

Alexander, Michelle. (2011). *The new Jim Crow: mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.

When I was a college student in the late 1960's and reading a classic text about social stratification in the U.S., I maintained that racial segregation of African-Americans created a caste system for black people in this country. While the laws that legalized racial segregation and Jim Crow practices have been abolished, Alexander discusses the creation of a New Jim Crow.

Michelle Alexander's extensive research illustrates how a permanent social caste system has been created without defining it on the basis of race. "In the era of color blindness" ...we use our criminal justice system to label black and brown men "criminals". We now discriminate against criminals in the same ways that we discriminated against African-Americans during the era of Jim Crow. When you are labeled a felon, you face discrimination in employment, housing, and denial of the right to vote, the right to serve on a jury and even the right to food stamps.

Michelle Alexander's historic book documented the mass incarceration of black and brown people in the United States. This country has the highest rates of incarceration of any country in the world. Alexander demonstrates that mass incarceration in the U.S. is a system of racial and social control and not crime prevention. Mass incarceration has not been driven by crime rates. Black incarceration rates soared whether crime rates were up or down.

Drug convictions accounted for most of the explosion of the incarceration rates. A drug war was waged on black and brown communities. Those arrested during the "drug war" were generally for possession and "those in state prisons for drug offenses had no history of violence or significant selling activity." Those arrested were not major dealers nor were they arrested for dangerous drugs. 80% of those arrested in the 1990's were for marijuana use.

"Studies show that people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates. If there are significant difference in the surveys..., they frequently suggest that white youth, are more likely to engage in drug crimes than people of color." However, in some states, black men have been imprisoned on drug charges twenty to fifty times greater than white men.

Alexander maintains that nothing short of a social movement will end mass incarceration. This social movement must address the racial divisions that have given rise to mass incarceration. Historically, “poor white and working class whites chose their racial status over their common economic interests with blacks,” which maintained a racial caste system which barely benefited whites but devastated blacks.

Alexander echoes Martin Luther King’s message of building a human rights movement; a movement that would include all people. We would create a society in which all people are valued and have the right to food, housing, health care, and education. We would create a society that values education over incarceration; jobs over jails.

By reading this book, the Bible of the movement to end mass incarceration, group therapists will learn how mass incarceration has maintained this nation’s racial divide and learn about the movement to end this divide.

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