

William S. Tregea: Prisoners on Criminology: Convict Life Stories and Crime Prevention

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Tregea has written a refreshing and classroom-friendly book. It links convicts' lives to criminological theory, highlights the implications of theory for prevention, and incites readers to become active in dealing with social problems. In addition to the usual assortment of theories, he raises issues of prison education, the incarceration binge, politics, media and the criminal-justice industrial complex. Tregea has been teaching in prison for more than 30 years, and his deep knowledge of both prisoners and education comes through. For 5 years, he had prisoners write about criminological theories to provide material for this book.

Tregea shares his own awakening to race, protest and interest in the criminal justice system. "I'm angry", he writes, because racially-disproportionate mass incarceration did not need to happen: "The ill-fated war on poverty could have succeeded—ending the trend toward jobless ghettos—if we had not taken on the Vietnam War...; the approach to street drugs could have taken a decriminalization, public health, and harm reduction approach instead of a war on drugs approach that has built the world's largest prison system" (2014, 8). He uses rhetorical questions about how the future of criminology should be positioned with respect to the amount of social disorganization, inequality, and public health: "Why do we need 'social disorganization' theory—can't there be less of the festering inner-city streets *there* to have theory about?" (2014, 8, emphasis original).

Tregea's perspective is that prisoners get into crime because it was going on in their neighborhood as they grew up. People focus on the criminal's bad decisions, but this is "the social world upside down", because they need to start with macro-historical structures (housing policy, business decisions) that led to increasing joblessness, stress, community

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disorganization and family dysfunction. It matters because “children as individuals do not choose their parents, neighborhoods, or historical periods” (2014, 13).

Chapter Two examines the prison state. Tregea discusses the consensus and conflict perspectives about criminal law to start what he recognizes may be an uncomfortable analysis of inequality and class. The chapter covers control of the dangerous classes, the drug war, harm reduction, prohibition, and “the incarceration binge culture”. He establishes that there is an imprisonment binge and racial disproportionality, and weaves in prisoner essays like “They Lock Older Guys Up—Now We Kids Had to Hustle” and “Rampaging Juvenile Elephants”.

Chapter Three, *The Politics of Mass Incarceration*, introduces Simon’s *Governing Through Crime* (2007). It reviews the politically charged Safe Streets Act of 1968, Rockefeller drug laws, and the federalization of harsh mandatory sentences as responses to crime that ignored root problems like concentrated disadvantage. Tregea connects these political transitions to his own professional experiences by noting how in his classes white traditional criminals were replaced with mostly black prisoners who were given harsh drug sentences. He uses Kraska and Brent’s *Theorizing Criminal Justice* (2011) to explore theoretical orientations to explain the imprisonment binge, including politics, media, drug scares, bureaucracy building and privatization. He also notes that “it is not necessary in the criminal justice occupational roles to ‘fight crime’ by understanding its family, community, social or economic origins of crime, or to join in action with others to reduce the root causes” (2014, 100).

Chapter Four, *Prisoners on Education*, makes strong connections between the lack of education and an increased chance of criminality. Approximately 80 % of state prisoners enter prison without a high school diploma and also lack basic job skills. Tregea reviews research connecting low achievement in school, dropout rates, substance abuse, delinquency and early sexual intercourse. Prisoners give powerful personal accounts of struggling in school, being held back in grades, suspended and truant. The lack of education and job skills become barriers to obtaining legitimate employment and add to other reentry challenges.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven discuss the connections between crime and the individual, family and community, respectively. Tregea summarizes the evidence-based predictors in Farrington and Welsh’s *Saving Children from a Life of Crime* (2007) into a helpful table broken down into criminogenic and protective effects at the individual, family and community levels. The prisoner essays illustrate the lack of positive and supportive parents, “Child Neglect—Left to Raise Self” (2014, 142), and abuse like being knocked unconscious. Some who were not engaged in formal education were schooled in criminality by family and/or community role models. Prisoners write of committing crime as a job and a rational decision to make ends meet (“Selling Drugs, Robbing—It’s Not ‘Life as a Party,’ It’s a Job” [2014, 150]). This chapter also covers addiction, environmental toxins like lead, exposure to violence and the amount of free will exercised by a 12 year old joining a gang.

