

Michelle Alexander Readings

Our main reading for understanding Michelle Alexander's perspective on mass incarceration was "Schools and the New Jim Crow: An Interview with Michelle Alexander," by Jody Sokolower, in the winter 2011-12 issue of *Rethinking Schools*: rethinkingschools.org/archive/26_02/26_02_sokolower.shtml

We augmented that with the following excerpts from Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (The New Press, 2011):

In less than thirty years, the U.S. penal population exploded from around 300,000 to more than 2 million, with drug convictions [due to the so-called 'war on drugs' that began in the 1980s] accounting for the majority of the increase. The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, dwarfing the rates of nearly every developed country, even surpassing those in highly repressive regimes like Russia, China, and Iran. In Germany, 93 people are in prison for every 100,000 adults and children. In the United States, the rate is roughly eight times that, or 750 per 100,000. The racial dimension of mass incarceration is its most striking feature. No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. In Washington, D.C., our nation's capitol, it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison. Similar rates of incarceration can be found in black communities across America. . . .

The term **mass incarceration** refers not only to the criminal justice system but also to the larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those labeled criminals both in and out of prison. . . . What is completely missed in the rare public debates today about the plight of African Americans is that a huge percentage of them are not free to move up at all. It is not just that they lack opportunity, attend poor schools, or are plagued by poverty. They are barred by law from doing so. . . . It does not matter whether you have actually spent time in prison; your second-class citizenship begins the moment you are branded a felon. Most people branded felons, in fact, are not sentenced to prison. As of 2008, there were approximately 2.3 million people in prisons and jails, and a staggering 5.1 million people under 'community correctional supervision'—i.e., on probation or parole. . . . It is the badge of inferiority—the felony record—that relegates people for their entire lives, to second-class status. For drug felons, there is little hope of escape. Barred from public housing by law, discriminated against by private landlords, ineligible for food stamps, forced to 'check the box' indicating a felony conviction on employment applications for nearly every job, and denied licenses for a wide range of professions, people whose only crime is drug addiction or possession of a small amount of drugs for recreational use find themselves locked out of the mainstream society and economy—permanently. . . .

In October 1982, President Reagan officially announced his administration's War on Drugs. At the time he declared this new war, less than 2 percent of the American public viewed drugs as the most important issue facing the nation. . . . Practically overnight the budgets of federal law enforcement agencies soared. Between 1980 and 1984, FBI antidrug funding increased from \$8 million to \$95 million. Department of Defense antidrug funding increased from \$33 million in 1981 to \$1,042 million in 1991. During that same period, DEA antidrug spending grew from \$86 to \$1,026 million, and FBI antidrug funding grew from \$38 to \$181 million. By contrast, funding for agencies

responsible for drug treatment, prevention, and education was dramatically reduced. The budget of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, for example, was reduced from \$274 million to \$57 million from 1981 to 1984, and antidrug funds allocated to the Department of Education were cut from \$14 million to \$3 million. . . . In August 1989, President Bush characterized drug use as ‘the most pressing problem facing the nation.’ Shortly thereafter, a New York Times/CBS News Poll reported that 64 percent of those polled—the highest percentage ever recorded—now thought that drugs were the most significant problem in the United States. This surge of public concern did not correspond to a dramatic shift in illegal drug activity. . . .

The Reagan administration launched a media offensive to justify the War on Drugs. Central to the media campaign was an effort to sensationalize the emergence of crack cocaine in inner-city neighborhoods—communities devastated by deindustrialization [loss of factory and manufacturing jobs] and skyrocketing unemployment. . . . No one should ever attempt to minimize the harm caused by crack cocaine and the related violence [which leave] behind unspeakable devastation and suffering. As a nation, though, we had a choice about how to respond. . . . Numerous paths were available to us, as a nation, in the wake of the crack crisis, yet for reasons traceable largely to racial politics and fear mongering we chose war on an ‘enemy’ that had been racially defined years before. . . . These stark racial disparities [in who has been imprisoned in the drug war] cannot be explained by rates of drug crime. Studies show that people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates. If there are significant differences in the surveys to be found, they frequently suggest that whites, particularly white youth, are more likely to engage in drug crime than people of color. . . . From the outset, the drug war could have been waged primarily in overwhelmingly white suburbs or on college campuses. SWAT teams could have rappelled from helicopters in gated suburban communities and raided the homes of high school lacrosse players known for hosting coke and ecstasy parties after their games. Suburban homemakers could have been placed under surveillance and subjected to undercover operations designed to catch them violating laws regulating the use and sale of prescription ‘uppers.’ All of this could have happened as a matter of routine in white communities, but it did not. Instead, when police go looking for drugs, they look in the ‘hood.