

Behind Bars: Surviving Prison

Jeffrey Ross and Stephen Richards (2002) Alpha Books pp 179 excl. Index and references
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Do people get told what to expect before they get sent to prison? Are they prepared? Generally, before being sentenced, the only formal contact that people have is with their solicitor. After being charged, it can be a very lonely time waiting for the court process to begin.

Behind Bars: Surviving Prison is a US-based peer-written book designed to fill this gap. The target audience for the book is readily available in the 'Acknowledgements' section; "Dedicated to the men and women, both convictions and correctional officers, who on a daily basis survive the insanity behind bars". Interestingly, though, when explaining who the audience of the book is, the authors say of content of the book that it covers what "you need to know it before you're arrested, not after. After you're arrested it will be too late, because the journey to prison may have already begun."

At the time of publishing, Jeffrey Ross was an Assistant Professor in Criminal Justice and Social Policy at the University of Baltimore. He has co-authored a number of books on crime and criminology, and worked for four years inside a correctional institution. Stephen Richards was an Associate Professor of Sociology Criminology at Northern Kentucky University. He completed his degree and PhD while serving in a federal prison, spending eleven years in prison in total.

The positioning of this book amongst existing literature is particularly fascinating. Firstly, in contrast to UK-based publications, it certainly stands alone. There have been numerous UK attempts at 'first-hand experiences'; *I'm Still Standing* (by Bob Turney) and *Wasted* (by Mark Johnson) to name two. Often, though, these are written as autobiographies. There are, however, very few examples where the author tries so directly to provide an information-focused book, imparting personal experience. The closest example UK is also a recent one;

The Little Book of Prison (by Frankie Owens, in 2012). However, there is no direct equivalent to *Behind Bars*, ie one that is 'co-produced'. This is important. Far too often, there is an 'us and them' culture within prisons. This book seems to overcome this issue effortlessly.

However, this pair of criminologists manage to produce a cogent and accessible look at the brutal reality that is the US prison system. It aims to show new, current or would-be prisoners some critical survival tips, such as the best ways to avoid being beaten or sexually abused, how to land a favourable work assignment, how to work the parole system, and a glossary of prison slang to make the transition easier. These sections are very detailed. This is not surprising; they are undoubtedly based on personal experience. The authors talk through various aspects of prison life, including first arrival, food, work, education, sex and violence. The reader can be certain that the information contained in this text is not glossed-over, heavy-on-the-big-words academic pretence written from inside an office. Their humanistic and jargon-free coverage of what it's like to be taken into custody, processed and incarcerated is a refreshing departure from the stale, emotionally distant (and of often apologetic) coverage that is all too common in the academic coverage of this area.

However, the book seems to struggle to follow the well-intentioned path of producing an 'experience-based' publication. Unfortunately, rather than delving deeper into the promised subject matter (for example, it would have been good to read excerpts from interviews with former inmates, and anecdotes about mistakes they made in prison or how they prevailed in bad situations), the authors seem to be guilty of 'mission-drift', producing sections decrying the US penal system, the war on drugs and, most strikingly, dispensing incorrect/misleading legal advice (Chapter 2). At times, this advice could be seen as quite reckless (for example that a defendant should generally not plead guilty, and rather take the case through trial).

Perhaps these criticisms are unfair. At the end of the day, this book isn't meant to be founded on endless statistics - individual experiences can never guarantee to be broadly representative. The authors of *Behind Bars* simply put forward their thoughts and opinions based on their own experiences and ultimately, nobody can question these. It's not

particularly clear *exactly* what the 'experience' is of the authors - aside from the 'roles' that each have had in the past. Nevertheless, it's fair to say that, in parts of the book, the authors stray into areas that they probably have little experience of (eg women in prison), or at least where they're not writing from their own personal experience. In these situations, the book slips away from its strength and uniqueness.

Beyond the day-to-day goings on in prison, chapter 12 looks briefly at the issue of 'getting out', exploring briefly the types of release, then issues relating to after release. This includes issues such as finding suitable employment and housing. It would have been good to see this section be more detailed, as clearly the authors would have had some useful input on these issues. Nevertheless, and not surprisingly, it will be useful for readers to know that the co-authors came together again in 2009 to publish *Beyond Bars: Rejoining Society After Prison*. While not within the scope of this review, it seems that this further book, combined with *Behind Bars*, provides a comprehensive source of peer-based information following conviction.

Potential readers would be wise to understand that no book could prepare you for what prison has in store. The deprivation, brutality and violence of prison are unique, and it's hard to see how reading a book can prepare you for that. Furthermore, readers may be forgiven for dismissing *Behind Bars* because of its date and geographical focus. However, once you accept that the finite details may not be 100% reflective of modern day prisons, this book provides a unique perspective of life in prison, and should certainly be recommended reading for those preparing to go to (or currently in) prison, those working in prison (eg prison officers, social workers) and those with broader criminal justice involvement (ie probation officers, students and researchers).

