

## International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



### Special Edition: Challenges of Contemporary Prison Research Guest Editors' Introduction

#### **Hilde Tubex**

University of Western Australia, Australia

#### **Anna Eriksson**

Monash University, Australia

For the past couple of decades, the pressing issue of increasing prison populations has dominated criminological debate. The inexorable rise, starting in the 1980s in most industrialised countries, has led to numerous studies analysing levels of punitiveness, either within one country or by comparative study. As levels of punitiveness are mainly measured in terms of their final outcome – that is, the size and composition of prison populations – a lot of contemporary research related to prisons has focussed on the main drivers of prison populations in a broader context of social, economic, political and institutional structures, in an attempt to explain the quantitative expansion of prison populations. However, and more recently, there is also a growing body of qualitatively oriented research, particularly ethnographic research investigating the ‘lived experience’ of imprisonment, which looks at what is happening within (expanding) prisons. So far so good; contemporary prison research is (still) producing valuable analyses from both a macro and micro perspective, with the caveat that both streams of scholarship hardly seem to meet or collaborate.

Why, then, the need for a special issue on the challenges of contemporary prison research? The main driver for putting this special issue together was a profound concern about approaches to prison research and its future. The introductory chapter written by **Hilde Tubex**, reflecting on her experiences as an academic prison researcher, as a policy advisor, and as a public servant in both Europe and Australia, describes ways in which the concept of how prisons should be run, what they are supposed to achieve, and the evidence and expertise they rely on to reach that goal, have changed in the current penal climate of increasing prison populations. Regardless of the growing body of prison research described above, the development of penal policy these days seems to be driven by other levers, such as increasing ‘law and order’ discourse which claims that the use of imprisonment is legitimate and that ‘prison works’; neo-liberal punitiveness in the implementation of imprisonment; and a managerial focus on ‘what works’ in prisons. This situation carries the risks that statutory agencies and academic researchers are drifting apart, which might jeopardise both the future of prison research and the evidence base of penal policy.

Our concerns are along the lines of the discussion generated by Ian Loader and Richard Sparks in their book *Public Criminology?*. Loader and Sparks (2011) refer to criminology as a ‘successful failure’: booming in academia but losing its influence in the world beyond that. The same concerns relate to prison research. Over recent decades, the environment of prison research has changed, not only within academia but also in relation to government organisations. Therefore,

we thought it was time to reflect on the aims and purposes of contemporary prison research and the challenges it presents. The focus of this special issue is not on the 'findings' of prison research but more importantly on 'how' we do it and 'why' we do it certain ways, including the many legitimate concerns around access, choice of method, managing field work and communicating results, as well as ethical dilemmas that arise in all these situations. As editors, we feel that the 'process' of qualitative prison research and how we think this can contribute to the world of prisons is rarely discussed in detail in sanitised academic publications. We wanted to provide space for this very important discussion, reflecting not only the practical challenges of researching a total institution, but also the politics which permeates every stage of such research.

Therefore, selected prison researchers from around the globe were invited to write about their perspectives on this topic. By no means do we pretend that this selection is representative of current scholarship: this would require a volume the size of an encyclopaedia. The selection was based on availability of scholars and existing networks, and people sharing similar concerns. In bringing together authors for this special issue, we wanted expertise that covers a geographic spread of countries known for their different penal cultures and practices: hence, the UK, Nordic countries, continental European countries and Australia are represented. The selected researchers predominantly conduct qualitative research; however, none deny the importance and impact of quantitative research, and some combine both methods in their approach. We concentrate on qualitatively oriented research – mostly conducted 'from the inside' – primarily because we consider this approach to be endangered in the current climate of quantitative measurements, evaluations, audits and monitoring. In particular, we asked the authors – based on their own experiences – how they thought this type of research can be of relevance to prison practice and the 'bigger picture' of what is steering growing prison populations.

This turned out to be more difficult than expected, and we are aware that, during the process, many authors faced moments of despair, execrating their initial enthusiasm to commit to this project. We are more used to writing about *what* we find through our research rather than about *how* we do research and *why* we do it certain ways. Therefore, we are very grateful to the authors who went along with us on this journey, and we are equally grateful to the peer reviewers, who invested of their own precious time giving feedback and suggestions, thus making this special issue even better.

The results of this exercise present common threads we all have to deal with, but each contribution brings its own particular perspective on how we see the challenging aims and purposes of our research work. For **Alison Liebling**, 'getting the description right' is essential in research that changes policy and practice in the longer term; she identifies with the 'democratic under-labourer' – rather than the 'policy advisor' – a project requiring an *I-Thou* relation with the research participant, instead of an *I-It* relationship. A more activist approach, using prison research as a penal reform tool, is advocated by **Peter Scharff Smith** who illustrates how, through his projects, his aim is to use research to analyse, challenge and even change the current relationship between prisons and the surrounding society. **Ben Crewe** emphasises the importance of penetrating '[i]nside the belly of the penal beast' to document the everyday penal experience, and develops a framework to analyse the 'depth', 'weight', 'tightness' and 'breath' of imprisonment. **Kristel Beyens, Philippe Kennes, Sonja Snacken, and Hanne Tournel** start from a constructionist perspective, presenting dilemmas for researchers when investigating different types of 'actors' in the prison setting without 'choosing sides'. They plead for a 'slow science' that does not stop at the doors of academia, but includes putting penal practices on the political agenda to be debated in the media and with politicians and practitioners. **Bronwyn Naylor's** contribution focuses on the potential for the practical application of human rights for prisoners and its uptake in prisons by governments, emphasising the importance of public reporting on human rights, and the broad dissemination of research findings.

The aims and purposes of research become even more challenging in particular situations as when researching First Peoples in Australian prisons. Developing a specific methodology to conceptualise a decolonising prison research approach and contribute to First Peoples cultural resilience in prison is described by **John Rynne** and **Peter Cassematis**. Finally, there are the experiences of **Lila Kazemian** who, when conducting prison research in a foreign setting, was confronted with obstacles both within academia and government organisations. She emphasises that, although there might be a divide between penal reform discourse and the reality of prison practice, keeping a productive dialogue with all parties involved is imperative.

Our aim was to provide a forum for the discussion on how to build a research environment that is beneficial for both academia and practice, without compromising our integrity as prison researchers. We hope that, by bringing together a spectrum of eminent scholars with diverse research perspectives, we have contributed to opening up new ground for empirical study, theoretical discourse, and vigorous debate.

*Correspondence:* Dr Hilde Tubex, Future Fellow, Faculty of Law, The University of Western Australia, 34 Stirling Highway, Crawley WA 6009, Australia. Email: hilde.tubex@uwa.edu.au

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## References

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