 pages, \$42

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Sex, race, power, science, and industry—all this and more can be found within the 288 pages of the book *Explaining U.S. Imprisonment* by Mary Bosworth. As a Reader in Criminology from Oxford, England, Bosworth takes readers on an interesting journey as she describes aspects of prisons in the United States that provide unique insights into American prison culture and its origins. For anyone studying criminology, forensic psychiatry and psychology, or forensic sciences or who is working in jails and prisons, this book is a useful tool for understanding the prison world. The book is full of facts that are well researched. Themes related to specific subgroups within the incarcerated population—including racial-ethnic minority groups and the growing female inmate population—are peppered throughout the book. The coverage of critical aspects of correctional life and its underpinnings gives readers the opportunity to think more deeply about the correctional system.

Given the staggering size of the incarcerated population in the United States, the effort to understand the correctional system is important. Worldwide, the United States has the highest per capita incarceration rate. This trend has a complex history and began to grow especially over the 18th century and into the current era. Over the years, the prison enterprise has seen a flurry of activity, including construction of more prisons at great cost, with varying degrees of security built into modern designs. Clean, sterile conditions in new institutions have sprouted to replace the architectural wonders that were built in the 18th century, where some prisoners

or jail inmates are still confined. Cells barely bigger than the individuals they held generally are now built with a toilet, a sink, and a cot and are often large enough (if barely) to contain more than one inmate at a time, a necessary element required to manage the often overcrowded conditions at many facilities. With these realities in the background, this book guides readers across a range of topics, each of which fits with the other such that by the end of the book the total puzzle of the correctional system in the United States is in view.

The eight chapters begin with quotes from important historical figures. The first chapter, covering the history of U.S. imprisonment, begins with a quotation from Dorothea Dix from 1845, in which she advocates for familiar themes such as better food, clean air, and humane treatment and conditions. The chapter is thought provoking and provides a solid factual foundation for the rest of the book. By reviewing prison origins in colonial times and then addressing prison issues in the context of the Civil War era's Southern politics and slavery, this volume pulls readers into the incredibly complex issues of race and culture as they pertained to the prison movement. The notion that prisoners were an integral part of economic growth, by providing inexpensive labor, helps one realize the magnitude of the potential financial and political pressures to extend prison services. Later, as wars came and went, jails and prisons were a way to manage individuals detained during wartime; there were no better alternatives. Unfortunately, in these early times, conditions were far from standardized, and health and sanitation challenges abounded. Nonetheless, the prison environment and various prisons became show pieces for demonstrating American accomplishments to visiting dignitaries.

In subsequent chapters, there are exposés on prison culture, including detailed descriptions of sexuality and how it was manifested, restricted, and permitted across various institutions and times. For example, the Mississippi State Penitentiary was described as developing an infrastructure of conjugal visitation. Although this was started for black male inmates, it eventually grew to be available to all men and then later to the female inmate population. Some of the bases for these types of programs included the sense that conjugal visits might alleviate some of the pressures for prisoners and therefore decrease management challenges for correctional staff.

A chapter on the challenges to a culture of control describes emerging efforts to examine prison development. Numerous commissions and other special review mechanisms have been established to look closely at incarceration. In addition, there has been a renewed interest in hearing first-hand accounts of prison life. As technology has evolved, certain prisons have developed communications access for prisoners via e-mail and other technology. In addition, sociologists have increasingly contributed to the literature on aspects of incarceration and prison life. Despite robust attempts to examine the trends toward incarceration and the experiences of inmates, the growing prison population has intensified the pressures on prison systems. States are currently examining the complex issues of prison overcrowding and reform efforts for incarcerated individuals.

The book finishes with a chapter on incarceration trends among illegal immigrants. The author reviews this trend in light of the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, and describes criticism of the United States for incarcerating individuals under the aegis of fighting terrorism. The author questions U.S. policies that seem to encourage detention through imprisonment.

In the book's conclusion, the author speaks to the never-ending stream of

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criticism of prisons, counterbalanced by arguments that would justify the need for increasing the number of prisons. Regardless of whether prisons are viewed as a means of societal control or as a bastion of racial disparity, the author highlights the view that prisons are a part of the fabric of the culture of the United States. At times the author's writing style is choppy, the book's content is redundant,

and the author's political views and opinions are juxtaposed with fascinating historical facts. Nevertheless, the content is inspiring in many ways because it calls on everyone to wake up and look around. We are all only a few degrees away from someone who has been incarcerated; incarceration of the U.S. population is endemic. But there is more to the story if one looks closely, as this book

does, at the incarceration of immigrants, female offenders, and non-dominant populations—and blacks in particular. This book provides a comprehensive overview of prison politics, history, and current status and the numerous vicissitudes that make this book worthwhile reading.

*The reviewer reports no competing interests.* ♦