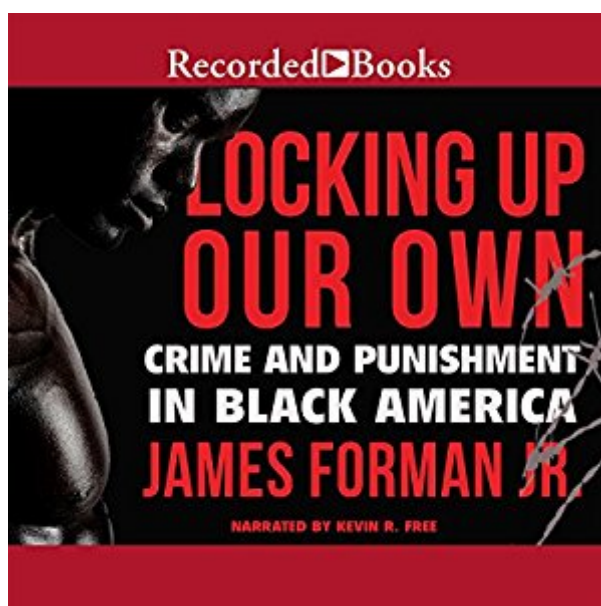


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Locking Up Our Own: Crime And Punishment In Black America



Synopsis

An original and consequential argument about race, crime, and the law. Today, Americans are debating our criminal justice system with new urgency. Mass incarceration and aggressive police tactics - and their impact on people of color - are feeding outrage and a consensus that something must be done. But what if we only know half the story? In *Locking Up Our Own*, the Yale legal scholar and former public defender James Forman Jr. weighs the tragic role that some African Americans themselves played in escalating the war on crime. As Forman shows, the first substantial cohort of black mayors, judges, and police chiefs took office around the country amid a surge in crime. Many came to believe that tough measures - such as stringent drug and gun laws and "pretext traffic stops" in poor African American neighborhoods - were needed to secure a stable future for black communities. Some politicians and activists saw criminals as a "cancer" that had to be cut away from the rest of black America. Others supported harsh measures more reluctantly, believing they had no other choice in the face of a public safety emergency. Drawing on his experience as a public defender and focusing on Washington, DC, Forman writes with compassion for individuals trapped in terrible dilemmas - from the young men and women he defended to officials struggling to cope with an impossible situation. The result is an original view of our justice system as well as a moving portrait of the human beings caught in its coils.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is the best book about how we have come to have so many young black men in jail and prison. The statistics are familiar but shocking - to take one as an example, roughly 30% of young black

men that are high school dropouts are *currently* in jail or prison. That's a stunning failure for those men, of course, but it's a failure for the rest of our society as well. Many analysts point to white racism or the war on drugs as the causes of that incarceration, and they're of course not totally wrong. But Forman's contribution is to point out incompleteness of that narrative, as the incarceration boom had complicated origins. There are two of those additional factors that Forman analyzes with unique skill and detail. The first is the get-tough-on-crime stance taken by many black politicians and civic leaders in the 1980s and 1990s. These were times when the crack epidemic wrought particular havoc in the black community in Washington, DC - on which Forman focuses - and which created a demand for get-tough policies by the black middle class that was disproportionately the victim of crack-fueled crime. The second is the trend towards pretextual searches of cars in Washington - Eric Holder's version of Rudy Giuliani's stop-and-frisk - which was designed to reduce gun possession in DC. Those searches were deliberately executed with greater vigor in poor, black neighborhoods, and the result was that many poor blacks were arrested for minor drug offenses when officers found marijuana in their cars while looking for guns. It's a Greek tragedy, and it reminded me favorably of Randy Shilts' brilliant treatment of the AIDS epidemic in *And The Band Played On*. Forman's background as a former public defender in DC is a great strength of the book, but it also makes the narrative somewhat DC-centric. Incarceration increased throughout the country - were the political and justice dynamics the same in Mississippi and Ohio, to take two examples, as they were in DC. That remains an open question. The book is frustrating, too, in that Forman offers no easy cure for the problems. More drug treatment programs, more constructive diversion programs for youthful offenders, more nuanced reading of arrest records by current and prospective employers? Those would all be good, to be sure, but I left this book feeling that it would take these things, and at least a handful of similarly benign trends, before we will really get a handle on these problems. But it is to Forman's credit that he offers no silver bullet for the problems. Life is sadly frustrating at times.

This is an important book that makes good points. It is a complicated story and I'm not sure the black leaders had much choice but to do what they did. This book should be read along with another important recent book, John Pfaff's, *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform*. Pfaff would agree with Forman about having compassion for people convicted of violent crimes. A larger issue is the failure of black leadership in general to find ways to organize the black community to better fight for themselves and lead their people. I believe it is to a large extent a futile effort to try to devise a cure for our criminal justice system. Like the education

system and the health care system, the criminal justice system reflects the society as a whole with its characteristic problems, inequality, injustice, and incoherence. These systems will not be improved until the general society is improved or changed fundamentally. I am not talking about socialist revolution but a fundamental increase in fairness and equal opportunity and decrease in discrimination and all of the barriers to fairness and equal opportunity. We won't have any real progress in any sphere until we can eliminate the essential corruption at the heart of our society and economy. There are many good people working in the field and good work being done and this should be continued simultaneous to general efforts to improve our society. We may have to wait 4 years to start on all of that. Midwest Independent Research, educational websites. Law, mwir-law.blogspot. There are book lists.

A fascinating and fresh look at one of the most important issues of our time. I was captivated from the very first page as Forman weaves stories of actual individuals into the broader narrative of civil rights. Who in his right mind would try to talk about the role that black leaders played in producing our national tragedy of mass incarceration? Who could possibly hope to navigate that minefield without being accused of being an apologist or a racist? But with amazing skill, Forman manages to tell the story, in vivid and compelling detail, in a way that makes sense, confers dignity and responsibility appropriately, and even provides hopeful guidance for the future. You'll finish this book with a new appreciation for the problem of mass incarceration. You'll also leave with a lens and perspective for considering "urgent" proposals for addressing other pressing issues facing our time, like gun control and economic inequality.

A different take on modern day mass incarceration, Dr. Forman examines its beginnings with harsh minimum mandatory sentences for tough gun and drug laws in Washington DC, enacted and doubled down on by black police and lawmakers and largely supported by their communities. It goes deeper than that, though, and argued, that today's mass incarceration came about by a series of well intentioned laws and policies to combat drug and gun violence in America's urban area said. Harsh laws we're not backed up by promises to examine and fix root causes, for example. One of many good reads to better understand the current state of our criminal justice system and the road that led us here.

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