

## WEBINAR TRANSCRIPT

# An Evening With Michelle Alexander

### JUNE CHRISTIAN

Good evening. On behalf of Teaching Tolerance, please allow me to welcome you to this evening's webinar. We are excited to bring you an insightful and informative hour with the world-renowned author and speaker Michelle Alexander, as well as to announce Teaching Tolerance's new teacher's guide to *The New Jim Crow* that will be released this fall.

Before I introduce Ms. Alexander and we discuss her exceptional scholarship, I'd like to take a moment to introduce Teaching Tolerance to those participants who may not be familiar with our project.

Teaching Tolerance is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center founded in 1991. Morris Dees and Joe Levin, founders of the SPLC, created Teaching Tolerance to counter the recruitment of youth into hate groups through anti-bias education.

The mission of Teaching Tolerance is to reduce prejudice, improve relationships among all people, and support equitable school environments for our nation's youth. Fulfilling our mission, we publish three magazines, a print edition in both the fall and spring, as well as an iPad edition in the summer. We have a number of film kits, lessons, publications and resources that are completely free to educators across the United States.

I invite each of you to [tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org) to sign up for our weekly newsletter, to register for Perspectives for Diverse America, our new K-12 anti-bias literacy curriculum, which is the first of its kind, and to peruse any of the many resources aimed at making schools and our country equitable for all.

Now, on to our next order of business for tonight's webinar. You'll notice that you have a few windows that are open on your computer. You're able to control the size of the windows as well as minimize them. I suggest that you maximize the Media Player. Technology has made it possible for Michelle to join us via webcam, though there are slides available that'll allow you to read the questions Ms. Alexander will answer this evening, I encourage you to make this window a bit smaller.

I will draw your attention to the slides as necessary for a few audience polls. You'll also notice a question-and-answer box. Please type all of your technical-assistance questions here, though you will find some of your questions from Twitter that Ms. Alexander will answer this evening, the box is only for technical assistance. Any questions for our esteemed guest should be posted on Twitter (@tolerance\_org) using the hashtag #aquestionforMichelle.

I'd like to draw your attention to the icons at the bottom of your computer screen. You can place your cursor on any of the icons, and the text will appear. The first two icons—a yellow icon with a graph and a blue icon with a film projector—are already maximized on your screen; they refer to the slide presentation and the Media Player, respectively. The purple icon labeled “Contact Us” will allow you to send Teaching Tolerance a message regarding tonight’s webinar.

If you have questions for Michelle Alexander, we encourage you to click on the next icon, labeled “Speaker’s Bio”; in that window you can email Ms. Alexander from the website for her book, *The New Jim Crow*. We would also like to encourage you to share this webinar with your networks; you can do this via the green icon with the event label “Teaching Tolerance presents an evening with Michelle Alexander.”

Finally, one of your maximized windows is the Twitter feed that will allow you to participate in the concurrent Twitter chat. Please be sure to log in to your Twitter account so that you can participate in tonight’s Twitter chat.

On to tonight’s revered guest, I am so pleased to welcome Michelle Alexander to tonight’s webinar. Michelle is a highly acclaimed civil rights lawyer, advocate and legal scholar. In 2005 she won a Soros Justice Fellowship, which supported the writing of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, published by the New Press. In the same year she accepted a joint appointment at the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in the Moritz College of Law at The Ohio State University.

A New York Times best seller, *The New Jim Crow* has received rave reviews, and the book and Alexander have been featured in national radio and television media outlets including CNN, MSNBC, NPR, C-SPAN, Bill Moyers Journal, The Colbert Report, Real Time with Bill Maher, Tavis Smiley, and The Washington Journal, among others. The book won the 2011 NAACP Image Award for Best Non-Fiction.

Formerly the director of the ACLU’s Racial Justice Project in Northern California, Alexander served as a law clerk for US Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun. She lives in Ohio with her family, and it is my supreme pleasure to welcome you, Michelle, to tonight’s webinar.

