

Border Criminologies: Assessing the Changing Architecture of Crime and Punishment

Global Detention Project Working Paper No. 10

Mary Bosworth
February 2016

About the Global Detention Project

The Global Detention Project (GDP) is a non-profit research centre based in Geneva, Switzerland, that investigates the use of detention in response to global migration. The GDP's aims include: (1) providing researchers, advocates, and journalists with a measurable and regularly updated baseline for analysing the growth and evolution of detention practices and policies; (2) facilitating accountability and transparency in the treatment of detainees; and (3) encouraging scholarship in this field of immigration and refugee studies.

About the author

Mary Bosworth is Professor of Criminology and Fellow of St Cross College at the University of Oxford and, concurrently, Professor of Criminology at Monash University, Australia. A longer version of this paper will appear in the forthcoming volume *Challenging Immigration Detention: Academics, Activists, and Policymakers* (Edward Elgar Publishing).

The Global Detention Project Working Paper Series is edited by Michael Flynn (GDP) and Matthew Flynn (Georgia Southern University).

This series is made possible in part by the generous support of the Open Society Foundations.



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Abstract: There is increasing convergence between criminal and immigration law as states respond to the challenges of international migration by erecting and enforcing tougher visa and border controls. Many countries have put the criminal justice system to work in managing migration. The numbers of foreign nationals in prison or in immigration detention centres have consequently surged. This paper examines the particular perspective that criminology provides in explaining and critiquing these developments. While the field has been slow to respond to immigration detention, often clinging to a nationalist vision of the administration of justice, over the past decade scholars in the nascent field of "Border Criminologies" have begun assessing the changing architecture of crime and punishment. Their research has drawn on the traditions of applied research about state control, producing accounts of policing, imprisonment, and detention. While work still needs to be done to broaden the intellectual reach of this new subfield, this paper argues that criminology offers a rich, critical heritage as well as a set of methods through which to understand these policy developments.

Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed, in most economically developed countries, an increasing convergence between criminal and immigration law as states have responded to growing numbers of people on the move by erecting and enforcing tougher visa requirements, instituting innovative forms of border policing, and adopting new legal sanctions (Pickering and Ham, 2015). In addition to introducing an array of immigration legislation (Aliverti, 2013; Stumpf, 2006), many countries, like Britain, have put the criminal justice system to work in managing migration. As a result, the numbers of foreign nationals in prison subject to deportation orders or in immigration detention centres awaiting expulsion have surged (Kaufman and Bosworth, 2013).

In this paper, I set out the particular perspective that criminology brings to the issue of immigration detention. Although criminology was initially rather slow to respond to the impact of mass migration, scholars in the nascent field of "Border Criminologies" are developing new approaches to and accounts of border control by concentrating on its intersections with the criminal justice system (see, for example, Aas, 2013; Weber, 2013; Aliverti, 2013; Barker, 2013; Bosworth, 2014; Kaufman, 2015). Through detailed empirical research and conceptual analysis, scholars in this field argue that penal power facilitates and structures responses to mass mobility, inspiring institutional design and legal reform, while also equipping the state with additional forms of and reasons for coercion. Drawing on my own field research in multiple detention sites in the United Kingdom, I will set out the contributions criminology can make to gaining research access and understanding immigration detention centres.

Overview

Britain locks up some 3,500 women and men each day under Immigration Act powers. A handful of children may be held for up to a week as part of family groups in a “pre-departure facility” known as Cedars. Officially, there should be no unaccompanied minors in detention although each year a certain proportion of those who enter as adults are later determined to be under-18 years.

Detainees come from across the globe, with most from former British colonies or from places of current or recent conflict. Although a small number are held for documentation purposes, usually people are detained pursuant to removal or deportation. What this means is that in Britain, in other words, detention is used at the end of a person’s migration, rather than upon arrival. Until a successful legal challenge in 2015, certain asylum seekers could also be held under a “fast track” scheme if their case was pre-determined as unlikely to succeed. At the time of writing this system has been suspended and its replacement is under review.

For the most part, this form of confinement is brief. Two-thirds are removed, deported, or released within 28 days. A small number in each facility will have been held for over a year. However, unlike the rest of Europe, Britain does not have a statutory upper time limit. The country has not opted in to the EU Return Directive, which among things sets a maximum time-limit for pre-deportation detention that is intended to be applied by all European Union countries.

