

# TEACHING TOLERANCE



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## WEBINAR TRANSCRIPT

# Teaching *The New Jim Crow* with Michelle Alexander

### JUNE CHRISTIAN

Good evening and welcome to tonight's webinar, *Teaching The New Jim Crow with Michelle Alexander*. We're excited to preview our new teaching guide, *Teaching The New Jim Crow*, with the author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander. I'd like to welcome Michelle to the webinar.

### MICHELLE ALEXANDER

Thank you so much, June. Go ahead.

### JUNE CHRISTIAN

Okay, before I go into the full introduction of Michelle for those of you who may not be familiar with our esteemed guest this evening, please allow me to share a bit about Teaching Tolerance. We're a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, founded in 1991 to curtail the recruitment of youth into extremist hate groups. TT's mission is to reduce prejudice, improve intergroup relationships and to help create equitable school environments. If you have not already yet signed up for our weekly newsletter, please do so at [tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org). We have a number of quality anti-bias resources for teachers, counselors and school administrators, including lessons, a variety of publications and film kits. These resources are free of charge and can be downloaded at [tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org). We also encourage all K-12 teachers to sign up for our *Teaching Tolerance* magazine. We publish two print magazines in the fall and spring and an iPad edition in the summer. Please sign up at [tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org).

Have you checked out *Perspective for Diverse America* yet? *Perspective* is our K-12 anti-bias literacy curriculum, aligned with the Common Core State Standards. *Perspectives* offers teachers the opportunity to teach complex, culturally relevant texts that enables students to see into the experiences of others in addition to reflecting their own experiences. We believe students deserve rigor and relevant texts like *The New Jim Crow*. Please take a moment to build an Integrated Learning Plan at [perspective.tolerance.org](http://perspective.tolerance.org).

A few housekeeping issues for tonight's webinar. If you look at the bottom of your screen, you'll notice a few icons. The yellow button with the question mark is the help guide. Click this button and you can access resources and information to resolve issues you may experience during the webcast. Next to that button is another yellow button that if clicked, will maximize or minimize the webinar slides. The next button, a blue button with a movie projector, is the media player. You can control the volume level with the media player and if you are watching this webinar on demand, you can pause the webinar using the controls



found in the media player. The red Q&A icon is for questions. Please type your technical questions as well as any questions you may have for Michelle or about the guide in the Q&A box. You'll find resources from this teaching guide in the green folder icon. Michelle's introduction to the guide in this box along with other resources, I will reference as we preview Teaching *The New Jim Crow*.

If you click the purple button, you can send us an email. We appreciate your feedback and we hope you'll share this webinar with your friends. Anyone can view the webinar on demand after tonight's broadcast. Please click the green button with what appears to be a less-than mathematical symbol and share this webinar broadly across all your social networks. We love to see every teacher across the nation teach *The New Jim Crow*. Should you have a question about some of the concepts raised tonight or in *The New Jim Crow*, we've included the option for you to look it up on Wikipedia. We appreciate your feedback and look forward to hearing your thoughts about tonight's webinar. You can minimize and maximize any of the windows with just a click of your mouse.

Before we jump into previewing the guide, please allow me to introduce tonight's guest. Michelle Alexander is a highly acclaimed civil rights lawyer, advocate and legal scholar. In recent years, she taught at a number of universities including Stanford Law School, where she was an associate professor of law and directed the Civil Rights Clinic. In 2005, she won the Soros Justice Fellowship, which supported the writing of *The New Jim Crow*. In that same year, she accepted a joint appointment at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity and the Moritz College of Law at Ohio State University. Since its first publication, *The New Jim Crow* has received rave reviews and has been featured in national radio and television media outlets including MSNBC, NPR, *Bill Moyers Journal*, *Tavis Smiley*, C-SPAN and *Washington Journal*, among others. In March, the book won the 2011 NAACP Image Award for best nonfiction.

Prior to entering academia, Alexander served as the director of the Racial Justice Project for the ACLU of Northern California, where she coordinated the Project's media advocacy, grassroots organizing, coalition building and litigation. The Project's priority areas were educational equity and criminal justice reform. It was during those years at the ACLU that she began to awaken to the reality that our nation's criminal justice system functions more like a caste system than a system of crime prevention or control. She became passionate about exposing and challenging racial bias in the criminal justice system, ultimately launching and leading a major campaign against racial profiling by law enforcement known as the DWB Campaign or Driving While Black or Brown Campaign.

