The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness

BY MICHELLE ALEXANDER

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A 2010 Silver medalist at the Independent Publisher Book Awards, The New Jim Crow frighteningly demonstrates that “we have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.”

The United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, and no other country incarcerates as many of its racial minorities. The U.S. incarcerates a higher percentage of Blacks than South Africa did during the height of apartheid.

Alexander dispels two major myths that sustain the scandal of mass incarceration:

1) The War of Drugs was intended to get rid of the kingpins of drug distribution; and
2) The War on Drugs was primarily concerned with the most dangerous drugs.

Neither is true. President Reagan’s War on Drugs initiated a new era of “unprecedented punitiveness.” Between 1980 and 2000, the number of people incarcerated increased from roughly 300,000 to over two million. The vast majority of these have been for nonviolent minor offenses.

Contrary to popular perception, the majority of drug users in the U.S. are white, yet seventy-five percent of people imprisoned for drug offenses are Black or Latino.

Even more startling were the results of a 1995 Drug Survey question that asked “Would you close your eyes for a second and envision a drug user and describe that person to me?” Ninety-five percent of respondents pictured a Black drug user, even though African Americans constitute only 15 percent and whites the vast majority of drug users.

An ideology of “colorblindness” masks a deeper reality: U.S. society is content with a drug war that defines the enemy racially.

Imagine that white middle class neighborhoods throughout the nation are subjected to SWAT Team searches that result in indiscriminate seizures of property, arrests and jail for innocents, and even death of innocent people due to the indiscriminate use of force. Outrage at government and scandal would ensue.

Although criminologists have documented at least 780 flawed paramilitary raids, including some that have resulted in deaths of innocents, there is no public outrage.

Discrimination occurs at every step in the process, from whom to stop, where to stop, whom to arrest, whom to sentence, and whom to imprison and disenfranchise.

Although the U.S. Supreme Court is one branch charged with the responsibility of protecting minorities from the excesses of majoritarian democracy, the Court adopted rules that maximize—not minimize—the amount of racial discrimination that would occur in the War on Drugs.

Adding insult to injury, the Court also has insured that people of color will not face a jury of their peers and will have no recourse to challenge discrimination at any point in the system.

Developing a vision that unites the interests of impoverished whites with people of color, Alexander calls for a new social justice movement that advocates for “All of Us or None of Us,” as traditional forms of civil rights litigation and policy reform have failed. That is a vision of faith and citizenship worth giving one’s life for; indeed, nothing less will suffice.