

Crime, Law, and Deviance News

Newsletter for the Crime, Law, and Deviance section of the American Sociological Association

The Forgotten Labors of the Imprisoned: A Snapshot

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The American labor movement is experiencing a moment of resurgence. As workers across sectors advance new unionization pushes with growing support, labor mobilization appears on the rise—a trend that promises to improve working conditions and reduce poverty among the working class (Brady, Baker, and Finnigan 2013). However, a substantial subset of workers remain legally barred from participating in this shift: those laboring in prison. Through my research, I seek to document the lived realities of these often forgotten workers through ethnography, interviews, and historical analysis. Here, I quickly review insights into macro- and meso-level dynamics of contemporary prison labor systems. Then, leaning on ethnography's ability to humanize such sweeping phenomena, I highlight the ground-level experiences of one man, an incarcerated laborer whom I call "D.S.," to provide but a brief snapshot of how inequities within American penal labor may impact those inside.

Broader conditions of prison labor

Although most American prisoners perform labor, they are not classified as formal employees. As a result, they are denied many standard rights and protections. This includes the absence of a minimum wage (where wages are offered at all) (Sawyer 2017), workers' compensation (Zatz 2008), social security (Social Security Administration 2010), and even

enforcement of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations (Atkinson and Rostad 2003). These and other features leave captive laborers vulnerable to coercion (Hatton 2020). Yet, this workforce, whose efforts remain vital for carceral operations nationwide, also lacks the First Amendment right to legally organize against harmful conditions or unjust treatments arising in this underregulated context (Cummins 1994).

In my new book, *Orange-Collar Labor* (Gibson-Light 2022), I draw from an 18-month prison ethnography and 82 interviews with penal laborers and facility staffers to examine life and labor in this context. To begin, the world of prison work is diverse. American prisons today are often home to numerous and varied jobsites. These range from manual labor to knowledge work, including jobs in textiles, printing, engraving, data entry, manufacturing, maintenance, lands upkeep, construction, agriculture, call center operation, heavy equipment operation, metalwork, roadwork, roofing, laundry, teaching and tutoring, administrative assistance, counseling, locksmithing, auto repair, firefighting, and much more.

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Prisoners and staffers alike rank these positions hierarchically. “Good prison jobs,” in the language of participants, offer greater compensation, relatively more rewarding environments, and other perks that reportedly helped individuals feel like they’ve temporarily “escaped” the institution. “Bad prison jobs,” conversely, represent “prisons-within-the-prison,” providing lower pay for often-deskilled tasks within more punitive settings that often exacerbate the pains of imprisonment. The worst jobs are reserved as punishment for those failing to perform well in other positions (at the discretion of overseers).

One’s placement in this internal labor hierarchy can have dramatic impacts on carceral experiences and wellbeing. Nearly everything in prison costs money. Those landing a rare higher-paying, more secure position can better afford supplemental food, hygiene products, writing and crafts materials, and in some facilities recreational goods like televisions or CD players. Many are better able to financially prepare for release and in some cases may even send home earnings as “prison remittances” to friends or family. At the other end of the spectrum, those struggling to secure desirable work are more likely to rely on the institution to provide basic necessities—frequently lacking in quality as well as quantity. They often must turn to the underground prison economy for much-needed items and services (which they buy with the informal currency of choice: cheap foods like ramen noodles; Gibson-Light 2018). Because such dealings are unsanctioned, however, this subjects them to greater scrutiny from the institutional security apparatus, which punishes open participation in the black market.

