

Course Essay: The New Jim Crow

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The New Jim Crow: Unveiling Racial Injustices in America's Criminal Justice System

Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* is a groundbreaking examination of the deeply rooted racial biases within the American criminal justice system. Published in 2010, this controversial work has been both praised for shedding light on the covert continuation of racial segregation through the War on Drugs and mass incarceration and challenged and banned for its provocative perspective. The book was met with considerable acclaim and debate, notably facing censorship in North Carolina and Florida, where it was once prohibited for over 130,000 incarcerated individuals. In this essay, I will introduce the book, provide a brief summary, evaluate its main topics, discuss a significant context in which it was challenged, and assess the motivations behind such challenges. Furthermore, I will consider whether any restrictions should be imposed on this thought-provoking book.

The New Jim Crow was authored by Michelle Alexander and first published in 2010. It takes a critical look at how the War on Drugs has evolved into a tool for racialized social control in the United States. The book argues that the system of mass incarceration operates with remarkable efficiency to disproportionately affect people of color, relegating them to second-class status, much like the Jim Crow laws did in the South after the Civil War. Alexander argues

that this system is sustained by racial discrimination in law enforcement and sentencing, leading to disproportionately high rates of incarceration among African Americans.

In *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander two main themes take center stage: mass incarceration and systemic racism. Alexander describes the covert mechanisms of racial control that permeate modern American society. The book meticulously dissects the system of mass incarceration, making a compelling argument that it operates with remarkable efficiency to sweep people of color off the streets, confine them within the confines of prisons, and subsequently release them into an inferior second-class status (Alexander 115). Alexander intends to expose the hidden biases within the criminal justice system and prompt readers to confront uncomfortable truths about systemic racism; furthermore, Alexander's observations are incisive, noting the paradox of a country that prides itself on equality while maintaining a racially discriminatory justice system. She does not shy away from taking a firm position against these practices, advocating for reevaluating our approach to crime and punishment. The book acts as a wakeup call to reexamine the country's approach to crime and punishment, especially regarding racial equity.

In addition, *The New Jim Crow* delves into the persistence of systemic racism within the criminal justice system, even in the post-Civil Rights era. For example, she highlights how the "War on Drugs" disproportionately targets Black and Brown individuals, leading to their overrepresentation in prisons. Alexander argues that the system perpetuates racial discrimination through various policies and practices. Her position is supported by data and real-life stories that illustrate the impact of systemic racism. For instance, she provides compelling narratives of individuals affected by mass incarceration, making the systemic issues emotionally resonant. Alexander addresses essential questions about racial bias within the criminal justice system,

sparking critical reflection on their worthiness. It challenges readers to confront the uncomfortable realities of systemic racism and to actively seek justice (Alexander 221). Alexander addresses mass incarceration and its disproportionate impact on communities of color. She provides evidence of racial disparities in arrest rates, sentencing, and post-release consequences; furthermore, she takes a clear position that mass incarceration perpetuates racial inequality, effectively creating a racial caste system.

The New Jim Crow is highly effective in presenting its topics and positions. Alexander combines meticulous research with compelling personal narratives to make her arguments emotionally resonant and thought-provoking. The book's chronological organization helps readers understand the historical context and the evolution of racial control mechanisms in the United States. While it excels in highlighting the problems of mass incarceration and systemic racism, it could benefit from a more explicit roadmap for solutions to enhance its persuasiveness.

The challenge to *The New Jim Crow* in North Carolina and Florida prisons exemplifies the controversy it stirred. As our readings have mentioned, there was a time when: “more than 130,000 adults in prison in North Carolina and Florida, the book is strictly off-limits.” (Bromwich 1) This ban was enforced as part of a broader policy regulating inmates' access to specific literature. Officially, the restriction might have been justified on the grounds of maintaining order and preventing unrest, but it also hinted at an underlying discomfort with the book's bold critique of systemic racism within the criminal justice system. The impact of such a ban was profound – it not only deprived inmates of a crucial educational resource but also stifled an essential dialogue on race and justice within these facilities. This act of censorship in environments that are already isolated from societal discourse posed a significant obstacle to the

rehabilitation and reintegration of inmates. It also reflected a broader reluctance to acknowledge and address systemic societal issues.

While the concerns for security and order in prisons are understandable, suppressing materials that promote critical thinking and societal engagement seems counterproductive to the goals of justice and rehabilitation—as we have covered extensively in our class discussions. Fortunately, this ban was eventually lifted, a decision that likely mirrors a changing attitude towards race and criminal justice reform issues. By initially restricting and later allowing access to such literature, these episodes serve as critical case studies in the ongoing debate between maintaining institutional order and upholding the rights to education and information, especially in correctional settings.

Given the depth and significance of its examination of systemic racial issues in the criminal justice system, imposing restrictions on *The New Jim Crow* is not only counterproductive but also a disservice to public discourse. The book offers an essential perspective on the enduring legacy of racial inequality in America, serving as a vital educational tool for understanding and addressing these deep-seated issues. Limiting access to such an enlightening work undermines the collective effort to foster an informed and empathetic society. Furthermore, censoring this book contradicts the fundamental values of freedom of speech and the right to information, which are cornerstones of a democratic society. In hindering open access to Alexander's critical insights, we risk perpetuating ignorance and inaction in the face of systemic injustice.

In conclusion, Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* is a powerful exploration of racial biases within the American criminal justice system. While it has faced challenges and

criticisms, it remains a significant contribution to the ongoing dialogue on racial justice. It prompts readers to confront uncomfortable truths about systemic racism and encourages critical examination of societal constructs. Rather than imposing restrictions, we should engage in open discussions to address the issues raised in the book and work towards a more just and equitable society.

Works Cited

Alexander, Michelle, and Cornel West. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Revised edition, New Press, 2012.

Bromwich, Jonah Engel. *Why Are American Prisons So Afraid of This Book?*