



Locked Down, Locked Out: Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better

Maya Schenwar

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In *Locked Down, Locked Out*, award-winning journalist Maya Schenwar looks at how prison tears families and communities apart, creating a rippling effect that touches every corner of our society. Through the stories of prisoners and their families, as well as her own family's experience of her sister's incarceration, Schenwar shows how the institution that locks up 2.3 million Americans and decimates poor communities of color is shredding the ties that, if nurtured, could foster real collective safety. The destruction does not end upon exiting the prison walls: the 95 percent of prisoners who are released emerge with even fewer economic opportunities and fewer human connections on the outside than before. *Locked Down, Locked Out* shows how incarceration takes away the very things that might enable people to build better lives. Looking toward a future beyond imprisonment, Schenwar profiles community-based initiatives that foster antiracist, anticlassist, prohumanity approaches to justice. These programs successfully deal with problems both individual harm and larger social wrongs through connection rather than isolation, moving toward a safer future for all of us."

"This book has the power to transform hearts and minds, opening us to new ways of imagining what justice can mean for individuals, families, communities, and our nation as a whole. I turned the last page feeling nothing less than inspired."

—Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow*

"Maya Schenwar's stories about prisoners, their families (including her own), and the thoroughly broken punishment system are rescued from any pessimism such narratives might inspire by the author's brilliant juxtaposition of abolitionist imaginaries and radical political practices."

—Angela Davis, author of *Are Prisons Obsolete?*

"A tour de force! Schenwar has written a must-read, damning account of the twisted philosophy and practice of incarceration...Until society changes its approach toward its 'offenders,' until we leaven punishment with forgiveness, reconciliation, and restorative justice, we are all guilty as charged."

—Dennis J. Kucinich, US Congressman (1997–2013) and presidential candidate

Locked Down, Locked Out: Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better Details

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Lauren says

Confession: often, when I read general non-fiction, I put the book down somewhere in the middle and never pick it back up. That didn't happen for Locked Down, Locked Out. in fact, I found myself carrying it around the house and reading "just one more page." It was well-written, personal, both well-researched and anecdotal, persuasive and often heartbreakingly true.

Rumeur says

I'm probably the "minority" on how I feel about this book. The author has many facts & sources for these facts, along with statistics but I'm just a reader with my own feelings on this topic. Who do I feel the worst for? The families!! Most definitely not the prisoner

One of the first facts thrown out in the book is that USA has the highest amount of people incarcerated. I'm sure we are!! These criminals should actually feel somewhat relieved they live in USA & committed their crimes here rather than in other countries. Other countries don't deal with criminals like we do. If you're caught stealing --you could lose your hand, arm or more!! Is that what the author would think is better? Other crimes the criminal will be executed as soon as caught--is that what the author thinks is better??

Here in USA we have so much crime because the criminals know the justice system inside and out. They know they'll get 3 meals/day (might be awful but it's better than starving) they also have a roof over their head they're not paying for & a bed to sleep in at night. They have privileges in some jails that make me sometimes feel like committing a crime. When an inmate can get gender reassignment surgery while carrying a life sentence--I'm ready to commit & maybe I can get that tummy tuck I'd like

The next part I'm a bit more sympathetic about but again, more for the family than the criminal. Visitation---the family's sometimes travel many miles , are treated like prisoners with pat downs, long lines, getting yelled at for violating a rule etc. I'm sure all the prisoner themselves can think about is ...themselves. Hey, I'm getting visitors!! I doubt they think much about the process & long drives their loved ones must go through just to see their criminal family member

Of course you can't write a book like this without involving race. The facts about race, or people of color other than white, are higher. Why is this? Ok facts say they're poorer & less educated. Ok but why? They have access to public schools just like the rest of us. I've read many memoirs about people of color who were brought up in poverty and managed to graduate from an Ivy League college!! Why aren't these facts put in this book? They might not be as numerous & also that would mean this type book couldn't use the race "fact". I really do get tired of the old "race card". We are all humans & if in USA , you should be going to public school at very minimum & either from school, family & other sources, we all know in our hearts right from wrong (unless we are talking about mentally challenged, that's different). Why do I,lily white from birth, middle class income family, know not to commit a criminal act? Maybe because I have respect for both myself & other people living in this world. My conscience would kill me before jail time would! Don't forget I'm in need of a tummy tuck & after reading this book, I'm still NOT considering becoming a criminal

This book bleeds pro-crime & how to make jail time better. Why? I keep asking myself this over & over!!

