



Confronting Police Violence and an Unjust Justice System

Michele Graham

Reviewed: Ryan Lugalia-Hollon and Daniel Cooper, *The War on Neighborhoods: Policing, Prison, and Punishment in a Divided City*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2018.

We publish Michele Graham's review of the 2018 book The War on Neighborhoods: Policing, Prison, and Punishment in a Divided City as Black people in the US again endure the trauma of a murder in their community at the hands of police officers. Graham's reflections on the authors' findings (drawn from a neighborhood study in Chicago) emphasize the continuing legacies of historically racist policing, racist prosecution practices and racist incarceration patterns in the United States. The review also touches on Graham's own encounters with state-sponsored violence in uniform: "I've witnessed my peers being stopped, frisked, and disrespected... I am pleased that The War on Neighborhoods has the data to prove that [systemic injustice] is more than a feeling. It affirms my lived experience."

In *The War on Neighborhoods* (2018), scholars and activists Daniel Cooper and Ryan Lugalia-Hollon examine the United States' flawed criminal-justice system and its devastating impact on "majority-Black" communities, using a mixed-methods approach. Cooper and Lugalia-Hollon conducted more than 50 individual interviews with residents and officials in Chicago's Austin neighborhood. Austin is approximately 85% African American and described as "home to redlining, mortgage discrimination, and racially restrictive covenants, where African Americans were denied access to homes... [and] decades of general divestment [which] forms the core of the highest incarceration community area in Chicago" (p. 21). Cooper and Lugalia-Hollon examine how criminalization takes root in communities like Austin, in the hope of changing policymakers' attitudes towards punishment and punitive policing, and the everyday lives of those most affected.

Through their informants' narratives, Cooper and Lugalia-Hollon show how the carceral state unequally affects everyday life for residents. In the introduction to *The War on Neighborhoods* (a play on the term "war on drugs"), we meet Michael and Harold, who have different ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds but share similar criminal histories and substance-use behaviors. Michael, a white male, was never given a prison sentence, whereas Harold, a Black male, "had been imprisoned four times in his life for drug-related offenses, for a total of 21 years" (p. 8). Michael and Harold's story exemplifies the discrepancies in the sentencing policies as applied to the Black and Hispanic residents of urban communities and their white suburban counterparts.

Historical roots of concentrated incarceration

To explain why these policies exist and persist, Cooper and Lugalia-Hollon situate them in historical context. They argue that the policing of Black bodies can be traced back to the colonial

era in the United States, with the search for healthy, strong slaves who were able to endure harsh physical labor. The forms of policing that surveil and entrap Black bodies evolved from slave catching to slave watching, used to detect and deter attempted rebellion among slaves. These practices have produced a legacy of stereotypes that suggest that Black people are always up to something nefarious, and that Blacks must be relegated to a particular location and watched carefully to ensure they never step out of line. The parameters for policing Black people continued to expand, even after emancipation, and were brutally enforced by Jim Crow laws that supported the policing of Black bodies in order to prevent integration. To emphasize the dehumanization of Black urbanites and the echoes of a slave mentality, the authors explain, “[a]cross the United States, prison construction in rural places has served as an economic development strategy, with prisoners as the commodity” (p. 130).

The authors use the term “concentrated incarceration” to describe the high incarceration rates of disadvantaged communities in comparison with communities that have similar crime rates but more status or capital. Incarceration rates are not equally distributed. Rather, concentrated incarceration of structurally vulnerable communities is evidence of historically reinforced ideologies that insist on the superiority of one race over another. They provide an example with this statement by John Ehrlichman, former advisor to President Richard Nixon: “The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people... by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities... did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did” (p. 29). The authors ask readers to consider variables beyond crime, such as low educational levels and sparse capital investments, that create the conditions for concentrated incarceration.

