Life Beside Bars*:ك*Confinement and Capital in an American Prison Town
Heath Pearson
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In *Life Beside Bars* (2024), Georgetown University Assistant Professor Heath Pearson explores a southern New Jersey community from two differing perspectives during the mid-to-late 2010s. Pearson's archival examination of Cumberland County explores a history of Lenape genocide in the seventeenth century (first European settlement by 1675), chattel slavery (into the 1830s), and Japanese American labor camps (in the 1940s), as well as the emergence of prisons (since the 1980s). Currently, the three state prisons (Bayside State Prison, Southern State Correctional Facility, and South Woods Prison), one federal prison (FCI Fairton), and Cumberland County Jail house some 6,500 residents, and from this perspective racialized punishment is depicted as a 350-year continuation of punitive control. An alternative perspective is the emergent interdependent community within a twenty-mile radius that Pearson constructs through ethnographic vignettes. This community, cultivated from the 150,000 residents, resists the hyperconfinement of the area and provides an alternative path for not only rehabilitating carceral residents but reforming a punitive society. Pearson's Appendix II provides demographic details of twenty-six people discussed throughout the ethnographic vignettes.

There is something for everyone in *Life Beside Bars*. For those uninitiated in the field of criminal justice, Pearson's ethnographic account tethers the economy, politics, and education to a punitive carceral system emphasizing historic and systemic discrimination faced by racial and ethnic minorities. A superficial call for "law and order" channels enforcement on those who are already oppressed living in an underresourced and undereducated community, lacking opportunities for sustenance and stability. For those familiar with criminal justice parlance, the

concept of interdependent relationality (or community) as it relates to entanglements with a carceral system is set forth. Cycles of vertical relationships of confinement and control and political machinations as well as religious self-aggrandizement led to Pearson's call for interdependent relationality in Cumberland County, with "The Spot" provided as an example of an "alternative space." "The Spot" is a clothing store wherein the owner, customers, and others who inhabit it (including Pearson) form a subcommunity that sustains and supports the community at large through horizontal relationships emphasizing mutual care and resource sharing, especially with a justice-involved population.

Pearson's immersive fieldwork centralizes carceral institutions as a pervasive feature of everyday life for the incarcerated, their families, prison staff, and those living on society's economic and racial margins. The call for interdependent relationality addresses mass incarceration and its racialized foundations by "growing the family circle," (a statement accredited to Mother Teresa). But the dogmatism of co-opted religious service providers exemplifies the limitations even in a spiritual realm. In spiritual contexts, interdependent relationality connotes the deep, reciprocal connections between people, the divine, and the broader community where relationship is central to spiritual identity, moral responsibility, and communal life. But Pearson demonstrates that such religious notions can be co-opted by dogmatic and punitive religious beliefs reinforcing an oppressive system on the most marginalized of communities negating covenantal relationships. Instead, the prosecutor's office organizes public forums deferring to a pastor's rhetoric based on the fallacy that most people are sheep, deviants (perhaps even the mentally ill) are wolves, and there is a divine call to be sheepdogs and defenders of the community, legitimizing punitive modalities.

While carceral institutions are not ancillary, isolated, and segregated communities, a perverse (perhaps intentional) societal function is further marginalizing vulnerable people, many being confined for nonviolent offenses and most living with mental challenges, undereducation, and poverty. The belief that incarceration is an individual experience is demystified as over 95% eventually return to underresourced communities that rely on mutual dependence, emotional ties, economic exchange, and social obligation for reintegration, and even then most reoffend. Such recidivism is described by sociologist Loïc Wacquant as a "conveyor belt," a process of hyper-incarceration impacting marginalized communities and providing a cautionary note of the punitive nature of justice. As Pearson states, "Order does not mean removing criminals from workers. Order means criminalizing and confining some workers to change their status for greater control and exploitation" (56).

The call for interdependent relationality places the most vulnerable at the center of society with a focus on mothers, partners, and children providing money, emotional support, and logistical help to the incarcerated. There is also the need for vocational training and economic opportunities for justice involving individuals both inside and outside confinement. While there is an individual focus while incarcerated, as criminologist Todd Clear states, imprisonment marginalizes communities who disproportionally endure the burden of punitiveness. Relationships need to be reorganized, burdens redistributed, and care afforded to individuals and communities surviving under structural violence. Society's well-being is comprised of the well-being of others with residents resisting punitive policing and punishment, not with calls to abolish police and prisons, but redirecting efforts and resources to respond to multifaceted community needs (i.e. enhanced health, education, employment, housing, and transportation needs).

Interdependent relationality emphasizes how healing, redemption, and hope emerge not solely from personal faith but through shared presence, mutual vulnerability, and enduring connection. It is a resistance to excessive individualism as well as a call to reflect on structures and systems of oppression and discrimination. A call for collective experiences rooted in mutual responsibility, grace, and solidarity may present quite a challenge in our social media age but a criminal justice system that punishes and stigmatizes needs to transition to a criminal justice system that seeks reintegrative modalities. Degrading and excluding offenders is counterproductive, not only to their immediate family but throughout society. This seemingly "quick fix" masquerading as individual (or divine) accountability is counterproductive to the greater good both short and long term. There is a call for community empowerment advancing Pearson's view that prison life is a shared, not solitary, condition and a healthy community bears one another's burdens.

Pearson's concept of interdependent relationality echoes deeply with religious traditions that view human dignity, redemption, and justice as inherently communal, offering a powerful bridge between ethnographic insight and spiritual praxis. As punishment is woven into the fabric of everyday life, interdependent relationality calls for equitable and compassionate modalities of corrections as well as societal changes. Being engaged in prison ministry for two decades as well as nurtured in Newark, New Jersey, where over 6,000 carceral residents are confined in four facilities within a twenty-four-mile radius, I was both comforted by the breadth and inspired by the substance of Pearson's work.

Fernando Linhares,

Kean University