

Smart Justice Vermont Top Picks for Reading Groups & Book Clubs

[Are Prisons Obsolete?](#) by Angela Davis

With her characteristic brilliance, grace and radical audacity, Angela Y. Davis has put the case for the latest abolition movement in American life: the abolition of the prison. As she quite correctly notes, American life is replete with abolition movements, and when they were engaged in these struggles, their chances of success seemed almost unthinkable. In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Professor Davis seeks to illustrate that the time for the prison is approaching an end. She argues forthrightly for “decarceration”, and argues for the transformation of the society as a whole.

[Angels with Dirty Faces](#) by Walidah Imarisha

The three lives in this creative nonfiction account are united by the presence of actual harm—sometimes horrific violence. Imarisha, dealing with the complexities of her own experience with sexual assault and accountability, brings us behind prison walls to visit her adopted brother Kakamia and his fellow inmate Jimmy “Mac” McElroy, a member of the brutal Irish gang the Westies. Together they explore the questions: People can do unimaginable things to one another—and then what? What do we as a society do? The result is a nuanced and deeply personal analysis that connects readers emotionally with the lives of people caught up within, and often destroyed by, our criminal justice system.

[Becoming Ms. Burton: From Prison to Recovery to Leading the Fight for Incarcerated Women](#) by Susan Burton & Cari Lynn

Widely hailed as a stunning memoir from someone more likely to be locked up or otherwise silenced, *Becoming Ms. Burton* is the “miraculously inspirational” (Vivian Nixon) life story of Susan Burton, whose organization A New Way of Life has transformed the lives of more than one thousand formerly incarcerated women in Los Angeles.

[Just Mercy](#) by Bryan Stevenson

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 transformed Bryan's understanding of mercy and justice forever.

[Locked Down, Locked Out: Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better](#) by Maya Schenwar

Combining extensive research with her family's experience of her sister's incarceration, Schenwar reveals the enormous damage prison causes by severing millions of people from their families and communities. Schenwar explores alternatives to incarceration that provide healing and resolution to victims while building public safety in communities, and which can be expanded to create a safer, more just world.

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

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.

[Prison Industrial Complex for Beginners](#) by James Braxton Peterson

In this illustrated text, Peterson boils down the PIC to its insidious core – a collection of social structures, systems, and policies – especially institutional racism, the war on drugs and mass incarceration. Peterson distills these multi-layered components that make up what activists deem the Mass Incarceration Movement that has, and continues to, imprison and dehumanize convicted individuals in the United States.

[Prison Town: Paying the Price](#) by Craig Gilmore & Kevin Pyle

This comic book tells the story the ways in which the financing and siting of prisons and jails affects the people of rural communities in which prison are built. It also tells the story of the how mass incarceration affects the people of urban communities where the majority of people who are incarcerated come from. Included in the comic book are alternatives to the current system.

[Rethinking the American Prison Movement](#) by Dan Berger & Toussaint Losier

Provides a short, accessible overview of the transformational and ongoing struggles against America's prison system. Dan Berger and Toussaint Losier show that prisoners have used strikes, lawsuits, uprisings, writings, and diverse coalitions with free-world allies to challenge prison conditions and other kinds of inequality. *Rethinking the American Prison Movement* is invaluable to anyone interested in the history of American prisons and the struggles for justice still echoing in the present day.

[The New Jim Crow](#) by Michelle Alexander

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.

[The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America](#) by Marie Gottschalk

Throughout American history, crime and punishment have been central features of American political development. This 2006 book examines the development of four key movements that mediated the construction of the carceral state in important ways: the victims' movement, the women's movement, the prisoners' rights movement, and opponents of the death penalty. This book argues that punitive penal policies were forged by particular social movements and interest groups within the constraints of larger institutional structures and historical developments that distinguish the United States from other Western countries.

[Understanding Mass Incarceration](#) by James Kilgore

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.

Smart Justice VT offers this list of titles to encourage further learning, debate and critical thinking about the problem of mass incarceration, its causes and its solutions. The opinions of these authors do not necessarily reflect those of the ACLU, our staff, or the campaign for Smart Justice, nor is this meant as a comprehensive list of the incredible scholarship and writing that exists on this topic.