The Modern Prison Paradox

The test of every religious, political, or educational system, is the man which it forms.
If a system injures the intelligence it is bad. If it injures the character it is vicious.
If it injures the conscience it is criminal.
Henri Frederic Amiel, Journal (June 17, 1852)

In the early morning hours of Sunday, August 14, 1971, police cars in the small city of Palo Alto, California, were dispatched to the homes of 12 young men. Uniformed officers knocked on their doors and notified the men that they were being charged with armed robbery and burglary. They were read their rights, searched, handcuffed, and put in the back of a squad car. Each was taken to the police station, where he was summarily processed: photographed, fingerprinted, and led to a holding cell. These dozen men were then transferred to prison, where they were to be incarcerated together for 14 days under the watchful eye of the warden and a rotating cast of 12 young prison guards.

Thus began a landmark experiment that offered scholars a remarkable window on the socializing effects of prison. The experimental protocol was fairly straightforward. Twenty-four research subjects, all healthy and normal college-aged men, had been randomly assigned to play the part of either a prisoner or a prison guard. For two weeks, these men would live full time (in the case of the inmates) or work long shifts (in the case of the guards) in a simulated prison that had been carefully constructed in the basement of a building at Stanford University.
The goal of the study, which would come to be known as the Stanford Prison Experiment, was to examine “the extraordinary power of institutional environments to influence those who passed through them.” In particular, the researchers were interested in the way that individuals adapt to the rules and roles of their situational context. The relatively long time frame of the study and the nearly total immersion of the research subjects in the prison environment were necessary, according to the researchers, to “allow sufficient time for situational norms to develop and patterns of social interaction to emerge, change and become crystallized.” Essentially, the researchers set out to show that even “normal” people could be shaped by the contours of their environment and their relative position within it.

The results of the Stanford Prison Experiment are by now well known to any student who has taken an introductory psychology class: the experimental subjects quickly began to adapt to prison life. By only the second day, participants had begun to display intense emotional behaviors according to their assigned role. Prison guards developed an “us against them” mentality, becoming belligerent toward their charges. Inmates also succumbed to their new role. Some pushed back against their captors, refusing to comply with institutional rules. Others became depressed and in many cases withdrawn. The extent and speed of this adaptation surprised even the researchers.

The situation escalated in the days that followed. Officers resorted to increasingly punitive tactics to force compliance with their edicts. The researchers witnessed prison guards intentionally humiliating inmates, calling them derogatory names, and punishing them for insubordination or other behaviors deemed unacceptable. In addition, the researchers noted that “none of the less actively cruel mock-guards ever intervened or complained about the abuses they witnessed.” Those who occupied the inmate role likewise became deeply immersed. Several inmates staged a rebellion, barricading themselves in a room. By the middle of the first week, others showed signs of severe psychological distress. The lead researcher, Philip Zimbardo, describes the scene that unfolded:

The most dramatic of the coping behaviour utilised by half of the prisoners in adapting to this stressful situation was the development of acute emotional disturbance – severe enough to warrant their early release. At least a third of the guards were judged to have become far more aggressive and
dehumanising toward the prisoners than would ordinarily be predicted in a simulation study.⁴

Faced with an environment that encouraged nearly total adaption to their respective roles of the powerful and the powerless, these seemingly normal men began to act out in ways that would have been completely out of place in their regular lives; indeed, the demands of the institutional environment seemed to override their individual dispositions. Zimbardo writes, “We had created a dominating behavioral context whose power insidiously frayed the seemingly impervious values of compassion, fair play, and belief in a just world. The situation won; humanity lost.”⁵

Confronted by a rapidly deteriorating situation and concerned for the health and safety of the research subjects, Zimbardo and his colleagues terminated the experiment after only six days.⁶

Crime and Punishment in America

Over the past half-century, America has enacted a real-life version of the Stanford prison on an unprecedented scale. In just four decades, the size of the state prison population has grown by more than 700 percent (see Figure 1.1).⁷ By 2008, the number of incarcerated individuals in the United States hit an all-time high, with 1 in 100 adults in either prison or jail⁸ and fully 1 in every 31 American adults under some form of correctional jurisdiction (including incarceration, probation, and parole).⁹ In the size of its incarcerated populations, America now has no equal; it houses about a quarter of the world’s prisoners, despite having less than 5 percent of the world’s population. China, which has a population four times larger than that of the United States, is a distant second in the size of its imprisoned population, and most European nations have only about one-seventh the per capita incarcerated population of the United States.¹⁰

These snapshots are startling. However, there are two important ways in which even these numbers underestimate the true scale of mass imprisonment. First, the incarcerated are highly concentrated by race, class, age, and geography. In America today, the prison has become an increasingly prevalent institution in citizens’ lives, but it is particularly so for youth, racial minorities, and the poor. For example, while “1 in 100” describes the proportion of incarcerated among the nation’s total
adult population, the figure is 1 in every 9 for young black men and a whopping 1 in every 3 for young black men without a high school education. Among young male Latinos who did not complete high school, 1 in every 14 is behind bars.