In addition to her nonprofit advocacy experience, Michelle has worked as a litigator at private law firms including Saperstein, Goldstein, Demchak & Baller, in Oakland, California, where she specialized in plaintiff-side, class-action lawsuits alleging race and gender discrimination.

Alexander is a graduate of Stanford Law School and Vanderbilt University. Following law school, she clerked for Justice Harry A. Blackmun on the Supreme Court. She currently devotes much of her time to freelance writing, public speaking, consulting with advocacy organizations committed to ending mass incarceration and most important, raising her



three young children, the most challenging and rewarding job of all. Again, thank you, Michelle, for joining us this evening.

### **MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

Well, thank you so much, June, and everybody at Teaching Tolerance for all of the incredibly hard work that has gone into creating this curriculum based on *The New Jim Crow*. I want to thank those who have joined this webinar tonight and hopefully there are many, many teachers who are joining the webinar, who are intending to use this curriculum in their classrooms. I won't repeat tonight all that I said during the last webinar. I believe that it's available for viewing on the Teaching Tolerance website. If you missed that one, I described in some detail the thesis of the book, the structure of the argument and why I believe it's so important for young people to have the opportunity to explore the issues and arguments raised in this book.

Since that webinar, I've now spoken with dozens more teachers who have told me that they are very eager to get the curriculum in their hands and put it to good use. Over and over I've heard that the curriculum is coming out at precisely the perfect time, coming on the heels of the uprisings in Ferguson and the great amount of discussion that's occurring among young people today around race and the true meaning of justice. Young people are talking, talking about uprisings in Ferguson, the killing of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis and Michael Brown. Many have formed opinions, many are confused, profoundly confused about the meaning and significance of all that they see in the media and hear from friends or others.

Many feel hurt and angry and of course there are many young people who are profoundly ignorant or indifferent, but very, very few young people are provided with an opportunity to talk openly and honestly about race in their schools. Even fewer are afforded the chance to explore how and why our racial history matters so much to our present and why a seemingly colorblind criminal justice system has managed to produce such widely racially disparate results. These are issues that our young people are thinking about on their own with very little support from teachers or educational institutions for the most part. I think this is not only a shame for those young people, but poses a real threat to our democracy as a whole. As a nation, we've quintupled our prison population in a stunningly short period of time. We went and brought a prison population of around 300,000 in the early 1980s to now a prison population that's over 2 million with several million more folks who are under correctional control.

Here we are—50 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act—and another massive system of racial and social control has been born again in this country. [A] penal system unprecedented in world history. A literal war is being waged within our own borders, a drug war, complete with all of the military gear that was on display in Ferguson. We have managed to create a vast new system, something that the world has never seen before, a penal system unlike anything that has ever existed anywhere else in the world. One that not only cages millions of people, but one that authorizes discrimination against tens of millions



more. Tens of millions of Americans are now saddled with criminal records for life, records that authorize legal discrimination in employment, housing, access to education and basic public benefits.

I describe in the book so many of the old forms of discrimination that we supposedly left behind during the Jim Crow era are suddenly legal again once you've been branded a felon. How we got to this place is no mere accident, no strange coincidence, and it cannot simply be explained by crime rates or misguided criminal justice policies. The politics and social dynamics that helped to birth mass incarceration have much in common with the politics and social dynamics that birthed the old Jim Crow. Yet, all of this is not something that is typically discussed in our schools. Young people are expected either to figure all of this out on their own, the politics, the dynamics and the relevance of our racial history to our present, they are either expected to figure it on their own or ignore it and treat it as irrelevant.

