

The New Jim Crow Virtual Book Study and Discussion

Introduction and Chapter 1

1. *Initial Reaction*

When you first opened *The New Jim Crow*, what beliefs about race, racial progress, and our criminal justice system did you hold? Were you inclined to believe the claim that mass incarceration is “a new Jim Crow”? What biases, stereotypes, or assumptions might influence your thinking about issues explored in this book? What life experiences have shaped your views?

2. *Meaning of Caste*

The New Jim Crow describes the system of mass incarceration as a “caste” system. It calls attention to the fact that the millions of people labeled as “felons” or “criminals” are barred by law from mainstream society. Like Jim Crow (and slavery), mass incarceration acts as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race. **How do you feel about describing mass incarceration as a caste system? What might it mean for a nation to be home to a caste-like system claiming democracy as its foundation?**

3. *How Close to Home?*

Are you, or is anyone you know locked in a second-class status described here—unable to vote or legally discriminated against in employment, housing education, or access to public benefits? What do you know personally about the struggles of those who are part of the undercaste?

4. *Racial Bribes*

In chapter one, the “divide and conquer” political tactics that helped birth slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration are explored in detail. Alexander argues that poor whites have repeatedly been offered, “racial bribes”, that is special, largely superficial privileges have been extended to poor whites

in an effort to drive a wedge between them and poor blacks. **When you read this chapter, was any of the history new to you? Do you see similar “divide and conquer” dynamics at work today? Is the “get tough” movement aimed at those labeled “illegal immigrants” an example of racial bribes in action—i.e., promising to crack down on racial and ethnic minorities and denying them basic human rights, while failing to improve the status of poor whites by much?**

5. *Is Beloved Community Possible?*

Do you believe that Dr. King’s vision of a beloved community can be realized in the United States? How do your feelings on this subject impact how you relate to the call to end mass incarceration and our nation’s cycle of cast?