



Preface

◆◆◆ Over the past 30 years, crime has played an increasingly pivotal role in U.S. politics and culture. Politicians go to great lengths to define themselves as tough on criminals and drug addicts. Journalists cover crime more extensively than any other issue. Television networks launch new “reality-based” shows that glamorize law enforcement and blur the line between entertainment and news. And victims’ rights activists clamor for more aggressive policing and harsher penalties. In this context, lawmakers have adopted a wide range of anticrime policies aimed at “getting tough” on offenders. The rate of incarceration in the United States is now among the highest in the world, and one out of three young black males is under the supervision of the criminal justice system.

Throughout this period, most criminologists have devoted their attention to investigating the causes of crime and criminal justice processes. At the margins of the discipline, however, a growing number of scholars have pursued a different line of inquiry, analyzing the role of the crime issue in U.S. politics and culture and the way in which the politicization of this issue has affected the policy-making process. In spite of widespread interest in these issues, almost none of this new work is discussed in standard sociology, criminology, and criminal justice texts.

The Politics of Injustice is the first book to communicate this new research to nonspecialists and specialists alike. We examine the U.S.

crime problem, crime as a political and cultural issue, and the policies that have resulted in the dramatic expansion of the penal system. In so doing, we draw on a wide range of scholarship, including research on crime, its representation in political discourse and the mass media, public opinion, crime-related activism, and public policy. Our review of these literatures is thorough yet focused on the development of our central argument: The punitive turn in crime policy is not primarily the result of a worsening crime problem or an increasingly fearful and vengeful public. Rather, above all else, growing punitiveness reflects efforts by national politicians to shift public policy on a variety of social problems—including crime, addiction, and poverty—toward harsher, more repressive solutions.

We hope the book will provide readers with a better understanding of the nature of crime and punishment in the United States, as well as the cultural and political contexts in which they occur.