

Literature review: the new jim crow essay sample

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



I must say that I may have been completely wrong about the state of diversity in our country. I have worked in public service for literally my entire working life (30 years) and in public safety for all of it. I have worked in inner city areas and subsidized housing plans. But my opinion has been similar to that of most white Americans; that people of color do not want a hand up, they want a hand out. Not to be derogatory but that's what I concluded based on what I experienced. That minorities, especially African-Americans, were using their race and situation to justify their poor choices. After reading *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander I must admit that my opinion has changed. Ms. Alexander makes a very compelling and radical argument that the mass incarceration of minorities (especially young, black men) is the rebirth of Jim Crow segregation laws; ultimately relegating most people of color to the status of second-class citizens (Alexander, 2010). This injustice has been perpetrated through the very zealous enforcement of drug laws and the War on Drugs campaign, along with a spate of Supreme Court decisions that have endowed the police with greater power and weakened the constitutional protections granted all citizens; especially those protections in the fourth amendment (Alexander, 2010). Ms. Alexander's book is a dynamo of very detailed research and presents convincing evidence to support her arguments.

It is apparent that she has "done her homework". I found the most compelling argument for Ms. Alexander's premise to be her conclusion that the racial inequity that exists within the criminal justice system has created a pattern of "marginalization" of people of color (Alexander, 2010). From law enforcement (for example), who have been given great latitude in New

York City to “ stop and frisk” anyone they deem possessing criminal intent, to the lack of qualified and competent legal aid that is provided to those who cannot afford their own defense; limiting their assertion of their constitutional rights, to the media’s constant portrayal of minorities as criminals feeding the fear of crime and the subtle bigotry that results has changed the practice of racial control from segregation in order to maintain society’s dignity to incarceration to maintain society’s safety (Alexander, 2010). In the process the nation has created the largest system of imprisonment in the world where 1 in 10 black men are in prison, mostly for non-violent drug crimes (Alexander, 2010). The ensuing destruction of their lives along with the lives of their communities, economically and socially, puts barriers to success in place that are near impossible to overcome.

While Ms. Alexander does make a very strong argument for her premise, I found her most troubling argument to be that of the underlying conspiracy by whites, particularly the establishment, against people of color. Ms. Alexander argues that the birth of mass incarceration began in the late 1960’s after the enactment of the Civil Rights Act removed most of the segregational laws in place at the time. According to Alexander, in the search for another method of race control, the establishment sought to allay the fears of rising crime rates with more stringent penalties for violent crime and particularly drug possession; which correlated to the increase in violent crime (Alexander, 2010). This was the path to the future “ war on drugs” and the spark that led to the mass incarceration solution. Forman, in his piece challenging Alexander’s analogy, alleges that the crime rates the FBI was reporting were not, as Alexander alleges, misreported; that the street crime

rate did quadruple in the years from 1959-1971 (Forman, 2012). Forman also counters Alexander's conspiracy argument with the fact that it was black activists who were clamoring most for stiffer punishment for convicted criminals, as a way of trying to improve the deplorable living conditions in the inner city areas (Foreman, 2012).

If black activists were the group most adamant about increasing sentences as a crime deterrent, how could there be a conspiracy? Alexander does make it very clear through her research and facts that our nation has an unnatural and dangerous addiction to imprisonment, especially when it comes to African American males (Alexander, 2010). She also provides very compelling data supporting the fact that the over-incarceration of minority males is leading to the social and economic decline of their communities, inhibiting their ability to recover from imprisonment and increasing the rate of recidivism. Alexander's research also alludes to the chronic issues of inequity and fairness within the American justice system for minorities (Alexander, 2010). She claims that's because the system does not provide adequate resources for proper defense of those who are underserved, laws are not equitably administered and law enforcement has been given too much power under the guise of stricter enforcement; meaning a population already economically and accessibility disadvantaged is further disenfranchised under the context of fighting crime (Alexander, 2010).

Alexander points out that the social ills of mass incarceration and the policies and practices that feed it cannot be remedied until every human is treated with the same dignity and respect. That in order to break the cycle of mass

incarceration, society must remove the color filter and see people of color for who they are; citizens of our nation seeking the same opportunity and access that the Caucasian majority enjoys (Alexander, 2010). The New Jim Crow has started the discussion about the status of people of color in our nation and evaluated the inequities they face in from a different direction; one that very few were aware of prior to its publication. Alexander has shown through her research that there is, without question, a set of factors that are slowly creating a subordinate class within our society that is not labeled black or white, it is simply known as criminals. These humans, for whatever reason or circumstance are viewed as disposable by the establishment; unworthy of the rights that everyone else enjoys and that much of this is the result of the legal system and the government working to reduce crime by increasing the sentences of convicted criminals; creating a literal bird cage around them preventing escape.

The sad part is that overwhelmingly, evidence shows that the majority of these criminals are young males of color in the 14-21 year old age range (Alexander, 2010). Alexander suggests that the remedy to the problem of racial injustice and mass incarceration is not one of a "civil rights" movement but of a "human rights" movement (Alexander, 2010). She argues that even those of the Caucasian race have suffered ills along with people of color. Perhaps not to the same extent, but there is suffering nonetheless. She argues that we all must sacrifice our "racial bribes" and work toward access and equality for all if the chain of control is going to be broken (Alexander, 2010). Alexander's work has been considered groundbreaking and has inspired many to heed the call to action she pleads

for in her piece. One such initiative that has resulted because of her work is the Campaign to End the New Jim Crow (CENJC). This initiative was formed in Harlem, New York during October of 2011 and is a coalition of several racial injustice prevention groups. The group's mission is to raise awareness and about mass incarceration and institutional racism, with the goal of building a grassroots, bottom-up movement that challenges the racist ideologies that have helped produce these conditions (CENJC, 2014).

The groups vision is to foster a " movement that is committed to ending mass incarceration entirely and to push for a fundamental shift from a punitive model to a healing and transformative model of justice—a model that does not criminalize people for public health problems like drug addiction and does not criminalize poverty" (CENJC, 2014). Since it's beginning, the group has developed and implemented several outreach programs, committed to advocacy and uncovered numerous incidents of racial injustice within the local area, pursuing their investigation and demanding responsibility (CENJC, 2014). While there is much work to do, the CENJC is collaborating with similar groups throughout the country to address and remedy the disease of mass incarceration and racial justice inequity.

Alexander makes a very compelling argument in her work *The New Jim Crow*. She has identified and brought the light of public awareness to a deplorable social ill that more than just inequity for people of color.

She would argue that it is a wake up call for all people that the establishment desires to create a society where a caste system builds a moat around those who have and those who have not. I fell that while it is a very convincing

argument and there is certainly enough data to support the claim of mass incarceration, I am having trouble buying the conspiracy hypothesis. It is no secret that the “ War on Drugs” has led to a dramatic surge in the prison population, but so have many other crime fighting initiatives, specifically the “ three strikes” laws. It is also no secret that the “ War on Poverty”, brought to life by LBJ in the sixties, has led to little change in the living standards of our nation’s poor, despite having thrown billions of dollars and numerous legislative pieces at the problem. If we are going to solve the issue of racial inequity in our country we must learn that we cannot simply legislate, incarcerate or financially inflate our problems away. If we are truly committed to social and racial justice and equity we must educate, tolerate and communicate. Lest we all end up segregated.

References:

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