For these groups of citizens, rates of contact with criminal justice now rival the likelihood of experiencing more traditional landmarks of the life course, including getting married and owning a home. Today, a black man without a high school education is more likely to be found in a prison or jail than at work. Prison institutions have likewise replaced other, more conventional points of citizen contact with the state, emerging as “a major institutional competitor” to military service and secondary public education, particularly for racial minorities. As Senator Jim Webb recently observed, “[T]he principal nexus between young African-American men and our society is increasingly the criminal justice system.” For these individuals, imprisonment has become a “predictable part of experience.”

Likewise, the experience of incarceration is highly concentrated in certain geographic areas. For instance, taxpayers in Pennsylvania spend more than $40 million a year to incarcerate residents sharing just a single low-income zip code in the state. In Michigan, one-third of prisoners

**Figure 1.1.** Estimated number of jail and prison inmates in the United States, 1910–2010.

are sent back to a single county. About 80 percent live in Detroit, 41 percent in only eight zip codes. A greater number of prisoners return to just seven neighborhoods in Houston than come home to several whole counties in Texas. And of the more than 50 community board districts in New York City, nearly three-quarters of prisoners in the entire state hail from just seven. Simply put, some areas have become “deep reservoirs of criminal justice involvement,” where punishment and prisons help to construct the “architecture of community life.”

This has led some to criticize the very concept of “mass incarceration,” arguing that it is not the “masses” who are imprisoned so much as highly concentrated groups within certain locales. As Todd Clear notes, “[I]ncarceration is not an equal opportunity activity.”

The second way in which acknowledging only a general upward trend of American incarceration obscures its true impact is that “1 in 100” includes only those who are in prison or jail on any given day. The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that by 2001 the proportion of adults who had ever spent time in prison had reached nearly 3 percent, and it was well over 16 percent for black men. These proportions would be significantly higher if jail time were included. To the extent that the effects of prison persist beyond the prison gates, the accumulation of ex-prisoners in the population is certainly as important as the number of individuals imprisoned at any one time.

Not surprisingly, researchers have noted these patterns and trends with some alarm. However, scholars interested in the consequences of incarceration, particularly its effects on recidivism, have so far attended primarily to the effects of imprisonment relative to other forms of punishment (e.g., probation). This focus reflects a legitimate concern about recent growth in the total correctional population, and extant studies provide crucial commentary on the implications of America’s increasing reliance (and many would argue over-reliance) on incarceration. However, while the rapidly rising number of people serving time behind bars is important, so, too, are recent changes in the way that U.S. prisons are constituted. That is to say, we must be concerned not only with who is being incarcerated in America, but also with how they are being incarcerated. In this book, I analyze changes in the culture of American prisons over the last half century and assess the consequences of variation in correctional administration for the types of people and communities that prisons produce.
The Politics and Practice of Punishment

The modern period has been marked by two significant trends in the culture of American corrections. First, the American criminal justice system over the past half-century has largely abandoned the goal of reforming inmates. Rehabilitation-oriented programming retrenched, leaving prisons to serve little more than a “waste management function.”\textsuperscript{24} Famedly summing up this new approach to crime control, James Q. Wilson commented: “Wicked people exist. Nothing avails except to set them apart from innocent people.”\textsuperscript{25} In the contemporary era of warehousing and incapacitation, what goes on inside the nation’s prisons has become largely beside the point, with the exception of regular reassurances to the public that prisoners are being treated with the tough justice they deserve.

The second change that accompanied the modern politics of crime control was the arrival of a new language of criminal justice, what Malcolm Feeley and Jonathan Simon term the “new penology,” which focused on “the efficient control of internal system processes in place of the traditional objectives of rehabilitation and crime control.” The cornerstone of this penological approach was a heightened attention to risk management.\textsuperscript{26} In essence, as policymakers and prison practitioners began to doubt that prisons could really reduce recidivism, rehabilitation became subordinated to the more concrete task of efficient operational control; if criminal populations could not be transformed, they could at least be effectively managed.

