



Together we can make a difference.

SPRING 2019 BOOK DISCUSSION

EVENT SUMMARY

A capacity crowd gathered at the home of Many Hands member Lydia Marshall on April 11 to discuss Michelle Alexander's award-winning book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Co-moderator Jill Rosenbaum Meyer, a television news and documentary producer and Many Hands board member, opened the evening with a quotation from the author summarizing her message: "We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it." Co-moderator Candice Jones, President and CEO of the Public Welfare Foundation and a Many Hands member, then joined Meyer in a dialogue about the book's central themes.

Their discussion emphasized the importance of understanding the U.S. criminal justice system in historical context. Since the 1970s, when the war on drugs began, the incarcerated population has grown from 200,000 people to more than 2,000,000 today. At the same time, the U.S. has created a permanent underclass of people who have been released from prison but remain locked out of the full benefits of citizenship. This is a story, in Jones's words, of how policy creates a crisis.

The story begins with the Rockefeller drug laws, which established the country's harshest penalties for drug possession or sale when they were adopted in New York in 1973. The approach driving this legislation, Jones explained, was to "take a sickness and frame it as a crime." Two decades later, the nation's prisons were filled with people convicted of small drug crimes, including a hugely disproportionate number of people of color.

As Meyer pointed out, the criminal justice system that has enforced the war on drugs is colorblind on paper but differs significantly by race in practice. Jones noted that although research shows no differences by race in marijuana use, there are large racial discrepancies in marijuana-related arrest and conviction rates. These gaps often reflect differences in how the police see their role--as controlling or protecting a community. Similarly, she highlighted the stark difference between attitudes toward the earlier war on drugs and today's opioid crisis, which is widely seen as a public health emergency.

Jones and Meyer also focused on the broader impact of incarceration, especially on women, children, and families. More than half of the people entering prison are parents and heads of households, Jones observed. Even before a parent goes on trial, the cost of entering the criminal justice system can be devastating. A parent who is unable to make bail runs a high risk of losing not just her job but her housing and custody of her children. Involvement in the criminal justice system also makes it more likely that her children will experience school failure and become involved in conflicts with the law.

The U.S. loses \$50 billion to \$60 billion in GDP each year due to a criminal justice system that costs \$80 billion to operate. Yet the growth rate of investment in prisons continues to outpace increases in investment in education. These outcomes represent, in Jones's words, an indictment of American society and an equal opportunity partisan failure.

Jones and Meyer then opened the floor up to members of audience, including representatives of two 2018 Many Hands grant recipients working with formerly incarcerated women: Kari Galloway, executive director of Friends of Guest House, and Ashley McSwain, executive director of Community Family Life Services. Helenia Bragg, a former Friends of Guest House resident, also shared her perspective.

The ensuing discussion addressed a wide range of topics, including the role of guns and gun policy in the criminal justice system; efforts to help former felons participate in the legal cannabis industry; policing reforms, including data-informed policing and community investments; the important role played by prosecutors in the criminal justice system; prospects for the implementation of uniform police standards in the U.S.; examples of more humane criminal justice systems (Norway, the Netherlands, and Germany were cited); restorative justice alternatives to the current system; the special challenges facing incarcerated women, now the fastest growing part of the prison population; the impact of prison privatization and the growth of the prison-industrial complex, which has grown to encompass detention centers for immigrants; and the recently passed First Step Act, which retroactively eliminated disparities in sentencing for crack- and cocaine-related convictions.

Additional reading recommended by Candice Jones:

- Danielle Sered, [*Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road to Repair*](#)
- Patrick Sharkey, [*Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence*](#)