

## Cyberhood ([www.thecyberhood.net](http://www.thecyberhood.net)) Book Review

Wacquant, Loïc. 2009. *Prisons of Poverty*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. 290pp. \$22.00 paper

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When promoted in 1994 to Commissioner of the New York City police force, William Bratton made a distinct administrative turn from community policing strategies he implemented in Boston as Police Commissioner. With the blessing of New York's Mayor (and former prosecutor) Rudolph Giuliani, Bratton introduced zero-tolerance policing. He restructured the force by firing or demoting high-ranking officers, and then ordered commanders to focus as many precinct resources as possible on policing minor nuisances, such as public drunkenness, littering, jaywalking and other petty crimes. Zero-tolerance policing theorizes that serious crimes will be reduced if you police against the daily petty disorders. The approach worked in New York, or appeared to work, and the crime rate dropped. Chief Bratton then promoted zero-tolerance policing abroad by offering training and seminars to police forces around the world: Scotland, Mexico, Argentina, France, Italy, England, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Austria, and Canada each adopted some form of this approach.

In *Prisons of Poverty*, Loic Wacquant outlines the history of the broken windows theory of crime from its inception in a psychology experiment, followed by research in a U.S. think tank, to implementation by the Chief of New York Police, to Western Europe and then the rest of the world. While the average citizen sees crime reduction as a victory, Wacquant asks at what price? He argues that what is publicly intended to improve the quality of life for all is actually an attempt by governments to replace social welfare programs with prison sentences. *Prisons of Poverty* is nothing if not a harsh critique of zero-tolerance policing and other formalized crime policies whose end result is to criminalize poverty.

As discussed by Wacquant, proponents of zero tolerance policing fail to recognize that crime rates had been dropping in New York preceding the adoption of this policy, and that crime rates dropped in other major cities that did not use this technique. Nevertheless, researchers, leaders, and media consumed the story coming out of New York and could not incorporate their "successes" quickly enough into their own policies.

Wacquant offers a more elucidating longer view of crime policy, which attempts to explain the hasty proclamations of the successes of zero-tolerance policing. A report given to President Lyndon Johnson in 1967 stated that the US inmate population in federal and state prisons was being reduced by about one percent per year. The subsequent annual report showed that the reduction of the inmate population had waned, but still recommended a moratorium on building large prisons and a phasing out of detention facilities for juveniles. The report stated that prisons, jails and juvenile facilities have failed and "[t]here is overwhelming evidence that these institutions create crime rather than prevent it."

But in 1973, the US reversed course and began incarcerating individuals at an unprecedented rate. In 1971, the US had an incarceration rate of 176 per 100,000, but by 1985 the rate had doubled to 310 and doubled again by 2000 to over 700. That year, the US housed 1,931,000 adult inmates and 109,000 juveniles. When the number of people on probation and parole is added to the inmate count, the number of individuals under correctional supervision becomes nearly 6.5 million people.

The costs to incarcerate this many individuals have also risen exponentially. The US government spends more to house inmates than it does on its two main assistance programs for the poor. In 1980, the US spent three times more on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and food stamps than it did on jails and prisons. But by 1995, incarceration costs are 130 percent more than AFDC and 70 percent higher than food stamps. This amount of funds might be warranted to protect the public from increasing crime, but the fact is, crime rates in the US have decreased during this period. (The late 1980s to early 1990s did see an upsurge in violent crime brought on by the crack cocaine pandemic but was contained mainly in urban poor areas and not reflective of overall crime in the rest of the US).

