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**Review of *Can't Catch a Break: Gender, Jail, Drugs, and the Limits of Personal Responsibility*. Susan Starr Sered and Maureen Norton-Hawk. Reviewed by Brandy Henry**

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today and in the foreseeable future. Even nudging our social policies and our budget allocations further toward their politically possible limits will only marginally improve the conditions of adolescents, given the magnitude of their problems. One in seven girls in developing countries is married before the age of 15, with only small improvements in some countries and no progress or deterioration in others. Adolescent unemployment remains intractable. One in five adolescents suffers from mental illness, most often depression. Virtually all women in Egypt still experience some form of female genital mutilation.

The real solutions to human rights abuses of adolescents require major social transformations that address the overwhelming poverty, unemployment, racism, sexism and family violence that afflicts the world. While the book's chapters present reasonable recommendations, the likelihood of their implementation to the degree required is low. The recommendations in the book are punctuated with "should" and "must," imploring people of good will in high positions to do more to respect the rights and needs of adolescents. Except for one author who sees brutal conflicts and the harm to adolescents as "a challenge whose solution might only lie in divine hands," there is almost no guidance for how to influence or pressure people in power to act in the interests of adolescents or for those outside of power to act on our own if those in power don't respond. As is often said, "Hope is not a plan." The recommendations in this book are wise; the strategies to achieve them are lacking.

*David Tobis, Senior Partner, Maestral International*

Susan Starr Sered and Maureen Norton-Hawk, *Can't Catch a Break: Gender, Jail, Drugs, and the Limits of Personal Responsibility*. University of California Press (2014), 216 pages, \$29.95 (paperback).

Gender, race and income inequality remain huge problems in American society. These issues have drawn widespread attention through the recent Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street movements. It is also well understood that women face

additional barriers in accessing equal pay and advancement.

The book *Can't Catch a Break: Gender, Jail, Drugs, and the Limits of Personal Responsibility* uses case studies to elucidate the aforementioned structural inequities and how they impact women. Authors Susan Starr Sered and Maureen Norton-Hawk build on their backgrounds as sociologists with respective expertise in women's health and criminal justice. Together, they conducted a 5-year longitudinal study of impoverished women in Boston. *Can't Catch a Break* gracefully zooms in and out between big picture policy discussion and individual stories gleaned from those 5 years of fieldwork. This combination of personal stories with powerful social policy analysis brings the subject to life.

A sociological lens is used to break down the cultural biases that maintain inequities for women. The belief in personal responsibility is examined as a central tenet in shaping American culture. Starr Sered and Norton-Hawk link America's Protestant beginnings to a widespread cultural belief in the Horatio Alger myth. They connect the idea that people can and should "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," to multiple social policies which keep women from "catching a break." Many of these policies relate back to the "War on Poverty" and neoliberal "Reaganomics," which radically restructured America's welfare system. Through the case studies, readers are able to see how these policies have affected real women.

The authors go on to discuss how institutional and social policies incorporate this American value of personal responsibility. The criminal justice, medical, mental health, substance abuse and child welfare systems are dissected in Chapters 3 - 7. In Chapter 8, the authors circle back to the criminal justice system and revisit the question, "have prisons become the way that America deals with human suffering?" In conclusion, they offer an alternative theoretical framework to that of "personal responsibility." This new framework views the problems of an individual as stemming from structural barriers which prevent an individual from accessing "good" choices. Finally, they offer suggestions for best practices in addressing these structural barriers.

Overall, the combination of the case studies with sometimes shocking demographic statistics is particularly

compelling. However, the authors drew conclusions from these anecdotes and personal observations. Additionally, in Chapter 5, "It's All in My Head: Suffering, PTSD, and the Triumph of the Therapeutic," the authors make unsubstantiated claims regarding therapeutic treatments. In this chapter, psychological treatments are characterized as contributing to the structural system that oppresses women. The authors state, "We suspect therapy is more likely to be effective for securely housed, middle-class Americans" (p. 103). They then go on to discuss a culturally irrelevant example from Sri Lanka that suggests that psychotherapy for trauma "makes things worse," as one of their participants reported. While their points are logical from the sociological lens through which they are examining this situation, they choose to ignore a wide body of research of evidence-based trauma treatment. Additionally, their repeated linking of actual professional psychological treatment to pop psychologists from "Oprah" and "Jerry Springer" suggests a lack of understanding of the field of which they are so critical.

In conclusion, *Can't Catch a Break* is an engaging read and serves as a good primer for those interested in how policies and institutions maintain gender inequality. However, it appears to succumb to internal biases resulting from a reliance on the ethnographic interviews that made the book so approachable.

*Brandy Henry, Heller School for Social Policy & Management,  
Brandeis University*

Jill Leovy, *Ghettoside: A True Story of Murder in America*. Spiegel & Grau (2015), 386 pages, \$28.00 (hardcover).

Jill Leovy has been a crime reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* since 2000. Her book, *Ghettoside*, follows the police investigation of the 2007 murder of an 18-year-old African-American man, Bryant Tennale, the son of a Los Angeles detective, who was shot and killed in an area of Los Angeles called "Ghettoside" by locals and police officers who work nearby. Leovy chronicles the police investigation from the ground in an amalgam of case-study/narrative/journalistic fashions. Much of the book focuses on L.A. Police Detective John Skaggs' perspective and interactions during his probe of the murder (which he subsequently solved).