

Real-world office:  
professor of sociology  
Bruce Western  
interviews former  
prisoners at this pizza  
shop in downtown  
Boston.



# The Prison Problem

Sociologist Bruce Western rethinks incarceration in America.

**W**HEN JERRY ENTERS the pizza place next to Boston's Government Center, he shakes Bruce Western's hand heartily. Jerry, who has served 25 years for armed robbery and aggravated rape, was released two months ago. Western is studying what happens to prisoners after their release and has come to interview Jerry about his experience.

After ordering them coffees, Western, a sociology professor and faculty chair

of the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management, turns on his tape recorder. "Today is the sixth of November," he says, setting the recorder down on the table. "My ex-wife's birthday," Jerry (not his real name) notes wryly. Western reads out the four-digit number that identifies Jerry for the purposes of the study. "I should play that number in the lottery tonight," Jerry says.

Jerry is quick with a joke, charismatic and likable—not what comes to mind when one hears "convicted rapist." For

by Elizabeth Gudrais



Western, this has been one of the study's chief lessons. Although he is one of the foremost experts on incarceration in America, in the past he primarily studied prisoners through datasets and equations. Meeting his subjects in person put a human face on the statistics and dashed preconceived notions in the process.

Western has come to believe that just as offenders' crimes carry a cost to society, so too does the shortage of social supports and rehabilitative services for offenders. A crime-control strategy of locking up more people, and keeping them locked up longer, isn't working, he says. He is determined to help the American public understand how crime is shaped by poverty, addiction, and histories of family violence, in an effort to promote a more humane—and more effective—prison policy.

### "Luck, Not a Plan"

MORE THAN 2.2 million Americans are incarcerated. This population is dynamic: hundreds of thousands of people (mostly men) are released from U.S. prisons each year to try to make a go of it in a world where they have failed before—with the added disadvantage of a prison record. More than two-thirds will be re-arrested within three years; half will go back in prison.

Those released from prison are, as a group, little studied, partly because maintaining contact with them is so difficult. The men tend to be "very loosely attached to families and jobs," Western explains. Prison time strains relationships with partners and children, and the men often

live separately after their release. They may move frequently, sleeping on the couches of friends and relatives or even becoming homeless as difficulty in finding employment begets financial trouble.

Tracking this group, though complicated, is essential to Western's goal of understanding what challenges prisoners encounter in reintegrating into communities. With funding from the National Institutes of Health, he is tracking a sample of inmates released from the Massachusetts prison system who return to Boston-area addresses during the course of a year. The researchers collect friends' and relatives' information (to maintain contact when, for example, a subject's phone is disconnected for nonpayment) and work with community street-workers and the Boston police, who may have information on the former prisoners' whereabouts. Ultimately, Western hopes to learn what services might most effectively help the formerly incarcerated lead productive lives and what alternatives to prison might better improve public safety.

The challenges are great. The difference between the prison en-

vironment and the outside world can be jarring in the extreme. Jerry confides during his interview that he's had trouble sleeping at the shelter for homeless veterans where he lives: he isn't used to other people in his sleeping space. Inside the medium-security prison, inmates fought all day long, he says, but "when the cell door would click closed at night, that was the only time you were safe. No matter what beef anyone had with you, it had to wait until morning." At the shelter's dorm-style room full of bunk beds, with people moving around all night, Jerry is constantly on edge: "It's like my body left the prison, but my mind is still in there."

The outside world brings an onslaught of stimulation, the sudden need to make dozens of small decisions each day, when before, the prisoners were expected to do as they were told. "Adaptive behavior in prison is maladaptive behavior outside," explains Marieke Liem, a postdoctoral fellow at Western's HKS program. She is investigating the effects of long-term incarceration and prisoners' reentry using data from the United States and her native Netherlands. In both her study and Western's, subjects have said they simply can't cope on the outside—that going back to prison seems comforting and familiar.

The psychological challenge of reintegrating is often layered on top of other adversity—for example, childhood trauma. Jerry was five when his father went to prison for three years for shooting Jerry's mother in the head during a drunken fight. (Luckily, the bullet went through her ear and her jaw, not her brain; deafness in one ear was the only lasting effect.) After his father's return, Jerry recalls, "I would stay awake at night listening to them fight, wondering what he was going to do to her." In many cases, says Western, "the violence people bring into the world has its roots in violence they witnessed, or which was done to them, at very young ages." With stories like Jerry's, he notes, "the line between victim and offender is very fuzzy indeed."

