

BOOK REVIEW

Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road to Repair* (The New Press, 2019)

The Pantheon of Critical Criminologists*

DANIELLE SERED, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF COMMON JUSTICE, focuses on solutions to violence in the context of mass incarceration in her first book, *Until We Reckon*. Sered unapologetically discusses ways to avoid incarceration and address the problem of racism within the United States. The benefits of restorative justice are presented in depth from the viewpoints of victims, offenders, and society but is survivor-centric throughout. Sered contends that incarceration does not solve the social problem of violence and makes the argument that, if that were true, the United States “would be the safest nation in all of human history” (p. 7). She demonstrates that most violence does not result from the pathology of an individual but, rather, is created from various social drivers; poverty, inequity, lack of opportunities, shame, and isolation. Incarceration exacerbates the driving forces of violence by halting education, causing homelessness, restricting employment opportunities, and destroying the social fabric of our communities. Sered argues that mass incarceration cannot solve violence, just as reform cannot solve mass incarceration without first addressing the issue of violence. Sered challenges readers to think about ways violence can be addressed without relying on punishment and instead focus on what is healing for the offender, the victim, and the community and how to hold all parties accountable for healing.

* THE PANTHEON OF CRITICAL CRIMINOLOGISTS (T-POCC) is a think tank made up of outside and inside alumni from over a decade of Ohio State University Inside-Out (www.insideoutcenter.org) classes held at Southeastern Correctional Institution in Lancaster, Ohio. This book review was produced by 10 of our inside members who have collectively served approximately 179 years in prison, four of our outside members who recently graduated with degrees in social work and psychology, three of our outside members who are currently undergraduates majoring in criminal justice and Japanese, and the instructor liaison to T-POCC, an associate professor of sociology.

Acts of violence, and depictions of it in the media, have become normalized in our society, yet the lasting effects of violence on individuals and communities are neglected. Sered does not shy away from the topic of trauma but discusses its far-reaching impacts. The book documents the ways that the current criminal justice system fails to meet the needs of victims, leaving many feeling retraumatized and unsatisfied with the outcomes. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2017 only 45 percent of violent victimizations were reported to the police, and only 8 percent of victims of violent crime received any form of help from any public or private victim services agency (Morgan & Truman 2018). Even when crimes are taken to court, a victory in the courtroom can leave victims feeling unfulfilled and cause additional pain. Sered argues that our criminal justice system should shift the focus to what victims need to heal.

Accountability is what is needed, because our current system is a passive instrument of punishment. Punishment alone is an ineffective method for controlling behavior, yet this is all the U.S. criminal justice system relies on as its driving force and as a tool of revenge, carried out in the name of victims. The current system does not hold individuals accountable for their actions; prison “insulates people from the human impact of what they have done” and, instead, moves the individual away from accountability (p. 93). Isolating the offender and preventing the victim from direct participation in the system both serve to take accountability off the table. Sered makes a powerful point that “our experience of being harmed is often one that isolates us. One way we reconnect to the community from which the violence separated us is by caring about and seeking the safety of others like us” (p. 30). However, the prison system pushes those who have been involved in violence further into isolation, making healing difficult to achieve for all parties.

The first step for perpetrators of violence, acknowledging responsibility for one’s actions, is undoubtedly a crucial step in the process of taking accountability. However, this is an extremely hard first step to take when it seems like the system is structurally violent in its reliance on punishment alone. People who have harmed someone often do not fully understand the impact of the harm they have inflicted. The phrase “hurt people hurt people” applies here, because many offenders have previously been victims themselves (p. 146). The pain experienced from being hurt is often minimized as a result of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age. Racism and violence in the United States have always gone hand in hand. In the United States, Black males are both overrepresented as victims and perpetrators of violence, and homicide is the leading cause of death for young Black males.

Only half of all violent crime is reported, so policing and corrections alone cannot address the problem. Addressing the inequalities and problems that lead to violence is the key to solving the high occurrence of violence in poor communities of color. Because the criminal justice system is built on institutional racism, Sered argues that poor communities of color that are most impacted by violence need to vote and be civically engaged in order to have a voice and change the way our government works.

Sered argues that most victims do not want the person who harmed them to only be punished by the criminal justice system; instead, they want closure that is gained by direct contact with their offender in order to ask the questions that only the offender can answer. Sered talks extensively about how these face-to-face encounters are not possible within the current criminal justice system, which negatively impacts the healing process for the victim. Sered declares a need for more easily accessible resources for victims to help them cope with their trauma versus what the current system offers. Our current system neglects to acknowledge the fact that the first time someone commits violence is not the first time that violence is experienced. Whom we define as a victim is extremely limited in the United States; policies that block access to victim funds to those who do not cooperate with law enforcement and to those with felony convictions prevent a large group of people from being considered as victims of violence.