Ask 50% of those incarcerated now, if they'd rather serve the penalty for their crime in a different country? I know what the answer would be I think everybody knows what their answer would be too. Why are our jails filled to capacity? Why is there over crowding? It's because we treat our criminals too good!! Ok I know having a bologna sandwich isn't everyone's ideal lunch meal but it's food & they're not paying for it or making it so what's the complaint?! Should we start serving gourmet meals? Talk about prison over crowding. They complain they were sent to a facility too far that their family can't visit them Well some of those people are incarcerated for murder---what about their families? They'll never see the victim again If they're not in because of murder but still don't see their family whose fault is it really?? They're the one who committed the crime. Why should their family feel like prisoners. When they get released, they can quick visit their family before committing their next crime that gets them incarcerated again. Also if they did their crime in other countries --you think anyone would care about family visits ?? They might be so busy working in a hard labor camp that they're just happy to be finished for the day & happy if they even got to eat a bologna sandwich

I could keep going on but even with what I wrote now I'll have people wanting to find my home to burn it down but I can't sit back & read a book like this & NOT express my feelings. I'm in USA & I have the freedom of speech especially since I haven't committed any crimes. Our jails are becoming more & more like country clubs Not all, but some & I think they should be happy they have a place to live. The book will tell you otherwise & all the wrongness in our jails & prisons & that we are just hiding our "bad eggs" as the book called them

For those with mental disabilities, I don't agree with my own thoughts about the criminals in jails. I know many State Hospitals closed & now these people who had been taken care of all their lives have no idea how to live on their own in the outside world & this then leads them to being placed in jails with criminals. This is not a fair & just system for these individuals & I don't have answers for what or where to place them. I'd say reopen some State Hospitals but allow them more freedoms & try to teach those who might be able to learn, how to do basic life skills so they could possibly live their lives in homes overseen by medical personnel & government agencies. Check in on them to make sure they're doing their best & not starving because they don't know how to make an egg or a sandwich

This type book I believe the reactions will either be with the author, or like myself , not exactly with. There are some things I agree with when reading but most is just fuel

I won this book in Goodreads giveaway in return for honest review. Many thanks to publisher & author & I guess I best fireproof my home now

Alan Mills says

Wow! Read this one.

Maya tells a very personal, powerful story by mixing first person narrative (Maya's sister has been in and out of jails and prisons for years), narratives taken from letters written by prisoners themselves, and facts and figures from academic research. Maya's well honed writing skills (her day job is Editor of Truthout) meld these disparate sources into a remarkably readable, and thought provoking, book.

If you are new to the issue of prison reform, Maya's book provides an excellent starting place. By filtering the stories she tells through her own personal experiences, she provides a "way in" to the prison system for

those unfamiliar with that world. For those who have been in the struggle for years, the book is energizing, shedding new light on old problems in a manner that is both accessible and enraging.

But (and this is a minor "but" amongst many superlatives), the book's strength is also its weakness. Because so much of the narrative is filtered through Maya's personal lens, the reality of life behind bars is softened. There is a reference by Johnnie Walton to men at Tamms supermax cutting themselves, but the issue it is then dropped without exploring what this means, why they do it, how widespread it is, and what this says about supermax prisons. There are hints of untreated serious mental illness scattered through the book, but there are no details, and it appears Maya did not become close with any prisoner suffering from a serious mental illness (other than drug addiction--which is its own kind of hell). There is a suggestion that prison damages those we incarcerate, but the depth of the damage done, and the implications of that damage to society, are not explored. I eagerly await a book where the reader is taken into the "Belly of the Beast," as Jack Abbott so wonderfully phrased it.

This is not that book.

