

Joan Petersilia: A Review of Her Work and Contributions

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Abstract

This entry reviews the work of Professor Joan Petersilia, an award winning and highly impactful applied criminologist with expertise in corrections and public policy. The focus is on the content and impact of her research on crime control in general and corrections in particular, as well as her standing in the field of criminology and among criminal justice practitioners.

Main text

Joan Petersilia (1951-), formerly the Director of the Criminal Justice Program at RAND and currently a Professor Emerita of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California, Irvine and the Albert A. Sweet Professor of Law and Stanford University, is a preeminent scholar and one of the most widely-known and respected criminologists in the world. She has produced award-winning criminological research that systematically addresses pressing problems in sentencing and corrections. As Todd Clear, Provost at Rutgers University and a President of the American Society of Criminology, explained: "Nobody can write about corrections in the 20th and 21st Century without citing her work" (cited in Lane 2006, 14). This body of work and her sustained commitment to bring social science research to bear on crime policy has been heralded by scholars, government officials, and practitioners alike, and it has earned her the Stockholm Prize in Criminology 2014, arguably the most prestigious award in criminology.

Professor Petersilia is known for her demonstrated ability to consistently produce innovative high caliber research, serve as a clear and compelling voice on behalf of research with policy implications, *and* ensure that criminological work is brought to bear on pressing problems related to corrections. She is the rare distinguished academic who has consistently had a significant impact on the criminal justice system in general and the operation of corrections in particular. As a former President of the American Society of Criminology and the California Association of Criminal Justice Research, Professor Petersilia describes herself as an applied criminologist, and more recently she has written about her role as an "embedded criminologist" (Petersilia 2008).

The hallmark of Petersilia's research is an empirical focus on some of the most important crime policy issues our times. In a published review of Professor Petersilia's work, aptly titled "Joan Petersilia: A Life of Policy-Relevant Corrections Research," Jodi Lane (2006), one of Professor Petersilia's former Ph.D. students, explains that rather than being interested in the causes of crime, Professor Petersilia is interested in the criminal justice system, especially how it processes people and how it makes decisions about various sanctions. With this focus front and center, Professor Petersilia has studied an array of topics, from the effectiveness of felony probation and the impact of intermediate sanctions to the complexities surrounding prisoner

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reentry. Her work on these and other issues focus on improving the corrections system through program evaluation and policy relevant research.

Beginning her research career at RAND in 1974, Professor Petersilia was one of the first criminologists to recognize the trend toward community corrections as an important area for research and to conduct large-scale empirical studies in this area. Beginning in the mid-1980s, much of her research focused on assessing the impact of community-based punishments on offender behavior and public safety. Her research in this area includes a number of specific program evaluations, including evaluations of intensive supervision, electronic monitoring, day fines, drug testing, and work release. In a related line of empirical work, Professor Petersilia has examined the effects of diverting inmates from prison to intermediate sanctions. This research focused on such questions as how much prison populations could be decreased by diverting specific classes of offenders to community corrections, and how much crime that group would be expected to commit if left at large.

Professor Petersilia has published several overviews of extensive literatures and edited volumes that provide distillations of state-of-the art knowledge and have been widely distributed to an array of diverse audiences. For example, “A Crime Control Rationale for Reinvesting in Community Corrections” (1995) was identified by reviewers at *Federal Probation* as one of the “top ten” articles or books of 1995 (Corbett and Harris 1996). Related, one of her edited volumes on the subject, *Community Corrections* (1998), was described as “a must-read for community corrections professionals and their academic brethren...a truly significant contribution to the community corrections literature” (*Federal Probation* 1997). Likewise, *Reforming Probation and Parole* (2002) was designated a “best seller” by the American Correctional Association, the largest organization of corrections professionals in the world.

Adding to her expertise in community corrections, in the late 1990s, Professor Petersilia turned her attention to a new line of research by focusing on the way in which the justice system deals with individuals with developmental disabilities. Her work along these lines makes it clear that the people with developmental disabilities are disproportionately likely to be involved in the criminal justice system as both crime victims and offenders, and the inability of the system to understand their special needs and problems is a significant public policy problem. She was among the first to identify this important issue, and after doing so she moved forward with research on key questions and she quickly emerged as the leading expert in the area. As her interest in offenders with disabilities evolved, so too did her interest in crime *victims* with disabilities.

Professor Petersilia’s expertise in crime and disabilities has manifest in a plethora of publications, including a review of the topic of victims with disabilities in *Human Rights* (2000), the official publication of the American Bar Association. As a result of growing national interest in the topic, the U.S. Congress passed the “Crime Victims with Disabilities Awareness Act,” signed by President Clinton in 1998. The Act mandated a National Research Council panel on the topic, and Professor Petersilia was appointed chair of that panel. The two-year study convened several meetings, and commissioned eight scholarly reviews. Professor Petersilia organized and ran the meetings and co-wrote the final report, “Crime Victims with Developmental Disabilities,” which was published and distributed by the National Academy of Sciences (2001).

Shortly after this landmark report was released, Professor Petersilia revealed, once again, the breadth of her research agenda when she collaborated with another premier criminologist, James Q. Wilson, to produce *Crime: Public Policies for Crime Control* (2002). A review of the book in *The Public Interest* observed: “There can be little doubt that this book will long be regarded as the most definitive source of references to the policy-oriented literature on crime and justice.” Reissued in 2011, there is arguably no other single volume that provides as inclusive and as authoritative an account of criminological findings.