Young people are not, in fact, ignoring it. Young boys sag their pants, mimicking prison-issue wear, and young kids of all colors listen to rap music that blasts the police and celebrate gangsters and sing along to the lyrics and tunes without fully understanding the cultural meaning and the political and historical significance. Stop-and-frisk operations are normalized in communities of color. It's become a routine fact of life to be subject to a near police state in many communities. Yet again, these developments and dynamics are rarely discussed in classrooms. I hope that with this curriculum that begins to change, and the curriculum itself was created in response to teachers who told me after the book was published that they wanted so much to share the history and the data and the facts that were included in the book with their students that felt that it really needed to be adapted for a younger audience and that there need to tools and materials that will empower teachers in classrooms to be able to talk about these issues in a truly constructive way.

This curriculum really has been created in response to that demand by teachers who want to engage young people in meaningful discussions about the relevance of race and our current social institutions and who need some support in doing so. Several months after my book was first published, a young man sent an email to me that I'll never forget. He sent me a message saying, "Thank you, thank you so much for writing this book, I now understand why, for the first time I understand why every one of my male relatives, numbering nearly 30 have spent some time in jail or prison." This is a young man who grew up in North Lawndale in Chicago, a neighborhood that has been hard hit by the drug war, a neighborhood that I describe in the book. He said, "For the first time I now understand actually what's happening to my family and to my community, I didn't understand it before, I thought there must just be something wrong with us, with our people, I didn't understand the history, the political dynamics and the way the legal system is now structured to keep entire communities either locked up or locked out, and I want to be part of a change."

I also received messages from young people who had absolutely no contact with the criminal justice system, folks who were raised in privileged suburbs and who were exposed to the book and were amazed by the other world they knew nothing about. I believe that this



book, I hope that this book can be a useful tool for the young people in high schools who are eager to grapple with these issues and even many young people who have never been exposed. I'm just thrilled that the curriculum is now complete and ready to launch. I hope it will spread far and wide to empower segregated urban schools where mass incarceration has redefined the ordinary life course of millions of young people and their families, as well as to impoverished white rural communities where the drug war had begun to spread, a war that was born with black folks in mind, but now is destroying the lives of many poor whites, too, where work has disappeared and meth has spread and punishment is easier to come by than treatment or genuine concern.

I hope this curriculum reaches privileged suburban schools, too, places where the hammer of the criminal justice system really swings and where young people who are experimenting with drugs and getting into schoolyard fights or shoplifting are more likely to be viewed as just kids acting up or being young and stupid, engaging in predictable indiscretions rather than viewed as proof positive that they are no good and need to be punished, need to be locked up and controlled at all cost. Thank you again to Teaching Tolerance and all those who have joined this call who want to create opportunities for young people to participate in these dialogues, in these conversations, reach their own conclusions about what is happening in our country today and what they might be able to do to help create a better world,

#### **JUNE CHRISTIAN**

Thanks, Michelle. This has been such an exciting collaboration for us at Teaching Tolerance and being able to create the teaching guide to accompany your groundbreaking work. We really want to develop a guide that is both relevant to students and academically rigorous. Your analysis of mass incarceration and the criminal justice system is timely and it prompts meaningful discussion of not only mass incarceration and the criminal justice system, but also structural inequality and racial justice. As we move into learning more about the guide, we'd like to take a survey of the folks who are in our audience this evening. Are you a K-12 teacher? If you'll take a moment to let us know. If "yes" you are or "no" you're not. Let's take a look at who is present, okay. We've got 60 percent of folks who are not K-12 teachers and 39 percent or roughly 40 percent who are. We want to welcome you all and hope that you receive something that's beneficial to your job functions, to your practice, to your lives in tonight's webinar.

The instructional aims of this guide provide teachers with standards-based lessons that promote literacy. The guide includes abridged excerpts from *The New Jim Crow* for teachers who may not be able to teach the book in its entirety. All of the strategies and tasks are aligned to the Common Core State Standards. Here at TT, we believe that standards should not prevent teachers from teaching relevant and rigorous texts like *The New Jim Crow*. The strategies support text-based vocabulary instruction, close and critical reading and speaking and listening skills. The tasks are action oriented and include writing prompts to aid comprehension and bolsters students' writing skills. We also sought to help teachers facilitate meaningful discussions about important social issues like racial inequality in the criminal justice system. Not only are the strategies and tasks standards-based, we also



provided tools to equip educators to teach about and discuss race and racial justice.

