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Talking Back:

Non-Uniformed Prison Staff Respond to Media Representations of Their Work

Susan Dewey

The University of Alabama

Brittany VandeBerg

The University of Alabama

Ruben Oroz

Independent Scholar

Susan Lockwood-Roberts

Indiana University

Abstract

The present study's goal is to illuminate how media-generated popular cultural understanding of prison impacts the educational, therapeutic, and administrative work non-uniformed staff engage in with people who are incarcerated. Understanding these dynamics is vital because non-uniformed prison staff play instrumental roles in supporting people who are incarcerated with making the transition to future community members. We argue that non-uniformed staff rarely feature in media accounts of prison, yet these popular cultural representations of prison nonetheless shape both the work they are able to carry out in prison and their perspectives their work. Uniting and building on literature in cultural criminology, prison social climate, and transdisciplinary work on courtesy stigma, this article unfolds in two parts. First, we explore how non-uniformed staff conceptualize and interpret the impact of media representations of prison on their everyday work. Second, we examine how non-uniformed staff respond to the political will wielded by a media-educated voting public in determining their work's scope in prison.

Keywords: Prison, corrections, cultural criminology

Introduction

Ninety-five percent of people in prison are going to be released. They're going to be your neighbors. What kind of neighbor do you want to have? Do you want a neighbor who spent their time in prison getting angrier, or do you want a neighbor who worked through their issues and is ready to be a good contributor to society? The work we do every day to help people in prison change their lives for the better is the stuff you don't see on TV.

- Amy, a prison mental health specialist

U.S. prisons have been a popular crime media staple for decades (Rafter, 2000; Steinmetz, 2017) because media offers a view into the otherwise closed worlds of correctional institutions (Cecil, 2015). Many people who lack firsthand experience of living, working, or knowing someone who has served a sentence in prison formulate their understandings of incarceration based on dramatized representations they see in the media which, in turn, impact whether and how they support reforms designed to make prison a more therapeutic and less punitive institution (Pickett et al. 2015). Since journalists and entertainment media writers and producers also often lack this firsthand experience, the representations they create of everyday prison life are typically skewed in ways designed to maximize audience attention through salacious, disturbing accounts which reinforce negative public attitudes toward prison as an institution and those associated with it. Contemporary public interest in prison spans a wide ideological spectrum among activists, politicians, and popular culture, which is unsurprising given how prominently prison features in canonical American legal, political, and literary texts (Smith, 2011), countless movies and television series created for the viewing pleasure of “penal spectators” (Brown, 2009), and in penal tourism, where sites of punishment become part of a vacation agenda, as occurs at both former sites of punishment, such as Alcatraz in California and in operational prisons through tours (Welch, 2015; Wilson, et al. 2017).

In their focus on the salacious and often fear-inducing aspects of prison, these media representations neglect key realities about everyday prison life. People who are incarcerated have significantly lower levels of formal education, literacy, and test scores in comparison with the general population (Brazzel, et al. 2009) and have extensive histories of trauma, violence, substance use disorders, and multiple forms of marginalization (Brennan, et al. 2012; Laub & Sampson, 2006). Non-uniformed prison staff—who include educators, clinical staff, and administrators such as wardens and leadership from headquarters— provide critical services to help people who are incarcerated overcome these significant challenges and manage the life-long stigma of a felony conviction post-release. The primary responsibilities of non-uniformed prison staff focus on providing care and support, which distinguishes them from uniformed correctional officers whose chief role is to maintain institutional security (Arnold, 2016).

The present study's goal is to illuminate how media-generated popular cultural understanding of prison impacts the educational, therapeutic, and administrative work non-uniformed staff engage in with people who are incarcerated. Understanding these dynamics is vital because, as prison mental health specialist Amy observed regarding “the stuff you don't see on TV,” non-uniformed prison staff play instrumental roles in supporting people who are incarcerated with making the transition to future community members. We argue that non-uniformed staff rarely feature in media accounts of prison, yet these popular cultural representations of prison nonetheless shape both the work they are able to carry out in prison and their perspectives on their work. Uniting and building on literature in cultural criminology, prison social climate, and transdisciplinary work on courtesy stigma, this article unfolds in two parts. First, we explore how non-uniformed staff conceptualize and interpret the impact of media representations of prison on their everyday work. Second, we examine how non-

uniformed staff respond to the political will wielded by a media-educated voting public in determining their work's scope in prison.

Popular Culture, Cultural Criminology, and Prison

Popular culture provides most of the information people have about criminal justice processes and institutions, meaning that the same public who votes on criminal justice issues is operating with partial and often misconstrued information (Grubb & Posick, 2021). Viewers and readers engage with crime media for complex reasons. Images—the substance of visual media—are inherently visceral because of how most people understand images without thinking, which poses problems for justice when viewers lack the knowledge and skills necessary to interpret images (Silbey, 2012). Media featuring accounts of crime and justice can reassure its consumers by providing neatly organized narratives of why people commit crimes and, in the process, convey to the viewer that the world is a safe place where justice prevails (Murley, 2019).

