



Policing the Poor: From Slave Plantation to Public Housing (Northeastern Series on Gender, Crime, and Law)

Neil Websdale

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While many applaud the apparent successes of community and saturation policing, Neil Websdale contends that such law enforcement initiatives oppress rather than protect the poor, particularly African Americans in large urban centers. Based on a groundbreaking ethnographic study of public housing projects in Nashville, Tennessee, he argues persuasively that community policing is a critical component of a criminal justice juggernaut designed to manage or regulate stigmatized populations, much like slave patrols served as agents for social control on Southern plantations. In a work that is sure to stir controversy and heated debate, Websdale draws on extensive field research, documentary sources, and interviews to illuminate how a criminal justice system deeply rooted in racism and slavery destroys the black family, creates a form of selective breeding, and undermines the civil rights gains of the 1960s. Unlike previous studies of community policing, which analyze programs through the lens of law enforcement, this book focuses on the history, experiences, and perspectives of the people whose lives are most affected by today's policing strategies. Skillfully blending the voices of project residents with a rich synthesis of historical, sociological, and criminological analysis, Websdale describes the situational, cultural, and economic circumstances of Nashville's poor; examines the policing of social upheaval by detailing events in the 1997 looting and burning of the Dollar General Store; considers African American kinship systems and the special circumstances of battered women; and discusses why the vice trades—prostitution and selling drugs—thrive in public housing projects. Websdale's hard-hitting look at community policing and its negative impact on the urban poor provides a much-needed balance to prevailing optimistic views on the effectiveness of this new method of law enforcement.

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