To be clear, serving and surviving a prison sentence is challenging for all. Nevertheless, it was accepted knowledge around my prison fieldsite that the conditions of one’s job could notably improve one’s time. But better work remains elusive for most. Ultimately, the agents of penal power control prison job placements. Still, workers are not without agency. They may leverage prior work experience, social ties with those better positioned in the labor hierarchy, knowledge of job search conventions, and other

capabilities and resources in pursuit of upward mobility. Access to these assets is often raced and classed, however, adding additional hurdles for many. Institutional and staff biases introduce further impediments to success. What’s more, after one secures a prison job, racial imbalances may relegate minoritized individuals to less desirable workstations. These forces negatively affect wellbeing and attitudes among the most marginalized within the already-disadvantaged imprisoned population. I further explore these dynamics—and resistance to them—in the book. Next, however, I would like to detail one man’s experiences to illustrate this system in action.

An ethnographic illustration

Ethnography has many warrants. It allows researchers to observe patterns and processes on-the-ground that other methods might be harder pressed to unearth, it can reveal mechanisms underlying complex phenomena, and, perhaps most critically, it centralizes the experiences and expertise of those living and operating in the social world under study. In the 18 months that I conducted fieldwork in a medium security prison, I met numerous aspirational workers seeking subsistence and dignity. Many shared personal outlooks, shaped by years—if not decades—in the system. Perhaps none possessed more institutional memory than D.S. He was a black man who was among the oldest of my interviewees. We met when he was hired into the prison sign shop, where a thirty-man crew produced street signs. This was considered one of the “best jobs” in the facility for its higher pay, relatively relaxed environment, and opportunities for internal mobility between various workstations (a valued feature amidst the monotony of lengthy prison sentences). His excitement about landing this sought-after position after several attempts was felt by all and he keenly shared his story with me.

D.S. was serving the tail end of a multi-decade stint. He had devoted much of this time to educational and labor pursuits. “I graduated from five different colleges up in the penitentiary,” he shared. “I majored in computer science. I also took sociology, but I majored in computer science. And I got a real good work history. I

worked at quite different [jobs] throughout the state. I worked in the kitchen for a lot of years—a cook.” He had also worked on the grounds crew (“rakes and shovels,” he called it), paper printing, and, long ago, sign manufacturing. He had leveraged his experience in the latter to land his new position. Perhaps the most influential factor, however, were his social ties. He revealed that his cousin, along with other insiders, had vouched for him. This helped elevate his file when the shop was once again hiring. “I knew a lot of guys,” he confided, “even a couple of the staff. I know them from other yards.”

The most exciting prospect of this new job, D.S. relayed, was the opportunity to engage in digital design work and put his computer science degree to use. The shop was home to several stations, including screen-printing, metal fabrication, and vinyl layout. The first of these employed a now-outdated ink-based method of sign production, but it was often claimed that it provided new hires an opportunity to learn the basics before moving to other positions. This is where D.S., along with most newcomers, began. The vinyl layout station, however, used more up-to-date techniques. Workers first designed signage on a row of desktop computers stocked with a digital library of shapes, logos, and templates. These were brought to life using a massive vinyl decal printer. Printed images were then carefully removed from their backing, adhered to metal sheets, and protected with various finishes.

Graduating from screen-printing to the vinyl station to do this work was D.S.’s goal. “See, this shit we doin’ with the ink? It’s obsolete. It’s all computers now.” In an interview, D.S. repeated his enthusiasm: “I’m prepared when needed,” he proclaimed. “There’s nothing I can’t do with a computer. I can build a computer from the ground up. I can give it any command you want.” Upon release, he planned to open his own computer business. He hoped his experience in the sign shop would expand his skillset. “Whatever you want a computer to do for your business, I’m the guy who can do it,” he beamed.

Despite initial promises that screen-printing was merely an introductory station, after many weeks, D.S. had still not managed to move to vinyl. Yet, another worker, a younger white man who started in screens around the same time, had made the switch. It turned out that mobility within the shop—as in other sites across the facility—relied heavily on race-based recruitment processes. Maurice, a black participant who had worked there for years, said of workstation assignments: “We’re in charge of that.” Indeed, staffers commonly delegated such decisions to senior workers. However, the racial politics of the institution (see Walker 2016) led most to prioritize members of their own racial cliques. Maurice provided an example mirroring D.S.’s situation: “Let’s say you worked in screens and you wanted to work over on computers. But you *can’t* because it’s full up. When there *is* an opening, they [current vinyl workers] already got somebody lined up for the position. ... You see who’s working on the computers, don’t ya?” Tilting his head to the all-white crew, he murmured, “They keep they *own*.”

