


# Varieties of Prison Voyeurism: An Analytic/ Interpretive Framework

The Prison Journal  
2015, Vol. 95(3) 397–417  
© 2015 SAGE Publications  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0032885515587473  
tpj.sagepub.com  


Jeffrey Ian Ross<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The public learns, experiences, and knows about jails, prisons, and the people who live and work there through a variety of mediums and/or methods. Not all situations are equal in terms of the cost to the individual, the reality of the experience, and the effect it may have on the participant. In an effort to better contextualize this process, this article develops a typology to better understand these methods of participation. Ten methods by which people can experience correctional facilities include, on one end of the spectrum, the highly personal experience of incarceration, and on the other end, attempts by individuals to understand and/or experience corrections without intimately engaging with the subject matter. This latter method, termed *prison voyeurism*, fails to contextualize the myths, misrepresentations, and stereotypes of prison life rather than clarifying or explaining them. The author develops a framework to interpret the jail and prison experience. Examples are drawn primarily from the American prison experience.

## Keywords

prisons, prison reform, prison voyeurism, popular culture

## Introduction

Since the creation of the first correctional facility, individuals and organizations have attempted to change the way prisons are built, operated, and who is incarcerated and/or works there. This process collectively referred to as

---

<sup>1</sup>School of Criminal Justice, University of Baltimore, MD, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Jeffrey Ian Ross, School of Criminal Justice, University of Baltimore, 1420 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21201, USA.

Email: jross@ubalt.edu

*prison reform* has ebbed and flowed over the past two centuries. Indeed, many interconnected obstacles have stood in the way of prison reform.

Among factors impeding prison reform are societal punitive attitudes, a lack of available resources, and inadequate knowledge of jails, prisons, inmates, correctional officers, administrators, and so on.<sup>1</sup> One of the important and rarely examined factors blocking prison reform is the failure of citizens to effectively engage with the field of corrections. Experiencing and understanding a particular phenomenon can range along a continuum that places at one end “high engagement” and at the other “low engagement.” Some kinds of experiences require a great deal of contact, intimacy, or participation by those involved. Other types of activities are indirect and entail some form of distancing from the subject.

The former kinds of experiences require face-to-face contact among people, places, and things, and thus are more tactile, immediate, and authentic. The latter types of situations and activities (e.g., multiplayer interactive computer games, Internet chat rooms, or phone sex) can be considered mediated experiences. Engagement does not necessarily mean understanding or acquiring expertise, but few would argue, that the more exposure one has to a particular field, the more knowledge one has, and the better one might be able to suggest and perhaps implement methods to improve it.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the prison experience can be rank ordered based on how much engagement an individual has with the subject matter and/or process.

## Argument

As we move from the more to the less engaged experiences connected to jails and prisons, there is a tendency to participate in what I call *prison voyeurism*—and it involves a push and pull dynamic. On one hand, prison voyeurism is fun and entertaining. Because of economic, emotional, intellectual, physical, and psychological costs, most people would rather choose prison voyeurism as the preferred option to experience corrections. I am neither suggesting that the only way to understand jails, prisons, inmates, correctional officers, and administrators is to have firsthand experience, by being incarcerated, or working in a correctional institution, nor am I arguing that all outsiders “looking into” the jail/prison system are voyeurs, I am, however, outlining what I believe is a useful and unarticulated conceptual and interpretive framework. Although some may believe that voyeurism is a pejorative term, the notion of prison voyeurism serves as a connotative and heuristic metaphor of an important social process. Why is this concept and process important? Prison voyeurism perpetrates myths and misconceptions about

corrections (Ross, 2012a), and these myths and misconceptions frustrate society's ability to reform corrections.<sup>3</sup>

More generally, this article has a number of interrelated goals. First, it reviews the diverse situations and relevant scholarly literature about the various forms of prison voyeurism. In doing so, it outlines the range of these venues and the manner in which they are structured. Second, the article tries to place these experiences into an interpretive framework. Finally, this study argues that prison voyeurism tends to reinforce the myths and stereotypes of correctional facilities, inmates, and correctional officers and, therefore, prison voyeurism hampers our ability to move beyond punitive mentalities.

Why is a typology construction important? It is a critical step in theory building. Especially one that attempts to explain why prisons are slow to change and one that explains how alienation and boredom, all part of the postmodern condition, view prisons as remote and distant spectacles of our society's failure to meaningfully deal with people who break the law.

### *Definitional Issues*

Before examining prison voyeurism, it would be prudent to examine the concept of voyeurism to differentiate it from related terms and processes such as spectacle, *Schadenfreude*, mediated tourism, and authenticity, and to properly contextualize these concepts.

Although the term *voyeurism* is often associated with sexual perversion, and over time has slightly changed in meaning (Metzl, 2004), voyeurism is best applied to situations where people seek out and/or experience pleasure, gratification, and/or excitement, usually through observation of something that is typically hidden.<sup>4</sup> As many studies indicate, numerous voyeurism vehicles exist. Not only can newscasts contain elements of voyeurism, but documentary films employ this method too, turning their viewers into witnesses to strange, forbidden, and/or foreign behavior. For example, over the past two decades, tabloid television talk shows (e.g., Maury Povich, Oprah Winfrey, Jerry Springer) have provided windows into the lives of individuals (particularly those with certain perversions). These people appear on the public stage for spectacle (and potential ridicule). More recently, reality television programming has exposed us to the homes and struggles of some of our current and former celebrities. These shows give us a glimpse into the lives of actors (e.g., Lindsey Lohan), musicians (e.g., the Osbournes), and people who are famous for being famous (e.g., the Kardashians). We witness how families cope when wives and mothers are swapped and how rivals get by when they are shipwrecked on a deserted island, and so on (e.g., Calvert, 2000/2004; Niedzviecki, 2009).

