

# Book Review: Governance, Performance, and Capacity Stress: The Chronic Case of Prison Crowding

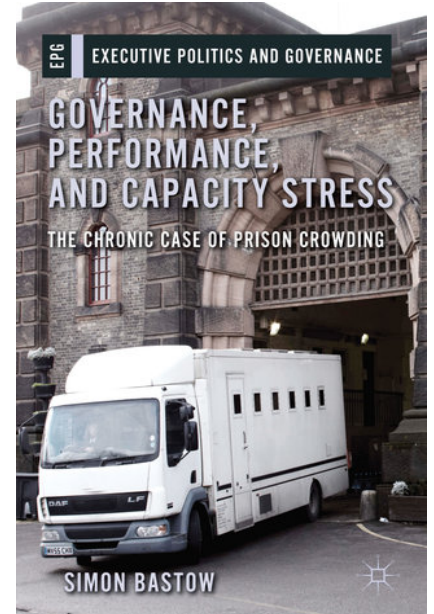
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Blog Admin

*In **Governance, Performance, and Capacity Stress**, **Simon Bastow** offers well-presented insights into both the pressures and the often hidden resources and capabilities which the prison system deploys to sustain itself, writes **Andrew Gray**. Both practitioners and students will find explanations of the complexities of this particular public administration, and readers with public policy interests beyond criminal justice will find a transferable methodology to investigate other manifestations of chronic capacity stress.*

**Governance, Performance, and Capacity Stress: The Chronic Case of Prison Crowding. Simon Bastow. Palgrave Macmillan. July 2013.**

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Endorsements of this new book include those from former Home Secretary Charles Clarke and Head of the Prison Service Phil Wheatley. Campaigners against prison crowding probably regard such people as part of the problem. The implication of this book, however, is that they are also its victims. Yet this is not a discourse of high policy. It does not address, for example, whether the crowding is the result of too many prisoners or too few prison places. Rather, it focuses on the ways the prison service manages the external and internal forces upon it to sustain and even improve order, discipline, and decency in what it is asked to do.

[Simon Bastow's](#) target is public service performance that is neither excellent nor failing but getting by; coping, always muddling never quite through accumulating constraints. This is chronic capacity stress. It is *chronic* in the sense of never cured, managed as part of life, sometimes in remission but at other times flaring up as acute episodes. It is *capacity stress* as an overload of expectation and an underload of capacity itself.

For his analysis of a part of public administration often overlooked by policy sciences favouring more dramatic extremes of policy pathology, Bastow offers a triangulation of perspectives with explanatory potential. Rational choice offers a view of chronic capacity stress as the product of accumulated decisions and actions taken by actors optimising their interests in the system over time. Cultural theory in contrast posits an explanation in terms of shared values and beliefs within settings that may both contest and institutionalise the underlying conditions. Systems theory focuses on the interconnected transactions as a whole and provides explanations in terms of system dynamics.

What do we learn from the consequent analysis? First, we gain understanding of the everyday operational stresses

of the prison service. This emerges from an effective combination of data about the system's throughput and resources and telling stories of service in practice. Through these we learn of the contested definitions of crowding (properly, he does not speak of *overcrowding*). Technically the capacity standard is defined as Certified Normal Accommodation (CAN), what the Prison Service defines as "uncrowded capacity" (PSI 17/2012). As the Ministry of Justice reported that on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2013, CAN was 76,293 and the prison population was 85,995, crowding in the whole estate was 112% (with some prisons as high as 165%). But in practice the prison service uses Operational Capacity (OC) to manage the system. OC is determined by custodial managers on the basis of their *operational judgement* (reviewer's emphasis) of "the total number of prisoners that an establishment can hold without serious risk to good order, security and the proper running of the planned regime" (PSI 17/2012). On 8<sup>th</sup> November, the OC was 85995, suggesting room for 658 more!

The stress, however, comes not from the numbers alone. There are additional dysfunctional demands made on capacity, for example, by the churn of prisoner movements created by the courts. And there is a perverse tendency of the system to make itself more difficult to sustain. Some of this can be attributed to misalignments within the wider criminal justice system. But your reviewer also observes how the transition of service elements into marketable commodities has fragmented provision.



HMP Leicester. Credit: [Chien-Chang Chen](#)

Second, we learn of the remarkable human capabilities that sustain the system. Some may see resistance in the interests of those running the system. More striking, however, is a benign operational adaptability that amounts to a negentropic resource sustaining a functional service in the face of policy contradictions. There is also evidence of remarkable personal attributes including strength of moral compass that some may have thought in decline. The paradox will not be lost on those with interests in the perverse outcomes of policy – the success in sustaining the system confirms to the policy community that the system is able to cope with more capacity stress.

Third, we learn of the value in bringing multiple perspectives to bear on enacted public policy. For example, crowding itself emerges as a physical, social, psychological, and political construct, each offering positive and negative qualities to those who experience it. As we enter an era of payment by results, we may use this analysis to ask very pointedly: what constitutes a result for whom in what circumstances? Are we speaking of results for the high policy community, for the court system, for the prison service, for other agencies such as the NHS, housing and social care, or for offenders?

The strengths of this analysis lie in the careful drawing of the enquiry and the conceptual tools used. Chronic capacity stress as a construct, rational choice, cultural theory and systems approaches as investigative lenses, and sustain as a property are set out carefully and analytically. If the author tends to reify NPM (a fashionable habit) he is stronger in dealing with other concepts. Performance, for example, is given a thorough treatment, with careful use of proxies and data. And while he does not define governance (nor lists it in the index despite its place in the book title), he goes some way to rescue it from its impoverished literature as a particular mode and treats it as a property intrinsic to collective endeavour. He is similarly careful not to be distracted into high policy; he keeps his focus on the system and its capacity.

As a result we gain well presented insights into both the pressures and the often hidden resources and capabilities which the system deploys to sustain itself. Both practitioners and students will find explanations of the complexities of this particular public administration. Readers with public policy interests beyond criminal justice will find a transferable methodology to investigate other manifestations of chronic capacity stress. Accident and Emergency departments in NHS hospitals spring immediately to mind.

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