Prisons as porous institutions

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Abstract

For six decades, scholars have relied on Erving Goffman's (1961) theory of total institutions to understand prison culture. Viewing prisons as total institutions offers insights into role performance and coercive control. However, mounting evidence suggests that prisons are not, in fact, total institutions. In this article, I first trace two credible challenges to the idea of prison as a total institution based on existing data: that prison gates open daily and that prisons operate within a context of overlapping surveillance and punishment supported by broader political and economic interests. Second, I draw on empirical findings from my own yearlong ethnographic study inside one U.S. state women's prison to illuminate a third challenge to the total institution paradigm. Using religion in prison as a case study, I describe the process of *institutional infusion*, in which an outside institution proffers attitudes, practices, and resources that individuals may draw on to shape their material and interpretive experiences within a host institution. Prisons are structured to accommodate institutional infusion, further calling their totality into question. I conclude that we can learn far more about the realities and inequalities of the prison experience by viewing prisons as porous institutions.

Keywords Organizations · Punishment · Prison culture · Prison-industrial complex · Religion · Total institutions

Each semester in sociology and criminology classrooms, students learn that prisons are total institutions. Total institutions are defined by Erving Goffman (1961) as "a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life" (p. xiii). Students learn that prison is a closed-off world that creates a culture unto itself, with prisoners and guards embodying roles that strip them

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of their individuality and promote particular attitudes and actions. Viewing prisons as total institutions offers a theoretical starting point to subsequent analysis of prisonization (Clemmer 1958 [1940]), importation versus deprivation theory (Irwin and Cressey 1962; Sykes 2007 [1958]), and prison gangs (Fox et al. 2012; Skarbek 2014). Given the utility of the concept, scholars continue to contextualize their research in terms of prison as a total institution (for recent examples, see Crewe and Ievins 2019; Jenness et al. 2019). The total institution paradigm has become a nearly taken-for-granted underpinning of the prison experience.

In recent decades, there have been several key findings on U.S. prison punishment that challenge our view of prison as a total institution. Although these findings are credible and substantiated, they have not yet been framed as threats to the totality of the prison institution. This article is an effort to bring together existing challenges to the prison-as-total institution paradigm, posit a new challenge, and take seriously an alternate view of prison as a *porous* institution. In the natural sciences, porosity suggests a membrane with defined pores, through which compounds may pass in either direction. Here, I draw on the metaphor of porosity to indicate that there are pre-defined openings in the structure of the prison institution through which influences may permeate from the outside in and from the inside out.

In the sections that follow, I first define what we mean by "total institution," and highlight the concept's contributions to our understanding of the prison experience. I then trace two existing challenges to its application to prisons. Some of these challenges have flown under the radar of mainstream readership; other challenges are based on research that has not heretofore been construed as a threat to the totality of prisons. Next, I draw on empirical findings from my own 12-month ethnographic study on religion inside a U.S. state women's prison to propose a new challenge to the notion of prison as a total institution: that of *institutional infusion*, defined as the ways in which an outside institution proffers attitudes, practices, and resources that individuals may draw on to shape their tangible and interpretive experiences within a host institution. I conclude that we can learn far more about the realities of the prison experience in the U.S. mass incarceration era through the theoretical lens of porosity.

Theoretical background: Prison as a total institution

In the essay "On the Characteristics of Total Institutions," Goffman (1961) conceived of prisons as a total institution: an isolated, enclosed, and highly structured space of work and residence that strips individuals of self-expression and promotes conformity to norms and rules. Prior to Goffman's famed essay, Baltard (1829) called prisons "complete and austere" institutions that "must assume responsibility for all the aspects of the individual" (Foucault 1977, p. 235). According to Goffman, prisons are one total institution among many, including psychiatric hospitals, monasteries, and boarding schools. The total institution concept was intended as an ideal type. Variation in the totality of an institution stems from role differentiation and the social status of inhabitants. Whereas incarcerated persons and correctional officers are highly differentiated in prisons, sorority sisters and kibbutzniks are decidedly less so (Davies 1989), leading to greater or lesser control over inhabitants. Additionally, the higher the social status of recruits, and the more voluntary the recruitment, the less the control over

inhabitants. For instance, wealthier clients at a psychiatric hospital or drug treatment program experience fewer restrictions to self-expression than their poorer or involuntarily-committed counterparts (McKim 2017; Mouzelis 1971). Analysis of variation among total institutions can offer analytical leverage in studies of authority and control.

Prisons are often characterized as the most "sinister" form of total institution because entrance is non-voluntary, the confined population is highly stigmatized, and the purpose is punitive (Davies 1989; Mouzelis 1971). Prisons are believed to have complete control (Garland 2001) or "almost total power over the prisoners" (Foucault 1977, p. 236). To accomplish this, prisoners' outside identities are stripped away, which Goffman called "mortification of the self." Any and all outward signs of individual expression are removed, from clothing and hairstyle to piercings and makeup. The result is a deeper embodiment of an "inmate" role, as a member of a monolithic group. Consequently, as Goffman put it, "*any* member of the staff class has certain rights to discipline *any* member of the inmate class, thereby markedly increasing the probability of sanction" (1961, p. 42). Prison punishment occurs in the aggregate: one group of individuals inhabiting a given role (correctional officers) has total power over another group of individuals inhabiting a given role (incarcerated individuals) through a paramilitary system of authority. In an edited volume on total institutions, Wallace (2017 [1971]) called total institutions "abominations to humanity" for the level of degradation and brutality that accompany the "total control" over the lives of those who inhabit them (p. 3).

Role performance and prison's control of aggregate groups dovetail with broader trends described by criminologists as the "new penology." The new penology of the late twentieth century U.S. prison boom, through tough-on-crime policies and the War on Drugs, is marked by "managing aggregates of dangerous groups" (Feeley and Simon 1992, p. 449). Rather than viewing punishment as a consequence for an individual convicted of a crime, under the new penology, the justice system uses prisons to manage groups of people deemed to be a threat, especially those in poor communities and communities of color. Mass incarceration stems from the criminalization of the poor (Clair 2020; Wacquant 2009), the overpolicing of Black and Latino/a communities (Brayne 2020; Rios 2011; Stuart 2016), and the incarceration of marginal groups (Irwin 2013 [1985]). Prisons, then, function as a convenient way to allay fears around public safety (Goodman et al. 2017). In this "crime control model" of punishment, people cycle through stints in jail (Kohler-Hausmann 2018; Sufrin 2017), accepting plea deals (Van Cleve 2016) and receiving years, decades, and life sentences behind bars (Irwin 2005). Once inside, correctional facilities manage violence and maintain control through a system of racial classification and extralegal gang governance that fortifies the deindividualized, aggregate nature of punishment (Skarbek 2014; Walker 2016).

