

INTRODUCTION

FROM THE BEGINNING, THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IN the United States has been focused on reform. From the Quaker initiative to turn the criminal poor into the working poor that resulted in the construction of penitentiaries in the 19th century to the impulse to make gentlemen out of convicted criminals that resulted in the parole system in the early 20th century, each reform was designed to protect property, increase the stability of civil society, and manifest the ostensible responsibility of every sovereign nation: to keep those who were recognized as citizens safe from harm. Each major reform has compounded the problem of crime, reinforced a race-based class system, and deepened the nation's reliance on punishment.

Parallel to this history of penal reform, there is another history. It is a history that is largely unrecorded, a history of people—prisoners, advocates, policymakers, judges—who really wanted to “solve the problem” that crime presents. These people initiated programs that actually reduced crime and recidivism and decreased the numbers of men and women who sit idle, as do more than 90 percent of the women and men in the jails and prisons of this country. Largely, these impulses caused great social upheaval during their implementation. The chaos caused by this social change is reported, but the successes—the valuable lessons gleaned from the attempt to actually reform or abolish the system—are buried. This book is the story of such an attempt at prison reform, an attempt that reduced the prison population in the state of Massachusetts by 15 percent and the recidivism rate from over 60 percent to 23 percent during the course of the 18 short months that are critical to this story, from January of 1972 to July of 1973.

THIS IS ANOTHER BOOK ABOUT PRISONS, CRIME, PUNISHMENT, AND SOLUTIONS.

I could begin by telling you about the more than 2 million people who are held captive in US prisons. And that more than 1 million of these people are young Black men. And that at least two-thirds of the 2 million have been in prison before or will be in prison again. I could also tell you that a scandalous percentage of prisoners are

prescribed psychotropic medication, not necessarily because they are mentally ill but because it makes them easier to control. I could explain that half a million of these individuals return to their communities each year with the intent of starting their lives over—homeless, jobless, and impoverished. And that more than 24,000 men and women will be imprisoned for their entire lives.

But this is not that kind of book. This book is a story told in many voices. It is a story about people—prisoners, their families, their allies, prison administrators, legislators, and advocates—who surveyed the political landscape in the fall of 1971 and, witnessing both society's angry rejection of penal welfare policies and the horror of the prison yard in the aftermath of Attica, decided that radical reform was the only way out. Rather than increase the size of the prison system, they decided to depopulate the large prisons, develop a community corrections model, and create a way for prisoners to participate in the public debate on crime and its solutions. And, to a certain extent, that's exactly what they did. They were right to have done so then. And they would be right to do so today.

This book is the result of a 30-year conversation among people who dare to believe that 2 million people need not be imprisoned to make the rest of us safe. In fact, they would point out, because there are 2 million people in prison, the rest of us are much less safe. The people of this story are manufacturers, educators, students, lawyers, clergy, and workers. A few are prison guards and prison administrators. Some are politicians. Many are prisoners. All are pragmatists. They challenge our ideas about security and dare us to examine and confront the problems that prisons create for society. They also tell us how we may construct solutions to these problems.

Prisoners, their families, and those from the communities where crime most often occurs know that one deep root of crime is the prison itself. If we are to cut out this root, prisons must ultimately be closed. Indeed, prisoners have shown us that they know what all the roots of crime are. Those who are in prison, the guilty and the innocent, know why they are there, and they know what needs to change to make their communities safe and allow them to build balanced lives.

All along, many of the men and women most directly affected by the prison system have, through their actions and through their very existence, challenged the racial and class structure of a society that was founded on the punishment and captivity of the poor and powerless. With scant support and fewer resources, from behind prison walls and within their communities, prisoners and ex-prisoners have created programs to reduce crime. They have mentored youth who appear to be walking a path directly to the prisons, sponsored furlough programs allowing prisoners to maintain their connections to society, developed job-training programs that are linked to employment after release, and set up halfway houses where formerly incarcerated people can teach those who are coming out the skills they need to rejoin their families and communities. Many of these programs work. They contribute to creating healthy and safe communities. While corrections departments largely continue to warehouse

prisoners in institutions devoid of opportunities for growth and change, they prove that current penal practices are dangerous and offer few solutions for the men and women in their custody.

THIS IS A STORY OF PRISON ABOLITION.

First and foremost, this is a story about a group of men who led an entire maximum-security prison. These men, these leaders, refused to see themselves as prisoners. Instead, they became primary actors determining the shape of their lives. These men and their allies knew they could present a vital solution to the problem of crime and punishment. This is also a story about a Republican governor, Francis Sargent, who believed that the prisons under his jurisdiction were a moral embarrassment; about public officials who took upon themselves the mandate to close these prisons and replace them with a statewide network of community-based corrections; about legislators who passed laws to create the framework for these changes; and about a commissioner of corrections, John O. Boone, who was committed to closing prisons. It is also about guards who saw prison reform as a threat to their livelihood and their culture.

In 1955, after a brutal standoff in the state's maximum-security prison in Charlestown, public discussions about prison reform took place. A commission was convened, the commission issued a groundbreaking report, and a new law was proposed. And, over the following 16 years, prisoners were once again forgotten. Resources were never assigned to support the proposed prison reform and regulations were never adopted to facilitate the implementation of the law.

Then, in early 1971, the public struggle for human dignity for prisoners in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts began in earnest. Through a concerted effort on the part of prisoners, their families, clergy, liberals, and labor, the untenable conditions in the Departmental Segregation Unit at Bridgewater State Hospital were exposed. Prisoners there were held in filthy isolation cells and denied clothing and sanitary food. Ultimately, prisoners and advocates forced the state to close this unit and put in place a far-reaching correctional-reform program. This is our story.