These shifting tides were compelled by substantial changes in the politics of crime control. In the first half of the 20th century, crime was largely absent from the national political agenda. Prisons were barely discussed in Congress, and imprisonment was used only sparingly by states.\textsuperscript{27} For most of this period, the design and operation of correctional institutions were instead left largely to specialists within the state and federal bureaucracy, such as criminal psychologists, social workers, and custodial staff. This began to change in the 1950s and 1960s, however, as elected officials on both sides of the aisle began to realize that appearing “tough on crime” was a winning political strategy that offered few, if any, strategic downsides. Against a background of urban unrest and rising rates of crime, punishment quickly became a high-profile political issue. The emergent view of offenders as violent and
immoral predators left little public sympathy for prison-based services that might make incarceration a comfortable experience. Moreover, on the heels of this “new punitiveness” in political rhetoric came an influential report, titled “What Works? Questions and Answers About Prison Reform,” which cast doubt on whether prisons could actually reform criminal offenders. As faith in the rehabilitative potential of prisons began to wane, support for continued funding of prison-based programs rapidly eroded.

The end result of these dynamics is a modern correctional model that employs prisons as little more than tools for temporary containment, a set of institutions designed for “selectively incapacitating the wicked.” As David Garland points out, “Treatment modalities still operate within [prison] walls, and lip service is still paid to the ideal of the rehabilitative prison. But the walls themselves are now seen as the institution’s most important and valuable element…. [T]he walls have been fortified, literally and figuratively.”

The results I uncover, however, make clear that time spent within the confines of a correctional institution is not a “deep freeze” during which individuals simply serve out their time unchanged. Rather, prisons are small communities unto themselves, and the context of life inside these state institutions has important consequences for the kinds of people they produce. In the chapters that follow I argue that, for both incarcerated individuals and their keepers, navigating a more punitive prison entails the adoption of new social relationships and collective norms. However, rather than the generalized trust and cooperation that are often posited to follow from strong social connections, America’s harsher prisons produce citizens who are less interested in – and arguably less capable of – healthy (re-)integration into a broad and inclusive social community. In this way, the culture of the correctional institution has important repercussions for the ways in which a growing group of citizens think, behave, and interact.

The Social Effects of the Punitive Prison

In uncovering the effects of more punitive prisons, I start by examining the effect of incarceration on the social orientations of the imprisoned. Inmates often form close relationships with peers while behind bars, but this is particularly true in higher-security prisons, where social ties
result from the desire for companionship, but also the need for protection. For example, I find that inmates incarcerated in these harsher prison settings become significantly more likely to report that they have friends who “help me when I have troubles” and with whom they can talk “about everything” than do inmates who serve time in less punitive settings.

This expansion of personal friendship networks, despite providing meaningful camaraderie and confidants, does little to ameliorate feelings of loneliness, however. Inmates in more punitive prisons are no less likely to say that they “feel lonely” or that “no one really knows [them] very well.” Instead, the expansion of social networks that occurs in this type of prison results in the adoption of criminogenic attitudes; those assigned to harsher prison settings are significantly more likely to agree that “some people must be treated roughly or beaten up just to send them a clear message” and to assert that they “won’t hesitate to hit or threaten people if they have done something to hurt [their] family or friends.” In sum, I argue that the social networks built between inmates in a more punitive prison seem at best to promote a particularized trust that does not substantially mitigate feelings of isolation. At worst, harsher prison environments inculcate inmates with an increased propensity for interpersonal violence and aggression, and ultimately increase the likelihood of re-offending following parole. In fact, I find that assignment to a harsher prison setting significantly increases recidivism. Using fairly conservative assumptions, I estimate that a more punitive prison culture might account for more than 64,500 crimes in the coming decade in California alone, which would be expected to include more than 13,000 violent crimes, such as murder, rape, and violent assault.

As in the Stanford Prison Experiment, I also find that the culture of prison institutions affects those individuals who hold formal power within the prison environment: the officers tasked with the maintenance of order and security. Like the number of people incarcerated, the ranks of people employed by the U.S. criminal justice system have increased substantially, growing by 86 percent between 1982 and 2003 to more than 2.36 million people (see Figure 1.2). As of March 2003, almost 13 percent of all public employees (and a larger percentage of public employees in 15 states and the District of Columbia) worked in the criminal justice sector. Much of this growth has been driven by the number of correctional employees. Between 1982 and
In 2003, corrections employment more than doubled, rising from about 300,000 to more than 748,000. Corrections now accounts for more than 63 percent of state criminal justice employees, with police protection and judicial/legal employees accounting for the other 14 and 22 percent, respectively. Today, the criminal justice system employs more people than General Motors, Ford, and Wal-Mart combined.

Just as more punitive settings shape inmates’ social ties, I find that harsher prisons affect the social relationships and attitudes of those who work behind their walls. In fact, the particular social patterns of inmates are mirrored in those of correctional staff. For correctional officers, prison work often requires long hours spent in a hostile and chaotic work environment, marked by the need for constant surveillance and feelings of threat. The result of this institutional context is the development of meaningful bonds between officers, but also the adoption of an “us against them” mentality. In particular, officers who find themselves working in harsher prisons develop harsher ideas about inmates than do their counterparts in less punitive prisons: they are more likely to express the belief that “most people who end up in prison are there because of personal failure” rather than “because they did not have advantages like strong families, good education and job opportunities.” They are also less likely to support the provision of rehabilitation programs and more likely to say that “rehabilitation programs don’t work because most inmates don’t want to change.” Even more striking are officers’ own assessments of how imprisonment...
shapes inmates; officers assigned to more punitive prisons become more likely to say that the institution where they work causes inmates to become more violent and that inmates actually leave prison less prepared to be law-abiding citizens than when they entered.

