

The new jim crow: is colorblindness this generation

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



The stability of racism in the United States has changed over centuries of its existence. Instead, racism shifts and molds into often unrecognizable ways that fit seamlessly into the fabric of the American consciousness to make it utterly invisible to the majority of white Americans. In the current era of political thinking, colorblindness, or society's unwillingness to discuss or even recognize race in any way, seems to be the dominant perspective.

Michelle Alexander, in her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* shatters this dominantly held ideology. Alexander, who for many years worked as a civil rights lawyer, uses her vast experience and knowledge concerning the criminal justice system to craft a meticulously researched argument that "colorblindness" is this generation's most important civil rights issue. As the title indicates, she makes the bold claim that mass incarceration is the 21st century version of Jim Crow.

This era in our racial history was one in which brutally devastating laws discriminated and segregated black populations. During Jim Crow, the idea of justice did not exist for black people within law enforcement or court systems. Though her argument is daring, Alexander successfully proves it by analyzing the criminal justice system. She discusses multiple ideas to formulate a case for individuals who are interested in social justice that refocus efforts to tackle the issue of over-populated prisons.

In the book's introduction, Alexander asserts that she is writing for an audience that cares deeply about racial justice, but also, she wants to empower individuals who have an impression that our nation's criminal justice system is flawed, but do not have the data or evidence to back up their assumptions. It is important to note that *The New Jim Crow* does not seek to

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be a full analysis of the ways in which the criminal justice system affects people of color who are not black or how the system affects women of color.

Alexander does acknowledge that the criminal justice system affects women of color, as well as Latinos and certain Asian populations in particularly adverse ways. She was very transparent in stating that her argument only portrays the black struggle with mass incarceration, but does point to the fact that more significant research needs to be done in these other areas. In order to illustrate the theory that mass incarceration is connected to the new Jim Crow, it is necessary to explain the historical structure of racial oppression.

Alexander begins her analysis with slavery, extends through Jim Crow, and ends with the formulation of the War on Drugs in the early 80s. Moving through these eras of racial history, Alexander reveals that each existed to maintain a racial hierarchy, similar to a racial caste system. She depicts the numerous ways in which this racial hierarchy is sustained as each system of oppression is challenged and ultimately ended, but instead of eliminating the racial caste, it transforms into a divergent existence within society.

Following the collapse of these systems, those committed to maintaining the racial hierarchy will find new ways to achieve their goals within the existing social and political structure in place at the time. Alexander makes a particular point that the perpetuation of the racial hierarchy exists because of the fears and vulnerability of low income working class white Americans. Specifically noteworthy is her analysis of the way in which politicians manipulated the anxieties of working class whites who were pitted against working class blacks.

For fear of ending up at the bottom of the social ladder working class whites sacrificed racial solidarity for a position just above blacks on this hierarchy. Politicians such as Ronald Reagan, knowing he could win support playing off of these anxieties, created the War on Drugs to bribe working class whites to vote for him. Exposing these racial bribes, through her assessment of political decisions based on racial biases and media depictions of crime and drugs, is critical to Alexander's overall argument that exploits any criticism that blacks are solely responsible for their position in society.

Her book also focuses more strictly on how the War on Drugs is executed. Alexander clarifies the process of events that occur before blacks are put into prison. Building on her argument she explores that by justifying and creating the so called War on Drugs in communities of color and stating that governmental policies are now funding the proliferation of police presence in these areas. Essentially, the police department has free reign to literally wage war on these communities doing massive drug sweeps, pulling over and searching anyone who they deem could be suspicious of committing a drug crime.

In my own experience, I have seen police search young adult males both black and white that they deemed suspicious of criminal activity. This experience happened to me over the summer when I was going to a concert at the red rocks venue in Morrison, Colorado. Before the concert, people tend to linger around the parking lots tailgating before the concert. I was with a diverse group of friends and was parting with them in the lots before we went into the show. The two friends I came with were male, one white and one black.

Of course before proceeding to the concert both the boys were trying to sell drugs for a little extra cash. Little did they know, there were undercover cops scoping the whole area for people selling illegal substances. The white male was carrying a two pound bag full of pills, while the black male only had five or six pills in his pocket. Needless to say both the boys got caught. I saw the white male hand over the bag full of pills to the police officer and he let him go, while I saw the black boy handcuffed and put into the back of the police officers vehicle.

Alexander points out, " few legal rules meaningfully constrain the police in the War on Drugs" (p. 60). They have a military style arsenal supplied by the FBI and CIA as well as financial incentives provided by the government to round up as many citizens as they can to arrest and throw in prison. The New Jim Crow is so penetrating and ingenious because it brings to the forefront an issue that has long been hidden from social justice agendas. It shows us systematic destruction of black males at the hands of a system that seeks total marginalization and criminalization of their existence.

This work of scholarship provides hope that we can overcome this era of racial destruction. Alexander intends for The New Jim Crow to serve notice to any individual who strives for equity and social justice, but I would also add that this issue is of particular importance to researchers and policy makers who have a significant hand in reform. This book should be required reading for individuals to recognize the systemic and environmental obstacles that all black youth must overcome.