



Introduction to the Teacher's Guide

In many ways, this is a dream come true. I have long hoped that a set of materials would be created that would support high school teachers who want to explore the myriad issues surrounding race and justice in our society, and who hope to use my book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, as a resource. I am thrilled that Teaching Tolerance has created *The New Jim Crow* curriculum, specifically designed for students in grades 9-12.

When I completed the manuscript for the book, I had little expectation that it would become a national bestseller. The book's main argument—that the stunning, unprecedented rise in U.S. incarceration during the past 30 years marked the birth of a new system of racial and social control reminiscent in many respects of Jim Crow segregation—was controversial, particularly coming on the heels of our nation electing its first black president. In the book, I challenged readers to think about mass incarceration as a human rights crisis rooted primarily in our unresolved racial divisions, anxieties, resentments and stereotypes rather than crime or crime rates. I documented the ways in which our legal system works to create and perpetuate racial disadvantage, and I encouraged readers to view those labeled “felons” and “criminals” as human beings worthy of basic civil and human rights. The book urged everyone—young and old, in communities of all colors and classes—to think and talk about the role of race in structuring life experience in the hopes that eventually we might become a more compassionate society, one that values the dignity and humanity of all people of all colors.

The response has been overwhelming. Policymakers, judges, academics, faith groups of all religions and denominations, prisoners and their families, formerly incarcerated people, youth groups and community people of all races and classes have organized study groups and forums to discuss not only the book and the crisis of mass incarceration, but also our nation's goals, hopes, and aspirations as a multicultural, multiracial society.

Most encouraging has been the response of students and teachers. Almost immediately after the book was released, I began receiving phone calls and emails from teachers across the country urging me to create curricular materials that would help them to translate the ideas and questions raised in *The New Jim Crow* for an audience of high school students. Many teachers working in schools in impoverished neighborhoods saw first-hand how the criminal justice system was undermining the life prospects of their students. They felt the book could help young people in their schools put into historical context the seamless web of laws and policies that have trapped so many of their peers, parents and relatives, as they cycle in and out of prison and live under perpetual criminal justice control or police surveillance. Other teachers in more affluent schools said they believed the book could help their students better appreciate the experiences and perspectives of people of color, as

well as the origins of their own stereotypes, biases and assumptions. A common refrain was that the book provided a rare opportunity for students to grapple with the contemporary dynamics of racial privilege and discrimination.

Today our children receive little meaningful education about race and its continuing role in our society. Too often students feel discouraged from discussing race in the classroom, for fear of saying the wrong thing, and too often teachers are not well equipped to deal with racial issues when they surface. Students are typically taught that severe racial inequality is a thing of the past and that now we are in a new age where race discrimination is illegal and no longer tolerated. Racism itself is often described as simply hate or conscious prejudice. This misleading portrayal of race and racism in our society limits young people's capacity to understand the modern-day relevance of our racial history and how unconscious bias and stereotyping influence all of us. It also makes it difficult for young people to understand how and why so many institutions in our society produce severe discriminatory effects—even though few politicians or policymakers today utter racial epithets or would consider themselves racially prejudiced.

If we are ever going to overcome racial inequality in the United States, we first have to be able to talk about it, describe it and know what it is. Unlike the old Jim Crow, there are no signs alerting younger generations to the existence of racial bias. The “Whites Only” signs are gone, and it's easy today to be lulled into a belief that some people are at the bottom simply because they don't work hard or are prone to crime.

It is critical for us, as educators, to rethink how we teach civil rights in our schools. We must learn to frame it as part of an ongoing, courageous struggle for equality with many setbacks. The struggle is not just for African Americans, but for many segments of society. When justice prevails for any group, it benefits our democracy as a whole. Helping students to understand the significance of current racial justice debates, issues and crises is especially important now, as our nation becomes increasingly diverse, one that demographers predict will be majority nonwhite by the year 2042. The recent killings of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri—two young men the age of your students—give the topic of racial justice both great timeliness and salience for young people. Understanding the nature of the criminal justice system in the United States, and what can be done to change it, is among the most pressing concerns for many young people today.

In view of the need and demand for materials and tools that will aid teachers' efforts to explore these issues, I am relieved and grateful that Teaching Tolerance volunteered to create a high school curriculum based on *The New Jim Crow*. As a law professor, I have a great deal of experience teaching about racial justice advocacy and criminal justice reform to law students and graduate students, but I have no experience teaching high school students. Teaching Tolerance brings a wealth of experience developing high school curricular materials, as well as a deep sensitivity to the challenges teachers face in modern classrooms, including time constraints and the necessity of ensuring that lessons are aligned with the Common Core.

This curriculum provides a range of lesson plans, activities and audiovisual resources for teachers of language arts, social studies and American history, anchored by manageable excerpts from *The New Jim Crow*. All of the lessons are fully aligned to the Common Core.

The Teacher Preparation Guide that opens the curriculum provides strategies for teachers to help them engage productively and honestly with their students, recognizing that sometimes discussions of race, ethnicity, power and privilege can evoke strong reactions.

The curriculum, like the book itself, is organized chronologically and walks students through some of the economic, political and social motivations behind slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation and, finally, mass incarceration. Teaching Tolerance has carefully designed the curriculum to allow students to analyze how these periods in our nation's history are both similar and different, and to draw their own conclusions about the book's thesis. The final lessons encourage students to think about what they can do to make positive change. In many respects, this is the most important part of the curriculum. I believe we must encourage students to view themselves as change agents, not victims or spectators or perpetrators—but as human beings who have values and the capacity to change our world and reimagine our democracy. Indeed, young people—more than any other segment in our society—are the hope upon which future generations can rely.

I hope that superintendents and principals will encourage classroom instructors to use this lesson series in whole or in part and that teachers will utilize them in the spirit of critical inquiry and debate for which they are intended. I would also encourage you to share with Teaching Tolerance your feedback on the curriculum, so that it can be improved upon over time.

With deep appreciation for all you do for our nation's children,



Michelle Alexander