Jerry started drinking when he was nine and left school after the ninth grade. This history of alcohol abuse is also typical among current and former inmates: at least two-thirds are thought to have substance-abuse problems—no surprise, given that people steal to get money for drugs, or commit other crimes due to impaired judgment while under the influence. In effect, American prisons are used as surrogate mental-health and substance-abuse facilities. The nonprofit Human Rights Watch found that 56 percent of U.S. inmates are mentally ill.

Jessica Simes, a doctoral student who is a research assistant in Western's study, tells of one subject, mentally ill and addicted to drugs, who failed a drug test that was a condition of her parole and was sent back to prison for the remaining 15 months of her sentence. She had received prescription anti-anxiety medication while in prison, but bureaucratic delays held up a new prescription once she got out. Besieged by anxiety and desperate to feel calm, she used heroin. "The medical community has determined that addiction is a disease," says Simes, "but the criminal-justice community considers it a crime."

In cases like these, the reasons people landed in prison in the first place make them more likely to end up there again. This is why Western favors more robust support for prisoners who are released. "In most cases," he says, "these are poor people with few social supports, real behavioral problems, or tragic family histories."

Although Western's team is still conducting interviews, the researchers have already identified some factors that seem to aid

## Not all former prisoners have advocates or mentors; most are released into a piecemeal system where the assistance they receive relies on “luck, not a plan.”

prisoners in reintegrating. As it happens, Jerry exited prison with several advantages. First, he is 51. Older offenders are less likely to commit new crimes and end up back in prison, perhaps because youthful tempers fade, or because maturity brings an awareness of what one has missed.

Moreover, Jerry has housing—he can stay in the shelter for the first year. He had \$5,800 in the bank at the time of his release, saved from his work-release job. And his sister lets him come over and search job postings on her computer in exchange for doing her dishes.

Jerry also has good relationships with his sons, ages 28 and 29, even though he’s been absent for most of their lives. He speaks with each of them daily. When he thinks about his sons, Jerry feels motivated to find a job. He wants to get his own apartment so he can offer them a place to stay, save up a bit of money to loan

“So many pieces have to come together” to set newly released prisoners on the path to a productive, stable life, says Caroline Burke ’13, a social studies concentrator who is one of Western’s research assistants. “If someone isn’t on the right track after the first few weeks, there’s a snowball effect.”

The few inmates who do reintegrate without much difficulty, who are best positioned to deal with the psychological effects of the transition, have the “big three” in place: they have a job lined up or find one quickly (e.g., through a trade union they previously worked with); they have housing (often with a relative or through a social-service program); and they have access to healthcare and treatment for substance-abuse and mental-health issues as necessary. The most effective reentry programs address these factors, and Western recommends directing more resources their way.

One more factor that can tip the odds is a mentor. Anthony Braga, M.P.A. ’02, a senior research fellow in the HKS program and chief policy adviser to Boston’s police commissioner, found that this was the key feature of the successful Boston Reentry Initiative. A joint project of local, state, and federal government, it matches each inmate being released with a mentor from a community organization. Braga, a longtime lecturer at Harvard who is now a professor at Rutgers, found that high-risk offenders who participated in the program and received mentoring took 30 percent longer to end up back in prison, and their offenses were far less likely to be violent crimes when they were rearrested. He says these results “show that you can make inroads and start getting them away from the pressures that lead them to falling back into their old ways.” (But Western notes that keeping expectations modest

is important: “Some of the most successful reentry programs,” he says, “only reduce recidivism by 10 percent.”)

