



December 1994

**Review of *Crime and Punishment in American History*. Lawrence M. Friedman. Reviewed by James Midgley, Louisiana State University**

James Midgley  
*Louisiana State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

**Recommended Citation**

Midgley, James (1994) "Review of *Crime and Punishment in American History*. Lawrence M. Friedman. Reviewed by James Midgley, Louisiana State University," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 4 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol21/iss4/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



book should include some discussion on comparative perspectives in policing, and further development of civil liability in the chapter on controlling police behavior. I also believe that the authors have missed a golden opportunity to discuss the link which binds the police and the community, by not fully developing and discussing the concept of the social contract in the first chapter.

All things considered, this is one of the best textbooks that I have read and it is certainly the best textbook on the subject of police and society.

Larry A. Gould  
Northern Arizona University

Lawrence M. Friedman. *Crime and Punishment in American History*. New York: Basic Books, 1993. \$30 hardcover.

Today, crime has again become a critical national issue. Recent opinion polls reveal that Americans regard crime as the country's most pressing social problem. Many politicians have responded by clamoring for ever more harsher punishments appearing to ignore the fact that the use of severe punishments has increased steadily over the years only to be accompanied by an inexorable rise in the crime rate. As they scramble for electorate advantage, many have abandoned their responsibility to inform, educate and guide public opinion. And yet, most know that crime is inextricably linked to wider social realities which retributive punishments alone cannot address.

Every politician and concerned citizen should read Lawrence Friedman's excellent history of crime and punishment in the United States which demonstrates time and time again how the phenomenon of crime (and the institutionalized mechanisms which have evolved to respond to it) have been shaped by wider social forces. Friedman defines crime as forbidden behavior to which the community and its law enforcement agents respond through the use of coercive power. But, Friedman contends, there is little else one can say about crime in absolute terms. The types of behavior that are defined as criminal, the persons who are identified and processed as offenders, and the means used to respond to crime have all varied enormously since the nation

was founded. Acts that would be regarded as quite normal today were severely punished in colonial times. Conversely, there are many offenses which did not exist in colonial times. Friedman notes also that many responses to crime which are institutionalized today were not used in the past.

It is Friedman's contention that these variations in the way crime is defined are not haphazard temporal vagaries but easily recognizable reactions to changing social realities. Changes in beliefs, cultural attitudes, economic activities and wider social structural arrangements have all influenced the way crime has been defined and the way society has responded to it. This fact is amply demonstrated by a vast array of narrative material which provides at times horrific and at other times amusing illustrations of Friedman's thesis. The power of superstition in colonial society, the dominance of slavery in the South, the emergence of industrialization in the North, the ruthlessness of the frontier all affected the way crime was defined and processed in different social economic and cultural contexts. Particularly apposite is Friedman's discussion of how crime today is influenced by a wider narcissistic culture which demands expressions of individualism. Contrary to popular belief, Friedman argues convincingly that the determinants of crime and punishment are to be found in the changing social and cultural context in which individuals function. This is an uncomfortable thesis but one that needs to be reiterated at a time when simplistic responses which attribute the crime problem to individual pathology are again being advocated.

Although the theme of Friedman's book has been articulated in academic circles before, this is probably the first time that it has been made so accessible to a popular readership. The book is readable and engaging. While academics may have wished for more analysis and a little less descriptive narrative, the extensive use of narrative is an effective means of communicating an important truth. This book deserves to be widely read. Hopefully, its message will be understood by those who are responsible for formulating criminal justice policies today.

James Midgley  
Louisiana State University