

BURNING DOWN
THE HOUSE

THE END OF JUVENILE PRISON

NELL BERNSTEIN



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Prison**

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When teenagers scuffle during a basketball game, they are typically benched. But when Will got into it on the court, he and his rival were sprayed in the face at close range by a chemical similar to Mace, denied a shower for twenty-four hours, and then locked in solitary confinement for a month.

One in three American children will be arrested by the time they are twenty-three, and many will spend time locked inside horrific detention centers that defy everything we know about how to rehabilitate young offenders. In a clear-eyed indictment of the juvenile justice system run amok, award-winning journalist Nell Bernstein shows that there is no right way to lock up a child. The very act of isolation denies delinquent children the thing that is most essential to their growth and rehabilitation: positive relationships with caring adults.

Bernstein introduces us to youth across the nation who have suffered violence and psychological torture at the hands of the state. She presents these youths all as fully realized people, not victims. As they describe in their own voices their fight to maintain their humanity and protect their individuality in environments that would deny both, these young people offer a hopeful alternative to the doomed effort to reform a system that should only be dismantled.

Burning Down the House is a clarion call to shut down our nation's brutal and counterproductive juvenile prisons and bring our children home.

Burning Down the House: The End of Juvenile Prison Details

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Julia Hannafin says

An incredibly important book. There is no "reform" -- only institutional recidivism lies down that path, in which kids are attempted to be protected from the harm the system does to them, then are let down again and again. This book does its due diligence in attempting to find the "good" within juvenile facilities (the ones that resemble schools and rehab more than prison) and finds that no place that confines children against their will is a good one. They always turn out to be ineffective and inhumane. It's a hard book to read for all the child abuse chronicled -- for all the soul-breaking the system that is supposed to heal does -- but it's hopeful too, presenting a series of tested, successful alternatives. The only thing I was left wondering is how to successfully dismantle those who have a vested interest in the system (whether guards and prison employees for the financial security and livelihoods juvenile prisons provide in often rural and remote communities, or the random American with an ideological interest in the premise to the juvenile prison system, that there are kids who qualify as unredeemable, that evil exists and it is over there, far from us, etc.) enough to build the alternative she describes.

Annika says

I started reading this book a few weeks ago for an AP Lang class, but it started to grow into something more than just a project I had to do for school. It was not at all what I expected it to be. This piece is incomprehensibly heartbreakingly, but also resolutely hopeful.

I strongly recommend this book.

Jocelyn says

This is a really uncomfortable book to read, and that's the point that Bernstein makes over and over – if it's hard for us to hear about, if it's hard for the guards to survive, imagine what the system is like for the *children who live there*. The author does a good job of convincing us that the system is even worse than we thought in Part 1, and in Part 2 she makes it clear that *reform* is impossible for a system this badly damaged, that it has to be completely dismantled and something else built in its place.

Sophie Diallo says

In this non-fiction book, Nell Bernstein describes the mistreatment of delinquent youths and shows that juvenile homes or prisons are not what they seem. In certain chapters, the author follows several different young adults and how they ended up in a youth prison. The book takes you back to when juvenile prisons were first created and what events shaped the juvenile court system today.

Overall, this book is very intriguing, but hard to read. I liked how the author was very specific and gave key information about the topic throughout the chapters. This book inspires you to do something about the unfair

juvenile court system and motivates you to look deeper into the subject. I would definitely recommend this to someone interested in the court system.

Carol E. says

This non-fiction book was very disturbing, but also a very important read. It tells the real story of what has been going on in juvenile detention over the years in America. It is HARD to read because of the violence and abuse perpetrated against our children. The author interviewed many children who had been or currently were in the system. Their stories are heart-wrenching.

The system is in a huge mess. It reveals euphemistic language we use that makes us think we are "helping" children who are locked up. We need to be much more clear about what really happens. I loved the question the author asks: any time a judgment is made against a child, ask yourself if that solution would be acceptable for YOUR own child. That's what we need to remember as our society deals with children who choose/fall into criminal activities.

I was afraid this book would cause me to have nightmares; thankfully, just before bedtime I reached the chapter near the end which describes changes being made across the country. The author visited a program that has been a model for others - and it is in my home state, which made me feel so happy and relieved!

