

*Reform Nation: The First Step Act and the Movement to End Mass Incarceration*, by **Colleen P. Eren**. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023. 282 pp. \$28.00 paper. ISBN: 9781503636736.

EMILY B. CAMPBELL  
Rhode Island College  
ECampbell1@ric.edu

The First Step Act (FSA), signed into law on December 21, 2018, by President Donald Trump, was one of few pieces of federal legislation to move the needle away from mass incarceration in a generation. Celebrated as an imperfect victory, its passage, at a time of great political tumult, was the outcome of a decades-long process within the movement for criminal justice reform. *Reform Nation: The First Step Act and the Movement to End Mass Incarceration*, by Colleen P. Eren, tells the story of its passage and uses the act as point of departure to illuminate the movement to end mass incarceration and the state of American criminal justice reform.

The FSA ushered in a new algorithmic risk assessment tool, expanded in-prison incentives for good behavior and participation in programs, and “earned time” facilitating pre-release. The act also made sentencing reforms from the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010 retroactive, lowered mandatory minimums for some drug offenses, removed the allowance of stacking that leads to longer sentences, and expanded humane release, in-prison drug treatment programs, and in-prison employment with hourly pay at a maximum wage of 40 cents per hour—a federal rate set in 2021 after the bill’s passing (pp. 15–18).

The FSA was endorsed widely by a broad coalition of “strange bedfellows,” including the ACLU, the NAACP, Koch Industries, the Prison Fellowship, and an eclectic group of public and political figures with Van Jones, Kim Kardashian, Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, and Jared Kushner among them. How did this unlikely group coalesce to this outcome? And what does the FSA’s passage mean for the movement’s future? *Reform Nation* examines these questions by drawing on 53 interviews with an impressive roster of policy

players, philanthropists, formerly incarcerated activists, and celebrities conducted between 2019 and 2021. The voices of Eren’s subjects are well integrated throughout the analysis while she remains firmly in the driver’s seat, offering a compact rendering of a complex reform environment and the fickle political climate surrounding it. She laudably resists prescription, writing “there can be no single template” (p. 14). Rather, she invites readers to understand the varied landscape of criminal justice reform and the many dilemmas it creates through her descriptive sociological account.

The first chapters offer a contextual and theoretical starting point, illuminating criminal justice reform’s “mainstreamization” post-2000—brought about by cultural watersheds including Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2010) and the heightened visibility of racialized police violence through the activism of the Movement for Black Lives. This shift ushered in a windfall of philanthropy, corporate social activism, high-profile celebrity, and the professionalization of right- and left-leaning advocacy organizations. The unique dilemmas of this newfound popularity—termed nationalization and mainstreamization—drive the book forward as the proceeding chapters are structured around central stakeholders: philanthropists (Chapter 3), celebrities and influencers (Chapter 4), corporate social activism (Chapter 5), and “right” and “left” national advocacy organizations (Chapter 6). The final chapter focuses on activists directly impacted by mass incarceration and considers the future of the movement.

Eren captures the dilemmas of strange bedfellow dynamics within the criminal justice reform movement, where newer players have more power and thus voice than seasoned, grassroots activists. The book portrays a reform scene that often sidelines grassroots actors, bringing them into the fold in sometimes cynically strategic ways for the retelling of traumatic stories (p. 172). Authenticity is complex, however, and the scope of those affected by mass incarceration is so wide as to galvanize Jared Kushner—a central actor in the FSA’s passage—whose

father was imprisoned for “tax evasion, witness tampering, and lying to the Federal Election Commission” (p. 57). Other challenges within the movement include the attention-grabbing power of *causes célèbres* over structural reform; corporate social activism’s approach to advocacy crowding out the hard-won insights of grassroots activists and professionalized policy actors; and celebrity and its “attention-as-capital” serving as both amplifier and potential distraction (p. 93).

Though the FSA passed because of bipartisan support, Eren illuminates the partisan visions of the nature of the problem through the narrative frames of “exodus” and “redemption,” drawing on the work of Francesca Polletta (1998). “Exodus,” favored by those left of center, see mass incarceration as an extension of the legacy of slavery and structural racism in America. “Redemption” narratives, embraced by conservatives, focus on second chances and a general sense that “overincarceration” (their preferred term) has gone too far and threatens fairness and American prosperity. Despite these competing narratives, the movement for criminal justice reform forged a complex path forward, in part through a concerted effort to bring more conservatives on board.

Eren’s engaging and detailed retelling of negotiations leading up to the FSA’s passage draws on a range of insider perspectives from her interviews. The account is highly valuable as a piece of contemporary history, but also allows the reader insight into an often unseen and lesser understood part of the American political process. Perhaps the most provocative aspect of the book is Eren’s characterization of American politics as “philanthrocapitalist and post democratic” (p. 10), led by a burgeoning plutocracy where “power is concentrated in the hands of a few in overlapping circles of business, politics, and entertainment” (p. 90). The political milieu she captures is one where money talks, celebrity amplifies, and relationships pay off with access, favors, and even Presidential pardons. This dimension of the book provides a compelling backdrop useful to researchers of contemporary politics and policy of all stripes.

For those looking to understand the state of American criminal justice reform and consider a way forward, *Reform Nation* is a must-read. The book should be of interest to scholars, practitioners, and students of criminal justice, public policy, American politics, and political sociology. Though the book captures the prominence of big players from philanthropy, celebrity, and a professionalized class of organizations, the text will prove useful for scholars of social movements as well, as it reveals the ever-shrinking role of citizen activists in higher-echelon politics.

## References

- Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.
- Polletta, Francesca. 1998. “Contending Stories: Narrative in Social Movements.” *Qualitative Sociology* 21(4):419–46.

---

*Fair Share: Senior Activism, Tiny Publics, and the Culture of Resistance*, by **Gary Alan Fine**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. 246 pp. \$32.50 paper. ISBN: 9780226823836.

JOHN F. MYLES  
 University of Toronto  
 John.myles@utoronto.ca

---

At age 80, I now decline most requests to do reviews but couldn’t resist *Fair Share: Senior Activism, Tiny Publics, and the Culture of Resistance*. I knew I could look forward to learning a lot from Gary Alan Fine, one of our discipline’s great ethnographers. I was not disappointed. In the tradition of Saul Alinsky, Fine’s ethnography results not only in great sociology but also in an excellent handbook for would-be organizers to extract the last bit of progressive energy my generation may have to offer.

In his sixties, Fine joined a “progressive” seniors’ organization of political activists—Chicago Seniors Together (CST)—as a participant observer. Formed in the 1970s, CST draws mainly on middle class and professional retirees from North Chicago—people