

A Study Guide for
The New Jim Crow
By Michelle Alexander
Prepared by Pamela Wood and the Riverside Church
Prison Ministry Study Group

We invite you to register your study group at

www.newjimcrow.org

So that we can work together on issues and projects

Information on our webpage:

“What Are We Doing?”

(a space to share activities and invite shared action)

and

“Life Experiences”

(a space to share the impact of the “New Jim Crow” on our lives)

Forming a Book Group to discuss The New Jim Crow, by Michelle Alexander

Why study this book group? It helps answer important questions and a discussion may bring out information and new points of view:

1. Why does the United States have the highest rate of incarceration in the world?
2. It costs \$55,000 a year to incarcerate a person for a year in NY State. Is this the way we want our society to allocate its resources?
3. Why are more African American males under the control of the criminal justice system now than were enslaved in 1850?
4. What Supreme Court decisions have eviscerated the 4th amendment, which protects us from search and seizure?
5. Why did the War on Drugs not make you safer?

Assembling a group

1. A group of 12 to 18 people is a good number to aim for.
2. A diverse group will stimulate discussion and offer different points of view. This might be achieved by combining 2 churches, a church and a community group, 2 different colleges or universities, for example.
3. It is helpful to have a space where people can see one another as they speak, a circle or a square rather than rows.

Running the group

1. Each meeting should have a facilitator. The job can be rotated or the same person may lead the group throughout.
2. It may be helpful to have the group generate the guidelines for discussion.
3. A minimum of 4 meetings is needed to fully discuss the topics, but 5 meetings would seem to us to be optimal, the last two devoted to Chapter 6 and future actions.
4. Aim for a meeting no more than 2 hours in length. People tend to lose focus after that time span.
5. To begin discussion, several techniques might be helpful.
 - a. Have people read a short passage from the book that struck them as important with no comment. This may help people who are shy feel more comfortable about participating. It is important to be sensitive to the possibility that all members of the group may not have strong reading skills.
 - b. Have people read some passages that seemed important to them but limit discussion to a half hour of the allotted time.
6. During discussions it is important to encourage the participation of all members of the group.
 - a. Call on people in turn, with the facilitator letting people know the goal is to maximize participation.
 - b. With the agreement of the group, it may be helpful to have a time limit for responses to questions. 3 minutes is a reasonable time limit. The timekeeper should not be the facilitator.

Supplementary materials

Google YouTube Michelle Alexander at BCCC. She gives an overall summary of key points in her book. There are several other You Tube videos as well.

www.sentencingproject.org gives statistics on incarceration and the imprisonment ratios of Blacks to Whites and Hispanics to Whites for each state in the U.S.

www.cepr.net/documents/publications/incarceration-2010-06.pdf is an article discussing the need for change in the prison system. There are excellent charts within the article and comparisons made between the U.S. and other countries in the world.

www.drugpolicy.org/news/pressroom/pressreleases/pr021011.cfm “2010 NYC Marijuana Arrest Numbers Released” This article is a specific example of the use of stop and frisk impacts communities of color.

www.c-spanvideo.org/program/ByAn A description of the Old Jim Crow, 73 minutes Private prisons are present in the majority of states in the U.S. They have had an impact on mass incarceration that is important for the public to understand.

www.globalsearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=8289 “The Prison Industry in the United States: Big Business or a New Form of Slavery,” by Vicky Pelaez, El Diario-La Prensa

www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyid=130833741 “Prison Economics Help Drive Arizona Immigration Law”

www.correctionsproject.com/corrections/pris_priv.htm “Private Prisons Are Back.” This article helps to make the connection between the old Jim Crow and the New.

The New Jim Crow: Study Questions for Introduction and Chapter 1

The questions are divided into questions that focus on the content of the book and discussion questions. Not all issues presented in the Introduction are followed up by questions because later chapters deal with the material in more depth. As you read, it may be helpful to keep a list of rights to which people convicted of drug and other crimes no longer have access.