Media also serves an additional explanatory—and potentially reassuring—function for viewers when offenders and their loved ones speak for themselves about a criminal case, allowing the viewer to assess the validity of the justice process, as occurred in the *New York Times*-owned podcast *Serial* (Buozis, 2017). Yet such media can also serve a subversive purpose by allowing viewers to identify with the illicit while remaining ensconced in the boundaries and authority of the law (Young, 2009). In this respect, contemporary crime media derives from story-telling traditions that valorized working class people who flouted a system rigged against them – most notably in the examples of highway bandit Robin Hood or pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read—as “criminal heroes” (James & Lane, 2020).

Media representations and public attitudes about prison are in constant dialogue with one another, and cultural criminology emphasizes the indistinguishability of media portrayals of crime and justice from public attitudes (Akrivos & Antoniou, 2019). The institutions and processes of punishment have their own cultural lives due to their embeddedness in media which, in turn, helps to shape how these institutions and processes actually function (Ogletree & Sarat, 2015). The permeable boundaries between representations of crime and justice and actual criminal justice practice is particularly evident in real-world actions taken by viewers, as occurred when fans of the Netflix series *Making a Murderer* conducted their own investigations into the circumstances of the case discussed and led efforts to exonerate the two men convicted of murder (Stratton, 2019). To date, the Governor of Wisconsin has received 2,200 contacts regarding the case (Reinwold, 2022). A Netflix series based on Piper Kerman's memoir of the thirteen months she served in federal prison, *Orange is the New Black*, engages in self-reflexive commentary about popular cultural representations of women in prison and, in so doing, may serve as an educational tool for viewers to critically engage with the gendered dynamics of incarceration (Schwan, 2016).

Critics have warned against turning justice processes into a spectacle for at least two decades, noting the potential for superficial media coverage to undermine public confidence in the law by transforming the practice of law grounded in logic to legal strategies akin to advertising and public relations (Sherwin, 2002). Just as media has the potential to prompt prison reform by raising awareness about the issues facing people who are incarcerated, media can also reinforce dominant narratives that work against reform. For example, reality television series problematically cast people who are incarcerated in the United States as neoliberal subjects with the freedom to redeem themselves through rehabilitative processes, in contrast to their peers incarcerated in international prisons depicted as abusive and dehumanizing (Wallace, 2015). Critical engagement with media portrayals of forensic science likewise note how these depictions are often highly gendered, with a disturbing focus on the bodies of both female forensic investigators and female victims (Steenberg, 2013).

Media representations of prison staff are resoundingly negative. An analysis of print journalists' portrayals of correctional officers found that nearly 80% featured negative accounts, which functions to

diminish public support for their work and increase levels of stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction (Vickovic, Griffin & Fradella, 2013). These negative depictions are likewise present in television commercials featuring prisons, correctional officers, and correctional institutions (Ross & Sneed, 2018). To our knowledge, ours is the first study of how media impact the work of non-uniformed prison staff.

Prison Social Climate

Prison social climate comprises the multi-dimensional moral, emotional, social, and physical aspects of prison which interact to create socio-institutional relations and perceptions of overall institutional legitimacy and fairness in correctional facilities (Auty & Liebling, 2020). Non-uniformed prison staff have received limited attention from criminologists relative to correctional officers and people who are incarcerated. This lack of attention is surprising given how the burgeoning body of prison social climate literature's unanimous argument that people who are incarcerated in well-organized, humane institutions that promote personal growth have lower recidivism rates post-release and experience psychological and attitudinal shifts associated with desistance (Auty & Liebling, 2020; Cheliotis & Jordanoska, 2016). Despite this robust scientific support for the educational, therapeutic, and administrative work non-uniformed staff perform in prison, detractors have asserted for decades that high recidivism rates are themselves a measure of the inefficacy of their efforts (Martinson, 1974).

Interactions are a key component of prison social climate as staff go about the difficult but routine tasks of setting boundaries with both people who are incarcerated and their work in prison more generally, which requires the need to constantly distinguish “between ‘good’ and ‘right’ relationships; ‘tragic’ and ‘cynical’ perspectives; ‘reassurance’ and ‘relational’ safety; and ‘good’ and ‘bad’ confidence” (Liebling, 2011). Physical conditions also impact prison social climate for staff and people who are incarcerated, with poor physical conditions corresponding to significantly higher levels of serious violence in the institution, staff substance abuse, psychological symptomology, physical duress, and sick leave use (Bierie, 2012a; Bierie, 2012b). The human suffering inherent to incarceration requires staff to conceal emotional vulnerabilities even in extreme instances such as a death in prison (Barry, 2019). Stress associated with role conflict, role overload, and perceived danger also present an increased likelihood of work-family conflict for prison staff (Lambert, et al. 2015). While less experienced staff whose contact with people who are incarcerated is limited to issuing orders may be more likely to respond punitively to these challenges, the opposite is true for staff with more years of service and sustained interaction with prisoners (Kelly, 2014). While these research findings offer tremendous insights, they are restricted to the experiences of uniformed prison staff.

