



Commissioner's Book Club: **Just Mercy**

Discussion guide

Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

Author Bio

[Bryan Stevenson](#) is the founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a human rights organization in Montgomery, Alabama. Under his leadership, EJI has won major legal challenges eliminating excessive and unfair sentencing, exonerating innocent death row prisoners, confronting abuse of the incarcerated and the mentally ill and aiding children prosecuted as adults. and aiding children prosecuted as adults.

Mr. Stevenson has argued and won multiple cases at the United States Supreme Court, including a 2019 ruling protecting condemned prisoners who suffer from dementia and a landmark 2012 ruling that banned mandatory life-imprisonment-without-parole sentences for all children 17 or younger. Mr. Stevenson and his staff have won reversals, relief or release from prison for over 140 wrongly condemned prisoners on death row and won relief for hundreds of others wrongly convicted or unfairly sentenced.

Mr. Stevenson has initiated major new anti-poverty and anti-discrimination efforts that challenge inequality in America. He led the creation of EJI's highly acclaimed Legacy Sites, including the Legacy Museum, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and Freedom Monument Sculpture Park. These new national landmark

institutions chronicle the legacy of slavery, lynching and racial segregation, and the connection to mass incarceration and contemporary issues of racial bias.¹

Summary

Just Mercy is the autobiography of Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer who started the Equal Justice Initiative to defend those wrongly convicted in Alabama. The focus is Walter McMillian, a Black man who was framed for a murder he did not commit and sent to death row despite strong evidence he was innocent. Stevenson shows how structural racism, biased policing and inadequate legal representation cause injustice and how justice can prevail when someone refuses to give up.

I learned a great deal from Bryan Stevenson's memoir. While the structural racism built into the American justice system was less of a surprise (and unfortunately also familiar to us in the Canadian system), this book opened my eyes to the ways in which children in the U.S. bear this burden as well.

As Bryan says, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done." Indeed, in many ways, the truest measure of a society is how we treat those who are accused and convicted of criminal offences. Few are as vulnerable to the whims of the state; few test our commitment to respecting inherent human dignity more. Human rights are not something we earn; they are embedded in our very existence.

—Commissioner Govender

Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

In 2018, the Department of Justice Canada highlighted the overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples in the Canadian Criminal Justice System.² In 2020, BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner published a report called [Disaggregated Demographic Data Collection in British Columbia: The Grandmother Perspective](#)³. This report highlights how data collection can be helpful in identifying systemic

¹ Equal Justice Initiative. 2025. "Bryan Stevenson." <https://eji.org/bryan-stevenson/>.

² Government of Canada. 2023. "Overrepresentation of Indigenous People in the Canadian Criminal Justice System: Causes and Responses." <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/jr/oip-cjs/p3.html>.

³ BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner. 2020. "Disaggregated demographic data collection in British Columbia: The grandmother perspective." <https://bchumanrights.ca/resources/publications/publication/datacollection/>.



discrimination and how it also has the potential to create harms for marginalized communities if not collected in a responsible way. Lack of race- and identity-based data can hide the real impact of systemic racism and inequality in areas like policing and the courts. Implementing the Grandmother's Perspective can see data collection employed to expose and address injustice, rather than control and harm communities.

The Commissioner's 2021 report, [Equity is Safer: Human Rights Considerations for Policing Reform in British Columbia](https://bchumanrights.ca/resources/publications/publication/scorpa/),⁴ was developed as a submission to the Special Committee on Reforming the Police Act (SCORPA). Based on expert analysis of data from five police jurisdictions, Equity is Safer described how Indigenous and Black people, as well as other racialized groups, are either grossly or significantly overrepresented in arrest and chargeable incident statistics. It also noted that a great deal of police activity involves people experiencing mental health issues, in which Indigenous, Black and Arab/West Asian people are also significantly overrepresented.

Launched January 2024, the Human Rights Commissioner's [Inquiry into Police Use of Force](https://bchumanrights.ca/inquiries-and-cases/inquiries/inquiry/use-of-force/),⁵ is examining data on the police's use of force on racialized communities and people experiencing mental health issues, and will make recommendations to address any concerns arising about systemic discrimination.