With no explanation offered on how to get people who have harmed others over the hurdle of denial, one is left wondering what measures, if any, can be taken to prepare people for this first step of accountability. Is it possible to begin taking the steps to accountability while in denial? Is it possible for a person to take accountability in a system that has stripped them of their humanity? Sered expands on Bryan Stevenson's (2014) concept of mercy, adding that justice is achieved by the combination of accountability and mercy. Mercy is about a restraint of power on the part of the punisher, whereas accountability is an exercise of power by the one who caused harm to right their wrongs. Stevenson elevates the humanity of all parties by not diminishing the harm done with the mercy offered, and Sered contends that this is true for a process of accountability as well. These two aspects of justice are what bring back the humanity of both parties, but the power to offer mercy and hold others accountable is not part of the current system, and therefore justice cannot be achieved.

The justice system does not provide survivors of violence what they need, but it is their only option; they must either involve the criminal justice

system or do nothing. Sered encourages readers to think outside the box by proposing that incarceration should not be the way we address violence. Victims want their voices heard and a sense of control over the situation. Sered has seen success in creative, healing solutions through her work at Common Justice, and restorative justice methods have been shown to be effective in reducing recidivism and bringing healing to victims. Sered offers many solutions to both the incarceration and violence problems our country is facing and shows that it is possible to decrease both at the same time. Focusing reform efforts solely on low-level, nonviolent drug offenders will not significantly reduce the incarceration population; violent offenses must be addressed as well. Thus, her first solution is to change our sentencing structure. Sered argues that long sentences benefit no one and harm those incarcerated, because they remove the opportunity for accountability, repair, and restoration. In other countries that have lower rates of violent crime, a 15-year sentence is often on the higher end of the scale, but in the United States it is seen as a slap on the wrist. Capital punishment must be abolished as an agent of structural violence that only perpetuates violence. Sered continues to offer more solutions for sentencing reform, such as reducing minimum sentences, offering alternatives to incarceration, redefining a range of felonies as misdemeanors, and granting parole more often. Prosecutors should use incarceration as a last resort and success should be redefined for this profession, so it is not measured by convictions. Changes also need to be made to policing, and victim services should be moved out from under the the control of the criminal justice system. Most of the policy reforms Sered introduces are not new to the field of criminal justice and fail to address how we could achieve accountability before involvement of the criminal justice system.

The arguments made by Sered are backed by both empirical research and case narratives from Common Justice, an organization offering restorative justice programs for people convicted of violent crimes as an alternative to incarceration. The narratives provide an opportunity for empathy and help illustrate the ways Sered has seen her ideas in practice. She presents her knowledge and ideas humbly, never claiming to have all the answers and acknowledging that not every community can or should address violent crime the way Common Justice has. Her experience is significant, though, as her work at Common Justice is one of the only restorative justice programs for people convicted of violent crimes as an alternative to incarceration in the United States. However, Common Justice is still reactionary, a postconviction

adaptation, whereas restorative justice ideas and theory could be applied to more community-oriented prevention solutions.

Sered's work effectively details how ineffective and detrimental the criminal justice system is for victims, offenders, and communities. Her book is an essential tool for people in the United States to gain an understanding of how interpersonal violence is intimately related to trauma, homelessness, poverty, racism, unemployment, and criminalization. Until we reckon with this structural violence, including the history of racial violence in this country, we will continue to see and practice violence in the criminal justice system. In turn, the prison-industrial complex is a destructive, costly, and unjust system, which itself exacerbates the violence it supposedly solves. One criticism we have of the book is that, although Sered depicts the ways that this structural violence manifests through a dysfunctional social fabric in the United States, she does not clearly flesh out and design policy recommendations aimed at improving or restructuring that social fabric. The prison-industrial complex is one of our nation's most destructive, costly, and unjust systems; most could easily argue, in fact, that it is itself criminal.

Although Sered makes compelling arguments, her reform plans play it too safe. According to a *New York Times Magazine* feature by Rachel Kushner (2019), scholars like Ruth Wilson Gilmore push the boundaries further and take a more systematic and radical perspective, removing the word "reform" and replacing it with "abolition." The article states, "[she is] calling for government investment in jobs, education, housing, and health care – all the elements that are required for a productive and violence-free life" (ibid.). Sered focuses heavily on what happens after a crime is committed; however, if we put a greater focus on asking why crime happens, we can move from a reactive toward a preventative approach. As Kushner (ibid.) describes, "Abolition means not just the closing of prisons but the presence, instead, of vital systems of support that many communities lack. . . . abolitionists ask how we resolve inequalities and get people the resources they need long before the hypothetical moment when, as Gilmore puts it, they 'mess up.'" Abolitionists effectively argue that criminal justice reforms do nothing but repackage problematic policies into new policies with the same problematic results, because the system itself as currently arranged and implemented is designed to fail. Overall, *Until We Reckon* is a powerful call to action and can be used as a mechanism for inciting much-needed change to address the violence in the United States that is harmful to all of us.

REFERENCES

- Kushner, Rachel
2019 "Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind." *The New York Times Magazine*, April 17. At www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html.
- Morgan, Rachel E., and Jennifer L. Truman
2018 "Criminal Victimization, 2017." Bureau of Justice Statistics, December. At www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv17.pdf.
- Stevenson, Bryan
2014 *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. Spiegel and Grau: New York.