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Policy Isssue Resources

close

Search

close

close

by James Ridgeway | April 24, 2015

The following article was published on Wednesday on The Intercept. It was written with the support of a fellowship from the Alicia Patterson Foundation.

In 1986, Patty Prewitt was sent to prison for the murder of her husband. In addition to maintaining her innocence, she, like many others her age, has also been a model prisoner for nearly 30years. Yet Prewitt, now 65 years old, will not be eligible for parole until 2036, so she is virtually guaranteed to spend the rest of her life behind bars.

In anessay published in the2013 anthology *Too Cruel, Not Unusual Enough*, Prewitt described an incident in a womens prison in Missouri a decade ago, when a caseworker sat her down and presented a modest proposal. I think we should start a cemetery behind 2-House, the caseworker said. A graveyard for you and the others serving no-parole.

Prewitt writes:

While she described her vision down to the flower beds and flat gravestones that can easily be mowed over, I sat sad, dumb and numb. It never occurred to me that the state was patiently waiting for me to die, although it makes perfect sense. In their opinion, a pine casket is my only way out, and since I am not directly sentenced to the death penalty, they must wait for me to die on my own a second-class dead-woman-walking.

Patty Prewitt is one of the tens of thousands of Americans who will never again experience life outside of prison. While inside, Prewitt, a grandmother of 10, runs education and parenting programs, produces award-winning writings, and crochets teddy bears for charity. Yet for a crime committed three decades ago (and currently being reviewed by the MidwestInnocence Project), she will forever be barred from society, never again to live among free people.

In ancient times, communities would often rid themselves of convicted criminals and other undesirables through the practice of banishment: casting unwanted people out into the wilderness. The Romans often employed banishment as an alternative to capital punishment, and indeed, considered it a fate nearly as terrible as death. Later, the British Empire liberally employed the punishment of banishment and transportation to colonies such as Australia, while the Soviet Union became known for its use of internal banishment to Siberia. The terms *exile, outlaw*and *outcast* all owe their origin to this once widespread practice.

As the world grew smaller, banishment, as a practical matter, virtually ceased to exist. Though it still remains on the books in a few Southern states, it is generally thought of as an archaic form of punishment, and one that cannot function effectively in the modern world.

Yet the impetus behind banishment to permanently remove individuals from society, and subject them to a kind of social death flourishes today in the American criminal justice system, where prisons and jails are the settings for a new kind of internal exile.

The United States holds more than 2.2 million people in prison and jail, grossly outpacing the rest of the globe in terms of both sheer numbers andincarceration rate. With less than 5 percent of the worlds population, we hold nearly 25 percent of its prisoners. Compared with Western Europe, we incarcerate five to ten times as high a percentage of our citizens.

But those overall numbers are just part of what sets us off from other industrialized nations. In Europe, the nature of sentencing is such that virtually every person who is sent to prison will one day return to society. Even those who receive life sentences are eventually eligible for parole. The International Criminal Court stipulates that those convicted of the very gravest crimes should serve 25 years before having their status reviewed. That is one key reason why rehabilitation, and not purely punishment and incapacitation, is the primary aim of the prison system.

In the United States, people sentenced to death number slightly over 3,000. With the number of legal and de facto state moratoria increasing, more of them are likely to die in prison of suicide or natural causes than by an executioners hand. They join tens of thousands of others in suffering permanent banishment to the carceral state.

Read the full article on *The Intercept*.

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face.

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September 29, 2022

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