In most contemporary scholarship on prisons, the variation proposed by Goffman (1961) is overlooked in favor of an immutable view of an isolated institution with total control over groups who embody deindividualized roles. Classifying prison as a total institution is a readymade shorthand to signify an intractably coercive context. Indeed, a plethora of recent studies of prisons mention the total institution paradigm as a baseline assumption, sometimes in a cursory way (Awofeso 2010; Cresswell et al. 2018; Esposito 2012; Fili 2013; Flores 2013; Jenness et al. 2019; Jonson and Cullen

2015; Norman 2017; Parrotta and Thompson 2011; Schnittker et al. 2012; Turney et al. 2012; Rus 2012). By contrast, only a handful of recent studies contend with or attempt to build on the paradigm of prison as a total institution (Crewe and Ievins 2019; Goodman 2014; Hicks 2012; Moran and Kienanen 2012; Schliehe 2016; Yeung and Somashekhar 2016).

Although researchers continue to describe prisons as total institutions, I argue that it is inaccurate – and perhaps even misleading – to do so. On-the-ground research tells us that viewing prison as a total institution does not reflect the realities of incarceration. Furthermore, the notion of prison as a separate and impenetrable total institution helps to perpetuate the "comforting and convenient" myth (Farrington 1992) of what prison accomplishes for society as a tool of public safety and crime reduction. The total institution paradigm is politically useful to assuage the public's fears about crime through narratives of keeping "criminals off the streets" and "locked away." This rhetoric persists despite the criminological consensus that an increased use of prison punishment is not associated with reducing or deterring crime (Cullen et al. 2011). Below, I consider evidence contradicting the view of prisons total institutions and evaluate what we can learn instead by conceiving of prisons as porous institutions.

Existing challenges to the total institution paradigm

In this section, I bring extant research to bear on the notion of prison as a total institution. First, I consider evidence demonstrating that outsiders enter and exit prisons on a daily basis, be they correctional officers on shift, families visiting incarcerated loved ones, or "new admits" importing their culture and beliefs into the prison world. Second, I draw on scholarship on the structural position of the prison within its larger context of U.S. penal policy, complementary systems of surveillance, and the prison-industrial complex to dispel the notion of the prison as an isolated institution of unique and total control. Although a few of the studies described below set out to critique the total institution paradigm, the vast majority of the following studies are not framed as such. Instead, I cull together their empirical insights on the realities of the contemporary prison to suggest that, collectively, these challenges can levy a potent criticism to the characterization of prison as a total institution.

Prison gates open daily

The first major threat to the notion of prison as a total institution may sound quotidian. A glut of empirical evidence shows that new people enter and exit prisons on a daily basis. Indeed, correctional officers leave for their homes at the end of their shifts, only to return again with attitudes and experiences from the outside world (Britton 2003; Farrington 1992). Friends and family may visit weekly, with letters and phone calls permitted daily (Comfort 2007). Although these encounters are admittedly mediated by prison rules and surveilling actors, they nevertheless disrupt the continuity of a monolithic "inmate" role performance and undermine the effectiveness of deindividualization. Inside prison cells, the ubiquity of radios and televisions threaten the assumption that prisoners are entirely cut off from the outside world. Bringing together heretofore disparate evidence, we begin to see that the prison population is

continually exposed to the world beyond prison walls via interactions with outsiders. Because this fact calls the "total isolation" of prison into question, Farrington (1992) deemed prison a "not-so-total" institution, "enclosed within an identifiable-yet-permeable membrane of structures, mechanisms and policies, all of which maintain, at most, a selected and imperfect degree of separation between what exists inside of and what lies beyond prison walls" (p. 7). Notably, the argument is not that prisons are ineffective as total institutions – rather, policies and routines are designed to allow for outside influences each and every day.

Not only do prison gates open daily for officers and visitors, but they also open for "new admits." New prisoners arrive while others depart each day (Immerwahr and Johnson 2002; Padfield and Maruna 2006). According to the total institution paradigm, when individuals become incarcerated, they are inculcated into prison culture, learning the rules, expectations, and hierarchy of the social order. This perspective aligns with a longstanding view of prison culture as a product of the harsh deprivations that characterize punishment (Berk 1966; Owen 1998; Sykes 2007 [1958]). However, for decades, other scholars have questioned "deprivation theory," contending instead that prison culture is "imported" from vestiges of individuals' backgrounds, attitudes, and experiences prior to their incarceration (Cao et al. 1997; Irwin and Cressey 1962; Mears et al. 2013). Citing allegiances to external group identities, including race and ethnicity, political leanings, and religious affiliation, Jacobs (1976) asserted, "The view of prisoners as isolated individuals who may or may not become socialized into an inclusive inmate culture through participation in primary groups is no longer useful in describing the contemporary prison" (p. 476). Crewe (2009) renewed support for the importation model in twenty-first century U.K. men's prisons, finding that outside contact, including the influx of drugs and material possessions, conferred status and shaped internal culture (see also Kreager and Kruttschnitt 2018). Construed in this way, the importation model – including gang affiliation, drug distribution, and their role in shaping the social order – runs contrary to the idea of prison as a total institution.

There is additional evidence that individuals bring outside attitudes and behaviors with them into prison, and that these imported traits shape the prison social world. For instance, the spike in arrests of Civil Rights activists led to an increase in prisoner politicization (Berger 2014). Elsewhere, we see individual-level and societal-level factors leading to prison violence above and beyond prison-level deprivations (McCorkle et al. 1995; Wilsnack 1976). We also know that prisoners may perform a "front stage" self to navigate authority structures while cherishing their "back stage" as an authentic self that privately resists or rejects prison rules (Schudson 1984; McCorkel 2013; Rubin 2015). In "knowing the ropes" (Goffman 1961, pp. 54–55) of a total institution, also called "secondary adjustments," be they a natural reaction to the deprivations of imprisonment or intended to disrupt the status quo (Rubin 2015), we see evidence that prisoners do not, in fact, experience total self-mortification. True to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model, but contrary to his later total institution model (1961), prisoners' back stage selves are not wholly subsumed by prison authority, despite what their front stage selves might suggest. What is perceived as self-mortification may be more like what McCorkel (2013) identified as "renting out [one's] head," or performing adherence to dominant prison narratives. Overall, the importation model demonstrates that those who involuntarily cycle through the prison gates bring their outside attitudes, allegiances, and behaviors into interpersonal interactions and

everyday lived routines inside prison, such that culture is not solely shaped by the system of rules, deprivations, and control set out by the penal institution itself.

Overall, prisons are not as isolated as the concept of the total institution would suggest. As Law and Lodge (1978) asserted, "[T]he considerable 'leakage' of outside structural and cultural factors raises doubts about the 'totality' of the total institutions" (p. 377). The notion that people enter and exit the prison daily, bringing residue of the outside world into their interactions inside the facility, chips away at our facile image of prison as an isolated world on a hill or up a river.

The prison in its broader structural context

The second major threat to the prison as a total institution is derived from literature on prisons in their broader context – including structural and socioeconomic landscapes. The findings presented below have not set out to explicitly critique the total institution paradigm. However, as I argue, they demonstrate the ways in which viewing prison as a total institution can be problematic when analyzing the realities of inequality and imprisonment in the U.S. today.

