

"New Jim Crow" discriminates against people with a criminal record

Written by Christina Cerruti, TC Daily Planet
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Minneapolis resident Manu Lewis has spent the past four years working to turn his life around and give back to society despite his criminal record. "I do a lot of volunteer work. I do a lot of community work," he said. "I do a lot of organizing within the community that I reside in, but the fact still remains that society still sees me as a convicted felon. So no matter how much time I volunteer, no matter how many good deeds I try to do, I always have that stigma attached to me." He looks to people like Michelle Alexander who are "trying to overthrow some of these policies that are keeping the community held hostage."

Michelle Alexander is an author, professor, civil rights lawyer and advocate, who has represented hundreds of victims of racial profiling and police brutality during her career. With ten years experience advocating for change in the criminal justice system, she visited the St. Thomas campus in St. Paul on April 8 to share the thesis of her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*

She explained that the idea of "the New Jim Crow" has emerged since "it is no longer permissible to use race explicitly as a justification for discrimination, exclusion and social contempt. We use our criminal justice system to label people of color criminals, and then engage in practices that we supposedly left behind."

Alexander outlined how it appears to be "perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals," and that "once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination, employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, exclusion from jury service are suddenly legal."

According to Alexander, Minnesota has the second lowest incarceration rate in the U.S. However that doesn't mean that there aren't families and communities in the state who are being affected by a broken criminal justice system.

Neal Dalton was an audience member who knew what it was like to return to the community after serving time in prison. After a decade behind bars, he had to work to create opportunities to start over. Since 2009, he has worked with the local group Power of People to offer support to men transitioning from prison back into the community. According to Dalton, Minnesota has

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one of the highest recidivism rates in the nation. He said that is due to a number of factors, including not having access to basic necessities like food, housing and money for transportation.

"If you lose your housing for whatever reason or if you can't obtain housing once you're already out, it's a potential violation of parole," he said. One of the key components to creating better opportunities for those looking for a second chance is raising awareness about these issues. "A crime shouldn't define a person, because people can change," he said. "The fact of the matter is that 90 percent of people will come out of prison at some point in time. And the question is what kind of people do you want coming back out into your society?"

During her lecture, Alexander also pointed out the effect that the mass incarceration of African American males has had on African American women. She cited an article titled, *How the Mass Incarceration of Black Men Hurts Black Women*, published two years ago by The Economist magazine that declared that the majority of black women in the United States are unmarried, including 70 percent of black professional women. The article explains that this is due in large part to mass incarceration of black men, which takes them out of the dating pool at the years that they are most likely to commit to a partner or to a family.

This idea really resonated with DeVon Nolen, a mother raising three sons. She believes that there is a system in place that has created these conditions. "It's no coincidence that my father, brother, husband... I can go on and on of the list of black men in my family who have been incarcerated whether justly or unjust," she said. As an activist and community organizer, Nolen says that she is really looking forward to the action that will come from more people working to fight mass incarceration in society.

At the end of her lecture, Michelle Alexander sounded the alarm for a major social movement to fight to end mass incarceration in the U.S. "We've got to move beyond finger-pointing and wishful thinking and be willing to do the hard work of organizing on behalf of poor people of all colors," she said. "That's our job in a democracy, to do that work. Not expect the politicians to lead and for us to follow. But for we the people to lead and demand that our politicians follow."

To these words, Nolen said that she was "looking for people to put some power behind the words and really use our power as a collective voice of American citizens and say this is something that is against humanity. It's a human crime. So I'm excited about that," she said.

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