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More to the Story

Recent decisions by New York Federal Court Judge Shira Scheindlin and Attorney General Eric Holder regarding stop-and-frisk practices and mandatory minimum sentences are a wakeup call. While criticized by some who simplify the issues, there is more to this complicated story that must be told. Their actions should raise the bar of our consciousness.

The story begins by acknowledging the discouraging data predictions about literacy rates in this country. In a nation that prides itself in its commitment to equal access to education, hundreds of thousands of children are still not achieving the reading standard that is appropriate to their particular grade level. There is a looming disparity affecting children and youth who are overlooked because of race and economic marginalization.

According to a 2010 Report by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, millions of American children reach fourth grade without learning to read proficiently. They further state that the highest impact is on children from low income families. It is well researched that reading at grade level by the 3rd grade is crucial to the child's further educational development and to lower a child's potential for dropping out of school. Literacy is also a contributor to one's ability to earn a living wage. The Department of Justice states, "the link between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is *welded to reading*." Evidence shows that children who do not read by third grade often drop out of school, take drugs, or go to

prison. Because of this unfortunate, but reliable data, states use the rate of illiteracy to help calculate the number of prison beds they will need in the future.

Speaking of prison beds, this alarming story must include the growth in the Prison Industrial Complex over the past few years. This is especially true in communities with small populations that have few other commercial businesses. Current calculations show that the price tag for public and private prisons is over \$300 billion. It is lucrative income for private companies who own and operate prisons. However, as in any business, their first priority is profit and not the reduction in crime or the rehabilitation of a human life. If we care about the common good of our society, we must require public accountability for our incarceration system and invest in our children's future in the first chapters of this story.

The most recent chapter in the story includes the New York City Police statistic that shows 84% of the persons who experienced the stop-and-frisk police practices between 2004 and 2012 were African American and Latinos. We should each be aware of the statistics in our own towns and cities because I suspect they would be similar. Attorney General Holder interrupted the story by stopping the practice of imposing mandatory minimums for low-level drug related crimes. Their actions reveal the unequal impact on people who are poor and people of color, specifically African American and Latino males.

Michelle Alexander, author of "[The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.](#)" said, "Today's announcements give us fresh hope that there is, in fact, a growing public consensus that the path that we, the nation, have been on for the past 40 years has been deeply misguided and has caused far more harm and suffering than it has prevented."

Judge Scheindlin and Attorney General Holder took some small steps toward equal justice for all, but there is so much more to the story that we must hear.

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