

Book Review: Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform by John F. Pfaff

Michelle Iglesias

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr>

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Iglesias, Michelle () "Book Review: Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform by John F. Pfaff," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 93 : Iss. 2 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol93/iss2/17>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

Pfaff, John F. *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform*. New York: Basic Books, 2017. viii + 311 pages. Hardcover, \$27.99.

John F. Pfaff's new book, *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform* (2017), proffers an understanding of why the ruling narrative on mass incarceration reform breaks down under scrutiny before offering theoretical solutions for research on and advocacy for reform options. Relying on an analysis of multiple sources of secondary data, and on his experience as a criminal law professor and researcher, Pfaff outlines three major points of what he has coined the "standard story" of the historical and current reform efforts. From there he provides an analysis of why these major arcs are failing to make greater strides to reduce incarceration statistics in the current reform movement.

In distilling the plot lines of the "standard story," Pfaff looks at the rhetoric of the war on drugs, disparities in prison sentencing and maximum sentencing guidelines, and the debates assigning blame to private prisons for increased incarceration numbers. With a heavy use of statistics from sources such as the National Research Council, the Bureau of Justice, and a plethora of academic sources that precede his, Pfaff argues that the "standard story" misses swaths of nuances that are contributing more to incarceration statistics than could be solved by decriminalizing drugs, reducing sentencing maximums, and abolishing private prisons. His interpretation of the available data shows that reform efforts based on this traditional reform narrative have not and will not provide large reductions in incarceration rates. He also does a good job of laying out the ways in which many nuances and elements contribute to the rate of incarceration, which are ignored in this "standard story."

His dissections of these major points provide the basis for his argument that true reform will require studying and better understanding incarceration admissions and prosecutorial conduct. Reform movements historically focusing on length of prison stay and sentencing guidelines have not impacted incarceration levels as had been anticipated. Pfaff notes that a shift in focus from the power of policy making to the acts carried forth from such policies may be key in understanding incarceration rates. After all, it is the implementation of legislation at local, state, and federal levels that truly impact these statistics. Most interestingly, Pfaff makes a case for the error in looking at the "prison industrial complex" as a singular system that should, or even can, be overhauled as a solution for prison growth. It is not a singular system that contribute to prison growth but rather a conglomeration of smaller institutions that act as an ecosystem which feed off of, and are influenced by, one another. National legislation, state legal precedence, and county involvement of legal players, ranging from law enforcement to attorneys to judges, all contribute to those factors that have created a prison industrial complex. He asserts that it is not the complex that has created prison growth, but rather the complex was formed as a result of prison growth.

Reiterating that reform efforts focused on decriminalizing or legalizing drugs are often coupled with tougher guidelines and approaches to violent crimes, Pfaff contends that a review of prosecutorial power and behavior is needed because that is the main player deciding how laws are carried out. Do prosecutors have a political incentive? Do they focus more directly on cases that can be cleared or more easily proven rather than those crimes that are truly of concern to the communities in which they take place? He claims that there is so little research, data, and focus on the actions of prosecutors that reformers will truly need to focus here in order to find sustainable answers to the causes of prison growth. Much like their impact on crime incidents, Pfaff outlines how the economy, shifts in political objectives, and community image play roles in prosecutors' decisions.

These impactful components are often fueled by fear, according to Pfaff. Communities fear a rise in crime as seen in the 1980s and 1990s, which resulted in "tough on crime" rhetoric. Communities also fear reform efforts that may result in an increase in crime. Pfaff points out that reform efforts thus far have not resulted in a significant increase in crime, and he concurrently suggests that there is a threshold of crime that communities already tolerate in exchange for greater advances in education, economic opportunities, and community stability, for the greater good. This is not a zero sum game on crime and punishment. In fact, Pfaff notes that the system of punishment in the United States is a broken one in which punitive measures do little to assure communities' safety and do nothing to restore an offender to the community. Parole, usually used to reduce over-crowded prisons rather than a measure of an offender's restoration, are furthering systems that create stressors which may lead to greater recidivism (e.g., barriers to housing, inhibitors to food and benefit assistance, denial of student loan options, and inability to gain employment). The ways in which the current system punishes and releases offenders do little to provide the community with ways to address the causes that lead to offenses in the first place.

Pfaff finally suggests that, in addition to looking at prosecutorial conduct, admission rates and reasons, and the ways in which the punitive structure of the prison system is failing, reformers should focus on the ways in which the system addresses (or fails to address) violent crime. It is not the low-level offender that crowds prisons, receives astronomical prison sentences, or is at the greatest risk for recidivism, but rather it is those violent offenses that are the target of tougher crime laws and fear-based and political incentives to incarcerate larger numbers of people for longer terms as a way to soothe community worry. Pfaff ultimately uses this platform to ask researchers and advocates to look more closely at the front-end causation of crime incidents rather than back-end solutions for what to do with those people in the prison industrial complex once they have already arrived. Pfaff provides an in-depth jumping off point for future research and larger discourse on this complex and multi-layered issue that affects the majority of the United States. He admits there is likely no single solution or approach that will adequately course-correct the alarming path we are presently on but invites

people to the table to discuss and deepen our understanding and advocacy efforts to reach true reform.

Michelle Iglesias, MSW
Austin, Texas