

BOOK REVIEW

Inside Knowledge: Incarcerated People on the Failures of the American Prison. By Doran Larson. New York: NYU Press, 2024.

Amber Joy Powell 

Department of Sociology and Criminology, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA, USA

Email: amber-powell@uiowa.edu

Despite decades of legal evidence that incarceration exacerbates social stratification, the American reliance on prison to simultaneously provide retribution, rehabilitation, incapacitation, and deterrence remains. Author Doran Larson's *Inside Knowledge* challenges the long-held legal fiction that incarceration provides community safety. While Larson's project echoes findings from sociolegal scholarship on the collateral consequences of prisons for the confined, their families, and the broader community, *Inside Knowledge* also engages ongoing discourses on reform, transformation, and possible abolition through primary witness accounts of imprisoned people. As a writing instructor for Attica Correctional Facility, Larson collected first-person essays from currently incarcerated people to better understand the inner workings of prison. Since 2009, incarcerated people across the U.S. have submitted over 3,300 essays, collectively forming the American Prison Writing Archive (APWA) – the “largest and first fully searchable digital archive of nonfiction essays by currently incarcerated people writing about their experience inside prisons across the United States” (vii). From these essays, *Inside Knowledge* centers the voices of imprisoned people so often neglected in ongoing policy debates regarding America's incarceration epidemic. Clear in their goal that *Inside Knowledge* “is not a sociological study” nor “a legal or policy argument” (vii), Larson's attention to primary witness testimony aptly reflects the brutalities of prison without sensationalizing people's lived experiences. By unearthing imprisoned people's realities, we as legal scholars, lawmakers, advocates, and grassroots activists are compelled to question *who* and *what* purpose does prison serve – if any – in the modern era of mass incarceration?

The answers to these questions lie in America's history of incarceration, its ideals for what prison could accomplish (in the public imagination), and its ultimate silencing of the imprisoned people who attempted to speak out about its ills. Chapter 1 documents the emergence of the American prison and its supposed mission to provide effective punishment, correct society's wayward subjects, incapacitate lawbreakers, and deter the imprisoned and general public from future lawbreaking. Yet, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, prison exposés revealed the contradiction between prison officials' claims of incarceration as a correctional public good and the imprisoned

people's everyday realities of dehumanization on the prison grounds. On the one hand, 18th- and 19th-century writings from primary witnesses such as Patrick Lyons and Charles Dickens chronicled how the suffering of imprisoned people included isolation, negligent work conditions, disease, psychological abuse, scarce food rations, and idleness. Black writers of the 1960s and 1970s Black Power Movement such as Malcolm X, George Jackson, Assata Shakur, and Angela Davis further indicted carceral systems as modern-day weapons of white supremacy and racialized social control. On the other hand, prison officials not only attempted to regulate and discredit testimonies from incarcerated people but also repeatedly blamed imprisoned people themselves for the carceral conditions in which they endured. Through the rise of mass incarceration in the 1980s and 1990s, prison officials and policymakers alike continued to disrupt public sympathies that might question if prison was in fact fulfilling the legal promise of safer communities that had been politically touted.

The ensuing chapters dismantle contemporary rationales of legal punishment (i.e., retribution, rehabilitation, incapacitation, and deterrence) by introducing the stories of several currently incarcerated people. In Chapter 2, Larson argues that America's stated goal of prison as retribution largely fails. Rather than cultivating accountability and genuine remorse for victims, the prison treats the confined as "animals" to be controlled rather than human beings to be treated. Testimonies detail the degradation of strip searches, chronic voyeurism, humiliating jokes, and egregious health conditions. As one writer points out, "Those of us who are not violent swiftly learn it. If you are capable of feeling emotion, you eventually lose that ability, you can't afford to have it. Men become animal, predators preying on those who are considered weak. Principles are lost, values are rejected, morals become non-existent" (64). Thus, Larson demonstrates that the very values prison culture imposes for one's physical survival are the values that hinder one's ability to reflect on their crime and take genuine accountability.

Chapter 3 addresses "the lie that prisons can be rehabilitative" (90). Essay accounts from several incarcerated people show that not only do carceral institutions fail to rehabilitate them, but that their own sense of self-transformation comes from within and despite the harrowing conditions of prison. Several writers refer to rehabilitation discourses as a "guise" or "joke." Many imprisoned people do not have access to the few programs that are offered. And the few programs prison officials do offer often serve as "time fillers" rather than the provision of long-lasting support. Disclosing the inadequacy of official programs, writers discussed the role of outside volunteers, loved ones, and fellow imprisoned peers as the support systems that led to their self-transformation. What I most appreciate about this chapter is the question posed to writers about what a "beautiful prison" might entail. The purpose of the exercise did not rely on whether the "beautiful prison" is possible, but rather reveals the ways in which prison witnesses envisioned they would be treated in their ideal world. For example, witness Ken Hartman writes,

The beautiful prison is characterized by the quality of its treatment of human beings. Respect real and not based on fear but on the recognition of the inherent dignity of even the most damaged.... In the beautiful prison, men and women who have done awful and even vile things are constantly encouraged to rise above their worst acts and rejoin society. (135)

Lastly, chapters 4 and 5 unpack the myths of incapacitation and deterrence. Larson recognizes the potential immediate advantages of incapacitation for some victims of sexual and intimate partner violence. Yet, the writers collectively challenge the belief that such containment creates safer communities. For the imprisoned, their loved ones shoulder the financial and emotional burden of caretaking in their absence. The violence of incarceration further ensures that once released, many return to prison within a short time period given the legal and social stigma of one's criminal record. As writer Don Cox notes, "They are shamed of us afraid of us and would love to forget about us. Who in the world would want to give a job to an ex-con? We are at the very bottom of the social ladder" (198). This legal disenfranchisement reduces opportunities for desistance and results in a perpetual cycle of crime and prison.

At a political moment in American history where scholars, policymakers, and grassroots activists engage in ongoing debates about the reformation, transformation, and potential abolition of the carceral state, Doran Larson's *Inside Knowledge* serves as a crucial contribution to sociolegal scholarship, affirming the need for those who are most impacted to not only be included in our conversations, but also serve as the experts for the legal practices that *actually* work to reduce harm both in the community and from the state. Through this expertise of imprisoned people, both publics and scholars across multiple sociolegal fields will challenge carceral mythologies of prison as an effective tool for public safety.