

Black History Month Speaker Offers Five Principles for Creating a More Just Future

FEBRUARY 24, 2020

Winston & Strawn's Diversity & Inclusion Committee and Black Lawyers Network affinity group were pleased to present a Black History Month celebration on February 12 featuring [Professor James Forman Jr.](#), Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*.

Director of Diversity & Inclusion [Sylvia James](#) welcomed the 425+ firm members, clients, and alumni who attended or dialed in from across the country along with our special guests from Eleanor Roosevelt High School in New York. She introduced Forman, a former D.C. public defender, founder of a charter school for incarcerated teens, and law professor at Yale, and encouraged everyone to read their complimentary copy of his book.

Forman acknowledged the determined pro bono commitment at the center of Winston's mission and the importance of having programs in the workplace that open up space for conversations about race, justice, and inequality. "Black people have a history of struggle, so in that spirit today I want to talk to you about what it means to struggle for racial justice and how you have to equip yourself to be an effective advocate for justice in these times," he said.



He began with the facts that brought him to become a public defender:

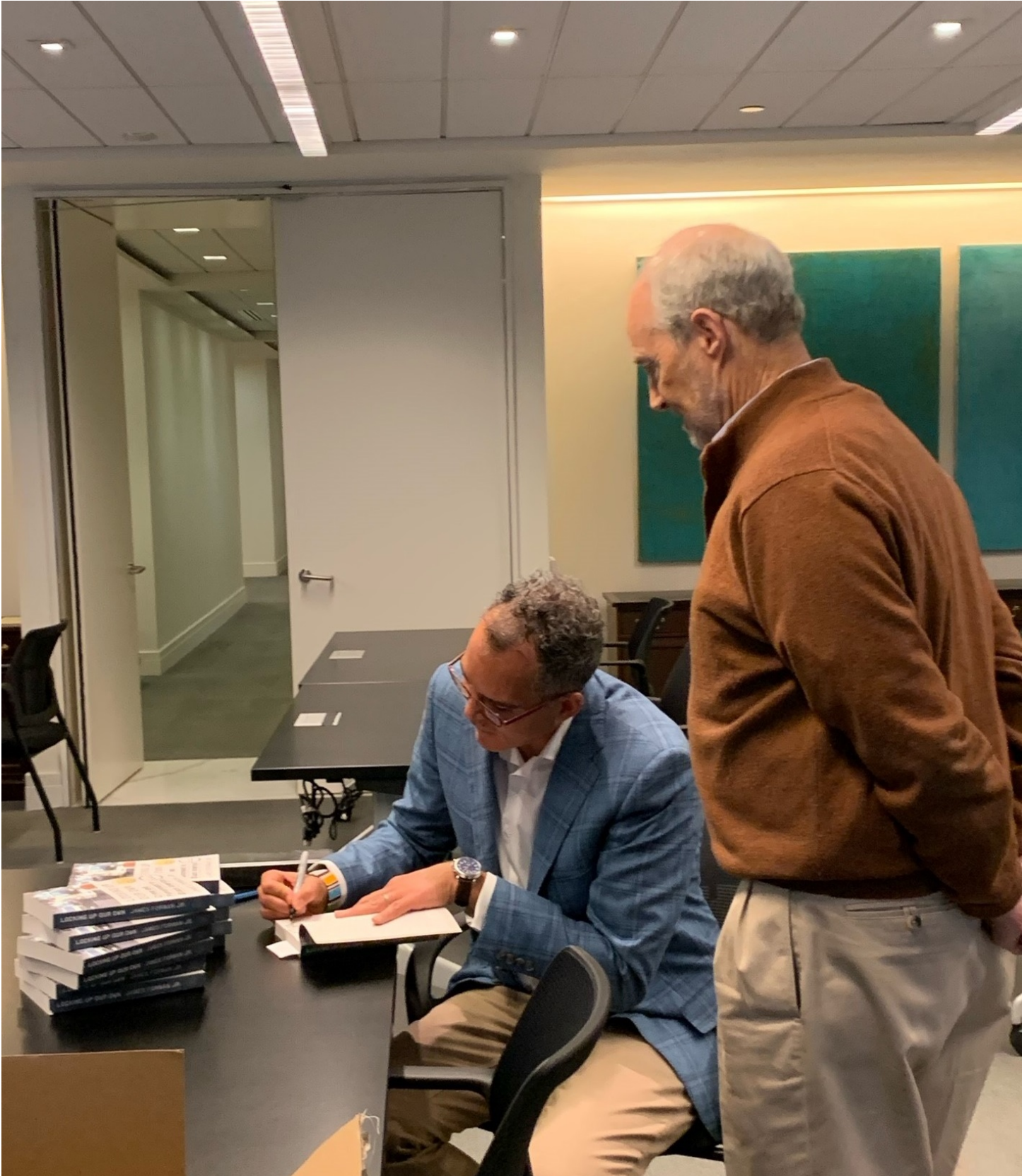
- The United States has 5% of the world's population and 25% of its prisoners.
- We became the world's leader in incarceration in the late 1980s.
- The incarceration rate today is seven times higher than it was 50 years ago.
- One in three black and Latino men will go to prison in their lifetimes.

