



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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