

The BJA Executive Session on

Police Leadership

2017

The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership is a multi-year endeavor started in 2010 with the goal of developing innovative thinking that would help create police leaders uniquely qualified to meet the challenges of a changing public safety landscape.

In support of an integrated approach to creating safe and viable communities across America, the project directors recruited 20+ principals from a range of disciplines. The principals, in turn, led national field teams of practitioners focused on the work of policing and the organization of the future.

To gain new insights on leadership, the *BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership* engaged police chiefs in documenting their own paths and invited leaders to participate in various audio and video forums to tell their stories and discuss the future of policing and police leadership.

Please visit our website, www.bjaleader.org, to learn more about this project and to access a broad array of interactive, multimedia resources.

The principals are supported in their work by a team that includes project co-directors Darrel W. Stephens and Nancy McKeon, and BJA Senior Policy Advisor Steve Edwards.

Locking Up Our Own: A Perspective on James Foreman's New Book

by
Darrel W. Stephens

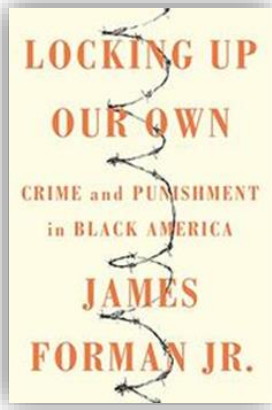
Editor's Note: This review was published on this site in July 2017. In April 2018, James Foreman was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in General Nonfiction for *Locking Up Our Own*.

James Foreman Jr. was an original principal of the Bureau of Justice Assistance Executive Session on Police Leadership. Mr. Foreman is a Professor at Yale Law School. While involved with the Executive Session he engaged the Innovations in Policing Clinic to explore innovative approaches to the development of trust and collaboration with their communities. The outcome of that initiative was five case studies written by Yale law students under Professor Foreman's guidance and direction. These studies are a key part of the Executive Session's body of work and can be found at: <http://bjaexecutivesessiononpoliceleadership.org/World-Future.html>.

In Professor Foreman's book - *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (April 2017) he examines the development and

implementation of the policies that led to mass incarceration in America. His examination includes the role that black leaders played in the development of policies in response to the urban violence of the 1970s through the 1990s.

I wanted to share my perspective on Locking Up Our Own.



“Ever since the day of Dante’s sentencing, I’ve wondered what our criminal justice system would look like if we tried to approach it the way Mr. Thomas did. What if we came to see that justice requires accountability, but not vengeance? What if we came to understand that equal protection under the law, including equal protection for black victims too long denied it, doesn’t have to mean the harshest available punishment? What if we endeavored to make the lives of black victims matter without policies that lead to the mass incarceration of black defendants? What if we strove for compassion, for mercy, for forgiveness? And what if we did this for everybody, including people who have harmed others?”¹

Dante was a 16-year-old young man that had been arrested for armed robbery; Forman was a DC Public Defender who represented him in the case. Dante confronted a man waiting for a bus and told him to give up his money or he would cut him. The man threw out the money in his pocket and ran. Dante took the money and ran the other way. A security guard that had been alerted by a woman that observed the robbery soon apprehended him. Dante made a written a confession at the police station that ended with expressing his sorrow for committing the robbery. There was little chance that he would not end up in jail.

As Forman explored Dante’s background he learned that this was his first arrest. He wondered - why now? Dante lived on a street that the Thirteenth Street Mob claimed as their territory. He had been intimidated by the gang but was given the opportunity to join the gang, which he saw as a way to be safer in his neighborhood. The gang initiation required that he rob someone at the bus stop and turn the money over to the gang.

Although violent offenders were not normally offered an opportunity for probation, Forman was able to find a program that would take Dante in lieu of jail if he could get the judge and victim to agree to support placement in the program. The judge agreed after the victim appeared in court and sentenced Dante to the program.

The effort by Forman and compassion of the victim allowed Dante the opportunity to avoid a life of interaction with the police and criminal justice system. There was nothing in his background that suggested that he was a violent offender – he made a mistake because of the influence of a gang. Few black youthful offenders are able to recover from being in jail for a year or two.

Foreman’s experience as a public defender and working with high-risk youth in educational settings brings him to the questions he raises in the above excerpt from the book. “What if we strove for compassion, for mercy, for forgiveness? And what if we did this for everybody,

¹ Forman, Jr., James (2017-04-18). Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America (Kindle Locations 4007-4012). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition.

including people who have harmed others?” If we had a criminal justice process that did that – I believe it would be much more effective.

Forman provides a good foundation for how America ends up with more people in prison than any advanced nation in the world and the impact on poor African Americans. Our black leaders certainly played a role but the laws that put us there were widely supported by all segments of society.

I hope his thoughtful and provocative examination of these issues will help blunt the effort to return to policies that rely on incarceration to address America’s crime problems.

The author is Darrel W. Stephens, Executive Director of the Major Cities Chiefs Association and retired (2008) Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC Chief of Police. Darrel is also the Co-Director of the BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership.

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