Indeed, there are many reasons why individuals engage in such experiences. Although the causes of voyeurism are interesting, and recent scholarship has provided insights into the issue at large (e.g., Calvert, 2000/2004), this topic is not the main concern in the context of this article.

What is prison voyeurism? In short, prison voyeurism includes attempts to understand and/or experience corrections without intimately engaging in the subject matter. It is also characterized by superficiality in terms of economic, physical, mental, emotional, and psychological investment in the experience.<sup>5</sup> For example, after participating in a voyeuristic experience, people may believe that they are sufficiently educated on the topic and can engage in meaningful discussions about it. Voyeurism allows participants to learn about a subject, without the appropriate rigorous and potentially boring downsides. In short, it is much easier to learn in this manner, but the content is shallow and/or skewed. Prison voyeurism reflects a failure to meaningfully engage with the subject matter. In no way does this mean that outsiders simply looking into the prison are voyeurs. But, prison voyeurism is typically done through activities that are mediated, entertaining, and provides a distraction from the actual experience.

Prison voyeurism must be distinguished from the concept of *spectacle*. Although historically the correctional system has provided many opportunities for observers to participate in spectacles, this is not the same as voyeurism. The interest in corrections-related *spectacles* is not new.<sup>6</sup> Take, for example, the practice of public executions during Europe's Middle Ages. Often, with the encouragement of the King and Queen, people commonly traveled great distances, sometimes bringing along picnic lunches, to attend executions. This type of behavior was also exhibited during the era of lynching's in the American South (ca. 1865-1940). The issue of entertainment derived from such matters of crime and justice has not qualitatively changed, as exemplified by tailgate parties held in prison parking lots when death row inmates are executed.

Prison voyeurism may contain elements of *Schadenfreude* (i.e., taking pleasure in someone else's pain and suffering). For instance, in recent years there have been discussions about the feasibility and ethical propriety of televising, via pay per view, the execution of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh or of 9/11 mastermind Osama bin Laden, had he been captured and incarcerated in an American correctional facility. *Schadenfreude*, however, is not quite the same as voyeurism, as the later can have a number of different value laden reactions.

Prison voyeurism may seem like a type of *mediated tourism*. But the concept is typically applied to the tourist industry (e.g., Selby, 2004) and not necessarily criminal justice.

Another related issue is the concept of *authenticity*. There is an increasing awareness that in our society individuals are seeking out products, services, and experiences that are authentic (Peterson, 2005). There is a growing discourse in the field of marketing and business development that is helping corporations and other businesses make what they sell more authentic (e.g., Bendix, 1997; Boyle, 2003; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Lewis & Bridger, 2000). Gilmore and Pine (2007), for example, see authenticity, along with availability, cost, and quality, as one of four important “consumer sensibilities” (p. 5). They argue how the postmodern condition has led to socially constructed reality and, increasingly, mediated realities (De Zengotita, 2006). Consumers, they argue, more and more prefer authenticity in the products and services they purchase.

In short, although *prison voyeurs* are, or at least can be interested in spectacles, may succumb to Schadenfreude, participate in mediated tourism, and/or desire “authentic” products, these four elements on their own are not substitutes for or define prison voyeurism.

## Literature Review

This review involves a number of interrelated discourses, including work on prison reform, popular culture, mass media, and tourism studies. The following review simply highlights some of the recent relevant scholarly literature.

First, the long history of prison reform and scholarship illustrates selected initiatives that were proposed and implemented to change and improve the field of corrections. In many respects, the history of the correctional enterprise is the history of reform. Various individuals, organizations, and states have attempted to create jails and prisons that not only achieve the multiple objectives of the punishment sanction but also accomplish them in a humane manner. This includes a shift from institutional corrections to a greater emphasis on community corrections (Cullen & Gendreau, 2000). Part of the paradox is not simply conducting appropriate empirical research that demonstrates that selected conditions are dysfunctional, but also convincing the wider public, politicians, and policy makers that it is worth developing, sponsoring, and passing legislation, and implementing different policies and practices to change this state of affairs.

Some research in the field of popular culture studies has examined corrections. It has usually been framed in terms of the cultural commodification of prison. Wright (2000), for example, after briefly reviewing the history of marketing in the United States, outlines how

the social and physical reality of prisons is constantly mystified and mythologized. Its purpose is to discipline those workers and poor people who are not imprisoned, yet . . . The intimidation and deterrence factor of prison is served by keeping it distant, remote, and unknown, but at the same time, nearby, an immediate threat of imaginable evil. (p. 16)

Freeman (2000), however, reviews Hollywood movies and the news media coverage of jails and prisons, the corrections industry's response to crises, and steps that corrections professionals can take to change negative perceptions about their field prompted by media reports.

Other work has examined the role of our cultural industries in the creation and perpetuation of myths about prison. Ross (2003) argues that at least 10 interdependent primary cultural industries perpetuate myths about incarceration. Organized more or less from least to most important, they are fashion, advertising, music, video games, fiction, memoirs, museums/prison tourism, documentaries, motion pictures, and the news media. An in-depth examination of these entities might be useful, but they are not equally important.