Our strategy included providing abridged excerpts that teachers can use for students. Though the abridgement does not address all of Michelle’s scholarship in a way that the book does, we do recommend teaching the book and we do recommend teaching the book whenever possible. However, these excerpts are masterfully done and created to highlight the central themes of the book. Teachers who may not have the time or resources to teach the book in its entirety can confidently use the excerpts. Teachers can choose from a variety of strategies to help students closely read and comprehend the text. It’s easy to create a flexible plan for instructional differentiation.

Who is the guide for? The guide is intended for high school classrooms. We hope that all teachers who would like to teach *The New Jim Crow* in their classroom will. That includes English classrooms, U.S. history classrooms, contemporary issues, social studies and sociology classrooms. This guide has a bit of everything for any humanities classroom. Let’s talk about what’s in the guide. We wanted to make sure that teachers are prepared to teach *The New Jim Crow*. The guide begins with addressing your level of comfort discussing race and racism in your classroom. Conversations about race, racism and other forms of oppression can be difficult. Sometimes, we avoid talking honestly about race and racism because we fear conflict or because you don’t have the skills or competencies to engage in difficult conversations. We may fear messing up or sounding like a racist or doing harm unintentionally.

Part of preparing students to talk about *The New Jim Crow* is acknowledging our fears and concerns about discussing race and racism. We hope that you will engage your colleagues in discussing the difficulties and benefits of dialoguing about racism with your students. Though these conversations may never be comfortable, we can become more comfortable with being uncomfortable and exposing our vulnerability. The next step of preparation is embracing vulnerabilities. You may not have the answers when conducting difficult conversations, especially about structural inequality. Cataloguing your strengths, vulnerabilities and needs will help prepare you for the discomfort you may experience while discussing racism with students.

An example of a strength may be the rapport that you’ve built with your students. An example of a vulnerability may be not having a firm grasp of the history of racial inequality in the United States. Stating vulnerabilities will then help you identify your needs. You may want to learn more about the Reconstruction amendments and Jim Crow as you embark upon teaching *The New Jim Crow* in your classroom. We’ve also provided a way to address a range of emotions that students may experience as they are learning. Pain, suffering, anger, blame, guilt, shame, confusion or denial are all possible responses. Understanding that the responses that may arise and being prepared to address them are key to continuing the learning process and to keep the conversation going. There are a few strategies we’ve identified that can be used in the classroom when strong emotion arises—reiterate, contemplate, respire, communicate.



We offer ways to check-in with your students, suggestions for checking-in with them and ensuring that they have the time and space to adequately debrief the information and to share their responses to the subject matter are vital to continuing an important dialogue.

Let's take a look at the overarching essential questions of the guide. These are the three questions that guide the learning in teaching *The New Jim Crow*. The first, how does the U.S. criminal justice system create and maintain racial hierarchy through the system of mass incarceration? How does the current system of mass incarceration in the United States mirror earlier systems of racialized social control? The third question, what is needed to end mass incarceration and permanently eliminate the racial caste system in the United States?

Let's look at lessons one and two. These are the introductory lessons to the guide. Lesson one introduces students to the subject matter and lesson two prepares students for the content. Students understand how the perceptions, biases and stereotypes influence their understanding of the book's concepts. Teachers are encouraged to include students in setting rules and norms that will manage classroom discussion. Subsequently, they are given the overview of the content, so that they are prepared for concepts that *The New Jim Crow* expertly provokes.

You may be asking, "What's in each lesson?" Lessons three through nine contain most of the content most of the same elements. There is an abridged excerpt for each lesson that corresponds with the chapter in *The New Jim Crow*. Lessons three through five contain an excerpt from chapter one. Subsequent lessons correspond with the remaining chapters of the book. Though there are overarching essential questions for the teaching guide, each lesson contains an essential question for that lesson. The big idea communicates the enduring understanding that students should have upon completing ... We've got just a bit of technical difficulty, and I want to make sure that the slides correspond with what I'm actually talking about. Let me back up to the big idea, which is basically the enduring understanding of the lesson.

Then, we also have links to required and optional materials for the lesson as well as a list of background knowledge and knowledge areas students should have or know for each lesson. Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary are also listed for each lesson as well as a warm-up and exit ticket. There may be some variation in the procedures for the lesson, however, each lesson offers teachers an opportunity to choose from before-, during- and after-reading strategies to help students closely read their text and aid comprehension.