Courtesy Stigma

Prison staff work in a stigmatized institutional context. The impacts of stigma on people who have served a prison sentence are well-documented in terms of reduced self-esteem (LeBel, 2012), difficulties finding and keeping a job (Haluska, 2015) or an intimate relationship (Gunn, et al. 2016), and limited community support (Evans & Cubellis, 2015). The children and intimate partners of incarcerated people also experience this stigma by proxy (Luther, 2016; Hinck, et al. 2019). Much less is known about how people who work in prison understand and interpret courtesy stigma, the public disapproval faced by those professionally associated with a stigmatized group.

Studies of how professionals manage courtesy stigma tend to coalesce around how workers cultivate a positive identity in contrast to dominant cultural perceptions of their occupations as physically, socially, or morally tainted “dirty work” (Ashforth, et al. 2007). The social and emotional costs of such stigma-by-association has also been documented in studies of role disclosure and other insider-outsider communication

difficulties experienced by volunteers who work with people living with AIDS and patients in hospice care (Dwyer et al. 2013; White & Gilstrap, 2017). Similarly, workers in non-profit organizations providing services to sex workers report challenges in ways that directly shape the workplace environment, perceptions of support, and available resources (Phillips et al., 2012).

Previous studies have explored how correctional officers navigate stigmatization in both law enforcement and popular cultural domains due to their “images as ‘professional babysitters’ and the ‘scum of law enforcement’ (Tracy & Clifton, 2006, p. 7). Working in prison requires a nuanced set of skills irrespective of a worker’s educational background, which correctional officers in the United Kingdom allude to in their use of the shorthand term “jailcraft” with reference to the interpersonal skills and integrity required to maintain security and control, including a strong understanding of human behavior, the ability to maintain relational boundaries while practicing empathy, and remaining emotionally detached from incarcerated individuals (Arnold, 2016).

Correctional educators occupy a unique prison position as professionals with college and sometimes even more advanced degrees, in contrast with correctional officers, who only need a high school credential. Yet the greatest difference between correctional officers and educators is that the former fills a role that revolves around security and control, whereas the latter’s role is to provide care and support (Arnold, 2016). Perhaps because of the sharp distinctions between security and support roles, prison social climate is often characterized by a divide between correctional employees tasked with security and those tasked with providing education and psycho-social programs to incarcerated individuals. It is in this fascinating and sometimes fraught socio-institutional context that our research team carried out the study.

Method and Analysis

The first author conducted and analyzed the results of semi-structured interviews and observations with non-uniformed staff at nearly 100 different prisons—at all security levels and housing men, women, and juveniles—centrally managed by eight separate state prison systems. Each state prison administration varied in size, with some larger administrations employing more staff than the total number of individuals employed in the entirety of the smaller state systems. Consequently, we chose not to quantify our results and instead focused our analysis on prevailing themes that emerged in each state. Our participants’ confidentiality is likewise protected by not naming the states or prisons in the study.

Our study included a broad range of non-uniformed staff in terms of years on the job, demographics, and professional roles. The first author organized her visits, most of which were approximately ten days in duration, to prisons by coordinating with prison administrators at headquarters in each location. In all eight states, she spent the first day of each visit interviewing senior administrators responsible for the selection and/or development of classes, programs, and activities offered in the prisons under their purview. This initial set of interviews during her visit to each state helped to frame the philosophies, resources, and general dynamics guiding non-uniformed staff’s work in prison. The first author then spent the remaining days of her visit conducting observations and interviews in prisons to understand the successes and challenges prison staff experienced while implementing administrators’ vision for their work.

As is typical across the United States, leadership staff at prison administrative headquarters tended to hold advanced degrees, including at the Ph.D. level, and have more than a decade of experience in corrections. The number of leadership staff interviewed at headquarters varied by state, ranging from five to fifteen. Non-uniformed staff who worked at the prisons in our study all held four-year degrees and relevant licenses to teach classes and/or lead therapeutic programs. The number of prison staff interviewed in each state ranged from thirty to fifty. In total, the first author conducted several hundred interviews, which ranged in type and duration

from multi-hour conversations while driving between prisons to quick but extremely informative conversations during visits to prisons.

The semi-structured interview guide used in the study was structured around five central themes and included questions designed to encourage elucidation in particular areas without overdirecting the course of the interview or prematurely determining its results. The first, successes, asked to describe some of the administration's greatest achievements with education and psychosocial programming, the route to these successes, and public responses to them. The second, instruction, addressed educational delivery in different housing units, use of technology, state-mandated benchmarks for adult basic education, how staff create a safe and supportive learning environment, and decision-making processes regarding education and programming. The third, student profile, explored staff perspectives on prisoners' pre-incarceration life experiences and how programming addresses those experiences, the percentage of prisoners receiving special education, and whether prisoners' mental health issues impact educational delivery. The fourth, student motivation and incentives, focused on the impacts of age, sentence length, crime of conviction, and incentives for participation in education. The fifth, collaboration, centered on relationships with other agencies, the rationale underlying these relationships, successes and challenges associated with the establishment of these relationships, and remaining challenges with respect to collaboration with other agencies.