More recently, Brown (2009) describes the notion of penal spectatorship. She states, "many American citizens access punishment through cultural practices removed from formal institutions like prisons in a manner which, although largely unacknowledged, massively extends throughout our social foundations" (p. 4). Brown is interested in studying "penal subjectivity," which involves "performances of punishment, when distant from actual punishment" (p. 5). Brown states, "[c]itizens may participate vicariously in mediated worlds when pain is inflicted across television, films, recreation and news. They may be disturbed by these images. They may find such engagement titillating" (p. 5). In order to prove her thesis, Brown selectively culls evidence from a handful of prison films and prison tours, and then discusses the enigma of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo.

She suggests that "Such distance . . . shields us from the democratic burden of punishment as a kind of cultural work: something we do, which requires intention, deliberation, and human check, which has effects both intended and unintended" (p. 11). Brown then turns to the issue of punishment:

The penal spectator thus makes decisions about punishment based on a framework that depends, in many ways, on a denial of any real democratic engagement in interrogating the project of punishment. Rather, in her positioning, she is so disconnected from the practice of punishment as to be simply a voyeur. (p. 12)

The field of tourism studies has observed the fleeting nature of tourists. Sturken (2007), for example, provides a nuanced understanding of memorial

sites and the commercial products that seem to attach themselves to these places and events. Sturken states that “[t]he tourist is a figure who embodies a detached and seemingly innocent pose” (p. 9). She identifies a particular kind of tourist, one who is a tourist of history. Sturken adds, “the American public is encouraged to experience itself as the subject of history through consumerism, media images, souvenirs, popular culture, and museum and architectural reenactments” (p. 9). This process, Sturken argues, attempts to provide a “cathartic ‘experience’ of history” (p. 9). Sturken is “concerned with the subjectivity of the tourist of history, for whom history is an experience once or twice removed, a mediated and reenacted experience, yet an experience nevertheless” (p. 9). She adds, “the mode of the tourist, with its innocent pose and distanced position, evokes the American citizen who participates uncritically in a culture in which notions of good and evil are used to define complex conflicts and tensions” (p. 10). In many respects, the tourist that Sturken identifies is similar to the prison voyeur.

To build upon this literature, I utilize the concept of prison voyeurism and apply it to a different set of arguments. What primarily interests me is the range and effects of prison voyeurism.

## **The Range of Engagement With the Prison Experience**

Approximately 10 basic situations exist, ordered on a continuum of decreasing engagement,<sup>7</sup> where individuals can gain entrance and potentially gain experience about corrections: These include

- living in a correctional facility,
- working in a correctional facility,
- volunteering in a correctional facility,
- visiting a correctional facility (e.g., practitioners, loved ones),
- formal learning about the field of corrections (e.g., ranging from students taking a college level class to a scholar or consultant conducting research on corrections),
- viewing nonfiction/documentaries and/or television programs featuring correctional settings,
- touring currently operating correctional facility,
- participating in a Scared Straight (or similar) program,
- touring a prison museum, and
- spending a night in a former correctional facility made into a hotel.

## *Incarceration*

Being incarcerated in a correctional facility exposes an individual to numerous challenges (e.g., Sykes, 1958). Many scholars and prisoners, and activists have suggested the depth of the experience is dependent on the length one is incarcerated as well as facility-specific characteristics (e.g., Ross & Richards, 2003). Indeed, correctional facilities vary based on a number of factors including the level of security, and whether one is incarcerated in a jail, state prison, or in the Federal Bureau of Prison facility. But no one can deny that the experience of incarceration leaves an indelible mark on a person's experience.

## *Working in a Correctional Facility*

Short of being incarcerated, another way to experience jail or prison is to actually work there for a period of time. This can range from being a contract worker providing services (e.g., working for a contractor in the kitchen, medical services) to being a line correctional officer, to working as a warden. Similar to the process of incarceration, the experience of working in a correctional facility varies based on the actual position, length of employment, the intensity of the experience, and the level of security of the facility (Johnson, 2012).

## *Volunteering in a Correctional Facility*

In an effort to deal with resource shortages, give prospective employees a sense of what working in a jail or prison may be like, and/or for public relations purposes, many correctional facilities rely on and/or encourage volunteers to provide selected administrative, educational, therapeutic, and religious programming. These include literacy enhancement, creative writing programs, life skills, alcohol and drug counseling (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous). Still others provide religious counseling (e.g., Prison Fellowship; Brewster, 2005). Some volunteer programs, such as the Inside-Out Prison Exchange program, have become more formalized and multifaceted. The Inside-Out program involves college students pursuing bachelor's degree in criminology and criminal justice taking university-level classes in prison alongside inmates. Piloted in 1997, the program boasts of more than 300 college students and 400 inmates having participated in the experience (<http://www.insideoutcenter.org/>). Students help prisoners with their homework. A hybrid model of this experience is internships and practicums that college and university instructors may facilitate for their students. These kinds of arrangements work best in minimum security kinds of prisons.



### *Visiting a Correctional Facility*

A number of people, from loved ones/relatives to friends and professionals such as lawyers, visit prisoners. These meetings are treated as a privilege, and the correctional facility has ultimate control over when, where, and under what conditions the visits occur (Carleton, 2005). The types of visits are also dependent on the security level of the prison and whether they are state or federal jurisdiction. Some of the visiting arrangements are more formal and coordinated by organizations with vested interests, such as the Prison Visitation and Support program ([www.prisonvisitation.org](http://www.prisonvisitation.org)). Started in 1969, this interfaith program is tailored to visiting inmates in federal and military prisons. This contact is for only a few hours a week in closely monitored circumstances (e.g., waiting room). There is also a difference between contact and no contact visits. The former allow some sort of touching between the inmate and the visitor, whereas the latter is usually done through a glass wall partition and a two-way telephone. In both cases, there is surveillance over the visit, either by correctional officers who are present in the room and/or through close circuit television. Some states will allow conjugal visits that vary in terms of duration. Only prisoners with few disciplinary tickets are allowed visits.

