

Legal Ruralism and California Parole Hearings: Space, Place, and the Carceral Landscape*

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ABSTRACT This article discusses the important relationship between rurality and criminal justice processes, drawing on field observations and in-depth interviews with parole commissioners to argue that California's physical carceral landscape profoundly shapes lifer parole hearings. First, commissioners report that prisons' location in rural areas affects the rehabilitative resources available, which are seen as an important aspect of their readiness for release. Location and perceived rurality of prisons shape commissioners' perception of the inmates at various institutions, creating implicitly different standards for inmates housed at different prisons. Second, spatiality and rurality influence parole commissioners' work lives, exacting a toll that includes onerous travel, early burnout, and challenges to assembling a diverse board. Together, these findings underscore the importance of legal ruralism to the relationship between spatial and carceral landscapes.

Introduction

Parole is a notoriously understudied component of the U.S. criminal justice system (Rhine, Petersilia, and Reitz 2017; Wacquant 2002), yet post-sentencing criminal justice decisions affect millions of Americans each year. One in 55 U.S. adults is on parole, probation, or a combination of the two (Kaeble 2018:1). Parole hearings tend not to draw media attention, but are numerous; in 2013, 46 states handed down 187,035 discretionary parole grants (Rhine, Petersilia, and Reitz 2015). And in over half of states, parole boards hold full release authority—the power to release nearly all prison inmates before the end of their maximum sentence (Schwartzapfel 2015).

The majority of extant work on parole decisions is quantitative, documenting the factors correlated with parole outcomes, including inmate race, mental illness, and in-prison behavior (e.g., Matejkowski et al. 2011; Mooney and Daffern 2014; Morgan and Smith 2008; Weisberg, Mukamal, and Segall 2011; Young, Mukamal, and Favre-Bulle 2016).

*The author is grateful to the participants of the Law and Rurality Workshop at UC Davis School of Law, especially Lisa Pruitt and Chris Smith, for their extremely thoughtful feedback. Thanks as well to Laszlo Kulcsar and anonymous reviewers for editorial guidance, and to Debbie Mukamal and Robert Weisberg at the Stanford Criminal Justice Center. Excellent research assistance was provided by Alison Bloch, Habib Olapade, and Yegina Whang. This article is dedicated to the memory of Joan Petersilia, a brilliant friend and mentor.

A few notable exceptions examine hearings' social dynamics from a qualitative perspective. For example, Shamma's ethnography of 25 hearings details the ways that inmates are called upon to "perform" rehabilitation (2019). For the most part, there is little consensus about the factors that predict parole outcomes, and almost no work on the sociological dynamics of the hearings. The social processes within parole boards' decision-making have "long neglected by academic, research, and policy communities" (Rhine et al. 2017).

One of the main factors that distinguish parole hearings from other criminal justice processes is their location. While trials, sentencing, and other criminal justice decision-making typically occurs in a courthouse near a town or city center, parole hearings are held at the facility where the inmate is imprisoned. Thus, unlike other criminal law processes, the parole decision-making landscape is embedded in the carceral landscape. Yet, to date no research has examined the relationship between parole hearings and prison location; the instant article fills this gap by foregrounding rurality in its analysis of parole decision-making.

Rurality and the Carceral Landscape

In the past 40 years, nearly 70 percent of prisons have been constructed in rural sites (Eason 2016:262; 2017b). "With little fanfare, prison proliferation has severely altered the physical, social, economic, and political landscape of rural America" (Eason 2016:261). Decisions about prison location are often the result of complex and highly contested political battles (Eason 2017a; Gilmore 2007; Huling 2002; Lynch 2009; Thompson 2012). Increasingly, these battles have resulted in rural prison proliferation. Jail construction has also grown in rural areas while declining in urban areas (Kang-Brown and Subramanian 2017). Some researchers have commented that carceral facilities comprise such a large part of the rural landscape that they even "foster[] cycles of base subsistence and dependence on continued incarceration rates" (Walker et al. 2017:410).

While urban legal actors such as judges and attorneys tend to "constitute the rural as relatively lawless," (Pruitt 2014:190), states' tendency to plant prisons in rural regions has become practically axiomatic (Lawrence and Travis 2004; Lynch 2009). Cultural criminologists have considered the relationship between prisons and the spaces they inhabit, examining the "carceral habitus" that shapes, and is shaped by, prisons and prison-building, including site selection processes (Schept 2015; see also Schept 2014). Schept also interrogates the relationship between the rural landscape and carceral logic, following Hayward's calls for a visual methodological orientation to prison research (2014, citing Hayward 2010; see also Brown 2009). Prisoners' geographic alienation functions

as a literal and symbolic means of separation, “constructing barriers no less effective than the walls of the penitentiary or at separating the ‘excluded’ from the ‘included’” (Pallot 2005:99).

The prison visitation literature draws implicitly and explicitly on cultural criminological critiques to examine the social consequences of rural prison proliferation. Most prisons are located in rural regions, but most prisoners hail from urban ones (Clark and Duwe 2017; citing Austin and Hardyman 2004; Coughenour 1995; Holt and Miller 1972). For example, less than a quarter of New York’s prisoners are from upstate, but 91 percent of its prisoners are incarcerated there (Wagner 2002). This means that visiting incarcerated loved ones brings social, financial, and logistical hardship, particularly to less affluent families (Christian 2005; Christian, Mellow, and Thomas 2006; see also Comfort 2003). Inmates’ experiences are influenced by rurality as well, since distance partly determines the frequency of visits they receive (Clark and Duwe 2017). Infrequent visits strain social ties (Berg and Huebner 2011; see also Bales and Mears 2008; Duwe and Clark 2013; Mears et al. 2012; Rose and Clear 1998) and are associated with disciplinary problems in prison (Cochran 2012; Lindsey et al. 2017).

