

One inmate's call for reform

By EDWARD HUMES

Inside

Life Behind Bars in America

Michael G. Santos

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AS Michael G. Santos celebrated his acceptance into a long-distance doctoral program, the correctional officer overseeing the former cocaine dealer's 20th year in prison blandly told him he might as well tear up his college papers. Despite his exemplary conduct and successful completion of bachelor's and master's degrees under more progressive supervisors, Santos learned that his continued education and plan to write about the state of U.S. prisons had been deemed an unacceptable "security risk."

When Santos tried to show the value of his work by sending the warden a copy of an unpublished book he'd written, the inmate was reprimanded and forced to sign a paper acknowledging that he'd been warned never to give "anything of value" to prison staffers again. At the same time, he saw hardened felons who ran vicious prison gangs, trafficked in drugs, raped weaker inmates and ruled cellblocks with terror and violence receiving special privileges, private cells and the most desirable work details. The worst of the worst, who displayed no desire to leave behind their lives of crime, were placated and pampered by prison officials as a means of keeping the institution quiet.

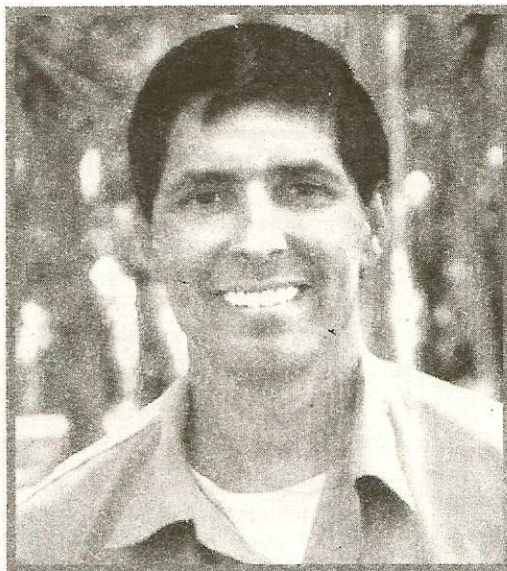
Such are the strange priorities of the iron-caged world Santos describes in his revealing, compelling book, "Inside: Life Behind Bars in America." This surprisingly dispassionate account of life in federal prison reads more like a work of advocacy journalism than personal memoir, freshening both the genre and the arguments about the failings of modern U.S. penitentiaries. The tone and his focus on other inmates' experiences rather than his own lend the book weight and authenticity, opening a window onto the corrupt, violent and ultimately counter-productive society of American prisons.

At the heart of Santos' frequently harrowing book is a simple argument: Prisons have become places where crime does pay. Inmates who avail themselves of the few opportunities to reform and become productive citizens are treated as weak by predatory prisoners and with derision and hostility by many prison officials. This, in turn, leads to recidivism rates of more than 50%, he argues, and the constant, costly growth of prisons as an industry.

"The corrections complex does not exist to prepare people for law-abiding lives," Santos writes. "Corrections professionals, oxymoron though the term may be, want more people serving longer sentences. . . . [T]hey do not want people earning freedom, or preparing themselves to succeed . . . outside."

Santos uses vignettes and character profiles of the

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St. Martin's Press

A TARGET? Author Michael G. Santos says prison officials blocked his efforts to earn an online doctoral degree and have tried to suppress his writings.

various inmates he has met over two decades of incarceration to support this premise. He begins with his entry into an Atlanta maximum-security federal prison, which he describes as one of the most violent and chaotic in the country. There he is thrown together with a career criminal and "shot caller" from a Compton Crips gang. The intake process makes no distinction between Santos — a nonviolent, middle-class kid from Seattle — and Crip Tank, a violent, unrepentant offender whose first order of business is getting "blessed with heat" (obtaining a makeshift knife) from a fellow Crip.

Santos, with only a high school education at the time, managed to befriend Crip Tank and, through him, other powerful but barely literate inmates by helping them file legal papers and grievance complaints against the prison. That gave a measure of protection to the young newcomer, who might otherwise have fallen prey to assaults or worse. In this way, he meets street gang members, thugs with Mafia ties and white-collar criminals in their 60s serving time for embezzlement, Ponzi schemes and, in one odd case, over-fishing Indian Ocean lobster.

