MuseumsForward

Changing the Narrative of Incarceration: Ethical Interpretation of Prison Museums

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Abstract

U.S. prisons have historically been sites of debate, contestation, and uprising. Historic prison museums are part of the dialogue around the U.S. penal system. In the past, these museums have been criticized for upholding and reinforcing existing mechanisms of power, control, and classification, but more recently they are attempting to prioritize access, discourse, and social responsibility. The purpose of this research study was to investigate if and how historic prison museums engage visitors in thinking about contemporary issues of incarceration. The study was designed as a descriptive survey. A total of 55 adults were interviewed, 32 at Old Idaho Penitentiary, Boise, ID, and 23 at Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, PA. Results demonstrate that adults visiting prison museums do think about contemporary issues of incarceration during their visit, issues such as the daily lives of incarcerated people, mental health of prisoners, the death penalty, and issues of race. However, the ability of prison museums to challenge visitors' mind-sets around incarceration was limited. Prison museum staff can use the results of this study to advance institutional goals towards ethical interpretation of the site. Additionally, museum staff can use the results of this study to better understand how to engage visitors in other controversial or politically sensitive issues.

Keywords prison museums; incarceration; museum visitors; descriptive survey; ethical interpretation

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Accepted: June 10, 2022

Published: June 10, 2022

Introduction

U.S. prisons have historically been sites of debate, contestation, and uprising. Not only is the U.S. penal system largely ineffective, it also directly reflects "a legacy of racism as well as discrimination against [the] poorest and least educated citizens" (Schwarzer, 2012). At the end of 2016, an estimated 1 in 36 adults were either in correctional custody or had just been released under state supervision (Slavinski & Spencer-Suarez, 2021). According to the World Health Organization, countries like the U.S. lack proper mental health services and use prisons as a dumping ground for the mentally ill (WHO Resource Book, 2005). Interestingly, Liat Ben-Moshe (2020) argues that the deinstitutionalization or the closing of asylums in the United States demonstrates that true prison abolition is possible. The author pushes back against anti-prison abolition discourse that created a narrative of "jails as the new asylums" (pg. 33). In recent years, national discussion around mass incarceration has increased, however, the stigma around formerly incarcerated people and their families has remained (Ševčenko, 2017).

Part of this larger dialogue around the U.S. penal system are museums that have taken over historic prison sites within the U.S. These sites balance visitor expectations, funding, and ethical considerations when interpreting their sites for the public (McCreery, 2015). In the 1970's, museums were criticized by museum scholars for upholding and reinforcing existing mechanisms of power, control, and classification. As a result, 'new museology' has dominated museum scholarship, demanding that museums take a more active role in tackling discrimination, and inequality (Europa, 2015; Schwarzer, 2012; McCreery 2015). For example, Sean Kelley, the Director of Interpretation at Eastern State Penitentiary began a 2020 virtual lecture with the statement "we are a site of conscience" and argued for better, more socially responsible interpretation of sites of incarceration (Kelley, 2020). This article describes a qualitative research study designed to investigate if and how historic prison museums engage visitors in contemporary issues of incarceration.

Social conflict and the U.S. penal system

U.S. prisons are the visual embodiment of both justice and the State's presumed right over life and death (McLennan, 2008). The question of how and to what end, people convicted of a crime should be punished has been a source of conflict and crisis that has played out as many different prison models have been adopted and later discredited. In the

late 1800's to early 1900's, prisons generally focused on penal-servitude, or as in the case of Eastern State Penitentiary, the philosophy of rehabilitation through isolation and education (McLennan, 2008; Wintermute, 2017). However, even during the early years of the U.S. penal system, these models of incarceration were heavily criticized. For instance, it was common for free workingmen to go on strike, petition, and boycott the use of contract prison labor for both moral and economic reasons (McLennan, 2008). Similarly, after Charles Dicken's visited Eastern State penitentiary, he wrote a scathing indictment of the use of solitary confinement as immoral and unethical (Wintermute, 2017).

In 1921, Spencer Miller, a Progressive era prison reformist, remarked that the true goal of prison reform should be prison abolition (Rubin, 2021). Interestingly, the U.S. prison population remained impressively stable between the 1920's and the 1970's with approximately 110 prisoners per 100,000 residents (Sampson & Loeffler, 2010). However, it is important to note that there were significant demographic changes during this period, with Black and Brown people being incarceration more frequently than Whites, mostly due to laws meant to enforce existing racial hierarchies (Waterman, 2016). 100 years after Miller's remarks, the U.S. penal system is left reeling from hard on crime policies, and the legacy of mass incarceration (Rubin, 2021).

The growth of the U.S. penal system from the 1970's onward has had an incalculable effect on the already disadvantaged minority groups of America (Petitt & Western, 2004). In 2008, the number of prisoners was estimated at an alarming rate of 504 per 100,000 persons (Sampson & Loeffler, 2010). In some segments of the population, it has become more likely for an individual to serve time than to attend college. Scholars have isolated a combination of factors including poverty, unemployment, family disruption, and race as having a clear link with high levels of incarceration. According to Sampson and Loeffler (2010) these social factors tend to cluster together and intersect creating "concentrated disadvantage" among certain communities (pg. 26). To make matters worse, these communities are often already stigmatized, leading to harsher sentencing than in communities that do not have these factors. In 2015, the policies of incarceration that led to an "era of mass incarceration", were being challenged and recognized by public officials as having ultimately failed (Ševčenko, 2017). This political reckoning was brought on, largely because of concerted efforts by scholars, activists, and protestors who in the 2016 Presidential election, raised public awareness and demanded Bill Clinton address the legacy of his 1994 "tough on crime" bill that increased rates of incarceration by

60%. Ultimately, the history of the U.S. Penal System is consistently echoed by resistance spurred by prison philosophy and education (Ševčenko, 2017).