We’re going to start with our first question and the question is: Michelle, please share with our audience a bit [about] you and *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* and talk to us about your experience writing the book.

Michelle? It’s all yours. Take it away.

#### **MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

I’m a little technologically challenged having never done one of these webinars before, so I apologize. I just want to begin by thanking you, June, and all those at Teaching Tolerance who have worked so tirelessly to develop a high school curriculum based on *The New Jim Crow* and to make this series of webinars and dialogues possible.

I want to thank all those who have logged in tonight and taken time away from your work, or

family, or your free time to spend time thinking about how we might be able to reach more young people, educate them about the crisis of mass incarceration in this country, its racial dimensions, its origins, how the system actually functions as opposed to how it's advertised or depicted in the media, and what it means for us as a nation 50 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act to have constructed a penal system unprecedented in world history.

A system that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. could never have fathomed or imagined. One that now governs entire communities defined largely by race and class. In many ways this curriculum project has been a dream come true for me. For the past couple of years I'd hoped that a set of materials might be created that would support high school teachers who want to explore the myriad issues surrounding race and justice in our society and who want to use my book as a resource.

I wrote the book in the hopes that it might help others have the same kind of awakening that I finally did about our system of mass incarceration and the continuing role of race in our society. I admit in the book at the outset, and every time I talk about these issues, that there was a time when I just didn't get it; even as a civil rights lawyer and advocate, even as someone who cared deeply about racial and social justice, I didn't fully get it. I didn't understand the magnitude of the harm caused to communities of color by mass incarceration, the war on drugs, and the Get-Tough Movement.

I assumed back then, like many people still do, that the millions of poor people and people of color cycling in and out of the criminal justice system could be explained by poverty, bad schools and broken homes. Never did I imagine back then that a new system of racial and social control, strikingly similar to ones that we supposedly left behind, had emerged again in my lifetime.

It was only after years of working as a civil rights lawyer and advocate representing victims of racial profiling and police brutality and investigating patterns of drug law enforcement in poor communities of color and attempting to assist people who had been released from prison and watching as they face one legal barrier after another, not just to re-entry but to basic survival, that I had a series of experiences that began what I now call my awakening.

I began to awaken to the uncomfortable reality that our criminal justice system now functions much more like a system of racial and social control than a system of crime prevention and control. Today there are more African Americans under correctional control in prison or jail, on probation or parole than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began.

More African Americans had been denied the right to vote in recent years than in 1870, the year the 15th Amendment was passed, abolishing law[s] that explicitly deny the right to vote on the basis of race, and of course, during the Jim Crow era, black folks were excluded from polls due to poll taxes and literacy tests. But today felony disenfranchisement laws in many states accomplish what poll taxes and literacy tests ultimately could not.

In some American cities today, more than half of working-age African-American men have criminal records and are thus subject to legal discrimination for the rest of their life. I've come to understand that these men comprised a growing under caste—not class—caste: a group of people defined largely by race relegated to a permanent second-class status by law.

Although it's tempting to imagine that this vast new system, a system unprecedented, unparalleled in world history, can be explained by crime and crime rates, it's just not true. After years of work and a tremendous amount of research, I finally came to see what seems so obvious in retrospect: the fact that more than half of the young black men in many large American cities are currently under the control of the criminal justice system or saddled with criminal records. It's not just a symptom of poverty or poor choices but rather evidence of a new caste-like system at work.

Millions of poor people, overwhelmingly poor people and people of color are swept into the criminal justice system at early ages often before they're old enough to vote, primarily for non-violent and drug-related offenses, various sorts of crimes that occur with roughly equal frequency in middle-class white communities and on college campuses but go largely ignored.

They're stopped, searched, frisked at young ages. When they're old enough to drive a car, their cars are pulled over, sometimes dismantled in a search for drugs. Eventually they're swept in and placed in literal cages, treated as less than human and then when they're released, they're stripped of the very rights supposedly won in the Civil Rights Movement, including the right to vote, the right to serve on juries, and the right to be free of legal discrimination and employment, housing, access to education and basic public benefit; 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 labeled a felon.

