

Example of surveillance and social control article review

[Law](#), [Criminal Justice](#)



Surveillance can be an effective tool for social control, no matter what the environment. The reason for that is we all behave differently when we believe we are or are not being watched. For example, we might feel free to play “air guitar,” wildly rocking to the beat of a song on the radio when we are alone, but if we know someone is looking at us, we feel self-conscious, and all we might do is hum the tune or do nothing at all.

This behavior holds true, too, with regard to crime. On the simplest level, a burglar won't enter a house if he knows someone is watching him, but he will feel free to break in and take whatever he wants if he believes there is no one else around. On a deeper level, surveillance can be used to control the behavior of inmates in a prison or a juvenile detention facility. If the inmates know that someone is watching their every action, they will likely not violate the rules – say, get into a fight or trash their cell – because they will undoubtedly be punished further for this offense. The presence of cameras, guards, and other surveillance tools acts to restrict their behavior and make it conform more to the expected norm.

Richard Ross' “Juvenile in Justice” (2012) series of photographs documents the many faces of the criminal justice system as it relates to the juvenile offender. There are three photographs of particular interest. The first is of a 12-year-old boy in a dingy, windowless cell. The ceiling and walls are crumbling, and the only objects in the room are a metal bunk bed, a metal toilet, and an overhead light. Although the cell is small, the boy still seems dwarfed by his surroundings, as if the weight of his crime and of the criminal justice system as a whole is bearing down on him. The only link he has with the outside world is the camera's lens; other than that, he is entirely alone. It

does not make the viewer feel hopeful about the outcome of the boy's experience in detention.

The second picture is of the high-tech surveillance system inside the detention facility. There are multiple closed-circuit video screens, an electronic control board, and detailed schematics of the facility. In contrast with the decrepit surroundings and hopeless expressions of the inmates, it reinforces the aspect of surveillance as a control mechanism. From here, the guards can watch any and all activity inside the prison and respond to infractions swiftly and decisively. Knowing that the control center is there undoubtedly gives many of the inmates pause about breaking any of the rules.

The third picture is of a 16-year-old girl from the waist down. She is wearing jeans and sandals, but there is an electronic ankle bracelet around her right leg, which allows the authorities to monitor her every move, and thereby control her behavior. What makes the picture even more unsettling, though, is the baby sitting in her lap. It reminds the viewer that illegal behavior comes with consequences not only for the perpetrator, but also for their family and friends who are caught up in the action. What will the baby, as it grows up, learn about the world when its mother is part of the criminal justice system? Will it, too, become an offender? Will it have a chance for a better life? We can only hope that, being monitored, the girl will be able to make it out of the system and become a more productive member of society, if not for herself, then for her child.

Surveillance, while effective, cannot and should not be the only answer to rehabilitating juvenile offenders. Inmates must have hope that their lives will

become better, and training to ensure they are able to grow beyond the system. It would be interesting to follow the individuals in these pictures through their time in prison and their release to the outside world, hoping that they have learned the lessons of social control and behavior that the system is designed to impart.

Works Cited

Ross, R. Juvenile in Justice. 2012. Web: <http://richardross.net/juvenile-in-justice>. 14 Nov. 2012.