Let's preview a lesson. If you look in the resources box on your desktop, you'll find all of the resources and a few extra, but all the resources for lesson seven, "The Color of Justice," as well as a few URLs for the lesson. You are more than welcome to look at any of the PDFs and URLs at your convenience. Right now, though, I'd like for you to click on the URL



entitled “The Color of Justice.” You’ll notice that as I mentioned before, there are essential questions for the lesson and the essential questions for this lesson are how does mass incarceration function as a mechanism of racialized social control in United States today? And what is the age of colorblindness and how does it attempt to mask racial caste? The big idea or the enduring understanding that students should walk away knowing about this lesson and about the concepts that come up in the lesson are that racialized social control has adapted to race-neutral, social and political norms in the form of mass incarceration.

Criminalization stands in as a proxy for overt racism and limiting the rights and freedom of a racially defined undercaste. You’ll also note that there are four objectives: that students can identify racial disparities in the rates of arrest, conviction and sentencing for drug crimes; that students will be able to analyze how political rhetoric and media imagery have fed racial stereotypes about drug crimes; students will be able to define implicit bias and discuss its prevalence in drug law enforcement; students will evaluate how the Supreme Court has ruled with regard to discrimination in a criminal justice system. This is the thinking, the foundation of the lesson as we move into the required materials. All of the highlighted text in blue are hyperlinks. You can click on these at any time, and they will take you to the PDF of the required materials and few of the optional materials in the lesson. You are more than welcome to click from the URLs from the web as you are now or you can go back to the webcast page and those PDFs are listed in the resource box.

As with any of the highlighted materials and the lessons, you have the opportunity to download the PDF onto your desktop. There are also supporting resources and the optional materials that will assist you in teaching *The New Jim Crow*. In the resources box, you’ll find the PDF of the excerpts of this lesson. Please take a moment to open and briefly skim the excerpts. For those of you who are able to access the PDF, I’m going to give you just a few moments to interact with the PDF. For those folks who are unable to access the PDF, I hope that you’ll go to the website and take a look at the PDFs that are there, and you also have the option to interact with the PDF if you look at the webinar on demand at another time and at your leisure.

In the resources box, you’ll also notice a link to the text-dependent questions and should you decide to navigate there, you’ll see that the text-dependent questions require students to closely read the text to ensure that they understand and are able to discuss the lesson intelligently with their peers, with you, with their parents. As we move into the procedure of the lesson, students will complete a warm-up that asks them to consider something they know, something they believe and something they wonder about concepts referenced in this chapter of the book. The concepts for this lesson are crack cocaine, media coverage of crime and racial profiling. Students should have nine responses. I’m noticing that we are having some slide issues. I want to make sure that we are on the right slide. Technology is such a wonder and can provide some wonderful problems at times.

These nine responses that students have about what they know, what they believe and something that they are wondering about will actually get them thinking about the subject



matter before they begin previewing the excerpts. You'll instruct students to complete two strategies before they begin reading the excerpts. These strategies prime the pop so to speak; students will complete the beginning of the Anticipation Guide, and again I'll remind you that all of the PDFs for this particular lesson are in the resources and it's completely up to you as to how you want to look at the PDFs and peruse them, but I'm going in order of what's in the lesson, what's in this lesson seven.

For example, students are asked in the Anticipation Guide if they believe that statistically the majority of illegal drug users are white and that drug dealers are black. The majority of students will probably answer "true" to this statement. They'll probably think that this statement is true. They'll determine the veracity of the statement as they closely read the book chapter or the excerpt. Next, Text Graffiti exposes students to short pieces of the text prior to having them read the full excerpts. Students read selected quotes out of context, silently comment on the quote and then respond to their peers' comments about the same quotes. Students will have the opportunity to read the excerpts or the book chapter twice. The first read, students will annotate the text with symbols of their own making to document their thinking and questions that arise while they are reading. Students will also receive a handout, where they can create their own annotation key to show others how they interacted with the text and what their symbols mean.

