



Book Review

Reform Nation: The First Step Act and the Movement to End Mass Incarceration

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Reform Nation: The First Step Act and the Movement to End Mass Incarceration by Colleen P. Eren. Stanford University Press, 2023. 263 pp. ISBN:978-1-5036-3673-6

As a professor of corrections, one is intrigued by the implications of the First Step Act. The First Step Act was passed by Congress and signed by President Trump in 2018. The goal of the Act was to reduce the power of previous tough sentencing laws and, instead, impose, for example, minimum sentences for people convicted of certain types of nonviolent drug offenses. In a November 14, 2018 White House statement, President Trump declared “Our whole nation benefits if former inmates are able to reenter society as productive, law-abiding citizens.” In her cutting-edge book entitled *Reform Nation: The First Step Act and the Movement to End Mass Incarceration*, Colleen P. Eren contributes, in my opinion, an astute discussion of how the criminal justice reform movement is gaining in momentum.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the criminal justice reform movement, especially in terms of its mainstreamization, enhanced by the celebrity movement and the fact that many people in power realized that mass incarceration was becoming a monster. Eren wonders if we can return to the incarceration levels of the 1970s. In chapter 2, the author describes in detail the concept of mainstreamization and the barriers to criminal justice reform: collective acknowledgment, competing concerns, ideologically resonant stories, alternative stories, resource growth, action+amplification, conflict re: goals or tactics, and expansion/mainstreamization. Chapter 3 addresses a huge philanthropic movement that “...revealed deep philosophical, ideological, and practical tensions within the movement, and created new debates it previously did not have to contend with because of a lack of funding.” (p. 61). Chapter 4 examines the importance of the celebrities and “influencers” in the reform movement. Here, Eren really shines in her analysis. She states: “...where attention exists, great marketing and buzzwords, but there is no increased, sustained civic engagements by individuals and groups that are not on the payroll, then a re-evaluation is warranted.” (p. 105).

Corporate leaders and businesses are discussed in chapter 5. Eren is cautious in her evaluation of the overt capitalists, aiming to “look good” during a time of mass incarceration: “Whether the change in the past 20 years in corporate activism and internal business practices, which we

can place under the “criminal justice reform” umbrella, is evidence of the nationalization and mainstreamization of that movement, and whether it will have substantial impact on decarceration or ameliorating the harms of the carceral system, will be addressed in the decades to come.” (pp. 127-128).

Eren addresses the harsh reality that “...larger movement building is difficult.” (p.161). In chapter 6, she noted that “None of the national reform advocates on either side interviewed for this project said that they became involved because they felt swayed by rational or fiscal arguments...” (p. 161). Eren is puzzled why some people may believe that the electorate “... is any different.” (p.162). Finally, Professor Eren asks two very pertinent questions. “First, even with openness to bipartisanship and humanistic appreciation for deep stories, how should these understandings be expanded beyond the elite ‘grasstops’ of the national movement to the general population? Second, can this do more than, as Andre Ward said, produce crumbs of reform?”(p. 162). In the final chapter of the insightful text, Eren explains the role of formerly incarcerated activists and the future of criminal justice reform by realizing that we need to have “...the movement understand and respond to the wants, needs, fears of the larger community. “ (p. 185). It is clear in chapter 6 that Professor Eren reminds us that the United States has a moral obligation to NOT remain a “brutal jailer”. Surprisingly, we can and must accept help from these “strange bedfellows” like former President Trump, who, in a stroke of wisdom, signed into law The First Step Act, thus allowing us to believe that mass incarceration may end in the United States.

This law book is ideal for the college or university professor, the criminal justice practitioner, and a researcher. Eren provides a truly visionary case for a positive criminal justice reform movement in the United States. There is a cautionary tale too since we must keep an eye on those who wish to help end mass incarceration but insist on injecting their money into the American economy and their celebrity status. Time will tell....



Kimora is a professor of criminal justice at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Her research includes the following areas of concentration: corrections, cognitive skills, mental health issues of the incarcerated, ethics, and leadership. Her published works include an essay entitled “The Enigma of American Correctional Education”, which was published in 2023 in the book entitled *Corrections 360: A Look at Corrections from All Angles* by Taryn Vanderpyl. Professor Kimora is editor of two academic books: *Ethnic Profiling: a Modern Framework*, as well as *When Young people Break the Law: Debating issues on Punishment for Juveniles*.

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