



---

2010

**Review of *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison*. Megan Comfort. Reviewed by Jonah A. Siegel.**

Jonah A. Siegel  
*University of Michigan*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

**Recommended Citation**

Siegel, Jonah A. (2010) "Review of *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison*. Megan Comfort. Reviewed by Jonah A. Siegel.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 4 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol37/iss4/20>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



placed on Blacks, Foster nonetheless dispels myths that slaves were unable to marry. Interweaving historical accounts with personal stories that remind us of how African Americans create culture, Foster challenges the reader to imagine that Africans could be passionate, engage in love rituals, write love letters and poems, and create happy, healthy households. We are taken on a journey that describes courtship, the rules and laws of society that dictated and restricted marriage among people of African descent, and through the marriage rituals themselves.

By comparing the story of a modern-day African couple who will be separated because their individual asylum statuses dictate they live on separate continents to that of the slave couples, Foster concludes the book by bringing us full circle to the dilemma of death or distance—a bittersweet reality of marriage among modern-day Africans living in the western world—eerily similar to African slaves in early America.

There are some confusing transitions as Foster interweaves first-person narratives with the work of other authors and modern-day stories, but overall the book is well-written with enough first-person stories to support the truths about African marriage in America. This is a useful book for any scholar of African American history and, in particular, for those looking to understand families of African descent. No stranger to writing about African slaves and Blacks in the antebellum period, Foster has done an excellent job discussing a significant ritualized institution that very often gets lost in the history of Africans in America—marriage.

*Shannon Butler-Mokoro, Salem State College*

Megan Comfort, *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. \$55.00 hardcover, \$22.00 paperback.

The United States prison population increased sevenfold in the last four decades, with over 1.5 million people currently in state or federal facilities and an additional 700,000 individuals serving time in local jails. Stakeholders are divided on mass incarceration—most either brand themselves as staunch

advocates for punitive sanctions or supporters of more lenient policymaking. The prison explosion has sparked a growing literature on the family effects of incarceration, and scholars are not exempt from this ideological chasm. While an early publication by Pauline Morris recognized the disparate impact of incarceration on families, the majority of studies have cast such implications in a negative light.

In *Doing Time Together*, the culmination of her dissertation work and first full-length publication, Megan Comfort repudiates this polarized thinking. Through a nuanced examination of how incarceration shapes romantic relationships, Comfort explores the institution of prison as an active agent rather than as an external, passive entity.

Utilizing in-depth interviews and participant observation with women visiting their partners at San Quentin in California, Comfort's book explores a range of topics: the process of accessing the facility; the risks and rewards of remaining partnered with an incarcerated man; the roles of correctional officers and institutional policies in intimate relationships; means of communication; and community reentry. Comfort grounds her findings in theory and previous scholarship on families and incarceration. Drawing on Donald Clemmer's notion of *prisonization*, "the taking on ... of the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary," she argues that women involved in relationships with men behind bars become engaged in "secondary prisonization," during which they become "quasi inmates." Through regulatory oversight that is qualitatively similar and at times only slightly less severe than that experienced by inmates, female partners are surveilled, confined and dehumanized while at the prison and at home.

One of Comfort's tasks is to dispel the myth of prison as a wholly positive or negative force. She claims that current research draws a causal relationship between incarceration and poverty, unemployment, and single motherhood with little analysis of the extent to which these circumstances existed prior to prison or whether incarceration relieves rather than exacerbates such hardships. In reality, the picture is more complicated; her interviews reveal accounts of family life surrounding prison that are neither straightforward nor homogenous.

The author utilizes Merton and Barber's notion of sociological ambivalence to move away from a "monotonal evaluation of 'good versus bad'" in assessing the effects of penal systems.

Part of the ambivalence expressed by Comfort's respondents results from their experience of a dissolution of boundaries between home and penitentiary. This is an important finding for scholars and social service providers alike, in contrast to the conventional distinction between the 'inside' and the 'outside.' Rather than depicting a system that is removed from the community, respondents describe an institution that is constantly and emphatically present in their lives. Comfort argues that the current discourse is an inaccurate reflection of the experiences of inmates' partners; as such, it suggests only ineffective services and policies.

Although Comfort's study addresses how incarceration shapes intimate relationships, her sample is somewhat limited. While keenly aware of the challenges of maintaining ties, respondents recount mutual efforts to strengthen their connection during incarceration. Because Comfort interviews only individuals who visit the prison and choose to remain in their relationships, the book does not elucidate the experiences of partners whose relationships do not endure a prison spell.

Comfort does not propose system reform based on this initial work, calling mainly for further investigation of the 'secondary prisonization' of partners and the enmeshment of the prison and the home. Her research takes important steps to refine the narrative about the nuanced family implications of prison and to identify the prison system as an active agent in producing change. Lest the reader be confused by assertions that partners can become "reliant on, and even grateful for, carceral control," Comfort's goal is not to advocate for harsher penal policies; rather, she calls for comprehensive analysis of the powerful grip of the penal system in order to generate effective service delivery, policymaking and scholarship. *Doing Time Together* is a critical read for anyone concerned with the unremitting growth of the prison population.

*Jonah A. Siegel, University of Michigan*