The prison environment also shapes the interactions that officers have with each other, with their superiors, and with friends and family. Officers working in harsher prisons are more likely to report that they would turn to the union to help resolve work-related problems. Conversely, they become less likely to turn to their direct supervisors for assistance. This is particularly true of officers who feel unsafe in the workplace. Prison work and experiences of violence likewise impose substantial costs on officers’ lives outside prison. Unlike inmates, officers must move between home and prison on a daily basis. For many, this transition can be a difficult one. In his searing account of time spent as an officer at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, Ted Conover describes the personal toll that the job took on him:

“Leave it at the gate,” you hear time and again in corrections. Leave all the stress and bullshit at work; don’t bring it home to your family. This was good in theory. In reality, though, I was like my friend who had worked the pumps at a service station: Even after she got home and took a shower, you can still smell the gasoline on her hands. Prison got into your skin, or under it. If you stayed long enough, some of it probably seeped into your soul.37

I find that officers working in harsher prison environments are especially likely to experience work–family conflict; these officers are more likely to say that they have “become harsher or less trusting towards family members since I took this job” and that “what happens at work negatively affects my relationship with my spouse/partner or children.”

In the last empirical chapter of the book, I turn my attention to the types of communities to which prisoners return. I start by analyzing survey data from 515 individuals living in diverse areas of Los Angeles County, a geographic area that alone receives almost a third of all people returning from prison in California. Within this one county, there is significant variation in the concentration of parolees. For instance, less than 1 parolee returns to the wealthy Beverly Hills zip code 90210 in a typical year; in comparison, several consecutive zip codes in south central LA receive roughly 15 parolees for every 100 residents. This variation in communities’ ex-prisoner concentration is highly predictive
of the social orientations of the individuals who reside there. I find that individuals living in areas of high ex-prisoner concentration are equally likely to say that they have friends and people in whom they can confide as those in areas of lower concentration, and there is even some evidence that they engage in more frequent informal social interactions. However, their social networks are smaller; individuals living in higher-concentration localities report a lesser number of close friends and confidants. At the same time, people who reside in areas that receive a higher concentration of ex-prisoners also report significantly less generalized social trust. They are less likely to believe that “most people can be trusted” and substantially more likely to instead endorse the idea that “you can’t be too careful in dealing with people.”

In order to see whether this pattern holds beyond this one county and state, I then expand my analysis to a larger and more geographically diverse dataset. Using survey data from nearly 12,000 individuals residing in 2,083 unique zip codes and spread across 13 states, I show that the patterns in Los Angeles County are not unique to this locale. Rather, the same patterns of atomized community that are evident among correctional officers and inmates serving time in more punitive prisons are characteristic of the many poor, urban neighborhoods across the nation to which ex-prisoners predominantly return.

Prisons are sometimes described as “total institutions,” in that for a period of time they segregate individuals from the rest of society. This would seem to suggest that they are most productively studied as isolated communities rather than as extensions of the low-income cities and towns from which most incarcerated people come. However, nearly 95 percent of the imprisoned will eventually be released. In California, for instance, which operates the largest of the nation’s state prison systems, the average time in prison is 26 months. This means that more than 40 percent of people who are currently incarcerated in that state will be released from prison this year. In total, some 650,000 of America’s incarcerated move back and forth – and some then back and forth again – between prison and their neighborhoods each year. When they leave the confines of the prison, these individuals are likely to bring with them the attitudes and behaviors they have learned. As the journalist Sasha Abramsky warns, noting that conflicts begun or sustained in prison are increasingly spilling out onto the street: “There is an awful lot of potential rage coming out of prison to haunt our future.”
The Modern Prison Paradox

Institutions of punishment are often considered to be a necessary, if unfortunate, prerequisite of a thriving civil society and the establishment of a legitimate state. Indeed, protecting the lives and property of citizens through the creation and enforcement of criminal law is inarguably a fundamental role of government. In the liberal democratic tradition, law and order is at the heart of the social contract and provides the foundation on which organized society is built. On this, John Locke wrote: “Government being for the preservation of every man’s right and property, by preserving him from the violence or injury of others, is for the good of the governed.”

