



James Forman, Jr.

Topics

Activism and Social Justice, Criminal Justice, Diversity and Inclusion, Education, Historians, Legal Affairs, Politics and Pundits

Travels From

Connecticut

Bio

Former public defender James Forman, Jr. is a leading critic of mass incarceration and its disproportionate impact on people of color. Forman graduated from Atlanta's Roosevelt High School, Brown University, and Yale Law School. He worked as a law clerk for Justice Sandra Day O'Connor of the U.S. Supreme Court. After clerking, he joined the Public Defender Service in Washington, D.C., where for six years he represented juveniles and adults in felony and misdemeanor cases. Professor Forman loved being a public defender, but he quickly became frustrated with the lack of education and job training opportunities for his clients. So in 1997, along with David Domenici, he started the Maya Angelou Public Charter School, an alternative school for dropouts and youth who had previously been arrested. A decade later, in 2007, Maya Angelou School expanded and agreed to run the school inside D.C.'s juvenile prison. That school, which had long been an abysmal failure, has been transformed under the leadership of the Maya Angelou staff; the court monitor overseeing D.C.'s juvenile system called the turnaround "extraordinary." At Yale Law School, where has taught since 2011, James

Forman, Jr. teaches Constitutional Law and a course called Race, Class, and Punishment. Last year he took his teaching behind prison walls, offering a seminar called Inside-Out Prison Exchange: Issues in Criminal Justice, which brought together, in the same classroom, 10 Yale Law students and 10 men incarcerated in a CT prison. Professor Forman has written many law review articles, in addition to op-eds and essays for *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, and *The Washington Post*. His first book is the critically acclaimed *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*, which explores how decisions made by black leaders, often with the best of intentions, contributed to disproportionately incarcerating black and brown people. A *Washington Post* bestseller, *Locking Up Our Own* was longlisted for the National Book Award and has been named a Best Book of the Year by numerous publications, including *The New York Times*, The Marshall Project, *Publisher's Weekly*, and *GQ*. Reviewers have called the book “superb and shattering” (*New York Times*), “eloquent” and “sobering” (*London Review of Books*), and “moving, nuanced, and candid” (*New York Review of Books*). On Twitter, *The New York Times* book reviewer Jennifer Senior called *Locking Up Our Own* “the best book I’ve read this year.” The book was awarded the 2018 Pulitzer Prize in Nonfiction in April 2018. Follow Professor Forman on [Twitter](#).

SPEECHES

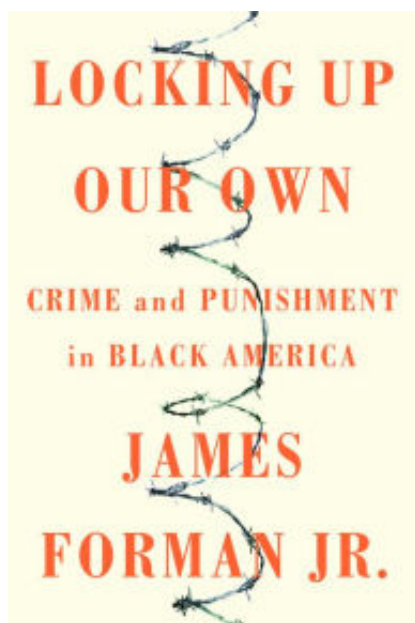
Confronting Mass Incarceration How did the United States come to lock up more of its citizens than any other nation on earth? What can we do to change that? In this memorable keynote, Yale Law Professor James Forman, Jr. diagnoses America’s criminal justice crisis with both data and human stories. He draws on his life experience as the child of a civil rights leader, public defender, and law professor. He also discusses research from his Pulitzer-prize winning book, *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*. Although the topic is one of great seriousness, Forman leaves the audience hopeful, inspired, and armed with concrete ideas for how they themselves can contribute to change.

BOOKS

[Locking Up Our Own](#) Crime and Punishment in Black America

Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

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.