Also at the turn of the century, Professor Petersilia was ahead of her time when she directed scholarly and policy attention to what is now commonly called “the prisoner reentry

problem.” As prison populations swelled in the United States, she led the way in understanding two aspects of prisoners’ reentry into the community: (1) understanding the consequences of releasing large numbers of ex-convicts into communities, and (2) determining what types of reentry programs are most effective. Related to this concern, she wrote a review essay commissioned by the National Institute of Justice, “Parole and Prisoner Reentry” that also appeared as a chapter in her co-edited book, *Prisons* (1999). The American Probation and Parole Association (a professional group) considered the article so important that it took the unusual step of reprinting it for distribution to all of its members.

In her book titled *When Prisoner’s Come Home* (2003), Professor Petersilia utilized both qualitative and quantitative data to critically examine the “prisoner reentry problem.” As she explained in the book, “we spent the last decade debating who should go to prison, for how long, and how we might pay for it, and we paid virtually no attention to how we would cope with prisoners after they left prison” (Petersilia 2003, 14). Conceptualizing prisoner reentry as all activities and programming conducted to prepare ex-convicts to return safely to the community and to live as law abiding citizens, Professor Petersilia examined the characteristics of U.S. returning prisoners, historical and current parole release and supervision practices, the effectiveness of prisoner reentry programs, and the causes and consequences of parolee recidivism. Moreover, she skillfully detailed how we help prisoners through rehabilitation and how we hinder reintegration through various legal and practical barriers. In the final chapter, she offered twelve empirically justified recommendations on how to improve prisoner reentry. For Petersilia (2003, 245), “the irony is that more punitive crime control policies, particularly ones that rely heavily on prisons, contribute further to the declines in social support that produced crime in the first place.” *When Prisoners Come Home*, which won the American Library Association’s Outstanding Academic Book Award in 2003, can be found on many bookshelves in corrections administrators’ office because, as a review in *The Public Interest* explained, it provides a “masterful synthesis” and “sensible recommendations.”

Academics, practitioners, and politicians alike have praised Professor Petersilia’s work. For example, in his Presidential Address to the American Society of Criminology in 2004, Francis Cullen (2005), himself a distinguished scholar with considerable expertise on corrections, identified Professor Petersilia as one of “The Twelve People Who Saved Rehabilitation.” In this Address, he credited Professor Petersilia with playing a major role in effectively challenging Martinson’s now classic assessment that “nothing works” in corrections by providing systematic research that suggests otherwise. Representing the practitioner community, Reggie Wilkinson, the President of the American Correctional Association, presented Professor Petersilia with a lifetime achievement award from the American Correctional Association in 2005. When he did, he called her one of the leading criminologists in the United States, as well as the world, and he emphasized the many ways her body of work has and will continue to shape the discourse and practice of criminal justice in the world for many years to come. To bring her work and the work of others to bear on criminal justice policy, she founded the Center for Evidence Based Corrections in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California and she serves as the Faculty Co-Director of the Stanford Criminal Justice Center at Stanford University.

Professor Petersilia has been called upon by government officials to lead efforts to reform the criminal justice system. For example, she was tapped by the California State Legislature to Chair an Expert Panel on correctional reform in California and thereafter tapped by the Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, to Chair a Strike Team charged with the implementation of California Assembly Bill 900, also known as the Public Safety and Offender Rehabilitation Services Act of 2007. For this work, the Governor of California formally thanked Professor Petersilia for bringing systematic evidence to bear on correctional reform and significantly influencing his thinking about prison and parole reform in California. Likewise, Professor Petersilia’s work has been recognized by a plethora of research and service awards from diverse

audiences, including academic societies, community groups, practitioner organizations, and government agencies. As just two examples, she is an elected Fellow of the American Society of Criminology and she has received its Vollmer Award for overall contributions to crime and public policy.

Over the course of her career, Professor Petersilia has not assumed that social science research, however well-done, will miraculously find its way to public policy makers; thus, she has routinely worked with law enforcement agencies and corrections officials on issues surrounding criminal justice reform. For example, she has testified before both the California Legislature and the U.S. Congress on issues pertaining to crime victims with disabilities and parole, successfully encouraging new legislation in these areas; participated in the National Institute of Justice's Executive Sessions on Sentencing and Corrections with a group composed of twenty-four officials who met quarterly to discuss policy issues; briefed hundreds of organizations on her research on community corrections, crime and disabilities, and what is now routinely called "the prison reentry problem;" and, most recently, she has served as the leading expert on the implementation of California's Public Safety Realignment Law of 2011 (A.B. 109), the state's historic attempt to downsize prisons, enhance rehabilitation, and protect public safety. As a result of her work along these lines, she has enjoyed a national and international reputation among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike as someone who takes research beyond the walls of academe and into the belly of the criminal justice system, especially corrections.

Across a range of topics in the world of corrections, Professor Petersilia has demonstrated the uncanny ability to identify emerging criminological topics, address them with research, and ensure research is brought to bear on the crime control policies. Always asking policy-relevant questions, she is greatly respected for her ability to analyze highly politicized issues in a fair, impartial, and data-driven manner and to cast light on such issues by utilizing rigorous empirical research. For this reason, she is easily recognized as one of the most applauded and decorated applied criminologists in both the U.S. and abroad. Those who know Professor Petersilia well attest to the fact that her passion for the work she does so well is fueled by the sheer love of doing criminological research and an unwavering commitment to escorting research into arenas where it can make a difference in the lives of real people in families and communities, especially those who most suffer from policies and practices that can be improved by evidence-based considerations.

Professor Petersilia earned her BA degree in sociology from Loyola University of Los Angeles in 1972, her MA in sociology from the Ohio State University in 1974, and her Ph.D. in criminology, law and society at the University of California, Irvine in 1990.

SEE ALSO

Corrections; community corrections; crime victims with disabilities; intermediate sanctions; parole; prisoner reentry; program evaluation; Stockholm Prize

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Further Readings

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