The lack of a time limit is currently receiving considerable public and political scrutiny (APPG, 2015). There has been a sustained campaign by NGOs, former detainees and some members of Parliament to end the uncertainty. Calls are becoming louder for a limit of 28 days. Though few go so far as to call into question the whole purpose of detention, in January 2016, the report of an independent review of welfare in detention headed by Stephen Shaw, to which I contributed a literature review on mental health, called for greater restrictions on the detention of certain populations and a radical overhaul of the overall management of immigration casework (Shaw, 2016). In addition to such operational matters, Shaw also called for greater academic scrutiny of these centres. Aside from the research emanating from the Border Criminologies research group in Oxford, there are few first-hand accounts about the situation detainees face in the detention and removal system and empirical details are hard to obtain.

Research Access in the Penal State

Considerable scholarship is being produced on immigration detention around the world. However, little of it is based on independent research conducted inside custodial centres. Governments have been extremely reluctant to allow in independent academic researchers, forcing researchers to rely on the testimonies of former detainees (Klein and Williams, 2012), undertake conversations in visit halls or over the phone (Griffiths, 2013), investigate detention centre staff (Hall, 2010; 2012), or surreptitiously collect testimonies while employed by or volunteering for NGOs (Griffiths, 2013; Fischer, 2015).¹ As a result, scholars have

¹ First-hand accounts have also been produced by NGOs, government agencies, and journalists (see, inter alia, LDSG, 2009; HMIP, 2015).

largely focused on undertaking legal analyses (Cornelisse, 2010; Wilsher, 2010; Hernandez, 2014), broadly documenting the historical evolution of detention regimes (Flynn, 2014), or analysing the impacts of particular policies like privatisation (Conlon and Hiemstra, 2014).

While such studies provide important evidence about many aspects of detention, they provide little detail of the texture of the institutions, how they differ from one another, their ambiguities, points of tension, or commonalities. As a result, and notwithstanding a growing, interdisciplinary set of publications on border control practices around the world, we simply have very little sense of the social and cultural world of immigration detention centres. What do detainees do all day? How do they get along with the staff? How does detention make them feel? Where are they from? How do they cope? What are they like?

From the beginning, these were the kinds of questions that I wanted to answer. It took 12 months to obtain permission to conduct fieldwork in detention. In navigating this process, I drew heavily on strategies and pathways I learned in my home discipline of criminology. In so doing, I turned to the extensive body of scholarship on the prison and took advantage of the discipline's long, albeit contested, relationship to the penal state.

Prisons, like detention centres, are hidden and secretive institutions. They are structured by significant power imbalances and, in the words of Richard Sparks (1992), suffer from an inherent "legitimacy deficit." To a large extent, the authorities know that allowing in researchers to prison invites critique. It is for this reason too, that prisons research is difficult to arrange. These are tainted institutions, characterised by coercion and conflict. Yet, with some exceptions, governments around the world are prepared to allow criminologists access to their penal institutions. Some, like many U.S. states and the federal system, make it very difficult. But even there, where there has been a dramatic decline in qualitative accounts, a certain amount of academic research continues (REF).

Criminologists have produced an extensive body of work across many countries on everyday life in prison (see, for example, Clemmer, 1944; Sykes, 1958; Carlen, 1981; Sparks, Bottoms and Hay, 1996; Bosworth, 1999; Liebling, 2004; Crewe, 2009; Phillips, 2010). This literature, which originated in Donald Clemmer's (1940) U.S. study *The Prison Community*, relies on an ethnographic method and extensive, informal interactions. Such strategies sometimes occur alongside—or generate—quantitative tools, leading to what Alison Liebling (2011) refers to as "ethnography-led measurement" (see also Liebling, 2004).

Much of this work focuses on relationships and regimes, examining the particularities of life behind bars in order to understand the nature and purpose of these complex institutions. By examining what custodial institutions are *like*, scholars interpret what they are *for* (Crewe, 2009). In so doing, prison sociologists build critical, analytical accounts on detailed, empirical fieldwork.

The productive nature of criminology's working relationship with the state is evident in this extensive body of research on the prison, much of which has had a direct impact on penal policy as well as on our understanding of punishment and incarceration. Similar applied scholarship can also be found in adjacent fields of

scholarship on policing, sentencing, and victims. There too, criminological research informs legislation and state practice.

For critics, this interactive relationship between the academy and government is problematic. All too often, they suggest, criminology veers too close to the state, producing research in its name and interests (Sim, 2009). As Foucault most famously pointed out, criminological scholarship can also be dull or hard to follow, uncritical and compromised: "Have you ever read any criminological texts?" Foucault asked indignantly.