For one, and most narrowly, Goffman (1961) described the ritual of the "institutional display," in which the institution opens its doors to showcase itself to outsiders. During institutional displays, prisons perform their best selves to scrutinizing visitors. As Goffman wrote, "Whatever such visits do for everyday standards, they do seem to serve as a reminder to everyone in the establishment that the institution is not completely a world of its own but bears some connection, bureaucratic and subordinated, to structures in the wider world" (1961, p. 104). Although institutional displays are few and far between in recent years, they persist in highly structured rituals such as victim's awareness events and prison tours. That prisons are compelled to perform a palatable version of themselves for visitors suggests that prisons do not operate as autonomous sites of unilateral control, but rather as McCorkel and DalCortivo (2018) put it, "[prison] punishment is an exercise of state power." Prisons have power only insofar as they are viewed as a politically legitimate arm of a larger system of state governance, thereby demonstrating the hierarchical relationship between the institution and society. Goffman's own acknowledgment of total institutions as connected in a subordinate manner to outside power structures has been lost along the way.

Next, consider how the prison is structurally connected to other penal institutions. The increasingly documented web of carceral control across penal and justice-adjacent institutions alike (Beckett and Murakawa 2012; Ellis 2020) threatens the total institution concept by showing that punishment neither begins nor ends inside prison walls. The "school-to-prison pipeline" demonstrates how surveillance of children in schools leads to future incarceration (Hirschfield 2008; Sander 2010; Shedd 2015). Other recent work suggests that the relationship between correctional and educational institutions is even more complicated than a unidirectional "pipeline." Rios (2011) described the "youth control complex," in which young boys are surveilled as adults by numerous authorities. In accessing programs and services intended to aid in transitions out of the penal system, youth of color encounter an interconnected system of institutional scrutiny and control (Fader 2013). The concept of "wraparound incarceration" is useful here, referring to persistent carceral surveillance across a "multi-institution, multiagency set of dynamic barriers, through which

they can be criminalized and subsequently incarcerated" (Flores 2016, p. 138). These sorts of barriers, including "institutional partnerships," make it inordinately challenging to avoid incarceration (Flores 2016; see also Fader 2013). The implication is that prisons do not operate alone, but instead work in tandem with entangled surveillance institutions that scaffold and support their punitive goals. What has been termed "revolving door" of the justice system implies a continual flow of arrestees transitioning from prison to the outside world and back again (Immerwahr and Johnson 2002; Padfield and Maruna 2006). Surveillance, poverty, and homelessness become a mutually-reinforcing cycle (Gowan 2002; Stuart 2016; Sufrin 2017). Indeed, the delineation between prison and outside society is not so stark once we consider that most prisoners will return home (Garland 2001; Leverentz 2014; Western 2018). Penal control germinates in institutions ostensibly designed to support, treat, and educate, and persists post-release in institutions ostensibly designed to rehabilitate and reintegrate. An accurate depiction of punishment in the U.S. criminal justice system, and its ramifications for racial and socioeconomic inequality, must leave the total institution paradigm behind in favor of a more holistic view of contemporary punishment, with its far-reaching system of surveillance and carceral power.

A final challenge to the total institution paradigm based on the broader structural context – which perhaps packs the biggest punch of all – is the concept of the prison-industrial complex (PIC). Decades ago, McEwen (1980) critiqued the fact that total institutional theory leads to "an overly narrow view in which the political ties and structural continuities between life inside and outside have been neglected" (p. 148). Emerging PIC scholarship addresses this oversight. The term "prison-industrial complex" was defined by Schlosser (1998) as "a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need." The PIC reflects complementary governmental and private interests that support the growth of prisons including tough-on-crime policies, militaristic overpolicing of poor communities of color, and corporate investments in arenas such as prison construction and contracted prison labor.

True to the prison-industrial complex, prisons are never self-sufficient (Farrington 1992). Prisons rely on goods and services from the outside, including food, textiles, healthcare, and access to legal texts, to name a few. Truly total institutions would be costly and impractical. When we consider recent empirical works, especially studies that directly interrogate the prison-industrial complex, we see that the prison is inextricably connected to the economic development and labor force of the wider community. Eason's (2017) *Big House on the Prairie* is a prime example of such scholarship, demonstrating how politicians promised that building a prison in a disadvantaged rural community would herald economic development – a promise that ultimately benefited major corporations to the detriment of local workers. Siting prisons in remote, rural areas does not disconnect them from local communities. Instead, the very existence of a prison in a rural community impacts property values, employment opportunities, and the influx of big-box stores where small businesses used to thrive (Eason 2017; Farrington 1992). Political support for an influx of private investment leads to a reduction in state funding for prisons, shaping prisoners' informal economy (Gibson-Light 2018) and their experiences of rehabilitative programming (McCorkel 2013; Schept 2015). Considering these economic and political ties, it is impossible to

maintain the illusion of prison as an isolated institution. The prison-industrial complex tells us that outside interests influence everything from the food prisoners eat to the sorts of labor they are required to work on a daily basis.

The incompatibility of PIC and prison as a total institution becomes increasingly apparent when it comes to discussions of prison reform. As Angela Davis argued, prison abolitionists must conceive of prison within its capitalist context in order to imagine a feasible alternative. Davis (2003) wrote, "If… we shift our attention from the prison, perceived as an isolated institution, to the set of relationships that comprise the prison industrial complex…. The first step, then, would be to let go of the desire to discover one single alternative system of punishment that would occupy the same footprint as the prison system" (p. 43). In short, the prison-industrial complex is such a heavy-lifting driver of profit that no alternative to prison could be successful unless it addressed the economic and political interests so deeply entrenched in the current criminal justice system.

Overall, it is evident from scholarship on the cultural, structural, and sociopolitical context of prison in the U.S. mass incarceration era that the total institution paradigm is incompatible with how prisons operate in practice. The total institution paradigm prevails in mainstream sociology and criminology despite a scholarly consensus that state and market forces have a vested interest in perpetuating prison punishment, and that schools, law enforcement, social welfare programs, and correctional facilities work together in a complementary surveillance endeavor.

Bringing together and building on existing literature

For the most part, the above scholarship does not couch itself as a challenge to the concept of prison as a total institution. However, bringing this evidence together in a new way builds a mounting critique against the prison's ostensible totality.[1] My goal is not to assert that prisons are low on the spectrum of totality or that they are ineffective in their efforts of totality. Instead, my goal is to demonstrate that the total institution paradigm is at best a mischaracterization, and at worst a misleading framework that leads outsiders to ignore critical sources of inequality in contemporary punishment.

