

PREFACE

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When Jim was released from state prison by the Massachusetts Department of Correction, he was sent straight to the county jail at Nashua Street in Boston. He had been convicted of sex crimes involving children and would now await trial on new charges. He wore orange scrubs when I met him. Orange was for protective custody—people locked in isolation for their own safety. Jim was different from most of the people I interviewed. He was white, in his fifties, estranged from his family. He'd been itinerant, wandering around the country and homeless for long periods.

Most of the people I spoke to in prison were African American or Latino men in their twenties and thirties, like Hector, Sam, and Juney. They were close to their families, and many lived with their mother after they got out. Around half found jobs in that first year. A year after prison release, two-thirds of the 122 men and women interviewed for the Boston Reentry Study had stayed out of jail.

Jim never got out. He went straight to Nashua Street.

I liked many of the people I had come to know through the reentry study, but I never looked forward to meeting with Jim. I liked the African American neighborhoods of Dorchester and Mattapan and the Irish enclaves of South Boston and Charlestown. I didn't like Nashua Street. The gray clouds that shrouded Boston for weeks at a time seemed to hang pretty low on those days. Jim would talk about his beefs with the staff. He'd ask us to send him books and the *Spare Change News*, the local paper distributed by the homeless in Boston. I felt that we weren't learning anything about life after prison by talking to him. The interviews revealed nothing about the origins of Jim's pedophilia. He was a pariah in the jail, and his family had cut him off.

All these things were running through my head during one interview as we sat in the small attorney's meeting room on the fourth floor of the jail. In the middle of the interview, I was stopped by a thought: if we weren't here getting Jim's story down, no one would. His voice, like the voices of millions of others, would be lost in the din of America's vast prison population.

This book tells the stories of the men and women I met through the Boston Reentry Study (BRS), a series of interviews my research team and I conducted with people leaving prison for neighborhoods around Boston. We were trying to understand what happens when people return to a community, and the challenges faced by them and their families. How did they look for work and housing? How did they manage their addictions or mental illness, and why did some return to incarceration? As we sought answers to questions like these, we tried more than anything to bear witness to the lives of those held captive in America's experiment with mass incarceration. This book is one effort to get people's stories down.

Many researchers have studied the contours and effects of American incarceration. The sociologist David Garland provided a sweeping account of social and economic insecurity after the postwar golden age that produced tectonic shifts in crime control and astonishing incarceration rates in the United States. Loïc Wacquant produced a macrosociology of the new penal regime, contained within a history of American race relations and compared to crime policy in Europe. Building on this work, I tried to spell out the connections between incarceration, poverty, and racial inequality in *Punishment and Inequality in America*. Electoral implications were weighed by Chris Uggen and Jeff Manza. Devah Pager examined employer responses to job-seekers with prison records. Becky Pettit's research illuminated corners of the population made invisible by incarceration, and Sara Wakefield and Chris Wildeman examined how children fared when their parents were sent to prison. Research by these scholars was just the tip of a much larger iceberg. A 2014 panel of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) chaired by Jeremy Travis reported on the entire research program.¹

The research on U.S. incarceration is what we hope for in the social sciences—pluralistic in method, scientifically rigorous, and relevant to pressing social problems. After social research helped frame mass incarceration as a problem of inequality and injustice, policymakers began to explore ways to reduce incarceration and its pernicious effects.

Despite the success of the sociological research, I worried that my own

work—statistical analysis of large data sets—filtered out a harsh and complex reality. I was gaining a sense of this reality from my teaching. I had taught at New Jersey State Prison when I was at Princeton and then in medium security at MCI Norfolk when I moved to Harvard. The men in my classes had led complicated lives. They'd grown up poor and had been on both sides of serious violence. Some were serving life sentences and would die in state custody. They also brought sharp and energetic minds to class. The lives of these men were somehow missing from my research.

A clue to solving this problem was offered by Jeremy Travis, who had conducted research on what is called “prisoner reentry”—the term used by policymakers and researchers for the transition from incarceration back to communities. Travis’s book *But They All Come Back*, published in 2005, reviewed what we knew about the challenges of leaving incarceration. The topic of prisoner reentry, he said, takes the perspective of those who pass through the system. This perspective raises a new kind of public policy question: what are our obligations to those who are punished?

I also use the process of reentry to learn about the perspective of those who are incarcerated. In this book, I report on the journeys of a group of men and women who left the Massachusetts state prison system in 2012 and 2013 and returned to neighborhoods around Boston. Many returned home to live with their families. Some had no home to return to and spent much of the year in Boston’s shelters and transitional housing. All the people I interviewed, however, were trying to find a place in society after incarceration. If they were not yet home after release from prison, they were at least trying to go homeward.