D.S.’s early enthusiasm transformed into impatience, then frustration. Calling me over one day, he shared his disappointment. He noted the segregation of the site, pointing toward each workstation in turn, indicating, “the Europeans all over *there* [in vinyl], Mexicans over *there* [in metal fabrication], and we’re over *here* [in screen-printing].” Visibly irritated, he added, “Now ain’t that some shit?” Over the next several weeks, D.S. began voicing his agitation more openly, leading to other conflicts that culminated in his dismissal from the shop. Like many expelled from top-tier sites, he was sent to one of several “punishment jobs,” which included polishing doorknobs, collecting discarded cigarette butts, or wrapping bologna for the lowest possible pay.

D.S.’s story illustrates how intersecting class and racial inequalities weave throughout the prison labor system—shaping not just work assignments, but procedures even within so-called good jobs. It also offers a glimpse into how negative work experiences behind bars may generate or amplify frustration and resentment. As men like D.S. seek to endure (or even eke value out of) oppressive carceral

spaces offering limited opportunities for growth, the prison labor system reifies inequalities, linking pre- and post-prison disparities in the process (Wakefield and Uggen 2010). As outside laborers today seek to advance demands and improve conditions, we must also remain solidary with these hidden workers whose liminal status prohibits them from addressing vulnerabilities in the same way.

References

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Crime, Law, and Deviance Section Information

Chair: Stacy De Coster, North Carolina State University

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Submit to our Awards!

Please consider nominating yourself or a colleague for one of our awards! Information for each is listed below.

Submissions for all awards are due to their respective chair by March 1, 2023.

James F. Short Jr. Distinguished Article Award

The American Sociological Association's section on Crime, Law, and Deviance invites submissions for the 2023 James F. Short Jr. Distinguished Article Award. This award is presented every year for a distinguished article in crime, law, and deviance published in the preceding two years. Papers published during the calendar years 2021 and 2022 are eligible. Any section member may submit an article for consideration and self-submissions are encouraged.

Committee: Heather Schoenfeld (Chair), hschoenf@bu.edu; Andrew Davis, apdavis5@ncsu.edu; Katherine Irwin, Kirwin@hawaii.edu; and Shannon Malone Gonzalez, sgonzalez@unc.edu

Submission information: Please send a brief letter of nomination and a PDF of the article to the Award Committee Chair, Dr. Heather Schoenfeld (hschoenf@bu.edu), with the subject line *CLD 2023 Distinguished Article Nomination*.by March 1, 2023.

Crime, Law, and Deviance Distinguished Student Paper Award

The American Sociological Association's section on Crime, Law, and Deviance invites submissions for the 2023 Distinguished Student Paper Award competition. This award is presented annually for the best paper authored by a graduate student. Papers may be empirical or theoretical and can address any topic in the sociology of crime, law, and deviance. Submissions may be sole- or multiple-authored, but all authors must be students at the time of submission. Papers should be article length (approximately 30 double spaced pages) and should follow the manuscript preparation guidelines used by the American Sociological Review. Papers accepted for publication at the time of submission are not eligible. The winner will receive \$500 to offset the cost of attending the 2023 ASA meeting. Nominations may be submitted by the author or by others, and we encourage self-nominations.

Michael Gibson-Light (chair), Michael.Gibson-Light@du.edu; Veronica Horowitz, vhorowit@buffalo.edu; Sadé Lindsay, SII228@cornell.edu; and Benjamin Weiss, weissb@oxy.edu

Submission information: Please send a brief letter of nomination (no more than one page) and a PDF of the article to the Award Committee Chair, Michael Gibson-Light (Michael.Gibson-Light@du.edu), with the subject line *CLD Distinguished Student Paper Nomination* by March 1, 2023.

