

Book Review

Reiman, J., & Leighton, P. (2013). *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison: Ideology, Class, and Criminal Justice* (10th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

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Reiman and Leighton introduce students to the idea that the criminal justice system is not as they had been brought up to believe that it was. The authors compare it to a carnival mirror that is designed to reflect a distorted image of reality. Their goals are to show students that what really goes on in the criminal justice system contradicts what they would believe to be fair; to offer a theoretical perspective for understanding the “failures” of the system; and do both of these in an affordable, short book written in everyday language. Each chapter is organized with an introduction of the ideas that will be discussed, the body of the discussion, and a summary of the main ideas.

Chapter 1 suggests that the traditional way our society has addressed crime is to build more prisons and hire more police officers. However, the authors introduce the idea that the criminal justice system has had only a marginal effect on crime. In fact, rather than deterring crime, prisons are schools of crime. The authors also assert that there is little evidence to support a relationship between hiring additional police officers and crime rates. They identify known sources of crime as being poverty and inequality, prisons, and drugs, which as a society, we have been unwilling to address in any meaningful way. Our society laments the fact that the criminal justice system is ineffective and, according to the authors, uses three main “excuses” to explain why our society has not been able to significantly reduce crime.

Chapter 2 presents the concept of crime as a social construction, not an objective reality. Our view of criminals does not tend to reflect a balanced view of the crimes that are actually committed, because when we think of crime, we automatically think of one-on-one street crime and not white-collar crime. The authors propose that our view of crime develops from the messages that the media and criminal justice system create for us; namely, that the group to be feared is poor, young, male, black, and urban, and our society needs to be protected from them.

In Chapter 3, the authors state that instead of the criminal justice system treating everyone equally,

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the progression of “arrest to sentencing is a funneling process” that filters out people who are wealthy and do not fit our image of a criminal. This is done through a series of decisions by legislators who define crime, by police who choose which crimes to investigate and who will be arrested, by juries who decide who will be convicted, and by judges who determine sentencing. This funneling process “screens out” the well-to-do, so that at each stage the middle and upper classes are more likely to be ignored, released, or sanctioned minimally. The authors present several examples of individuals who defrauded institutions and people out of great sums of money, but the consequences were not comparable to poor individuals who stole much smaller sums of money (e.g., C. B. who stole \$20 million from two savings & loans and served less than two years; H. B. whose fraud involved more than \$30 million and who served a sentence of one year and one day, etc.). This helps to explain why the prisons are full of poor people and debunks the myth that it is only poor people who commit crimes.

Chapter 4 restates that the criminal justice system does not protect society or achieve justice, yet it is supported as an institution. To answer the question of why this occurs, the authors examine who benefits from the current system. The current criminal justice system benefits those in power by conveying the message that the threat to wellbeing comes from the classes below, rather than the classes above, and that poverty exists because of the moral shortcomings of the poor. Thus, the upper classes are held out as benevolent and harmless, and the lower classes are held out as malevolent, dangerous, and solely to blame for their own actions, without consideration of the contributing societal context of poverty and inequality.

The authors use the theoretical perspective of Pyrrhic defeat theory to explain this social phenomenon. Pyrrhic defeat theory might be

considered the inverse of a Pyrrhic victory. A Pyrrhic victory is one where a battle is won, but it is so costly that it is in essence a loss. However, a Pyrrhic *defeat* is one where the battle (against crime) is *lost*, and the benefits are such that it could be considered a *victory* (for the upper classes). Reiman and Leighton state that “the failure of the criminal justice system yields such benefits to those in positions of power that it amounts to a victory” (p. 5). By focusing the blame upon the poor, it absolves the rich of the role they play in increasing economic inequality.

The book achieves its stated goal of challenging the beliefs of most students that the criminal justice system is a fair one, that it treats everyone more or less equally, and that individuals who break the law get what they “deserve” (e.g., prison). The book has several strengths. First, the authors’ enthusiasm and passion about this topic shines through and helps to engage the reader. Second, there is a companion website maintained by the second author that includes links to books, videos, blogs, discussions about controversial topics, text resources for students and professors, online exercises, chapter summaries, PowerPoint presentations, and links to related topics. Third, it is loaded with statistics that support the authors’ positions, and those statistics are thoroughly footnoted. However, the weakness of the book is also that it is loaded with statistics to support the authors’ positions ... that is, the presentation of so many numbers can sometimes be a little hard to process. There are some charts within the book to help illustrate some of the main points, but more visuals that use figures, bar graphs, line graphs, scatterplots, copies of newspaper headlines, etc. could really help some of the authors’ main points jump out at the reader. This book would be appropriate for use in a social work policy course, because it discusses national policies and their impact on marginalized people and provides the opportunity for lively discussions about ethical practice issues at the macro-level.