

Book Review of *Behind the Walls: A Guide for Families and Friends of Texas Prison Inmates*

Dale Sechrest

California State University, San Bernardino

Behind the Walls: A Guide for Families and Friends of Texas Prison Inmates

By Jorge Antonio Renaud

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Areas covered in this review of *Behind the Walls: A Guide for Families and Friends of Texas Prison Inmates*, include the purpose, or major focus, of the book, the degree to which those goals were met, the content, the author's conclusions and insights, and the usefulness of the book. The book describes an inmate's life in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) correctional facilities, where the author has served 20 years. Its purpose is to serve as a guide for the families of inmates confined in the TDCJ, which appears to be how the book began. However, the author does provide some insights into the frustrations of prison life generally, and suggests methods of coping. While reading the book, one expects the author to develop a major critique of modern correctional operations. This does not happen. Perhaps without being aware of Clemmer's concept of prisonization, the author describes the process in great detail, which is the strong point of the piece and makes some chapters required reading.

After providing some information on the Texas landmark case of *Ruiz v. Estelle* (1982) and some related court cases, the author focuses on the paradox of custody and security versus inmate needs and related modes of adaptation. He periodically refers to this case in relation to the demise of the "building tender," or trusty, system that existed in the Texas system through the early 1980s, and discusses it in some detail in his chapter on racism, riots, and gangs. What is not discussed is the method of selection and control of these trusties during the years when Dr. George Beto was director. However, the account of the pre- and post-*Ruiz* period is quite informative. (A detailed history of this era is provided by Martin and Eckland-Olson, 1987).

Mr. Renaud criticizes the system, especially for not reporting sex offenses, but offers no alternatives. For example, one wonders if the author and his fellow inmates were happy when the building tender system

was terminated (at least one study has suggested this possibility; Crouch & Marquart, 2001). Has the resulting system of gang control been better—or worse, as stated at page 124? Or, does it just not matter in such an environment? The conclusion seems to be that *whatever* happens the inmate must adjust to survive in a highly controlled environment that presents few options. The reader gets no guidance on how to manage one of the major problems of correctional institutions—gang and racial violence. Also, the issue of managing officer racism is not clearly stated, if it is an issue in this context.

The author presents an "inside" view of how the convict carves some order out of the chaos of confinement. One of the most insightful contributions of the book is the discussion of inmate relations of all kinds, especially the coercion of inmates into protective relationships that are paid for with money or sex, called "riding" (p. 61). In this context, gang and drug problem are also discussed. Again, solutions to these problems do not seem easily attained in the environment of the correctional institution.

His discussion of court cases is neither current nor complete, but does not appear to be a goal of the book. Missing is the decision relating to disciplinary hearings in light of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Sandin v. Conner* (1995), which would change his discussion of disciplinary proceedings leading to "punitive," or disciplinary segregation, which is not clearly distinguished from administrative segregation. He does capture the sad effects of isolation, especially as they relate to the newer "super-max" institutions. Another case not mentioned is *Lewis v. Casey* (1996), which limits inmate access to the courts and legal material, and would seem most relevant to his discussion of the role of inmate "eight-hoe squad" in *Ruiz*. The bad news is that the courts are not providing the type of support for inmate concerns that they did in the past, which is based on the assumption that correctional officials are now up to the job of running better institutions.

The revelation that the correctional officers are *always* right is not a new one. He does acknowledge their humanity and laments their situation in the dehumanizing environment of the correctional institution. Nowhere in the book, however, does the

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author discuss the many techniques inmates use to “soften up” and then take advantage of correctional officers, much less the danger these officers face daily from inmates. How are they to maintain control over large numbers of inmates if they are in the position of constantly having to justify (and lose) decisions that are often made under many and varied pressures? Yes, they could do better, but it is not an ideal situation with regard to fairness. The author could make some suggestions regarding the selection (education and qualifications) and training of officers; however, research seems to support the view that the effects achieved are limited in the correctional environment, just as they are in law enforcement and other professions.

The author discusses medical issues without ever mentioning *Estelle v. Gamble* (1976), the Texas landmark case that set the standard for deliberate indifference to inmate medical needs, although the term is used (p. 43). The AIDS issue is well-covered, as is Hepatitis C, although corrections officials are given little credit for managing either problem in a closed environment. The relationship of AIDS to sex in prisons is made clear, with the sad commentary that the system does not recognize preventive measures as necessary, alluding to the problem of lack of official acknowledgment that inmate sexual activity occurs. Mental illness among inmates is cited as a problem, but given little attention outside the context of segregation.

Mail and visiting are cited as the most important activities inmates can have. Again, while complaints are raised, little is offered by way of solutions. Even the author recognizes the importance of controlling contraband, although he somewhat cynically implies that correctional officers do not always discourage contraband coming into the institution.

Near the end of the book he points to the paradox of presenting oneself as such a good “rule-bound” inmate for the parole board that the inmate can’t function outside the institutional environment upon release, perhaps accounting for the high recidivism rates of parolees. Here he again notes that to survive and get out the inmate must “circumvent the rules” of the institution.

The author is fair in praising those things that are good, like the educational system of the TDCJ and the importance of real work for inmates is underscored. Inmate support and help to other inmates is alluded to but not given the importance it deserves. Programs and services could be better evaluated for their contributions. The new emphasis on “spirituality” in incarcerated settings is not specifically discussed, with the chaplain being seen as a contact for a furlough to visit a dying relative. However, the chapter on religion

does document its importance and its value to inmates to help keep contact with family. Victims are not discussed. A conservative reading this book is likely to say that they are getting pretty much what they deserve, and it should be worse!

This reviewer, who participated in writing the American Correctional Association standards for corrections, would have appreciated a chapter indicating what would be best practices. The fundamental issue is providing humane conditions, which even conservative jurists will acknowledge to be necessary. But, they need help. What are the best characteristics of a good institution—warden or correctional officer? What programs are best? What is the best way to manage discipline, and the gang, sex, and drug problems? Is there a better way to punish some of these errant individuals? A systematic discussion of the specific programs that are in greater need would be useful, and the author touches on some of these in the final chapter as general “inmate improvement” efforts. Outside contact to avoid the stigma and dehumanizing effects of prison is seen as most important. Finally, are outside controls on the system doing their job? Are the courts or the legislatures doing enough to encourage better management and ensure the rights of inmates?

Overall, the use of jargon is sometimes a problem, but a glossary covers most of these terms, such as a “3g” offense or a “picket.” The appendices are specific to TDJC, but provide good examples of the kinds of policies and procedures that are used in most systems. The book is thorough, but provides too much detail and too few conclusions or recommendations for general academic use. It is good as recommended reading, especially the chapter on gangs.

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