Teachers can employ the Shared Reading strategies to check comprehension of key points and concepts in the reading. There are also options to differentiate instruction for a variety of students including English language learners and emerging readers. Teachers can also choose from a variety of after-reading strategies, and you'll notice that those strategies are in the PDF section and they encourage you to facilitate a class discussion that centers on asking and answering text-dependent questions and including student-created questions. All of the strategies and tasks are aligned to the Common Core State Standards, and the standards are listed on every strategy. Students will return to the Anticipation Guide once they finish all of the reading strategies, nearing the end of the lesson. Through close reading they will find out that the majority of illegal drug users *and* drug dealers are white, though they may have initially thought that the majority of drug users are white and the drug dealers are black. Hopefully, students will agree that their belief was false in agreement with what they read in the chapter.

I'd like to take the opportunity to draw your attention to the Do Something assessment and the Write to the Source prompt that are located in the resources box. These are among the true jewels, and believe me there are several [in] the teaching guide. The Write to the Source prompts help students create arguments that are drawn from the facts of the book. Students are able to showcase their thinking and movement to action. When we started developing the guide with Michelle and her colleagues at The New Press, Michelle emphasized her desire for the final lesson to prompt students to action. Reading the book and discussing the contents is important. But our final lesson showcases Michelle's intent to prompt students to do something about the issues and concerns *The New Jim Crow* addresses.



She shares with us some of the truly amazing student groups and student-led action that came out of youth reading her book. Michelle, I know that I spent a good deal of time talking tonight and I want to thank you for your patience. Will you share with our audience some of the feedback you received from students and the phenomenal things they've done?

**MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

Yes, thanks so much, June, and thanks for walking everyone through so carefully how the curriculum was designed. I really encourage people to go to the Teaching Tolerance website and go to the curriculum that's posted there and look around for yourself at the structure of all of these lessons and the care that has been given to both the design and the kinds of questions and activities that are encouraged for the students. I think that teachers can really use the curriculum as a jumping-off point in their classrooms and tailor it to the needs and interests and desires and demographics of their classroom, so thank you so much for that, June. I know how much work has gone into this, and you've really done a phenomenal job.

It is true that the aspect of the curriculum that excites me most is at the very end, and if you link on the Do Something portion of the final lesson, it will take you to something called the Do Something assessments that list I think eight or nine different activities that students can engage in after reading the book or doing the various lessons in the curriculum. I think it's so important for students not simply to be provided with information and data and history and facts, but to see how they can actually make a difference in responding to what they've learned and been introduced to through their readings and classrooms discussions. I know that sometimes people who have read the book say that at the end, they feel a bit overwhelmed like, "Oh well, now what? The problem seems so big, it's so huge. What can I, as one individual, possibly do to make a difference?" I think classrooms are ideal environments to encourage people to think creatively about how they can in fact make a difference and that none of the previous systems of racial and social control would ever have come to an end if individuals and particularly young people had not imagined that they could in fact make a difference.

Many of the activities that are listed here in the Do Something assessments reflect the types of activities that students have been engaged in classrooms all over the country after reading the book. I shared with June and the other folks at Teaching Tolerance that teachers began sending me emails telling me about their success stories of using the book in classrooms even before the curriculum was developed. As an example of some of the things that teachers and their students came up with together as activities to do after reading and processing the book, one involved a young man named Anthony Perry in Louisville, Kentucky, who is a senior at St. Francis High School in Louisville, who after reading the book and speaking with other students and teachers, decided that this wasn't a discussion that simply the classroom needed to have or that needed to occur within the school walls, but this was a discussion that the entire community needed to be engaged in, in Louisville.



Anthony, as a senior in high school along with his [fellow] students and with the support of teachers, organized a conference held at the Muhammad Ali Arts Center in Louisville on *The New Jim Crow* and the school-to-prison pipeline.