The prisoners confined at Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Walpole (MCI Walpole) formed a chapter of the National Prisoners Reform Association, or NPRA, which had begun at the Adult Correctional Institution in Cranston, Rhode Island. The NPRA defined prisoners as workers. Using a labor-organizing model, the NPRA intended to form chapters in prisons throughout the country. The goal of the association was to organize prisoners into labor unions or collective-bargaining units. Prisoners' unions could then act as a counterbalance to the notoriously powerful guards' unions in negotiations with prison authorities about how the prisons were run. Prisoners throughout the country began to look at prisoners' unions as a catalyst for prison reform. But only at MCI Walpole did the NPRA become a recognized bargaining unit, democratically elected by the prisoners—the workers—to lead their struggle for reform within the prison.

The NPRA at Walpole remained the recognized representative of the prisoners for two years, and sought State Labor Relations Commission certification along the way. Even after its petition for recognition as a labor union was denied, the NPRA continued to exercise its power as the prisoners' elected representative for an additional two years. During its tenure, prisoners not only conducted arbitration with Department of Correction administrators, but also actually ran the prison for a period of almost three months while the guards staged a work stoppage—moving freely throughout the prison, establishing programs, and democratically determining policy and the structure of their day-to-day lives. They engaged the media and the public in a conversation about crime and how to stop it, what conditions were like within the prison, what needed to be done to keep released prisoners from returning, and ultimately, what needed to be done to close prisons.

The NPRA argued that prisoners were entitled to every constitutional right exercised by the outside population except the liberty to leave the confines of the institution. Prisoners, as human beings, had the same needs as people who were not in prison, and these needs are fundamental requirements not to be denied. Since prisons are governmental institutions, the NPRA held that the public has the right of access to them and to information about them. Maintaining that prisoners do not suffer “civil death” upon incarceration was radical then. It remains so. The Massachusetts prisoners took this argument further and challenged both their chattel status and the loss of their freedom—they demanded fair wages and the right to vote in all elections, run for public office, exercise freedom of speech, and participate in the development of public policy.

The voice of the prisoners was pragmatic, strong, and unrepentant. Their vision was positive, creative, and hopeful. More than 1,300 hundred men and women responded to this voice and came to volunteer day and night inside the maximum-security prison, acting as civilian observers at a time when that prison had the highest murder rate in the country. Together, prisoners and civilian observers dropped the murder rate to zero. Together, they learned that when a prison becomes a tool for self-development, it becomes a smaller prison—and that perhaps it could become so small that it would no longer be a prison. It is these voices, the voices of the prisoners who believed that they could change the prison and seized the moment, that form the conversation that underpins this book.

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT PEOPLE WHO CHOSE TO ACT.

Ralph Hamm was barely 20 years old when our story began. He graduated from the US Army Leadership Preparation Course in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in 1968, and had been scheduled to be shipped to Vietnam two days after “his” crime occurred. He had been in prison since he was 17. After being convicted—at a jury-less trial—for a brutal assault on a white couple, this young Black man was sentenced to two concurrent life sentences with an additional 40 years after the completion of the life

sentences. While maintaining his innocence, he used his agile intellect and honed his anger to fend off attacks from guards and prisoners alike.

Robert Dellelo was a larger-than-life character. The unacknowledged son of a mafia figure, Bobby had grown up in the state's notorious Department of Youth Services. He knew how to survive and he knew how to escape. More than any other convict in our story, he understood the relationship between power and leadership. He was a shrewd politician who was able to negotiate the complex alliances within Walpole. And when this failed, he was tough. He would fight and he would win.

The Reverend Edward Rodman organized a sit-in at his high school in 1968, at the age of 16. Two years later, Rodman was an unpaid field secretary for the Congress of Racial Equality in Virginia. Later, in college, he was one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He became an Episcopal priest and a professor at Yale University. While in New Haven, he coordinated community support for Bobby Scale throughout his trial. He came to Boston a committed prison abolitionist dedicated to eradicating slavery in all its forms. He taught prisoners and allies crucial skills for engaging in this struggle.

Phyllis Ryan was in her 50s, a veteran of the labor and civil rights movements. Ryan came to the movement with a fully developed organizing strategy, which she taught while she implemented it. She and her husband, William Ryan (author of the seminal book *Blaming the Victim*), were the bedrock of the outside support for the prisoners. Undaunted by the progression of her multiple sclerosis, Ryan used her razor-sharp intellect to motivate the press and hold politicians accountable.

Governor Francis Sargent was serving his first term in office. He was a career civil servant. Scandalized by both juvenile and adult penal confinement, he committed himself to reforming the penal system in Massachusetts. He used public outcry about the conditions at the Bridgewater State Prison and the slaughter at Attica to garner support for implementing a plan that he had already conceived.

John O. Boone was appointed by Sargent as commissioner of corrections in Massachusetts. He was a career prison administrator. He broke the color barrier in the federal Bureau of Prisons as the first Black caseworker, director of parole, and superintendent of a federal penitentiary. He was the first Black man to head the Department of Correction in Massachusetts.

Peter Goldmark was 30 years old when Sargent named him the executive secretary of Health and Human Services. He had worked as a city planner under Mayor John Lindsay in New York. Goldmark made successful de-institutionalization of human services the focal point of his office.

James Isenberg was 26 years old and a recent graduate of the University of California at Berkeley's School of Criminal Justice when Goldmark tapped him to oversee