

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JOEL HARVEY, *Young Men in Prison: Surviving and Adapting to Life Inside*. Uffculme, UK: Willan Publishing, 2007, ix + 185, index.

This book examines how young men between the ages of 18 and 21 make the transition to prison through analyzing the psychosocial experience of imprisonment. Harvey studied Feltham Young Offenders Institution, a remand centre in London, England, where suicidal behavior and self-harm occur disproportionately in the first month of custody. Harvey argues that policy makers have paid substantially more attention to the prison experience of offenders aged 18 and younger. Thus the aims of this book are to understand how young adult men adapt practically, socially, and psychologically within their first month of imprisonment and to look at the role of social support in adaptation. Other goals include understanding supportive transactions between staff and prisoners, social support among prisoners themselves, and self-harming behaviors.

During their transition to prison young men typically undergo a crisis of identity prompted by increased vulnerability, especially during the entry phase of imprisonment. The transition from the outside world to a “total institution” is marked by a liminal state where individuals shed their previous identities and are forced to act in accordance with new customary norms and ethical standards. New prisoners are also preoccupied with safety, especially if it is their first time in Feltham. This anxiety is coupled with the loss of control and freedom, uncertainty about the new environment, and separation from loved ones. Such elements of transition are not experienced in a uniform manner and play an overwhelming role in the psychological distress of prisoners.

Harvey discusses a multitude of ways in which prisoners have to adapt and the difficulties they face in making this transition. The obstacles to creating supportive and trusting relationships with the staff and among prisoners include the transient nature of the population and fear of victimization. However, establishing supportive relationships is essential to adaptation as it reduces the pain of imprisonment. The increasing prevalence of suicide and self-harm in Feltham reflect the need for further restructuring and reforming of policy provisions within the institution. It was found that those who resorted to self-harm did so as a means of relieving negative feelings and regaining a sense of control, whereas those who attempted suicide typically had more concrete problems such as difficulties in relationships. Overall, the locus of control largely determined the path prisoners took to adaptation. Those who had an internal locus of control

were less distressed and managed to interact positively in their new environment. These findings were generated using a comparative approach. Men who partook in harmful and potentially suicidal behavior were compared with men who did not resort to such measures. This was effective because it showed the varying degrees of vulnerability, social support, locus of control, psychological distress, and perceived ability to adapt between the two groups.

The research in this book bridged both quantitative and qualitative analysis. This was effective in that Harvey addressed the scope of the issue through existing statistics and studies, and provided ample evidence from semi-structured interviews, social network analyses and observations based on one year in Feltham. Harvey's sample consisted of 70 prisoners who were interviewed longitudinally at three time intervals (3, 10 and 30 days). His use of attachment theory was valuable in understanding the findings of his study because it emphasized the importance of early life experiences when trying to understand how an individual adapts at any one stage of imprisonment. This is applicable to the findings since those who were prone to self-harm and suicidal behavior were those who had lower levels of support both inside and outside of prison. Consequently, individuals with low levels of external support were less willing to seek support services while imprisoned.

Harvey's effort in drawing attention to the prison experience of young men during the early stage of imprisonment is certainly successful. He identified a wide range of obstacles these young men face in making the transition and adapting to prison life. However, Harvey's initial intention in studying this particular age group was because he felt they had been neglected in the analysis of policy-making. He could have strengthened his argument by making some suggestions oriented towards future policy provisions for restructuring Feltham. All of the data collected could have been put to practical use with the aim of deterring newly imprisoned men from inflicting harm on themselves or turning to suicidal behavior. Nonetheless, this book provides students, researchers, and policy-makers with an insightful look into the dynamics of prison life and the way factors outside of prison can have adverse effects on how an individual experiences imprisonment.

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