### *Formal Learning About Corrections*

Numerous opportunities exist for college and university students to enroll in classes focusing on the field of corrections—classes ranging from an introduction to corrections to those dealing with ethics and the law. This kind of formal learning can extend to state training academies for correctional officers. Although many states have training academies, other correctional training programs are delivered in the particular correctional institution where officers will be employed. Students taking an introductory or advanced correctional class may have as part of their curriculum the opportunity to visit a correctional facility. The practitioner-based training programs usually are more realistic, as part of the training actually involves getting into the correctional facilities to observe the working environment.

### *Viewing Nonfiction/Documentaries and/or Television Programs Featuring Correctional Settings*

A growing number of nonfiction films, documentaries, and docu-dramas have attempted to present the reality of jails, prisons, inmates, and correctional work. Some of these films have been intended for theatrical/commercial release, but most are made for public network or cable television programming. In general,

[t]he nonfiction filmmaker presents actual physical reality in a form that strives to be faithful to actuality. Unlike the fictional filmmaker, . . . the nonfiction filmmaker creatively records and interprets the world without substantially altering it. This is not only a matter of genre, but also of degree. (Barsam, 1979, pp. 582-583)

To accomplish the above-mentioned goals, nonfiction films on corrections often trace the history of different correctional institutions, cite statistics, and use archival photographs, newsreel footage, and re-enactments. They also commonly feature interviews with prisoners, ex-cons, correctional officers, chaplains, and wardens. Films might also incorporate copious prison footage (including its cell blocks, tiers, mess halls, gun towers, graveyards, etc.), dramatic language to describe individuals and incidents, and haunting music in the background. Some are narrated by well-known news personalities (e.g., Ted Koppel, Bill Kurtis, Hedrick Smith, Mike Wallace, and Tom Wicker). Others have voiceovers by prominent actors (e.g., Andre Braugher, Tim Robbins, and Paul Sorvino). Some documentaries and docu-dramas rely largely upon a series of "talking heads," including convicts, correctional officers, prison wardens, reformers, and judges. In other words, the entire film is primarily a series of interviews edited together.

Indeed, criminology and criminal justice professors frequently receive flyers and catalogs from for profit companies such as Films for the Humanities & Sciences, and Insight Media, as well as from professional organizations such as the American Correctional Association, selling documentary videos and DVDs. Some instructors use these documentaries as pedagogical classroom tools. During the past two decades, three companies and organizations have emerged as leading producers of nonfiction, corrections-related videos and DVDs: the Arts and Entertainment Network, the American Correctional Association, MSNBC (which is known for its *Lockup* series), and the National Geographic Channel's *Locked Up* and *Locked Up Abroad*. Regardless of who directs, produces, and distributes these documentaries and despite the pretence of objectivity, these programs routinely feature stereotypical images of prisoners who are extremely muscular, covered in tattoos, and intimidating. The correctional officers and wardens are usually not portrayed in such a manner. Unfortunately, nonfiction films often serve to reinforce the myth of convicts as violent predators and commonly focus on the more infamous convicts, tragedies, and institutions. Rarely are viewers given a glimpse of the mundane, daily reality of prison life. If they were, few would watch the programs. In an effort to tell a semi-entertaining story, certain liberties with the truth are taken. Thus, in many respects, documentaries about jails, prisons, inmates, and correctional workers are not that different from the other fictional depictions.

## *Touring a Currently Operating Correctional Facility*

The notion that jails and prisons should be open for public visits and inspection is not new. One can trace this idea back to the efforts of prison reformers such as John Howard (1777/2010), Guy Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville (1833/1964), and Thomas Eddy (1801), and to organizations such as the Quakers, the Pennsylvania Prison Society, and Citizens United for the Reform of Errants (CURE).

Over the past decade, a number of prominent reports and constituencies have advocated that jails and prisons be open to the public. One of the relatively recent efforts suggesting this approach was the Commission on Safety and Abuse in Prisons (Gibbons & Katzenbach, 2006). The final report argued that not only would public tours help citizens to monitor what goes on behind bars, but they would also allow visitors to see the good practices that are being implemented. One well-documented program of a correctional facility that opens its doors to the public is the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office (Wilson, 2008a). Since 2006, this correctional agency has allowed groups of 10 adults who are not on probation or parole and who do not have a forthcoming trial in a criminal matter to tour the main jail facility. It is not known how widespread this practice is across the United States.

Hybrid versions of the public tour are the numerous student prison field trips/tours. One increasingly studied pedagogical learning tool is the proverbial jail or prison tour that some criminology and criminal justice college or university instructors may offer to their students (e.g., Bordt & Lawler, 2005; Castleberry, 2007; Smith, Meade, & Koons-Witt, 2009). In these situations, the professor takes a group of students to a local correctional facility. The group typically receives an introductory lecture by a public or community relations officer, chief of security, or senior correctional officer, and then the students are taken to see selected parts of the facility. These tours typically last from 1 hr to half a day. Students may talk with various staff members who discuss jail/prison operations on a particular tier, pod, range, unit, or a shop foreman who is in charge of a prison industry. Occasionally, students will speak to selected inmates. The conversation is typically light. In these situations, inmates often feel like they are like caged animals in a zoo, with young students peering in on them (Bordt & Lawler, 2005). Student visitors may even get a meal similar to that eaten by the convicts and correctional staff.

