

Why are so few white males behind bars?

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

For the last few years the Sentencing Project, a Washington D.C.-based public advocacy group, has issued a report on crime and

punishment in America.

It's findings are well-known and predictable. Nearly one out of three young black males are in prison, on parole or on probation. And they make up nearly half of those

incarcerated in America's prisons. The response to the report is just as predictable.

Many blacks and liberal critics of the criminal justice system say blacks are jailed in huge numbers because of racially biased judges, juries, and prosecutors, discrimination in the enforcement of drug laws, poverty, lack of education, and the prison construction boom.

Many conservatives, and law enforcement officials say it's because young blacks commit more crime than whites; their crimes are more violent and that much of the public, including many blacks, demand that they be locked up.

While both sides debate the issue of why so many black males are behind bars they don't ask why so many white males who commit crimes aren't. The recent shoot-out between the LAPD and two young white bank robbers in North Hollywood makes this a more crucial question than ever.

Few would argue that the two would-be hold up men were dangerous criminals. One of the bandits had three arrests and two felony convictions. One of the convictions was for weapons violations in L.A. The other was a felony conviction for real estate fraud in Denver. After pleading guilty to the charge in Denver he fled the state to avoid sentencing. The other bandit had a felony conviction for the weapons charge. Yet the fact that the pair were on the streets of North Hollywood and not behind bars raises the following questions about the workings of the criminal justice system.

• When they were stopped in Los Angeles in 1993 with what one expert called a "bank robbers kit" of legal and illegal weapons and military equipment in their car and arrested, did authorities thoroughly check to determine if they were wanted for crimes in other states? Did they discover that one was a wanted felon? If so, why wasn't he extradited to Colorado for sentencing? Did the Denver police send notices about his flight to the FBI and local police agencies nationally?

• When they were released from jail why were some of their weapons returned? The police said they were ordered by the court to return them. But the presiding judge in the case disputed that. He indicated that he authorized release of their weapons only after the District Attorney "agreed" to the release and the police had "no objection" to their release. So who did what? And why?

• When other white males are arrested on weapons

charges and police confiscate their banned firearms, what charges are filed against them? How vigorously are they prosecuted? If the charges are subsequently dropped, are their guns returned to them?

• When young white males, who are repeat offenders are arrested and again convicted of serious crimes, how many actually receive and serve their prison sentences? How many are allowed to plea bargain lesser sentences, receive probation, community service, are fined and make restitution, are referred to diversion or rehabilitation programs, or are placed under house monitoring?

The North Hollywood bandits are probably not the exception. In 1990, 32,000 more young white juveniles were arrested for murder, forcible rape, robbery and assault than young blacks. Yet more blacks than whites were

imprisoned and more blacks than whites were tried as adults.

In 1991, more than 70 percent of males arrested were white, and 25 percent were black. But between arrest, trial and prison many seemed to disappear from the system. Only 35 percent of whites were held in custody while 44 percent of the blacks were held.

According to annual FBI Uniform Crime Reports since 1991, more whites are arrested for murder, rape, robbery, assault and drug related crimes than blacks, but they are less likely to be imprisoned than blacks. The gaping disparity between arrest and imprisonment is greatest in California. Although blacks are seven percent of the population, they account for 20 percent of felony arrests, and 31 percent of those imprisoned. By contrast whites are 53 percent of the population, and account for 33

percent of felony arrests, but only 29.5 percent of those are imprisoned. Blacks are 4.7 times likelier to be arrested than whites and 7.8 times more likely to be incarcerated.

Even if we accept the argument that blacks disproportionately commit more crimes than whites, and avoid muddying the issue by claiming a racial taint to the enforcement of California's three strikes law, it still does not explain why so many fewer whites that are convicted of felony crimes are imprisoned than blacks who commit similar crimes.

If the answer is legal incompetence, official indifference or racism, we should say so. As the tragic events in North Hollywood proved, when violent offenders no matter what their color are allowed to slide through the legal cracks, we all pay a heavy and deadly price.

CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL

The new South Africa

By Bernice Powell Jackson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

I first went to South Africa in 1982 I think. I remember getting off the plane and seeing a soldier at the foot of the steps with an M-2 rifle on his shoulder. I remember visiting the homelands where millions of black South Africans had been forcibly removed to and the Pass Courts where millions were jailed for visiting their families without the government's permission. I remember talking with school children and domestic workers and church folks who were trying to survive in an almost unsurvivable situation. I remember the constant knot in the pit of my stomach which was there from the moment I landed until the moment I took off. I remember the old South Africa.



