



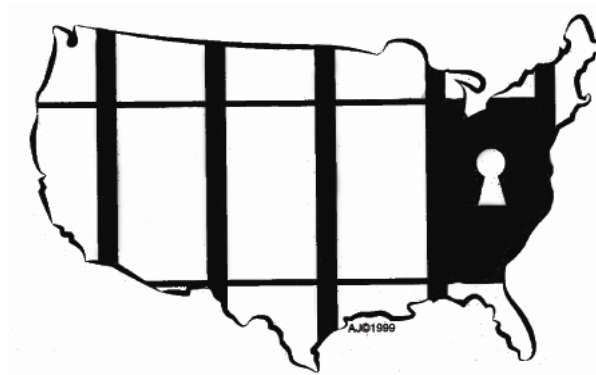
Drug treatment can fight prison bias

By ROBERT GANGI
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While race is a major subtext in this year's presidential campaign, the candidates rarely talk about it directly. They also rarely mention the issue area where racial bias in America takes its most virulent form, namely prison-related policies and practices.

Representatives of the Correctional Association of New York observe this racism in action regularly when we inspect conditions inside New York City's court pens that confine recently arrested people. On some days inside the facilities in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Manhattan, we will not see one white face, but cell after cell filled with black and brown people. The term "disproportionate confinement of minorities" does not capture the reality. More accurate to say the exclusive confinement. It is not surprising that the incarceration rate for African-Americans in New York is higher today than the incarceration rate for blacks in South Africa at the height of apartheid.

These distressing circumstances are not new, but have been in the making in New York and the rest of the United States for the past 35 years. Imprisonment trends over that time can be likened to a voracious monster created and nourished by government actions. In a historical development – unprecedented in the country and, in fact, the world – our nation's prison population has grown exponentially, by more than 600 percent from about 300,000 in the early 1970s to more than 2.3 million today.



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New York has the dubious distinction of having led the way. The incarceration rate in New York and in the country hit an all-time low point in 1972. Instead of locking up addicts, the state was directing many drug abusers into treatment programs run by the New York State Narcotics Addiction Control Agency.

Things changed in 1973 when Gov. Nelson Rockefeller successfully pressured the Legislature to enact harsh drug laws that applied to even low-level, nonviolent offenders. These statutes are the granddaddy of restrictive mandatory sentencing measures enacted by legislatures across the country during the last 3 1/2 decades.

Measured in statistics alone, the consequences of this get-tough sentencing approach staggers the imagination and the conscience. The United States now has the highest incarceration rate in the world by far – 25 percent of the world's inmates are confined in our country's prisons and jails. More than 500,000 our nation's prisoners are drug offenders charged with or convicted of nonviolent crimes.

The numbers also show that poor communities of color have felt the brunt of our government's so-called war on drugs. About three-fourths of the nation's prisoners locked up for drug offenses are minorities – this, despite research demonstrating that the majority of drug users and sellers are white. In New York, the figures are even more stark: 90 percent of the drug offenders in state prison for the sale or possession of narcotics are African-American or Latino. The majority of drug users and sellers, though, are white.

If current trends continue, one of every three black males born in the United States today can expect to serve time in prison.

Why are so many more African-Americans and Latinos in prison for drug crimes?

The hard reality, made worse by having the mandatory sentencing statutes on the books, is that law enforcement efforts focus almost entirely on low-income inner-city communities of color. In New York City, for example, police squads carrying out recent anti-drug initiatives have been sent principally into such areas.

Remedies are available to address these problems. Many studies, including several sponsored by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and a 1997 report by the RAND Corp.'s Drug Policy Research Center, have demonstrated that drug treatment programs, on the whole, are not only less costly, but also more successful than imprisonment in reducing drug abuse and crime rates, and in increasing drug offenders' ability to find and hold jobs.

If our nation's leaders are wary of the political liabilities they would incur by their advocacy for repealing harsh sentences and expanding treatment alternatives, they can seek insulation and take courage from the widespread support that the public has shown in several polls for these kinds of measures.

The United States Conference of Mayors, a body representing the mayors of America's large cities, unanimously approved a resolution last June stating that the war on drugs has failed. The resolution also condemned mandatory minimum sentences and the incarceration of drug offenders, and called for more funding for treatment programs. "The drug war is causing crime. It's chewing up young black men. And it's killing Newark," says Mayor Cory Booker.

The nation's prison policy, just like New York's, is not aimed at problem-solving, but designed, at best, to achieve a pernicious kind of containment. It is inflicted on a group of people, mainly low-income inner city people of color, a small percentage of whom may be violent and scary, but who are politically powerless and without the capacity to protect themselves from government abuse or neglect.

Prisons have become the blunt instrument of a regressive social policy and it is long past due that our country's leaders, those in high office and those who aspire to it, stand up on these issues and put a stop to the political folly and moral shame of our time.

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