When I finally stepped back and considered what I had learned about the system as a whole, how it functions day-to-day in the real lives of millions of Americans, it became clear to me that we haven't really ended racial caste in all of America; we'd merely redesigned it.

I wrote this book in the hopes that maybe, just maybe if I shared what I had learned and connected the dots between mass incarceration, Jim Crow, slavery, and explain how we got to this place, I might be able to help awaken others too.

The truth is when I finished writing the manuscript I had little expectation that it would become a best seller. In fact, people were telling me that nobody would read it; after all, Barack Obama had just been elected, our nation's first black president, and it seemed that the country was awash in post-racialism and the idea that we finally overcome our ugly racial history of discrimination and caste and we're on our way to the Promised Land.

The book's main argument is that the stunning, unprecedented rise in US 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's segregation was not what most people wanted to hear.

I worry that few people would listen, but I'm so glad that I and so many others were wrong. The response truly has been overwhelming: policy makers, judges, academics, faith groups of all religions and denominations, prisoners and their families, formerly incarcerated people, youth groups, community folks of all races, classes and backgrounds, of organized study groups, forums, town halls, not only to discuss the book and the prices of mass incarceration but also our nation's goals, hopes and aspirations as a multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial democracy.

But of all the groups that have taken the book and run with it, I've been most encouraged by the response of students and teachers. Almost immediately after the book was released I began receiving emails and phone calls from teachers across the country urging me to send them materials that would help them to share the ideas and questions raised in *The New Jim Crow* in their classrooms. Many of them said that the next generation of leaders needs to be included in this discussion too.

"But we can't just assign a book," they said. "High school students have different literacy skills, and we have real constraints in terms of time in our classrooms, and there is the necessity of meeting standards like the Common Core." Many of them said, "Give us something we can use in our classrooms," and over and over again I heard that the book needed to be translated into a form that teachers and young people could easily use, that was easily accessible to them in their classrooms.

I found many teachers working in schools in impoverished neighborhoods reported how they saw firsthand how the criminal justice system was undermining the life prospects of their students, destroying all hope for their futures. They felt that the book might help young people in their schools better understand their own experience and put into historical context all of the laws and policies that have trapped so many of their friends, parents and relatives as they cycle in and out of prison or live under perpetual criminal justice system or police surveillance.

Then other teachers in more affluent schools said they believed the book had helped their students better understand and appreciate the experiences and perspectives of people of color. They said, "Privileged students need to be exposed to these ideas, this history and this factual information so they can begin to examine and challenge their own stereotypes, biases and assumptions."

All of the teachers who reached out to me said they felt their students needed to know what mass incarceration is, really is, and examine the many myths that sustain it, like the common myth that people of color are more likely to use or sell drugs than whites, or the myth that racial incarceration can be explained by crime or crime rate. None of this is true.

In the era of mass incarceration, young people need to know how and why we got to this place; they need to be exposed to challenging new perspectives and form their own conclusions. I believe they need to consider what role they can play in changing and transforming the system. They need to be reminded of the importance of their own voice, their own

perspectives, and that they too have power.

I'm very glad that so many teachers pushed me in this way, to think seriously about how to make the content of the book accessible to teachers and students. I'm incredibly grateful that Teaching Tolerance has stepped up to this challenge. Thank you, June, again, for helping to make all of this possible.

#### **JUNE CHRISTIAN**

On to our next question. Michelle, you were talking about teachers who are having to align their curriculum to the Common Core. And what about this book? Tell us how the argument is organized that might help teachers who are wanting to teach the book in their classrooms and provide them with some insight to the book's thesis.

#### **MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

I really have the New Press to thank for the organization of the book. When I was done with the first draft of the manuscript I sent it off to my publisher triumphantly. I was so relieved that it was finally finished and then a month or two later I received a call from Diane Wachtell, the Executive Director of the New Press, who said, "I'm calling to tell you we absolutely loved the book and can't wait to publish it. There's just one thing: we want you to reorganize the whole book."

