

COMMENTARY

Jail violence no longer black-white issue

Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Bloody riots in America's jails and prisons are hardly anything new. In the past, the battles between inmates were generally blamed on turf wars, renewal of gang rivalries, the ancient prison ritual of making a "rep" as a tough guy, and of course, Black and white racial conflict.

But the frightening new twist is that jail violence is increasingly between Blacks and Latinos.

This was horribly evident during three days of racial brawls at several L.A. County jails the first week of May, in which some Latino inmates deliberately attacked Black inmates.

More than 80 inmates, most of whom were Black, were injured in the violence, some seriously.

These weren't isolated racial assaults. Since 1991 there have been more than 150 racially-motivated fights, mostly between Black and Latino inmates in L.A. County jails.

If Black inmates are systematically being targeted by some Latino inmates solely because they are Black, they have almost no chance of staying out of harm's way.

The sprawling L.A. County jails are the biggest in the nation. More than 10,000 pris-

oners alone are housed at the four jails where the recent racial violence occurred. At these jails Latino inmates outnumber Black inmates more than 2 to 1.

The massive warehousing of inmates, overcrowding and possible agitation by groups such as the Mexican Mafia who want total control of California's prisons have inflamed racial and ethnic tensions to a red hot pitch.

These life-threatening conditions mean that young Black men are now at double risk.

The first risk to them is a terribly racially-disfigured criminal justice system.

One out of three young Blacks is in prison, parole, or probation. They are ensnared in that system by poverty, a failed education system and the racially-biased disparities in the drug sentencing laws.

They are further trapped in that system by a glaring double standard in how crime and punishment is meted out to Blacks and whites. The recent report from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, a Washington, D.C.-based criminal justice think tank, confirmed that a young Black is six times more likely to be incarcerated than a white youth even when charged with a similar crime and neither offender has a record.

Many of the young Blacks, and that includes most of those within L.A. County jails as well as other jails throughout the nation,

don't wind up behind bars for rape, violent assaults, murder, or armed robbery.

Most are jailed for non-violent crimes such as petty theft or drug possession. Most of them have been incarcerated for less than two months.

(A parent of one of the young men injured in the attack at the L.A. County jails said her son was imprisoned for receiving stolen property.)

Worse, many of them have yet to be tried, let alone convicted of their alleged crimes.

The second more immediate risk to them is the danger of being assaulted by other non-white inmates.

The problem of how to safeguard young Blacks behind bars presented an embarrassing dilemma for L.A. County Sheriffs officials. Community activists, parents of the injured inmates, and a group of attorneys led by O.J. Simpson prosecutor Chris Darden demanded that Black inmates be permanently housed in separate dorms to insure their safety.

This is a blatant return to segregation and it doesn't make it any less troubling that this demand comes from Blacks.

Calling segregation a viable method to muffle racial and ethnic conflict is tantamount to throwing in the towel on three decades of hard struggle to achieve racial harmony.

Sadly, for now anyway, this is the only thing that sheriff's officials and Black activists can come up with to deal with the problem.

However, even this may prove to be an illusion. If segregation does temporarily stem the violence it still is only a temporary crisis measure that does nothing to deal with the deep-seated social causes of the violence.

The violence at L.A. County jails is an ominous warning that deadly racial violence is no longer between Black and whites.

This should be a wake-up call for Black and Latino community activists, religious leaders, elected officials, and educators to prod public officials to provide greater funding for youth service, counseling and gang mediation programs, provide more funds for job and skills training programs for hard core unemployed youth, and increase efforts to curb the astronomical high drop out rate among Black and Latino youth.

The young men involved in jail violence are sons, brothers, and fathers who lived in our neighborhoods.

Ultimately most of them will return to those neighborhoods.

They can easily bring that same violence that they are now wreaking on each other behind bars back to us. This is a heavy price to pay for ignoring their plight.

LAPD scandal renews call for police oversight

NNPA Editorial
Special to Sentinel-Voice

As the 2000 presidential election draws near both national conventions are less than three months away, the Black community agenda to both parties is developing under several tents of leadership. The Black Press of America is a voice among dozens within the Black community that demands to be heard.

At the top of any community's agenda for survival and improvement are food, shelter and security. And inasmuch crime, the security portion of that list, is a national issue that has been of concern to both Black and white Americans, the concern stops at the threshold of police violence and corruption.