Piche and Walby (2010) find that "carceral tours can be highly scripted and regulated in ways that obscure many of the central aspects of incarceration and, in particular, the experiences of prisoners" (p. 570). These researchers argue that "such tours afford little insight into the nature of punishment" (p. 570).<sup>8</sup>

### “Scared Straight” and Other Programs

Another kind of experience is embedded in the numerous “Scared Straight” programs that exist (or have been used) across the country (Holley & Brewster, 1996; Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Buehler, 2007). The basic premise behind this intervention is if a juvenile or young adult who has engaged in low-level deviant or criminal activity is briefly exposed to a correctional institution and has a chance to interact with the inmates, he or she will cease and desist from further criminal activities.

During the 1980s, a number of innovative programs intended to convince juveniles to stop committing crimes were implemented. One of the most controversial and newsworthy was the Scared Straight program, which was originally conceived in Rahway State Prison in New Jersey in 1976 by a group of inmates known as the Lifers. The so-called “Juvenile Awareness Program” involved a regular number of juveniles who were transported to the facility to spend a day where they were confronted and humiliated by the male prisoners. “The publicity of this program generated enormous public interest. The primary vehicle of the publicity was a documentary entitled ‘Scared Straight,’ which aired first locally in Los Angeles and then nationally in 1979” (Welch, 1996, p. 255).

The Rahway program’s claim that “90 percent of the 10,000 juveniles went straight was uncritically accepted by citizens and public officials alike” (Welch, 1996, p. 256). This prompted scholars to scientifically evaluate the program. What the researchers found was a different picture. One of the most well-known external assessments of Rahway’s program was conducted by Finkenauer (1982), who concluded that the program had not properly collected adequate records and that no attempt had been made to do any sort of follow-up study. Despite these kinds of evaluations, many similar programs still exist in the juvenile justice programs throughout the United States and elsewhere.

As mentioned previously, one of the classic prison documentaries is titled *Scared Straight*. This movie, filmed and released in the 1970s, traced the induction and reaction of 17 juveniles into the Rahway Prison. From an analytical perspective, the entire scenario seems a little contrived. In 1988, a follow-up documentary, *Scared Straight 20 Years Later*, was filmed. The movie posed the proverbial question: Where are the individuals who appeared in the first Scared Straight movie now? Predictably, some of them were unable to give up their lives of crime and were doing time, others were living law-abiding lives, and still some had died. Many of the people involved had found religion either inside or outside the prison system. *Scared Straight 20 Years Later* also included a reunion of some of the original convicts and juveniles involved in the program.

Despite the evidence that has been collected which questions the success of the “Scared Straight” original program, many of these kinds of programs still exist. In 2011, the A & E Television station, for example, began airing a show titled “Beyond Scared Straight.” In each episode, the producer took viewers into a different Scared Straight program across the country.

### *Prison Museums for the Public*

Approximately 95 prison museums are in operation around the world (Ross, 2012a). In the United States, these include infamous and decommissioned prisons, such as Alcatraz Prison in San Francisco, California (Levy, 2001; Loo & Strange, 2000); Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and the Louisiana State Prison at Angola, Louisiana (Adams, 2001; Schrift, 2004). Collectively, this phenomenon is known as “penal tourism” (Adams, 2001; Strange & Kempa, 2003; Wilson, 2008b). Prison museums offer a glimpse of what a functioning prison might be like. Such museums are often located inside or near both functional and decommissioned correctional facilities. These facilities typically display prison memorabilia and paraphernalia, archival photographs of inmates and prison life, prison hardware, confiscated weapons and contraband, death penalty displays, and examples of inmates’ arts and crafts. Some have gift shops that sell books, t-shirts, key chains, wallets, hats, patches, buckles, shot glasses, coffee mugs, and sometimes even arts and crafts made by current prisoners. Such items bring in extra revenue for these typically nonprofit businesses. Prison museums can be found in almost every state. Trying to establish a deeper appreciation of the theoretical and policy relevant aspects of prison museums is not easy.

One related experience concerns the increasingly popular paranormal investigations in old prisons and old prison cemeteries (e.g., Eastern, Old Montana State, Tennessee State Prison, Eddyville in Kentucky, Huntsville State Prison Cemetery, Angola Prison Cemetery, and The Asylum in New York) and the reports of sightings or experiences at such places. During the past decade, some reality-based television shows have capitalized on this phenomenon. Although all museums interpret and mediate historical reality, they have two competing missions: providing both entertainment and information to their visitors.

Almost all prison museums market themselves as tourist attractions and, predictably, have created attractive brochures and websites. These museums vary in terms of the visitor’s experience. Some allow visitors a great degree of engagement with the exhibits, whereas others are very passive leaving the visitor to simply stroll through on their own with minimal signs and markers.

The prison museums also differ regarding the extent to which they focus on education versus entertainment.

