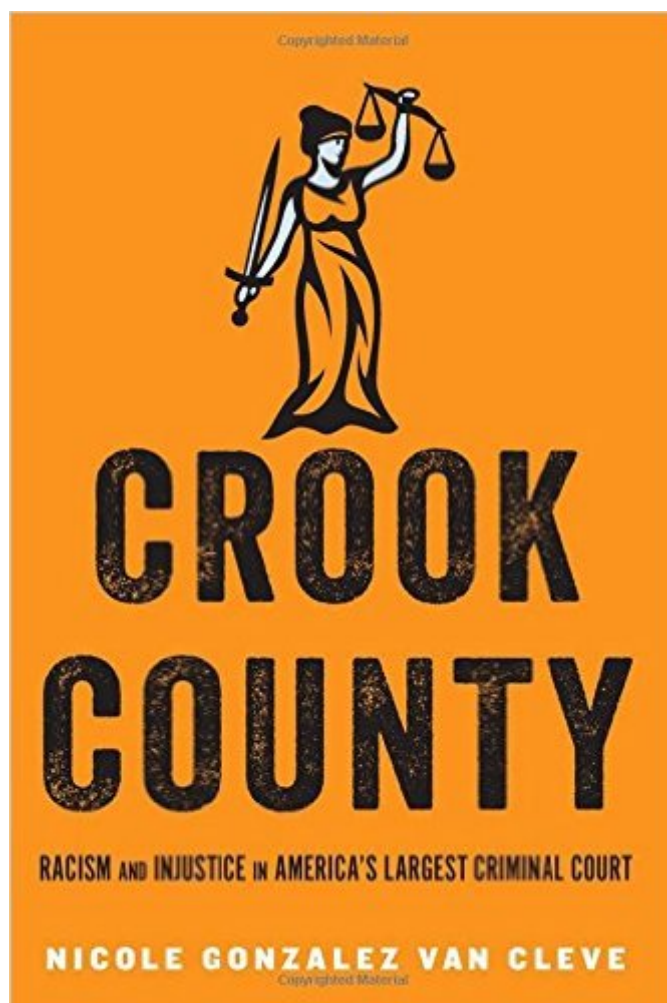


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# Crook County: Racism And Injustice In America's Largest Criminal Court



## Synopsis

Americans are slowly waking up to the dire effects of racial profiling, police brutality, and mass incarceration, especially in disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities of color. The criminal courts are the crucial gateway between police action on the street and the processing of primarily black and Latino defendants into jails and prisons. And yet the courts, often portrayed as sacred, impartial institutions, have remained shrouded in secrecy, with the majority of Americans kept in the dark about how they function internally. Crook County bursts open the courthouse doors and enters the hallways, courtrooms, judges' chambers, and attorneys' offices to reveal a world of punishment determined by race, not offense. Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleve spent ten years working in and investigating the largest criminal courthouse in the country, Chicago-Cook County, and based on over 1,000 hours of observation, she takes readers inside our so-called halls of justice to witness the types of everyday racial abuses that fester within the courts, often in plain sight. We watch white courtroom professionals classify and deliberate on the fates of mostly black and Latino defendants while racial abuse and due process violations are encouraged and even seen as justified. Judges fall asleep on the bench. Prosecutors hang out like frat boys in the judges' chambers while the fates of defendants hang in the balance. Public defenders make choices about which defendants they will try to "save" and which they will sacrifice. Sheriff's officers cruelly mock and abuse defendants' family members. Crook County's powerful and at times devastating narratives reveal startling truths about a legal culture steeped in racial abuse. Defendants find themselves thrust into a pernicious legal world where courtroom actors live and breathe racism while simultaneously committing themselves to a colorblind ideal. Van Cleve urges all citizens to take a closer look at the way we do justice in America and to hold our arbiters of justice accountable to the highest standards of equality.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I agree with the reviewer who suspects the author started the project with an agenda. When I picked up the book I wondered the same and I began reading with some skepticism. However, she makes a very strong case, leaving me to feel that if she undertook the study with an agenda it turned out to have some basis in reality. This is one of those rare examples of an academic writing a book that is an interesting read. As it happened I was reading the book at the very time the Stanford University swimmer was getting a slap on the wrist for raping a coed - something the judge justified by suggesting that a harsh penalty would interfere with the man's future success. While the judge's ruling was in my view outrageous, it was precisely the kind of scenario the author describes in this book. The book is based on a decade of observation and interviews and focuses exclusively on Cook County, Illinois. The reader is left to wonder about how widely the situation provided here applies in other jurisdictions. I was particularly impressed with the author's description of the pressures placed on judges, prosecutors, and public defenders. While an individual defendant or an individual victim may see their case as unique, the book does an excellent job of showing the larger context in which individual cases are handled - such as a lenient treatment of one defendant might put pressure to be particularly tough on the next. Like any good book this one makes you think.