Legacy of concentrated incarceration

The War on Neighborhoods explores the intersection of issues such as generational incarceration and endemic violence against women. The authors show how officials do not address the impacts of incarceration on children and families. Police officer Samuel is asked how he processes the shootings he responds to during his shift. The officer responds, “I don’t. It is disconnected psyche... if you see a true individual, a regular working guy that was victimized, it may be different, but even then there is a disconnect” (p. 67). Cooper and Lugalia-Hollon use Samuel’s described coping mechanism to demonstrate the dangers of interacting with an official who lacks the capacity or skills for empathy. They suggest, “[i]f you do not attempt to understand an individual’s condition, then you will not understand their behavior; this lack of understanding will dictate how you treat or mistreat them” (p. 68). Black and Hispanic communities are frequently policed by officers who are not from the community and thus find it difficult to identify with residents. If police are from the neighborhood, they respond to ceaseless pressures to make arrests due to ambition for professional advancement. Tom, a veteran of color in the Chicago Police Department, laments, “[w]e are being told to make arrests and if I don’t make that arrest, I am not going to get my management spot” (p. 82). As Cooper and Lugalia-Hollon explain, “officers routinely opt in to an unjust system, reshaping the lives of those they put in handcuffs even though they know such actions won’t positively influence human behaviors” (p. 82).

Beyond Chicago

As an African American woman, I applaud Cooper and Lugalia-Hollon’s efforts to inform the world of the preexisting conditions that hinder the chances of success for some and not others. The book is applicable outside of Chicago. I am also from a neighborhood that suffers from the effects of concentrated incarceration, and I have witnessed and encountered these hidden variables on a daily basis. I have been arrested for petty violations, which always unsettled me because I could not

grasp why hanging out in the lobby of the building where I live is “loitering.” Why is drinking a beer in public illegal in my New York City neighborhood, yet it is acceptable to have wine in Manhattan’s Central Park? I’ve witnessed my peers being stopped, frisked, and disrespected. The most disheartening part was our awareness that there was nothing we could do about it.

There is no accountability for officer misconduct, and if you have a criminal background, you are less likely to file a complaint, out of fear that no one will believe you and/or fear of retaliation. If you are dependent on the state for housing, then standing in their lobby is loitering because you do not own the building, even if you reside there. If you cannot obtain steady employment, the necessities of life will force you to commit behaviors that may lead to prison. Historical legacies, institutional failures, and discriminatory policies contribute to the decisions I have made that negatively affect my life. I have always felt this way and I am pleased that *The War on Neighborhoods* has the data to prove that it is more than a feeling. It affirms my lived experience.

Cooper and Lugalia-Hollon suggest that healing of both the victim and the offender is imperative if we are to shift away from punishment and towards rehabilitation. This is a reasonable theory and deserves to be tested. Like many previously incarcerated individuals, I will find it difficult to obtain employment once released; although we have paid our debts to society, we are labeled as ex-offenders. This title is a constant reminder of what I did and is used to define me as a person when I am so much more than that. I believe that industry should have a mandate to hire a number of convicted offenders. Affirmative action was required to get Blacks into the business arena and the same initiative is needed to combat recidivism. Elected officials fear that they will be viewed as being soft on crime. The current tumult over the bail-reform initiatives gives both hope and pause about the future of prison reform and the prison population. As long as we have advocates like Cooper and Lugalia-Hollon to fight for justice, hope reigns eternal.

Michele Graham is a Black woman born and raised in New York City. A survivor of the foster-care and prison systems, she is pursuing an associate’s degree in the Bedford Hills College Program. She loves her people, learning, performance art, and music. Her goal is to one day change the world.

To cite this article:

Michele Graham, “Addressing the Neighborhood Effects of Concentrated Incarceration: The War on Neighborhoods: Policing, Prison, and Punishment in a Divided City”, *Metropolitiques*, 19 May 2020. URL: <https://www.metropolitiques.eu/Addressing-the-Neighborhood-Effects-of-Concentrated-Incarceration-The-War-on.html>.