Yet in this regard, the modern American prison presents us with a troubling paradox. In the chapters that follow, I argue that the crime control politics of the past half-century have given rise to institutions that (re-)create the conditions that arguably gave rise to criminality in the first place, and they do so in a particularly intense and toxic form. Within the harsh environment of the nation’s most punitive prisons, strategic social connections are formed, as individuals band together for mutual protection and exchange. However, the social ties forged in prison ultimately foster social norms that are anathema to broad-based, cooperative community engagement.

The result is that, by sending people to increasingly punitive and dangerous prisons, we do not resocialize them into the norms and roles of American culture. Rather, we socialize them into the norms and roles of prison culture. And “as one inmate serving a life term at East Jersey State Prison puts it, ‘You create Spartan conditions, you’re gonna get gladiators.’” To the extent that the nation’s modern “law and order” institutions shape the social order in ways that weaken, rather than sustain, our communities and civil society, prisons may undermine the very collectivities they were designed to serve and perpetuate the problems of crime and disorder they are tasked with preventing.

Departures

In making the argument that prisons in the modern era shape Americans’ social orientations in salient ways, I depart from existing literature on
political institutions, prison effects, and social connectedness in four important respects:

1. Centralizing the State
   In most accounts, social networks and norms are construed to be a positive resource, a social good that inheres within formal and informal relationships. For instance, in his seminal work *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam implicates the “collapse” of social community in the emergence of a host of social ills. Strong social ties provide individuals with emotional benefits, including the chance for fraternization, group identity, and the feeling of solidarity that comes with being part of a shared effort. More extensive and deeper social ties can also promote a generalized sense of trust and feelings of communal belonging. In turn, people who possess high levels of generalized trust are more involved than others in community life and are more likely to engage in economic exchange and cooperative behavior outside their immediate social group. As Eric Uslaner writes, “Trust is the chicken soup of social life.”

   The idea that social relationships can serve a pro-social purpose is formalized in Pierre Bourdieu’s classic conception of “social capital,” wherein he invokes a “species of capital” that “allows its possessors to wield a power, an influence, and thus to exist, in the field under consideration, instead of being considered a negligible quantity.” Social capital can be leveraged by individuals toward varied ends – for example, to help find employment, to mobilize political action, or to trade and share property in informal markets. Likewise, in the aggregate, social networks and the norms they engender foster a range of collective goods, from education and children’s welfare, and safe and productive neighborhoods, to economic prosperity, and health and happiness.

   In contrast, we know sizably less about the potential “dark side” of social ties, the “down side” of social networks, or the possible “unsocial” forms of interpersonal association. Social networks may be more or less present, but they may also take different forms. Just as economic capital can be applied toward both charity and war, social connections can be deployed toward either more or less cooperative ends. As Francis Fukuyama remarks, “This does not disqualify it as a
form of capital; physical capital can take the form of assault rifles or tasteless entertainment, while human capital can be used to devise new ways of torturing people.” While “darker” incarnations of social connection have received substantially less attention than their more pro-social counterparts, they are no less a part of what gives social relations their broader meaning.

Even more significantly, there has been little systematic theorizing on the role of the state in shaping less pro-social kinds of interpersonal connectedness. This is true even in the many studies that have been attentive to the interrelations between crime, community, and social organization. These studies regularly cite poverty, residential instability, urbanization, and other macro trends as primary contributors to a decline in social activity. However, with few exceptions, the state as purposive actor is peculiarly absent from these accounts. What is still therefore missing is a political accounting of negative social capital – how it arises and what its relationship is to state power and public policy.

While recognizing the importance of existing work, my intention in this book is to locate the state front and center within the study of social community and collective well-being. The argument I make seeks to avoid attributing the diffusion of countercultural norms to “indigenous, self-sustaining social organizational capacity.” Instead, I start from the proposition that the state, through its policies and institutions, helps to shape the particular types of social attitudes and behaviors that form and persist within communities. This argument rests on two central claims. First, I argue here that government can play a formative role in shaping social organization in even its least pro-social incarnations. Second, I argue that it does this not only when it is derelict in its responsibility to mitigate poverty or when it otherwise passively fails to ameliorate systematic disadvantage, but also directly and proactively through its punitive policy choices and the culture of its carceral institutions.

Understanding the collateral effects of the modern prison institution is therefore critical, first and foremost because mass incarceration represents what is arguably the most significant public policy shift of the modern era. As Elliot Currie has observed, “Short of major wars, mass incarceration has been the most thoroughly implemented government social program of our time.” With mass incarceration, the United States “embarked on one of the largest public policy experiments in our history”; it is the “great public works project of our time.”
Moreover, with the exception of lethal force, confinement is the most extreme power that the state regularly exercises against its citizens. Prisons therefore maintain a unique position among democratic institutions, and their culture provides “a key index of the state of a democracy.” As Nicola Lacey remarks: “The state of criminal justice – the scope and content of criminal law, the performance of criminal justice officials, public attitudes to crime, and the extent and intensity of the penal system – is often used as a broad index of how ‘civilized,’ ‘progressive,’ or indeed ‘truly democratic’ a country is.”

