

Criminal Law News

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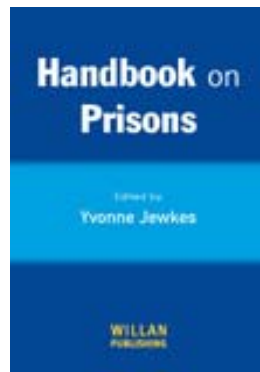
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Handbook on Prisons (Willan 2008) book reviewed by Sally Ramage' Mental Illness,

Medicine and Law (Ashgate 2008) book reviewed by Sally Ramage



This massive book of 780 pages was written by academics and some practitioners, namely Helen Arnold, Jamie Bennett, Charlotte Bilby, Helen Codd, Andrew Cotle, Elaine Crawley, Ben Crewe, Kimmett Edgar, Richard Harding, Clive R. Hollin, Sophie Holmes, Kirsty Hudson, Ruth Jamieson, Yvonne Jewkes, Helen Johnston, Roy D. King, Alison Liebling, Mike Maguire, Shadd Maruna, Kirsten McConnachie, Kieran McEvoy, Diana Medlicott, James Mehigan, Alice Mills, Rod Morgan, Anne Owers, Laura Piacentini, Peter Raynor, Abigail Rowe, Mick Ryan, David Scott, Jane Senior, Jennifer Shaw, Jow Sim, Keith Soothill, Richard Sparks, Sarah Tait, Dirk van Zyl Smit and Michael Wheatley.

It's flavour is that of an academic textbook on criminology, rather than a practitioner's 'nuts and bolts' detailed book on prison law. Yvonne Jewkes who coordinated the whole project also wrote the introduction, in which she states that the book's aims is to offer a broad introduction to prisons and imprisonment in a wide-ranging and timely manner. It also aims to provide core reading for university courses on criminology. It is divided into five parts, the topics being: 'prisons in perspective'; 'prisoners'; 'themes and debates'; 'staffing, management and accountability'; and finally 'regimes, rehabilitation and resettlement'.

Starting with the final section of the book first, resettlement, this has been studied and reported on in the UK Social Exclusion Report published in 2002. It is said that resettlement is part of prisons' core business and a full set of practical measures have been put in place to help prisoners obtain work and accommodation when they leave prison, with the much acclaimed National Offender Management

Services ('NOMS') at the core, a 'joined-up' individually planned approach that was claimed to significantly reduce offending.

The only set-back to this big ideal is that the plan was overspent by several hundreds of millions of pounds by way of a scrapped computer system into which all prisoners' details would be placed. The failure to implement a central database on offenders was put down to poor management and unrealistic expectations, the National Audit Office (NAO) said in a report. C-NOMIS was designed to track criminals in England and Wales from sentence to release. Yet the NAO found the project was abandoned due to a number of errors with the National Offender Management Service's (NOMS) programme management and the actions of its senior management. Plans for the £234m C-NOMIS, began in 2004. However, by July 2007 the project was two years behind schedule and its estimated costs had soared to £690m. The technical complexity of the project was also found to be "significantly underestimated". Whilst the report believed a single offender database was "technically realisable", it said NOMS did not adequately explore other potential solutions and underestimated the cost of customising the software it had already selected for the Prison Service. Procurement for CNOMIS was also found to be sloppy. In view of this turn of events in March 2009, parts of the final chapters may need updating.

Chapter 2 by Keith Soothill, on prison history made for interesting reading and included the 1966 Mountbatten Report which proposed the upgrading of physical security in the prison estate., placing high-risk prisoners together. The chapter narrates the prisoner protests, the May Committee Report advocating the rewriting of prison rules, and the birth of liberal penology. Keith Soothill's chapter included very useful suggested further reading, including the development of penal policy as narrated by Ryan (2003) in *Penal Policy and Political Culture*, published by Waterside Press.

Part 3 of the Handbook on Prisons includes chapters on the problem of containment, prison healthcare, drugs in prison, prisoner suicide and dealing with the media. These are current awareness issues and very important inclusions into a book on prisons.

This Handbook on Prisons concludes with a chapter titled, '*After prison, what? The ex-prisoner's struggle to desist from crime*' and quotes the UK Association of Chief Officers of Probation as defining the word 'resettlement' as follows:

'A systematic and evidence-based process by which actions are taken to work with the offender in custody and on release, so that communities are better protected from harm and reoffending is significantly reduced. It encompasses the totality of work with prisoners, their families and significant others in partnership with statutory and voluntary organisations'.

This is a highly readable book on prisons and it looks deeply at all the research ever done on the subject of prisons. It will be essential reading for undergraduate and post-graduate law and sociology students.

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