Three interrelated causes are posited by Wacquant as to why the US prison population has ballooned: the philosophical change in penal policy from rehabilitative to punitive, media exploitation of crime, and the collapse of the "dark ghetto." Rehabilitation, the previously stated goal of the US prison system, was discarded along with indeterminate sentencing, for determinate sentencing which proved to lengthen sentences, promote overcrowded facilities, and reduce the importance of judges. In the 1980s, media focus on crime was increasing and the general public became obsessed with the idea of random violent crimes. The proportion of murders in the US between 1975 and 1995 remained unchanged and actually declined after 1995, and property offenses followed a similar steady decline, with the exception of car theft. Nevertheless, the public was fearful and this allowed criminal justice officials to push get tough policies and increase sentences for violent and nonviolent crimes alike, often with longer sentences handed out for nonviolent offenses than for violent offenses. The percentage of prisoners sentenced for drug-related crimes was five percent in 1960 but rose to almost one-third in 1995. At the same time, reality crime television shows increased in popularity cementing the idea that crimes are more frequent and violent than they actually are and disproportionately committed by young, African American males. Wacquant argues that what changed in the US was not criminal behavior, but societal attitudes and criminal justice responses toward crimes committed by poor urban residents. The prison system became a way to contain the urban poor as welfare policies were reformed. In 1995, African American males were 55 percent of those entering jails or prisons, while comprising only seven percent of the US adult population. Wacquant states that US criminal justice policies are "an expression of cultural stands and political choices," a way to penalize poverty and contain black urban residents.

The US implemented a policy of criminalization of poverty through reductions in social services and increases in incarceration rates. For Wacquant, the increase in prison populations has been to "subdue the populations refractory to

precarious employment, to reaffirm the imperative of work as a civic norm, to warehouse supernumerary populations. . .” Many European countries are similarly situated as their incarceration rates have increased continuously over the past several years. Unlike the US however, Europe *is* experiencing higher crime rates and their prison populations can be attributed to sentence length rather than new admissions. The country that most resembles the US in their current restructuring is France, who, like the US, reversed its social trends and nearly doubled the inmate population from 1982 to 2002. Additionally, France replaced fines with prison time, increased sentence severity, and eliminated early release. For both countries, “the restructuring of the penal economy accompanies and supports the restructuring of the wage-labor economy, with the prison serving as border and overflow catchment for the deregulated market of insecure jobs.” In the US and Europe, those without jobs are often oversentenced, receiving sentences instead of fines. Whereas the rising US inmate population is attributed mainly to urban drug crimes, France’s increase is due to incarcerating violations of immigration statutes. However, both countries are “aiming to keep an undesirable category separate and to facilitate its subtraction from the societal body . . .” The rest of Europe is more similar to US in that their inmate populations can be attributed to antidrug policies or “war against persons perceived as the least useful and potentially most dangerous parts of the population: the jobless, the homeless, the paperless immigrants, beggars, vagrants, and other social rejects of the city.” Wacquant views carceral inflation as a combination of cultural preference and political decision-making. The US has already made its choice to criminalize poverty, and much of Europe is following suit. For Wacquant, it is too late for the US, but Europe may still choose to value its citizens’ rights.

The book offers valuable, heretofore undiscussed information on policies and key players that shaped recent criminal justice policy in the US and several European countries (the Afterword includes South American countries). His thesis is that criminal justice policy has been implemented to criminalize poverty, or as a way to keep the dregs of society locked away from the hard-working, law-abiding “good” people. The ideas behind broken windows theory and zero tolerance policing fit nicely into supporting his theory. The author explains both of these ideas in tremendous detail, but possibly out of order. Chapter one discusses zero tolerance policing and how its ideas were popularized by US think tanks to rest of the world, before chapter two explains the political reasons why these policies were so quickly accepted. Transposing these chapters would have allowed Wacquant to provide necessary chronologic exposition of US crime policy trends, before introducing crime-fighting policies that served as finishing touches, but not the beginning of, a new chapter in policing and criminal justice policy.

The expanded version of *Prisons of Poverty* also includes a third chapter that offers an in-depth look into penal policy in the US from 1967, or how the US went from progressive to punitive. Although much of the information in this chapter is included elsewhere in the book, it is useful to the reader who may not have a historical understanding of US crime policy during this time.

Some of the most interesting information, however, comes in the Afterword where the author explains how the book was enthusiastically received around the

globe, and ultimately translated into nineteen different languages. Wacquant writes in the introduction that the book was initially intended for academics and activists. Upon first reading, and due to the complexity of the argument (which may be attributable to the translation), and possible organization issues, I would have agreed. But after a second and third reading, I would also include anyone who values civil rights and is concerned that the rights of many are being decided by a select few and that those few do not have everyone's best interest in mind.