A select few scholars have taken up the charge of directly critiquing the total institution concept. As noted above, Farrington (1992) questioned the "total isolation" of the prison institution, calling for other scholars to dispute the purported "total structuring" of the prison environment and the "total submergence" of prisoner identity in future studies – a call that was widely ignored. McEwen (1980) suggested that characteristics of totality have been overemphasized to evoke shock and outrage, leaving the analytical leverage of cross-institutional comparisons on the table. Crewe (2009) described contemporary U.K. men's prisons as "porous and permeable" (p. 5) because prisoners bring "criminal cultures and subcultures" with them. Crewe argued that social, legal, and political forces led prisons to "become more porous and less repressive institutions… [they] have become less depriving and have allowed prisoners more opportunities for outside contact" (p. 150). Despite remarking on the increasing porousness of prisons, Crewe did not seek to dismantle the total institution paradigm. In fact, in a methodological reflection, Crewe

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[1] Notably, some of these challenges pertain to current usage of the term "total institution" of the prison, rather than Goffman's original description, although the distinction between the two has eroded in the past few decades.

wrote of his experience conducting fieldwork inside prison as "isolating and all-encompassing. After all, it is a total institution of sorts" (p. 485). In this article, I revive and build on Crewe's usage of the term "porous" to argue that we can learn more about how prisons actually work through a lens of porosity. Again, rather than interpreting the challenges presented in this article as evidence that prisons are ineffective total institutions, I argue that contemporary prisons are not designed to be total institutions in the first place. Instead, prisons are structured—politically, economically, and practically—with designated entry points where people, beliefs, cultural tools, material resources, and capitalist market forces flow in and out regularly.

One reason that our theoretical understanding of prisons is underdeveloped relates to restricted access to prisons for research. Access to prisons for research is notoriously arduous, especially in the United States (Ellis 2021; Eason 2017; Rhodes 2001; Wacquant 2002).[2] Even some of the most well-known accounts of contemporary confinement rely on secondary sources (Reiter 2016; Skarbek 2014). Nevertheless, as Wacquant (2002) asserted, "it is essential to *investigate the varied linkages between the prison and its surrounding institutions on the ground*, as they actually exist and operate" (p. 387, emphasis in original). Although it is logistically difficult to conduct scholarship on the prison's connections to the outside world (Farrington 1992; but see Comfort 2007), on-the-ground research is necessary because it can upend longstanding sociological hypotheses. For instance, after conducting fieldwork inside one U.S. state psychiatric prison, Alford (2000) found Foucault's theory of state surveillance to be inaccurate, calling prison architecture a "nonopticon" as opposed to a panopticon. Likewise, Crewe et al. (2014) found that privacy was indeed possible within the presumed hypersurveillance of the prison. Indeed, our faulty rendering of prison punishment stems, in large part, from the immense barriers that keep researchers out.

The current study addresses this problem by drawing on empirical data from nearly 500 hours of ethnographic observation on religious life inside one U.S. state women's prison. What was unexpected and remarkable during my time in the field was the extent to which the prison social world was connected to the outside world on a daily basis and a structural basis. I entered the prison expecting to observe individual women's religious conversion and devotion with respect to their punishment. What I found instead was that the prison as an institution was inextricably connected to religion as an institution, both from the outside in and from the inside out. Using evangelical and charismatic Protestant Christianity in prison as a case study, I suggest that we should consider the role of multiple, overlapping institutions in the lived experience of incarceration. The proposed concept of *institutional infusion* adds additional credence to the idea that prisons are fundamentally porous institutions.

Data and methods

The data for this article come from a larger project about religious life among incarcerated women, based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork inside a U.S. state women's prison (Ellis 2018, 2020). After securing permissions from the Institutional

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[2] U.K. prisons are comparatively more open to researchers than U.S. prisons (Rubin 2015; Wacquant 2002). This fact further demonstrates that porosity operates on a spectrum and is contingent on sociopolitical context.

Review Board and the Department of Corrections' research board, I conducted observations inside a correctional facility that I call Mapleside Prison (all names of people and places are pseudonyms) from April 2014 through May 2015.

Located in the eastern United States, Mapleside confines approximately 1000 women. The demographics of Mapleside include about even proportions of Black and white women, and a lower share of Latina women. Ages range from 17 to over 80, with an average age of 36. Average length of stay is 3.5 years, but sentences ranged anywhere from seven months to life without parole. The largest shares of women were convicted of drug offenses (around 17%) and murder (around 20%), with the next most common offenses being larceny (around 15%) and assault (around 15%).[3] As a correctional facility that housed women under minimum, medium, and maximum-security supervision, using Mapleside as a field site ensured that the degree or totality or porosity I observed was not a function of the prison's security level itself.[4]

I conducted observations at Mapleside for two to four days per week, for two to nine hours per day, averaging 3.5 hours per visit. I had permission to observe activities in the "Main Hall," the building that housed the gym, dining hall, classrooms, computer lab, volunteer coordinator's office, religious library, and chaplain's office. I conducted "sit-alongs" with a correctional officer on post and spent several hours per week doing office work for Chaplain Harper, the full-time, in-house chaplain. Additionally, I observed formal religious programs in the Main Hall. For the first two months of my fieldwork, I observed worship services and scriptural studies for Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Sunni Muslim groups. Table 1 shows the distribution of religious affiliation at Mapleside Prison. For the following ten months, I honed in on the largest religious group at Mapleside Prison, the "Protestants," who comprised 63% of the incarcerated population, based on self-identified affiliation, and are the primary subject of this article. The Protestant group was an umbrella affiliation for Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, Pentecostal, Apostolic, and nondenominational Christians, largely evangelical and charismatic in flavor. The Protestants held a single worship service for an average of 260 women each week, with separate denominational Bible studies. This group is difficult to categorize precisely because it encompassed a wide variety of denominations, contingent on which outside churches sent volunteer preachers.

I observed Sunday church services, Baptist Bible study, AME Bible study, nondenominational youth Bible study for women under 25, Ministry classes, Christian Witness Training courses, Discipleship classes, Protestant-based self-help programs, and weekly religious movie screenings. I attended special events, including "Gospelfest" where Christians showcased their ministerial talents, a weekend-long nondenominational Christian "retreat" in the prison library, a Christmas caroling event held in the gym, and two weekend-long nondenominational Christian revival meetings. Additionally, I conducted observations on major holidays, including Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

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[3] Exact parameters withheld to maintain confidentiality of the field site.
[4] We might conceive of minimum-security prisons as "less total" than maximum-security prisons; conversely, as an extension of my argument, I recommend construing maximum-security prisons as "less porous" than minimum-security prisons.

Table 1 Religious affiliation of incarcerated women at Mapleside

Religious Group	Percent Affiliated[a]
Protestant[b]	63
Catholic	7
Sunni Muslim	5
Lutheran	4.5
Wiccan	3.5
Seventh Day Adventist	3
Jehovah's Witness	2
Nation of Islam	2
None	2
Jewish	1.5

Based on official prison population records as of January 2015, coded by author. Every person, upon admittance to Mapleside, fills out a religious designation form, which allows her to attend religious studies and worship services for that group. She may select only one affiliation, and must submit a new form to change affiliations

[a] Presented as percentages rather than absolute numbers to disguise the exact size of the prison population for confidentiality. Percentages do not total 100 due to the exclusion of small groups that did not hold services at the time of the research (e.g. Native American, Moorish Scientist)

[b] Includes primarily African Methodist Episcopal, Apostolic, Baptist, Pentecostal, and nondenominational Christians

Although interviews were difficult to coordinate due to the lack of privacy, I conducted in-depth interviews with 18 incarcerated women, both religious and secular: 9 Protestants, 3 Catholics, 2 Jews, 1 Jehovah's Witnesses, and 3 Agnostics/Atheists. I was prohibited from bringing a tape recorder inside the facility; instead I transcribed key quotes from interviewee responses in real time. In total, I conducted nearly 500 hours of observation inside prison walls and spoke to hundreds of individuals who lived and worked there. My field notes totaled nearly 900 single-spaced pages, chronicling in detail what I witnessed, along with quotes taken verbatim in my notebook. I coded field notes line-by-line using the software *Nvivo* based on emergent themes.

