

The Impact of Mass incarceration on Peoples of African Descent: An Interview with Dr. Raymond A. Winbush

by

Guest Editor

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Raymond A. Winbush, Ph.D. is a scholar/activist in reference to the developmental psychology of African boys, and for reparations for the Trans-Atlantic trade in human beings. He is currently Director of the Institute for Urban Research at Morgan State University in Baltimore Maryland, the former Benjamin Hooks Professor of Social Justice at Fisk University, past Director of the Fisk University Race Relations Institute, and the former Assistant Provost and Director of the Johnson Black Cultural Center at Vanderbilt University.

RR (Ray Von Robertson): When you hear phrases like mass incarceration or the prison industrial complex, what thoughts immediately come to mind?

RW (Raymond A. Winbush): My thoughts are immediately summed up in two words, or three words, I guess, Black people and enslavement, because they are so closely associated with each other.

RR: What specifically related to those two words come to mind?

RW: Well, I always tell Black folks that we need to visit the thirteenth amendment of the constitution because it clearly states that enslavement was abolished, except for the punishment for a crime.

To me, there is a straight line between enslavement and the peonage system where they would loan out Black people who were in jail and the modern Prison Industrial Complex. It is a straight historical line. And so these words “mass incarceration” do not make you think of White people or women. You think of Black men. And that again is a straight line.

This silly show on T.V., *Orange is the New Black* was written by a White woman who was in jail for a year. She does not have a history.....what do you mean, the new Black? In other words, we are supposed to think that mass incarceration is not happening to us. So when I think of mass incarceration, to me, as a scholar, there is a direct connection between enslavement and mass incarceration.

RR: Why do you think of Black men when it comes to mass incarceration instead of Black women?

See, there was no mass incarceration of Black men during enslavement because you had free labor. It was real simple. Black women are involved in mass incarceration now, in fact, the fastest increase, or one of the fastest increasing prison populations is Black women. But look at the crimes they are committing. Most women are committing economic crimes----selling drugs, writing bad checks, sex trade, prostitution, as opposed to the men who are there for violence and non-violent drug offenses. I think the reason Black women are committing those types of crimes is because they do not have the general of an intact Black family with the Black man in prison. I also think of Black women, but not as much because they are not disproportionately in the prison population like Black men.

RR: In your opinion, does mass incarceration effect people of African descent diaspora negatively, and if so, how?

RW: It does. I will give you an example. I was in Trinidad two days ago. In an all-Black nation, twenty-six Black men have been shot by the police since the beginning of the year. I live in Baltimore and our numbers are not that high. I was in London a couple of years ago giving a lecture, same thing, Black men are in trouble. I was in Australia five years ago and there is a mass incarceration of aboriginal people. We know what is going on this country with mass incarceration. The final stop that I can say that I have seen the impact of mass incarceration was France and there is also mass incarceration there.

See, people laugh when Dr. Frances Cress Welsing says the Black male is under attack globally as a threat to White supremacists. If I were a White supremacist, the first target I would pick would be Black men because they have the ability to genetically annihilate us. I would pick men and boys, like Trayvon Martin. These are the men that can perpetuate the group of people we feel threatened by.

So, does this adversely affect us? Yes, because it deprives families, children of fathers, women of men, it also increases the chances of the spread of sexually transmitted diseases within prisons because of sexual violence against men. We would be surprised at the number of Black males who are walking around right now, ex-felons who are rape victims (prison rape) and do not want to talk about it. All of the aforementioned are adverse effects in my opinion.

RR: What role, if any, does White supremacy play in mass incarceration?

RW: White supremacy is at the core of it. You have methods in place to restrict the movements, freedom, and the ability of Black men to express themselves that have been in place since 1441 when the first twenty Africans were kidnapped and taken to Madeira Island by the Portuguese. Those were the first enslaved Africans we can document from confinement in the barracoons, the march from the interior to the shores of Africa, West Africa primarily, to inevitable enslavement across the diaspora. All of this, the idea of how do you control Black male bodies. We see this throughout our enslavement, obviously.