Tregea had to make some difficult choices about where to place prisoner essays that implicate a wide variety of factors, but sections like “*Parents Never There*” (2014, 184–185) are rich in knowledge and tragedy:

I never think it through until it is too late. My parents were never there to teach me right from wrong. That was most of my problem. I would do stuff for their attention. When I would get locked up I had their full attention. When I came home I lost their attention. They had me put on medication and it made me worse. They made me

hyper instead of slowing me down. Then I started to do drugs and drink. Now I am locked up again.

Indeed, Chapter Six is especially rich with prisoner excerpts and essays about family life: a prisoner stole his mom's drug stash and sold it to his grade school friends ("it felt awesome being the kid with the most candy, gum and pies" [2014, 179]); a friend who viewed females and his mother "as a hoe" because "all he seen was men coming in and out of the house and his mother shooting up" (2014, 180–181); of being "14 years old and homeless" (186), and "most of my life, my primary emotions had been sadness, loneliness and depression" later mixed with anger (2014, 188); of finding, at age 12 "the streets were safer than my home" because "my dad was a crack head, and my mother was an alcoholic" (2014, 190).

The limited discussion of crime prevention returns to Farrington and Welsh's (2007) protective factors. These include more investment in Head Start and other early childhood educational programs, positive parental involvement with school, and family-based interventions like parenting skills. Tregea was involved in forming a Boys and Girls Club to reduce delinquency—but he also reviews Wacquant's work about the political and structural decisions that caused a huge "tide of social disorganization" and the hyperghetto (2014, 174–175). Wacquant's powerful analysis blends with prisoner stories about the lack of access to legitimate employment opportunities, the drug trade, crack cocaine, and how having friends and families returning to the community from prison legitimizes criminal behavior. Crime prevention thus includes both the multifactor and comprehensive prevention programs favored by Farrington and Welsh (2007), plus the labor market, economic instability, segregation and factors highlighted by Wacquant's *Urban Outcasts* (2008).

Chapter Eight reviews structure, process and alternative theories. This is a brief review of structural strain, differential association and social learning, along with conflict theory, Neo-Marxism, Left Realism and Feminism. It is hard to say that a 397 page book should have done more, but this chapter was underdeveloped. The page on feminism means that masculinity and sexuality are not explored, nor was there theorizing about men's violence against women, let alone using women prisoners' experiences to create new criminological theory.

Chapter Nine examines prisoner survival, maturation, transformation and reentry. One theme is that the deck is stacked against prisoners because of the lack of skills training and educational opportunities in prison. Another notable theme of the prisoner essays is the difficulty in navigating the political environment of prison—gangs, homosexual activity and saving face—while simultaneously attempting to rehabilitate yourself. In response to these issues, a group of lifer convicts established The LIFERS, Inc., in collaboration with the National Lifers Association. Both groups promote prisoner education and transformation to ease the path of reintegration back into society. Both Tregea and prisoner essays discuss the transformative necessity of programs like the Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative in reducing recidivism and preparing convicts for success in the community.

For students, *Prisoners on Criminology* could be an eye-opening look into the real lives of criminals and the criminological questions raised by concentrated disadvantage. Tregea makes good use of rhetorical questions, sets up series of one page prisoner narratives well and has a generous number of discussion, exercise and review questions at the end of each chapter. The book is repetitious at points, which can help students and/or interrupt the flow and organization. Because the book is in some ways personal, Michigan data and policy is often mentioned along with the national—and although it is a good case study, instructors may need to help students who are put off by this place-specific theme. We would

recommend this for upper-level undergraduates and graduate students. Many practitioners will appreciate the links to theory and larger patterns, while faculty will find the rich catalog of prisoner autobiographies to be beneficial to their own criminological research.