More broadly, criminal justice institutions are an especially important site for empirical investigation because they are a feature of nearly every organized state and central to liberal notions of the social contract. As political scientist John DiIulio notes, “Prison workers perform what is arguably one of the most essential functions of the sovereign state.” The effects of prison institutions on individuals and communities should thus be of interest to any serious scholar of politics and the nation state.

2. Emphasizing Institutional Variation

Scholars have long been concerned with the economic, social, and psychological effects of incarceration. Indeed, interest in prison effects dates as far back as Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Du système pénitentaire aux États-Unis et de son application en France*, written following their tour of the southern United States in 1831. Since this first foray into American prison research, myriad studies have scrutinized the attitudes and behaviors individuals develop when they are exposed to the correctional environment. Researchers concerned with mental health and post-traumatic stress have examined the psychological pressures of incarceration, the difficulties of prison adjustment have dominated prison memoirs, and the contours of the inmate subculture have been addressed in scholarly studies of the sociology of prisons. Recently, the topic has even surfaced in the popular press, with *Time* magazine posing the question “Are Prisons Driving Prisoners Mad?”

Craig Haney, a prominent author on the “pains of imprisonment,” notes that by the end of the 20th century, there was relative agreement among scholars that prisons caused little serious psychological harm for most inmates. Summarizing the existing empirical literature, Frank Porporino suggested that “imprisonment is not generally or uniformly
devastating.” Yet Haney rightly notes that this was hardly an endorsement; “statements to the effect that not everyone who passed through prison is irreparably harmed, devastated, or made insane by the experience represent fairly faint praise.” Moreover, these studies too often obscured important ways in which the conditions of confinement could vary across prisons, variation that could substantially affect the potential of imprisonment to help or harm.

My aim in this book is to map this variation in the form and culture of the prison institution and to document its consequences for individuals and community life. This focus provides a new empirical leverage on the consequences of the prison boom. Scholars of the carceral state have sometimes portrayed the American prison system as a monolith and written of the “punitive turn” as a whole-scale shift in the culture of corrections. Yet, even in the 1950s, when Gresham Sykes and his contemporaries were penning their landmark prison studies, it is unlikely to have truly been the case that there existed “a remarkable tendency to override the variations of time, place and purpose [such that prisons were] apt to present a common social structure.” Rather, as I detail in Chapter 2, at least since the 1970s there has been substantial variation in the management of American prisons across states and regions. In addition, the rise of highly sophisticated inmate classification schemes has introduced greater and more systematic variation into the prison prototype.

In the following chapters, I measure prison variation – how harsh or punitive a prison environment is – by relying on the security-level designation(s) of a given facility: whether it is a low-, medium-, high-, or maximum-security setting. Using a facility’s security-level designation is theoretically advantageous in several respects. First, as I describe in Chapter 4, prison security levels in many ways approximate historical variation, in that higher-security prisons place a greater emphasis on order and control over rehabilitation: they offer less freedom of movement, greater oversight, and a more limited range of programs. They are also marked by higher rates of violence than lower-security settings. In contrast, lower-security prisons in many ways retain a more rehabilitative focus and less violent inmate culture. In this way, lower-security prisons provide an (albeit imperfect) proxy for a pre-1970s model of prison administration, and higher-security prisons more fully embody the new punitiveness.
More important, however, is that security level is one of the most identifiable signifiers of institutional variation in the modern American prison system; as Gerald Gaes and Scott Camp observe, “Prison security level, more than any other prison level variable, identifies variation in [both institutional and social] dimensions of prison regime.”

Prison management and design may differ across institutions of the same security level, but generally speaking, higher-security prisons are marked by more restrictive rules and protocols. Similarly, through increasingly mechanized classification procedures, the security level of a prison serves as a primary predictor of inmate composition, including the prevalence of gangs, levels of violence, and the “criminal propensity” of individual inmates.

By focusing on prison variation, I emphasize that prisons in the United States can and do take many forms; prisons are not homogeneous, and “the prison” as an undifferentiated concept is not all that useful. This variation has important implications, as correctional institutions can play a critical role in shaping social communities; as I show, variation in the way that imprisonment is practiced can produce widely disparate results.

Understanding the effects of prison design also has important implications for public policy. Given the relatively low likelihood that the nation will ever abolish prisons, custodial versus non-custodial sanctions is not the only or even the most pressing policy-relevant dichotomy. Instead, we must consider the consequences of different forms of incarceration – the various and varied ways that prison institutions are (or could be) designed and run.