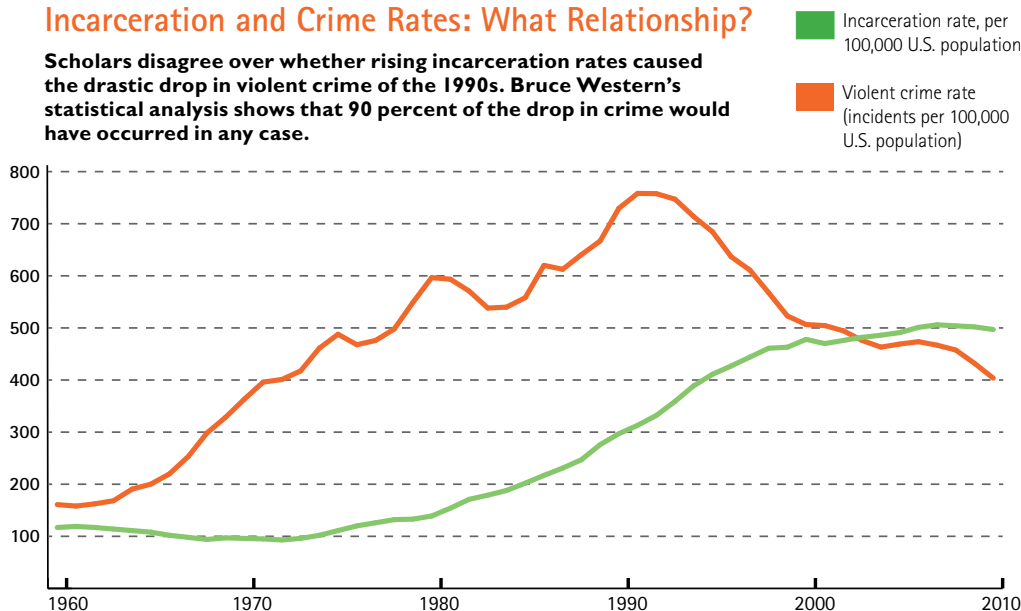
Jerry does have a mentor, his case worker at the shelter, a woman he calls “an angel.” Most recently, when his state-paid health insurance was canceled in error, she helped him get it reinstated. Not all former prisoners have advocates like this, notes Catherine Sirois ’10, the project manager for Western’s study; most are released into a piecemeal system where the assistance they receive relies on “luck, not a plan.”

### The Prison Pipeline

THE UNITED STATES has the dubious distinction of having the world’s highest incarceration rate: more than seven-tenths of 1

### Incarceration and Crime Rates: What Relationship?

**Scholars disagree over whether rising incarceration rates caused the drastic drop in violent crime of the 1990s. Bruce Western’s statistical analysis shows that 90 percent of the drop in crime would have occurred in any case.**



Sources: Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics Online (incarceration); Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics (crime).

to them if they need it. “I want to be their shelter in the storm,” he says. “Be there for them because all those years I couldn’t.”

Still, finding work might prove difficult. Jerry makes an excellent first impression—neatly groomed, intelligent, self-aware—but he struggles with emotional control. When a nurse declined his request for anti-anxiety medication at a recent appointment, he told her, “When you see me on the six o’clock news, you’ll know you made the wrong decision.” The nurse called security and Jerry was detained for 45 minutes, frisked, asked to remove his shoes and belt. “It was embarrassing,” he says. “Very embarrassing.” Many, perhaps most, former prisoners have trouble handling difficult emotions and keeping their cool during disagreements—crucial skills for workplace success.



percent of the population (about 1 in 100 adults) are in prison. Only eight countries have rates above one-half of 1 percent. The United States, with less than 5 percent of the world's population, has nearly one-quarter of its prisoners.

Stricter treatment of drug offenses, and longer sentences for violent and repeat offenders, underlie this high rate. The United States currently has 41,000 inmates serving life sentences without parole, according to a recent report; England has just 41. Yet as recently as the 1970s, the U.S. incarceration rate was one-fifth its current level. Then tough-on-crime laws passed at the state and federal levels with bipartisan support.

Now, the United States has reached "mass incarceration"—"a level of imprisonment so vast that it forges the collective experience of an entire social group," Western writes. He has found that 60 percent of black male high-school dropouts in the United States will go to prison before age 35. The deterrent effect of incarceration is lessened if it becomes so common that it no longer carries any stigma. "The American prison boom is as much a story about race and class," he writes, "as it is about crime control." Reentry services for released prisoners go only so far; making a real dent in the size of the prison population will require intervening in a cycle that begins long before any crime is committed.

But making that dent requires an honest look at hard-to-face truths. Two factors greatly increase the odds of going to prison sometime during one's life: being black or Hispanic, and being poor. Poor minorities do commit more crimes, but that only explains part of the disparity. "Small race and class differences in offending are amplified at each stage of criminal processing, from arrest through conviction and sentencing," Western writes. A criminal history accumulates that reflects not just criminal conduct, but the influence of race and poverty, and this in turn shapes later decisions about sentencing and parole release. Western and many fellow prison-policy scholars have observed that American criminal-justice policy is built on the rhetoric of personal responsibility—paying for one's bad decision—to the exclusion of asking why minority and low-income groups are so much more likely to make bad decisions, or how society fails them.