Administrators of these sites are keenly aware that it is difficult to strike a balance between historical reality and an overdramatized representation of what actually took place within their walls. That being said, the operators of the museums events must walk a fine line between the need to attract a sufficient number of visitors, thus generate income, and appealing to the public by compromising on historical accuracy. Some, but not all tourists who visit such sites may change their opinions of convicts and the field of corrections, whereas others may not. Perhaps with places such as Angola Rodeo (a very interactive prison experience for the tourist) and less so with the dormant/decommissioned correctional institutions, the visitors may come away less inclined to think of convicts as beasts and more predisposed to view them as humans (Adams, 2001; Schrift, 2004).

### *Prisons Converted Into Hotels?*

Some correctional facilities have temporarily or permanently been used as places where local curiosity seekers can visit and spend the night. In documentary filmmaker Michael Moore's controversial movie, *Roger and Me* (1989), for example, he tells the story of how during the 1980s, his home town of Flint, Michigan, when faced with "rampant crime" and "prison overcrowding" decided to construct a new jail. Just before the correctional facility was made operational, a gala affair was held at the institution, and the guests were allowed to stay overnight in one of the cells for US\$100 for the night.

Typically, when municipal, state, and federal jails and prisons are declared by court order to no longer be inhabitable, they are left idle, torn down, or converted into alternative use facilities. On rare occasions, jails and prisons located in large urban centers have been renovated for other uses. During the mid-2000s, the old Charles Street Jail in downtown Boston was purchased by a private entity. After a US\$150 million renovation, the facility is now the luxury Liberty Hotel. Many of the original elements of the jail are preserved (Lavoie, 2007).

### **Summary**

Each experience is qualitatively different. In addition, one has to assume that the situations vary based on a number of factors, including the availability of the experience (e.g., admission requirements and costs), the authenticity of the experience, and the amount of interaction visitors have with prisoners and correctional workers. These variables can be ordered on a scale from negligible to high.<sup>10</sup>

So what? At what point in time in the continuum does the experience shift to prison voyeurism? Many types of engagement have the potential for both voyeurism and real learning. It seems almost impossible to consider living and working in a prison to be voyeurism. It is possible, however, for voyeurism to be involved in volunteering, visiting, and formal learning, but it does not seem very likely. Documentary/television and touring open facilities seem to have equal potential for both voyeurism and real learning. Scared Straight and prison museums seem to lean more toward voyeurism. And, prison hotels seem like they have to be examples of voyeurism.

Thus, when the experience crosses from formal learning about the field of corrections to viewing nonfiction/documentaries on corrections, we are moving toward prison voyeurism (see Table 1).

## Conclusion

If prison voyeurism exists, why does it occur? We can probably find answers to this question in the basic economic theory of supply and demand. To begin with, there appears to be an increasing number of relatively low-cost opportunities for the public to take advantages of prison voyeuristic activities. Additionally, there appears to be an insatiable appetite for these sorts of things. This includes, but is not limited to, an abundance of boredom and need for low-cost thrill seeking that is probably part of our late modern (or liquid modern) condition, a situation in which individuals are characterized by *nomadism*. This refers to the behavior of individuals who behave like tourists, with minimal investments in their jobs, careers, relationships, and communities. This is demonstrated by frequent changes in jobs, partners, spouses, and values, and a lack of rootedness in usual social supports (Bauman, 2000).

Why should prison voyeurism bother us? What is wrong with the public, juveniles, and students watching prison documentaries and visiting correctional institutions? After all, are they not becoming educated, and learning more about those less fortunate than themselves? Is the person who visits the prison museum, for example, not contributing to the economy? Such visits are not illegal or immoral. True, but this is not the problem.

Visitors and viewers (i.e., the voyeurs) have preconceptions, myths, stereotypes when they engage in prison voyeurism. Rather than changing their beliefs, the experience typically reinforces these misconceptions. The information that is presented to them is highly structured, and, in many cases, contrived. The voyeurs are rarely affected by the exposure to these experiences. Prison voyeurism, more often than not, reinforces the stereotypes, myths, and misperceptions that the public has and, thus, furthers a tendency to advocate punitive mentalities.

**Table 1.** Continuum of Prison Voyeurism.

Setting/experience	Availability of experience (How readily available is the experience, that is, transaction cost)	Amount of interaction with prisoners and correctional workers	Predicted authenticity of experience	Predicted effect of experience on the subjects
Incarceration in jail or prison	Commission of crime that necessitates incarceration	High	High	High
Working in a jail or prison	Meet selection requirements, pass training, and work	High	High	High
Volunteering in a jail or prison	Agreement of the warden, approval of the Department of Corrections, no outstanding criminal charges	Medium	Medium	Medium
Visiting loved one or friend in a jail or prison	Approval of convict, no outstanding criminal charges, confined to visiting hours	Medium	Medium	Medium
Formal learning about corrections (e.g., community college/university level class)	Ability to pay tuition, meet admission requirements, opportunity costs	None	None	Medium
Nonfiction films, documentaries, and docu-dramas on prisons/prison life	Readily available to subscribers of cable television, accessibility of Internet connection, and/or subscription to Netflix, Hulu, etc.	None	Low	Low
Visiting jails and/or prisons to the public for tours-inspection	Free time, no pending criminal legal matter	Medium	Low	Low
Participating in "Scared Straight" or similar programs	Identification by the juvenile justice system that this program would be beneficial to youth; 1 to 7 days in duration.	Medium	Medium	Low
Prison tour for college-university students	Willingness of instructor and correctional facility to provide this kind of experience	Low	Low	Minimal
Prison museums for the public	Ability to afford the cost of admission; valid credit card	None	Low	Minimal
Spending the night in correctional facility converted into a hotel	Ability to afford the cost of the experience; valid credit card.	None	Low	Minimal



Crime myths, the larger context in which the criminal justice system exists, “have numerous effects on our perceptions; we may not even be conscious that they are at work” (Kappeler, Blumberg, & Potter, 1996, p. 3). Crime myths have six main purposes. First, they “organize our views of crime, criminals, and the proper operation of the criminal justice system” (Kappeler et al., 1996, p. 3). Second, they “support and maintain prevailing views of crime, criminals, and the criminal justice system, strengthening the tendency to rely on established conceptions of crime and justice” (Kappeler et al. p. 3).