U.S. Narratives on Incarceration

U.S. prison policy, especially in the age of mass incarceration has been supported by dominant narratives, espoused by politicians and existing within the public consciousness. The ideas discussed here are not an exhaustive list of myths around the U.S. penal system but serve as general background documented in criminology literature. Firstly, the "common-sense" theory of deterrence, refers to the belief that harsher punishment, including longer prison sentences and more difficult or painful conditions act as a more effective deterrent for criminals (Listwan et al., 2011 pg.1). Specific instances of this theory in effect can be seen in the mid-1990's when efforts were made by elected officials to reduce prison amenities such as access to a college education, televisions, exercise equipment, and good-quality food (Lacayo, 1995; Petersilia, 2003). The theory of deterrence has however, been largely critiqued by criminologists in recent years. For example, literature on prison recidivism indicates high levels of parole failure despite the threat of returning to prison (Hughs, Wilson, & Beck, 2001; Petersilia, 2003; Pew Center on the States, 2011). In fact, imprisonment is now thought to moderately increase the likelihood of future criminal activity (Listwan et al., 2011). However, despite changes in criminologist thinking, the lingering impact of past policies still effects the politics and perception of the U.S. prison system.

Additionally, conversations around the U.S. penal system often "operate within a framework of personal responsibility: the idea that those deemed "guilty" are caught in the system due to their own moral failings" (Schenwar et al., 2020 pg. 9). This allows lawmakers and members of the public to ignore mechanisms of oppression such as racism, classism, and ableism which impact an individual's overall likelihood to commit a crime and the severity of punishment for that crime. Law (2020) argues that the U.S. legal and penal system directly contradicts the assertion that imprisonment encourages people to take personal responsibility for their actions. Instead, people are put through a legal process which encourages an offender to deny responsibility, then they are locked away from victims and society, denying them the opportunity to make amends. These myths, along with other assumptions held by the public, such as: prisons make the community safer, incarceration helps victims heal, and prisons are

spaces for rehabilitation, all impact how the public thinks about the U.S. prison systems and how/if they demand reform.

The issue with reform

Reformers, scholars, and activists have shaped the U.S. Penal System with varying success, but ultimately failed to stop widespread prison expansion (Terwiel, 2020). According to Schenwar et al. (2020), it should not be a surprise that prison reform has been unsuccessful, because the creation of the U.S. prison itself was meant to reform criminal justice system of the time. Prison reformers who highlight U.S. fiscal concerns and the cost of prisons, often unknowingly propel prison budget-cuts that do little to reduce the prison population but serve mostly to render the lives of the incarcerated much less comfortable (Gottschalk, 2007; Whitlock & Heitzig 2021). This can be contrasted with moral, ethical, and political arguments such as the disproportional effect of the prison system on African Americans and other minority groups.

While this argument is certainly compelling, it does not attack the nature of incarceration itself, and has led prison conservatives to create tougher sentences for everyone rather than lessening the punishments of minority groups. Similarly, activists who argue for the abolition of the death penalty run the risk of further entrenching the carceral state as "life in prison" is seen a suitable compromise to the injustice of sending a person to death (Gottschalk, 2007). These examples illustrate on-going, well-meaning attempts at prison reform, and demonstrate the need for a different bottom-up, holistic, and intersectional methods for research and activism of the U.S. carceral state.

"Resistance, like power, is everywhere," and recognizing when and where there have been long and ongoing struggles against the power of the prison system, serves to deconstruct the primary assumptions by which U.S. prisons operate (Smith & Kinzel, 2020 pg. 96) The legacy of mass incarceration is being talked about actively in public discourse and politicians are changing "tough on crime" policies. For example, in late 2018, former President Donald Trump signed a law aimed at reducing the Federal prison population. As a result, incarceration levels fell to 810 inmates per 100,000 adults, the same as in 1995 (Gramlich, 2021). However, this is a modest decline, and further efforts to curb incarceration rates will require combatting the public discourse that suggests "hard on crime" policies keep society safe.

It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of even the most current forms of penal reform, as Whitlock & Heitzig (2021) point out, "the terrain is murky and erroneous" (pg. 5). Moving forward Gottschalk

(2007), argues that real change will occur when penal experts view engaging the public about the future of the U.S. Penal System as key aspect of their job. Specifically, Gottschalk (2007) says that experts need to provide a comparative history of various penal systems, discuss the extensive reach of modern correctional institutions, and figure out how to make prisons and the lives of the incarcerated, more visible to the public. In summation, efforts to resist and reform the U.S. Penal System must consider how their approach may serve to problematize incarceration or further entrench it as a necessity into the public consciousness.

Prison museums and social good

History and public memory are often at odds with each other, as dominant narratives are created from the perceived sense of self of the majority group and at the expense of alternative historical truths (Britton, 1997). Museums and heritage sites profess that they feel a professional obligation to avoid being political and therefore often refuse to engage with contemporary issues (Ševčenko, 2010). In this effort to stay apolitical, museums became complicit in maintaining the status quo. However, Rosenzweig and Thelen (1999) conducted the first survey on American's relationship to history and found that "Americans… want to make a difference, to take responsibility for themselves, and others" (pg.12). Rosenzweig and Thelen concluded that "assembling experiences into patterns and narratives [allow people] to make sense of the past, set priorities, project what might happen next, and try and shape the future" (pg.12) Also in 1999, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience was founded with the goal of creating safe space for remembering and preserving traumatic memories and enabling visitors to build connections between the past and present human rights issues (Sites of Conscience, n.d.). This movement created a new role for museums and historic sites, and it demonstrated that being a socially responsible museum required moving past education and entertainment to holistically embracing socially relevant missions. (Hein, 2005).