Case study: Protestantism in prison as institutional infusion

Background on religion in prison

Before entering the field, I expected that religion might matter based on the "importation" model of prison culture, hypothesizing that many women would bring their religious backgrounds with them into prison. After all, according to the 2016 General Social Survey, 92% of all women respondents, and 97% of Black women respondents, reported believing in God or "some higher power" with or without a degree of doubt. I expected that the incarcerated population would enter prison as believers (Chatters et al. 1999; Schnabel 2015). As mentioned earlier, I expected to learn about the ways that

individuals maintained their faith inside a coercive penal context (Dubler 2013; Dye et al. 2014; Johnson 2017; Kerley 2014).

Instead, I was surprised to observe that although many incarcerated women did indeed grow up "in church," or were raised by pious parents, the empirical story was far less individualistic. In retrospect, this makes sense given that women who become incarcerated may be more likely to feel alienated by formal religious institutions (Sullivan 2012). I discovered that larger institutional forces coalesced to lead to religion's deeply felt importance behind prison walls. Federal religious freedom legislation played a key role in the administration of religion in prisons. In 1965, leadership in the Nation of Islam (NOI) brought *Cooper* v. *Pate* to the U.S. Supreme Court, arguing for the application of the 1871 Civil Rights Act to prisons, such that prisoners should not be discriminated against on the basis of their religion (Colley 2014; Jacobs 1976). The Supreme Court ruled in their favor. In 2000, the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (*RLUIPA* 2012) protected against any substantial burden that restricts religious exercise in correctional facilities unless it is "in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest; and (2) is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest."[5] Constitutional protection paved the way for a symbiotic relationship between the state and religion, in which any inmate in the general population could practice their faith tradition. Except for those living in solitary confinement, all prisoners are allowed to participate in worship services and scriptural study programs. This ruling and legislation heralded the constitutional protection of religious freedom in U.S. jails and prisons today.

Beyond its protection as a constitutional right, the practice of religion in prison is by no means perfunctory. Rather, religious programs have stepped in to fill the void where state-funded secular programs disappeared (Becci and Dubler 2017; Hicks 2012). The George Bush presidency ushered a push for faith-based initiatives to do the work of social welfare, and religious programs in prison were no exception. Religion is now one of the single-most prevalent activities available in prisons (Becci and Dubler 2017; Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Erzen 2017; Sullivan 2009). One survey found that one in three incarcerated individuals participate in some religious activity (U.S. Department of Justice 1993), while another found that over nine in ten incarcerated women participate in religious programs (O'Connor et al. 2007). While accurate numbers are difficult to obtain, it appeared that about half of all women at Mapleside participated in religious programs. According to Chaplain Harper, the full-time chaplain on staff, "I would say 50/50 [participate]. For some, it's a crucial part of their survival. Others are not engaged at all." This estimate appeared consistent with my yearlong observations.

Given these seismic legislative shifts, alongside a rise in voluntary faith-based programming, my research question shifted. *How does religion as an institution shape the experience of punishment in a U.S. state women's prison?* As defined by Durkheim

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[5] In 1993, Congress passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Action (*RFRA* 2012), which was drafted with the help of evangelical groups like Charles Colson's Prison Fellowship. Religious freedom in prison was signed into law, mandating that the only restrictions to religious practice must be based on a "compelling government interest," which primarily included concerns about the safety and security of prisoners (see also Erzen 2017). In 1997, the Supreme Court heard the case *City of Boerne* v. *Flores*, ruling that *RFRA* can only apply to federal prisons and prisons in Washington, DC, as local ordinances should not be subject to federal regulation. As a result, state prisons were no longer required to abide by *RFRA*. *RLUIPA* passed three years later, and made religious freedom a condition of receiving federal funds.

(2001), religion is "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community…" (p. 46). Understood as such, religion connects beliefs related to the sacred with concrete practices ritualized by faith communities.

Below, I share evidence from extended vignettes, drawing on interview and observational data, to show how religion as an institution – in this case, predominately charismatic and evangelical Protestantism – intermixed with the prison institution in ways that profoundly shaped the prison experience. I call this process *institutional infusion*, in which the beliefs, practices, and resources of one institution are made available to individuals within a host institution. In the case of Protestant Christianity in prison, institutional infusion occurs through two key mechanisms: material resources and religious beliefs. As the following examples will demonstrate, religion as an outside force shapes the material experience of prison deprivations, and religion as a set of beliefs offers reprieve from normative organizational beliefs stemming from prison authorities. True to the paradigm of porosity, institutional infusion occurs not only from the outside in, but also from the inside out.

Religious infusion through material resources

Local religious congregations offered material resources that shaped women's lived experience at Mapleside in a tangible way. For one, religious volunteers entered prison walls from the outside every single day. Harkening back to findings from earlier work demonstrating that prison gates open for staff and visitors (e.g. Comfort 2007; Farrington 1992), I observed that non-staff religious volunteers entered daily. Religious volunteers were outside citizens (e.g. clergy, Bible study teachers) without any personal or professional connections to the prison who successfully navigated an extensive screening process. First, volunteer hopefuls submitted an application to Chaplain Harper, noting their church affiliation and evidence of ministerial credentials. Those who passed Chaplain Harper's screening underwent a background check and an interview about their motivations for volunteering. Next, volunteers attended a three-hour orientation and were issued an identification badge, allowing them to enter Mapleside for worship services, scriptural studies, and special events. Final approval by the Assistant Warden rubberstamped the chaplain's selections.

Once approved, religious volunteers made their way through metal detectors and body scanners, saddled with donated goods like books and pens to distribute to incarcerated adherents. As a result, material resources flowed through the religious department from houses of worship in the community to help alleviate some of the material deprivations of prison life. Rashida, an Apostolic Christian, put it succinctly: "The Religious Department is the best organized department in this institution." Having served multiple stints in prison, Rashida knew she had to ask for what she needed, and she knew exactly who to ask. She continued, "And not just the spiritual side. If you need counseling, hygiene – whatever – you go to the religious department *first*, because it's quicker and better quality." A massive amount of Christian reading material was available *gratis*, including weekly newsletters, informational pamphlets, graphic novels, scriptural analyses, and poetry. Those who attended Christian Bible study sessions received free copies of self-help books, prayer guides, textbooks, and

decorative journals donated by local churches. When a big-name Pentecostal preacher visited Mapleside, she brought *Victoria's Secret* body lotions for those who attended her service. In a world defined by austerity, the resources brought inside by religious groups were deeply cherished.

