Excerpted from **Ferguson shows America’s two systems of justice**

By Johanna Wald  NOVEMBER 25, 2014

For weeks this summer, after black teenager Michael Brown was gunned down by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson, Mo., the nation was witness to many disturbing images. We saw police in riot gear jumping out of armored trucks as if they were an occupying army, citizens being tear gassed in their own yards, and community members gasping in horror and disbelief. But the image that is seared forever in my consciousness is of the lifeless body of Michael Brown, lying on the ground in the street, alone, uncovered, in the middle of the afternoon, with blood spilling from his head.

He was left by the police to lie like that for four hours.

No grand jury decision not to indict Darren Wilson can erase that image. … It powerfully conveyed what those of us who examine the research on a regular basis have long acknowledged. In this country, we have two systems of justice: one for White America and one for Black America, particularly for Young Black Male America.

… This is fact, supported by an ever-growing body of evidence. “The threshold to decide to shoot is set lower for African-Americans than for whites,’’ noted Dr. Bernadette Park, author of a 2002 study revealing that participants viewing video simulations were more likely to shoot unarmed blacks than armed whites. The same could be said about the threshold to arrest, to detain, to charge, to convict and to sentence. Defendants with darker skin and more stereotypically “African American” features receive harsher sentences than their more light-skinned peers for similar offenses. At every stage, our nation’s system of justice functions like a maze for young African American men, pushing them deeper and deeper inside, and offering them fewer and fewer exits out.

The tragic death of Michael Brown, and the resulting increased media scrutiny on police practices, has pulled back the curtain on at least one aspect of that system. …It is becoming harder and harder for white Americans to rationalize away these images, or to deny that bias — be it intentional or unconscious — is at least partly responsible.

And therein lies hope, irrespective of the grand jury’s decision. Because biases, like policies, practices, and laws, are not set in stone. They can be reduced, shrunk, even eliminated, within ourselves and within our institutions.

Patricia Devine, professor of social psychology at the University of Wisconsin, has written that three factors need to be in place to break a “prejudice habit.” One is that we must acknowledge that we hold biases, even if they are unconscious. The second is that we must be motivated to change. And the third is that we must give ourselves time to practice new ways of thinking, acting, and making decisions. I suspect that, as a nation, Step One — acknowledgment — is our major stumbling block. We have been in a collective denial about the extent, reality, and real-world effects of our racial biases for a very long time.

And yet, as a nation, we have proven time and again that we have it within us to change, to right a wrong, to inch ever-so-slightly closer to that aspirational “perfect union.” … Perhaps the tragedy of Michael Brown, and the outrage, heartache, anger and despair that his death has sparked, will make us want such a society just a little harder.