Across the U.S. more than 50 former prisons now operate as museums (Ross, 2012). Unfortunately, despite seemingly good intentions, some scholars assert that prison museums have failed to meet their full civic potential (Tewell, 2018). In fact, it is argued that current forms of museum interpretation diminish visitors' ability and desire to engage in penal reform. Prison voyeurism, dark tourism, and the commodification of prison museums all serve to distance visitors from carceral realities. Interpretation in prison museums, is accused of idealizing and exoticizing incarceration instead of engaging with

contemporary issues surrounding mass incarceration. According to Foucault (1984), museums are closely related to prisons, they are both built environments that reinforce hegemonic power structures through classification, observation, and ranking, therefore any prison museum classification methods may serve to entrench visitor perceptions. In addition, organizations and activists have expressed concern that prison museums historicize incarceration to such an extent that visitor do not see it as a contemporary issue (Tewell, 2018).

Research into prison museum has shown that visitors generally have very little in common with the people who are most likely to be incarcerated (Knackmuhs et al., 2021). Specifically, visitors tend to be older, white, relatively wealthy, and well-educated. This difference creates a privileged class of "penal spectators" whose response to the thrill and danger of prison museum's interpretation may be indifference, or increased support for punitive measures. Ferguson and Piche (2015) argue that "penal spectatorship can naturalize the discourse of the state and direct its policies in punitive directions" (pg.358). Scholars assert that to ultimately serve the public good, prison museums need to combat their role in creating dominant narratives by embracing narrative nuance, cultivating inclusive relationships, creating contemporary connections, and contextualizing the site and story (Ferguson & Piche, 2015; McCreery, 2015; Tewell, 2018).

The opportunity and responsibility of museums to engage with social issues is well-documented and researched. New museology practices assert that museums can positively impact the social well-being of visitors and society at large (Ross, 2004; Anderson, 2012; Low, 2012; Weil, 2002). In fact, to ethical justify their existence, museums must abandon elitist, monolithic views of history in favor of a more democratized, plural representation of historical facts (Ross, 2004). Specifically, new museology is concerned with "community development, reflecting on the driving forces of social progress and associating them in its plans for the future" (Mayrand, 2015 pg. 117). McCreery (2015) investigated institutional efforts of prison museums to ethically interpret incarceration. The study found that staff at all 3 study sites indicated a desire to increase awareness of issues with contemporary justice issues. These goals, however, were interspersed with other institutional priorities like highlighting the role of the prison on the local community. Similarly, staff at each institution reported a need to balance interpretive goals with visitor expectations. For instance, staff at Ohio State Reformatory felt that a visitor who came to hear about the escape of Al Capone, might feel ambushed by a conversation about contemporary issues. By comparing all 3 sites,

McCreery demonstrated that despite similar intentions, the location, resources, history, and staff all impacted the degree in which the museums attempted to interpret contemporary issues.

Building off the McCreery (2015) study this research focuses on visitor outcomes of prison museum interpretation to better understand how prison museums are impacting thoughts around contemporary incarceration. Study participants relied on their own backgrounds and understanding of the U.S. prison system as well as their own personal experience at the site to reflect on how and if their thinking changed during their visit. Some participant responses are open speculation or patently untrue assertions about the U.S. penal system. These responses, however, are valuable to this study because they demonstrate the way in which knowledge, facts, assumptions, and dominant political narratives intertwine with what people see when they visit prison museum sites and help to create their understanding of the contemporary U.S. prison system.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to investigate if and how historic prison museums engage visitors in contemporary issues of incarceration. The study was driven by two research questions:

1. What do people think about relative to contemporary issues within the US penal system while visiting a historic prison museum? And
2. In what ways do people feel that their knowledge of the US penal system was challenged or extended during their visit?

Methods

Methods

This study used a descriptive survey design (Creswell, 2014), to amass data on the nature of visitor engagement with contemporary issues within the U.S. penal system while visiting historic prison museums.

Research sites

Data were collected via in-person interviews at two historic prison museums in the United States: Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, PA and Old Idaho Penitentiary, Boise, ID. From the 50+ historic prison museums in the U.S., these two sites were selected because of their varying geographical regions as well as their varying historical contexts. Eastern State Penitentiary is a well-known private, urban prison museum, while Old Idaho Penitentiary is a smaller public museum.

These differences helped to reflect larger trends and patterns of prison museum visitors more generally.

Eastern State Penitentiary is one of the most well-known historic prisons in the world, built in 1829, the prison is known for its architecture and rehabilitation programs meant to inspire penitence from the incarcerated (Schwarzer, 2012). Architecturally, it was built in a neo-Gothic style, and was described as a "forced monastery, a machine for reform" by the architect John Haviland (Bullet, 2020 pg. 1). The prison operated on the "Pennsylvania System", a method of incarceration that was considered to be a humane improvement from prisons of the past by its creators because it focused on rehabilitation through isolation and labor (Vaux, 1984). Eastern State Penitentiary stopped the practice of solitary confinement in 1913 due to overcrowding, and it was officially closed in 1970 (Bullet, 2020). After running through several development options, the prison was opened for public tours in 1994. Visitors to Eastern State Penitentiary see a foreboding structure, with steep brick walls, the center is an octagonal shape with seven radiating single-story cell blocks, and extra two-story cell blocks built as the prison struggled with overcrowding. The prison is maintained as a ruin, so aside from certain exhibits, such as the Al Capone cell, there has been little to no upkeep or repair. While visiting, people may see and read information related to the prison history, view art installments, listen to an audio guide, and explore an exhibit related specifically to contemporary issues of incarceration.