While some criminologists, such as social disorganization theorists, have centralized the arrangement of physical space as a cause of crime (e.g., Kubrin and Weitzer 2003; Sampson 1993), the physical places they typically consider are urban. Critical criminologists, such as Donnermeyer and Keseredy, have considered physical space as a constitutive element of criminal justice processes—although as they have pointed out, rural spaces are often neglected in these analyses (2013). When it *is* discussed in sociolegal analyses, rurality tends to be portrayed in one of two ways: idyllic, pure, and natural; or lawless and violent (Donnermeyer, Scott, and Barclay 2013). Both constitute a form of “othering” rurality and underscoring urban normativity—invoking the rural primarily as a foil to the urban (Pruitt 2014:191).

In recent years, Pruitt’s work has invigorated sociolegal research on rural areas, using the construct of “legal ruralism” to help theorize the impact of spatial concepts such as isolation, physical distance, and population density on sociolegal relations (Pruitt 2014:192). One of this work’s contributions has been to demonstrate that the relationship between law and space must be examined in terms of social dynamics, not just geographic reality. For example, people living in a less populated part of a large urban county might still have to travel hours to reach social services and lack access to public transit (see Pruitt et al. 2018:31).

The Local Context: California Rurality, California Carcerality

One of the most important reasons for California's tendency to site its prisons in rural areas is the state's large quantity of rural land and history of rural land use. Farms were prominent until the late 1970s, when the number of irrigated acres began to decrease. Since then, an average of "100,000 acres of irrigated land have been taken out of production each year" (Gilmore 2007:63). Most of this idled land was located in the Central Valley and Inland Empire desert counties. Although these regions' populations grew, suburbanization and exurbanization occupied only a small percentage of the newly idled farmland (Gilmore 2007:66). Around the same time, the California Department of Corrections (now the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, or CDCR) saw a population surge and sought to house tens of thousands of additional prisoners. Seeing an opportunity to make use of inexpensive land, the CDCR "launched an extensive public relations campaign emphasizing the economic benefits it believes will accrue to rural areas where the new prisons would be constructed" (Daniel 1991:130). As a result, many new prisons were placed in the Inland Empire and Central Valley. Today, most of the 23 "gargantuan new poured-concrete structures" built in California since 1984 "loom at the edge of small, economically struggling, ethnically diverse towns in rural areas" (Gilmore 2007:22; see also Chávez 2005).

Many attempts to quantify rurality on a national level end up capturing California's spatiality poorly, particularly if they rely on county-level designations of "metro" and "non-metro" areas.¹ For example, San Bernardino County (the fifth most populous county in California and one of the fifteen most populous nationally) is considered "metro." However, the county contains more square miles than New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Delaware put together, with less than 15 percent of their cumulative population. Another "metro" county, Riverside, spans 180 miles from east to west. The most remote of its prisons, Ironwood, is located near the Arizona border—a four-hour drive from the nearest major city, with no public transportation.

California's size means its prisons' rurality takes on an exponential dimension for parole hearings since hearings are conducted in person at the facilities where inmates serving life sentences with the possibility of parole ("lifers") are incarcerated. Each hearing is conducted

¹The state's 58 counties average over 2,800 square miles each (Pruitt et al. 2018:9), and only 40 have a population density of less than 200 people per square mile (Index Mundi 2010).

by a team of two commissioners: one Commissioner (a Governor appointee) and one Deputy Commissioner (a civil service employee). Typically, they travel to a given prison for a few days or a week, holding three hearings per day. But although constant engagement with California's carceral landscape is woven into parole commissioners' jobs, little is known about how, or whether, this landscape shapes the parole hearings process itself. Space and spatiality are not mentioned in commissioners' job descriptions, nor in their legal decision-making guidelines (California Code of Regulations 2018). And extant examinations of California's carceral landscape typically do not mention the parole process at all. This omission is somewhat surprising, given the enormity of the state's lifer population (around 30,000—a third of the country's lifers overall; see Young et al. 2016). This article interrogates the relationship between commissioners' perceptions of rurality and physical space, on one hand, and their role as parole decision-makers, on the other.

Data and Methods

I draw on 25 in-depth interviews with California parole commissioners, the arrangement of which was facilitated by professional contacts at the Board of Parole Hearings (BPH) and the Stanford Criminal Justice Center. The interviewee population comprised one-third of the state's commissioners. Interviews averaged one hour and fifteen minutes, and ranged from 45 minutes to over three hours. They were conducted in diners and coffee shops near parole hearing locations, or in downtown Sacramento, California near BPH headquarters. Ten interviews were with Governor-appointed Parole Commissioners and 15 were with Deputy Commissioners. All were promised confidentiality.² Interviews were recorded and transcribed, resulting in approximately 350 single-spaced pages of transcripts. Although many commissioners perform a range of functions (such as parole revocation hearings), the interviews focused specifically on lifer hearings.

In addition to the interviews, fieldwork included a tour of BPH headquarters, attendance at multiple lifer parole hearings, visits to prisons, informal conversations with lifer inmates and prison employees, and two day-long training sessions at local law schools for attorneys who represent lifers at parole hearings. I also conducted six informal interviews with these attorneys. This fieldwork entailed traveling to prison towns

²I use pseudonyms to refer to individual commissioners throughout this article. When immaterial to the analyses, I occasionally alter respondents' gender or other identifying details.

across California, which provided a window into commissioners' work lives. Although I do not draw explicitly on the trainings or attorney interviews herein, both were essential to my understanding of parole hearings and informed the interviews.

To analyze the data, a trained research assistant and I first each conducted a round of detailed open coding of interviews (which we selected using a random number generator). We coded in this manner until intercoder agreement was reached (see Campbell et al. 2013), which occurred at the seven-interview mark. Uncertainties about whether a piece of data met the criteria for a code were discussed until intercoder agreement was reached (see Campbell et al. 2013; Hruschka et al. 2004). The list contained more than 50 codes, which we categorized into thematic code families. Several codes appeared in multiple families. One family, for example, was "nature of the job;" another was "assessing rehabilitation and dangerousness." The purpose of this step was to generate my initial thematic orientation via intercoder agreement as a reliability check. I coded all 25 transcripts using a close, line-by-line examination, with particular attention to the themes derived from the initial round of coding.