Content Questions

1. What is Michelle Alexander’s main idea as expressed in the Introduction?
2. What is the rate of incarceration in the US and how does it compare to other countries?
3. What facts about drug use are important when assessing the timing of the War on Drugs?
4. What factors undermined the “Old” Jim Crow system?
5. How does Michelle Alexander assess the impact of the Clinton Presidency on African Americans?
6. What changes were taking place in the African American community and other communities of color that made them particularly vulnerable to the War on Drugs?

Helpful Terms, Concepts to Know

Racialized Caste System

Racial Bribe

Reconstruction

Discussion Questions

1. What reasons would you have for deciding that the increase in the rate of incarceration reflects the racism in US society?
2. Why have Civil Rights organizations not focused on or have been slow to focus on the issue of racial justice?
3. What strategies have wealthier whites used to divide poor whites from African Americans in the past and in the present?
4. “The current system of control depends on black exceptionalism; it is not disproved or undermined by it.” (p. 14) Do you agree or disagree?

The New Jim Crow: Study Questions for Chapters 2 & 3

Content Questions

1. What are the myths and assumptions does the general public believe about the criminal justice system?
2. How have the courts weakened the Fourth Amendment since 1982? Both chapters describe important decisions. It would be a good idea to have a list of specific decisions. We might find them useful in future discussions.
3. What are the problems with pretextual traffic stops? Especially with regard to Operation Pipeline?
4. Why do police departments in the various states prioritize drug arrests?
5. Both the police and prosecutors have a great deal of discretion in their roles. How has this discretion been used?
6. In what ways is jury selection biased?

Helpful Terms/Concepts to Know

“War on Drugs”

14th Amendment to the Constitution

Mandatory minimum sentence

Pretext stops

Consent searches

Racial profiling

McKlesky vs Kemp

Alexander vs Sandoval

Purkett vs Elm

Discussion Questions

1. What has been the role of the Supreme Court in addressing racial bias since the beginning of the Drug War?
2. Compare the “Old Jim Crow” system to the “New Jim Crow” system. What similarities? What differences? Purposes? Methods?
3. What do we feel is a reasonable response to those in possession of drugs currently defined as illegal? To those currently selling drugs that are currently defined as illegal?

The New Jim Crow, Study Questions for Chapters 4 & 5

Content Questions

1. What rights may be taken away as a result of a felony conviction?
2. What are the effects of mass incarceration on the communities which have high incarceration rates ?
3. How does Michelle Alexander interpret the development of “gangsta culture?”

Helpful Terms/Concepts to Know

Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988

Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1978

Housing & Urban Development’ “One Strike Guide.”

Debt bondage

Invisible punishment

Racial indifference

Political disenfranchisement

Discussion Questions

1. What are the similarities and differences between the “old” and “new” Jim Crow? What differences would be important to take into account when organizing a movement?
2. Alexander summarizes the social meaning of slavery as exploitation, Jim Crow as subordination and Mass Incarceration as marginalization. Does this seem to be an accurate summary and if so, how can marginalization be addressed?
3. How might the social silence around incarceration affect a movement for change? What factors does Alexander feel have caused Americans to deny the fact of mass incarceration of people of color? In what ways might a movement for change want to address them?

The New Jim Crow, Study Questions for Chapter 6

Content Questions

1. Why does the success in changing the charges against the Jena 6 not apply to the New Jim Crow?
2. Why have the civil rights organizations been slow to acknowledge the New Jim Crow?
3. What are the problems Michelle Alexander sees with the emphasis of the Civil Rights Movement on affirmative action?
4. What aspects of the Drug War does Michelle Alexander say must be dismantled?
5. Why does Michelle Alexander believe that conventional strategies for change will not work?

Helpful Terms/Concepts to Know

Jena 6

Black Exceptionalism

Affirmative Action

Discussion Questions

1. Do we agree that that colorblindness is part of the problem? If so, how can this be addressed?
2. What are our thoughts about Alexander's idea of no longer pursuing affirmative action?
3. Why does Alexander believe that when building a movement the focus should shift from Civil Rights to Human Rights?
4. What kinds of strategies can be effective in including all, especially poor whites?
5. Is punishment the best or necessary response to crime?
6. How do we change the power structure?
7. What prevents justice from being administered equally and fairly in the United States?
8. How do we engage people in promoting change whose interests are not so immediately involved in dismantling the system of mass incarceration?