Old Idaho Penitentiary was built in 1870, and "is one of only four territorial prisons open to the public today" (Idaho State Historical Society, n.d. pg.1). The prison was built before Idaho became a state and is described as having withstood the city of Boise's transition from "the wild west to a mid-20th century capital city" (pg. 1). While it started as a single cell house, it grew to several distinct buildings that are surrounded by 17-foot-high sandstone wall. According to current Old Idaho Penitentiary employees, the sandstone for the walls were mined from a nearby quarry by prisoners and used to build the wall. Prison labor, solitary confinement, and executions all took place at the prison. The prison was closed in 1973 and is currently open to the public for visits and tours. Upon visiting the site, people enter through the administration building where the wardens office, armory, and visitation rooms would have been. Visitors can explore on their own or take a guided tour. While at the site, visitors will see different cell houses, the dining hall, multipurpose room, the Rose Garden (where executions took place), the women's ward, and areas that served as solitary confinement cells. Informational labels are dispersed

throughout the site and provide information about life in the prison, executions, specific practices, and some of the inmates.

Participants

A total of 55 adults participated in this study, 32 at Old Idaho Penitentiary and 23 at Eastern State Penitentiary. Fifty-five percent (n=30) of participants identified as male, 44% (n=24) as female, and 1% (n=1) as non-binary. Thirty one percent (n=17) were 18-29 years old, 38% (n=21) were 30-50 years old, and 31% (n=17) 50-70 years old. Seventy-five percent (n=38) of participants identified as White, 14% (n=7) as Hispanic, 4% (n=2) as Asian, 4% (n=2) as Black, 2% (n=1) as Native American, and 2% (n=1) as Pacific Islander.

Forty-seven percent (n=26) said this was their first time visiting a prison museum; 24% (n=13) said that they visited one other prison museum before; 15% (n=8) said that they had visited the same site at least once before; and 11% (n=6) said that they had visited multiple prison museums in the past. Forty-five percent of adults (n=25) said they visited that day to have an experience. For example, one participant stated, "It was listed as a top attraction in Boise." Twenty-five percent (n=14) visited to facilitate an experience for others in their group. Twenty-four percent (n=13) visited to explore the prison and learn about the history of U.S. incarceration.

Finally, more than half of the study participants said they had a connection to the modern U.S. penal system (see Table 1).

Table 1: Frequency of participants' connection to the U.S. penal system (N=55).

	Frequency	# of Participants
No connection	43%	23
Acquaintance/friend was incarcerated	24%	13
Family member was incarcerated	26%	14
They/themselves were incarcerated	4%	2
They/themselves worked in a prison	4%	2

Data collection and analysis

Data collection occurred over two days in March 2022. Participants were intercepted at the end of their visit using convenience sampling. Only adults were approached to participate and if individuals were part of a group, only one member of the group was asked to give responses in the interview. Interviews lasted approximately 10-15 minutes. Interviews were structured with a combination of qualitative and quantitative questions. Questions were meant to encourage visitors to think about how they reflected on the information during their visit, or how much they feel like the information challenged or expanded their thinking (see Appendix A). Qualitative responses were analyzed using emergent coding. Both qualitative and quantitative data were summated, averaged, and turned into percentages to better understand trends in the data.

Limitations

Due to travel requirements, data were only collected in the month of March, limiting the study participants to those who visited during that time. This may have impacted the type of visitor who is going to the museum. For example, participants may be more likely to be locals rather than tourists or vice versa. Also, both sites are outdoors and are in areas where the temperature can drop extremely low in March. This may have impacted the kind of people who were visiting but also who may be willing to participate in the interviews. For instance, families or the elderly may be underrepresented in the sample because of the weather conditions.

Next, it should be noted that the length of each interview was only around 10-15 minutes. While interviewees were welcome to take up more time and some interviews went as long as 45 minutes, on average interviews were kept short to maximize the number of people the researcher was able to interview. Longer interviews would have allowed for greater reflection and perhaps a better understanding of what visitors saw and experienced.

Additionally, it is important to note that Eastern State Penitentiary had an exhibit specifically discussing issues of mass incarceration during the data collection period, whereas Old Idaho Penitentiary did not. Interpretive differences across sites allow for the sample to better represent the breadth of prison museums nationwide. However, these differences also may cause for some nuance of visitor experience at an individual site to be lost.

Lastly, the study used convenience sampling and intercepted participants at the end of their visit. This may have caused the

participant sample to be biased towards people who felt invested in their experience and wanted an opportunity to reflect. To mitigate this bias, the researcher assured visitors that "all answers are good answers" and offered goodies like muffins and hot chocolate during the interview to help incentivize participation. Taken together, these limitations describe the engagement of visitors at a specific time and place, and the results should be considered with these limitations in mind.

Results

Reflecting on contemporary issues within the U.S. penal system

What participants thought about

Ninety-one percent (n=50) of participants said they thought about something related to the contemporary U.S. penal system during their museum visit; 9% (n=5) said that they did not. When asked what they thought about, several themes emerged including a) daily life and environment of prisoners, b) prison reform, c) cautionary tale, d) death within the prison, and e) dangerous prisoners.

Forty-two percent (n=21) of participants reported thinking about the daily life or physical environment in which prisoners are kept. For instance, a participant from Old Idaho Penitentiary (OIP) stated, "I thought about all the history and the landscape. I found it interesting that everything was built by the prisoners, and they were forced to work. I know they still have prisoners do work now, but I wonder what kind of work and whether it is as hard."

Twenty-eight percent (n=14) of participants indicated that they thought about prison reform or more specifically the way prisons have changed overtime. At Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP), one participant noted, "Things feel like they have really changed and improved overtime, but this place closed in 1971 and that wasn't that long ago."

