

POINT OF VIEW

Our View

Conference should seek teeth in hate crime laws

If the National Conference of Community Justice's recent conference on hate crimes is to accomplish its objectives, its leaders, along with proponents of tougher hate-crime laws will have to ramp up awareness on the problem of hate crimes.

Looking at other states' and cities' efforts could provide a valuable springboard: The New York State Senate is set to pass hate crimes legislation. Last week, California state officials put the final touches on the nation's first hate crime computer database. The statewide database, expected to be up and running by the end of the summer, will help police track criminals responsible for hate crimes. It will also include information about the crimes committed, the suspects, vehicles spotted at the scene of the attack and other vital data. (The Hate Crimes Statistics Act, passed in 1990, was created for a similar purpose. Through it, the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program has pieced together a national system for tracking bias-motivated crimes. The 105th Congress passed the Hate Crimes Prevention Act in 1998).

This week, black leaders in Boston called for increased efforts to prosecute hate crimes. Boston has experienced a decline in hate-crime prosecutions despite a rise in the number of such incidents in recent years. In April, President Clinton renewed a call for expanding the federal law against hate crimes. He said federal prosecutors should have more leeway in pursuing violent crimes in which the victim's ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation was central to the defendant's motive.

"These are not like other crimes, because these crimes target people simply because of who they are," Clinton said then. "And because they do, they strike at the heart of who we are as a nation."

Clinton's call for tougher laws comes at a time when hate crimes continue unabated. There were 8,049 bias-related crimes in 1997, the last year for which the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services Division, which operates under the auspices of the Justice Department, prepared data. Of those, 4,710 were motivated by racial bias, 1,385 were motivated by religious bias, 1,102 were motivated by sexually-oriented bias, 836 were motivated by ethnicity/national origin bias, 12 were motivated by disability bias and four were motivated by multiple biases. The 8,049 incidents involved 9,861 separate offenses, 10,255 victims and 8,474 known offenders. It's not a stretch to think these numbers haven't increased.

Local hate crimes barely register on the national radar, perhaps due to the rarity of hate crimes here (and that could be the case) or to spin doctoring of statistics. Las Vegas would do well to avoid the hate-crime fray, since any glint of intolerance could affect the city's multi-billion-dollar tourism industry. That doesn't mean there aren't bigots here (remember the two anti-Skinheads found murdered last year), nor that we don't have to worry about hate-motivated violence — the city has a rainbow of races and ethnicities.

Proponents of stronger hate crime laws would do well to encourage lawmakers to follow other municipalities in ensuring perpetrators will be punished to the hilt. That would limit knee-jerk reactions to crimes and let criminals know that their hate will be met with staunch legal force.



Social Security helps reduce child poverty

Valerie A. Rawlston and William E. Spriggs
National Urban League
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Ask anyone you pass on the street what comes to mind when they hear the term "Social Security" and more often than not they'll refer to the program's old age or retirement benefits.

But Social Security provides a great deal more than just Old Age benefits. It provides for disabled workers, and children, too.

In fact, a study released this month by the National Urban League shows that Social Security benefits given to poor families with children form a safety net that keeps one million children from poverty, and prevents another million children from extreme poverty — that is, it prevents their families from having annual incomes below half that of the poverty line.

It's important to realize that Social Security's formal name is Old Age, Survivors and Disability Insurance Program. (The tax collected to support the program comes from the Federal Insurance Contribution Act, popularly known simply as FICA.)

In other words, Social Security is not merely a retirement program. It's an insurance program as well.

Social Security insures families against three things: One is a drop in earnings because of disability. The second is a loss in earnings because of the death of a

family's breadwinner. The third is a drop in earnings because of old age.

While most people focus on the old age benefit, Social Security checks do go to retired workers. But another third go to disabled workers, and a final third go to children under 18. By contrast, Social Security's overall profile looks quite different.

Roughly, three million insurance beneficiaries, less than one-tenth of all recipients, are children. About 30 million people get the Old Age insurance; seven million get the Survivors insurance, and six million more get the Disability insurance.

Some have suggested that we should privatize Social Security. But that would change the balance and the nature of the program for the worse.

It would, in effect, change what is an insurance program, in which all American workers are in the risk pool, into an individual retirement plan that would leave the families and children of the individual worker out.

This is an especially harsh prospect for Black America.

Two-thirds of African-American children — compared to 31 percent for white children — live in low-income families. About nine percent of African-American children — compared to six percent for whites — live in a family receiving Social Security benefits. Now, African-American children are almost four times more likely

to be lifted out of poverty by Social Security than are white children.

Social Security provides over 55 percent of the income for low-income families with children that receive Social Security benefits and over 35 percent of the income for lower-middle income families.

In most American cities, the average family benefit is enough to pay the rent of an apartment for a year.

That fact alone underscores the point that Social Security benefits make a difference.

We're not discussing welfare. Social Security is not a handout, as some crudely perceive welfare to be. The children receiving survivor's benefits are collecting an insurance premium on the loss of a parent. Privatization of Social Security threatens this intergenerational aspect of the program, and, instead of preventing a "young versus old" debate, would sharpen such a conflict, tearing at the

fabric that binds Americans together.

Americans like the current system of Social Security because it does what Americans like to think reflects the best of our values.

Privatization, however, reflects a lack of compassion, even greed. It casts aside societal efforts to support the family and the society's obligations to spread the risk of misfortune that makes us all part of the human race.

Privatization would only heighten the divisions of young versus old, and because of the way the risk pools are divided, African-Americans against whites. Most devastatingly, it would weaken the safety net that now keeps a million children out of poverty.

That's a step backward, not a step forward.

Valerie A. Rawlston is Research Analyst, and William E. Spriggs is Director of the Research and Public Policy Department of the National Urban League.

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Contributing Writers:
Lee Brown
Tammy McMahan
Rainier Spencer
John T. Stephens III
Fred T. Snyder
Al Triche

Photographers:
John Broussard
Kimberly Edwards
Jonathan Olsen

Ramon Savoy, Publisher, Editor-in-Chief
Lynnette Sawyer, General Manager
Marcello Sawyer, Copy Editor
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