In mid-December, anyone in the general population, regardless of her religious affiliation, was invited to a special event called "Cookies and Caroling." At this event, women congregated in the prison gym to sing Christmas carols and return to their cells with a bag of Christmas cookies. At the conclusion of the event, the chaplain drew the names of 20 lucky winners at random from a box to win a prize: their choice of a Christian self-help book or a body lotion from *Bath and Body Works*. These material objects, dispensed by Mapleside's Religious Department, represented coveted items from the outside world that would have been unavailable without donations from outside congregations.

Furthermore, participation in religious programs offered access to certain forms of self-expression that were otherwise prohibited by the prison rules. For instance, when it came to clothing, women at Mapleside bemoaned their Goffmanian deindividualization. As Lexi lamented, "I miss clothes. I'm so sick of beige." Chuckling, she shrugged in defeat over her head-to-toe khaki uniform: "We call it 50 shades of beige." Women were denied certain expressions of femininity: no high heels, only one hair clip at a time, no scarves, and limited makeup products. Lexi, who is Jewish, relished the blue eyeshadow she received in her Christmas gift bag donated by local churches. Likewise, Estrella, a Latina Pentecostal, coveted the magenta winter gloves she received in her Christmas gift bag. "I love 'em – they're not beige!" Estrella said, beaming.

Indeed, participation in religious programs offered reprieve from the monotony of the standard issue prison uniforms. Incarcerated women who volunteered their time to run the weekly Protestant worship service swapped their khaki uniforms for regal purple robes as members of the choir or glistening gold robes as ushers who escorted churchgoers to their seats. Members of the dance ministry donned flowing dresses in an array of colors: royal blue, bright white, and pink with Hibiscus flowers. Mime and drama ministries wore special makeup and costumes as part of their performances.

Participating in religious programs was also a respite from the claustrophobic quarters of the cellblock. On weekdays, women were locked in a 7′ by 10′ cell with little natural light and no air conditioning that they were forced to share with a cellmate. Importantly, leaving their cell was permitted for essential activities such as work and mealtimes, as well as for religious and secular voluntary programs. Jocelyn illustrated how participating in religious activities afforded her a degree of autonomy over her schedule. On Thursday afternoons, Jocelyn volunteered to help Chaplain Harper in the Main Hall. "I asked… if there was anything I could do to help the chaplain," Jocelyn explained. "I'm sure she has stuff [for me to do]. Apparently they were back-logged on these crosses." Jocelyn held up a two-inch needlepoint cross as evidence. "Women can write in and request a cross," Jocelyn continued, "So I offered to do it. It's nice to get out of my room. I'll do anything. I don't like to be in my room."

At Mapleside, religious practice, most commonly Protestant practice, offered material alleviations to the daily rhythms of prison life. Rather than prison having total control over prisoners' adaptations, religion offered a set of resources otherwise unavailable to the incarcerated population. As mentioned earlier, Goffman (1961)

might have called these adaptations "secondary adjustments," or "knowing the ropes" (pp. 54–55) to adjust to the highly regulated prison environment. However, contrary to Goffman's concept, religious secondary adjustments were not endemic to the prison. Instead, these items like notebooks, body lotions, magenta winter gloves, and Christmas cookies were not state-funded, but rather donations from religious congregations to their incarcerated laity. This represented a material manifestation of an outside institution infusing into the carceral experience.

Religious infusion through interpretive beliefs

The second way that religious institutions were infused into the prison experience was through religious messages that shaped women's interpretive experiences of their own imprisonment. Preaching ranged from "fire-and-brimstone" to liberation theologies. Overall, many religious volunteers offered uplifting messages of hope and divine omnipotence to churchgoers. For example, during a Sunday worship service, Pastor O'Neill, an amiable Black Pentecostal volunteer in his late 40s, preached redemption through divine forgiveness. "God does not care what you did," he exclaimed, "If you asked for forgiveness, He cast it into the sea of forgetfulness. He gave you a clean slate." Enthusiastic cheers of support emerged from the crowd of over 200 attendees. This sentiment of God's forgiveness resonated with women whose crimes led to harsh prison time. In an institution designed to degrade, messages of forgiveness like these were few and far between.

Similarly, one Sunday morning at a Catholic worship service, Sister Victoria described a perspective of divine love. In a calming voice, she said, "Ladies, I've said this before. You are prisoners here on earth." Sister Victoria pointed her finger towards the ceiling, continuing, "But to God, you are precious gems; worthy, important, beautiful daughters of God." A woman sitting beside me brushed a tear from her cheek. Messages like these contradicted prison messages of incarcerated persons as unworthy or pathologically flawed (examples of these punitive prison narratives in Hannah-Moffat 2001; Haney 1996; Johnson 2017; McCorkel 2013).

Importantly, volunteers had relative autonomy in the infusion of their religious beliefs in the prison. Of course, the vetting of volunteers gave a great deal of discretion to prison administrators (see Ellis 2020). Nevertheless, once approved to enter, there was minimal oversight during religious programs, with Chaplain Harper only occasionally sitting in on worship services. Religious programs were largely unguarded, one of the few spaces in the prison where officers did not regularly patrol. Only once did I hear of a volunteer being chastised for what they preached. This anecdote was relayed later by Pastor O'Neill during a Sunday worship service at Mapleside. By his own account, he violated the prohibition against proselytization dictated by religious freedom legislation. Pastor O'Neill said he preached Christianity to Muslim men during an interfaith service at a nearby men's prison. In the course of the service, he said he "got a message from the Holy Spirit." He borrowed a Qu'ran from one of the attendees, and turned to a passage about the Virgin Mary. "Let me tell you, half the men in there took off their *kufis*," Pastor O'Neill boasted, "Even the imam almost converted that day." After that event, Pastor O'Neill received a phone call from the prison chaplain. "I'm banned from the prison. I can't go there to preach no more," he said. "I'm recruiting their men!" Pastor O'Neill shrieked with delight at the memory of his successful

evangelism. After 40 days of prayer and fasting, Pastor O'Neill received a phone call from prison officials, in which they told him, "We want you to come back. So many inmates have been asking for you. But at an interfaith service, you can't preach the gospel…. We will let you come back, and you need to respect all religions." Pastor O'Neill's message was regulated by prison rules against proselytizing. Apart from this incident, I heard of no other time when any other volunteer's preaching was scrutinized. This relative autonomy suggests that the prison had less control over religious messages than we might expect based on the total institution concept.