They are staggering. And I say this out of astonishment, not aggressiveness, because I fail to comprehend how the discourse of criminology has been able to go on at this level. One has the impression that it is of such utility, is needed so urgently and rendered so vital for the working of the system, that it does not even need to seek a theoretical justification for itself, or even simply a coherent framework. It is entirely utilitarian. (Foucault, 1980: 47).

Whether they act as a "critical friend" (Liebling, 2010), or merely as critic (Sim, 2009), criminologists must engage with the state. Without it they cannot do their job. Yet, the diversity of criminological research guards against too simplistic an interpretation of this wide-ranging field. Though certainly dependent on the state for permission to study sites of confinement or forms of policing, criminologists are rarely its handmaidens. Instead, criminologists produce evidence about malpractice, injustice, and indignity in the criminal justice system, working both to reform and also reimagine current practice. The government and its agents are their source of information and the target of their analysis. An ability to navigate this relationship is one of the key requirements of the field, and one of its most important contributions to the study of immigration detention.

The research on which this paper is based took over a year to arrange. When I began, I had no point of contact in the immigration system. There was also no formal route to apply for access. So I turned to the institution I knew better, looking for help: the prison service. There I found a number of senior male staff who were willing to meet. Familiar with prisons research they vouched for me to colleagues more directly involved in detention, introductions that eventually lead me to the senior civil servant who had the power to permit the research project. At our first meeting, he agreed to all my requests.

Since then (August 2009) I have been conducting research inside immigration detention centres, free from scrutiny, and—despite producing a series of critical reports, articles, blog posts, conference papers, and a research monograph—without interference (see, for example, Bosworth, 2012; 2013; 2014). The first study has led to a number of other projects, deploying a range of methodologies from surveys to photography. The original civil servant has long since moved on (to the private sector). Not all of his replacements have been as enthusiastic about facilitating academic research yet none of them have drawn it to a close. Instead, they maintain a wary acceptance.

The Punitive Nature of Detention

In gaining access, I was able to capitalise on the fact that all current detention centre managers have previously worked in prisons.² Some of the civil servants have, likewise, previously worked in the Ministry of Justice or the National Offender Management System (NOMS). These senior members of staff have some familiarity with the discipline of criminology. A handful of them have even studied it at university.

This is not the only site of intersection between immigration and the criminal justice systems. Detention centres often look like prisons. In the UK since 2001 all new centres have either been built to Category B (high-secure) prison design standards, or have been former prisons reopened as detention centres. They are staffed by officers in uniform who are employed by private custodial firms or HM Prison Service. Many detainees have also previously served prison terms. In nearly all countries, other parts of penal machinery are also common from locked doors, roll counts, room searches, pat-downs, bars on windows, high fences topped with razor wire, and CCTV cameras.

Beyond such architectural similarities, in Britain, there is considerable conceptual parity between prisons and “immigration removal centres” (IRCs). Key policies are based on those from prison (Bosworth, 2007). As in prisons, for instance, daily life in removal centres is increasingly directed by concerns about “safer custody” and security. Detainees are allocated to rooms only after they undergo “room share and risk assessment.” Those considered to be at risk of suicide or self-harm are placed on the ACDT (Assessment, Care in Detention and Teamwork) system, which draws heavily on the prison service’s ACCT (Assessment, Care in Custody, and Teamwork) model. Both sets of institutions have designated security staff whose job is to monitor potential illegal or harmful activity. These officers pay particular attention to “high-risk” detainees, who are referred to within the detention centres using terminology from the police as “development nominals.” Removal centres also encourage staff to submit “SIRs”—security incident report forms—for any kind of behaviour or incident that strikes them as suspicious. Each of these policies uses the prison and its security measures as a reference point.

The implications of these similarities are not lost on those within. While mindful of the importance of retaining a narrow view of punishment as a legal category in order to protect some of its judicial safeguards (Zedner, 2013; Ashworth and Zedner, 2014), considerable legal and criminological research argues that detention centres should not only be understood as a form of punishment (Hernandez, 2014; Kaufman and Weiss, 2015; Majcher, 2014), but also that they reveal the expansive nature of punitiveness (Bosworth and Turnbull, 2015). Staff and detainees regularly refer to IRCs as prisons. For detainees, confinement is punitive, even though it is an administrative measure.