Two other factors that greatly increase one's odds of going to prison—low educational attainment and a lack of employment opportunities—are closely linked, and are connected to one decision: to drop out of school. That decision is often made by teenagers leaving public-school systems ill-equipped in any case to prepare them well for the modern work force. The dimensions of this multifaceted disadvantage may be even more closely linked than is immediately obvious. As one example, Patrick Sharkey, Ph.D. '07, a sociologist at New York University, found that chil-



**Western and his team of researchers meet regularly to discuss their work. Clockwise from bottom left are Catherine Sirois '10, Caroline Burke '13, Western, Jaclyn Davis, Tracy Shollenberger, A.M. '11, Anthony Braga, M.P.A. '02, Jessica Simes, and David Hureau, M.P.P. '06.**

dren's scores on vocabulary and reading tests fell in the days after a homicide in their neighborhood, presumably due to emotions such as fear and anxiety. In a neighborhood violent enough to affect long-term school performance, even education is not an easy ticket out of poverty.

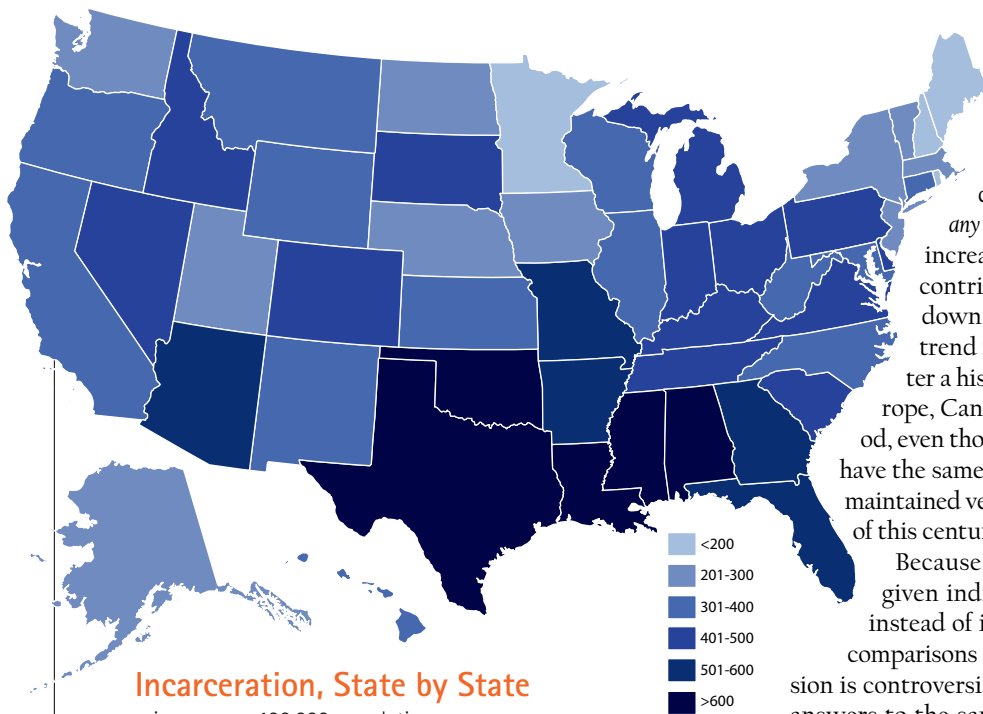
One of Western's students has found that the disparities begin even earlier. For her thesis in sociology and African-American studies, Tiana Williams '12 drew connections between race-based disparities in discipline in K-12 education, and race-based disparities in incarceration. Analyzing data from a large national survey, she found that African-American students were significantly more likely than white students to be suspended from school, even though they did not misbehave any more frequently. She also showed that students who were suspended were more likely to be arrested subsequently than students who were never suspended—indicating that the way children are treated in school helps set them on a path for later life.

Unless underlying social problems are addressed, says Catherine Sirois, nothing will change: "Our priority should be, how do we keep children from growing up in communities where selling drugs is their best career option?"

## "A Reform Moment"

AS PRISON POPULATIONS and expenditures ballooned, states began to realize their policies were unsustainable. Yet, even as politicians and the media focused in on prison reform, actual change came slowly.

Take the case of California, which made headlines last year when the amount budgeted for corrections surpassed that earmarked for higher education. (Incarcerating one person for a year costs tens of thousands of dollars, and in some places rivals the



**Incarceration rates vary widely among the U.S. states, with some above and some below the average of 441 per 100,000 population. The incarceration rates shown here reflect inmates housed within state prison systems, and exclude federal prisoners.**

Source: U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2012 (data from 2010 and 2011)


price of tuition at an elite university.) In the wake of a Supreme Court order to ease prison overcrowding by releasing more than 30,000 inmates, California voters in November scaled back their “three strikes” law, so the mandatory 25-years-to-life sentence for a third offense is restricted to serious or violent crimes.

