### Michael Tonry

## Punishments, Politics, and Prisons in Western Countries

#### ABSTRACT

Imprisonment rates and patterns and the professionalism and decency of prison operations vary widely between countries and, within the United States, between states. The explanations for differences are deeply embedded in national or local histories and political cultures; substantial changes are hard to achieve. Day-to-day life even in the "best" prisons is usually drab, monotonous, and unpleasant; in the worst it is squalid, unhealthy, and sometimes terrifying. Conditions for guards and other staff are often little better. The big difference is that they can go home at shift's end. They are often poorly paid and little respected; work in claustrophobic, stultifying environments; and deal daily with angry, depressed, mentally ill, and otherwise troubled people. The best run, most humane prisons address those challenges as best they canin some countries, sometimes, reasonably well. Many prisons—in some countries, most-are terrible places. Sometimes that is because policy makers cannot or will not spend the money needed to run them decently, sometimes because they do not much care what goes on inside, and sometimes because they affirmatively want prisoners to suffer. Staff miseries are collateral damage.

Countries' prisons serve as the moral equivalent of canaries in coal mines. Dead canaries attest to the presence of poisonous gases; overcrowded, squalid prisons, to an absence of respect for human dignity. "The degree of civilization in a society," Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote, in *House of the* 

Michael Tonry was formerly professor of law and public policy and director of the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University. I am grateful to Sandra Bucerius, Klära Kereszi, Krzysztof Krzycwski, Miklós Lévay, Rossella Selmini, Tapio Lappi-Seppülä, and Tim Newburn for critical readings of an earlier draft.

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# **Politics And Punishments**

**Edward McPherson** 

#### **Politics And Punishments:**

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Studies in Sociology, Economics, Politics and History ,1922

and Art ,1856

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