She was serious, and I laughed and then I cried and for a minute I thought I might refuse to go back to the drawing board, but that was really just about the best advice that anyone has given to me. The New Press specializes in publishing books about pressing racial and social justice issues and helping to ensure that they reach a wide general audience.

My publisher explained to me that the way that I had originally written the book was perfect for lawyers or academics, but when writing for a general audience I needed to imagine that I was taking my reader by the hand and walking them through the arguments slowly, carefully, never making any assumptions or jumping ahead. "Walk with the readers slowly," that's what she said. "And then let the truth unfold." That's what the book now aims to do.

The book as a whole challenges readers to think about mass incarceration not simply as a criminal justice problem or a problem of crime or crime rates but as a human rights crisis rooted primarily in our unresolved racial divisions, anxieties, resentments and stereotypes.

The book documents the ways in which our legal system actually works to create and perpetuate racial disadvantage and it encourages readers to view those labeled felons or criminals, the bad guys, as human beings worthy of basic civil and human rights.

The book aims to encourage everyone, young and old, and 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 book begins with an introduction that briefly describes my own awakening and shares the provocative conclusions that I eventually reached, namely that we've not really ended racial caste in America; we merely redesigned it.

The introduction explains that our prison population quintupled in a few short decades for reasons that have stunningly little to do with crime and crime rates. We went from a prison population of about 300,000 to more than 2 million with tens of millions more people cycling in and out of the criminal justice system, trapped in a permanent second-class status for life.

But then Chapter 1 really begins the journey; it reviews the history of racialized social control in the United States from slavery, to convict leasing, to Jim Crow, and now mass incarceration. It aims to answer the basic question: "How did we get here?"

The chapter emphasizes that systems of racial and social control mutate and change forms over time, and that throughout our racial history, poor people have repeatedly been pit against one another along color lines for the benefit of a relative few, triggering the rise of these successive new systems of control. It's a pattern that began with slavery and that has repeated itself in modern times.

Chapter 2 describes how mass incarceration actually works and it focuses on the war on drugs and how a war mentality allowed for the evisceration of basic civil and human rights, the militarization of local law enforcement like we witnessed live on the news in Ferguson, the financial incentives that have been built into the system, rewarding law enforcement for mass drug arrests.

It dispels some of the myths about how our system works, showing that few defendants ever get meaningful legal representations. They're often forced into plea bargains whether they're guilty or not and once they're released, they find they're second-class citizens for the rest of their lives.

Chapter 3 focuses on the role of race in the criminal justice system and then explains how a formerly race-neutral system can manage to round up, arrest and imprison an extraordinary number of black and brown men in the war on drugs when they're actually no more likely to be guilty of drug crimes and many other offenses than whites. The chapter aims to debunk the notion that racial disparities and imprisonment can be explained by crime rates and shows how the legal rules that structure the system actually guarantee discriminatory results.

Chapter 4 focuses on how this caste-like system operates once people are released from prison. It details the many, many rules, laws, policies, practices that authorize legal discrimination against people branded criminals or felons for the rest of their lives, relegating them to a permanent second-class status.

Chapter 5 explores the parallels between mass incarceration and Jim Crow, as well as many of the differences. It also explores the role of racial stigma in the era of mass incarceration and Jim

Crow, and it talks about why some people of color support aspects of mass incarceration today.

Chapter 6 is entitled “The Fire This Time”; it reflects on what the rise of mass incarceration means for the future of civil rights advocacy. I argue that nothing short of a major social movement has any hope of ending mass incarceration and that mere tinkering with this criminal justice system isn’t enough; we must build a movement that cultivates an ethic of genuine care, compassion and concern for every human being of every class, race and nationality. Our ultimate goal must be not simply to end mass incarceration or the war on drugs, but to break once and for all this history and cycle of creating caste-like systems in America.

The high school curriculum does not follow the format of the book exactly but it does walk students through the core segments of the argument in it and it ends with encouraging students to think about what they can do to make positive change.