Bernice Powell Jackson

But when I visited the new South Africa last month I saw something different and I felt something different as well. I saw that nation's Parliament at work — a new interracial, representative government, whose speaker is an Indian woman and whose deputy is a black woman. I saw black immigration officers at the airport and blacks sitting in restaurants and hotel lobbies.

The new South Africa feels different as well. Gone is the sense of the military state. Gone is the prison at Robben Island and in its place is a new tourist attraction. Gone is the feeling of evil in the air — a physical feeling that I often had there — that I was in the presence of evil, that I could touch it like static electricity. Gone is the demeanor of subservience which most blacks had been forced to adopt — there's a new straightening of the back and new kind of step in the walk.

It's a new day in a new South Africa. But it is a new South Africa which is still forced to deal with some of the old problems. Old problems like the crimes of the apartheid regime, including false arrests, police brutality, torture, even murder. Old problems like the millions of black South Africans still living in shacks, still without plumbing or electricity or the millions still unemployed.

Then there is the new problem of crime. During the apartheid regime, street crimes were few due to the presence of the military force on the streets and the fact that movements of people were tightly constrained by law. The new South Africa finds, however, that it is facing the crime problems of many large cities of the world where there is high unemployment but in a context where the police are inadequately trained for dealing with street crime.

Or there is the new problem of how to adequately educate and train millions who have been educated in a system whose foundation was built upon the belief that blacks should only be educated to be servants or mine workers or mail room attendants. Or how to train the millions of unemployed in skills which can lead to viable jobs in the electronic age in which we live.

There is a new spirit in the new South Africa. There is a sense that right can triumph over might. There is a sense that reconciliation can be achieved by repentance and forgiveness. There is a sense that South Africa will be a country of justice and peace. There is a sense that all South Africans will have adequate housing and food and education and flourishing communities. There is a sense and a commitment that South African whites and blacks and coloreds and Indians can all live together and live well.

But the clash of the old and the new means that those of us on the outside cannot abandon South Africa now. Those of us who worked so hard to see the new South Africa be born cannot abandon the baby now. We must find ways to help them provide housing. We must find ways to help them provide education. We even must find ways to help them fight street crime.

A VOICE FROM THE HILL

Strange political steps

By George Wilson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

After months of wrangling, the Senate Labor Committee finally held hearings on confirming Alexis Herman as the next Secretary of Labor. From the very beginning of the proceedings, it was evident that this meeting was not going to be the political equivalent of World War III. In fact, it had all of the warmth of a high school reunion. Members of the Congressional Black Caucus exchanged pleasantries with representatives of civil rights groups and supporters of Herman displayed looks of satisfaction.

Several factors make this whole scenario seem rather strange. First, it seems a bit unusual that the same "mainstream" media outlets that featured negative stories about Herman have suddenly lost interest in her.

This is corroborated by the fact that the television coverage of the hearings was minimal at best and print stories were as scarce as "hens' teeth." How can so much mud be thrown one minute and then the next, a cease fire suddenly declared?

Secondly, senators who had concerns about some of Herman's alleged activities during her tenure as the Director of White House Public Liaison, mysteriously had very little to say about any irregularities when she appeared before them. Members of the Committee were perfect "gentle ladies and gentlemen."

However, we must be reminded that in politics, perception plays a very key

role. Republicans don't want to be perceived as a party that beats up on African Americans or women, at least not publicly. Also, the President was stung by the criticism of the debacle that accompanied his nomination of Lani Guinere, and wants to show that he will stand by a "friend." Supporters have gotten their wish for hearings. You get the picture!

After the "love-in," which doubled as a confirmation hearing, senators from both sides of the aisle were gushing about how well Herman did during them. I always find these types of descriptions troubling. Does "doing well" mean that she spoke well and answered the questions? If that is so, it shouldn't be surprising that a person who has been functioning in the world of business and national politics for years, did "well."

Under the rules of the Senate, a vote must be taken in the committee responsible for confirming a candidate before

a vote is taken on the floor of the Senate.

However, in this case, unlike the cases of some of the other members of the Cabinet, the committee didn't take a vote and won't do so until after the Easter recess. In other words, in spite of all the political posturing, Herman and supporters will continue to wait, even though they have lingered for four months so far. Dragging out this process gives those on the other side of the issue more time to mount an offensive and perhaps cast more aspersions on Herman's character. Who knows what type of mud will be thrown during the congressional recess?

In the midst of so many strange political occurrences, one might remember the words of the person who said, "it ain't over 'til it's over."

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