3. **Going Beyond “Just” Inmates**

Extant research on correctional officers is far less expansive than scholarship on inmates. However, interest in the “street-level bureaucrats” who work inside America’s prisons has grown exponentially over the past few decades. What was once an overly simplistic and even hostile literature depicting prison custody staff as predominantly “less than quick witted” or “sadists,” and their jobs as requiring only “20/20 vision, the IQ of an imbecile, [and] a high threshold for boredom,” now encompasses a diverse set of descriptive and empirical studies that explore many aspects of correctional officers’ attitudes and behavior. Despite
this, however, published studies of prison officers are still extremely rare in comparison with examinations of inmates.

Understanding the orientations of prison workers is a critical part of assessing the formal culture of the modern prison. Correctional officers, on the front lines of the prison system, are responsible for the day-to-day execution of almost every aspect of prison life. They therefore play a primary role in shaping the institutional culture that inmates confront. Indeed, if the relatively casual contact that clients have with welfare administrators or their brief encounters with police officers can have an impact on their attitudes, as previous research has suggested, then the more intense and sustained contact that inmates have with correctional workers likely also has considerable effects. With this in mind, studies of correctional workers have begun to highlight how officers adopt and embody their professional norms and how they communicate these norms through their professional practice.

We can consider correctional officers not only as representatives of the state, though, but also as citizens who themselves may be affected by correctional policies and prison management. As I detail in the following chapters, correctional officers often face extremely high levels of violence in the workplace – according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, this occupational group has one of the highest rates of non-fatal work-related injuries – and I find that many of these workers feel they are not given the training and resources they require to keep themselves safe on the job. As bureaucrats, these individuals shape the administration of criminal justice, but as people and as citizens, they are also affected by it. Like inmates, correctional officers have daily experiences within the confines of a prison that are mediated by the design and implementation of institutional policies and practices. In fact, many career correctional officers will spend more time in prison over the course of their lives than a large fraction of inmates. Thus, in addition to examining the socialization of prisoners, I explore the flip side of the correctional coin: the ways in which prison work shapes the social lives, norms, and values of officers.

In expanding the subject of inquiry, I hope to emphasize that choices about how to manage and organize prisons do not affect only inmates. Rather, they have consequences for a much broader array of people who are both directly and indirectly affected by the culture of this increasingly predominant state institution. Consider the following:
even if correctional employees and inmates are each linked to only three other individuals outside prison or jail – a child, a mother, and a friend, for example – the affected population at any given time reaches a total of about 12 million Americans. That is roughly equivalent to the combined populations of Hawaii, Rhode Island, Montana, Delaware, South Dakota, North Dakota, Alaska, Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire, Idaho, and Wyoming. The population either directly or vicariously affected by incarceration increases dramatically once we also include the previously incarcerated, retired officers, and the host of others who have encountered correctional institutions as prison counselors, teachers, medical staff, or program volunteers.

4. Testing Causality
Several recent, rigorous empirical studies have shown that incarceration in a harsher prison environment may actually increase rates of recidivism. However, despite extensive theorizing, we are still missing evidence for how different prison environments might shape criminal behavior. What happens during imprisonment that affects subsequent proclivities for crime? The handful of quasi-experimental studies that exist on this topic have left the mechanisms that link in-prison socialization and post-prison behavior largely unexplored, with prison as a proverbial black box in which some indeterminate change occurs. In this study, I argue that the social roles and attachments that are formed or solidified in prison play a pivotal role in determining the effects of different types of institutions.

Inmates assigned to harsher, higher-security prisons are not placed there by random chance, however, but rather because of who they are and what they have done. In particular, inmates are placed in higher-security settings because they have characteristics that make them more likely to engage in misconduct or to attempt escape. Thus, in higher-security prisons, the average inmate has a higher likelihood of being affiliated with a gang, is serving more time for a more violent offense, and has a longer and more violent criminal record. We might therefore reasonably expect that differences in the social orientations of higher-and lower-security prisoners pre-date their incarceration.

The same is true of correctional officers. For prison staff, demographic and attitudinal characteristics are likely to predict the type of institution to which they feel best suited and, over time, officers will
select into the prison environment that conforms to their pre-existing orientations and beliefs. For instance, officers who hold more punitive attitudes may prefer working in more punitive prisons. This makes it difficult to determine the effects of different types of prison, as distinct from the differences individuals bring with them from the beginning.