This was not the first time California voters had considered such a change. Western believes the United States has finally reached “a reform moment” for prison policy. As voters chafe at swollen prison budgets and the costs of social disruption—an estimated two million American children are growing up with a parent behind bars—other states have also revisited mandatory-minimum sentence laws, increased use of parole, and placed drug offenders in treatment instead of prison. Several states have also decriminalized recreational use of marijuana (most recently, Washington and Colorado)—another indication that harsh drug sentences are falling out of favor.

The U.S. Congress has reduced crack/powder cocaine sentencing disparities (a contributor to the racial disparity in incarceration), and the Second Chance Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2008, funds rehabilitative services for prisoners, such as reentry programs, prison education, and drug treatment, as well as research on the effectiveness of those services. More than \$250 million has been awarded under the act so far—tiny compared to the combined state and federal prison budget of \$75 billion annually, but an encouraging sign, says Western.

Economic concerns remain the most persuasive argument in driving prison reform. But Western has an even more compelling argument: locking up more Americans, he asserts, has not greatly reduced crime. After peaking in the early 1990s, the U.S. homicide rate fell throughout the rest of the decade, and has remained

relatively low since then. The rates of other violent crimes and property crimes fell precipitously, too.



Western concludes that nine-tenths of this drop in crime would have occurred without *any* increase in the incarceration rate. He points to increased police spending and presence as a major contributor (more and better policing keeps crime down even if people aren't being sent to prison). The trend may also represent regression to the mean after a historic high. He notes that crime dropped in Europe, Canada, and Latin America during the same period, even though incarceration rates in those places did not have the same steep upward slope. What's more, New York maintained very low crime rates throughout the first decade of this century even as it shrank its prison population.

Because it is impossible to say how many crimes a given individual would hypothetically commit if free instead of imprisoned, such analyses necessarily rely on comparisons and statistical assumptions. Western's conclusion is controversial, and other scholars have obtained different answers to the same question—notably, a widely cited analysis by University of Chicago economist and *Freakonomics* author Steven D. Levitt '89, JF '97, who observed what happened in 12 states after large numbers of prisoners were released from overcrowded facilities under court order. The two scholars essentially disagree about the statistical assumptions underlying their calculations: Western does not believe one can generalize from the specific situation Levitt used to generate his assumptions; Levitt stands by his claim that locking more people up was the major driver of the 1990s drop in crime. But even Levitt recently told *The New York Times* that he believes that the trend has gone too far and the prison population should shrink “by at least one-third.”

## The Case for Change

WESTERN HAS HELPED lead two national task forces on the causes and consequences of mass incarceration. Now he is embarking on an action-oriented initiative, convening leaders from law enforcement, lawmaking, the judiciary, public policy, and substance-abuse and vocational services—as well as some former inmates—for a series of meetings at the Kennedy School during the next three years. Their goal: to overcome the political gridlock that has inhibited major criminal-justice reform in America.

Some say the “prison-industrial complex”—those who work at prisons, sell goods to prisons, and benefit from cheap prisoner labor—has become a large and powerful lobby that prevents change. Western believes this argument is “oversold,” and the real explanation is simpler: for all the dissatisfaction with the amount of money spent on prisons, tough-on-crime arguments are still popular. “If the crime rate drops, people say, ‘See, prisons work. We have to spend more money on them,’” explains Marieke Liem. Conversely, “If the crime rate rises, people say, ‘We have to spend more money on prisons.’” Western seeks to broaden the options.

One example: services for youths who have not yet committed crimes. Anthony Braga, who has studied gang violence extensively, says the average gang comprises about 30 young men, but “only five or six are what I would call truly dangerous; the rest of the kids are what we call situationally dangerous. They recognize that

there is the potential to be doing something better with their lives. If you can work with those kids, you can make a big impact.”

Helping divert youths from the path to prison may help stem the tide of urban violence and heal communities suffering from the absence of husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. “The prison walls we built with such industry in the 1980s and ’90s did not keep out the criminal predators,” Western writes, “but instead divided us internally, leaving our poorest communities with fewer opportunities to join the mainstream and deeply skeptical of the institutions charged with their safety.”

