

***Halfway Home: Race, Punishment, and the
Afterlife of Mass Incarceration, by Reuben Jonathan Miller***

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In the United States, it is legal to discriminate against individuals who have been convicted of a felony offense in a number of ways (e.g., employment, housing, political participation, etc.). Policies of this sort have become recognized as barriers to successfully reentering society after a term of incarceration, and it has been well-documented that these “collateral consequences” of arrest, conviction, and incarceration are especially harmful to the Black community. Miller’s goal in *Halfway Home* is to describe how marginalized communities, particularly those that are poor and Black, are negatively impacted by these obstacles as they reenter society after being incarcerated. He suggests that, while the formal criminal justice mechanisms constrain those reentering society in meaningful ways, the impact of informal sanctions is just as significant. Miller’s work in three separate studies forms the basis of this book: five years conducting interviews in homeless shelters and halfway houses in the Chicago area, a one-year grant studying the resistance strategies of the formerly incarcerated, and the development of the Detroit Reentry Project which follows dozens of men and women released from incarceration to learn more deeply about their lives, their loved ones, and the challenges they face upon reentering society.

A uniquely American phenomenon, over half of all Americans and two-thirds of Blacks have a family member who has been to prison (Miller, 2021, p. 143). In the U.S., 19.6 million individuals have a felony record, and those affected are disproportionately poor and Black. The disparities are staggering. Blacks are twice as likely as Whites to be arrested and five times as likely to be incarcerated. Unarmed Black boys are 21 times more likely to be killed by police, while one out of three will be arrested by the age of 18. Approximately 95 percent of all criminal cases in the U.S. legal system are disposed of via plea bargains, resulting in the fact-finding process being bypassed and instead trading it for the efficient processing of individuals through the system (so-called “assembly line justice”). Those facing charges, particularly those who are poor, also know that pleading guilty is the fastest way home from jail. In fact, they often feel coerced to plead guilty, even when they aren’t, in exchange for the guarantee of a lighter sentence or charges. Miller argues in *Halfway Home* that the operation of the criminal justice system in this way is purposeful and notes that, to understand these disparities in our current system, one need only study the context of how Blacks have been historically dehumanized and discriminated against (e.g., slavery, Jim Crow laws, etc.), with perhaps the most recent being the “colorblind” criminal justice policies put in place since the Civil Rights Movement that affect poor Blacks disproportionately while appearing to be race-neutral.

Another issue identified in *Halfway Home* is how our current system routinely ignores Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that so many poor Black children have experienced



and that these traumas (e.g., physical/sexual/emotional abuse, poverty, racism, having a parent incarcerated, etc.) are often correlated with their later substance use or abuse and delinquent and criminal behavior. Many children with a parent whose rights have been terminated, at least partly due to being incarcerated, find themselves in foster care and, later as an adult, with unresolved issues of their own that may lead to this intergenerational cycle being repeated. Meanwhile, those serving time are faced with what are referred to as the “pains of imprisonment” that include humiliation, isolation, hunger, and lack of autonomy that result in dehumanization and social death (Miller, 2021, p. 205). After completing a term of incarceration an individual finds themselves trying to reenter society, often with little to no real help from the correctional system. They are commonly greeted with a variety of impediments that make successful reentry unlikely: parole restrictions that many find nearly impossible to follow; depression from being separated from loved ones (including their children) while incarcerated and the disappointment they know loved ones feel about their behavior; and employment and housing discrimination. Upon release, individuals may find themselves directed toward halfway houses, many of which have very strict rules that the individual struggles to follow successfully. Moreover, few provide the kind of resources needed for successful reentry such as employment assistance. Instead, they rely on teaching “soft skills” in an effort to improve the chances of finding and keeping a job. While there are programs that prioritize connecting returning citizens with the much-needed resources of affordable housing and stable employment, they are unfortunately the exception to the rule. Miller concludes that the programs offered at a typical halfway house are important but ultimately insufficient.

Miller, who spent time in foster homes as a child, notes that his proximity to these issues uniquely situates him to conduct ethnographic research on this population. Growing up, he knew many people who became involved with the criminal justice system, including his father and siblings, as well as those who dealt with the fallout of those they care about being ensnared in the system. As an adult, he worked as a volunteer chaplain in the Cook County Jail in Chicago before entering academia where he has spent his career studying issues related to reentry. *Halfway Home* is well-written and compelling, and Miller introduces the reader to difficulties that people face upon reentry and illustrates those issues with the stories of individuals he interviewed. He effectively weaves together the various obstacles that exist to make reentry difficult with the personal stories of how these challenges have affected individuals he spent time with. Miller notably includes his own frustrations with helping his older brother, Jeremiah, who was serving time while the book was being written. He was Jeremiah’s primary lifeline to the outside world, and sharing about how much time, money, and emotional energy it takes to serve in that role helped to drive home his points about how the criminal justice system affects more than those under its supervision.

Halfway Home would be an excellent introduction for an undergraduate course to how pernicious the barriers to successful reentry can be, as it is written for a more general audience and does not assume the reader will begin with a deep understanding of these issues. I selected this book for a book club with undergraduate students, and they were unanimous and enthusiastic in recommending it. They indicated that while most of the concepts presented were not new to them, the way the book was written made these concepts more compelling and meaningful. *Halfway Home* is an important contribution to helping the public more fully understand the issues surrounding successful reentry to society after incarceration and how existing policies that amount to legalized discrimination continue to undermine returning citizens’ ability to be successful.