Several papers published by the reentry study research team analyzed the survey data we collected. These were mostly statistical studies of outcomes like recidivism, housing, and employment. This book aims to capture more of the lives of the people we interviewed. In taking this approach, I hope not only to meet Travis’s challenge to be curious about those who are incarcerated, their families, and their neighborhoods, but also to provide a window on the larger phenomenon of mass incarceration.

While conducting research for this book, I made several visits to Addis Ababa for a project studying justice institutions in Ethiopia. At dinner one evening with a few Ethiopian researchers, one of them, Mulagetta, told me about a colleague at his research institute, a German anthropologist. One day the anthropologist was in a remote area driving through a small village.

His car fatally struck a small child who had strayed onto the road. The girl's parents ran outside to see what had happened, and a crowd quickly formed around the anthropologist.

He asked that the police be called but was told that there were no police there. The village dealt with matters like this by itself. The anthropologist was told that he could go, but that they would send for him in a few days. Later that week a message came that he must return, and he was told to return alone. He went to Mulagetta and asked what he should do. "You have to go back to the village," said Mulagetta. So he returned. When he arrived, he was escorted to a meeting with the elders. They told him to pay 2,500 Birr (about \$125) to the family of the dead child. Next, he was ordered to buy a goat for the family. He purchased the goat, which was immediately slaughtered. The father of the dead child was called to the front of the meeting. The anthropologist, standing at the front of the room, was told to hold out his hand. He held out his hand and his wrist was bound to the wrist of the child's father with the entrails of the goat. The village elders announced that the anthropologist was now a member of the dead girl's family. And that was that. He was free to go.

The anthropologist returned to Addis, very upset. He felt that he hadn't properly compensated the family, nor had he been punished. Mulagetta said, "You have to understand, for the rest of your life, you are now part of that man's family. You have all the obligations of a family member. You have to visit from time to time. If they are going through problems that you might help with, you should help them just as a member of their own family would."

Western ideas about punishment and retribution were radically absent in this case of customary justice. Like the Ethiopian story, the problem of reentry raises the question of when punishment ends. When and how are debts extinguished? These questions are as ethical as they are empirical. I have tried to maintain an ethical perspective throughout the book. To guide politics or policy, the ethics of punishment must confront the real lives of those who are incarcerated. By testing our values against the conditions of poverty, racial inequality, and violence that surround mass incarceration, I hope that we might imagine a better path to justice.

A few notes on the text: All names are pseudonyms. Direct quotes are from audio-recorded interviews or field notes taken at the time of an interview. Quotes have been lightly edited for grammar and verbal tics.

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I thank the men and women of the Boston Reentry Study and their families and friends for generously sharing their time and life experience with me. This book is an attempt to honor their contribution to the research.

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However much this research has illuminated the path followed by men and women newly released from prison is due to the work of Catherine Sirois. As project manager, Cathy was brilliant, diligent, and patient, and she reminded us always of the ethical imperatives of the study. Her relentless follow-up with the respondents and her management of the research were models of scientific rigor. I turned to Cathy many times for help, both while we were in the field and afterwards as we were analyzing data and writing up. My thinking about the book was shaped by our long-running conversation, conducted over years. Cathy coauthored chapter 2 and commented in detail on the manuscript. I could not have completed my part of the research without her.

The reentry study was unique in sustaining a very high response rate. Credit goes to Cathy and also to Jackie Davis, the other full-time researcher. Jackie was a superb interviewer, good-humored, inhumanly reliable, and

unfailingly attuned to the many details of research design. Jackie was the mainstay of the fieldwork.

After Cathy and Jackie went on to graduate school, I was lucky to be working with Jennifer Arzu, who managed the project as we consolidated and cleaned the data. Quiet, tireless, and committed to the project's larger goals, Jennifer's contribution has been indispensable.

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Parts of the text were adapted from earlier publications. Chapter 2 draws from the paper "Study Retention as Bias Reduction in a Hard-to-Reach Population," coauthored with Anthony Braga, David Hureau, and Catherine Sirois and published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2016). Chapter 3 draws on the paper "Stress and Hardship After Prison," coauthored with Anthony Braga, Jackie Davis, and Cathy Sirois and published in the *American Journal of Sociology* (2014). Parts of chapter 4 were adapted from "The Rehabilitation Paradox," published online by *The New Yorker* (2016). Chapter 5 draws on the paper "Lifetimes of Violence in

a Sample of Released Prisoners,” published in *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* (2015).

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A year before we went into the field, my father passed away. John Western was a distinguished sociologist and a kind and gentle man. When he and my mother, Tasnee, were visiting a few years earlier, he came to a seminar I was teaching on “The Sociology of Crime and Punishment.” We were at MCI Norfolk, and it was the only time we’d ever been in class together. This book is dedicated to his memory.