Albert J. Reiss, Jr. Distinguished Scholar Award

The American Sociological Association's section on Crime, Law, and Deviance invites nominations for the 2023 Albert J. Reiss, Jr. Distinguished Scholar Award. This award is presented every other year to an individual for a lifetime of outstanding scholarship contributing to the sociological understanding of crime, law, and deviance. All members of the section are encouraged to submit nominations, and self-nominations are welcome.

Committee: Leslie Gordon Simons (chair), leslie.gordon.simons@gmail.com; Lisa Broidy, lbroidy@unm.edu; Laura DeMarco, Imdemarc@ncsu.edu; and Ramiro Martinez, r.martinez@neu.edu

Submission information: To nominate an individual for the award, please send a letter of nomination evaluating the nominee's contributions to the sociological understanding of crime, law, and deviance, accompanied by a copy of the nominee's CV, to the Award Committee Chair, Leslie Gordon Simons (leslie.gordon.simons@gmail.com), with the subject line *2023 CLD Distinguished Scholar Nomination* by March 1, 2023.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett Distinguished Book Award

The American Sociological Association's section on Crime, Law, and Deviance invites nominations for the 2023 Ida B. Wells-Barnett Distinguished Book Award (established in 2023). The award is presented annually for a distinguished book in crime, law, and deviance published in the preceding two years. Books published during the calendar years 2021 and 2022 are eligible. Any section member may submit a book for consideration, and self-submissions are encouraged, as are nominations that highlight the work of underrepresented groups.

Committee: Jennifer Carlson (chair), jennifercarlson@email.arizona.edu; Tony Cheng, tony.cheng@uci.edu; Stacy De Coster, smcoster@ncsu.edu; and April Fernandes, adferna2@ncsu.edu

Submission information: To nominate a book, please submit a brief letter highlighting its contributions to the Award Committee Chair, Jennifer Carlson (jennifercarlson@email.arizona.edu) with the subject *CLD Distinguished Book Nomination*, by March 1, 2023. Jennifer Carlson will provide the names and addresses to which copies of the book should be mailed no later than March 15, 2023.

Submit to our Panels!

The ASA Annual Meeting submission portal is now open for the 2023 meetings in Philadelphia. The deadline for submissions is February 22, 2023. Please consider submitting your papers to CLD Section sessions! This year we will have three open panels and a roundtable session. A description of each is found below.

Panel 1: Abolition, Social Movements, and Criminal System Transformation from an Empirical Perspective

Session Organizer: Monica Bell, Yale University

This panel will focus on empirical work within the realm of abolition, social movements, and criminal system transformation.

Submission: Open

Panel 2: Immigration, Crime, and the Criminalization of Immigration

Session Organizer: Daniel Martinez, University of Arizona

This panel will highlight recent empirical research examining the intersections of immigration, immigrant communities, crime, and public safety from diverse methodological approaches and across geographic contexts. Attention will also be given to the criminalization of immigration as well as the consequences of the federal government's recent efforts to impede access to the asylum system.

Submission: Open

Panel 3: Schools, Crime, and Social Control

Session Organizer: Anthony Peguero, Arizona State University

This panel will focus on recent research examining the nature and extent, causes and consequences, and proposed remedies to widely recognized forms of school crime, social control, increasing presence of law enforcement, and criminalization.

