About the Book

In America today, one in every hundred adults is behind bars. As our prison population has exploded, “law and order” interest groups have also grown in numbers and political clout. Committed to punitive justice, these organizations perpetuate America’s imprisonment binge. The Toughest Beat forcefully demonstrates how this cyclical process has unfolded in California.

In crisp, vivid prose, Joshua Page argues that the Golden State’s prison boom fueled the rise of one of the most politically potent and feared interest groups in the nation: the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA). As it made great strides for its members, the prison officers’ union also fundamentally altered the composition and orientation of the penal field. It promoted extreme punishment and moralistic conceptions of prisoners, helped institute ultra-tough penal policies such as Three Strikes and You’re Out, obstructed efforts to privatize prisons, and empowered sympathetic political figures and groups, including crime victims’ organizations that it helped create. To understand the nature, purpose, and scope of California’s penal system, Page explains, we cannot neglect the story of this group so often known simply as “the powerful prison guards union.”

Page draws on years of intensive research, using the lessons of the CCPOA to illuminate concrete processes that determine criminal justice outcomes at the state level. He demonstrates how actors produce and reinforce the penal status quo and considers whether, by making these mechanisms clear, we might open the door to real and lasting change in the penal field and beyond. The Toughest Beat is essential reading for anyone concerned with contemporary crime and punishment, interest group politics, and public sector labor unions.

Discussion Panelists

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- Nicole Lindahl  
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- Jody Lewen  
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