



Op-Ed: America's Misguided Primary Response to Crime

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Earlier this month the National Urban League published its annual report on the status of African Americans, *The State of Black America 2005*.

For the second consecutive year, we included in it the League's Equality Index, which put the overall status of African-Americans at 0.73--or, 73 percent of the level white Americans occupy in American society. As usual, our annual volume was devoted to examining the causes and consequences of the "equality gaps" that divide blacks and whites, and discussing what can be done to close them.

Now, new statistics just released by the federal government further illuminate crucial facets of our Equality Index, and also underscore another kind of gap that afflicts African Americans and the larger American society.

Those statistics from the Bureau of Justice show that the nation's prison and jail population in mid-2004 stood at 2.1 million, a slight increase of 2.3 percent from the previous year. This occurred even as the rate for both violent crimes and property crimes continued their decade-long decline.

Some assert the news indicates America's winning the fight against crime.

Actually, however, it's further evidence that American society at large is still bedeviled by its own "gap" between reality, on the one hand, and, on the other, a combination of ideology and inertia. Many in America just can't seem to give up the idea that a blanket, and simplistic, get-tough and lock-'em-up-for-as-long-as-possible response to the problem of crime is all that's needed.

The fact is they couldn't be more wrong. We need to reduce, not increase the number of people we're locking up.

I say this as a former two-term Mayor of New Orleans who had to confront an explosive and corrosive outbreak of violent street crime in that city. Believe me, I have no problem supporting measures that reduce crime nor with declaring that the punishment ought to fit the crime.

The problem is that in far too many instances the dynamic of punishment that is pushing more and more people into prisons and jails is not really in the best interests of rehabilitating the individual offenders, nor in the long-term interests of the larger society.

There, did you notice I referred to an idea that's virtually all but officially ignored today--rehabilitation?

Despite implicit assertions of get-tough policies, the overwhelming majority of those sent to prison or jail--many of whom have low educational and occupational skills--can't be locked up forever. That is particularly so because the surge in prison and jail populations has been driven by locking people up for first-time low-level drug offenses.

But four sets of statistics reveal our society's bizarre response to that reality.

One is that, according to The Sentencing Project, a criminal-justice think tank, since 1998 nearly 600,000 people have been released from prison every year.

The second is that federal data show nearly two-thirds of those released from prison are arrested for committing another serious crime within three years, and one-quarter end up being sent back to prison.

The third is that, as several government and private studies have shown, in-prison rehabilitation programs, by raising inmates' job and educational skills, improve their chances of going straight once on the outside.

And the fourth, unfortunately, is that the dollars devoted to in-prison rehab programs is paltry. The Sentencing Project found that in 1996 just 6 percent of state prison budgets were allocated for that purpose.

As a result, only 27 percent of re-entering prisoners had taken part in vocational programs, only 35 percent had participated in educational programs--and just 18 percent of those re-entering prisoners with substance abuse problems had received treatment while incarcerated.

If a significant number of ex-felons are burdened with these kinds of problems, why would we expect them not to commit crimes again? It's as if part of the nation's approach to the crime problem is based on minimizing the chances that ex-offenders will be able to go straight.

America's "reality gap" about crime and incarceration operates most corrosively among African Americans and Latino Americans, alarming and rising numbers of whom are in prison or likely to be in prison at some time in their lives. Members of these two groups now constitute nearly two-thirds of the nation's inmates. That's not a good sign for the present or the future of any sector of American society.

In our "Prescriptions for Change" manifesto in this year's *The State of Black America 2005*, we propose attacking the nation's crime problem from both ends: By improving educational quality in public schools that serve black and Latino youngsters, and expanding those job-training and career-counseling programs that target poor urban males, on the one hand; and by establishing comprehensive rehabilitation and re-entry programs within and outside of prisons that realistically give those who've committed crime a substantive chance to go straight.

It's time to eliminate America's "reality gap" about fighting crime.

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