

Dismantling Racism

The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander

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The New Jim Crow is a 2010 book by Michelle Alexander that describes her theory that mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness has resulted in what she calls The New Jim Crow, a new way following the days of slavery and later the Jim Crow laws for white supremacy to maintain its control over the nation's black population.

In Soapstone's Dismantling Racism Book Group, we had a great discussion of the book led by Nichole Cella and Rev. Evelyn Tolliver of First Born Church of Deliverance who has partnered in several programs with us.

Alexander examines the history of racial caste systems in America. Black people were brought to America during the colonial period as a form of cheap labor and placed at the bottom of the racial caste system in slavery. When the civil war ended slavery, southerners created the Jim Crow culture and laws that continued to monitor, regulate and suppress black people. When the civil rights movement of the 1960s put an end to Jim Crow, a new system of control emerged. The War on Drugs used the crack epidemic as a reason for aggressive policing to imprison an enormous number of black and brown people. President Reagan launched the policy in the 1980s and President Clinton made the effort more severe in the 1990s.

Legislative and court actions empowered the police during this time giving them greater discretion in making arrest, outfitting drug units with military gear, and authorizing them to seize assets of persons suspected of drug crimes. Prosecutors pressured offenders into accepting plea bargains and mandatory minimum sentences locked away more people for longer terms. In some states, the impact of these actions resulted in African Americans being 80-90 percent of those sent to prison on drug charges.

The War on Drugs contributed to dramatic increases in the number of people being sent into corrections systems. The Sentencing Project reports 1,842,100 individuals were under Corrections supervision in 1980 and 6,621,600 individuals in 2018. Once they became felons, they found themselves in an undercaste. Rules changed banning felons from federal housing or assistance. Court imposed fees and the criminal justice checks for employment made it difficult to keep afloat financially and avoid being sent back to prison.

Alexander argues many of the policies put in place that dramatically increased imprisonment of black men could be changed, but she notes it will be more important to change the court of public opinion than to roll back rules and legislation. She agrees with Martin Luther King Jr that America will never be a fair or equal country until poor people of all races are no longer oppressed.

In a January 2020 NY Times editorial, Alexander updated the arguments from her book saying, "Everything has changed and nothing has changed." She said the nation's prison and jail population quintupled in 30 years to give the US the highest incarceration rate in the world.

Alexander was surprised that the US would elect a black president and shocked by the backlash that led to Trump's election and his call for mass deportation and wall building. But she does see change.

Activism challenging police violence swept the nation. There has been bipartisan support for prison downsizing and hundreds of millions of philanthropic dollars are supporting criminal justice reform. Restorative and transformative justice movements have taken hold in cities. States are moving to

decriminalize marijuana. She saluted Trump's First Step Act that led to early release of more than 3,000 people from federal prisons for drug offenses.

In our discussions, we had several people overwhelmed with the fact that the War on Drugs had put one in three African Americans under corrections supervision, and that the effect of the War on Drugs policy was so punishing to blacks. We discussed how the hard facts in the book made it difficult to read. We talked about how Alexander had clearly listed on page 220-21 of her book the policies that need to be fixed, but we agreed with her that hearts must change as well as policies.