Book Review/Compte rendu

Bert Useem and **Anne Morrison Piehl**, *Prison State: The Challenge of Mass Incarceration*. Cambridge Studies in Criminology. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 236 pp. $US 24.99 paper (978-0-52171-339-9), $US 80.00 hardcover (978-0-52188-585-0)

How could the massive and unprecedented social experiment of mass incarceration in the United States not lead to major social and human costs, as predicted by several critics? How could the five-fold increase of incarceration rates since the turn of the 1990s not command higher rates of prison violence, gutted community supervision upon release, and expanding contingents of largely "unemployable" ex-inmates? How could imprisonment as the ultimate coercive state aggression onto its citizenry not lead to the erosion, if not obliteration, of what a democratic society holds most dearly — albeit at an ideological level — that is full citizenship understood as the pluralist and representative contribution of a citizenry to the construction of a just, fair, and legitimate society? How could all of this not happen when by year-end 2005, 1.5 million US citizens were behind prison bars?

In *Prison State,* Bert Useem and Anne Morrison Piehl take on the social and penological critiques and alarms over the increase of imprisonment in the US. Through a meticulous evidenced-based exploration, they seek to go beyond conventional wisdom and provide much needed empirical data on the causes and consequences of the US prison buildup.

The chapters of this book are structured in a clear, methodical manner much like a mainstream criminology text. Considering the multilevel intricacies of the social problematic at stake, such methodical staging is particularly welcome. In the most theoretically based discussion of the book, Chapter 2 reviews and empirically weighs the validity of multifarious economic and sociopolitical "causes" of mass incarceration. Mass imprisonment is the biggest change that US criminal justice has ever undergone, but Useem and Morrison Piehl emphasize that nearly everyone disagrees on its causes. Thus they argue that asking what benefits — if any — US society may have derived from the prison buildup is a more constructive scholarly endeavour.

One anticipated benefit derives from the electorally based argument that more prison should mean less crime and fewer victims. This is examined in Chapter 3, where ample empirical evidence points to two

startling, policy-relevant conclusions: more prisons have, indeed, meant less crime; however, the acceleration of the prison buildup in the last few years has produced declining marginal returns to the crime control effect of mass imprisonment. In other words, "the more prison, the smaller the crime reduction that results" (p. 76).

One cannot ponder prison expansion without also considering the concomitant expansion of prison releases, and their ultimate success. More inmates must eventually be released into the community. Useem and Morrison Piehl ominously note in Chapter 5 that the prison buildup may be directly responsible for colossal restrictions in in-prison programming, constraints on innovation and creativity in management of prisoner release, and legislated gutting of postrelease supervision. However, their interpretation of empirical data on the impact of the buildup on the US labour market (Ch. 6) is less pessimistic. According to them the evidence does not show that high rates of imprisonment lead to a long-term negative effect on individual-level employment outcomes after release.

Although mass incarceration and prison expansion may have become "a harmful addiction" (p. 52), Useem and Morisson Piehl argue that this particular social experiment had pragmatic objectives (to counter escalating crime rates), and must not be seen — as some critics allegedly argued — as the "irrational expression of a disturbed population" (p. 169). The authors' empirical analyses convincingly separate commonsensical beliefs and wishful thinking from evidence-based consequences of the US prison buildup. The authors ultimately conclude that the prison buildup movement has, in all empirical likelihood, reached a point where it no longer generates sufficient social benefits to warrant its extravagant financial and social costs. Reversing such a mammoth and convoluted ship, although necessary, may prove to be as huge a challenge as may have been, in the past, the effective reduction of crime rates. Whether one agrees with the authors' analyses and conclusions or not, this book remains unique because of the magnitude of its empirical demonstration and its ability to move beyond the traditional epistemological divide between left and right. *Prison State* is original and stands out in a sea of scholarly work on prison growth.

UNIVERSITÉ LAVAL JOANE MARTEL

Joane Martel's research interests lie in the sociology of criminal law, incarceration, and gender. She has recently published on prison segregation and Aboriginal identities in prison, and is preparing manuscripts on the paradoxes of managing Aboriginal "risk" in prison as well as on the role of remorse in parole decisions. Of late, her work has appeared in the *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, the *British Journal of Criminology*, the *British Journal of Social Work*, and *Theoretical Criminology*. joane.martel @svs.ulaval.ca