Sixteen percent (n=8) of participants thought that the prison museum was a warning about how bad prisons can be, and why they themselves do not want to go. At OIP, a participant stated they thought about "how much it would suck to be here. The museum is really trying to send that message and I got it."

Finally, 8% (n=4) thought about death in the prison: "We talked about how Idaho had just got rid of the firing squad in 2009. They killed people right here, it took a long time and that feels way too recent." And 6% (n=3) thought about how dangerous prisoners are: "Really, just about the people, how bad some of the people were."

What participants talked about

Seventy-six percent (n=38) of participants said that they talked to each other or another person at the prison about something to do with the current U.S. penal system. Twenty-four percent (n=17) said they did not have any conversations about the U.S. prison system. Most of these people were visiting the museum alone. When asked what they talked about, participants identified several themes including a) prison life/environment, b) crimes committed by prisoners, c) prison reform, d) health issues/death, and e) incarcerating children.

Consistent with what people thought about during their visit, the most common discussion topic (37%, n=14) was about the daily life and difficult environment in which prisoners were kept. For instance, a participant from ESP stated,

> "We just pointed out things in the cells and stuff. We talked about the blankets and pillows, how everything is falling apart. Also, how cold it is. They probably did not have space heaters in 1851. We talked about how the U.S. treat prisoners in general, the horrible conditions. Where is the oversight?"

Twenty four percent (n=9) of participants stated that they talked about the kinds of crimes that prisoners committed or how dangerous criminals are in general. At OIP, one participant responded, "We talked about the people who were in here and what they might have done to get imprisoned." Eighteen percent (n=7) stated they talked about health issues or death in the prison, 13% (n=5) talked about prison reform, and 8% (n=3) talked about the incarceration of children in the U.S.

To generate a clearer understanding of participant engagement with topics related to contemporary issues of incarceration, the researcher listed various themes participants may have seen or thought about while visiting the museum. Table 2 shows how many participants said they thought about something to do with these issues.

Table 2: Frequency of participants who said they thought about these issues during their museum visit (N=55)

	Frequency	# of Participants
Life in prison	91%	50
Prisoners and mental health	69%	38
Racism within penal system	56%	31
Mass incarceration	49%	27
The war on drugs	40%	22
Death penalty	91%	50
Children born in prison	45%	25
Prison reform	55%	30
Family impact	24%	13

Challenging or expanding thinking on U.S. penal system

What participants reported they learned

When prompted, all study participants (n=55) reported feeling like they learned something new about the U.S. penal system during their visit. When asked what they learned, four themes emerged including a) prison history, b) how prisons have improved, c) the daily life of prisoners, and d) dangerous prisoners.

Forty percent (n=17) of participants reported learning about prison history or practices used in historical prisons such as solitary confinement. For example, at ESP a participant said, "It was interesting to learn how the U.S. has tried diverse ways to handle criminals, with different models of prisons and such." Twenty-four percent (n=13) responded that they learned about how museums have improved overtime, such as this response from ESP: "I learned a lot about how this place has changed. The whole story of it. They went from solitary confinement to having Christmas parties together. Much more like how I hear prisons are now." Fifteen percent (n=8) of participants said they learned about the daily experience of being in prison, such as this response from OIP: "Yes, we learned how gross everything was. The cells were disgusting." Lastly, 4% (n=2) of participants stated that they learned about dangerous prisoners, such as this response from OIP: "I learned that there have been naughty people from the beginning of time."

What surprised participants

Seventy-three percent (n=33) of study participants said they were surprised by material about the U.S. prison system that they saw during their visit; 27% (n=12) said that what they saw at the museum met their expectations. Most of the participants who were surprised (79%, n=26) referred to bad prison practices, rules, and laws. This included practices like solitary confinement, incarcerating children with adults, and executions at the prison. For instance, a participant from ESP stated, "Yes, I was surprised by the kids that were held here with adults. That is wild that the U.S. ever did that." At OIP, one participant said, "How small solitary confinement is. It was surprising how different everyday life was for these people. Also, some of the punishments didn't seem justified."

Twenty-one percent (n=7) of participants were surprised by the amount of community/leisure activities allowed in prisons. At ESP, a participant explained, "I was surprised by how much it was like a community. They had sports teams, they had holidays. It was really interesting."

What participants disagreed with

When asked, 51% (n=27) of participants said that they saw something about the U.S. penal system during their museum visit that they disagreed with; 49% (n=26) reported that they did not disagree with anything that they saw. Most of the participants' reasoning for not disagreeing is illustrated by this participant response at ESP: "...You can't disagree with history." When asked to elaborate on this response, participants expressed empathy for historical figures who designed the prison system, such as: "I don't want to judge them for doing the best with what they had", or "It doesn't seem fair to disagree with what they did when I wasn't there and don't understand if it was necessary or not".

Of those participants that did disagree with things they saw, 37% (n=10) stated they disagreed with the prison conditions, 30% (n=8) with harsh sentences for minor crimes, 19% (n=5) disagreed with the imprisonment of children, 7% (n=2) disagreed with the use of solitary confinement, 4% (n=1) disagreed with allowing prisoners to have leisure activities, and 4% (n=1) disagreed with the use of the death penalty. One participant from OIP, who identified as a current police officer stated, "I disagree that they are allowed to have recreation." At ESP, one participant responded that they disagreed with, "The small crimes that got people put in a place like this, but people thought differently back then." When stating what they disagreed with, some participants compared what they saw to their own understanding of

modern prisons, such as this response from ESP: "Yes, the overall conditions, like I get that we need prisons to be scary, but more modern prisons are doing a better job of treating people humanely."