The conference was titled “A 360-Degree View of the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Changing Policy, Changing Outcomes” and was a conference that was encouraging people to read the book and engage in these dialogues amongst themselves. The event was attended more than 300 people from the Louisville community. It was supported by organizations like the ACLU and the Ali Center and the Jefferson County Public School System and Americans Who Tell the Truth, an organization based in Louisville, and Joe Guttman, a former prosecutor who teaches at Central High School in Louisville, came and spoke, as well as a number of other advocates and activists, professors from Bellarmine University also presented. What began as a discussion and debate in one classroom turned into an event in Louisville, Kentucky, that attracted hundreds of people and has helped to inspire community organizing and the activism in that community. Obviously, that’s an incredible story and much of it has to do with just real brilliance and fierce commitment of one young man, Anthony Perry, who has now gone off to college.

I received many, many other stories as well. It was in Oregon, I’m speaking at the University of Oregon and met number of high school students who attended that event at University of Oregon’s campus and they came from a classroom, an A.P. composition classroom, where they had read the book and were required to write essays in response, sharing their views and critiques of the book. The students and the teacher in the classroom decided that they didn’t want to just write about the book, they actually want to do something. They decided to create a project where they would go and interview people at a local re-entry center and hear their stories firsthand and get to know the people who had actually experienced the system firsthand, get to know them, get to hear their stories and share their stories through a journalism project that the class undertook on their own initiative.

That project became highly successful and is now an ongoing project, partnership within the school and the re-entry center, which has proven enormously helpful not only for the high school students to learn about the system, but it also provided an opportunity for people who are released from prison to recognize that their experiences and the stories matter and to have the opportunity to speak in high schools and to speak to high school students and play a meaningful role in educating young people. There’ve also been students who have created fantastic arts projects, performing music, creating rap songs, developing paintings and spoken word, all in response to the book and the classroom discussions that they had and put on performance for fellow students as a way of sharing what they have learned and their discussions through art and music, rather than just through descriptions of data and fact and history.

You’ll see a number of activities listed that I think that letting students know at the outset of work on the book that they are going to have an opportunity to decide what kinds of activities they might want to engage in, can help inspire students to think about their en-



agement with this material, not merely as an academic exercise, but as an opportunity for them to form their own opinions and develop their own relationship to these issues and to develop a sense of their own power, agency and capacity to make a difference after processing what they've learned. I greatly appreciate the fact that Teaching Tolerance embraced this idea with such enthusiasm and has made activism and students' creative expression a key feature of the curriculum.

#### **JUNE CHRISTIAN**

Thanks so much, Michelle. We do have a few questions from tonight's participants for you, and there are also a couple of questions about the guide itself. I want to start with a question for you and the question is, how is the term *caste* relevant and not hyperbolic relative to your critique of its historical meaning?

#### **MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

Well, I recognize that caste is not a term that is typically used in our public or political discourse. It may seem like an extreme term, but I use the language of caste because I wanted to make a clear departure from the language of class in our society. As a nation, we typically avoid talking about race or class as a society. I think conversations about class are resisted in large part because there is a tendency to imagine that one's class reflects upon one's character. In America, we tend to want to believe, despite much evidence, that anybody with a proper discipline and drive can move from a lower class to higher class. We recognize it may be difficult, but as a nation, we tend to want to imagine that mobility between classes is always possible, so the failure to move from a lower class to higher class reflects on someone's character and of course by extension, the failure of an entire race or ethnic group to move up or seem locked up at the bottom reflects very poorly on the group as a whole.

What I wanted to make abundantly clear in the book is that African Americans who are cycling in and out of prisons and jails and ghettoized communities today are not simply part of a lower class or even an underclass; they are actually trapped. They are locked into a permanent second-class status by law. It's not just that they lack opportunity or attend poor schools or are plagued by poverty; they are barred by law. Many, many, many of them are barred by law from mobility. The major institutions which they come into contact are actually designed to prevent their mobility. Young people are born in these communities into a system where their parents likely have already been saddled with criminal records and thus may be unable to vote and are legally discriminated against in employment, housing, access to education, basic public benefits; so young people are born into family that are already governed by this system of control.

Young people, when they reach a tender age, often before they are even old enough to drive, come into contact with the police, stopped and frisked without any evidence of criminal activity, thrown to the pavement, their backpacks rifled through, when they are old enough to drive, their cars are often searched. They are often under constant surveillance, stopped and frisked, searched routinely and then eventually they're caught for something and swept into the criminal justice system. Once they're swept in, they are branded for life.