"There is a direct connection between equity and community safety. Systemic discrimination erodes the foundation of trust between communities and law enforcement, jeopardizing the safety of all residents," said Commissioner Kasari Govender. "This inquiry aims to better understand who is at the receiving end of use of force by police, whether any disproportionate impact revealed amounts to systemic discrimination and what can be done to address any equity issues that emerge. As I have said before, 'we cannot act on what we do not know.'"

⁴ BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner. 2021. "[Equity is safer: Human rights considerations for policing reform in British Columbia | BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner](https://bchumanrights.ca/resources/publications/publication/scorpa/)." <https://bchumanrights.ca/resources/publications/publication/scorpa/>

⁵ BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner. 2024. "[Inquiry into police use of force](https://bchumanrights.ca/inquiries-and-cases/inquiries/inquiry/use-of-force/)." <https://bchumanrights.ca/inquiries-and-cases/inquiries/inquiry/use-of-force/>.



Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. What stands out to you most about Walter McMillian's story?

- Answers will vary.

2. In what ways does race play a role in the justice system as described in the book?

- Race influences arrest, prosecution, jury selection and sentencing.
- McMillian's interracial affair and race made him a target. The book shows systemic racism's real impact on people's lives.

3. How does poverty affect the characters and their legal outcomes?

- People impacted by poverty lack resources for quality legal help or appeals. Stevenson shows how wealth affects legal outcomes and this shows that inequality limits access to justice.

4. What role does disability or mental illness play in the cases Stevenson handles?

- Some clients, like Herbert Richardson or others with PTSD or trauma, aren't provided proper support or consideration at trial. They face harsher sentences despite mental health needs. This highlights disability rights and calls for fair treatment under law.

5. Stevenson says, "the opposite of poverty is not wealth—it is justice." What does that mean to you?

- Answers will vary.

6. Why do you think the judge overrode the jury's verdict to impose the death penalty?

- Alabama allowed judges to override life sentences. In McMillian's case, bias and racial prejudice influenced that decision. It shows how power without accountability can undermine justice.



7. How are families and communities affected by wrongful convictions?

- Walter's family suffered emotionally and financially. Communities lose trust in justice institutions. Families need support systems—something Canada and B.C. could address through improved legal aid.

8. What does Stevenson's own experience of racial profiling teach us?

- Stevenson was stopped and threatened by police despite being a lawyer. Race and appearance shaped how he was treated. It reflects broader issues with policing and discrimination still relevant today.

9. How do you think the themes relate to British Columbia? Do you know of instances of racial profiling in British Columbia?

- Answers will vary.

10. Consider discussing specific incidents of racial profiling in British Columbia. For example, on May 14, 2021, retired BC Supreme Court Justice Selwyn Romilly, a Black man, was wrongfully detained and handcuffed by Vancouver Police Department (VPD) police officers while out for a morning walk on Vancouver's seawall. Vancouver Mayor Kennedy Stewart, who is also the Chair of the Vancouver Police Board, responded that "such incidents are unacceptable and cannot continue to happen ... I want to say again, all of our institutions are based on colonialism and as such, are systemically racist. This includes the City of Vancouver and the Vancouver Police Department. We must continue to acknowledge this reality and do our best to combat racism—especially in our government institutions." You can read more about Human Rights and policing in British Columbia in BCOHRC's Equity Is Safer report. What do you think "mercy" means, in the context of justice?

- Answers will vary.
- Answers may include recognizing humanity beyond a crime, seeing potential for change, breaking cycles of suffering, restorative justice.

11. How does Just Mercy help readers to see systemic discrimination?

- The specific stories show patterns beyond individual bias—legal rules, policing practices, jury exclusion. It illustrates how discrimination is built into structures and systems.



12. What role should citizens play in defending human rights? What actions could you take to support fairness in your own community?

- Answers will vary.
- Stevenson argues we're "all implicated" when we allow injustice. Answers may include volunteering with legal clinics, supporting local justice reform initiatives, challenging bias when witnessed, discussing systemic injustice with others.

13. The book brings up issues related to children's rights. Do you think poverty and racism play a role when children are tried as adults? Why is it important for children's rights to be respected in the justice system?

- Answers will vary.
- Answers may include that children are a uniquely vulnerable group that require special consideration under the law and how classism and racism can impact which children afforded this special protection under the law.