But it is a damn good start. Buy it. Read it. Share it. Send one to a prisoner.

Darcia Helle says

Maya Schenwar has written a compelling book that really needs to be read by everyone in the U.S. Our "justice" system has become a for-profit venue for retribution and revenge. There is little rehabilitation or actual justice. By locking millions of people in cages for an ever-growing variety of "crimes", we have effectively created a revolving door prison culture.

This book takes us inside and beyond those prison walls. Schenwar's writing style is conversational, making it an ideal read for people from any educational background. She takes us on a journey, using real and sometimes personal cases to spotlight the cracks, fissures, and major breaks in our prison system.

Even if you believe - or maybe especially if you believe - that at least most people in prison deserve to be there, you need to read this book. Schenwar points out how the prison culture destroys the inmates' humanity, how merely surviving inside those walls requires a shutdown of the very qualities we should be nurturing. The type of change we are cultivating inside prisons is not what we want to set loose on society when these inmates are released.

While the first half of this book focuses on the problems of prison, the second half is all about ways to fix the breaks. These are not idealistic, far-fetched dreams, but actual programs that work and should absolutely be implemented everywhere.

Not everyone in prison is a cold-blooded killer. In fact, most are not. Yet we treat them all equally, like rabid animals in a war zone. Isn't it time we regained our humanity?

Joy Messinger says

The day I started reading this book, I was listening to an interview with Roxane Gay on Phoebe Robinson's *Sooooooo Many White Guys* podcast. Roxane was talking about how women & non-binary folks' writing is often framed as memoir & personal narrative, whereas male writers are tackling subjects without making it about themselves (even if it is). I thought about this frequently as I was reading *Locked Down Locked Out*, a deeply personal & deeply political book by Maya Schenwar on the need for decarceration & prison abolition. With the stories of her & others' family experiences with incarceration woven through a call to take whatever steps we can toward breaking down the prison industrial complex, Maya writes her values of connection, self-determination, & vulnerability, simultaneously showing how incarceration impacts people in both individual & systemic ways. *Locked Down Locked Out* is packed full of facts & information but doesn't collapse under its own weight; I left it feeling moved & inspired toward action, for sure, but without the dense jumble of too much information all at once. I'd recommend this book to those new to abolition work, as well as those interested in deepening their knowledge. Thank you, Maya, for sharing the stories of your family & many others so that those of us in the free world can continue to learn.

Julia says

Such an insightful, well-written, engaging, and personal account of the stories of prisoners and their families, her own sister's incarceration, and the broken punitive system that we live in. Maya Schenwar leaves you feeling angry, hopeful, and ready for restorative/transformative change. This is an important book, something that everyone should read.

Charlotte Ashlock says

I know many people who are skeptical of prison reform, specifically the idea that there can be alternatives for dealing with people who commit particularly "evil" crimes. I feel like this book is one which will open skeptical minds and get them thinking. The skeptics will not be able to just dismiss this book as bleeding-heart liberalism... because it's a book that refuses to dodge the tough questions.

What do I mean by this? Well, the opening scene of the introduction describes the author's mixed feelings when her heroin-addicted sister ends up in jail, (again). The author writes, "Later, when I pick up the phone and hear a robotic voice announce, 'You have a collect call from the Cook County Jail: press five to take the call,' I press the hang-up button and get back into bed."

As a whole, the book makes the argument that connection to friends, family, and community outside of prison is what rehabilitates people (and therefore the prison-industrial complex hobbles rehabilitation by making this connection difficult.) And yet the author opens the book with a scene where the task of connecting with her newly incarcerated sister, was something that was just too much to handle in that particular moment. What this honesty means to me, is the author is not white-washing the difficulty of pursuing the alternative solutions. The alternative solutions are hard.

But the status quo is one of tremendous cruelty, that doesn't even make us safer. The author shares compelling evidence that prison makes prisoners MORE likely, not less likely, to commit another crime. We're paying huge amounts of taxpayer dollars for a service that makes us LESS SAFE! That is just insane.