The impact of media representations on non-uniformed staff's everyday work emerged strongly in all interview responses, and this theme was also a consistent presence in the first author's observations, which provided valuable context for our analysis by allowing her to fully experience the contexts in which prison staff work—and which people who are incarcerated live and learn—by being physically present for periods of up to ten hours a day. These long hours in prison allowed the first author to develop trust and rapport with participants, which was further enabled by her previous professional experience working in prison. Such observations also familiarized the first author with the psycho-social and physical impacts of extreme temperatures, safety concerns, tensions between non-uniformed staff and uniformed staff, and other aspects of everyday working life in prison that might not have otherwise been as readily apparent. Analysis of interviews and observations utilized open coding to identify preliminary themes followed by axial coding to determine relationships between those themes.

Findings

Three primary findings emerged in our analysis. First, non-uniformed staff acknowledged that general public perceptions of corrections derive from stigmatizing media representations, which they attempt to mitigate by publicizing positive transformations in incarcerated individuals' lives while emphasizing the long-term cost-savings of reducing recidivism through therapeutic, rather than punitive, approaches. Second, our participants spoke at length about confronting the courtesy stigma that suffuses their work with individuals who are incarcerated and generally receive limited public support or empathy. Third, non-uniformed staff emphasized the complex interplay between the politico-economic, legal, sociocultural, and administrative-institutional forces that help to shape prison social climate.

Countering Inaccurate Media Representations

Non-uniformed staff lamented the ubiquity of stigmatizing media representations while also acknowledging the need to actively cultivate counter-narratives that emphasize the positive transformations that routinely occur in prison settings. Almost every participant referenced media representations in response to interview questions regarding general public perceptions of their work, often by referencing specific television series or films about prison. "A lot of what they see on TV," an educator explained regarding the basis of most

people's knowledge about corrections before naming some of the myriad popular cultural representations that inform popular understandings of incarcerations, "*Lockup, Prison Break*. When I tell people what I do for my job they jump to extremes of everyone is sodomizing and killing each other. They only know what they see on TV, they're headline-motivated." As one teacher concisely put it, "My friends think I see fights every day." Likewise, a program administrator expressed frustration at the essentially dehumanizing nature of these media representations, noting, "These are not just random criminals. They have goals, aspirations, and they're making it happen. This is not *Orange Is the New Black*."

In light of these inaccurate media representations, non-uniformed staff recognize the need to counter and otherwise mitigate negative perceptions they regard as pervasive in their social worlds outside of prison. This is particularly important in light of the principle of less eligibility, which has traditionally served as an argument against prisoners receiving any advantage greater than those available to underprivileged people in the free world (Sieh, 1989). Our participants realize that public support is conditional and that most people understand "justice" in a variety of contexts. For example, our participants acknowledged greater support for educating those individuals who committed non-violent crimes, crimes related to addictions or compromised mental health, or crimes of passion, whereas education and programs for sex offenders remains more controversial. Bearing this in mind, it could be considered that, if media representations of the prison social climate stage these institutions as populated by violent people, where aggression is continuous, the public will be less willing to support programs for the rehabilitation of the prison population. The latter would not be worthy of receiving such benefits for maintaining this alleged violent conduct. This is a straightforward way in which the media can affect the daily work of non-uniformed personnel, since, without the support of the voting public, it is more likely that certain rehabilitation programs will not be applied within corrections.

Corrections as a field is slowly changing in ways that now encourage engagement with stigmatizing dominant cultural narratives about prison by publicizing positive transformations in the lives of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals and emphasizing the long-term cost-savings of reducing recidivism through education and other rehabilitative programs. "We always tell staff," a senior administrator explained, "you're the ambassadors of corrections, you're the ones who share what we do." Some jurisdictions use social media such as Facebook and Twitter as well as more traditional media like radio and television to publicize graduations and other achievements with the view that, as one educator put it, "good things that inmates do should be in the press." A few state prison systems in our study offer opportunities for incarcerated individuals to actively contribute to the community by growing food for donation to area food banks, building structures for people in need, and, in one instance, even by using prison commissary sales to fundraise for a shelter that houses women who have been victims of violence. Responding to our first research question, these are other ways in which media representations impact the daily endeavors of non-uniformed personnel. To their already busy work scheme, they must add combating these popular images through an active action that implies producing positive "propaganda."

The first author heard about and observed numerous other forms of positive public engagement, including resource and employment fairs, victim awareness events, and graduations, some of which featured journalists in attendance alongside prominent community members. Administrators reported that such positive events increase volunteerism as guests invited from the free world share what they learned about prison within their social circles. All these initiatives celebrate successes achieved by incarcerated people while also reducing stigma and humanizing incarcerated individuals and their families. One state system we visited was in the process of furthering this two-pronged initiative by creating a brochure and video from a child's perspective about what children can expect when visiting a parent or other loved one in a correctional facility, with the goal of sharing the results with incarcerated individuals' family members and legislators alike. The same progressive administration also planned to host a banquet for employers who hired formerly incarcerated people in the hopes of reducing community stigma while also acknowledging their efforts.