Read this over 24 hours. I had to stop more than once to simply catch my breath. I am sitting in Chicago waiting for a conference revolving around criminal justice. This book has me in a quandary. there is a hopelessness depicted here for which I see no solutions. But, we must believe we can pull out of this. Some sort of national repentance is necessary.

I have to go all the way back to Sudhir Venkatesh's Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets to find comparable insights into criminal justice in Chicago. Comparable because both books are based on the authors' experience of real life - in one case on the streets, in the other in the courts. Both authors are incredibly brave investigators and eyewitness reporters of not just what they saw, but also what they learned. Cook County is raw truth served up in compelling literary style. More than a necessary indictment of County culture, it also provides

context for headlines I read every single day in the Chicago Tribune about violence in the streets. We cannot really understand what's going on in our ghettos unless we also understand what's going on around and on top of the ghetto. This book courageously provides that context. It's a must-read for everybody who cares how the other half lives in 2016.

The writing -- which is very compelling -- brings to light so many personal stories that would have otherwise gone unnoticed and unknown. A well-written, easy-to-dig-into read bringing witness to a timely topic.

The author wrote about a poor and uneducated population, but wrote to a highly educated and sophisticated audience. I found myself using the dictionary quite often. I was employed by the Cook County Juvenile Court for 23 years, and it was a precursor to the Cook County jail system. I was unconscious when I worked there, but now I am aware.

This book is one of the most significant studies in sociology and criminal justice to come out in years. Naysayers may not like her findings, but they are not easily dismissed. Nicole Van Cleve has done unparalleled research: over more than a decade, she conducted thousands of hours of ethnography and courtwatching and supervised still more by law students who confirmed her findings. Through heartbreaking stories, Van Cleve depicts the criminal courts for what they are: a site of government in which racism is enacted as policy and given legitimacy through the actions of judges, lawyers, and countless other state actors. People who aim to defend the system of racism will undoubtedly hate this book because Van Cleve understands them so well. I will enthusiastically assign and cite this book; it is rigorous yet readable, poignant yet unqualified in its indictment of a system of "justice" that is deliberately unequal. In weaving together the deeply human stories of the lawyers and judges who propagate injustice and in telling the shocking and intimate stories of the people who encounter the everyday racism of the criminal courts, this book shows evidence that Van Cleve is one of the most important and provocative voices in criminal justice scholarship today.

This is a must-read book. Gonzalez Van Cleve's harrowing account of the true state of the "justice" system provides a powerful wake-up call to anyone who believes such institutions are colorblind. Through vivid case studies and insightful analysis, the author rips off our collective blinders and forces us to look at a cruel reality - one in which the first step toward change is admitting that in fact there is a problem. Highly recommended.

Although this is the one of the American tragedies, its a story that must be told. I hope the Cook County board president, Toni Preckwinkle reads it, and President Obama, and the presumed new to be elected in November Cook County State's Attorney, too. I work in another branch in the Cook County government, the health services, which seems to attract a much more dedicated and empathetic staff to care for the same population that are the defendants and their families and friends depicted in the book. There are many differences between the criminal justice services and health services in Cook County, but my gut says there must be something really wrong in how lawyers are trained and educated. Instead of filling them up with the minutia of laws and legalese, perhaps law school should teach their students how to communicate with clients, how to empathize, how to be human throughout their careers. The details of laws and whatever else they learn can be looked up. The behaviors tat Dr. Van Cleve describes among the highly educated attorneys and judges make it clear that the present type of education of attorneys in laws schools serves to perpetuate a racist, corrupt system.

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