What would be the easiest way to get safer? A disproportionate number of people in prison come from backgrounds of poverty, racism, and abuse- so fighting those problems, and helping people have better childhoods, might be the best investment in our safety we could make.

The entire second half of the book is about alternative solutions- not utopian ones the author has imagined, but ones that have actually been road-tested by a variety of nonprofit organizations. My favorite part of the book was reading about a Peace Room in an inner city high school. The Peace Room was always staffed by youth workers and whenever anyone started to have a fight or an argument that escalated, they would either get sent to the Peace Room, or their concerned friends would drag them there.

The author shared a transcript of a conversation that took place in the Peace Room that made me feel very emotional because it reminded me of my time in youth counseling, both the humor and the difficulty of it. A teenager threw a carton of milk at another teenager, who took that as an insult to his honor and responded by menacingly stalking the milk-thrower. The adult counselors worked with both teenagers to help them understand the other's point of view (e.g. having milk thrown at you is super annoying, stalking is over-reacting.) If the milk-throwing incident had been allowed to escalate into violence it could have led to detention, suspension, which in turn leads to juvvie, which in turn leads to jail... the counselors were intervening before the whole vicious cycle could start, which was amazing. However, you could also tell it was extremely hard work. Getting the angry teenagers to understand their "enemy" was incredibly hard work.

"Hurt people hurt people," was one of the messages of the book, and I think that's incredibly true. Prison is where we stash people who's hurt is so bad, we just can't deal with it. It would be more courageous to turn to those people and try and heal their pain and straighten them out. Instead we put them in prison, where we can ignore them and not think about it. But it bites us on the butt when they come out of prison and re-offend.

This book makes me tremendously grateful for all the healers in the world who have the courage to face the pain of others (and the pain that resentful, hurting people inflict on would-be healers.) It also makes me reflect on the times in my life I have turned away from someone else's pain because it was just too much for me to handle. In the end, if helping someone else is hurting YOU, maybe it's not the wisest idea. But surely all of us could stand to give a little more than we currently do, to cure the ills of the world. Maybe if we did, there would be fewer people in jail.

Fate's Lady says

Prison is a relatively new institution in our society, and an aggressively harmful one. This covers some of that harm and how and why it works the way it does, and also addresses the prison abolition movement and restorative justice and other prison alternatives. Very well done.

Lauren says

I should have read this way sooner. Extremely grateful to Maya Schenwar for weaving an abolitionist framework throughout this book. She highlights some very exciting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment while also providing necessary critique of commonly-accepted "reforms." For example, she pays attention to the impacts of home detention and questions whether reforms such as these are really

challenging the system or if they're just expanding the reach of the carceral state. Maya reminds us that we must keep questioning morality politics and how we've come to define things as "criminal" while other harms (e.g. financial crimes and government negligence) remain unobserved. Throughout her book, we hear the collateral consequences of mass incarceration and a prison industrial complex that continues to militarize and monetize surveillance against poor and communities of color. Alternatives like restorative and transformative justice and critiques such as these need to continue to be elevated in the media and public discourses.

Sara says

The first half of the book is a thoughtful discussion of how prisons impact prisoners, their families, and communities. The book demonstrates many ways that prisons don't serve useful social functions, but instead cause harm and exacerbate social problems.

The second half talks about new ways of thinking about and addressing conflicts and harm that don't rely on criminalization. There is a lot of in-depth and amazing work being done and these chapters take what could be written of as pie-in-the-sky ideas and ground them in the ongoing work of organizations and individuals working towards both decarceration as well as alternative practices of restorative and transformative justice.

Its a great overview and also provides suggestions for additional resources so you learn more!

Joliene Mahan says

Maya Schenwar is a brilliant story-teller. This vulnerable work captures heart-breaking and hopeful moments of her own family's struggle to support a family member through the violence of incarceration and contains deep emotional insight into the psychological effects of confinement on incarcerated people and the people who love them. It is a moving and compelling piece for prison abolition and the need for building alternatives that foster connection and healing instead of isolation.