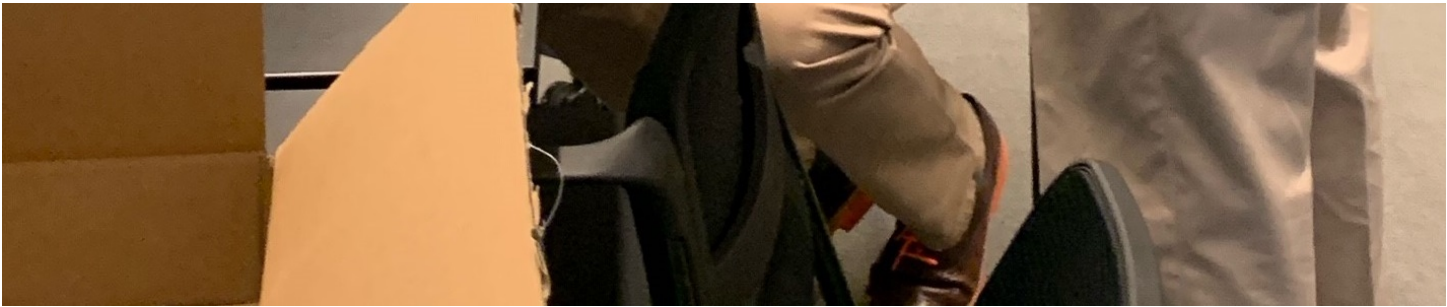
Much of Forman's program focused on what we can do as a community to try to change some of these numbers, and his five principles for those fighting for a more just future.

1. **Never give away your power to make change.** Whether you're an individual standing up for somebody more vulnerable than you or an organization changing policies to address the harsh employment landscape for those who have been incarcerated, you will never regret trying to do something in response to injustice you're seeing.
2. **Live in relationship with communities that have been most directly harmed.** Forman talked about the Inside Out program he started at Yale, and has extended to professors at other universities, in which law students attend class alongside men and women incarcerated in state and federal prison. "There's something so powerful about building relationships between people in prison who are supposed to have no future and students who are supposed to be our future." He noted the many mentoring programs and other opportunities available to anyone who wants to get involved.
3. **Be willing to hear and tell those uncomfortable truths.** "When you hear somebody say 'that's a high crime neighborhood' you may ask 'What kind of people are they?'" Forman said. But when you begin to arm yourself with the truths of slavery and segregation that are part of American history, you'll be prepared to ask a different set of questions: 'What kind of people are we?' and 'What kinds of laws and policies created this inequality?'
4. **Seek allies in unlikely places.** "Today so few people want to talk across difference. We barely encounter people with whom we disagree, and if you say one thing wrong you're cancelled," Forman told attendees. He recalled a

sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in which he talks about listening to his white jailers with an open heart rather than dismissing them as his eternal enemies. “We need to do much more of that if we are ever going to build the lasting coalition needed to dismantle mass incarceration.”

5. **Commit yourself to remaining hopeful.** In the context of his parents’ involvement in the civil rights movement, Forman dispelled the myth that it was popular and everyone participated. “When you’re fighting a seemingly insurmountable injustice, people tell you change is impossible. And if you make the change they told you was impossible, they’ll say it was inevitable.”





In closing, he said “I don’t know the idea out there that is going to truly make a difference in response to our current system of mass incarceration, but I know the people who will bring it to fruition are with us and that we will replace it with a system that truly protects and heals communities.”

This Heritage Month program was part of Winston’s annual series that celebrates the diversity that exists at the firm and helps foster an inclusive work environment. Visit our [Diversity & Inclusion](#) page for more information.

3 Min Read

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