We still have a lot of work to do and a lot of discussion to engage in regarding how we care for children who are caught up in the criminal justice system. Everyone should read this book so that we can address this question together.

Pamh1955 says

A must read for every American that gives a damn about children. Sad, motivating and eye popping information.

Joanne Rixon says

This book is very well-written: clear, well researched, both emotional and logical. It gives a thorough background of the history of juvenile 'justice' in America, but the reason I'm rating it so highly is that in addition to history, it talks about the future. Many times reading this I thought, you know, if only the people in power, the people who set public policy, would read this. It provides a blueprint for a better future, and I want our whole society to follow Bernstein's plan. It's a good one.

Louise says

This is a very important book. It makes a case that the juvenile prison system can't and shouldn't be reformed but rather closed with most youth placed in alternative programs.

Dimitri says

Calling this book, "The New Jim Crow" but for juveniles, would not be an unfair comparison. However, the comparison offers a tough benchmark for this book to hurdle. Nell Bernstein offers an undeniable case against the abuses and immorality of juvenile detention. Yet, her argument is unstructured, unorganized and relies on anecdotal stories rather than hard-hitting data. An important read, it is just upsetting that it wasn't presented more neatly.

Toby Mustill says

"Rehabilitation happens in the context of relationship". It's difficult to place a rating on this book. 2/3s of the book is talking about the current issues with the youth justice system (in America) and the final 1/3 is talking about recommendations and "where to go from here". Now, I know that is usual academic format, however, Nell basically completely tears the idea of youth incarceration from its inception to shreds. I understand that she is coming from a place of frustration and anger at the system. Again, however, this seems somewhat contrary to a making a good argument. I see that the title of the book is "Burning Down the House" and that is (almost) literally what Nell wants to do. So, if you read this book be prepared for a very dour and upsetting first 2/3rds.

Having said all that, the last 1/3 of this book is brilliant and I agree with every statement 100%. It outlines potential solutions and ideas for moving forward in addition to step by step taking the reader through how to get to that point in time. The idea of community based wrap around solutions where service providers work with the youth and their family while understanding the context of where the youth comes from, past traumas and potential road blocks absolutely hits the nail on the head and that's what we're all trying to achieve. Including the idea of secure care for the absolute worst case scenarios, to therapeutic foster care, to youth workers one on one with the client in the community.

So, read the book, it's well worth it and it's very thought provoking, but be prepared to sit through the not so productive bits!

Jed says

An empathic, well-written and deeply researched look at the American juvenile detention system. Could have been called "Teenage Gulag"; Bernstein shows us the worst abuses that juvenile prisons are prone to, but also shows us that even the "best" facilities fail our children and betray any notion of justice--there is no right way to lock up a child.

Rachel says

This is a very important book. The author proposes not only reform, but an end to juvenile incarceration altogether. And she has done her homework. Every one of her points is thoroughly backed up with data from

excellent sources. The book is organized into two sections. The first part focuses on the kids who are caught up in the system. It shows how the system works, with a lot of attention to the abuse of the children. The second part details recent reforms and new approaches, explores ideas about how kids can actually be rehabilitated, and presents a compelling case for finding solutions for most kids other than taking away their freedom.

The kids in the system are overwhelmingly nonwhite and disadvantaged. A high percentage of them have been abused and/or neglected. Mainstream (white middle class) America lets the abuses in the juvenile justice system go on because we can look at these children and consider them “other,” and, because of their acting out, somehow less than human. Yet most of them are locked up for things that would get a white middle-class teenager a slap on the wrist, if that. Most teenagers at some point challenge authority, do something risky, and show poor judgment. (How many respectable adults never tried underage drinking, shoplifting, some drug experimentation, or skipping school?) They act immaturely because they are immature. Being locked up is intrinsically dehumanizing. And when some people, however many of them are well-meaning, control the lives of others who are locked up, there’s a power differential that sets the stage for abuse. The author makes all these points multiple times in the book. The repetition was mildly annoying at times, but these points really need to come across.