On the contrary, it could be inferred that negative media representations generate a lack of volunteers. It is clear that no one wants to be part of an institution that is seen as negative, where unworthy people live. The lack of volunteers could affect the daily activities of non-uniformed personnel, since the less available people to perform duties, more tasks fall on them.

Yet non-uniformed staff also noted the importance of strategically countering inaccurate media representations among the general public so as not to reinforce a broader public perception that, as one educator observed, education is “putting a silver spoon in a convict’s mouth.” Participants described utilizing a combination of pragmatism that emphasizes the proven efficacy of education in reducing recidivism alongside careful curation of information-sharing in public settings. The pragmatic approach emphasizes the overall benefit to society; as one administrator noted, “When we engage with the public, we remind them that 90% of those individuals who are incarcerated will be released, and if we don’t help them, they’ll go back to prison, and we don’t want that.” The curated approach considers the potential for public backlash due to the perception that incarcerated individuals do not deserve to have access to benefits, especially those that are unavailable to the general public. Unfavorable media representations of life inside corrections not only force non-uniformed personnel to combat them, but also condition the way they must do so. In other words, in addition to generating an extra responsibility, it also shapes the nature of it. An educator observed that she sometimes finds herself in an ethical bind when she wants to share the kinds of successes that happen in her facility, such as free classes offered by the most expensive and well-regarded private university in the region, but does not do so widely due to concerns about a negative public reaction:

It’s going out and being very careful about where we show success. I sometimes tiptoe around things that we want to do, and I don’t always tell all the things we get, like our college classes from [prestigious, expensive private university]. Not just any old college, but [the prestigious university], where we couldn’t afford to send our children and here [in prison] they’re getting a free education.

Non-uniformed staff make difficult choices in engaging with political and socio-institutional forces and negative media representations. Yet they also make these choices in the context of pervasive stigma surrounding correctional facilities, people who are incarcerated, and their profession more generally.

Managing Courtesy Stigma

Non-uniformed staff navigate the courtesy stigma that results from their professional association with incarcerated people by distinguishing themselves as able to fill a specialized niche that requires both heightened empathy and the ability to maintain professionalism while working with a challenging population. Some described their work in prison as a vocation connected to a personal belief system and faith in people’s abilities to change their lives for the better. Others, particularly those who did not feel anchored by a clearly defined sense of purpose, keenly experienced negative impacts to their sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem because of courtesy stigma. This turns out to be another way in which media representations negatively influence job performance of non-uniformed personnel. The adverse images media shows of imprisoned people partly underlies the social stigma they suffer, and the latter generates the discrimination experienced by non-uniformed staff. As we could see, this marginalization endured by non-uniformed personnel can affect both the sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem, capabilities associated with job performance.

All the non-uniformed staff in our study readily acknowledged the significant stigma facing currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, including the associated belief that people convicted of crimes should not receive any assistance in prison. Many expressed a sense of working in a parallel world that affords staff a heightened understanding of the challenges most incarcerated people face, including poverty, lack of family

support, trauma, and struggles with addictions and other mental health issues. As one educator noted, “outside [prison] there’s the stigma of being a felon but in here that’s not even a thing.” An administrator captured this sense of living in two worlds in observing how punitive approaches to incarceration lack foresight: “I’ve had a lot of comments [from the public] like, ‘they should be in there breakin’ rocks.’ But what kind of neighbor do people want to have when they get out?”

The punitive mindset is perhaps most evident in negative public reactions to funding for post-secondary education, which is likely due to the broader crisis of higher education that has made college unaffordable for many families. A senior administrator whose tenure has extended through the 1994 revocation of Pell grants for incarcerated individuals through their relatively recent reinstatement at a select number of sites reflected on the rationale underlying the revocation by stating, “I think a lot of that was the public saying, ‘I’m paying for my child’s education and inmates shouldn’t get that.’” Likewise, our participants readily recounted numerous statements made by detractors who directly challenged the value of their work with arguments such as, “you have to go to prison to get an education in this state,” “my kids had to pay to go to college, so why don’t they?” and “why are we spending money on people in prison?” In other words, the impact that media representations have on public opinion makes them not supportive of educational programs. Those who live inside prison do not deserve to have benefits that free people do not have. This is generated thanks to the idea transmitted by the media that those who live inside corrections are unworthy, immoral, violent criminals who cannot be rehabilitated. Education is not taken as a rehabilitation tool, but rather as a benefit that is being provided to a citizen who is not worthy of receiving it. This attitude affects everyday work of non-uniformed staff, who must be able to count on educational programs to carry out their tasks properly. Education is essential for rehabilitation (Davis et al., 2013).