Whether participants thought differently

Lastly, participants were asked whether any of the material they saw prompted them to think differently about the modern U.S. penal system. Sixty-four percent (n=34) responded yes, whereas 36% (n=19) responded that they felt the same as before they visited. For participants who responded yes, four themes emerged as to what material prompted them to think differently, including information on a) societal issues, laws, and trends, b) problems with health and safety, c) effectiveness of past penal punishment, and d) efforts to reform prisoners.

Thirty-two percent (n=11) of participants said that information on certain U.S. laws, prison practices, or general societal thinking prompted them to think differently about the U.S. penal system. At ESP, one participant pointed towards information about "Voter laws and voter suppression through the penal system" as changing their thinking.

Thirty-two percent (n=11) stated that information about poor health practices in the penal system prompted them to think differently. For instance, one participant of OIP stated, "Yes, I do think about the mental health issues. Seeing these cells really solidified how far we have come but how much farther we need to go."

Twenty one percent (n=7) said the information they saw prompted them to think that the modern penal system needed to have harsher punishment, such as this response from ESP: "Yeah, I think this place and prisons back in the day were about actual punishment, now they let people watch tv, and have so much recreation, no wonder we have so much recidivism."

Twenty one percent (n=7) responded that information about reforming prisoners prompted them to think differently. For example, at OIP, one participant noted, "I think their education effort here were good and we need more effort put into reform and helping people."

Discussion

Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to investigate if and how historic prison museums engage adult visitors in thinking about contemporary issues of incarceration. The following section of this article discusses the themes that emerged from participant responses

that either resist or confirm larger trends discussed in the literature regarding interpretive practices and ethical intent at prison museums.

Thinking about key issues within the U.S. penal system

The myriad of issues within the U.S. penal system such as mental health, overcrowding, racial injustice, and social injustice are well documented by penal scholars within the academic literature (Guetzkow & Schoon, 2015; Sampson & Loeffler, 2010; Schwarzer, 2012; Waterman, 2016). As ethical institutions bound by the rules of new museology, prison museums are tasked with interpreting these issues for the sake of public good (Ševčenko, 2010). Past scholars have shown that doing so in practices has proved to be a considerably difficult (McCreery 2015; Wilson, 2008; Tewell, 2020, Ferguson et al., 2015). Despite these difficulties, almost all participants in this study thought about contemporary issues within the U.S. prison system to some extent. The major issues thought about and discussed by museum visitors were the daily lives of incarcerated people, mental health issues, the death penalty, and issues of race.

It is unsurprising that participants thought most about the physical environment and daily life of prisoners while visiting a historic prison museum. According to prison museum staff, prison museums should be considered sites of conscience (Kelly, 2020). Staff assert that the museums draw their interpretive power from their physical location, connecting visitors to memories of human suffering. According to the Sites of Conscience (2021) website,

> "A Site of Conscience is a place of memory – such as a historic site, place-based museum or memorial – that prevents this erasure from happening in order to ensure a more just and humane future. Not only do Sites of Conscience provide safe spaces to remember and preserve even the most traumatic memories, but they enable their visitors to make connections between the past and related contemporary human rights issues."

Participant responses reflected this assertion by connecting the physical space of the museum to issues within the daily lives of prisoners. Smalls cells, lack of privacy, poor hygiene, and constant oversight were all referred within participant responses that reflect the indignities of daily life as a prisoner.

Mental health is an on-going issue within the U.S. penal system. The World Health Organization directly correlates the United States' high

prison population with a lack of proper mental health services (WHO Resource Book, 2005). Most participants said they saw or thought about something related to mental health while visiting the prison museum. However, participant responses focused on mental health within the prison or mental health issues caused by the prison rather than examining the link between incarceration rates and criminalizing the mentally ill. Bruggeman (2012) argues that some prison museums do a decent job of representing life in prison but fail to fully examine the reasons why people end up in jail in the first place. By failing to view mental health as a cause of incarceration, participants avoid critically examining key issues impacting current rates of incarceration like lack of mental health services and addiction.

Similarly, racist governmental policies have targeted the Black community, substantially accelerating rates of incarceration for Black men (Guetzkow & Schoon, 2015; Schwarzer, 2012; Whitlock & Heitzig, 2021). Despite some participants reporting that they thought or saw something related to race in the criminal justice system, they were not very likely to think about people of color being incarcerated at higher rates than their white counterparts. Instead, roughly half of those participants thought about segregation or ill-treatment of people of color in the prison. Similarly, participants were less likely to think about issues related to causes of incarceration such as mass incarceration or the war on drugs. This pattern supports trends establish by other research on visitor thinking at prison museums and may indicate a key limitation to prison museums helping stir actionable change.

Alternatively, some participants thought about darker themes such as death within the prison. When prompted most participants stated that they thought about the death penalty during their visit. Participant responses highlighting death, and the darker aspects or criminality and punishment are discussed in academic discourse as dark tourism (Ferguson et al., 2015; Tewell, 2020; Wilson, 2008). Tewell (2020) refers to dark tourism "an outgrowth of the morbid curiosity for death and disasters of the 19th and 20th century" (p. 56). They postulate that "American society's obsession with crime, and especially with cruel and unusual punishment, may offer [an] answer" as to why historic prison museums have flourished in the United States (Tewell, 2020 p. 57). Visitor fixation with darker themes at prison museums can restrict their ability to empathize with prisoner suffering and lead to the reification of visitor perception that harsh punishments are necessary for deterring crime (Wilson, 2008).