Lastly, I extracted the data for each code family and conducted a final round of coding to identify additional themes. During this process, I noticed two related themes from different code families. One, within the "nature of the job" family, related to the geographic and spatial aspects of commissioners' employment, which was not something the interview schedule explicitly addressed. A second theme regarding spatiality emerged within the "views about prisons" family. This article draws on the data associated with these two themes, as well as on my field notes related to rurality and physical place.

Results

I do not consider prisons' rurality by using an objective measurement of "rurality," but rather by drawing on Pruitt's conception of "legal ruralism" to incorporate rurality's social dimensions: looking at how parole commissioners think about and understand rurality, distance, and space. True, many of California's prisons are located in "rural" areas by virtually any measure. But some prisons commissioners characterize as rural are actually situated near cities. "Rural" becomes shorthand for expressing a sense of isolation and distance from metropolitan areas, as well as distance from cosmopolitan coastal areas—particularly the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and San Diego. As scholars have shown in other contexts, perceptions of rurality are contingent and malleable (e.g., Friedland 2009;

Willits and Luloff 1995). Seeing rurality through commissioners' eyes necessitates adopting a fluid and contingent understanding of which parts of California "count" as rural.

Table 1 shows California's 34 adult prisons.

For each facility, the table includes factors related to perceptions of rurality: the county where the prison is located, whether the county is coastal, the education level in the county, whether there is a city of 100,000 or more within 50 miles (about an hour's drive) of the prison, whether there is a city of 300,000 or more within the same distance, and the population density of the county in which the prison is located (in addition to this number in relation to the state average). None of these is a perfect measure; as discussed above, California's geography makes it difficult to apply national measures of rurality. Table 1 demonstrates the range of sites in which California's prisons are located. Overall, rural counties are common; only 12 out of 34 prisons are located in counties whose population density falls below the state's average.

Overall, rurality shaped parole processes in two different ways. First, it affected how parole commissioners interpreted and understood prisoners' experience, and consequently the way they made decisions. Second, it affected their own relationship to their jobs. Each set of results is discussed in turn below.

How Prison Rurality Influences Parole Decisions

Parole commissioners cited rehabilitation or "programming" as the most important factor contributing to decision outcomes. This programming includes work training, substance abuse programs, education, anger management classes, and other opportunities. Programming is run separately in each prison, with considerable variation between facilities. In general, lower-security prisons offer more programs. The security level at which an inmate is housed (from I to IV) depends on the classification score he receives. Higher scores indicate greater perceived dangerousness; inmates' scores increase with bad behavior and decrease with good behavior (though lifers are never housed at Level I prisons, which represent the lowest security level and the greatest amount of programming).³

³California also has other opportunities, such as fire camps and landscaping programs, but many of these opportunities are off-limits to lifers (see Goodman 2012:438). Additional classifications include condemned units (death row inmates), reception centers (short-term housing and classification centers), and SHUs (secure housing units that provide additional of security within level IVs).

Table 1. Prisons by Level, Selected County Characteristics, and Distance from Large U.S. Cities.

Prison Name	Level(s) ^a	County of Prison's City	Coastal County?	(% County w/BA/BS) ^b	City of 100,000 + ^c within 50 miles? ^d	City of 300,000 + within 50 miles?	County Pop Density per sq. mile (% of State Avg) ^e
Avenal State Prison (ASP), Avenal California City	I, II	Kings	No	13%	No	No	108 (43%)
Correctional Facility (CAC), California City	II	Kern	No	16%	Yes (Lancaster)	No	108 (43%)
California Correctional Center (CCC), Susanville	I, II, III	Lassen	No	12%	No	No	7 (3%)
California Correctional Institution (CCI), Tehachapi	I, II, III, IV	Kern	No	16%	Yes (Bakersfield, Lancaster)	Yes (Bakersfield)	108 (43%)
California Institution for Men (CIM), Chino	I, II	San Bernardino	No	20%	Yes, multiple (e.g., Ontario, Pomona, Corona, Riverside)	Yes (Santa Ana, Riverside)	106 (42%)
California Institution for Women (CIW), Corona	N/A	Riverside	No	22%	Yes, multiple (e.g., Ontario, Pomona, Corona, Riverside)	Yes (Santa Ana, Riverside)	327 (130%)
California Men's Colony (CMC), San Luis Obispo	I, II, III	San Luis Obispo	Yes	34%	Yes (Santa Maria)	No	85 (34%)

(Continues)

Table 1. Continued

Prison Name	Level(s) ^a	County of Prison's City	Coastal County?	(% County w/BA/BS) ^b	City of 100,000 + ^c within 50 miles ^d	City of 300,000 + within 50 miles?	County Pop Density per sq. mile (% of State Avg) ^e
California Medical Facility (CMF), Vacaville	I, II, III	Solano	No	26%	Yes, multiple (e.g., Vallejo, Fairfield, Sacramento, Berkeley)	Yes (Oakland, Sacramento)	529 (211%)
California Rehabilitation Center (CRC), Norco	I, II	Riverside	No	22%	Yes, multiple (e.g., San Bernardino, Riverside, Rancho Cucamonga)	Yes (Riverside, Santa Ana)	327 (130%)
California State Prison, Corcoran (CSP-COR), Corcoran	I, III, IV	Kings	No	13%	Yes (Visalia)	No	108 (43%)
California State Prison, Los Angeles County (LAC), Lancaster	I, III, IV	Los Angeles	Yes	31%	Yes (Lancaster, Palmdale, Santa Clarita)	No	2,490 (992%)
California State Prison Sacramento (SAC), Represa	I, IV	Sacramento	No	30%	Yes (Sacramento, Roseville, Elk Grove)	Yes (Sacramento)	1,550 (618%)
California State Prison Solano (SOL), Vacaville	II, III	Solano	No	26%	Yes, multiple (e.g., Vallejo, Fairfield, Sacramento, Berkeley)	Yes (Oakland, Sacramento)	529 (211%)

(Continues)