In many respects I think that’s the most important part of the curriculum—the end. We’ve got to 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 re-imagine our democracy.

Young people, more than any other segment in our society, and I know teachers know this better than anyone else, are our hope if we’re going to ever break free of our history and cycle of creating a caste-like system and choose instead to build a truly thriving, inclusive, multiracial, multiethnic democracy.

#### **JUNE CHRISTIAN**

Our next question, Michelle, is: What skills or understanding do you believe teachers need to teach the lessons in Teaching Tolerance Teacher’s Guide to *The New Jim Crow*?

#### **MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

I believe the most important thing teachers need is an open heart and open mind and a willingness to take some risk in a classroom, and by risk I mean be willing to open up a conversation about race even if you’re not entirely sure where it will go.

In my experience, many teachers are eager to explore these issues in the classroom or at least see the importance of it. But they’re afraid, they’re afraid of saying the wrong thing, or being misunderstood, or afraid of students getting emotional, or students saying the wrong thing—and all of this fear means that nothing much constructive gets said about race in the classroom at all.

When it comes to issues of race, students are typically taught that severe racial inequality is a thing of the past and that now we’re in a new age where race discrimination is illegal and no longer tolerated.

Racism itself is often described as simply hate or conscious prejudice, and 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 influences all of us.

I think 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 policy makers today utter racial slurs or would consider themselves racially prejudiced.

As I see it, if we are ever to overcome racial inequality in the United States, we first have to be able to talk about it, to describe it and to 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.

We're doing our young people our profoundest service, I think, if we continue to avoid issues of race in a classroom or talk about it only in a clinical fashion without speaking from our hearts as well as our head.

This curriculum is very traditional in many ways; it's designed to be used in traditional classrooms. It's designed to meet the requirements of the Common Core but this curriculum can just be a launching pad, a safe place to begin in your classroom. It provides a clear structure, goals and outlines for reading and discussion, vocabulary words and exercises. It provides a level of guidance intended to make any teacher comfortable getting started.

There is no ideal teacher and no ideal classroom for this curriculum; it's designed to be accessible to anyone. But what this curriculum does need and what only you, you who are teachers, can bring is an open heart and an open mind and a willingness to take some risks so that future generations will one day be able in their classrooms to study the history of the movement that not only ended mass incarceration but ended the history of caste in America. That it will be possible to read that history only if we begin having an open and honest conversation about race among ourselves and in our classrooms with young people so they could have some hope of leading the way.

#### **JUNE CHRISTIAN**

Michelle, hopefully we're not having too much of a technology issue. Technology is wonderful but sometimes it has a couple of snags. When you're ready you can go ahead and take it back, and the question ... I'll repeat the question: [Where] do current events like Ferguson and the fatal shootings of youth like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown intersect with *The New Jim Crow*?

#### **MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

It's not possible to understand fully what happened in Ferguson, not just the killing of Michael Brown but the uprising that followed, without understanding that a new system of racial and social control has been born in the United States. In the media and political

discourse, few clues are offered to the general public, much less to young people about the deeper sources of the conflicts and crises that continually repeat themselves.

Every few days a young black man is killed by the police in the United States; that is roughly the same rate that black people were lynched during the Jim Crow era. But today there is little acknowledgment anywhere that a new system exists that is repeating the mistakes of the past. Many communities of color are hurt, angry and often confused about how to respond.

As young people watch the news or hear about these events and they deserve a better education about the causes and consequences of the past that we as a nation have chosen. I think it's critical for us as educators to rethink how we teach civil rights in our schools. We've got to learn to frame it as part of an ongoing courageous struggle for equality with many, many setbacks.

The struggle is not just for African Americans but for many segments of society including immigrants, poor people, gays and lesbians, and women; that when justice prevails for any group, it benefits our democracy as a whole. Helping students to understand that and 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 a majority of non-white in just 30 or 40 years.

The recent killings of young men like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown give this topic a heightened importance and urgency. 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, many young people today. That's why we ought to be willing to tackle these issues in our classrooms and create places, spaces for constructive, meaningful dialogues; places where we can contemplate what a hopeful and truly transformative action might look like.