Hardcover

REVIEWS: "James was an excellent speaker who really connected with the audience on a personal level. He was professional, exceedingly kind, and generous. We thought he gave one of the best presentations we've had all year."

- University of Southern Maine

"James Forman Jr. didn't fail to impress. Although the gravity of his work could have left the audience despondent...Forman gave encouraging, small ways to overcome the American addiction to punishment. Yet, he didn't belittle the anguish by the African American community in the face of violent, drug-fueled crime, or the decisions made by empathetic local officials. He went out of his way to compliment both Democratic and Republican lawmakers. After his talk, he handled questions with grace and aplomb."

- Lawrence University

"James Forman, Jr. is a highly engaging speaker, combining hard data with moving and poignant anecdotes. I invited him to be the keynote speaker at a conference on children's rights and juvenile justice in January 2016. He was outstanding."

— Professor Kim Ford-Mazrui, University of Virginia School of Law

"James Forman Jr. is an eloquent, engaging, and inspiring speaker. His remarks encourage both reflection and action."

— Loni M. Bordoloi, Ph.D., Program Director of the Teagle Foundation

"James Forman's convocation address at Macalester was thoroughly compelling: relaxed, lively, yet filled with matters of substance and seriousness. He speaks to the subjects of most importance in our times and does so in a way that is personal and persuasive. I would invite him back to speak again at Macalester in an instant."

— Brian Rosenberg, President of Macalester College

"James Forman's expert and profoundly humanistic presentation on the roots of racialized mass incarceration led his appreciative audience to a deeper understanding of the roots of the problem and what it will take to fix it."

— Tim Ready, Director of Lewis Walker Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnic Relations, Western Michigan University

"James Forman, Jr. is an incredible speaker—his breathe of knowledge of the criminal justice system both past and present is quite deep. The evolution of the system from 200,000 prisoners in the 1970s to the current 2.2-million today is shocking but understandable when Professor Forman explains it. It is very easy to see how we dug this whole for ourselves in the U.S. and how we can dig our way out if we want to. Forman knows all the players in this tragic issue and he skillfully avoids demonizing any of them, which would be oh so easy to do. He's an incredible dynamic and engaging speaker, at the end of the event there wasn't an adult or student in the room who didn't wish he was our teacher."

- Sharon La Cruise, Vice President of Admissions, Programs & Resident Life, International House

Feedback for Changing the Odds Conference, Momentous Institute

"This session was tremendous in presenting historical and current information on mass incarceration and the struggles and facts that African Americans faced. The speaker was certainly passionate and an expert on the topic and I enjoyed the personal connections that emphasized his stance. I love the applicable pieces that we can take home with us personally and with our work!"

"I really appreciated the encouragement to step out of our zone of discomfort towards what we perceive as an injustice system & become those that help contribute towards a more just system."

"I really enjoyed your session and feel like I have more information and some new language to help speak to the challenges ahead of us. The call to action - to do what we are good at to help was important and has given me pause. Thank you!"

"Very powerful, and presented in a way that we all left challenged to take ownership for our actions related to this."

Praise for *Locking Up Our Own*

"Superb and shattering . . . 'How did a majority black jurisdiction end up incarcerating so many of its own?' This is the exceptionally delicate question that [Forman] tries to answer, with exemplary nuance, over the course of his book. His approach is compassionate . . . It's [Forman's] six years as a public defender that seem most relevant to the sensibility of this book—and that give it a special halo, setting it apart."

— Jennifer Senior, *The New York Times*

"The big spring book to argue about . . . Forman can catalogue more dysfunctional systems at close range than *The Wire* did."

— Boris Kachka, *Vulture*

"A sharp analysis . . . Forman shows how our nation has gotten to the point where so many citizens—primarily blacks—are imprisoned . . . Writing with authority and compassion, the author tells many vivid stories of the human toll taken by harsh criminal justice policies. He also asks provocative questions . . . Certain to stir debate, this book offers an important new perspective on the ongoing proliferation of America's 'punishment binge.'"

— *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)