Table 1. Continued

Prison Name	Level(s) ^a	County of Prison's City	Coastal County?	(% County w/BA/BS) ^b	City of 100,000 + ^c within 50 miles? ^d	City of 300,000 + within 50 miles?	County Pop Density per sq. mile (% of State Avg) ^e
Substance Abuse Treatment Facility and State Prison (SATF-CSP), Corcoran	II, III, IV	Kings	No	13%	Yes (Visalia)	No	108 (43%)
Calipatria State Prison (CAL), Calipatria	I, IV	Imperial	No	14%	No	No	43 (17%)
Centinel State Prison (CEN), Imperial	I, III, IV	Imperial	No	14%	No	No	43 (17%)
Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), Chowchilla	N/A	Madera	No	14%	Yes (Clovis, Fresno)	Yes (Fresno)	72 (29%)
Chuckawalla Valley State Prison (CVSP), Blythe	I, II	Riverside	No	22%	No	No	327 (130%)
Correctional Training Facility (CTF), Soledad	I, II	Monterey	Yes	24%	Yes (Salinas)	No	132 (53%)
Deuel Vocational Institution (DVI), Tracy	I, II, III	San Joaquin	No	18%	Yes (Stockton, Modesto, Fremont)	Yes (Stockton)	520 (207%)
Folsom State Prison (FSP), Represa	I, II, III	Sacramento	No	30%	Yes (Sacramento, Roseville, Elk Grove)	Yes (Sacramento)	1,550 (618%)
High Desert State Prison (HDSP), Susanville	I, III, IV	Lassen	No	12%	No	No	7 (3%)

(Continues)

Table 1. Continued

Prison Name	Level(s) ^a	County of Prison's City	Coastal County?	(% County w/BA/BS) ^b	City of 100,000 + ^c within 50 miles? ^d	City of 300,000 + within 50 miles? ^e	County Pop Density per sq. mile (% of State Avg) ^e
Ironwood State Prison (ISP), Blythe	I, III	Riverside	No	22%	No	No	327 (130%)
Kern Valley State Prison (KVSP), Delano	I, IV	Kern	No	16%	Yes (Bakersfield)	Yes (Bakersfield)	108 (43%)
Mule Creek State Prison (MCSP), Ione	I, II, III, IV	Amador	No	22%	Yes (Roseville, Stockton, Sacramento)	Yes (Stockton, Sacramento)	63 (25%)
North Kern State Prison (NKSP), Delano	I, III	Kern	No	16%	Yes (Bakersfield)	Yes (Bakersfield)	108 (43%)
Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP), Crescent City	I, II, IV	Del Norte	Yes	14%	No	No	27 (11%)
Pleasant Valley State Prison (PVSP), Coalinga	I, III	Fresno	No	20%	No	No	163 (65%)
Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility (RJDF), San Diego	I, II, III, IV	San Diego	Yes	37%	Yes (El Cajon, Chula Vista, San Diego)	Yes (San Diego)	781 (311%)
Salinas Valley State Prison (SVSP), Soledad	I, III, IV	Monterey	Yes	24%	Yes (Salinas)	No	132 (53%)
San Quentin State Prison (SQ), San Quentin	I, II	Marin	Yes	57%	Yes, multiple (e.g., Vallejo, Fremont, San Francisco, Hayward, Berkeley)	Yes (Oakland, San Francisco)	501 (200%)

(Continues)

Table 1. Continued

Prison Name	Level(s) ^a	County of Prison's City	Coastal County?	(% County w/BA/BS) ^b	City of 100,000 + ^c within 50 miles? ^d	City of 300,000 + within 50 miles? ^e	County Pop Density per sq. mile (% of State Avg) ^e
Sierra Conservation Center (SCC), Jamestown	I, II, III	Tuolumne	No	21%	Yes (Modesto)	No	24 (10%)
Valley State Prison (VSP), Chowchilla	II	Madera	No	14%	Yes (Clovis, Fresno)	Yes (Fresno)	72 (29%)
Wasco State Prison-Reception Center (WSP), Wasco	I, III	Kern	No	16%	Yes (Bakersfield)	Yes (Bakersfield)	108 (43%)

^aSource: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Statistical Reports at <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov>. Many prisons also have special housing units and non-level-specific beds, which I do not list here.

^bSource: Towncharts.com, which uses US Census data, USGS data, and other aggregated sources.

^cCalifornia has approximately 68 cities with populations over 100,000. Only U.S. cities are included.

^dSource: Google Maps (for distance); Wikipedia (for most up-to-date city size).

^eRounded to nearest full percent. Source: Towncharts.com.

Although commissioners discussed security level as theoretically determinative of an inmate's rehabilitative opportunities, the interviews made it clear that security levels were only part of the story. Other factors outside an inmate's control—most notably the facility in which he is housed—affect the programming available. "...[T]he institution, it matters," Commissioner Jenn Grossinger said. "If you have lockdowns [in which prisoners are confined to certain areas and their activities are restricted], they don't hold classes. 'Cause the—you know, usually, I'll tell you who's usually in lockdown, I mean, it's kind of sad, you know, High Desert, Tehachapi, Lancaster... I can tell right off the bat. You *know*." Commissioner Grossinger's list includes prisons at a variety of levels (I/III/IV, I/II/IV, and I/IV, respectively). What these prisons have in common is rurality. Nor, as Table 1 shows, does there appear to be much relationship between rurality and security level.

Other commissioners detailed differences between same-level prisons as well—disparities Commissioner Alice Laidlaw called "pathetic"—explaining that inmates who happened to end up at program-rich facilities had access to opportunities that others lacked. Commissioner Joan Jerrett echoed this. When I asked whether there were differences between same-level prisons, she nodded vigorously. "San Quentin has a lot of programming. Those inmates typically come in with *beaucoup* certificates, you know, they've got all kinds of things they've been doing." I then asked, "Do you think it makes it easier for them to rehabilitate?" She nodded again. "I think it gives them opportunities... Soledad [in a coastal area near Monterey] also has a lot of programs. Some other places don't."

Commissioner George Redick explained that in rural prisons, it is harder to hire staff: "One of the biggest problems we have is staff support. It's totally inconsistent... Statewide, it's a crapshoot, what you're getting in terms of preparation [for release]." Commissioner Garcia said, "Chowchilla [and] down there by the Mexican border, you can hardly get staff!" And Commissioner Grossinger explained that "programming prisons"—those with lots of rehabilitative options, have:

[A] lot of counselors doing sessions, um, sergeants, lieutenants... on their chronos [laudatory write-ups by staff members] saying, 'we held a [programming] session on second watch or third watch, you know, in the unit.' I mean, it shows me that, okay, he can go out to the yard and play around with his buddies and do that, but he chooses to do this. That's a big plus.