#### **JUNE CHRISTIAN**

What can we expect from you in the future, Michelle? Do you have any current projects that we should look for in the very near future?

#### **MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

I'm beginning to work on another book, one that explores [the] means to build a truly transformative movement for justice in America, you know, where do we go from here? And I'm also working on some short writing projects. I may launch a blog so I can be at dialogue with all of you and a wide range of folks about this work. I'm going to keep on writing and hope that it helps to contribute to the building of a truly transformative movement for justice.

#### **JUNE CHRISTIAN**

We've completed the prepared questions that we have for you, Michelle, and we're going to head into some poll questions for the audience so that we can give you an opportunity to

take a sip of water and to gather some important information from our audience.

I would like to direct our audience members to look at the slide window on your workspace there, and the question is: Why did you register for this webinar? You can choose from “I am a fan of Michelle Alexander,” “I support Teaching Tolerance,” “I support the Southern Poverty Law Center,” “I am interested in the subject matter,” or you’ve read *The New Jim Crow*, you plan on teaching or have taught the book in your classroom, or perhaps there’s another [reason] why you’ve registered for the webinar.

If you could take some time and click the boxes that are true for you, I’m going to give it a few seconds and then we’ll look at the feed and see what the results of this poll are. Also, if you have questions for Michelle, if there’s anything pressing or very urgent that you want her to answer, now is the time to push those questions through. We’re going to start with the Twitter questions in just a moment.

Right now we’re headed to the poll results. We’ve got a lot of fans of Michelle and Teaching Tolerance and the Southern Poverty Law Center, and almost 80 percent of folks have read *The New Jim Crow*.

We have one more poll question, and this is a yes or no question—it’s pretty easy. Are you a K–12 educator? Are you currently a K–12 educator, and if you’ll check yes or no, we like to get a feel for the folks who are teaching in our audience and perhaps are interested in teaching *The New Jim Crow* in their classrooms. Seventeen-point-eight percent are K–12 educators and 82 percent are not K–12 educators.

We encourage the 82 percent to talk to your friends who are classroom educators and to let them know that Teaching Tolerance has a wonderful curriculum that is to accompany Michelle’s exceptional piece of scholarship, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*, and to teach it in their classrooms and to help make a profound impact on the students they teach in their classrooms.

Right now, what we’re going to do is move forward into the Twitter questions and what’s going to happen now is, Michelle, if you’ve chosen one of the question that you’d like to answer at this point, you can go ahead and take control and read the question and then provide the answer for our audience.

#### **MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

June, I should first say that technologically I’m having trouble seeing the Twitter questions to scroll through them, but I did see one which came through that asked how do I expect high school administrators to respond to the curriculum.

This is something that was exactly discussed quite a bit in the process of drafting and reviewing the curriculum. I think there may be some mixed reactions but overwhelmingly it is my hope that it’s met with a real open mind because the way the curriculum has been designed, as

I said earlier, really follows fairly traditional goals and benchmarks for teaching, and it tackles a subject that many students are going to be very interested in, that they may have heard about in the news, have had questions about themselves. It introduces them to a provocative thesis that they may have a strong reaction to, either agreeing or disagreeing with.

The curriculum walks them through the process of thinking through critically a set of data, history, facts and claims and wrestling with them and discussing them and learning new vocabulary and exploring in a much deeper way aspects of our history that often are glossed over in textbooks or classroom discussions.

I've heard many, many reports from teachers who have been using this book in their classrooms already that it's been incredibly successful, that students have been excited about reading it and excited about talking about it. In a couple of instances students after class wound up forming their own clubs to focus on ending mass incarceration. In Louisville, Kentucky, a citywide town hall was organized by students who had read the book and were interested in holding a citywide town hall on the school-to-prison pipeline issues.

We've seen already that even without a curriculum and without a point of guidance that's provided here, that teachers have been able to take the material and run with it and get very positive feedback from students and from other administrators.

