

One nation, under lock and key

BY ROSETTE ROYALE
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contributed to the problem.

Lawyer and author Michelle Alexander says we need a social movement to change the criminal justice system

Imagine you could arrest every single person in Houston, Texas, and toss them behind bars. Sounds crazy, doesn't it? But maybe, in some sense, something similar has already happened. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, nearly 2.3 million people exist in prisons and jails. That's how many people live in Houston, the country's fourth-largest city.

Nearly 60 percent of those locked up were nabbed for drug related crimes. Of the more than two million who are incarcerated, 38 percent are black; in 20 states, the number of black people behind bars far exceeds the number who aren't. And these figures don't include people on probation or parole. What, you might be inclined to ask, is going on here?

Michelle Alexander, a lawyer who directed the ACLU's Racial Justice Project of Northern California, set out to get some answers to this question. What she found distressed her. Our country's mass incarceration has come as a direct result of policies that target poor people of color, policies that have national precedent. The evidence to support her claims fills the pages of "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness," (The New Press, \$27.95), a sobering look at how we've become the nation with more people incarcerated than any other.

In town to give a number of talks sponsored by the Bush School's Diversity Speaker Series, Alexander, currently an Associate Law Professor at Ohio State University, sat down at Mount Zion Baptist Church to discuss what she's learned. She spoke not only of how and why these inequities arose, but how, in an unexpected twist, her early belief in the criminal justice system may have

Rosette Royale: So you wrote a book called "The New Jim Crow." First, let's start with the old Jim Crow. What's that?

Michelle Alexander: Well, the old Jim Crow is a system of rules, laws, policies and customs that served to lock a group of people defined by race into a permanent second-class status. Jim Crow laws authorized discrimination in virtually every aspect of social, political and economic life. Most people think of Jim Crow as separate schools for black children and white, but of course Jim Crow laws also authorized discrimination in access to employment, housing, education, all sorts of public benefits, all sorts of public accommodations. It created a race-based regime of social control.

R.R.: And the name Jim Crow. Where does that even come from?

M.A.: Actually, it came from a song-and-dance routine and the character was named Jim Crow. It was a minstrel show that was mocking of African Americans and celebrated the worst racial stereotypes that justified discrimination during that era. So Jim Crow was a pejorative term that came to be associated with all those forms of race discrimination.

R.R.: So that was the old. And now, it seems we're in the new. How do you define the new Jim Crow?

M.A.: The new Jim Crow is a system of mass incarceration that serves to sweep millions of poor people, primarily poor people of color, into a



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Michelle Alexander

"Within a few short decades, this vast, new under-caste emerged that swept millions of folks for primarily non-violent and drug-related offenses, the same types of crimes that occur with roughly equal frequency in middle class communities, on college campuses and universities that get ignored. Millions of folks."

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