As commissioners perceive it, less staff support for programming means fewer programming opportunities. But perhaps even more

importantly, poorly-staffed prisons mean less assiduous *documentation* of programming—documentation on which commissioners rely heavily in making their parole decisions (see Young et al. 2016). Commissioner Laidlaw, for example, emphasized the importance of formal and informal staff sponsorship, which she said was less available at prisons “in the middle of nowhere.”

In addition to being less able to provide staff support for programming (and documentation of programming), commissioners said that remotely-located prisons suffered from an inability to recruit volunteers. With the state’s prison system so stretched to capacity that it was the subject of a federal consent decree⁴ to reduce its population (Henderson 2008; Specter 2010; Newman and Scott 2012), California prison programming relies heavily on volunteers. Several commissioners mentioned rurality as an obstacle to volunteer recruitment, which translated to uneven programming opportunities between prisons. Commissioner Stephen said:

We used to have a lot of therapy programs. Now we don’t have this. People have deep psychological issues and we don’t offer them enough assistance. We can’t expect them to heal themselves. San Quentin is successful because it’s in the Bay Area. This is why it’s so good—lots of volunteers. But not at Susanville. Not at Avenal.

Commissioner Nath made similar observations. When I asked him about differences between prisons, he told me, “If you go to San Quentin... man, these [inmates] have completed more programs than you can shake a stick at, because the community has stepped up...” He then talked about regional spending differences in criminal justice:

[In bigger cities] they’re finding [volunteer] partners in the community to help them, whereas in [rural places like] Fresno,⁵ they’re building bed space... So, in one community, there’s opportunities for help, or rehabilitation, and in another community, there isn’t or it’s limited... [For example,] San Francisco, unfortunately, not all the communities can be like that.

⁴A consent decree is a mutually binding agreement between two parties that requires some action to be taken, often under the supervision of a judge. They are often used by federal courts to ensure regulatory compliance.

⁵By “Fresno,” Commissioner Nath may have been referring to Pleasant Valley State Prison in Coalinga, or to one of the two prisons in Chowchilla. All three prisons are within an hour’s drive of Fresno.

By many measures, Fresno County would not be considered rural. It has a California State University campus (CSU Fresno) and a city of half a million people. However, within California's particular geography, Fresno *is* often considered rural. It has a lot of agricultural lands, is located in the San Joaquin Valley, is distant from other large cities, and has few cultural landmarks such as large theater or concert venues. Whether or not Fresno is "technically" rural is somewhat beside the point; within California, it is *perceived* as rural. In this way, it is similar to prisons near Bakersfield, Kern Valley State Prison and North Kern State Prison, which commissioners also termed "rural" despite a CSU campus and a city population of over 300,000. In Bakersfield, as in Fresno, "rural" may be code for different things, including lower population density, a dearth of widely recognized cultural landmarks, and relative isolation within a large agricultural region.

Commissioners explained that when funding crunches occurred, prisons like Solano (in Vacaville, less than an hour's drive from Oakland, Hayward, and Berkeley) and San Quentin (near San Francisco) could continue programming due to the ease of getting volunteers. But in rural locations, the end of state funding often meant the end of a program. Non-profit organizations and universities, which are common sources for volunteers, are much sparser where rural prisons are located.

In places with less programming, commissioners reported, inmates are often left to their own devices and have trouble demonstrating evidence of rehabilitation. Instead of joining an anger management group facilitated by a staff member or volunteer, an inmate in a rural prison could write a "book report" explaining what he learned. Commissioners Benjamin, David Stephen, Gabe Garcia, Amy Homes, and others acknowledged that this self-directed rehabilitation required cognitive tools some inmates lacked. Consequently, where little programming was available, commissioners said they found themselves acting more like counselors than judges. At a recent stint conducting hearings at a "non-programming" prison, Commissioner Benjamin spent part of each hearing discussing rehabilitation ideas with inmates: coaching them on how to form study groups, choose materials, and lead groups effectively.

Other commissioners took a different approach to the differences they perceived between urban and rural prisons. For example, Commissioner Ting didn't advise prisoners in rural, non-programming facilities to do book reports or start their own groups, both of which struck him as futile. Instead, he said they should try to get transferred somewhere with more opportunities—which he acknowledged was not always an easy task. Commissioner Nath agreed: "When I go to... hearings [at a remote prison], my biggest goal is to help them come to the realization, or to

help persuade them, that they've got to get out of there [and transfer somewhere else]."

There was no hard-and-fast rule that certain prisons' inmates merited stronger consideration for parole grants, but commissioners admitted it was difficult not to hold pre-conceived notions. For example, Commissioner Homes said that at Soledad and San Quentin, prisoners got a "hard look because these guys might actually be ready to go." Commissioner Stephen said that at programming prisons, "[T]here's a lot of questions, a lot of evaluation because you're seriously trying to determine whether he will be ready to go." Commissioner Clevie said, "[I]f you go to Solano you *expect* to get parole dates. If you go to... Corcoran, you'll be *surprised* when someone comes in ready for parole. So it's sort of the expectation for the week based on the institution... it's just sort of a soft rule." These statements suggest that lifers incarcerated in non-programming institutions—institutions commissioners nearly always characterized as rural—may not always get serious consideration for parole grants.

Commissioner Laidlaw said she applied implicitly different standards based on the location and security level of an inmate's institution. Similarly, Commissioner Diana Yokoyama told me about a prisoner who had impressed her by writing book reports about how his reading related to his life. The prisoner "wrote all of this on his bunk, just sitting with a notebook." While this might not have been impressive if he had been housed at a different facility, Commissioner Yokoyama said, this inmate had done it at High Desert, which she considers a "hard prison" because of its remote location.

