

Taming the System: The Control of Discretion in Criminal Justice, 1950-1990

By Samuel Walker

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It is a truism that the administration of criminal justice consists of a series of discretionary decisions by police, prosecutors, judges, and other officials. *Taming the System* is a history of the forty-year effort to control the discretion. It examines the discretion problem from the initial "discovery" of the phenomenon by the American Bar Foundation in the 1950s through to the most recent evaluation research on reform measures. Of enormous value to scholars, reformers, and criminal justice professionals, this book approaches the discretion problem through a detailed examination of four decision points: policing, bail setting, plea bargaining, and sentencing. In a field which largely produces short-ranged "evaluation research," this study, in taking a wider approach, distinguishes between the role of administrative bodies (the police) and evaluates the longer-term trends and the successful reforms in criminal justice history.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Displays a formidable command of the relevant literature....A concise and balanced overview of a critical dimension in the operation of the criminal justice system."--*Choice*

"[A] comprehensive, very well-organized, and informative account..."--*Contemporary Sociology*

"With such titles as *Popular Justice: A History of American Criminal Justice* (1980) and *In Defense of American Liberties: A History of the ACLU* (1990), Samuel Walker secured his status as a major voice in criminal justice history. *Taming the System* buttresses his reputation by demonstrating once again his considerable strengths: mastery of the topic, clear and effective prose, well-crafted arguments, [and] sound conclusions."--*The Journal of American History*

From the Back Cover

It is a truism that the administration of criminal justice consists of a series of discretionary decisions by police, prosecutors, judges, and other officials. Analyzing the origins, nature, and impact of various efforts to control discretion, *Taming the System* is the first comprehensive history of the reform attempts in the past forty years. Of enormous value to scholars, reformers, and criminal justice professionals, Walker's book approaches the discretion problem through a detailed examination of four decision points: policing, bail setting, plea bargaining, and sentencing. In a field which largely produces short-ranged "evaluation research", this study, in taking a wider historical approach, distinguishes between the roles of administrative bodies (the police) and evaluates the longer-term trends and the successful reforms in criminal justice history. Serving as an "interim report" on what does and does not work in the system, *Taming the System* concludes that not only has the effort to control discretion been a unifying theme in criminal justice history, but that there have actually been some successes, resulting in reducing disparities in race and social class.

About the Author

Samuel Walker is at University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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