Alissa says

This book is fascinating. It delves into the effects of the US prison system on the inmate population at large while simultaneously providing a riveting account of the author's relationship with her sister and her sister's experience in a variety of prisons - not to mention the author's various "pen pals". I

The current prison system is clearly broken and Schenwar's potential solutions are spot on. A must-read for any U.S. citizen.

Lisa says

The first half of this book discusses how the (American) prison system sabotages all the factors known to reduce recidivism rates among ex-inmates: family connections, interpersonal relationships, community

engagement, education, and employment.

The author, Maya Schenwar, illustrates with examples from her own family's experience. Her sister was incarcerated multiple times and gave birth in prison. Schenwar explains that inmates are warehoused far from home, sometimes even out of state, making family visits prohibitively expensive or impossible for working-class and poor families, which is the majority of the affected families. If family makes it to the visitor center, long lines and short hours mean some won't get in. Phone call rates are extortionate; calls are monitored and interrupted; call privileges are subject to the whims of wardens and corrections officers. Mail, also monitored and censored, routinely goes "missing." Books are heavily sanctioned and may be taken from inmates for minor infractions. And once released from prison, a person's job prospects are dismal because their skills (if any) are out of date and few employers will accept an ex-con. Thus rather than rehabilitating, the system ensures that people leave prison worse off than they entered it, and therefore more likely to re-offend or fall afoul of parole restrictions.

Meanwhile, structural conditions that predispose people toward crime, such as racism and poverty, are fortified when the prison/legal system "disappears" millions of marginalized people for years or even lifetimes. Though the author is white, she is cognizant of that privilege and readily acknowledges how much worse the odds are for minorities of all kinds. She frequently turns over the bullhorn so those minorities can speak for themselves.

Schenwar doesn't ignore the abuses that inmates suffer from guards and other inmates, but she doesn't spend much time on it, either. This makes the book less upsetting than others in the genre.

The second half of the book focuses on decarceration, what we as individuals can do to dismantle the prison system. She encourages pen-pal programs and activism opportunities, but she also asks us to reconsider our understanding of crime (versus harm, for example) and whether we really need to bring police into situations. She also spends a fair amount of time on models of community-based justice (or transformative justice), with concrete examples of how schools and communities can address harmful behavior and remedy the underlying causes of violence without throwing people away.

This is a practical, personable book that is easy to read. A list of resources gives readers ideas for immediate action, and extensive bibliographic notes pave the way for further research.

Pamster says

Awesome, like a prison studies primer. If your shelf is full of weighty, statistics-heavy prison studies resources that you feel like you'll never get to, this is a totally accessible way in. It goes over a lot of aspects of PIC, and there is also a family memoir element, explaining the author's personal investment in this area of activism. Loved it.

Dennis Fischman says

Reading this book, I realize how much I have to learn, even after decades of trying to understand power and oppression in the United States. When it comes to incarceration, my first reactions are liberal, which I define as wanting to make things better without doing the work to make things right. I read the first half of the book

and felt proud of myself for getting a better understanding of the many ways people in prison and their families suffer. Then I hit the suggestions for change in the second half of the book, and to my surprise, I struggled with them.

Maya Schenwar makes a strong case that prisons do nobody any good. She shows how incarceration allows the rest of us to put the problems of poverty, domestic violence, unemployment, lack of education, mental illness, discrimination, housing that's not fit for human habitation--and so many others that contribute to people committing crimes--out of sight and out of mind.

I had to agree, and yet I kept wondering about the small group of people that would continue to victimize other people regardless. I don't want to be a victim of crime, and I don't want my wife to be a victim. That's natural, I think. But what is it in me that defaults to that line of thinking and doesn't let me keep my thoughts on the people who are victims of the criminal justice system? There are so many, and they are in pain every day...and a whole lot of them were victims first. "Hurt people hurt people."

The most important lesson I learned from this book is to ask not who committed a crime, but who harmed another human being. *Crime* has been and is continually defined in a way that allows the state to "discipline and punish" (borrowing from Michel Foucault here). Thinking about *harm* allows us to think about undoing the harm and restoring peace and justice between people (or creating it where it didn't previously exist).

I will be thinking about this book for a long time.
