

The problem of mass incarceration can seem overwhelming. But there are some great resources to help us understand the problem and find clear paths to being part of the solution. Below are some recommended resources.

1. [Video Overview of Incarceration](#) in America provided by [Visually](#):

2. ***Understanding Mass Incarceration: A People's Guide to the Key Civil Rights Struggle of Our Time*** by James Kilgore (2015)

We all know that orange is the new black and mass incarceration is the new Jim Crow, but how much do we actually know about the structure, goals, and impact of our criminal justice system? *Understanding Mass Incarceration* offers the first comprehensive overview of the incarceration apparatus put in place by the world's largest jailer: the United States.

Drawing on a growing body of academic and professional work, *Understanding Mass Incarceration* describes in plain English the many competing theories of criminal justice—from rehabilitation to retribution, from restorative justice to justice reinvestment. In a lively and accessible style, author James Kilgore illuminates the difference between prisons and jails, probation and parole, laying out key concepts and policies such as the War on Drugs, broken windows policing, three-strikes sentencing, the school-to-prison pipeline, recidivism, and prison privatization. Informed by the crucial lenses of race and gender, he addresses issues typically omitted from the discussion: the rapidly increasing incarceration of women, Latinos, and transgender people; the growing imprisonment of immigrants; and the devastating impact of mass incarceration on communities.

3. ***Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*** by Bryan Stevenson (2015)

Bryan Stevenson was a young lawyer when he founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a legal practice dedicated to defending those most desperate and in need: the poor, the wrongly condemned, and women and children trapped in the farthest reaches of our criminal justice system. One of his first cases was that of Walter McMillian, a young man who was sentenced to die for a notorious murder he insisted he didn't commit. The case drew Bryan into a tangle of conspiracy, political machinations, and legal brinkmanship—and transformed his understanding of mercy and justice forever.

JUST MERCY is at once an unforgettable account of an idealistic, gifted young lawyer's coming of age, a moving window into the lives of those he has defended, and an inspiring argument for compassion in the pursuit of justice.

4. ***The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*** by Michelle Alexander (2012)

Once in a great while a book comes along that changes the way we see the world and helps to fuel a nationwide social movement. *The New Jim Crow* is such a book. Praised by Harvard Law professor Lani Guinier as "brave and bold," this book directly challenges the notion that the election of Barack Obama signals a new era of colorblindness. With dazzling candor, legal

scholar Michelle Alexander argues that “we have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.” By targeting black men through the War on Drugs and decimating communities of color, the U.S. criminal justice system functions as a contemporary system of racial control—relegating millions to a permanent second-class status—even as it formally adheres to the principle of colorblindness. In the words of Benjamin Todd Jealous, president and CEO of the NAACP, this book is a “call to action.”

**5. *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics* by Marie Gottschalk (2016)**

The huge prison buildup of the past four decades has few defenders, yet reforms to reduce the numbers of those incarcerated have been remarkably modest. Meanwhile, an ever-widening carceral state has sprouted in the shadows, extending its reach far beyond the prison gate. It sunders families and communities and reworks conceptions of democracy, rights, and citizenship—posing a formidable political and social challenge. In *Caught*, Marie Gottschalk examines why the carceral state remains so tenacious in the United States. She analyzes the shortcomings of the two dominant penal reform strategies—one focused on addressing racial disparities, the other on seeking bipartisan, race-neutral solutions centered on reentry, justice reinvestment, and reducing recidivism.

**6. *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform* by John Pfaff (2017)**

*Locked In* is a revelatory investigation into the root causes of mass incarceration by one of the most exciting scholars in the country. Having spent fifteen years studying the data on imprisonment, John Pfaff takes apart the reigning consensus created by Michelle Alexander and other reformers, revealing that the most widely accepted explanations—the failed War on Drugs, draconian sentencing laws, an increasing reliance on private prisons—tell us much less than we think. Pfaff urges us to look at other factors instead, including a major shift in prosecutor behavior that occurred in the mid-1990s, when prosecutors began bringing felony charges against arrestees about twice as often as they had before. He describes a fractured criminal justice system, in which counties don’t pay for the people they send to state prisons, and in which white suburbs set law and order agendas for more-heavily minority cities. And he shows that if we hope to significantly reduce prison populations, we have no choice but to think differently about how to deal with people convicted of violent crimes—and why some people are violent in the first place.

An authoritative, clear-eyed account of a national catastrophe, *Locked In* transforms our understanding of what ails the American system of punishment and ultimately forces us to reconsider how we can build a more equitable and humane society.

**7. *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* by James Foreman, Jr. (2017)**

In recent years, America's criminal justice system has become the subject of an increasingly urgent debate. Critics have assailed the rise of mass incarceration, emphasizing its disproportionate impact on people of color. As James Forman, Jr., points out, however, the war on crime that began in the 1970s was supported by many African American leaders in the nation's urban centers. In *Locking Up Our Own*, he seeks to understand why.

Forman shows us that the first substantial cohort of black mayors, judges, and police chiefs took office amid a surge in crime and drug addiction. Many prominent black officials, including Washington, D.C. mayor Marion Barry and federal prosecutor Eric Holder, feared that the gains of the civil rights movement were being undermined by lawlessness—and thus embraced tough-on-crime measures, including longer sentences and aggressive police tactics. In the face of skyrocketing murder rates and the proliferation of open-air drug markets, they believed they had no choice. But the policies they adopted would have devastating consequences for residents of poor black neighborhoods.

A former D.C. public defender, Forman tells riveting stories of politicians, community activists, police officers, defendants, and crime victims. He writes with compassion about individuals trapped in terrible dilemmas—from the men and women he represented in court to officials struggling to respond to a public safety emergency. *Locking Up Our Own* enriches our understanding of why our society became so punitive and offers important lessons to anyone concerned about the future of race and the criminal justice system in this country.

***Recommended Videos:***

8. [We need to talk about an injustice](#) | Bryan Stevenson TED talk

9. [13<sup>th</sup>](#) (Netflix)

In this thought-provoking documentary, scholars, activists and politicians analyze the criminalization of African Americans and the U.S. prison boom.

10. [Gideon's Army](#) (HBO Documentary Films)

**GIDEON'S ARMY** follows the personal stories of Travis Williams, Brandy Alexander and June Hardwick, three young public defenders who are part of a small group of idealistic lawyers in the Deep South challenging the assumptions that drive a criminal justice system strained to the breaking point. Backed by mentor Jonathan “Rap” Rapping, a charismatic leader who heads the Southern Public Defender Training Center (now known as [Gideon's Promise](#)) they struggle against long hours, low pay and staggering caseloads so common that even the most committed often give up in their first year. Nearly 50 years since the landmark Supreme Court ruling *Gideon vs. Wainwright* that established the right to counsel, can these courageous lawyers revolutionize the way America thinks about indigent defense and make “justice for all” a reality?

11. [\*The House I Live In\*](#) (Charlotte Street Films)

From the dealer to the narcotics officer, the inmate to the federal judge, a penetrating look inside America's criminal justice system, revealing the profound human rights implications of U.S. drug policy.

**Other**

12. [\*Justice Declaration\*](#)

The United States locks up more of its citizens than any other nation. Our over-reliance on incarceration fails to make us safer or restore the people and communities who have been harmed. Our misguided response to crime has pervasive, devastating, and long-lasting consequences for individuals and American society at large. Followers of Christ have a unique responsibility and capacity to address this crisis. Grounded in biblical values, the Justice Declaration is a call to the Church to deploy its unique and unparalleled capacity to respond to crime and over-incarceration.