Moreover, these messages had a weighty impact on how women interpreted their own incarceration. For instance, Ja is an early 20s woman who became a devout Christian during her time at Mapleside. "God saved me," she said during a field interview, "[by] putting me here [in prison]. I've learned so much about myself from being here. You don't know yourself until you come to a place like this, stripped of everything you have." Ja viewed God as having played an active role in her incarceration. Kimmie, a fellow Protestant, agreed. Now in her late 30s, Kimmie already served over a decade of her multi-decade sentence. "When I first got here, I felt distant [from God]," she explained. "I kept saying, 'God, where are you?'" Her perspective evolved as her faith grew. "[Now] I know He's always been with me. I realized He brought me here to get my attention." Hollis, who was serving a ten-year sentence, agreed wholeheartedly. At age 50 and living in prison, there was a lot Hollis could feel cynical about. Instead, she wakes up with a smile and feels grateful to be alive. "Some people thank God for saving them," Hollis reckoned, "I thank God for *rescuing* me." For Hollis, God rescued her from the dangerous path she was on. These examples from Ja, Kimmie, and Hollis represent a larger pattern on how Protestant messages shaped religious beliefs around incarceration itself.[6]

Institutional infusion was not unidirectional. The religious beliefs that infused into Mapleside, permeating through volunteers' Bible study lessons and Sunday sermons flowed back out of the prison, too. Sabrina's example brings typifies the bidirectionality of porosity. Sabrina is a 25-year-old woman who was reincarcerated at Mapleside after a parole violation. Sabrina became a devout Methodist Christian while incarcerated, and an active participant in several evangelical Protestant programs. One afternoon while talking to her mother on the telephone, which cost more than a day's wages, Sabrina said she wanted to find out whether her mother was "saved," in the evangelical Protestant sense of the term. She told her mother, "I want to see you in Heaven," Sabrina recounted, "Have you said the sinner's prayer?" Sabrina beamed as she relayed the phone call to me. Sabrina's mother replied, "I've said a lot of prayers, but do you mean like verbatim? I can Google it." Sabrina laughed, certain that her mother did not know that the "sinner's prayer" was the profession of faith in Christ as Lord that ensures salvation in the evangelical Protestant tradition.

"I told her, 'Today's your lucky day, I can lead you through it.'" Sabrina proceeded to guide her mother through the prayer that would consecrate her as a Christian. "She repeated after me. I said, 'Lord?' and she said 'Lord'— and then the phone cut in."

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[6] These examples indicate that although religious volunteers had relative autonomy once inside prison, the sorting process by prison administrators and the intractably coercive prison context shaped religious messages, such that they may also have worked in furtherance of penal goals. I explore the tension between freedom and constraint of religious messages and practices in greater depth elsewhere (Ellis 2020).

Sabrina imitated the robotic male voice that interrupted: "You have 60 seconds remaining." They made it just in time. "We went through it, and right when we said 'Amen,' it cut off." Sabrina grinned, proud to have "saved" her mother over the phone. Institutional infusion was bidirectional, such that Sabrina's experience of religion was not restricted to the correctional facility, but also permeated prison walls to shape her mother's faith on the outside.

In another example, during a Protestant "Discipleship" class that I observed one afternoon, Maria spoke on the topic of sharing one's newfound faith with family members. Maria was a late-50s Baptist woman who had served seven years at Mapleside, climbing the ranks to eventually become a teacher of this class for new-found Christian women on how to be disciples of Christ. "People say you found Jesus in prison," she began with a tone of incredulity, referring to the ever-present stereotype of "jailhouse conversion" with which incarcerated women perpetually contended. Maria continued, "You didn't *find* Jesus while you in here. Jesus was in you way before Mapleside." The students in her class nodded dutifully. Peering over the readers perched on her nose, Maria posed a question: "Who needs to hear this message?" A student in the front row raised her hand and replied, "Everybody." Maria surveyed the room, seemingly dissatisfied with that answer. No one else ventured a guess. Maria offered the response she had in mind: "Your children. It's your children. If they seen you changing, you got to be real." Maria punctuated these final few words for emphasis. She saw fit to educate Christian newcomers on the importance of sharing religious messages with their children on the outside.

Despite their physical separation from their children, many women spent a great deal of the time over the phone, parenting their children on matters of religion. Natalie, a Catholic woman in her 50s, said, "Every time I talk to [my daughter], I tell her to pray." In fact, she was so intent on discussing Catholicism that her adult son was nervous to tell her that he converted. "Mom, I converted to be Baptist now," Natalie recalled later in an interview. "He thought I was going to be upset, but I wasn't at all." Natalie said that she told her son, "That's OK! I don't care what you are, as long as you believe in God."

Heather, too, routinely shared her beliefs with her children. Nearing 60, Heather's children, who were in their 20s and 30s, never expected her to convert faiths while in prison. She was raised Catholic and attended mass nearly every week before becoming incarcerated. She shared that she was "saved" during a period she spent in solitary confinement, and now participates in evangelical Christian programs. Heather explained, "I ask them all the time," miming a phone next to her ear, "Do you believe that Jesus died for us?" Heather wanted to make sure her children would be "saved." Her children were unenthused. "Yeah, Mom, we do," Heather mimicked their lacklus-ter replies. "They think I just found this religion 'thing' in here.… I guess that's a thing that happens." She rolled her eyes in defeat. Natalie and Heather, alongside many others, spent substantial time on the phone with their children discussing the religious beliefs they developed inside prison walls.

Numerous women at Mapleside drew on religion to connect with their family on the outside. This suggests a key way that the institutional infusion between religion and prison was bidirectional. Not only did volunteers enter prison gates daily, and material resources that were otherwise unavailable in prison flowed into religious programs, but incarcerated women also took the religious beliefs they developed while in prison and

transmitted them to loved ones outside prison walls. Institutional infusion operated from the outside in as well as from the inside out.

As a final example of religious infusion through beliefs, I draw on ethnographic field notes from an event held at Mapleside each May to honor the "National Day of Prayer." On this memorable evening, Frances, a woman in her early 70s who has been incarcerated for nearly two decades, took to the microphone to offer opening remarks: "We are locked in, but not locked out." Her proclamation was met with energetic applause from the audience. As Frances relayed to the crowd, five years ago she heard God tell her that she should spearhead an interfaith prayer service. "I'm a simple woman. I'm not smart. Why do you want me to do this?" Frances was perplexed. She said that God replied, "I chose you as the one to bring this program to Mapleside." Her goal for the "National Day of Prayer" was "to show people on the outside that we *do* pray in here, that we pray every day for people all over the world." This matched with a twin goal of bringing in outsiders to "pray for us, to show us that there are people who love us and care about us." The warden, chaplain, and prison staff supported Frances' initiative, allowing her to organize a two-hour event in the prison gym, open to the prison general population to join together in prayer. Frances' remarks represented a symbolic connection between the world outside prison and the world inside prison, brought together by faith. Frances' words describing being "locked in, but not locked out," rhetorically connected religion on the inside and the outside, and manifested as a two-hour prayer event at Mapleside.

The total institution paradigm would not have predicted these findings. As an isolated institution defined by an internal culture of its own making, the total institution paradigm would not account for outsiders entering prisons to preach lessons that challenged prison narratives, nor material resources entering prisons as donations from local congregations, nor incarcerated individuals promulgating their religious beliefs with relatives outside of prison. Each of these cases suggests the porosity of prison walls.

