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New Jim Crow

On MLK Day, Fresh Air hit a home run by interviewing Michelle Alexander. Her "The New Jim Crow" is continuing to garner press after its publication. This is good, because the issue is critical for our democracy and MLK's legacy of equality. The mechanism of the old Jim Crow was the legal, political and economic laws that allowed for White elites to keep racial minorities second class citizens.

The new Jim Crow is the ways in which the war on Drugs has criminalized half the working age male population in racial minority communities. The fact of felonization of the population, combined with legal political and economic discrimination against those with felonies has created a new caste at the bottom of our society.

She highlights how the War on Drugs was promoted by Reagan's Administration as a continuation of the southern strategy of Nixon racializing public policy to gain working class white votes. The result has been a 80% increase in prison population (from 1970s to the present), boom in prison employment in largely working class white communities. Politicians found it hard to resist the no down side appeal of tough on crime propaganda.

This prison population was not representative of the countries criminal actors. All studies show that all classes and races are criminal at about the same rates. Those going to prison were largely racial minorities and poor of all races. The targets of the war on drugs was racially defined. While all races and classes use drugs, the militarized police actions target exclusively poor and racial minorities. While they claim to be only going after the worst of the worst. The results of their arrests are clearly pulling in young, small time, occasional uses from poor and minority neighborhoods. When was the last time you saw a swat team crash the frat house on homecoming?

After criminalizing a large marginal group of drug users in particular neighborhood, felons are faced with a host of obstacles designed to prevent their reintroduction into society. These legal obstacles created by the same tough on crime politicians. felons can't vote, live in subsidized housing, receive food assistance, employers are encouraged to discriminate against them. So when half the population of a neighborhood cannot get a job, food to eat or place to stay, politicians wonder why the neighborhood is not a healthy social and economic community.

Alexander rightly calls for a social movement which will stop the felonization of a majority of poor and minority youth. Politicians will continue to play the fear card and push militarization of our neighborhoods in the US like they have for Iraq and Afghanistan. We have to force them to change course. We need develop alternatives to prison for the majority of our non-violent offenders. We need to work to assist ex prisoners to reintegrate into our society. We need to change our laws so that non-violent criminals are allowed to be equal in citizenship to other on society.

With the death of Derrick Bell (great civil rights law professor), I can see Michelle Alexander taking over his place as the dean of radical law voice. I hope the New Jim Crow, becomes a cult classic not only in law schools across the country, but in the local activist community. MLK's dream will have to run through the demilitarization of the Criminal Industrial Complex. We cannot win this by more swat sweeps. We can only win this by treating criminals as human beings and expecting they treat us as human beings. It is our responsibility to set an example for human behavior. At present, society has created people and communities that are second class citizens. That is a criminal violent act by us - through the U.S. government. We cannot expect others to act humanely if society acts criminally.

Mindful prisoner