

**Book Review: Daniel P. Mears, *Out-of-Control Criminal Justice: The Systems Improvement Solution for More Safety, Justice, Accountability, and Efficiency*. Cambridge University Press. 2017. ISBN: 978-1107161696 (eTextbook). 307 pages. \$17.85.**

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In his book, *Out-of-Control Criminal Justice*, Daniel Mears writes about what he calls the Systems Improvement Solution, also called the Systems Solution. The Systems Solution is his solution for the way criminal justice policy is currently handled. Mears is an influential criminologist who is also the Mark C. Stafford Professor of Criminology at the Florida State University College of Criminology and Criminal Justice (Mears, n.d.). Along with *Out-of-Control Criminal Justice*, he is the author of *Fundamentals of Criminological and Criminal Justice Inquiry*, *Prisoner Reentry in the Era of Mass Incarceration*, and *American Criminal Justice Policy* (Mears, n.d.). He is well-versed in his field of criminal justice, research, and policy; his research has also been featured in multiple journals and media outlets (Mears, n.d.). In *Out-of-Control Criminal Justice*, Mears discusses every aspect concerning his Systems Solution- what a system is as a whole, the innerworkings of a system, how the Systems Solution can be used in other fields besides criminal justice, the emphasis on research, the multi-stakeholder policy process, the benefits of a Systems Solution, and many other pieces needed for a Systems Improvement Solution.

The book introduces the readers by first explaining the negative consequences that past criminal justice policy has created and the consequences of current criminal justice policy; the list of problems was

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too big for the author to include all of them, so he only gave a few examples. Mears then states that safety, justice, accountability, and efficiency are systems problems and how the Systems Improvement Solution can combat them. Systems problems are also not only a part of the criminal justice system, there are problems within the health care, education, environmental protection, War on Terror, and manufacturing systems. Mears discusses how there are many generic problems within any system, like the “no-captain” problem for example- there is no captain to guide his team or he is not guiding them very well.

The next two chapters discuss what a system is exactly; systems include goals and outcomes, elements and subsystems, external forces, and dynamics. Theory is also used to help understand a system. Mears then puts all of these pieces of a system together and discusses them within the criminal justice system itself. Investing in criminal justice policies without understanding systems and how they function is detrimental to improving the problems in criminal justice.

The book continues in the following chapter with Mears talking in depth about what the Systems Improvement Solution really is and what is included in it. The Systems Solution includes three important steps such as “(1) continuous implementation of the evaluation research hierarchy and systems analysis; (2) a multi-stakeholder deliberative process for informing research and developing, evaluating, and improving policy; and (3) adoption of evidence-based policies, programs, practices, and decision making” (134). To put simply, the steps include conducting thorough research, having diverse stakeholders in the policy process, and implementing the evidence-based policies themselves. The last topic Mears discusses is the benefits of the Systems Improvement Solution and conclusion of his book. *Out-of-Control Criminal Justice* offers the reader a lot of knowledgeable and informative material from many perspectives on the solution to inadequate criminal justice policy.

One of the most important topics in *Out-of-Control Criminal Justice*, as well as the first step of the Systems Improvement Solution, is the emphasis on thorough research needed for criminal justice policymaking. Intense research is a vital part of a Systems Solution, not just for the criminal justice system but for any system. Research must be empirical and evidence-based. Evidence-based policies and practices cannot be developed unless high quality research is first conducted on the specific issue (Byrne and Lurigio, 2009). Mears states that one issue in policymaking is that policymakers assume that one or two small effective studies conducted on a subject is considered “evidence-based”, and he mentions the Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment as an example.

## **Kennedy Ratcliff**

At first, the experiment was showing positive results, so policymakers wasted no time in implementing a “mandatory arrest” policy for domestic violence. Unfortunately, after a while, the results did not continue to be as positive. The Minneapolis Experiment is not evidence-based because it was not a long enough experiment, it was not repeated multiple times (other states implemented mandatory arrest as policy, but it was not necessarily “experimented” with in other states prior to policy implementation), and it was not thoroughly thought out from multiple angles. The research of the experiment was well-intentioned but not high quality. Policymakers cannot and should not rely on small studies for sound policy implementation; they need to be patient for results and rely more on in depth research.

Policymaking itself is not the only aspect vital to the System Solution, but the people having a say in the policies also. As well as being the second step in the System Solution process, Mears repeats multiple times how important it is to have a diverse stakeholder process- professionals and researchers should not be the only ones with a hand in the policymaking process, but employees from all branches of the criminal justice system (law enforcement, corrections, courts), victims, communities, and even offenders should as well. Having diverse stakeholders is greatly needed in policymaking; having individuals who are part of the criminal justice system for different reasons helps policymakers see many perspectives. Criminal justice employees understand the innerworkings of the system in their specific field, victims are a part of the system because they are trying to receive justice, and offenders know what it is like to be guided through the system and they see it first-hand. Along with seeing the criminal justice system from all angles, having diverse stakeholders helps keep personal bias amongst policymakers at bay. It also allows many different people who are affected by the criminal justice system to have their voices be heard.

The third step of the Systems Solution Process is implementing evidence-based policies. There is not much to this step; policymakers use the empirical research to create and implement policies, and the three step process continually repeats itself. As society grows and changes, policies need to as well.