Such stigmatizing beliefs are particularly pronounced toward people who are serving sentences for sexual offenses, leading several participants to describe such individuals as “a harder population to have empathy for.” Such stigma extends by proxy to non-uniformed staff who work directly with sex offenders, with one mental health treatment staff member noting, “When people hear I work in the sex offender treatment unit, they give an odd look. They don’t realize how much variability there is in the offenses. People tend to assume the worst. The stigma can be really harsh.” Many participants acknowledged that many incarcerated individuals experience lifelong stigma that follows them even after their release through background checks related to employment and housing. An administrator characterized this lifelong stigma as inhibiting or even preventing people from starting over post-release in ways that her administration actively seeks to address by positively shifting public perceptions about people who have served sentences in a correctional institution:

If folks don’t give up the stigma piece, then the punishment never stops. Our real end mission is to see them [incarcerated individuals] as someone’s family member. Otherwise, it’s as if I have one overdraft on my checking account and then the bank keeps charging me that \$27 fee every month for the rest of my life.

Some non-uniformed staff described themselves as doing work that others cannot or do not want to do, thus acknowledging courtesy stigma’s impact on their professional lives while also allowing them to take pride in pursuing a challenging occupation. As one educator concisely stated, “Prison is not for everybody!” Prison, according to a senior administrator, “is the toilet in your house. It’s not glamorous but if it’s not working, no one is happy.” If media continues to portray prisons as terrible and dangerous places, it is likely that a smaller percentage of the population will be willing to work there. This may affect the conditions under which non-uniformed staff perform functions, since human resources are needed to carry out their responsibilities. Other participants regarded their work as part of their religious vocation, as did one educator who resigned from a teaching position at a Catholic school to teach in a prison:

We're selling hope and they [incarcerated students] are buying. Since I have been here, I truly believe in rehabilitation, and I see God more than I ever did when I taught at Catholic school. I'm the seventh chance queen. Sometimes they are slow because of all the knockdowns they've had. We are the light for them. They come here [to class] to breathe the fresh air.

Yet other non-uniformed staff felt stigmatized for working in prison due to what they regarded as general public perceptions that they could not find jobs elsewhere and accordingly had to seek out employment in a correctional setting. A teacher summarizes this perception in stating, "I know that I have heard my administration say, 'why would a teacher take a prison job?' It insinuates something." Another educator observed of her work at the correctional institution, "When I started here, I didn't know if I wanted to tell people where I worked. No one listens to us. I just don't think people in the professional world see people in corrections as equal to them. They think, 'probably they just couldn't get a job somewhere else.'" Such harsh characterizations of the important work correctional educators and administrators do every day are essential to consider considering broader debates about mass incarceration.

Shifting Political and Socio-institutional Tides

Interplay between diverse political and socio-institutional forces directly informs the scope, type, and quality of work non-uniformed staff can accomplish and the funding they receive to carry it out. Our participants were keenly aware of how, for instance, shifting political tides in Congress or their state legislature could quickly eradicate, sustain, or enhance their efforts due to concerns expressed by particularly vocal (and often ill-informed) constituents regarding the use of public money. Participants' characterizations of this dynamic interplay coalesced around the themes of public misperceptions, administrators' relationships with political decision-makers, and socioeconomic realities such as the job market and heightened public awareness of criminal justice issues as a consequence of mass incarceration.

Participants characterized public misperceptions of correctional institutions as a parallel, secretive world that permanently houses dangerous people, with some emphasizing this point by using evocative language referring to correctional institutions as "the Twilight Zone" and "the land of no time." Educators reported that even their peers teaching in public and private schools expressed surprise that classes and other self-improvement opportunities exist at all in correctional institutions. "Most people don't know schools exist in prison," a teacher explained, "They think 'once a criminal, always a criminal.'" One school principal at a large maximum-security prison laughed as she recalled explaining her job responsibilities to friends, who had assumed that all people employed at correctional facilities worked as security staff. "You can see it in their eyes," a teacher said of watching a group of visiting professionals express surprise, while touring her facility, at the number of activities they saw incarcerated individuals pursuing, "when they first come on grounds and see they're not behind bars."

Such overall lack of awareness regarding everyday prison life among members of the public has detrimental effects in creating an "out-of-sight-out-of-mind" effect. One administrator alluded to this point with the language of "report cards" used to evaluate public schools' performance in his state, "If a public school report card gets an F, the parents are gonna march. If prison schools fail and no one gets stabbed, who cares?" In addition to limited knowledge regarding their work, our participants must negotiate competing public discourses that variously position correctional institutions as best kept tucked away in isolated rural areas or "an expensive way to create better criminals," all while attempting to respond to the enduring question of "what works?" in correctional education and psycho-social programming. A senior administrator concisely summarized the impacts of these competing discourses as part of the complex circuitry of public misperceptions and concerns about the use of public money on education and programs in prison:

Criminal justice is in the news a lot. We used to talk as a society about what people deserved, but now we talk as a society about what works. Do you want someone spending four years to become a better criminal? It has to do with the bottom dollar, too. We incarcerate more people than any country in the world and states/taxpayers put a significant amount of money into prisons. A lot of people want prisons tucked away. No one wants a prison in their neighborhood. We don't want to spend more money on prisons, but we have to make do with what we have. We're robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Prevailing public sentiments put educators and administrators in this position of “robbing Peter to pay Paul” in conjunction with the shift across jurisdictions from punitive to rehabilitative approaches to reduce recidivism. Doing so prompts resistance from critics who evince what one administrator described as a mentality of “just lock ‘em up, they’ll learn, that vendetta, especially if it’s personal, like when the person has been the victim of a crime.” Yet evidence contradicts this critical stance, as noted by one of our participants regularly tasked with data collection and interpretation as part of his work responsibilities in a state prison system that made the transition to a reentry-oriented approach a bit earlier than other states:

During the early days of the shift of focus to reentry initiatives, the accusation was that we had told our agents not to violate people [by returning them to prison for parole violations], and yes, we were encouraging them not to pull the trigger so quickly and revoke. But the numbers suggest that this isn't what has been going on. If we were letting people go at an increased rate and not preparing them, the expectation would be that they would be committing new crimes. We haven't seen huge increases in prosecutions and convictions and returns for new sentences on parole violators. We're returning people far more successfully than we were thirteen or fourteen years ago. The data tell a pretty consistent story.

Corrections is part of a highly complex political system that costs taxpayers a great deal of money. Yet no matter how consistent a story the data may tell about the value of education and psycho-social programs, our participants repeatedly emphasized the need for goal-oriented ideological alignment among political decision-makers, administrators, and facility staff. To succeed, our participants agree that laws, administrative policies and practices, and on-the-ground staff need system-wide focus on a consistent mission with support from the general public. They also agree that much of what they are able to accomplish on a daily basis is contingent on administrators who can effectively convey the importance of rehabilitation to legislatures and the voting public to whom they are accountable. “The message we share,” an administrator who routinely engages with media noted, “is that almost everyone is going to get out of prison. Everyone, almost, is going to return to the community. The public doesn't always understand that. The people returning to the community need to be pro-social. We want no more victims. We want them to be a success story.” This perspective spans a remarkably diverse political spectrum, with our participants listing their supporters as an eclectic cast of characters that included both rapper Jay-Z and the libertarian Koch brothers.

Heightened public awareness regarding criminal justice issues, particularly correctional institutions, is directly related to the socioeconomic costs and widespread impacts of mass incarceration. As a long-term non-uniformed staff member observed, “Before, when I said what my job was, it'd be ‘oh, she's such a bleeding heart.’ Now people say, ‘you're doing such great things.’ Now so many people know somebody who's incarcerated and they're more accepting. It's a real thing to people now because so many people are incarcerated.” Another veteran teacher explained, “The public is seeing now that returning citizens are coming back with things to offer. They're coming out and they're able to get jobs and pay taxes like an everyday citizen normally does. That contributes to the public being on board.”

Conclusion

Our analysis sought to illuminate how media-generated popular cultural understanding of prison impacts the educational, therapeutic, and administrative work non-uniformed staff across eight United States correctional systems engage in with people who are incarcerated. At a historical moment when the United States incarcerates a higher percentage of its population than any other country in the world, and criminal justice reform enjoys bipartisan support among legislators, policymakers, and the voters to whom they are accountable, it is not surprising that so many educators and administrators couch their observations within statements about mass incarceration. Through conducting semi-structured interviews and observations with non-uniformed staff at nearly 100 different prisons—at all security levels and housing men, women, and juveniles—centrally managed by eight separate state prison systems, and performing an open analysis of prevailing themes, our results reveal that non-uniformed staff acknowledged that general public perceptions of corrections derive from stigmatizing media representations, that they regularly confront courtesy stigma that suffuses their work with individuals who are incarcerated and generally receive limited public support or empathy, and emphasized the complex interplay between the politico-economic, legal, sociocultural, and administrative-institutional forces that help to shape prison social climate.

Our participants shared how they, as non-uniformed staff, conceptualize and interpret the impact of media representations of prison on their everyday work. They acknowledged that a significant number of people know someone who has either been incarcerated or struggled with addictions or other serious mental health issues that might lead to incarceration. In recent decades, correctional settings have become a much less mysterious – and much more personal – institution for many people in the United States. Yet society continues to be fascinated by sensationalized depictions of correctional institutions made popular by television and other media. Participants were quick to underscore how their rehabilitative work with incarcerated individuals has little relevance to what the public sees on television. They often find themselves having to explain, and even defend, their work to people in their families and social circles. Even though they have college degrees and professional licenses, many said that they are made to feel “less than” their counterparts in traditional school settings. Such courtesy stigma is part of the deeply rooted disregard and unease that surrounds dominant cultural understandings of correctional institutions.

Our participants also disclosed how they, as non-uniformed staff, respond to the political will wielded by a media-educated voting public in determining their work’s scope in prison. They often feel they must strike a delicate balance between promoting the many positive impacts that successful prison education programs can have on people who are incarcerated and not appearing to advocate for educational opportunities that many families in the free world cannot afford. Thus, prison administrators become central figures in justifying the use of public taxpayer money to support such program as an investment in creating [rehabilitating] individuals to be good neighbors and citizens when they are eventually released. Couching prison education and support services in broader goals of rehabilitation and overall community health helps produce the necessary goal-oriented ideological alignment among political decision-makers, administrators, and facility staff needed to garner public support.

