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CRIM 241  
February 15, 1994

Critique of  
"The Modern Prison as Total Institution?  
Public Perception Versus Objective Reality"  
by Keith Farrington

In this article, Farrington argues, successfully I think, that the typical modern North American correctional facility is not, and in practical terms could not be, a "total institution" as defined by Erving Goffman in 1961. He also argues that the image of the prison in "total institution" terms remains in the minds of the public, and results in some negative consequences in the form of misdirected justice policies.

In the notes following the article, Farrington states (24) that Goffman intended his definition of the total institution to be an "ideal type", and that "all ideal types tend to exaggerate, oversimplify, and overstate these qualities as they exist in real life". The qualities as delineated by Goffman (Farrington:24) are:

(a) *total control* over the inmate population which the administration attempts to achieve and maintain; (b) the *total structuring* of the inmate's environment and activities; (c) the *total submergence* of the inmate's preinstitutional entity as he or she is socialized into and forced to adjust to this environment; and (d) the *total isolation and separation* of the institution and its inhabitants from the larger society in which the institution resides.

The degree to which the first three of these qualities, "total control..., total structuring..., and total submergence..." actually occur in the day-to-day operation of modern facilities

has been limited, in terms of policy, by prison reforms brought on by "the value that our culture places on such qualities as freedom, inalienable human rights, and the importance of family" (15), and the belief that even those defined as criminals should be treated humanely. It is these beliefs, as well as the belief that humane treatment will aid in the offender's reintegration into society, that are largely responsible for the increasing emphasis on community-based correctional responses (the antithesis of the total institution, in correctional terms) in Canada (Ekstedt & Griffiths, 1988:257). In practical terms, the inmate social system also makes full implementation of the internal ideals of the total institution very difficult. Curt T. Griffiths explains the "deprivation model" of inmate social system as developing from a need to jointly fight against the controls and deprivations of the prison system; the type of fight of course may be placed anywhere on a continuum containing both psychological and physical responses.

Farrington's main focus in this article is the way in which the modern prison interacts with the larger society, unlike the "total isolation and separation" of the total institution model. He first cites the prohibitive cost of building maximum security prisons which would even come close to meeting the requirements of the total institution model.

The logistical problems of operating a total institution are even more daunting, "in terms of such practical matters as staffing, the availability of various kinds of support services, the transportation of inmates, and work-release opportunities"

(12). Finding locations for such institutions is becoming increasingly difficult as well because of opposition from nearby communities (12). Farrington argues that the pure model of the total institution is in fact an impossibility in a democratic society, because it would require that even the staff be confined to the facility to ensure social isolation (13).

Farrington, with Jerrald Krause, argues (15-16) that the public perception of the prison as a total institution is partially a strategy to avoid having to admit to what Durkheim called the "organic" nature of our society - the interdependence of all of its elements, not excluding the criminal element. Total isolation of prisons and their inmates, as well as allowing people a feeling that they are safe from the worst of criminals, would also seem to be a rejection of the anomic nature of our society; the fact that crime is a natural function of the general breakdown "in either the rules of society or the moral norms" (Williams & McShane, 1988:60,110). By keeping prisons and inmates isolated, it is possible to pretend that they do not exist, or at least to dehumanize the inmates to the point where people can pretend that our society does not need changing.

The unfortunate consequence of "the myth of prisons as total institutions" (23) is that prisons do not accomplish what the public expects of them; they do not remove criminals totally or for long, and they do not rehabilitate them. Believing in the myth, though, results in laws becoming harsher, more people being incarcerated, and more prisons being built. This results in a corrections system that becomes increasingly punitive rather than

rehabilitative. Farrington's article points out that "the basic idea of prisons as total institutions may simply be unworkable in the context of 20th-century American society" (14), but public belief that it is workable results in misdirected justice, while at the same time virtually ignoring the causes of crime.

#### Sources

Ekstedt, John W. and Curt T. Griffiths. Corrections in Canada. Policy and Practice. Second Edition. Toronto: Butterworths. 1988.

Farrington, Keith. (1992, January) The Modern Prison as Total Institution? Public Perception versus Objective Reality. Crime & Delinquency, Vol.38, No.1. 6-26.

Williams, Frank P. and Marilyn D. McShane. Criminological Theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ. 1988

$\frac{10}{10}$  Well done. In a critique it is not necessary to bring in other sources to the degree you did. However, I found your paper an interesting read as a result.