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Presentation

Meanings of punishment in narratives, images and symbols

Speaker

[Dr Hannah Thurston](#), SSPARC, University of Brighton

Abstract

For some time now qualitative researchers have sought to understand the meanings of punishment as expressed in narratives, images and symbols. This literature views culture as a complex set of meanings, forms of representation and performance; punishment is understood as 'a cultural product', and as such, is studied with reference to the meanings it carries. For example, whilst capital punishment lives in the execution chamber and prisons exist within urban landscapes both the death penalty and incarceration also thrive in films, books and news articles; in presentations and representations. It is here that punishment acquires much of its cultural significance; in the spaces and places where the penal and the public meet. However, while these cultural representations of punishment continue to be fruitful sources of data, a new methodological paradigm is developing within criminology, a paradigm in which museums are understood as sites for cultural criminological work. This paper will argue that museums offer collective memories of punishment in storied form, and thus are significant resources for cultural criminologists. Providing illustrative examples from a study conducted in Texan punishment museums, this paper will examine how punishment-related tourist sites can be used within criminological research. Moreover, it will be argued that the museum provides a unique opportunity for narrative, visual and object analysis of the crime and punishment story.