Submission: Open

Roundtables: Crime, Law, and Deviance Roundtables (1 hour)

Session Organizers: April Fernandes, North Carolina State University and Chris Smith, University of Toronto

Submission: Open

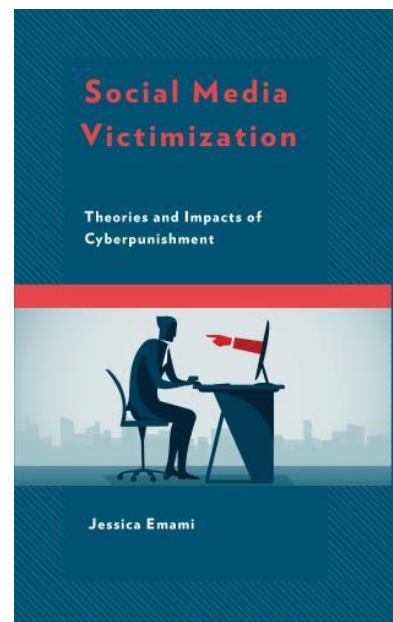
Member News and Awards

Brittany Friedman was recently appointed to the American Bar Foundation as an Affiliated Scholar. She was also recently appointed to the editorial board of *Theoretical Criminology*.

Joachim J. Savelsberg. 2021. *Knowing about Genocide: Armenian Suffering and Epistemic Struggles*. University of California Press is the recipient of the 2022 Barrington Moore Award, ASA Section for Comparative-Historical Sociology, and of the Gordon Hirabayashi Book Award--Honorable Mention of the ASA Section for Human Rights. It is available as a paperback, and also as an open access online publication (access [here](#)).

Member Books

Jessica Emami's book, *Social Media Victimization: Theories and Impacts of Cyberpunishment* (Lexington Books), uses theories that originated in studies of extremism and terrorism, and analyzes the processes that drive people to punish others using social media. She examines the technological shortcomings of online media platforms as well as the inhumane speed of information travel, emphasizing that the technology itself is implicated in the current environment of ubiquitous conflict online. She concludes that today's social media platforms are by their very structure unable to curb or resist cyberpunishment. This book would be of interest to scholars and students in sociology, criminology, and media studies



Emami, Jessica. 2022. [*Social Media Victimization Theories and Impacts of Cyberpunishment*](#). Lexington Books.

Member Publications

Bardelli, T., Gillespie, Z., & Tu, T. L. (2022). Surviving austerity: Commissary stores, inequality and punishment in the contemporary American prison. *Punishment & Society*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/146247452211183>

Bryan, B. (2022). Housing Instability Following Felony Conviction and Incarceration: Disentangling Being Marked from Being Locked Up. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*. <https://rdcu.be/cQoO5>

Jones, A., **Buntman, F.**, Ishizawa, H., & Lese, K. (2022). The Mental Health Consequences of Parental Incarceration: Evidence from a Nationally Representative Longitudinal Study of Adolescents through Adulthood in the United States. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-022-09689-2>

Malone Gonzalez, Shannon and **Faith M. Deckard**. 2022. "We Got Witnesses" Black Women's Counter-Surveillance for Navigating Police Violence and Legal Estrangement." *Social Problems*.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spac043>

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Savelsberg, Joachim J. 2022. "Cultural Genocide and its Limits: An Armenian Illustration." *Shuddhashar Magazine* #31 (11/2022). Access [here](#).

Werth, Robert. 2022. "More than monsters: Penal imaginaries and the specter of the dangerous sex offender." *Punishment and Society*. Published August 22, available at:
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14624745221118883>

Crime, Law, and Deviance Newsletter Information

Have something to submit for the next newsletter?

Email our newsletter editor, Dr. Sarah Hupp Williamson, at swilliam@westga.edu.

Email if you have any of the following news items to share:

- *Announcements*: Upcoming conferences, employment openings, and opportunities for funding/publishing.
- *Accomplishments*: Promotions, honors, and awards.
- *Publications*: Recently published books and articles.
- *Current Events*: Issues affecting crime, deviance, justice or law of current interest.
- *Features*: Are you leading a research center or doing innovative research on crime, deviance, justice, or law? Let us know!
- *Graduate Students on the Market*: Are you on the market? If so, send your name, degree, institution, picture, 250 word research description, and e-mail to our Newsletter editor. Have you already accepted a position? Let us know!

Deadline for the spring/summer newsletter: May 15

Deadline for the fall/winter newsletter: November 15