They are branded a criminal or a felon and once branded, they're ushered into a parallel social universe in which the basic civil and human rights that others take for granted no longer apply to them.

In this way, the current system is controlled and operated in so many poor communities of color permanently locks a huge percentage of the African-American community out of the mainstream society and economy. In places where the drug war has been waged with great veracity, places where mass incarceration is the norm, the majority of black men of working age have criminal records and are the subject of legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives. I believe that people in these communities are trapped in an undercaste, that our criminal justice system in these communities function much more like a system of racial and social control than a system of crime prevention and control. Although the criminal justice system purports to be colorblind, it in fact creates and maintains racial inequality and racial hierarchy in many of the same ways that earlier systems have controlled it, like Jim Crow and slavery.

Mass incarceration today operates 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. Because so many millions of people now find themselves trapped by law, saddled with criminal records, often for engaging in the very same forms of activities, particularly drug use and sales, that go ignored in more privileged communities. Because so many millions now find themselves trapped by law, relegated to a permanent second-class status for life, I felt that using the language of class was just inadequate; that we needed to acknowledge that something that akin to a caste system had been born again in the United States, one that's kept millions of people permanently locked up or locked out of the mainstream society.

#### **JUNE CHRISTIAN**

Thanks, Michelle. I would love to get in a couple of more questions; there's one that I wanted to answer. Someone asked, "What do we at Teaching Tolerance envision as the ideal lead up before teaching *The New Jim Crow*? And I want to throw out the whole question quickly. I want to ask, on a scale of zero to five, how comfortable are you talking about race and racism? I would encourage you to click which number corresponds with the comfort level and then press "submit." The reason why I bring this up is because I think it's important for us, we do, what I think, a really wonderful job of helping teachers prepare themselves and students for issues that come up, emotions that will come up while teaching *The New Jim Crow*. That front matter I think is really a great opportunity to help teachers teach *The New Jim Crow* and to prepare their students for teaching *The New Jim Crow*. It's the "Preparing to Teach *The New Jim Crow*," lesson one and lesson two, are really key for that. I just wanted to see what, okay, good.

Most of you have a good degree of comfort when talking about race and racism, and that's a wonderful thing. There was another follow-up question, quickly, before I ask you one more brief question, Michelle. More specifically, are there history and social studies lesson



that we believe are critical prerequisite before teaching *The New Jim Crow*? What I'll say to that is in every lesson, there are background knowledge and knowledge area bullets that teachers can use to create mini-lessons, so students need to know that information before learning *The New Jim Crow*.

Quickly, Michelle, do you know of any programs that have implemented using *The New Jim Crow* inside juvenile justice facilities?

**MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

Yes, I have heard of that. In fact, I was at an event just recently in Oakland, California, where I was told that the book was being read and there were facilitated discussions going on at a juvenile facility. Unfortunately, I do not have the name of that facility handy, but I do know that it has been used and that it's been used in juvenile facilities, it's been used in prisons, and that it's also been used in a number of afterschool programs and mentoring programs as well. But I'm not aware of a curriculum that has been specifically developed or any set of materials that have been specifically developed for working with juveniles or working with young people outside of [the] classroom.

**JUNE CHRISTIAN**

Alrighty, thank you so much, Michelle. That's all the time that we have. I'd like to thank everyone who joined us tonight for tonight's webinar. To our audience members, the archive of this webinar will be available tomorrow. We encourage you to share it widely among your family, friends and colleagues. Also, I'd like to encourage you to look at the curriculum; the website is [tolerance.org/publication/teaching-the-new-jim-crow](http://tolerance.org/publication/teaching-the-new-jim-crow), and to really peruse the curriculum and to use it widely because I think this is a timely conversation for students and there is a lot to learn here. Again, thank you for your participation this evening. Michelle, thank you so much, this has been a phenomenal opportunity to work with you and to work with your scholarship.

**MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

Thank you so much. I really look forward to hearing about the successes and challenges of using the curriculum in classrooms around the country. I hope people will give Teaching Tolerance feedback on the curriculum and I'm sure that there will be interest and willingness to continue to revise and adapt in response to feedback, so thanks so much.

**JUNE CHRISTIAN**

Thank you, Michelle. Goodnight, everyone.