Breaking this cycle is a tall order, but keeping people out of prison is clearly preferable to trying to help them once they’re already there. The prison experience shreds social ties with the outside world, leaving inmates with convicted criminals as their only friends. Prison also gets them out of the habit of getting up and going to work each day—Western often refers to employment as a means of social control. And prison decimates former inmates’ employment prospects. When someone can’t get a job and his social circle consists of other criminals, making money through criminal activity—i.e., recidivism—becomes his most likely path.

Western does not believe it is a coincidence that when social-welfare programs were trimmed throughout the 1970s and 1980s, large increases in crime ensued. “We may have skimmed on welfare, but we paid anyway, splurging on police and prisons,” he

“We’re still in an era where being soft on crime carries political risk,” he notes, but he has fresh hopes for the president’s second term.

EARLIER IN HIS CAREER, Western, the son of a sociology professor at the University of Queensland, Australia, wrote about labor markets and statistical models for sociology. A chance conversation with a colleague prompted him to envision prisons as a “labor-market institution”: he became aware that people who would receive vocational, substance-abuse, and mental-health services in many European countries are incarcerated instead in the United States. His scholarly work then proceeded in a new direction.

Examining prisons’ role vis-à-vis U.S. labor markets, Western found that the United States owes its (historically) comparatively low *unemployment* rate in part to its high *incarceration* rate: people who would otherwise be unemployed are excluded from the calculations. He has also documented the reduction in pay suffered by people with a prison record, compared to their peers with no record, and how incarceration contributes to income inequality in the United States by condemning some people to very low pay. He has explored the interconnectedness of race, lack of employment opportunity, and incarceration (finding, in research with his former Princeton colleague Devah Pager, that a black man *without* a criminal record had about the same chance of being called after applying for a job as a white man *with* a criminal record). And he

**“We may have skimmed on welfare, but we paid anyway,  
splurging on police and prisons. Dollars diverted from education  
and employment found their way to prison construction.”**

writes. “Dollars diverted from education and employment found their way to prison construction.” Assistant professor of sociology and social studies Matthew Desmond agrees, noting, for example, that the United States serves a smaller segment of its population with public housing than do most European countries—but makes up for it in spending on prisons, which are used as de facto public housing. Says Desmond: “We’re going to house the poor one way or another.”

Liem, a practicing forensic psychologist in the Netherlands who first came to Boston in 2009, was struck by the way American inmates are “treated as subhuman.” That they wear jumpsuits and are referred to by number instead of name; that sex offenders are made to register publicly; that felons in some states lose their voting rights for life—all contribute to a “sense of otherness,” she says. “This idea that *once* you made a mistake and *forever* you have to pay for it is striking.” She suggests that instead it is possible to have compassion for both the victim and the perpetrator. For his part, Braga says he understands public opposition to services for convicted criminals, especially for violent offenders. But, he says, “if we’re trying to reduce overall levels of victimization, it seems like you’d want to do *something* that makes it less likely that people are going to continue committing crimes.”

Western estimates that the cost of providing job placement, transitional housing, and drug treatment for all released prisoners who need it would be \$7 billion—one-tenth of current state and federal spending on corrections. He has been disappointed that the Obama administration has not taken a stronger stand on prison reform.

found that the high incarceration rate had the perverse effect of seeming to *raise* the average wage for African-American men: because so many low-earning African-American men are in prison, racial equality in pay is more apparent than real.

During his time on the faculty at Princeton, he first ventured inside a correctional facility to teach a sociology course for incarcerated men. For someone who “had spent most of my career crunching numbers on a computer and teaching Ivy League students,” Western remembers, that experience was “unbelievably powerful.”

Since coming to Harvard in 2007, he has worked with Kaia Stern, a lecturer in ethics at Harvard Divinity School, to take groups of undergraduates into Massachusetts state prisons for courses on urban sociology. The Harvard students learn alongside inmates who are also pursuing bachelor’s degrees—and in the process, learn to view issues of crime and punishment in a more nuanced way. Because of this experience, Western, a married father of three daughters, has gained empathy for Jerry and others who have committed violent crimes. “Often we want to say that people in prison are criminal and evil and unredeemable, or that they’re innocent and victims of circumstance,” says Western. “The truth is that they’re neither of those things. You can do some very terrible things in your life and yet be deeply human at the same time.” ▽

Freelance writer Elizabeth Gudrais ’01 lives in Madison, Wisconsin.



Visit [harvardmag.com/](http://harvardmag.com/) extras to read more about the courses and other initiatives that bring students into contact with current and former prisoners.