Time and again, as Santos moves through maximum- to medium- to minimum-security facilities across the country, the inmates he meets either consider attempts at reform to be a ridiculous waste of time or are frustrated in their attempts to better themselves and to prepare for release. For example, one white-collar criminal had his visiting and telephone privileges revoked for discussing business dealings and investments with his wife over the phone.

Corrections officers are portrayed mostly as hostile, bored or indifferent to rehabilitation. Their emphasis, Santos writes, is always on maintaining order within prison walls, not on promoting public safety once inmates are turned loose; consequently, inmates' efforts to improve themselves are not valued. "Inside" also details numerous instances of alleged corruption among guards, including bribery, smuggling, collusion with prison rapists and one episode in which an organized-crime figure allegedly paid one female guard \$1,000 for a five-minute sexual liaison in his cell. Engineered by the woman's husband, a fellow correctional officer, these visits were repeated many times, according to Santos. He points to court cases and news reports on correctional corruption to bolster his accounts.

The federal system may have a reputation as a network of "country clubs" far cushier than the frequently brutal state prisons, but the ones Santos describes, particularly the maximum-security penitentiaries where he started his sentence, are crime-ridden hellholes. During his very first "movement" — when masses of inmates are herded from one area to another down a narrow corridor — he witnessed a fatal stabbing.

Santos doesn't dwell on his own story in the book, but what there is seems fascinating. Arrested at age 23 for running a cocaine ring that supplied suburban dealers across the nation, he drew a 45-year sentence in 1987. His partner-turned-informant, a high school buddy, got four years for essentially the same crimes. Santos repeatedly writes that his predicament is his fault alone. But he does argue that 45 years might be excessive for a first-time nonviolent offender when many violent career criminals with whom he has served time got much shorter sentences.

Santos, whose earliest possible release date is in 2013 at age 49, is aware that most Americans favor punishment over correction. But he argues that prison systems should adopt a policy in which privileges and release dates improve for inmates who stay out of trouble and make efforts to better themselves. He suggests it would save tax dollars and promote public safety, given that the average federal convict is out in less than three years, rehabilitated or not. The first jail he stayed in while awaiting trial operated on such a merit system and was among the safest, most cost-effective facilities he has seen. In 20 years of confinement in 19 facilities, he has seen no other like it, he writes.

Santos relates how he has structured his prison time to avoid confrontations with other inmates and trouble with guards and has pursued every educational opportunity open to him. This culminated in a master's degree from Hofstra University and acceptance to a University of Connecticut online doctoral program, the one blocked as a security risk. According to Santos, the program would have cost the prison system nothing and the only approval needed was to allow the university library to send him research materials on loan. Prison officials refused, explaining that the books might contain contraband. Santos argues that he was targeted because of his writings, which have included several unpublished books aimed at fellow inmates, as well as "Inside," his first work for a general audience.

"We don't want you writing," Santos recalls his unit manager warning him. He describes prison officials who delay his mail to publishers for weeks, bar journalists from interviewing him and obstruct his contacts with university mentors. He writes that he barely got his just-finished manuscript for "Inside" safely in a mailbox before he was abruptly thrown into "the hole" — solitary confinement — then transferred to another prison, a process during which his one print copy of the manuscript for "Inside" might well have vanished.

Santos expects readers to be suspicious of the claims of an inmate, so he bolsters his account with references to documented court cases and reports on prison conditions that jibe with his descriptions. Meanwhile, prison officials are blocking access to academics interested in his work, such as Sam Torres. The Cal State Long Beach criminal justice professor has assigned Santos' earlier manuscripts to his students and had them mail questions to him. When Torres tried to visit him in Lompoc, Calif., Santos writes, the former federal probation officer was refused — once again, as a security risk. Torres, who does not view prison issues from a liberal "social worker perspective," disagrees with the system's treatment of Santos. "His point is that all prisoners shouldn't be treated alike," Torres told a reporter. "Look at what he's accomplished — he's an impressive guy." ■