

# Preying on the Poor: Criminal Justice as Revenue Racket

In March 2015, Americans learned from the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) that the city of Ferguson, Missouri had been operating a “predatory system of government.” Police officers were acting as street-level enforcers for a program – aggressively promoted by city officials – in which fines and fees were used to extract resources from poor communities of color and deliver them to municipal coffers. In this talk, I argue that what the DOJ discovered in Ferguson should not be seen as anomalous, either in relation to U.S. history or contemporary American governance. Based on an ongoing book project with Joshua Page, I offer a political analysis of the origins, operations, and consequences of revenue-centered criminal justice practices that have grown dramatically in the U.S. since the 1990s. Under this policy regime, local governments and market firms draw revenue streams from fine-centered policing, court fees, bail systems, prison charges, civil asset forfeiture, and much more. These and related practices have a long pre-history in earlier uses of predatory governance to advance American state and nation building, order the political economy, and manage race, class, and gender inequalities. Connecting this history to the present, I present political explanations for why government authorities have turned criminal justice systems into highly regressive tools of revenue extraction, and how this transformation is reshaping governance and citizenship in an era of profound social inequalities.



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