Commissioner Stephen explained how he weighed prison location in making parole decisions:

Well, here's how I do it. If he's taking classes... to the best of their ability, to address the issues that are of concern, then those are all positive for suitability. If you're at San Quentin, and you're not taking any classes, guess what? Then I know you're not trying very hard, right? So it's a double-edged sword... If you're at a [prison with few programs] and you're reading every book you possibly can read, and you're doing everything you possibly can... that's a plus. And if you're just reading books at San Quentin, not so good.

Commissioner Ernst echoed the idea of geographically-based standards even more explicitly. Where more programs are available, he said, there is simply a "higher standard." At a place like "Folsom or Avenal or some [other] place without programs," they won't expect inmates to

have done as much. (Interestingly, although Avenal is rural by almost any measure, Folsom is within an hour's drive of Sacramento. Still, since it is *east* of Sacramento, not west—as the Vacaville prisons are—commissioners perceived it as more remote.) Commissioners justified their use of inconsistent standards by underscoring what they saw as the reality of the differences between prisons. Commissioner Jose de Sousa explained: “CMC, Avenal, San Quentin, Solano, are overwhelmed with programs. You’ve got to take advantage... You’re not in Corcoran, you’re not in Pelican Bay... you’re not in Tehachapi. Salinas Valley—I [work] there, too—that place is hell. You’re not in them places.” Commissioners believed that even though prison location wasn’t a criterion they were supposed to consider, it would not be fair to compare inmates housed in well-resourced facilities to inmates in more remote, less-resourced places.

Thus, the data reveal not simply that commissioners take resource limitations into account in making parole decisions, but that rurality shapes the social *processes* that constitute decision-making. Commissioners’ perceptions of rurality (which may or may not accord with objective measures) affect their perception of resources (a perception which may or may not be accurate), which in turn shapes their views of prisoners, the way they conduct hearings, and how they think about parole decisions—all despite spatiality’s absence from legal guidelines.

A Different Lifestyle: Prison Rurality and Parole Commissioners’ Work Lives

Commissioners were not asked about the effects of prison location on their work lives. These data typically emerged when they were asked to name the most difficult part of the job. Commissioner Redick’s reply was characteristic: “This is a hard job. This is a very hard job... You’re traveling at least two weeks out of the month, sometimes more. [Starting now,] I’m going to be on the road for six weeks straight.” In discussing their work travel, commissioners often referred to California’s expansiveness, the onerousness of traveling to remote areas, or the number of hours involved. “California is a big state,” Commissioner Sandy de Morales told me. “I mean, you go from Pelican Bay down there to Donovan in San Diego, or to the desert. You’re talking about *big* distances.”

Making their own travel arrangements, Commissioner Benjamin said, was difficult in rural sites where it is difficult to find accommodations. Even when the commissioners’ schedule allowed them to go home overnight, they worked long days, sandwiched between long drives. When I interviewed Commissioner Mohan Nath, for example, he was preparing to conduct a week of hearings at a prison 150 miles from his home, and

planned to drive there and back daily, adding more than four hours to each workday. When I asked Commissioner Doug Bradbury, “When you first started doing lifer hearings, what surprised you most?” He replied:

...I think it surprised me to see how gut wrenching it is to go hearing, decision, hearing, decision, hearing, decision, sleep, hearing, decision, hearing, decision, hearing, decision, sleep, hearing, decision, hearing, decision, hearing, decision, while you are on the road. Living out of hotels, working... The average hearing is three hours, three hours and five minutes. If you don’t take breaks, and we don’t take breaks, that’s twelve hours in a four-hearing day and many hearings go way longer...

For non-white commissioners, travel to rural sites can take an especially significant toll. Commissioner Redick said that when he is working at High Desert Prison in Susanville, he feels like he “can’t go anywhere” in the town except the prison, because he is black. Even though the county comprises only 65 percent non-Hispanic whites, Commissioner Redick said that as a black man, he does not feel physically safe: “In this day and age, you would think that that won’t exist, but it *does*... you have to be careful.” He related anecdotes in which other commissioners of color were treated poorly as well.

Several commissioners also lamented that the job’s nature made it difficult to recruit women, younger people, and people with family responsibilities. Commissioner Sadie Bailey told me, “In terms of the board composition, it would be ideal to get more women, but it’s hard because of the travel. If they do get women on the board, they maybe tend not to stay.”

The travel expectations also affected interviewees’ ideas of what made an “ideal” or “appropriate” commissioner. Commissioner Benjamin insisted, “This is *not* a job for a person with a family, particularly if the family has young kids.” No one wants to drive to “all these crazy places,” Commissioner Max Ting said. “Who’s going to drive to *Blythe*?” Commissioner Redick said me, “Most places we go are shitholes. I mean, *Avenal*? Whoa. You can drive to Visalia, but I mean... it’s *remote*.”

The extensive travel is compounded by hearings that run unpredictably long, due partly to the lack of time restrictions on victims’ testimony. Commissioners reported that it was not unusual for a hearing to run four hours. Three lifer hearings each day (which had been recently reduced from four at the time of my interviews) could mean a 12-hour workday, not including preparation or travel time. Commissioner Garcia said, “Sometimes we don’t get out of there till midnight. We don’t take any breaks... It’s a pretty grueling process... [The hearings] are exhausting. They’re lengthy, they’re emotional. And you never get a break.”

The emotionality of the crimes came up repeatedly in commissioners' accounts. One commissioner returned repeatedly to the case of a "baby killer" to whom he had given a parole grant. The inmate had been convicted of shaking a baby and throwing it against a wall. Although the commissioner said he knew that the grant was the "right thing to do," it "haunted" him and he was having nightmares.

