

Did Black Baptists Join the War on Drugs?

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James Forman, [Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America](#) (2017).

In [Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America](#), James Forman, Jr. shows how African American voters in Washington DC lobbied for longer prison sentences and more police officers. Forman's argument complicates the story told by Michelle Alexander in [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#), which is that white conservatives increased prison sentences and police in order to impose a new system of racial control on black Americans, all under the rubric of a War on Drugs. Underlying Alexander's argument is the claim that African Americans were not in fact the primary consumers of drugs in the United States; whites were, though they suffered comparatively lower rates of incarceration and arrest.

Forman concedes Alexander's point about white drug use, but argues that African American leaders played a significant role in the rise of mass incarceration. As he tells it, problems with narcotics coincided with a proliferation of firearms. Guns became the weapon of choice for drug distributors, who turned to crime out of economic necessity and used extreme violence to eliminate competitors, increase market share, and create an illicit, street level, drug market. This market driven violence, maintains Forman, became so intolerable that African American majorities voted for higher prison sentences and more police, effectively joining white conservatives in what Alexander has termed "mass incarceration." Rather than a coordinated, right wing plot, however, Forman suggests that the story in Washington was a tale of incremental choices by desperate officials who implemented radical policies that had unanticipated effects.

This is important. Forman's story presses us to look more closely at the causes of crime in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, and his well-researched, rich description of debates within the DC's African American community about crime suggests that both cultural and structural forces contributed not only to mass incarceration's rise, but its inevitability.

As startling as this may sound, Forman's account actually dovetails with other work on the spike in crime in America in the 1960s and 70s, among them criminologist Barry Latzer's 2017 book [The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America](#). According to Latzer, two factors explain the rise of violent crime in places like Washington DC in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The first was the baby boom, which led to a surge in the number of young men – white and black – nationwide. The second was the Great Migration, the departure of six million African Americans from the rural South to the urban North between World War I and 1980. Southern migrants, argues Latzer, brought with them a culture of honor and violence that they had learned from southern whites – a culture that then exploded, like a bomb, in American cities.

Professor Forman's study raises questions about this thesis. If southern migrants brought a culture of violence with them from the Deep South, why did a majority of those migrants become intolerant of violence? Why, in other words, did black southern voters demand increased prison sentences and more police? Why not settle scores on their own, Andrew Jackson style, with their guns?

Forman provides an intriguing response. He suggests that African Americans brought with them not a culture of crime and violence, but a culture of anti-violence and crime control. Black ministers, argues Forman, along with their congregations, viewed the rise in urban crime through a rural, Biblical lens. As white liberals lobbied for treatment as the solution to the heroin epidemic, for example, black ministers balked, opting instead for punishment. And as white liberals lobbied for decriminalization of substances like marijuana, black ministers balked again, arguing for prohibition.

Both stances were classic evangelical Protestant positions, positions that actually united Protestants, white and black, across the South and Midwest. This is an important contribution, for it helps to further explain links between the white rural and suburban conservatives in Alexander's [New Jim Crow](#), and the black urban majorities in DC. Both were Protestant, both were socially conservative, and both were prone to viewing the problem of drugs and crime through the lens of personal moral choice, punishment, and Prohibition (Remember, evangelical Christians, Baptists in particular, endorsed abstinence not simply from alcohol but also narcotics).

American tendencies to view crime through the lens of personal moral choice, and crime control through the lens of Old Testament punishment – both stories that Forman tells – yields a paradox. At the heart of our system of punishment, lies our commitment to liberty. Most Americans view crime as a matter of personal moral responsibility, a position reflected in the criminal codes of all 50 states, and also the Constitution of the United States, which protects liberty against government intrusion, but provides no protection against poverty, joblessness, homelessness, or any of the other structural causes of crime.

Take the rise in violent crime in the late 1960s and 1970s. According to historian Tom Sugrue, the conditions that led to the urban crisis in DC – and other American cities in the 1970s and 80s – had less to do with personal moral choice than with major demographic and economic shifts in the United States. The first, he argues, was the Great Migration.. Instead of dealing with this shift structurally, however, policy makers dealt with it as a matter of personal choice. No public or private agency was created to assist migrants procure housing, find jobs, or receive health care or job training. No agency was created to provide child care, elder care, or anything else that the migrants might have needed. Instead, Americans viewed the move simply as a product of personal moral choice.

Then, according to Sugrue, the very people who could have provided job training, health care, housing, and employment, the middle class and affluent residents of American cities, got in their cars and drove away. This shift, white flight, was also unmanaged and unregulated. White urbanites took their skills, their training, and their tax dollars to suburban enclaves, draining cities of resources and limiting the options available to black elected officials in places like DC. Forman notes this in passing, arguing that African Americans did not simply want police and prisons, they wanted services – in essence a Marshall Plan – but city coffers had been drained.

Then came the final blow: deindustrialization. Just as African Americans poured into cities and white tax dollars left, argues Sugrue, the factories closed. At this point, things became desperate. For some, crime ceased to assume a negative moral connotation and actually became a rational choice, a means of survival in an environment that provided no safety net. For others, an aggressive response to crime became an imperative. But the options available were limited. City coffers were empty, but state and federal dollars were available for law enforcement – in part because rural and suburban whites shared the same Old Testament values as urban blacks.

Blacks locked up their own, yes, because they had no other choice.

Editor's note: For a previous review of *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* see: Christopher Slobogin, [The Causes of Punitiveness](#), JOTWELL (July 17, 2017).

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