

BOOK REVIEW

L. Thomas Kucharski,¹ *Ph.D.*

Review of: *Psychology in Prisons*

REFERENCE: Towl G, editor. *Psychology in prisons*, BPS Blackwell, Oxford, UK, 2003, 193 pp.

If a survey of psychologists currently working or who have substantial experience in correctional settings was conducted it would likely show that few anticipated that their careers would lead them to working in prison. If a survey of graduate and professional training programs in psychology was conducted, few courses in correctional psychology would be discovered. Most of us, who have spent a substantial part of our professional careers behind the walls and razor wire began with little or no formal training or guidance on how to provide psychological services in prison. So it was with enthusiasm and optimism that I approached Towl's "Psychology in Prisons" with a hope that here would be an authoritative guide that would begin to fill the gap in training on working in this unique and challenging environment.

What I found in reading "Correctional Psychology" was more a guide to programs and services in the HM prison system and less a resource for working in prison in general. Because this volume focuses on the experience in the UK, it requires that the reader translate what is presented about the HM system to their own situation. The chapters of this volume focus to a large degree on the provision of services to inmates and this is its strength. Chapters focusing on group work with sex offenders, violent offenders, cognitive skills training, juvenile offenders, bullies and their victims, suicidal and disruptive inmates and female inmates outline approaches within the HM prison system and describe an array of opportunities for working with difficult client populations. I had hoped however to find a more comprehensive description of the challenges posed by each type of inmate and differential treatment strategies that have been found effective.

¹ Associate Professor of Psychology, John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Former Chief Psychologist, Metropolitan Correctional Center, NY Federal Bureau of Prisons, New York, NY.

A chapter on incident management in prison provides a good overview of the role of psychologists in hostage situations. I would have liked to see this section expanded to include other incidents confronted in this sometimes violent and stressful environment. Chapters on recruitment of psychologists and the training of psychological service providers delineates how the HM service evaluates potential candidates and trains new staff, both quite labor intensive processes that may be impractical for other systems, yet informative none the less. A chapter on reducing recidivism provides a review of the relevant research on several important factors that relate to recidivism such as deficits in employment skills, lack of family support systems, educational limitations, substance abuse problems and criminal social networks but curiously leaves out any serious discussion of psychopathy, a set of psychological characteristics that is very important in understanding recidivism and one that may account for the deficits in many if not all of the areas discussed.

Towl and the contributors provide an overview of the types of programs, interventions and roles psychologists play in the HM service and in so doing allow the reader who is curious about correctional psychology a glimpse into what might be a rewarding career. For psychologists who are currently practicing in a correctional environment this volume provides some direction in the types of programs that are useful and targets subgroups of inmates that should be the focus of services. Very little attention is given however to seriously mentally ill inmates and their management, employee assistance programs for prison staff, selection of personal other than psychology staff, risk assessment in workplace violence situations, critical incident debriefing or the complicated process of integrating treatment programs into an environment with a custodial orientation. "Psychology in Prisons" is a good first step but falls short of what I had hoped would be an authoritative guide to the important, often challenging and complicated work of correctional psychology.