



ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL LACHINE

War on Drugs racist

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Last year, I wrote a grant proposal on behalf of three organizations seeking a total of about \$300,000 from the Bureau of Justice Assistance to fund a mentoring program for ex-offenders re-entering the community. BJA was one of two offices administering Second Chance Act Grants, funding meant to help nonprofit organizations implement programs that would “improve re-entry planning and implementation,” the purpose of the Second Chance Act of 2007.

Mariam Williams



After reading Dr. Michelle Alexander's book, “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,” and hearing her keynote address at the Anne Braden Institute's memorial lecture last week, I feel like the grant was a sham and a glaring example of the government

Mass incarceration and the ugly specter of a new Jim Crow

waste we hear is so prevalent.

I feel this way because, according to Dr. Alexander, the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government have structured our criminal justice system so as to guarantee a vicious cycle of imprisonment and recidivism, especially among the people targeted in the War on Drugs.

The target is poor people of color. To paraphrase Dr. Alexander's thesis, mass incarceration has relegated millions of black and brown people in America to legalized second-class citizenship, creating a caste system that is the moral equivalent of Jim Crow. Rather than rely on race to strip away civil rights gains, our government and our society in general label people of color “criminals” and continue the practices civil rights legislation was supposed to abolish, in-

cluding discrimination in employment, education and housing and denial of the rights to vote, to serve on juries and to receive governmental assistance.

Keep these four points from Dr. Alexander's book in: 1) The U.S. prison population has quintupled since 1970. 2) Mass incarceration is a direct result of the War on Drugs. 3) The War on Drugs has been waged almost exclusively in communities of color, despite research that consistently shows all races use and/or sell illegal drugs at equal rates, except among youth. In that case, black youth are less likely than white youth to use or sell illegal drugs. 4) The role of personal responsibility notwithstanding, mass incarceration is wrong, its seizure of liberties is un-American, and it must end.

Mass incarceration has dec-

imated millions of families and entire communities. While that saddens me, the legislative and judicial role in the imprisonment explosion angers me. Through grant programs and asset allocation legislation, the federal government incentivizes local police departments to continue practices that are 99 percent ineffective at stopping drug possession, sales, use or crime. The U.S. Supreme Court has forced citizens to surrender their 4th Amendment rights and has made it impossible to file a lawsuit against a police department or prosecutor based on racial discrimination. The War on Drugs is well-funded and the U.S. Supreme Court has pre-empted challenges to its enforcement. The system is so thorough it keeps privatized, publicly traded prisons that employ some 700,000 people in business.

And to complicate life forever, or to ensure permanent second-class status, the government often prevents parol-

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ees and ex-offenders from obtaining the very stability needed to successfully reintegrate into life on the outside. They do so through legislation that opens all criminals and ex-offenders, no matter the nature of their crime, to employment discrimination and bars them from many professional licenses and from governmental housing, educational funding and even food assistance.

As I read Dr. Alexander's book, I thought of a number of small ways to combat the War on Drugs and its effects. Get the American Civil Liberties Union into classrooms to teach the youth targeted in the War on Drugs their rights. Build mixed income housing so that a war waged on poor people directly affects people of all incomes, who won't tolerate invasive tactics in their neighborhoods. Invest in the education, infrastructure and job training needed in poor communities to eliminate the violent crime that the War on Drugs doesn't.

But I think the most effective way to stop mass incarceration in the near future is to page Dr. Paul and Dr. Paul. That is, cut mass incarceration's monetary supply and raise awareness about the government's unchecked power in the War on Drugs.

Kentucky's own junior U.S. Senator, Dr. Rand Paul, and his father, Dr. Ron Paul, R-Texas, both claim to want a smaller, less intrusive government. (The elder Dr. Paul wants to legalize marijuana, an obvious necessity to ending the War on Drugs.) If that's true, they have to oppose tax dollars funding a practice that is rendering millions of people unemployable and labeling them useless at a time when America can't afford to forfeit anyone's potential.

The people unwilling to consider raising taxes on the "One Percent" to balance the budget should consider not rewarding law enforcement for using expensive and largely ineffective tactics in the War on Drugs. Representatives who fear large government erodes freedom should be

appalled at warrantless car sweeps and at mandatory sentencing. And instead of giving away millions of dollars each year to different organizations to do what Congress and the US Supreme Court have made it impossible to do, why not just eliminate the laws that bar ex-offenders from fully participating in the economy?

Given the state of the economy and record-low approval ratings of Congress and the President, declaring the War on Drugs a national economic catastrophe and a failure of big government might be the best approach to ending it.

According to Alexander, however, this is not enough. She asserts that to keep Jim Crow from reincarnating again, we must acknowledge the racial motives behind mass incarceration and have a national conversation about race.

Mass incarceration, she explains, is driven by race, not by crime rates. President Ronald Reagan declared the War on Drugs before crack cocaine appeared in poor communities of color. He made the

face of drug use and of crime a black one, and he did it to appeal to poor and working class whites who feared they had lost irrecoverable ground in the years following the Civil Rights Movement. He preferred securing their votes over securing poor communities of color by financing an economic and educational revival in areas that manufacturing had abandoned.

I don't dispute Alexander's declaration that talking about race is necessary for preventing another Jim Crow system. As she makes clear in her book, her point has already been proven at least twice. Convict leasing, a form of free labor initiated after the Civil War, replaced slavery. The War on Drugs and the removal of civil rights from ex-offenders has many of the same effects Jim Crow had on "free" blacks from the early 1900s to the signing of the Civil Rights Act. There is no reason to believe that the powerful class won't again use progress towards racial equality to make poor and working class whites feel slighted and then invent new policies to retract those gains and give the

class of whites for whom they possibly have equal disdain a false sense of security.

The question, for me, then becomes: How do you have a conversation with people who aren't in the room?

You see, there were a number of students who chose not to hear the lecture, and I'm not referring to the thousands of students who attend the school but couldn't possibly fit in an auditorium that holds 500. The entire student body couldn't fit in the Yum Center, either. I'm talking about the students who left before the lecture began. When it was clear that about 20 people who wanted to attend would not be able to because there weren't enough seats, two professors announced that they would still give their students credit for attending the lecture if they left then and gave up their seats for people who wanted to be there. The professors gave their students a choice, and once they knew that in their absence they would still receive their incentive for going, the students chose not to stay and listen to an honest lecture about racialized injustice.

Even in our institutions of higher learning, a place where free thinking is encouraged—and, I must note, a place that gets increasingly inaccessible for poor and working class people every semester—the people we expect to lead us in the future can ignore these stark realities.

Perhaps the solution is to incentivize a national conversation. To engage poor and working class whites who, Alexander notes, have been disenfranchised, and to avoid preaching to the choir, I believe the best chance for this movement is to frame it, initially, as an economic necessity. To compete globally with countries that have billions of people, we must equip as many people as possible in the U.S. for productive citizenship. Is the promise of restoring our world super-power status enough to talk about race in America today? Depending on people to care just because there's a problem affecting other human beings isn't enough to end this injustice.

Mariam Williams is a writer who lives in Louisville. More of her writing can be found at RedboneAfropuff.com.