Non-uniformed staff are constantly in the process of countering beliefs about what people who are incarcerated “deserve” with their practices and engagement with the public. As “ambassadors of corrections,” these non-uniformed staff are essential but unacknowledged leaders in prison reform. Work on penal spectators argues that punishment is a narrative of pain and abuse where perpetrators and victims bleed together (Brown, 2009). Current negative media representations of prison staff are safely and remotely consumed by the public who are then asked to reconcile the culturally produced imaginaries of correctional institutions as sites of danger an insecurity with support for rehabilitative reforms and programming. Non-uniformed prison staff, through their work and advocacy, seek to reshape these imaginaries into those of hope and healing while prison

administrators do their best to chip away at the perceived remoteness of spectating by highlighting that the distance [or separation] of the people who are incarcerated from the spectator [public] is only temporary (Walby & Piche, 2011).

Is society ready to reimagine care and healing as a component of punishment? The invisibility of non-uniformed staff in media representations of prisons may be intentional or inadvertent, but the individuals and the work they do are a key aspect of rehabilitation programs. Their existence is a contradiction to penal subjectivity as we know it that challenges penal spectators to reflect upon their very understanding of and relation to correctional institutions and those who work and reside within them. Perhaps, then, non-uniformed staff are positioned to play a critical role in reconfiguring and producing ‘a more critical, and empathetic and socially responsible engagement’ with representations of incarceration (Fuggle, 2020).

In critically analyzing our findings, we see evidence of a society at a crossroads in which the general public is poised to either cling to the hype of television prison or to end mass incarceration through criminal justice reform. To the latter end, we offer three recommendations for educators and administrators: increased public transparency, clear alignment at all levels with a mission to support evidence-based education and programs, and recruitment-oriented outreach to students preparing for careers as teachers, social workers, and mental health professionals.

First, we recommend that educators and administrations further increase transparency in their dealings with the public. Security certainly must always remain paramount in correctional settings, yet it is possible to balance protecting public safety with consistent and accurate communications with the public about the value of education and programs. Given that media is such a well-financed and pervasive source of misinformation about correctional settings, these communications are likely to be most effective when expressed as part of a consistently aligned mission endorsed at all levels of government as well as by institutional staff and the general public.

Such alignment also provides those who work in correctional settings with a clear sense of purpose and pride in helping incarcerated people to change their lives, thereby mitigating some of the negative impacts of courtesy stigma, while also giving staff the ability to envision themselves as “ambassadors of corrections” who can readily discuss the rationale underlying the types of education and programs offered in their facilities. Expanding the work of public information officers to envision all staff who work for the correctional system as spokespeople would exponentially expand the communication of transformative stories and the positive economic impact of reduced recidivism through rehabilitative programs.

Second, we recommend clear alignment at all levels with a mission to support evidence-based education and programs. Our participants point to data validating the impact of education on lowering recidivism and generating overall positive social change. They discuss the importance of education and programs in lowering the high costs of incarceration. They remind us that most individuals who are incarcerated will return to their communities and that it is important that they return with the skills necessary to become contributing citizens. Yet, we find society unwilling to confront the often harsh on-the-ground realities that shape the lives of people prior to, during, and after their incarceration. Although many of our participants reported a changing culture in which administrators proactively engage with the public, it is clear that public perceptions of education and programs offered in correctional settings are rarely based on empirical data. Our participants agreed that their administrations must lead the effort to inform the public about the positive events and achievements that occur in correctional settings alongside the state-specific evidence that indicates rationale for and the effectiveness of the work being carried out in correctional settings.

Third, we encourage correctional educators and administrators to actively engage in recruitment-oriented outreach to students preparing for careers as teachers, social workers, and mental health professionals. Our participants frequently observe how their professional peers and other members of their social circles express surprise regarding the fact that education and psycho-social programs exist at all in correctional

settings. Many educators in our study had experience teaching in public schools and decided to leave following the implementation widespread test-based assessments that sacrificed meaningful learning and compromised the abilities of the most vulnerable students to succeed (Lockwood, 2018). These teachers reported feeling a greater sense of freedom and personal fulfillment in their classrooms within the correctional setting than they ever had in the highly restricted and time-pressured atmosphere that characterized their public-school experiences.

Many teachers with previous public-school experience expressed that they wish they had known earlier that correctional institutions were a career option for teachers, just as social workers and mental health staff do not often consider correctional settings as professional options during their education. We recommend that correctional educators and administrators engage with local universities and colleges through guest lectures in classes and by bringing interested students to correctional facilities in order to attract the most enthusiastic, committed, and well-qualified graduates to work in correctional settings.

The United States is poised to end mass incarceration. The present study demonstrates the viability of criminal justice reform through rehabilitative programs such as education. It also demonstrates the criminal justice reform is a major social, economic, and cultural issue across the political spectrum. Correctional educators and administrators are immersed in positively impacting the future of those who are incarcerated. They are also immersed in impacting the future of taxpayers who cannot continue to sustain the cost of incarcerating their fellow human beings.

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