Interestingly, commissioners often talked about the travel and emotionality in the same breath. Their discussions about gruesome details of crimes led them into talking about the difficulty of travel, and vice versa. For example, after telling me that the worst part of his job was the travel, Commissioner Clevie said, "Other [than the travel], the hardest job is the crimes. It really will impact you when you're reading this stuff and thinking, people could do that to each other? And sometimes it's the long hours. But I guess that goes back to the hotels and the bad food." For many commissioners, like Commissioner Clevie, it was difficult to separate the long drives through the Central Valley from the substance of the hearings. This was so for Commissioner Kent as well. When asked about the hardest part of his job, he began by talking about the travel, then transitioned into talking about how the substance of the crimes, and how hearing about them had changed him:

The travel. That's probably [the worst part of my job]. The facts don't—I guess I have a short-term memory—I don't remember things that often about the cases. But I think inherently after a while it has an effect on me. Sometimes when I walk in the park by myself I think, 'is that a sex offender over there?' And after while it's, 'do they think I'm a sex offender?' [Laughter] Things like that, that obviously just, you become more guarded in whatever you do. I tend to stay home much more. I used to go out, now I need to know what my surroundings are, where I'm going. You see the worst of the worst of the worst. So I think subconsciously I'm affected.

Commissioner Clevie's and Kent's oscillation between travel and crime details gets to a crucial point that resonated with my observations: the decision to become a commissioner entailed adopting a "lifestyle" that exacted a personal toll—one that included onerous travel, long hours, and troubling cases. As one commissioner said, "everything sort of falls apart in your life." Several commissioners reported that some of their colleagues quit because of "lifestyle," which they used as a shorthand for the combination of onerous travel, long work hours, and emotional and psychological resources the job demanded. Commissioner Isabel Llona said, "They say the burnout rate's about five years." These data suggest

that in addition to shaping the social processes that constitute parole decision-making, California's carceral landscape affects commissioners' experience of their work lives, the length of time they stay in the job, and the racial, age, and gender makeup of the parole board.

Discussion

When prison siting decisions are made, economic and political calculi tend to comprise the bulk of popular and scholarly conversation (Beale 2001; Bonds 2009:423; Martin and Mitchelson 2009:463). But just as the causes underlying placement decisions are socially and culturally complex (Che 2005; Eason 2017a; Lynch 2009; Schept 2014; 2015), so, too, are the consequences. Answering calls to elaborate the research agenda for prison proliferation (Eason 2016) and location (Koh 2013) requires thinking broadly about the relationship between the physical landscape and the landscape of social actors.

These data illustrate the power of physical landscape, specifically rurality and perceptions of rurality, to shape criminal justice processes. In the foregoing analyses, place is not just a backdrop, but a constitutive element of the social interactions that comprise the hearings process. In a relatively narrow slice of the penal system, we see manifold ways rurality informs parole commissioners' decision-making process and the texture of commissioners' work lives. Traversing, understanding, and engaging within rural spaces is not at the obvious forefront of commissioners' work, but it *is* at the core, and influences the penal landscape in hidden ways.

Perceived or actual disparities in the rehabilitative resources available to inmates at different prisons shape commissioners' decision-making processes. In an attempt to hold fairer hearings, commissioners considered prison rurality and its effects on resources available to inmates—factors absent from the legal decision-making guidelines. They approached hearings at “programming prisons,” such as Solano, Soledad, and San Quentin with the assumption that the inmates there had done rehabilitative work and merited a “hard look.” They approached rougher, less-resourced, and more remote prisons, such as High Desert, Ironwood, and Corcoran, differently predisposed. In the hearings themselves, commissioners sometimes coached or counseled inmates from rural facilities that they perceived as under-resourced. And in making their decision, they held inmates to different standards based partly on facilities' rurality.

Commissioners' perceptions of location-based discrepancies between prisons may well reflect reality. Programs' availability is often contingent on the proximity of resources. At one extreme, less than 20 miles from San Francisco, San Quentin State Prison offers yoga, creative writing,

a culinary arts program, and entrepreneurial and business training. Volunteers are these programs' backbones, and the prison is located in a densely populated area within easy driving distance of dozens of universities, colleges, and nonprofit organizations. At the other extreme are prisons in some of the state's remotest and poorest regions, where inmates are expected to rehabilitate by writing book reports alone in their cells. These differences in access to rehabilitative resources can be seen not just as a prison disparity problem, but as a manifestation of America's rural access to justice crisis. As Pruitt et al. detail in a six-state survey, rural residents who seek legal help face numerous barriers, including a dearth of public transit, small law practices, and reliable communication tools (2018).

In recent years, county-level spatial inequalities have grown (Deweese, Lobao, and Swanson 2003; Pruitt and Colgan 2010:227), with rural residents are disproportionately likely to lack safe housing (White 2015), drug treatment (Pruitt 2009), representation for indigent defendants (Pruitt and Colgan 2010), and reintegration services for the formerly incarcerated (Wodahl 2006). In addition to marginalization via inadequate legal services, marginalization of rural regions tends to be baked into legal doctrine. This "judicial blind spot associated with metropolitan spatial privilege" (Pruitt and Vanegas 2015:77) spans numerous substantive areas of law. For example, appellate judges have discounted the idea that travel distances of 150 miles each way are a "burden" to women seeking abortions, which ignores realities of gender, class, rurality, and victimization that "may dramatically intensify the challenge created by [a woman's] physical distance from a clinic" (Pruitt and Vanegas 2015:82; see also Haksgaard 2017; Statz and Pruitt 2019). An analogous judicial disregard for the realities of rurality and economic disadvantage have emerged in voting jurisprudence (Karlan 2018). By "discount[ing] the role of spatiality," legal actors deepen the inequality between urban and rural areas (Pruitt and Vanegas 2015:86).

Just as many rural areas have become "legal deserts," the results I have described suggest that rural prisons may be resource deserts, and that parole decision-makers perceive them as such. Commissioners try to equalize their assessments, tempering expectations for inmates in facilities they perceive as "remote." This is a balancing act about which they receive no formal guidance.⁶ They are attempting to correct perceptions

⁶Additionally, some commissioners' insistence that inmates who "really want it" will rehabilitate without formal programs is analogous to appellate judges' minimization of the burdens spatiality imposes on rural residents. It plays into an "ethos of self-reliance" mythology that in remote regions, people simply need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps (see Pruitt 2014:191, 195).

of systemic unfairness that are shaped by the rurality of the carceral landscape (see Gilmore 2007; Table 1). While there is something fair-minded and practical about the ways commissioners incorporate their understandings of rurality and its effects on the prison system, there is something troubling about the idea that inmates who engage in identical rehabilitative activities may have these activities weighed differently because of the prison in which they are located.