Challenges and the problem with prison reform

McCreery (2015) demonstrated that prison museum professionals view new museology practices as an institutional goal. New museology principles have been defined as intentionally representing "value, meaning, control, interpretation, authority and authenticity" within museums. This also refers to the redistribution of power within museums to further critique dominant power structures (Stam 1993 pg.1). However, these goals are impeded by the internal dynamics, funding, and visitors within prison museums. According to Tewell (2020), prison museums have failed to live up to their full-civic potential, in part because of the pressure to appeal to visitors and ensure institutional funding from governmental bodies or other stakeholders. To spike interest in visiting, prison museums have often had to lean into visitor expectations and motivations, for instance they offer ghost tours or other dark tourist activities alongside their primary educational experiences. The tension between these two interpretative mechanisms impacts overall visitor outcomes and ethical interpretation of the sites. While museum staff's intentions on how to interpret their site cannot be measured by assessing visitor's experience at the site, the ethical justification for the existence of the museum itself can be supported by evidence that prison museums are impacting the way visitors think about contemporary issues within the U.S. prison system.

Despite participant engagement with key issues in the U.S. prison system, responses were mixed as to whether the participants viewpoints were changed or challenged during their visit. A significant number of participants reported that their viewpoints were challenged. However, a small portion of those participants indicated that their mindset changed to think that harsher discipline was a necessity for reduced crime and recidivism. This means that only a little more than half of participants mindsets were changed to think differently about issues of prison reform, mental health, living conditions, or societal laws and trends that increase rates of incarceration.

While all of participants said that they learned about the U.S. penal system, only a little over half said that they saw something that they disagreed with. Wilson (2008) noted that prison museums do not facilitate truly empathetic responses towards incarcerated people and therefore can do very little to change the status quo. This assertion is supported by study participants who stated that they did not disagree with historical prison practices because it felt wrong to disagree with history. Interestingly, when asked to elaborate on why they did not disagree with anything they saw, participants expressed empathy with powerful historical figures who were tasked with creating the U.S. penal system rather than those who were incarcerated. Despite having

learned about the severity of penal punishment, having the viewpoints challenged or shifted, many participants were still unable to feel emboldened to actively disagree with what they saw. This is perhaps because the participant was not encouraged to think of alternatives to incarceration and they could not see past the societal view that prisons and prison practices are a necessity (Tewiel, 2020).

Some responses by study participants indicate ways in which assumptions, biases, or misinformation about the U.S. penal system interplay with facts presented by the museum. For instance, a participant believed amenities offered by current U.S. prisons lead to increased rates of recidivism, therefore they interpreted harsh penal punishment as reasonable and effective. This assumption relies on the deterrence theory of incarceration which "asserts that the deterrent effect of prisons will be stronger if inmates are not placed in so-called country club institutions but are instead exposed to harsh, painful environments" (Listwan et al., 2013 pg. 1). Contrary to the theory of deterrence, there is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that harsher prison conditions directly correlate with increased rates of criminal activity and recidivism (Chen & Shapiro, 2007; Listwan et al., 2013). Without being presented with direct evidence to the contrary, the museum visitor left the museum thinking that harsh punishment must have been more effective at deterring criminals in the past. This is an example of specific, well-documented assumptions held by the public that can be addressed by prison museums to challenge their understanding about the contemporary U.S. prison system.

Penal spectatorship refers "to the consumption of punishment from a social distance" which allows "citizens a voyeuristic glimpse into spectacles traditionally only available to those in proximity to the punished" (Ferguson et al., 2015, pg. 359). The consequences of penal spectatorship have been noted throughout the literature. According to Wilson (2008), visitors do not have personal connections with past prisoners and thus their suffering rarely evokes feelings of empathy. Penal spectatorship is considered especially problematic because distanced engagements with punishment can reinforce misconceptions about the penal system and reify existing sentiments about the viability of punitive punishment (Ferguson et al., 2015; Wilson 2008). In this study, more than half of participants said that they had some relationship to the U.S. penal system, including having friends, or family who have been incarcerated or having worked in a prison. The high frequency of participants having a relationship with the U.S. penal system may be due to how widespread and dominating the prison system has become in the lives of Americans. In some cases,

participants used their personal connections to the U.S. penal system to discuss how and if their knowledge was challenged or extended during their visit. This did not however, guarantee an empathetic response. Further study is needed to understand how and if a connection to the modern U.S. penal system impacts visitor's interpretation at a prison museum.

As noted throughout this section, there are several limitations to this study and further research is needed to fully understand the visitor interpretation at prison museums. Firstly, this study did not account for differences in responses across the two sites despite varying history, funding, staff, and overall interpretation. Comparing across sites would have allowed for a more critical understanding in how different methods of interpretation impact visitor outcomes. By not comparing across sites, this study focused on the effectiveness of prison museums but cannot generate recommendations for effective interpretive practices.

Additionally, this study did not consider participant predispositions towards the U.S. penal system other than asking whether they had any general connections to the U.S. penal system. More information is necessary to fully understand how that connection impacts an individual's perception of the penal system before ever visiting a prison museum. Asking participants to self-report whether their thinking was challenged or extended proved difficult because visitors often interpreted this question to mean what they learned and tried to avoid discussing changes to their political viewpoints. In general, there was some hesitation to discussing issues within the modern U.S. penal system because the topics felt overly political or controversial. Participants preferred to discuss what they saw or learned rather than their own opinions.

Implications

If prison museum staff strongly want to educate visitors on prison reform and dismantle dominant narratives that persist through U.S. society about criminality and incarceration, they must first take a critical look at current visitor outcomes after visiting a prison museum. The prison museum sites used for this research study are already thinking about and attempting to ethically interpret their sites. Eastern State Penitentiary currently has an exhibit called "Prisons Today" which directly addresses some contemporary issues of incarceration such as mass incarceration, rates of recidivism, impact on families and more. Eastern State Penitentiary is working directly with Old Idaho Penitentiary to improve upon their interpretation of the site. This study

provides practical and research implications for prison museums across the U.S. to begin to develop a set of best practices in interpretation of their sites. First, this study demonstrates that despite most participants visiting in hopes of a leisure or entertainment experience, visitors do actively learn and make connections to the contemporary U.S. prison system. However, this study also reveals the current failures of U.S. prison museums when attempting to challenge or extend visitor thinking around incarceration. While prison museums may collect some data about their visitors already, it is important for them to continue to measure how visitors are interpreting their sites to better understand the effectiveness and ethical implications of their interpretations.