We know that is a mistake.

Police violence and corruption are part of a national crisis within our law enforcement and judicial system. Although, California is a leading city in police brutality—more than 80 questionable police killings in less than a year in 1988—the LAPD is not alone in its patterns which target Black and Latino citizens.

Whether the subject is racial profiling in New Jersey, racially-targeted customs inspections Chicago or Atlanta or police shootings in New York, African-Americans typically are disproportionately victimized by corrupt police nationwide.

The case currently unfolding with the Los Angeles Police Department comes as little surprise to many of us within The Black Press. Organized crime, groups who participate in violent acts of White supremacy and police violence and corruption have long been fringe elements of American culture. And they have long been

only mildly deterred. In fact, to some extent they are accepted as part of the fabric of American culture: a few bad boys who like to have a little fun but who are really good men at heart.

In Los Angeles, in the development of this case, cops have exposed organized and extensive levels of unchecked police corruption: police planting evidence, targeting Blacks and Latinos and awarding brutality and shootings. The code of blue silence mechanism didn't work because the department's Black and Brown officers know that when faced with criminal charges, they won't walk away as easily as their White counterparts. So, they snitch.

Clearly, we are seeing more than isolated incidents as a result of police stress, we are seeing the first glimpse of proof that there is widespread corruption within the police department of one of the five major cities in the United States.

We call on the presidential candidates from both parties to endorse a national standard operating procedure for all law enforcement agencies.

There should be adequate federal funding and training for citizens watch groups both as community patrol agents and as monitoring groups for area police departments.

We expect candidates to speak to restructuring police departments and to creatively rotate civilian resident leadership into police department management.

Police officers and management should pay stiffer penalties and fines for corruption and crime. Hold officers to the law. We hope that both presidential candidates address these requests. But we demand that they address this issue.

Census, reapportionment and redistricting Mississippi style

Don E. Slabach
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Census 2000 response rates continue to make headlines across Mississippi.

It has been reported widely that the state is among the lowest in initial responses. Continued concerns regarding Mississippi's status in the census count and resulting apportionment and funding sweepstakes have elected officials and citizens alike attempting to redouble their efforts to get a correct count.

Mississippi's response rate to the written surveys now stands at approximately 60 percent, the sixth lowest response out of the 50 states.

By contrast, Indiana — which has been reported as the state on the bubble with Mississippi in the congressional apportionment — is tied at 66 percent as the seventh highest response rate in the nation. Additionally, 14 of 18 southern and Sunbelt states, the region anticipating the highest population growth, have higher response rates than Mississippi. The exceptions are Alabama, Louisiana, New Mexico and South Carolina.

Taken together, these two scenarios do not bode well for either the accuracy of Mississippi's count or the resulting apportionment of congressional seats.

The deadline for survey returns has past and the emphasis now moves to the door-to-door canvassing of households. Original plans had hoped that census takers would only be required to canvass approximately 33 percent of all Mississippi households based on the survey response goal of 67 percent. However, with the low response rate of 60 percent in hand, interviewers must now meet the larger burden of polling 40 percent of Mississippi households in order to maintain an acceptable level of accuracy. This only adds to the less than sunny outlook for

Mississippi's reported population.

Once the counts are made and officially reported, the process of reapportionment for congressional seats begins. The formula for determining congressional numbers assigned to each state is complicated and based on setting priority values determined solely by population counts.

Estimates continue to place Mississippi on the losing side of those priorities due to the larger and more dynamic growth experienced by states like Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, and Arizona. An accurate count of Mississippi's population would leave the state on uncertain grounds for keeping all five congressional seats, but an undercount of as little as 5,000 residents could clearly jeopardize our standing.

If the official census and reapportionment figures do confirm the undesirable result of losing a congressional seat, a new round of controversy and internal competition will begin.

The responsibility of determining congressional redistricting for equal representation falls on the shoulders of the Mississippi Legislature. Should Mississippi find itself with only four congressional districts, the Legislature will be forced to make a political decision that meets the standards of both constitutional law and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

It will be a political decision due to the fact that no legal precedent exists for determining which district will be absorbed into the other four.

Only legal standards regulating equal representation and the status of minority voters can shed any light on the Legislature's final decision. Other variables such as geography, incumbency, seniority, political affiliation,

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