Many teachers have also reported that students will go home and tell their parents about the book and that the parents will begin reading it, engaging in dialogues with their children, and in the broader community about these issues. So far the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and it's my hope that it will be met with open minds and open hearts by administrators.

#### **JUNE CHRISTIAN**

We have another Twitter question for you, Michelle, and the question is: Do you have any recommendations for parents with young children, and how can we talk about race and racism with elementary-aged kids?

#### **MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

That is a challenge that I'm facing in my own home, as I have elementary-aged children myself, and literally just two days ago my 7-year-old came home and asked me, "What is the N-word? Why won't anybody tell me what the N-word means?" We had to sit down and have a talk we already had with my older two children and explained what that word means and what its history is. Those are very painful and difficult conversations to have with your children.

In my own household and what I've learned through reading and dialogues with other parents is that it's important to talk openly and honestly but in a way that constantly reminds young people of their dignity. If you come from a faith perspective, reminding them of their own inherent divinity and value.

Also, not just emphasizing the bad things that happened in the past, but really taking every opportunity to emphasize the courage that was demonstrated, the heroic struggles, the many people of all colors who at great risk to themselves ... offered their lives and livelihoods, stood up for justice and continue to do so.

I remember when I was in school, that I absolutely hated learning about slavery and Jim Crow. I remember having just a knot in my stomach seeing pictures of slave ships with people chained like animals in the bottom of slave ships and seeing pictures of “White Only” signs in textbooks. I felt ashamed and shutdown.

Looking back, I see that my teachers were very well intentioned wanting to educate students about the horrors of slavery and Jim Crow. But not much was said about the love that endured, the beauty, the music, the songs that were born in the cotton fields, about the slave rebellions, about the courage of so many people that made abolition of slavery possible, that made the movement, the beautiful Black Freedom struggles of the Rights Movement possible.

I think in talking to elementary students as well as older students, high school students and beyond, that we just can’t describe how bad things were and what the racial slurs mean; we also constantly have to instill within our kids a sense of their own dignity and humanity and value and let them know that they are linked to a river, as Dr. Vincent Harding would put it, “A river of struggle and resistance, a movement towards justice.” That’s true for people of all colors to say that there were people who looked like them and who came from similar backgrounds who risked a lot to be part of a movement for justice. I think sharing that side of the story is very important so that students don’t just feel shame and don’t feel powerless but instead begin to imagine the possibilities for them in their own lives.

#### **JUNE CHRISTIAN**

We have another question from one of our Twitter users, Michelle, and the question is: Do you think that building a social movement starts at the local level or do we need federal leadership, or both?

#### **MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

I absolutely believe we need leadership at all levels of our government and all layers and levels of our society. But I am most deeply concerned about the consciousness and organizing capacity and leadership of those who have been most impacted by the system of mass incarceration.

I am most encouraged by the birth of organizations like the Formerly Incarcerated & Convicted Peoples Movement, organizations like All of Us or None, organizations that are comprised of and led by formerly incarcerated people and their families, people who have been demonized, discarded, locked up and thrown away who are finding their voice, reclaiming their dignity and standing up for their basic civil and human rights.

I think until we as a society begin to see those who have been demonized as criminals and

felons, and all the other labels we throw at them, until we begin to see them as human beings who have hopes and dreams, and have successes and failures, who've made mistakes in their lives, large and small, but so many of them want to contribute, want to do right by their children, and to work and contribute to our society, until we see them and hear from them in their voice and their own stories, I think it will remain very, very, easy for us to remain attached to our stereotypes and imagine that those "other"—those "other people"—are rightly disposed of.

As I described in the last chapter of the book, I think that ultimately what has to take place is not just changes in rules and laws, not just ending harsh mandatory minimum sentences, or abolishing no drug forfeiture laws which allow law enforcement to profit on the war on drugs, not just making changes to our rules and laws—but it's also about shifting our consciousness and what's most important is the way we go about making change.