Discussion: Prisons as porous institutions

What theoretical utility is to be gained by viewing prisons as porous institutions? What can we learn from the ways that prisons absorb the beliefs, mores, and resources of external institutions? Before delving into the contributions of the porosity paradigm, I briefly summarize existing and novel threats to the notion of prison as a total institution presented in this article. I described two existing challenges from prior literature. First, that prison gates open daily to outsiders. Second, that modern punishment is shaped by a web of surveillance across penal and non-penal institutions, and that political and economic interests drive the prison-industrial complex. Both of these undermine the totality of the prison as it is often conceived as a remote, self-sustaining site of total control over inhabitants. Next, I drew on data from my own case study of Protestant Christianity in a U.S. state women's prison to demonstrate a process of institutional infusion: how the external institution of religion enters prison walls every day, materially shaping the experience of carceral deprivations and bringing in beliefs and messages that subsequently trickle out of the prison, shaping relationships with family on the outside.

Viewing prisons as porous can change the way social scientists understand the rhetoric of punishment. Myriad scholarship has examined how governmental policies and punitive state rhetoric trickles into the prison (Garland 2001; Hannah-Moffat 2000). Research has understandably looked at how state agents shape penal narratives and material deprivations of the prison experience. However, if we shift our lens to consider how numerous institutions interact with prison as a porous institution, we can learn a great deal more about various alternative institutional attitudes and resources available inside the prison. Prisons do not exist in a vacuum. Institutional infusion demonstrates how the beliefs, constraints, and practices of one institution are made available to individuals to shape their interpretive and tangible experiences within prison as a host institution. Other examples of institutional infusion may include the institutions of marriage, family, education, or the military as they compete with or operate alongside the structure, rules, and mechanisms of prison control.

Stepping away from the ideal type of prison as a total institution, we can better investigate the prison experience within its real context in a web of economic, political, and wraparound institutional forces. When we delve into the construction of prison culture, we can move beyond importation versus deprivation theory to a more organizational approach, viewing the prison as an institution that interacts with other institutions, with religion as one example among many. Furthermore, if prisons are porous, we are free to consider how prisons function like other institutions, rather than continuing to view them in a separate category of totality. For instance, taking a neoinstitutional approach can show us how the prison's strategies and goals are shaped by the external constraints of its environment, its position in the organizational field, and the behaviors of other penal organizations in the field (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; see also Goodman et al. 2017). With the rise of mass probation (Phelps 2017), we might interrogate how collaboration and competition between probation departments and prisons shape correctional management and punishment. We can analyze how institutional isomorphism leads prison ministries from diverse religious backgrounds to look surprisingly similar upon entering prisons (see Erzen 2017; Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Sullivan 2009).

Geographical context matters. The total institution paradigm has not been as salient outside of the U.S. context. Davies (1989) argued that total institutions are a decidedly modern, Western concept. Total institutions encompass spheres of work, leisure, and residence all in one; this collapse of spheres is notable only when those spheres of work and residence are differentiated in wider society (see also Mouzelis 1971). Therefore, the total institution's mode of control carries more weight in individualistic cultures as opposed to more collectivist societies. Thus, what prison punishment "means" as an isolated space of work and residence is circumscribed by its larger cultural context. The cultural individualism of the United States makes the total institution paradigm compelling, but as McEwen (1980) suggested, it might instead be a distraction from the realities of contemporary U.S. punishment. A paradigm of porosity may better capture the prison experience on a global scale. For instance, in their study of prisons in England and Norway, Baer and Ravneberg (2008) found the boundaries between the inside and the outside to be an "incompatible juxtaposition" (p. 213). Some Scandinavian prisons are so porous that they allow prisoners to wear their own clothing and leave for work outside of the prison compound. On the other end of the spectrum, prisons in Brazil may close their doors to outsiders entirely (Johnson 2017). A scale of

porosity allows for more apt international and comparative research on prisons. Prisons are not monolithic, and the degree of porosity may vary across security level, type of facility, or even geographic proximity to densely populated areas. Viewing prisons as porous institutions allows us to examine variation within and among correctional facilities domestically and worldwide.

Importantly, acknowledging that prisons are porous institutions does not imply that they are open institutions. Entry into and exit from prisons remains highly regulated. The scientific definition of porosity suggests small "pores," or pre-defined holes in a membrane for air or liquid to penetrate. True to the analogy, passing through prison walls is not a free-for-all. We must not conclude that the people confined in prisons are somehow "freer" than we imagined. This article does not seek an overhaul of our understanding of prisons as harsh and coercive. Instead, it urges us to reframe our understanding of how prisons operate, how outside resources are integral to the experience of prison punishment, and how pernicious actions can be tolerated by well-intentioned onlookers in a closed environment.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, by acknowledging that prisons are porous, we can better analyze racial and class inequality in the mass incarceration era. Porosity is a more accurate framework through which to view the cycle of arrest and confinement that pervades socioeconomically disadvantaged communities and unhoused populations (Irwin 2005; Kohler-Hausmann 2018; Sufrin 2017). Additionally, we can more precisely theorize the collateral consequences of mass incarceration when we view prisons as porous – and therefore inextricably connected to communities. High rates of incarceration among Black and Latino men impact those who are left behind (Rios 2011; Roberts 2004): the imprisonment of one individual shapes marriage and relationships (Baćak and Kennedy 2015; Comfort 2007; Turney and Wildeman 2013), intimate partners' mental health outcomes (Wildeman et al. 2012), and children's educational and health outcomes (Turney and Haskins 2014; Turney 2014). Each of these outcomes aligns with a theoretical framework in which prisons and communities infuse with each other in a bidirectional manner.

In fact, viewing prisons as a total institution may do a disservice to our understanding of inequality in the contemporary carceral landscape. It may risk further marginalizing already-marginalized populations. The extent to which prisons are hidden from public view limits critical analyses of their efficacy and harms (Foucault 1977). Rather than viewing prisons at the margins of society, they are better conceived as "interfaces" in which contested political, economic, and social interests are embattled (Gilmore 2007). Scholars who study prisons – especially those who physically enter prisons themselves – recognize the murky boundaries of carceral punishment (Russell and Carlton 2020; Turner 2016). When we consider how outside institutions like religion permeate prison walls, we can finally acknowledge that prisons do not "remove" individuals from society, but rather they transfer them to a controlled, punitive location that can never been fully unlinked from the outside world. No longer is incarceration a siloed experience: instead, it is inextricably connected with other important institutions that pervade individuals' lives before, during, and after incarceration. This finding can help both scholars and the public recognize that prisons are firmly rooted in the social structure in measurable ways. If prisons are reconceived as porous, we may feel a greater responsibility to peer inside to understand how punishment is shaped by external institutions over which we have greater control. We may take a stronger role

in advocating for change in institutions that have direct and regular contact with prisons. We may no longer believe that reforming what goes on inside prisons is beyond reach.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest   The author declares no conflict of interest.

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