

360 Degrees: Perspectives on the U.S. Criminal Justice System

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HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA — While America's prison population has quadrupled (to more than 2 million) since 1980, most of us are fortunate enough to have no first-hand knowledge of the nation's prison system. That ignorance can be a handicap, though, in understanding the various debates currently taking place about prison and criminal justice reform, and in an attempt to give us a somewhat more intimate experience with 'the system,' Picture Projects has created 360 Degrees: Perspectives on the U.S. Criminal Justice System.

Launched in January, 360 Degrees is available in both Flash 5 and HTML versions, and takes its name from two specific features of its presentation - the goal of revealing all 'angles' of the justice system, and the site's use of QuickTime Virtual Reality (QTVR) panoramas to place surfers as much as possible inside the worlds of the featured subjects.

These strategies are showcased in 360 Degrees' Stories section (produced in cooperation with NPR's Prison Diaries -<http://www.radiodiaries.org/>). While most coverage of a crime is limited to perpetrator and victim, and ends with the conviction, 360 Degrees has interviewed members from the entire justice process - including prison and parole officers, lawyers, judges, and parents. For each subject, audio diaries recorded in situ are accompanied by QTVR panoramas of the subject's working or living environment.

In addition to the obvious views of court rooms and prison cells, this feature also offers glimpses of such locations as a prison's 'receiving' area, and the family homes of criminals and their victims. (The HTML version of the site has an added consideration to those with slow connections. Rather than loading the QTVR panoramic movie immediately, a scrollable, still, panoramic image is placed on the page, with a link to the larger interactive version if desired.)

Transcripts of the audio files, still photos and information about the featured inmates' prisons complete the presentations. To date there are only two stories available, (that of a 21-year old armed robber -- who wanted to be a police officer as a child -- and a 15-year old convicted of attacking her classmate with a razor blade) but spaces are reserved for six additional essays in the future.

Dynamic Data provides an even more intimate perspective on the criminal justice system - your own. Offerings here include a pair of online quizzes - one to explore how many felonies and/or misdemeanors you yourself may have committed over the years, and the

other to poll visitors about their feelings on Criminal Theory. Features on demographics, community impact, and an inmate's right to vote are planned for future updates. (The Flash version of this section also features a constantly updating version of the familiar 'Debt Clock' - in this case tracking the money spent on the U.S. justice system during 2001.)

The last of the exhibits at 360 Degrees is an extensive interactive Timeline, tracing criminal justice from the 7th century to the present day - from the "Dooms" (the earliest recorded set of Anglo-Saxon laws) and Trial by Ordeal, to such current topics as Restorative Justice, Racial Profiling and the Death Penalty. After the Timeline, visitors can explore the site's recommended Resources, including book and video lists, audio documentaries and broadcasts, and a few dozen recommended links. Dialogue offers online forums and debates.

The Flash design is imaginative and efficient, and the HTML version is a very close approximation of the Flash interface. (Though in at least one case --the thumbnail captions in the HTML Timeline-- the text was small enough to be illegible in my Mac browsers.) And while 360 Degrees is still a work in progress, if you are intrigued by the offerings available already, you'll know that you have more to look forward to in the coming months.

360 Degrees: Perspectives on the U.S. Criminal Justice System can be found at <http://www.360degrees.org/>