While Mears talks in depth about the Systems Solution process, he also talks about basic functions and different parts of systems as a whole. External forces affect all systems, so the criminal justice system is not immune to them. One major external force is money/ funding. There are so many people who are part of the criminal justice system- employees, victims, and offenders just to name a few. The criminal justice system is

huge and requires large amount of funding, but the funding is not always given, especially to certain parts of the system. Mears repeatedly states throughout the book how critical intensive research is for policymaking, but the funding is not always there. It seems like there is never enough money being put to use in the criminal justice system. Even whenever there is sufficient funding for research, policymakers disregard and marginalize scholarly expertise during criminal justice decision-making, and it is not anything new, they have been doing that for the past few decades (Serota, 2020). For the Systems Solution to properly work, expert research must be taken seriously, but policymakers seem to give more authority to what goes on in the media; which is another external factor.

The media has always played a role in public opinion and policy making, and technology keeps advancing every year. It has evolved from newspapers, to television news, and to social media. Due to media and their “perception” of crime, the public has demanded punitive actions for offenders for the past few decades. Unfortunately, the people are often misled and are generally not educated in what actually goes on concerning crime and justice (this is why evidence-based research should have more authority in policymaking than public opinion). News and other television networks have a tendency to not only push their own agenda for the public, they exaggerate the frequency of crime and how often violent crime happens (Thompson, 2011). When crime is exaggerated and seems to be a huge problem in the community, the public will gravitate toward and vote for officials who advocate for harsher punishments (Thompson, 2011). There is nothing wrong with broadcasting crime in the community; the people have a right to know what is going on. It is a problem when it becomes inappropriately and falsely magnified to scare the people into wanting harsher punishments than necessary. Falsely elevating the people’s fear of crime is a factor in why the past few decades of criminal justice policymaking has been unnecessarily tough on offenders; the laws and punishments kept getting tougher and tougher, and now the public is starting to change their minds because they see how ineffective the current and past laws have been on crime. This is why research is so important in the process of policymaking. If evidence-based research was a bigger priority in the previous few decades, the current state of the criminal justice system would not be in such a bad state and need so much reform. While having diverse stakeholders in the process of policymaking is extremely important, Mears is also right in heavily underscoring how important the role of research in policymaking is.

One core principle of the Systems Solution that Mears mentions is being non-partisan. Policymakers need to put their personal biases aside and think about what would best benefit the nation. That is where research comes into play. Sadly, policymakers take advantage of the fact that it is possible for research to “be twisted like a pretzel to fit particular political agendas” (187). Conservative policymakers tend to be harsh on crime and offenders while liberals tend to advocate for the opposite, but all parties need to put their partisan thinking to the side and strictly look at the objective facts of research. Having partisan conflict in policymaking is a key force in preventing sound and effective policy from being achieved and in limiting the prospects for problem resolution (May, Jochim, and Pump, 2013).

The four main problems Mears mentions that are in the criminal justice system are safety (crime), justice, accountability, and efficiency (cost efficiency). Currently, many citizens do not feel safe, many offenders do not receive true justice, government officials and policymakers need to be held to a higher standard of accountability, multiple citizens are losing their trust in the police, and the criminal justice system itself is incredibly expensive and not cost-efficient in its current state. The four main problems are all inter-connected and are difficult to solve one at a time- without criminal justice accountability, citizens have no trust and do not feel safe, if thousands of offenders and victims are not getting the justice they deserve, citizens still lack trust in the system as well as where their taxpayer money is being put to use. As of 2009, the average cost of incarceration in the United States per year is \$28,835 while the average cost of out-of-prison supervision (parole and probation) is \$1,529 per year (Polinsky and Riskind, 2019). With those kind of numbers and the major issue of prison overcrowding, it would seem like a good idea to sentence more offenders to probation instead of prison; it would save a lot of money and be cost efficient. On the surface it sounds like a great idea but sending more offenders to probation takes a toll on the probation officers. More probationers means higher caseloads for probation officers and less time to spend with each individual probationer. Lack of extra funds and resources for probation offices ultimately means less justice for probationers and a higher chance of recidivism, which then leads to more crime. Probation officers are not the only overworked criminal justice employee, but public defenders also. A public defender is an attorney assigned to an accused individual who cannot afford to pay for their own attorney. Public defenders receive very little funds, have severely high caseloads, and lack adequate resources; all of this makes it impossible for public defenders to provide

fair and effective representation to all their clients (Richardson and Goff, 2013). This is especially unfair since this problem seems to target and affect minorities the most. Many defendants may be innocent but will receive an unfair sentence due to inadequate lawyering. Due to the high caseloads and inability to zealously study a case, public defenders may constantly settle for plea bargaining. This public defender issue is an accountability, justice, and cost efficiency issue. Funds are not being used correctly and public defenders cannot properly represent their clients which then causes a lack of justice. Crime, justice, accountability, and efficiency can be improved if the Systems Improvement Solution is implemented. If more funds are used effectively and if more research is conducted to find evidence-based answers, then evidence-based practices can be put into play to help fix these issues. If the criminal justice system can implement all of the ideas that Mears mentions in *Out-of-Control Criminal Justice*, then crime, justice, accountability, efficiency, and the many other problems that are within the system can improve.

In *Out-of-Control Criminal Justice*, Mears discusses the Systems Improvement Solution process and everything that it entails- systems as a whole, the criminal justice system, the importance of research, having diverse stakeholders, external forces, the problems and benefits of the Systems Solution, and much more. While Mears does tend to repeat and regurgitate a lot of information throughout the book, the book is still a great and informative read with a wonderful idea on how to fix current system problems. It is recommended for anyone interested in criminal justice and policymaking and how the subjects can be improved; especially for college students thinking about going into either fields. It would also be an extremely valuable book for current stakeholders and policymakers to read.

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**Kennedy Ratcliff**

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