Women and men find their loss of liberty and separation from family, friends, and their communities especially difficult, perceiving in it a punitive response to their

² In the United States and Australia, immigration detention centres are also staffed with uniformed officers employed by many of the same custodial firms that run prisons. Elsewhere—in France, the Netherlands, Greece, and other European countries—detention centres are under police operation (Bosworth and Vannier, 2016). In all these countries, the connections with the criminal justice systems are extensive and inherent.

legal status. "We're like prisoners," Uriel³ complained when he was in IRC Brook House. "We're searched all the time. We basically don't have the freedom, I know it's detention but you don't have to be treated like a prisoner." In fact Uriel, went on, matters in detention were even worse than prison, since "even people in prison have some freedom." Such pains of confinement are compounded by the uncertainty about the duration of detention, which engenders considerable fear and anxiety. "I don't know how long I will be here. ... I have to live ... but I don't know what's happening with my immigration case," Uriel concluded plaintively (unknown nationality, IRC Brook House).

There is some variation in viewpoints. Detainees who have been in prison value their access to mobile phones, longer visits, and the internet. Yet, women and men are quick to note similarities between these kinds of establishments. "It's a cell not a room!" a Nigerian man in IRC Morton Hall stated unequivocally, "It's got bars on the windows, what room has that?" Many wonder why they are being treated like prisoners. "Why am I in prison when I haven't done anything wrong?" (Detainees, all centres).

Officers are more ambivalent. Though dressed in uniform and trained in techniques of "control and restraint" they are often unsure about the institution in which they work. While some believe they labour in a prison, others offer an alternative account. "It's like a boarding school," said Justine (Manager, IRC Colnbrook). "The way I sort of describe it," her colleague, Frank, reported, "is it's a cross between like a Prison Officer and a Social Worker. You know, I'm here to make sure everyone behaves and doesn't cause too much trouble, but at the same time, I'm here to listen to them and help 'em as much as I can" (Manager, Colnbrook).

In certain respects, the punitiveness of detention springs from its difference to prison. The lack of a defined period of confinement is often singled out in this regard. Neither staff nor detainees approve of the open-ended nature of detention. Often their critique rests on an explicit comparison with the prison. "We should hold them for six months, maximum," Solon, who worked in IRC Brook House, stated in a view widely held. "We don't hold prisoners, like this," Scot noted. "So we shouldn't hold detainees indefinitely" (DCO, Yarl's Wood).

The immigration and deportation systems are also distinct. Women and men find both difficult to endure. While some try to remain hopeful, many others are deeply cynical about the process. They may experience these contradictory emotions simultaneously. "My religion helps me cope with detention," Uriel asserted. "The officers help me to remain hopeful." Even the other detainees, he said, were of assistance. Yet, he could not make any progress in his immigration case. Under these circumstances he was "ready to go. But where?" (Uriel, unknown nationality, IRC Brook House).

Unlike prison, where release is usually welcome, the end of detention is often feared. "I'd rather die in detention than go back," Adah asserted tearfully (Nigeria, Yarl's Wood). For women like her, no matter how debilitating a period of confinement was, the alternatives looked worse; forcible return to poverty, violence, the denial of their hopes and aspirations. Those who had lived many years in the UK faced separation from their family and friends; some would not

³ Not his real name, all respondents have been given pseudonyms.

see their children grow up. While such matters await them, their effect shapes the period of detention. The problem, Mohy from Libya observed, is that “Nobody care about if you died here or have got any political problem. Don't care about anything, just send, send, send” (Libya, CH).

Given these accounts, some have argued that a “punitive” detention system might, in fact, be more just (Bosworth, 2011). If sites of detention fell under the criminal justice system, this line of reasoning attests, they would be governed by the same sets of expectations and legal protections. Currently, detainees are held under administrative rather than criminal powers, and as such are not afforded the equivalent due process rights as prisoners (Wilsher, 2012; 2010). Not only can they be held indefinitely in Britain, but they do not have the same rights of appeal as prisoners. There is significantly less judicial oversight of detention and its outcome. The decision to detain and to deport is made by a relatively junior civil servant and does not require any face-to-face interaction or court proceeding (HMIP and ICIBI, 2012).

In these ways and others, incarcerated migrants are far more vulnerable than prisoners who enjoy the rights and protections of the criminal law (Bosworth, 2011). Detainees are not entitled to legal aid. Finally, those who have already served a criminal sentence endure what might be considered “double-jeopardy” when they are detained again prior to their removal following the completion of their criminal sentence (Dow, 2007).