Third, these misrepresentations “reinforce the current designation of conduct as criminal, support existing practices of crime control, and provide the background assumptions for future designation of conduct as criminal” (Kappeler et al. pp. 3-4).

Fourth, the myths are “convenient[ly] used to fill gaps in knowledge and to provide answers to questions social science either cannot answer or has failed to address” (Kappeler et al. p. 5). Fifth, the stereotypes “provide for an outlet for emotionalism and channel emotion into action” (Kappeler et al., p. 5). In general, they “seem to follow a series of recurrent patterns. These patterns allow a disproportionate amount of . . . attention to be focused on a few isolated criminal events or issues” (Kappeler et al. p. 5).

Finally, with respect to corrections, myths about jails and prisons hinder the emergence of rational discussion and prevent a fair hearing by the public. The acceptance of such misconceptions also means that the same types of mistakes will continue to be made in the policy arena. By reinforcing punitive mentalities, rehabilitation and the rehabilitative ideal are, thus, frustrated.

It is well and frequently argued that myths and misconceptions are harmful, and voyeurism promotes these myths and misconceptions. Scholars can use this typology to study public perceptions and how they are shaped by public-corrections interaction. Can students and the public also learn some lessons here? Indeed. A considerable effort must be expended in countering the myths and misperceptions by various audiences regarding corrections in the United States. Both seem to be driven more by voyeurism or morbid fascination. Based on the continuum, we should (a) try to participate in the higher engagement activities, (b) make efforts to properly learn from the activities that have the potential for both voyeurism and real learning, and (c) avoid or at least do not take seriously (i.e., pretend to learn from) the activities designed more for voyeurism or entertainment.

### **Acknowledgments**

Special thanks to Mike “Lee” Johnson, Rachel Hildebrandt, and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for comments and suggestions.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. This research uses the term *corrections* to refer to jails, prisons, convicts, correctional officers, administrators, and workers.
2. Indeed, engagement is dependent on numerous factors including but not limited to available and/or disposable resources. Those resources can include income, time, educational attainment, training, intelligence, and so on.
3. Over the past decade, a scholarly literature and consulting practice have developed around the importance of understanding, creating, and promoting the importance of authentic goods, services, and experiences. According to Gilmore and Pine (2007), "This authenticity imperative is intensified as fakes saturate contemporary markets and product counterfeiting becomes more sophisticated and more global" (p. 7). However, this is tangential to my major argument.
4. Calvert (2000/2004) prefers the term "mediated voyeurism," which includes "the consumption of revealing images of and information about others' apparently real and unguarded lives, often yet not always for purposes of entertainment but frequently at the expense of privacy and discourse, through the means of mass media and Internet" (pp. 2-3). Calvert's definition is more appropriate for documentaries, docu-dramas, and television shows than for other issues tied to prisons and incarceration.
5. This is similar to Surette's (2007) notion of experience reality and symbolic reality, although these concepts differ in significant ways.
6. Although important and relevant, this discussion is not interested in the power of images that depict human pain and suffering. For a respectable review of such visual impact, see, for example, Sontag (2003).
7. The ranking should not be interpreted as an empirical statement; it is more of a heuristic device based on the author's professional experience and years studying correctional facilities.
8. One colleague told me how every year he used to take his students on a tour of a maximum security state prison. It included a lifer without the possibility of parole who killed his buddy while he was drunk/stoned. His message was "stay off drugs" and because he was a college grad, "anyone can commit murder if they are on drugs." This entire experience seemed fine until the professor discovered that the convict had the same speech every year, and it was clear he was doing it to try to get special privileges or even be pardoned.
9. Sources have told me about former prisons/jails converted into restaurants and night clubs. Unfortunately, I have not been able to uncover these kinds of businesses.

10. Empirical research may help clarify and better operationalize these axes, but this is not the major purpose of this article.