Knowing that visitors are connecting their experience at the prison museum to contemporary issues around incarceration is encouraging for staff who are attempting to ethically interpret their sites. There are, however, some major hurdles to overcome before prison museums can argue that their interpretation is creating meaningful change. For instance, many visitors claimed that they did not disagree with any of the prison practices they saw "because it does not make sense to disagree with history." This mindset can be unsettled by demonstrating that these spaces and practices do not only exist solely within history but also have a clear and linear relationship to the modern penal system where many of the prison practices continue today. To capitalize on these connections, prison museums need to stress how prison reform happened historically and ways that people can become involved in creating change in the present-day. This will require prison museums to take a stronger stance on issues of incarceration that could alienate some visitors or potential funders. However, this is a necessary challenge to overcome to meaningfully disrupt common biases and assumptions around the contemporary U.S. penal system.

Historically, it has proven to be difficult to create effective change within the U.S. penal system because reform efforts that focus on one specific issue often reinforce incarceration in general. Effective change is believed to occur when the very principle of incarceration is challenged. Narratives of incarceration that persisted throughout some visitor responses include the perceived necessity of "hard on crime" policies, a general fear of incarcerated people, and assumption that modern prisons have greatly improved. This study demonstrates that while visitors learn about the modern U.S. penal system, they generally think about reform in terms of specific issues within the system such as poor treatment of prisoners, the death penalty or race issues instead of questioning the prison system. The literature on prison reform has

demonstrated that focusing on specific issues generally reinforces systems of incarceration and has been unsuccessful in generating substantive change.

Based on participant responses and the researchers own experience at the sites, these prison museums currently focus their interpretation on the historical context of their site without exploring the history and creation of the penal system in general. Therefore, prison museums should provide interpretations that inspire visitors to question the very existence of the prison system. For example: why do systems of incarceration exist? Who do they serve? What are the alternatives to incarceration? How has the history of the U.S. penal system informed public perception of criminality, mental health, race, and poverty? If prison museums challenge the perceived necessity of incarceration, it could be instrumental in challenging the status quo of how prisons are perceived by the U.S. public. This could eventually help lead to substantive change in how the U.S. approaches criminality, punishment, and reform.

Lastly, an exciting anecdotal finding that came from this study was prison museum visitors' willingness to discuss difficult and politically charged topics around incarceration. Most participants felt comfortable and even appreciated being able to freely share their opinions. For those participants that were interviewed in a group, there were interesting discussions that occurred when they were given the opportunity to sit and reflect on what they had learned. While these discussions were not considered part of the study, they were an interesting by-product that demonstrated the value of including questions, reflections, and interactions with staff/experts as part of a museum learning.

This study should be used as a reference point or source of inspiration for further research into visitor outcomes at prison museums. Possible next steps include a larger study with a bigger sample size that includes a greater number of prison museum sites. This is important for establishing clearer trends in the data. A larger data set would also allow researchers to determine if and how visitor connection to the U.S. penal system impacts visitor interpretive outcomes. Lastly, to generate a set of interpretive best practices, researchers should also look at how interpretive practices across different prison museums changes visitor interpretation at each site.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Getting Started

1) Please describe why you visited the prison museum today.
2) Is this your first visit to a prison museum? If no, how many prison museums you have visited before?
3) I am going to read you 5 options meant to help understand your relationship to the U.S. Penal System, please choose the one that best describes you.
    a) I have no connection to the U.S. Penal System
    b) I have an acquaintance/friend who is or has been incarcerated in a U.S. prison.
    c) I have a family member who is or has been incarcerated in a U.S. prison.
    d) I/myself have been incarcerated in a U.S. prison.
    e) I have worked in a U.S. prison.

Reflecting on Contemporary Issues within the U.S. Prison System

4) During your visit today what did you find yourself thinking about? Did you find yourself thinking about anything to do with the U.S. prison system? If so, what about it?
5) During your visit did you talk to anyone about anything to do with the U.S. prison system? If yes, what did you talk about?
6) I am going to read you a list of topics related to the U.S. prison system. For each one, please respond yes no or unsure if you remember seeing or thinking about something related to the topic during your visit today. [If yes, ask what they saw and/or thought about.]
    a) The life of an incarcerated person (yes/no/unsure)

b) Prisoners and mental health (yes/no/unsure)
c) Racism within the criminal justice system (yes/no/unsure)
d) The era of mass incarceration generally (yes/no/unsure)
e) The war on drugs (yes/no/unsure)
f) Death penalty (yes/no/unsure)
g) Children born in prison (yes/no/unsure)
h) Prison reform (yes/no/unsure)
i) Family impact of incarceration (yes/no/unsure)

Challenging or Expanding Thinking on U.S. Prison System

7) Did you feel like you learned anything new about the U.S. prison system during your visit? If yes, what did you learn?
8) Were you surprised by any of the material about the U.S. prison system you saw during your visit? If so, explain what the material was and why.
9) Was there any material about the U.S. prison system that you disagreed with during your visit? If so, explain what the material was and why.
10) Did any of the material you saw today prompt you to think differently about the U.S. prison system? If yes, please describe the material and how it made you think differently.

Personal Information

11.) Would you be willing to answer a couple questions about yourself? Each question is entirely optional.

a) What is your gender identity?
b) What is your age?
c) How would you describe your ethnic background?
d) What is your current occupation?