Another main point is that rehabilitation and growth are facilitated by connection with supportive and loving people who are educated on the best ways to help the kids. (One story that stuck with me was about a girl who, in the name of therapy, was forced to call her father who’d raped her so that she could “move past it.” Of course it went badly.) Preferably this rehabilitation takes place within the community. The author notes several programs where the money that was previously used to incarcerate the kids was funneled instead into community programs, with excellent results.

Are these kids too dangerous to let out on the streets? Apparently, only a small percentage are more dangerous than more-privileged kids who didn’t get sent to jail for doing the same things. Even the more dangerous ones should have the opportunity for connection and rehabilitation. The system as it is does far too little of that.

Five stars for content, four for writing—very well-written but redundant at times. Also a bit of mistaking correlation for causation. For example, it may well be true that completing high school causes kids to stop being criminal. But my guess is that studies showing this and other assertions document association rather than cause and effect. The book has excellent endnotes showing sources, so I could check on that, but it’s a minor quibble. Not only am I convinced of all the author’s arguments, but the book made me want to go out and help some high-risk kids. Maybe I will someday.

Lisa Vegan says

Except for Thanksgiving weekend, Labor Day weekend is the most difficult holiday weekend for me, so this wasn’t a good time for me to be reading this book, but I guess it was good timing to finally finish it. I found it utterly devastating, though it’s such an important book, and thankfully it does offer hope and excellent suggestions in the final sections. Thank goodness viable alternatives to what is the norm are provided. Otherwise, the book would be nothing but tortuous.

My feelings about human nature are getting more and more negative as I read certain books and see certain

films. I think I need a comical book next.

This book gets 5 stars because I want absolutely everyone to read it, particularly adults and adolescents somehow affected, including judges, prison and school officials, treatment program workers, teachers, foster parents, graduate students in all related fields, but everyone. Even if a reader feels nothing in this book applies to their life and they are powerless to do anything, that's not so. If you are a voter, a citizen, a parent, an adolescent, this is a must read book, in my opinion.

I've read a lot and experienced a lot (thankfully never incarceration) but not since I read *As We Are Now* by May Sarton am I so certain death is preferable to being helpless and solely in the hands of other human beings. I could really identify with these kids. I have worked with similar kids and now I wish I could have done that even better than I did. I could have been one of these kids, as the author points out, that's true of most people. For me, from ages 11-13 I could have ended up incarcerated and I am lucky that I did not. While I didn't have the positive essentials for young people the authors posits, such as a supportive adult when I was at the ages of the kids whose stories are told in this book, I know that if I'd ended up at 90% of the covered places, I'd have been so much worse off, as I know I couldn't have withstood the physical and/or sexual abuse, and the even worse isolation than I had.

I like her ideas of what our society should do, and it's why I want everyone to read the book. Without a swell of demand, it's not likely to happen on a wide scale.

One thing that came up for me again, is I've never understood why those under age 18 (maybe 24-25 since that's when brain development is considered complete) are tried and punished as adults. I don't care what kinds do; they're not adults. They're just not. In fact, when I hear of 12-17 year olds in the news who's committed horrible crimes, if anything they tend to be immature for their ages. They're kids, and society should have hope for the 99% of them who aren't hard core psychopaths.

The inequities shown here are appalling but not surprising.

Anyway, I'm glad I read it, and I'm glad it was written. The author did not let down the kids she got to know, the kids she befriended. Their trust in her was earned and justified. I hope it does a tremendous amount of good.

Connie says

Much like *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander, I went into the book curious and eager to learn, and came out of the book with furor in my belly. The statistics Bernstein cites in the book about recidivism, costs, and abuse in prison are astonishing. Having lived in the U.S. for the past ten years, I have become somewhat ingrained in the culture of punishment and the so-called law and order. I hope this book can mark the start of a much needed culture change and understanding toward juvenile incarceration.

Elaine says

This book is sometimes very difficult to read because of the graphic brutality endured by children incarcerated in this country -- harsh beatings, sexual abuse, long stints in isolation. Bernstein intersperses

Department of Justice reports and grim statistics with moving stories of kids who are or have been incarcerated -- many of whom she worked with at a youth newspaper in the Bay Area. She concludes the system is so broken it cannot be reformed -- and illuminates some places (Red Wing, Minnesota, Missouri) where juvenile prisons have been replaced with more humane -- and more effective -- settings to deal with children in trouble with the law.