## References

- Adams, J. (2001). The wildest show in the South: Tourism and incarceration at Angola. *The Drama Review*, 45, 94-108.
- Barsam, M. (1979). From nonfiction film: A critical history. In G. Mast & M. Cohen (Eds.), *Film theory and criticism* (pp. 580-593). New York, NY: Oxford University.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Beaumont, G., & de Tocqueville, A. (1964). *On the penitentiary system in the United States and its application in France*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. (Original work published 1833)
- Bendix, R. (1997). *In search of authenticity: The formation of folklore studies*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bordt, R. L., & Lawler, M. J. (2005). Teaching a course on prisons: A design, some resources, and a little advice. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 16, 180-192.
- Boyle, D. (2003). *Authenticity: Brands, fakes, spin and the lust for real life*. London, England: Flamingo.
- Brewster, D. R. (2005). Volunteers. In M. Bosworth (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of prisons and correctional facilities* (pp. 1016-1018). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Brown, M. (2009). *The culture of punishment: Prison, society, and spectacle*. New York: New York University Press.
- Calvert, C. (2000/2004). *Voyeur nation: Media, privacy, and peering in modern culture*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Carleton, F. (2005). Visits. In M. Bosworth (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of prisons and correctional facilities* (pp. 1004-1009). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Castleberry, S. B. (2007). Prison field trips: Can white-collar criminals positively affect the ethical and legal behavior of marketing and MBA students? *Journal of Marketing Education*, 29, 5-17.
- Cullen, F. T., & Gendreau, P. (2000). Assessing correctional rehabilitation: Policy, practice, and prospects. In J. Horney (Ed.), *Criminal justice 2000: Volume 3 policies, processes, and decisions of the criminal justice system* (pp. 109-175). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice.
- De Zengotita, T. (2006). *Mediated: How the media shapes our world and the way we live in it*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Eddy, T. (1801). *An account of the state prison or penitentiary house, in the city of New-York* (Vol. 2). New York, NY: Isaac Collins.
- Finkenauer, J. (1982). *Scared straight and the panacea phenomenon*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Freeman, R. M. (2000). *Popular culture and corrections*. Lanham, MD: American Correctional Association.
- Gibbons, J. J., & Katzenbach, N. (2006). *Confronting confinement: A report of the commission on safety and abuse in America's prisons*. Washington, DC: Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons.

- Gilmore, J. H., & Pine, B. J. (2007). *Authenticity: What consumers really want*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Holley, P. D., & Brewster, D. (1996). A description of speak outs in Oklahoma prisons. *Journal of the Oklahoma Criminal Justice Research Consortium*, 3, 123-133.
- Howard, J. (1777/2010). *The state of the prisons in England and Wales with preliminary observations and an account of some foreign prisons*. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale ECCO, Print Editions.
- Johnson, L. M. (Ed.). (2012). *Experiencing corrections: From practitioner to professor*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Kappeler, V. E., Blumberg, M., & Potter, G. W. (1996). *The mythology of crime and criminal justice* (2nd ed.). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Lavoie, D. (2007, November). Boston jail transforms into luxury hotel with restaurant called "Clink." *USA Today*. Retrieved from [http://www.usatoday.com/travel/destinations/2007-11-08-boston-jail-hotel\\_N.htm#](http://www.usatoday.com/travel/destinations/2007-11-08-boston-jail-hotel_N.htm#)
- Levy, J. B. (2001). Escape to Alcatraz: What self-guided museum tours can show us about teaching legal research. *New York Law School Law Review*, 44, 387-428.
- Lewis, D., & Bridger, D. (2000). *The soul of the new consumer: Authenticity—What we buy and why in the new economy*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Loo, T., & Strange, C. (2000). "Rock prison of liberation": Alcatraz Island and the American imagination. *Radical History Review*, 78, 27-56.
- Metzl, J. M. (2004). Voyeur nation? Changing definitions of voyeurism, 1950-2004. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 12, 127-131.
- Niedzviecki, H. (2009). *The peep diaries: How we're learning to love watching ourselves and our neighbors*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights.
- Peterson, R. A. (2005). In search of authenticity. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42, 1083-1098.
- Petrosino, A., Turpin-Petrosino, C., & Buehler, J. (2007). Scared straight and other juvenile awareness programs. In B. C. Welsh & D. P. Farrington (Eds.), *Preventing crime* (pp. 87-101). New York, NY: Springer.
- Piche, J., & Walby, K. (2010). Problematizing carceral tours. *British Journal of Criminology*, 50, 570-581.
- Ross, J. I. (2003). (Mis)representing corrections: The role of our cultural industries. In J. I. Ross & S. C. Richards (Eds.), *Convict criminology* (pp. 37-58). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Ross, J. I. (2012a). Debunking the myths of American corrections. *Critical Criminology*, 20, 409-421.
- Ross, J. I. (2012b). Touring imprisonment: A descriptive statistical analysis of prison museums. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 4, 113-118.
- Ross, J. I., & Richards, S. C. (Eds.). (2003). *Convict criminology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Schrift, M. (2004). The Angola prison rodeo: Inmate cowboys and institutional tourism. *Ethnology*, 43, 331-344.
- Selby, M. (2004). *Understanding urban tourism: Image, culture and experience*. London, England: IB Tauris.

- Smith, H. P., Meade, B., & Koons-Witt, B. A. (2009). The utility of the correctional tour: Student perceptions and the propensity for academic growth. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education, 20*, 292-311.
- Sontag, S. (2003). *Regarding the pain of others*. New York, NY: Picador.
- Strange, S., & Kempa, M. (2003). Shades of dark tourism at Alcatraz and Robben Island. *Annals of Tourism Research, 30*, 386-405.
- Sturken, M. (2007). *Tourists of history: Memory, kitsch, and consumerism from Oklahoma City to ground zero*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Surette, R. (2007). *Media, crime, and criminal justice: Images, realities, and policies* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Sykes, G. (1958). *The society of captives: A study of a maximum security prison*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Welch, M. (1996). *Corrections: A critical approach*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Wilson, C. R. (2008a). Police practice: Public tours of local jails. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 77*, 16-20.
- Wilson, J. Z. (2008b). *Prison: Cultural memory and dark tourism*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Wright, P. (2000). The cultural commodification of prisons. *Social Justice, 27*, 15-21.

### **Author Biography**

**Jeffrey Ian Ross**, PhD, has researched, written, and lectured primarily on corrections, policing, political crime, violence, abnormal-extreme criminal behavior, and crime and justice in American Indian communities. During the early 1980s, he worked for almost 4 years in a correctional institution.