As staff appreciate, these aspects of immigration detention matter. “As far as prisoners, our main aim is to keep them in custody, you know, turn them out as law-abiding citizens. It’s about reducing re-offending and reducing risk. And that’s what it’s all about,” Julie asserted (Manager, IRC Morton Hall). This set of objectives was clear to her and something she could support. It was also clear to the prisoners. “At some point,” she continued, “they will accept the situation that they’re in, and that’s the big difference. That there will be an acceptance. ‘I’ve gone to court, I’ve been sentenced, I’ve done something wrong,’ whether or not they admit guilt or not.” In detention, however, detainees do not feel the same. “That’s the difference,” she said. “Their desperation ... you know, they’ve got no control” (Manager, IRC Morton Hall).

In comparing detention to the norms and expectations of the criminal justice system, its lack of proportionality becomes clear (Flynn, 2012). On what basis, after all, would detention for immigration matters be proportionate? What would the confinement be measured by?

A comparison with the penal state identifies the lack of just desserts in this form of confinement, while any view of it in relation to the flow of people around the world shatters any claims it might have to deterrence (Broders and Leerkes). Finally, in the British case at least, the inequities of its open-ended duration become clear (Costello, 2015).

In both their similarities and differences with prisons, immigration detention centres challenge fundamental assumptions about punishment, requiring us to think critically how coercive state power may reproduce penal techniques and logics within non-criminal justice settings. Despite failing to adhere to standard goals of punishment, immigration detention is experienced as punitive by those

who are confined, as well as by some of those who work in the system. Immigration detention—at least, its administrative forms—is not strictly punishment, but it is a type of penalty applied on the basis of identity to those without citizenship or legal status, the vast majority of whom are men of colour from the global south.

Border Criminologies and the Expanding Penal State

One of the more enduring impacts of building and running sites of administrative detention is that those within become tarnished by association. Why hold people in places that look like prisons unless they are, somehow, dangerous? This form of symbolic criminalisation is facilitated by long-standing forms of racialization. Simply put, most of those in detention in any system are from the global south. These are often the same populations whose descendants are over-represented in the criminal justice system or who are targeted in fears about Islam and terrorism.

IRCs are expensive. They are also inefficient. People will continue to come. The spaces within them are limited, and the numbers outside far greater. Yet, symbolically and politically, IRCs are arguably effective. Not only do they appear to show that the government is doing something, they also justify why this something must be done simply by the fact that they resemble prisons. Even though people struggle to articulate what they do or why their numbers are growing, in their resemblance to prisons and in their policy overlaps, detention centres are becoming increasingly entrenched and inevitable.

By investigating its sources of legitimacy (Bosworth, 2013), criminologists unveil detention's lack of humanity. Testimonies from those subject to immigration detention can shed light on the changing nature of penal power, while opening new lines of thought. They also reveal what is at stake. Notwithstanding their vulnerability, many detainees seek to resist; their accounts remind us that people even in the most abject of situations attempt to negotiate power relations. Detainees are in a particularly weak position because their very identities render them unable to make the claims they would assert. Their narratives demonstrate just how important identity is in a world of global mobility. Scholarship on surveillance and the new technologies of border control (Aas, 2007) have considered some aspects of this issue, but first-hand accounts from detainees can flesh out the burden of living without citizenship while appreciating how these individuals try to assert alternative, identity-based claims.

By working with detainees and staff, describing their days, listing their accounts, we do more than illuminate these hidden institutions. We also make them come alive. We need more empirical analysis of life in immigration detention if we are to understand how it is experienced and managed. Focusing on testimonies is one way to humanise those behind bars and ask difficult questions about detention.

One of the most unsettling aspects of research in this field is the unwieldy nature of the problem. It exists at more than one site—both inherent in the institutions, and reflecting entrenched global inequalities. It is difficult to see how matters can improve in one site without the resolution of severe problems in sending countries. Similarly, in the European sphere of influence, both sending and

receiving states reflect, contribute, and are restrained by EU law and policy, and by the broader economic crisis.

While it is tempting to respond to these challenges by giving up, we should instead endeavour to view them as multiple sites for action and understanding. Academic research alone cannot solve the kinds of problems that have led to the emergence of entrenched immigration detention regimes, particularly as the global inequalities underpinning border control are manifold and intimately tied to issues of race. But by humanizing those confined within detention systems, and in particular by working with staff and detainees, we can at least open these hidden sites to public gaze. In so doing, we remind ourselves always of our shared endeavour and intertwined responsibilities. These people have the right to live safely somewhere. If not here, then where?

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Global Detention Project
3 rue de Varembé
1202 Geneva, Switzerland
globaldetentionproject.org
+41 (0) 22 733 08 97
admin@globaldetentionproject.org