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This work treats an enduring sociopolitical issue that again captured public attention in summer 2014 with the police shooting of Michael Brown in Missouri (too recent to be included in the reviewed work). Despite the extensive mass media attention and scholarly output on the topic, this is the first encyclopedia to focus specifically on African Americans and the US criminal justice system. The most comparable work is Helen Taylor Greene and Shaun Gabbidon’s Encyclopedia of Race and Crime (SAGE, 2009), but it treats all major US racial and ethnic groups. In recent years, an increasing number of book-length studies have appeared, for example, James Unnever and Shaun Gabbidon’s A Theory of African American Offending: Race, Racism, and Crime (Routledge, 2011) and Marvin Free and Mitch Ruesink’s Race and Justice: Wrongful Convictions of African American Men (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012). However, the work under review brings together much information from disparate sources.

Editors Jones-Brown and Frazier are both professors at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York (CUNY); Brooks is retired from the CUNY library system. They have assembled a collection of 129 signed entries. Their stated aim is to document three centuries of “the impact of the law and the justice system on people of African ancestry in the United States” (xiv) and how these have contributed to the disproportionate representation of Blacks in arrests and imprisonment at the local, state, and federal levels. Emphasis is on criminal suspects, convicts, victims, lawyers, and activists. Entries average approximately two to six pages in length, although a few run to thirteen pages or more. Most are either biographical or topical in nature and are interfiled in one alphabetical sequence. Representative biographical entries include Trayvon Martin, Rodney King, O. J. Simpson, and Al Sharpton. Sample subject entries are “racial profiling,” “civil rights movement,” “gangs,” and “sentencing disparities.” Each entry provides a list of references at the end, and there are numerous in-text references throughout. Liberal use of “see also” references to related topics is also employed. These features, along with a very detailed index, serve to somewhat mitigate the challenges in navigating a straight A–Z arrangement without broad subject or section headings. Although the essays are relatively brief, the extensive bibliographic citations fulfill the aim of bringing together a large quantity of selected sources for follow-up by users desiring more in-depth information.

Other than the formatting, the chief weakness is the lack of clear criteria for inclusion beyond the general statement cited above. For example, a two-page entry is devoted to Jesse Jackson, in which the only reference to crime is his organizing sit-ins and marches leading to mass arrests. There is also a six-page entry titled “Slavery.” While it covers such topics as the fugitive slave laws and the harsh punishments endured
by many slaves—and makes reference to the lasting legacy of slavery today—the content in this article is readily accessible elsewhere. More selectivity would have made room for lengthier, more in-depth entries pertaining to the core topic.

Despite its flaws, the encyclopedia’s unique coverage and thorough bibliographic information still render it a valuable reference source. Recommended for all libraries.—Michael L. Nelson, Collection Development Librarian, University of Wyoming Libraries, Laramie, Wyoming