The dynamics I have described are not acknowledged anywhere in California's parole decision-making, nor in commissioners' job descriptions. They are not mentioned in trainings for attorneys who represent lifers, nor are do they appear in commissioners' extensive training materials. As with statutory and judicial disregard for other spatial inequalities (Pruitt and Vanegas 2015), *not* acknowledging inequalities means these inequalities become more entrenched. Tying rural prison disparities to the larger access to justice crisis in rural America offers a framework for thinking more systematically about inequalities in rehabilitative opportunities—one of many ways that “seemingly aspatial government policy... may have important spatial outcomes (Pruitt and Colgan 2010:313, citing Lobao 2004).

Moreover, the commissioners' discussion of certain facilities as “remote” or as “shitholes” speaks to the importance of what Schept calls “carceral habitus” (2014; 2015). Prison towns' perceived alienation from the state's cultural centers is seen even when the prisons themselves are relatively close to some of the state's largest cities. Places like Bakersfield and Fresno are not only located in the Central Valley and surrounded by idled or agricultural land, but are in counties with lower income levels and educational attainment than their comparably-sized coastal counterparts. Though they contain colleges or universities, these are CSUs, not UCs; the latter hold more prestige and tend to be located near the coast, in areas with higher population densities. Here, we see the convergence of the rural with commissioners' *perceptions* of the rural. As in Schept's connection between prisons and the coal mines of Appalachia, California's prisons are connected in both imagination and actuality (Gilmore 2007) with rurality and remoteness. This is further tied to Donnermeyer et al.'s discussion of “rural othering,” in which rural communities are “presented as an object of dread”—“a countryside which is dangerous and malevolent” (2013:81). We see echoes of this in the ways commissioners “other” the locales they visit, emphasizing both literal remoteness in terms of distance and psychic remoteness (“shitholes”).

My second set of findings demonstrates how California's rural landscape and prisons' location within that landscape assumes a significant role in parole commissioners' day-to-day work life, shaping the way they

think about and navigate their jobs. The willingness and ability to traverse the state's vast spatiality goes hand in hand with the willingness and ability to hear gruesome details about some of the most troubling things humans can do to each other. These elements of the job are woven into commissioners' accounts.

To enter the inmates' world, commissioners must leave their own, physically and psychologically. To do their job well often means to "have no life"—to be subsumed by long hours, highway miles, and hearings minutiae. Commissioners considered the distances they traveled onerous, and suggested some prisons' location was so far away as to be absurd ("Who's going to drive to *Blythe*?"). Research on the relationship between travel and health suggests that increased work travel is associated with increased rates of obesity and poorer self-rated health (Richards and Rundle 2011; see also Chen 2017; Chen et al. 2018). Particularly when travel is considered in tandem with emotional and psychological stress (Reamer 2017; Young 2016), it is no wonder that commissioners describe a pattern of early burnout. They quickly learn that the spatial dimensions of their work shape their lives—and for some, take a harrowing personal toll.

Commissioners' descriptions of burnout parallel corrections officers' experiences. Depression and emotional exhaustion are common among people who work in prisons (Griffin et al. 2010; Neveu 2007; Schaufeli and Peeters 2000). For commissioners, this is compounded by long hours, which differentiates them from prison guards⁷ (who are unionized and compensated for overtime hours), as well as by extensive travel, which differentiates them from most other criminal justice system employees.

The instant findings can also be read as a companion to the literature on prison rurality's effects on inmates and their families. As Martin and Mitchelson argue, "imprisonment's spatial forms (within and beyond the prison itself) merit careful consideration" because prisons impact[] and reconfigure[] social relationships" (2009:462). This insight has been explored within the prison visitation literature (Berg and Huebner 2011; Christian 2005; Christian et al. 2006; Clark and Duwe 2017; Cochran and Mears 2013; Lindsey et al. 2017), but rarely outside of it.⁸ California prisons' rurality also shapes the commissioner workforce.

⁷To be sure, the commissioners' experience is distinct from the experiences of the corrections officers in the literature on criminal justice workers' burnout. Compared to prison guards, for example, the commissioners spend a great deal less time within prison walls. Nonetheless, the emotional content of their job is similar, and they develop intimate knowledge of each inmate's personal history and commitment offense.

⁸Of course, I am not equating prison rurality's impact on commissioners to its impact on inmates or their families.

Multiple commissioners mentioned that the job was more difficult because of their race, age, or family status. Others said it was “not a job for a person with a family.” Commissioners’ accounts suggest that rurality may create gendered and racialized patterns in the commissioner workforce.

Conclusion

The carceral and physical landscapes go hand in hand. Examining parole hearings through the lens of legal ruralism (Pruitt 2014) underscores the importance of spatially and rurality in shaping the social dimensions of criminal justice processes. Additionally, like Shammas’s work on performances of rehabilitation (2019), the analyses herein illustrate the importance of qualitative work in understanding the extralegal aspects of parole decision-making. Rural criminology is not simply a study of how criminal justice processes function in sparsely populated places. Rather, people’s relationships to physical space—from their subjective attachments to their attempts to navigate distances to the ways geography affects their relationships with other actors—are an important aspect of social life (Tickamyer 2000). Rurality is socially and contextually defined, and may incorporate multiple aspects of what we think of as “rural.” The process of rural “othering” (Donnermeyer et al. 2013) involves both actual and perceived remoteness, and both actual and perceived distance—not just from large cities, but from cities widely considered cultural centers.

These perceptions of rurality shape criminal justice processes in fundamental ways that deserve deeper examination in the criminological literature. For example, future work could follow Schept’s lead (2014) and interrogate the cultural connections between rural land and carceral habitus. In California, it may be fruitful to examine the connection between idled and productive agricultural land, the prevalence of suburban and rural poverty in the Central Valley (Zach 2018), and the growth of prisons in the region, to track the continuing social and cultural aspects of the dynamics Gilmore describes in *Golden Gulag* (2007) and their implications for understanding rural spaces as a constitutive element of criminal justice processes.

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