An example of the control of Black bodies is the pimp walk. I remember when we grew up there was this walk called the “pimp walk.” The pimp walk originated with Black men who tried to escape enslavement. Those who tried to escape and were caught and were then given the option of having “half their foot cut off” or “castration.” So if you saw “roots” you know that was what John Amos chose. As a result of that, the man was walking the “pimp walk” because he was limping. However, he was a man of stature of the plantation (because he attempted to escape). So when young Black men saw that man of stature with half a foot, which was a direct to enslavement. So, the confinement of Black male Bodies is one of the primary goals of White supremacy.

When you look at George Zimmerman, Trayvon (Martin) was at his house and he (Zimmerman) wanted to restrict his movement. The restriction of movement, I do not care if it is Selma to Montgomery, the marches, even the million youth march years ago with Khalid Muhammad in New York. They put barriers up so they would be confined. The confining of Black bodies was a historical tool of White supremacy. Another example, how many times have you seen police make young Black males sit on the curb with their hands in the air? When you see it, you see three or four young brothers, fourteen to fifteen years old, sitting on the curb. I actually asked a police officer “why do you make them sit on the curb?” The officer replied “it restricts their movement so they cannot escape.”

I said to myself as a psychologist, it still restricts the movement of Black men. Conversely, White men have always been free to wander and walk all over the place. Stop and frisk in New York. Restricting the movement of Black men.

RR: What impact, if any, has the militarization of the police has had on mass incarceration? It is horrible. Again, when I was in Trinidad a couple of days ago I saw the militarization of the police. The militarization of the police is going on all over the world, but it is most visible in the United States. All of these armored vehicles that are coming back after the Iraq war, the Afghanistan war, and the other weapons are being passed on to police departments across the United States. This started during the Reagan administration. When I grew up on the eastside of Cleveland (a rough side of town) you did not see cops with helmets on and flack vests and Black armored trucks. Back then, you only saw police cars. The highest rate of police murders of Black people takes is in Jamaica which has had 230 police killings of Black people this year. Trinidad is running high in police murders as well. What is ironic is that as the militarization of the police force has direct implications on Black males we are the prey.

RW: In your opinion, have Black politicians done enough to end mass incarceration? No, because crime is always an issue. All politicians, regardless of color will say they are going to reduce crime. Everybody says that. First of all, violent crime is at an all-time low in the United States. This is one of the most peaceful eras in American history that we are experiencing. Most people do not even know how much crime is being committed in their community. The eleven o'clock news, which I never look at before I go to sleep, is full of blood and guts and viewers leave with the idea that this is a dangerous city I live in.

Take Chicago for instance. Even when we hear all of this stuff about the murders in Chicago, when the murders go down, which has been the case for the past six months, you do not hear anything about it. If you ask the average American, he/she will not know that violent crime is at an all-time low. You know one of the time periods with substantial lows for Black crime was 1995-1998. You know why it was so low during this period?

Because on October 16, 1995, the Million Man March took place in Washington, D.C. People do not want to give Farrakhan credit for the increase in Black adoption, the increase in payment of child support, and the massive decrease in Black crime. So I think politicians fall into the trap. So we need to engage in honest dialogue with politicians about the level of crime. Unfortunately, they are more worried about getting elected.

RR: What can laypersons, scholars, and activists do to end mass incarceration?

RW: We can start organizing against it. Legal scholar Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) is an excellent guide for outlining what we need to know about and what we need to do. I was lucky to have taught her when she was a student at Vanderbilt University years ago. She has always been on the case about this stuff, even as a student. Further, we need to call on our elected officials (of all colors) on the carpet in a forum and ask them if they are for or against mass incarceration. Additionally, we need to ask them "what are you doing to exonerated, parole, or put on probation those older and younger Black males who were put in prison for minor drug offenses?" And if they give an insufficient answer, we vote them out of office. But we do not ask those sorts of questions of our politicians.

RR: Thank you Dr. Winbush for granting me this interview on behalf of the *Journal of Pan African Studies*.

RW: Thank you.

[The above interview was conducted June 18, 2014]