

The New Jim Crow Virtual Book Study and Discussion

Chapters 2 and 3

1. *Main Myths*

Many Americans are stunned to learn the facts about mass incarceration. Even in the hardest hit communities, people often blame themselves (or their children) for staggering arrest and incarceration rates. Many believe that mass incarceration can be explained simply by “bad choices”, but do not realize that kids on the other side of town are also using and selling drugs, and making bad choices, without having to pay for such mistakes for the rest of their lives. **Did you believe any of the main myths that rationalized mass incarceration before you read *The New Jim Crow*? To what extent is consciousness-raising about these myths necessary in order to create an environment in which people are willing to challenge misinformation and the status quo?**

2. *Mainstream Media*

At the beginning of Chapter 2, Alexander states that the way the criminal justice system actually functions is vastly different from the way it is advertised in the mainstream media through shows like *Law and Order*. **How does the mainstream media portray our criminal justice system? How are “criminals” depicted? What voices are most frequently heard in news coverage of crime? What voices are missing? What are the images, ideas, and messages that have influenced your beliefs and attitude about our criminal justice system? What about the beliefs and attitude of the public at large?**

3. *License to Discriminate*

Chapter 3 explains that the U.S. Supreme Court has made it virtually impossible to challenge racial bias in the courts at any stage of the criminal justice process, from stops and searches, to plea bargaining and sentencing. In some ways, this situation is reminiscent of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which embraced the “separate but equal” doctrine and protected the old Jim

Crow regime from legal challenge. **What can be done to expose and challenge racial bias in the system if the Supreme Court won't address it? Can the strategies of earlier movements be a guide, or are new approaches necessary?**

4. *Police Power*

The Supreme Court has eviscerated constitutional protections against unreasonable searches and seizures, effectively giving the police license to stop and search anyone, anywhere, at any time. **Did you know the law had changed in this way? Have you ever been a victim of a stop and search by the police on the street or in your vehicle? How many times? What did it feel like? If you have never experienced it, why do you think that is?**

5. *Who benefits from the War on Drugs?*

Alexander notes that many law enforcement officials—including conservatives—were not eager to jump on board with the War on Drugs, because local communities were more concerned about serious crimes such as murder, rape, and robbery. The Reagan administration overcame this initial resistance by offering millions of dollars to state and local law enforcement agencies that would boost the sheer numbers of drug arrests. It became a numbers game driven by cash. Alexander writes:

“Every system of control depends on the tangible and intangible benefits that are provided to those responsible for the system’s maintenance and administration. This system is no exception.”(*New Jim Crow*, p. 72).

What are some of the other benefits, besides cash, that this system provides to those who support it? Who benefits from the system as is, and who is harmed? Would changing the financial incentives be enough to end the system? Why or why not?