In a perfect world, we would randomly assign both inmates and correctional officers to different types of prison and evaluate the outcome. This would allow us to isolate the impact of the prison environment. Of course, this is both infeasible and wildly unethical. For this reason, extant scholarship on prison effects remains primarily “anecdotal, qualitative and phenomenological.” This is not to say that we have learned little from these examinations and also from the many excellent quantitative, descriptive inquiries into prison effects that have emerged in recent years. However, only a handful of existing studies allow for the successful establishment of cause-and-effect relationships. For example, of the 300 relevant studies reviewed by Patrice Villetaz and her colleagues that estimated the effects of incarceration relative to non-custodial sanctions, the authors were able to find only four randomized experimental studies, one natural experiment, and an additional 23 non-randomized quasi-experimental studies that employed a sufficiently large number of control variables. Even fewer experimental or quasi-experimental studies examine the effects of incarceration in different types of prison, and nearly all such studies examine imprisonment’s effects on recidivism only. This has left open the question of whether social orientations following imprisonment are caused by the prison or whether they are instead a reflection of the pre-existing resources and constraints that inmates and officers bring with them from the start. The analyses that follow are therefore distinct in that they help to adjudicate between these potential explanations.

By relying on two unique sources of data and two quasi-experiments, the analyses presented in the coming chapters help establish that prison institutions actually change the social attitudes and behavior of individuals. (I describe the specifics of these research designs in Chapter 4.) My contention is that the particular contours of the prison environment actively shape the ways in which social groups coalesce, the collective norms that groups develop, and the ways that individuals behave when they return to society at large. Just as in the mock prison of the Stanford
Prison Experiment more than 40 years ago, “the negative, anti-social reactions observed were not [only] the product of an environment created by combining a collection of deviant personalities, but rather the result of an intrinsically pathological situation…. The abnormality here resided in the psychological nature of the situation and not [just] those who passed through it.”

Separating “cause” from “correlate” is important not just as a methodological exercise, but also for its public policy implications. The dominant model of inmate rehabilitation is often solely “person-centered and dispositional in nature (focusing entirely on individual-level change).” Yet addressing only the stable characteristics of individuals that make them likely to recidivate following release from prison serves to obscure the ways that imprisonment itself can encourage criminality. I find that it is the environment to which individuals are exposed, in addition to the pre-existing features of these individuals, that explain their attitudes and behavior. If this is the case, then focusing exclusively on the dispositions of individuals is not enough. Instead, we must also seek to reform the institutional contexts in which they are placed. This is not to deny that people have agency; individuals are surely responsible for the choices they make. However, the results I present in the following chapters suggest that those choices are also a product of the circumstances in which they are made.

How Institutions Make Citizens

By locating prisons as important state-centered sites of socialization, I do not mean to suggest that they are the primary places where social networks are produced, or even that they are the only arena in which social ties are transformed by the “right hand of the state.” As Dietlind Stolle’s comprehensive review of social capital makes clear, “the spread of generalized trust, and norms of reciprocity and social participation are complex phenomena and cannot be explained by one factor alone.” Rather, my broader point is that social connectedness and the state are interdependent and reciprocal; civil society and the state work together in a “dynamic and cooperative relationship” to build the strong social dynamics that enable effective collective problem solving.
In this regard, the prison social context can help us to specify the dynamics of a more general set of processes. Prisons have a number of features that make them a strategic site for theoretical inquiry into how state policies and institutions “make citizens,” shaping their social attitudes and behavior. First, decisions about the particular prison institution to which an individual will be assigned are largely outside of his or her control. While some attributes of the individual will determine the type of prison to which he or she will be assigned, these characteristics are predictable, consistent, and observable. This helps to alleviate concerns that individuals are “selecting” into and out of their preferred social context. In addition, the boundaries for interpersonal interaction in prison are highly constrained. Prisons are extremely controlled environments, in which individuals are limited in their freedom of movement; once inside the prison walls, individuals cannot freely choose where they will go and with whom they will associate.

Second, prisons place people into social interactions of lengthy duration – the average prison sentence in 2008 was about two years, and many correctional officers work 10- to 12-hour shifts for years or even decades on the job – and the context in which these interactions occur can lend social solidarities a particular intensity and importance. As Devah Pager and Michelle Phelps write, “Prisons can be unpredictable and dangerous environments, [so] access to the right social networks may be integral to a successful survival strategy.”

Finally, although the correctional institution represents a particularly stark form of state intervention, prison culture provides a useful microcosm of the social world. Prisons are small communities unto themselves. Like any small city or town, many prisons have schools and churches, factories and stores. Most residents get up every morning, eat breakfast, and go to work. After a long day, they eat dinner. Then they read or exercise; they play games, write letters, or watch television. They make friends; they make enemies; they change and adapt. Many features of modern prisons – in particular, the extent to which they manage violence, provide resources, and promote cooperative interaction between individuals and groups – are not unique to these particular social environments, but are instead reflective of the state’s capacity to administer to these concerns in a variety of contexts.

In important respects, then, the results I present in the following chapters provide a general reflection on how the culture and constraints
people face in their daily lives help shape their social adaptation. This book is about prisons, but it is also a broader story about why political institutions matter for how citizens come to view their social world, how they interact with others, and how they experience and respond to the particular context in which they are placed.