

Just Mercy Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *Just Mercy* explains why the United States judicial system is so broken, including how its bias toward women, Blacks, minorities, and others makes communities and the entire country a worse place and what author Bryan Stevenson is doing with his Equal Justice Initiative to try to stop these injustices.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



Maybe you feel like you know a lot about America's criminal justice system because you love shows like *Law & Order*. But maybe not so shockingly, the real-life criminal justice system is pretty different. Your average person may not know it, but there are actually a lot of injustices happening there.

So how about we hear some real, hands-on experiences from someone who actually has worked as a lawyer inside America's prisons and courtrooms? In *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, Bryan Stevenson gives us exactly that. He takes a hard look at the system that is meant to safeguard its citizen's rights but has become a cruel way to mistreat vulnerable members of society.

Sadly, different groups in society such as women, the mentally disabled, and children have taken the brunt of an unfair type of "special treatment." After reading this eye-opening book, you will be shocked by the injustice rampant in the legal system and want to do something about it.

These are just 3 of the many important lessons in this book:

1. The American criminal justice system has had issues with mass incarceration and excessive punishment since the 1980s.
2. Women, Blacks, and even children get an unfair treatment by the United States judicial system.
3. Mass incarceration wrecks entire communities as well as the lives of the individuals that this broken system treats so poorly.

Ready to have your eyes opened? Let's dive right in and see what we can learn!

Lesson 1: The American criminal justice system has a problem with punishing too harshly and over-incarceration.

Unfortunately, since the 1980s, the American criminal justice system has been rampant with excessive punishment. This is when US courts started giving extreme sentences even for minor offenses. If you had any kind of criminal behavior on your record, no matter how small, it was even worse. This meant even a small crime could give you a life sentence.

The result? In the 1980s, at any given time, 41,000 people were in US prisons for drug charges. Today, that number is 500,000. This is shocking when you think about drug use exploding in the 1980s.

Stevenson shared an example of one of these harsh sentences when he encountered a woman serving a long one. Her crime was writing five bad checks to buy Christmas presents for her children. Each one was less than \$150.

Extreme punishments like this for petty crime bred another extreme: mass incarceration. The more people we jailed for little crimes, the more crowded the prison system got. Today, we face a nationwide crisis because of mass incarceration.

The United States prison population has gone from 300,000 in the '70s to a whopping 2.3 million today. This isn't even counting the millions more on parole or probation. These statistics mean that one out of every 15 people who were born in 2001 will end up in prison at some point.

Lesson 2: The United States judicial system is unfair toward Women, Blacks, and children.

It's tragic to think about the problem of mass incarceration. But it's even worse when you examine who is getting the worst of it. African Americans, women, and children get the brunt of the unfairness.

Racial bias, not always obvious but deeply woven into American society, has made blacks be treated with unfair suspicion. Because of this suspicion, blacks are far more likely to be criminal suspects than whites. **While one in 15 Americans are sent to prison in their**

lifetime, for African Americans, this number is one in three!

In addition to African-Americans, the system increasingly mistreats women. Incarceration of women is rapidly escalating in the US. From 1980-2010 we saw an increase in female incarcerations of 646 percent, placing it one and a half times higher than that of men.

Around 60 percent of women doing time are serving for drugs or property-related offenses. They also have to endure more harsh treatment in prisons. Many of them are in cramped quarters and have to endure the abuse of male guards. Guards sexually abuse them and receive little punishment for their actions.

The System doesn't spare children, either. Shockingly, prisons have swept up children as young as 13. During the 1980s, the judicial system often tried them as adults. Today, Florida prosecutors decide whether or not a child is tried as an adult, and there is no minimum age requirement.

When they are tried as adults, they get punished in the same way as adults. In prison, they face sexual and physical abuse. If you are in prison underage, you are five times more likely to suffer sexual abuse. It wasn't until 2005 that the death penalty became illegal for children.

Lesson 3: When someone goes to prison it negatively affects their entire community, which brings down our entire country.

Simply being in prison is a traumatic experience that has effects for the rest of that person's life. A ten-year sentence might seem reasonable for certain crimes, but the experience can be damaging beyond that time for the person convicted.

Stevenson shares the story of Joe Sullivan, who got a life sentence with no parole for a non-homicide crime from when he was just 12 years old. In prison, Joe suffered sexual abuse on more than one occasion, leading him to attempt suicide multiple times. Many prisoners, like Joe, suffer such cruel treatment that they can't understand how they ever committed any violence themselves.

But beyond the devastating effects on the prisoner, the families and communities are also suffering. The author witnessed first-hand that being accused of a crime affects the entire family. **When Stevenson defended Walter McMillan, who was put on death row for a murder he didn't commit, he was greeted by over 30 family members of Walter, all affected by his conviction.**

His sentence even affected his community. This was especially true because Walter came from a small, dense neighborhood. Countless people contacted the author who wanted to do anything to help and wanted to give encouragement.

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Just Mercy Review

It's books like these that reveal important injustices that make me super disappointed in my country. *Just Mercy* is an eye-opening and vital read if you want to understand just how unfairly the US "justice" system treats criminals. The only question that I wish the book would have answered is "how do we stop these awful things?"

Who would I recommend the Just Mercy summary to?

The 54-year-old judge whose conscience bothers them when it comes to sentences given for crimes, the 30-year-old American that wants to know the truth about how his country is really doing at "liberty and justice for all," and everybody in the United States government that has the ability to put an end to these disgusting atrocities.