If the way in which we pursue advocacy and the way in which we talk about the work that we're doing doesn't help to achieve a fairly radical shift in consciousness so that we begin to view poor people and folks who are trapped in segregated, jobless ghettos as people who are deserving of our care and compassion and concern; until that shift in consciousness takes place, we will continue to birth these exclusionary or oppressive systems in one form or another.

I am much more interested in what ordinary people think and are doing and what those who have been most impacted by this system are thinking and doing in response to it than I am in what politicians, most of whom are bought and paid for by people who do not share necessarily the interest of the poor and the most disadvantaged.

My hope rests not with our politicians but with the rest of us who care enough to educate ourselves, engage in dialogue, organize and use whatever skills, talents or abilities we have in service of this movement. That is what I believe will help to shift the consciousness and build a truly transformative movement.

#### **JUNE CHRISTIAN**

We're nearing the end of the webinar and I have another question that I'd like to ask you from our Twitter followers: Someone said, Michelle, that your thesis focuses on young men and, at a time when African-American women are graduating from college at the highest rate that it's been in our history, can you hypothesize about the impact of mass incarceration on women?

#### **MICHELLE ALEXANDER**

That's an excellent question and I think it's important ... I state in the introduction, actually, to the book that the book focuses primarily on the experiences of black men in our criminal justice system, but it's critically important for us to explore the impact on immigrants, on poor people generally, on women as well, women of all colors—and black women in particular have been greatly impacted by the war on drugs and the system of mass incarceration.

There have been large increases in the rate of incarcerations for women, particularly women of color over the last 30 or 40 years. The increases have been primarily due to [the] drug war. Women in prison are overwhelmingly convicted of non-violent and drug-related offenses. They're often convicted for crimes related to the activities of men in their lives and very often find themselves getting harsher sentences than men because they may not snitch or do not want the father of their children to do time and wind up getting punished even more severely in our system.

The impact of incarceration on women is enormous in communities of color where already so many men are missing from the home. Many children find themselves in foster care as a result of the system of mass incarceration and its impact on women as well as on men.

But as the question implies, it's absolutely true that women, black women, are graduating at rates from college now that are quite impressive and often seem to be having a different experience in the era of mass incarceration than many men. If you look at the numbers from many colleges, you'll see that sometimes there's three times, four times more black women than black men in many colleges today. The system of mass incarceration and the drug war has a lot to do with that.

In the book I described some of the work of William Julius Wilson and others who have explored this gender divide in more depth than I do in my own work. But certainly the disappearance of work, of industrial work in the inner-city communities in the last few decades, has had a much greater impact on men than it has on women. But just because men have been experiencing higher incarceration rates than women does not mean that women are unaffected by the incarceration.

It means that there are far, far more single women attempting to raise children without a father who's in the home often; their father may be behind bars or even if the father has been released from prison, because he's been branded a criminal or a felon, is facing legal discrimination in employment, is barred from public housing and discriminated against [by] private landlords, and the ability for them to contribute financially and in other ways to their children and to play the role of a traditional father is greatly hampered, and this places an enormous burden on women that are forced to figure out how to go it alone and all hold their families and communities together, as so many millions of men find themselves cycling in and out of prison during this time.

As I said in the book, it's my hope that other scholars will build on the work that I have done and the work that others have done and explore in much greater depth the impact of mass incarceration on women and the differences as well as the similarities experienced by this group in time.

**JUNE CHRISTIAN**

That concludes our webinar for this evening.

Thank you, Michelle, for an enlightening evening.

To our audience members, the archive of this webinar will be available tomorrow. We encourage you to share it widely with family, friends and colleagues and all of the teachers that you know. Thank you for attending tonight's webinar and participating in the Twitter chat.

We will welcome Michelle back on October 29th for an in-depth discussion of the teacher's guide to *The New Jim Crow*. We invite you to sign up for our newsletter at [tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org) for more details as the release date for the new teacher's guide nears.

Upon the end of this webinar, we would appreciate your completing a brief feedback survey. Again, I thank each of you for your time and participation tonight.

Michelle, again, I thank you for such a brilliantly inspired evening. Good night.