

## COMMENTARY

## No slowdown in prison boom for U.S. Blacks

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

There's much to cheer about in the recent Justice Department report that shows the first slowdown in nearly three decades in the number of people imprisoned. More politicians, and law enforcement officials, it seems, have finally realized that warehousing thousands of people in American prisons is no panacea for the nation's crime and drug ills. In states such as California and New York, courts are much more willing to send people to drug treatment programs rather than prison.

The bad news is that the new window of public enlightenment on crime and punishment remains tightly closed for Blacks. They now make up nearly half of the more than 2 million persons behind bars. According to the Justice Department report, 10 percent of all Black males between ages 25 and 29 are in federal and state prisons. The rate is three times greater than that for Latino males, and 10 times higher than for White males.

The soaring Black incarceration rate has wreaked monumental damage on Black families and communities. It insures that more children are raised in impoverished single female-led homes. They will likely

attend segregated, crumbling public schools. It permanently bars many Black men from voting because of draconian laws that severely restrict, if not outright bar, ex-felons from voting. The voting ban diminishes the political power of Black communities. The high Black imprisonment rate also drastically increases health risks and costs in Black communities, since many prisoners are released with chronic medical afflictions, particularly HIV/AIDS.

The habitual reasons given for criminalizing practically an entire generation of young Blacks is that they are poor, crime-prone, and lack family values. The more embarrassing and disgraceful reason is the racially biased drug sentencing laws. Though far more Whites use and deal drugs, including crack cocaine, than Blacks, the overwhelming majority of those prosecuted in federal courts for drug possession and sale (mostly small amounts of crack cocaine) and given stiff mandatory sentences are African-American.

They are also more likely to receive longer sentences in state prisons for drug-related crimes than Whites.

Congress has refused repeatedly to modify, let alone eliminate, these racial

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## U.S. should help Haiti play its pitiful hand

By Emory Curtis  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

There is a saying that individuals as well as countries should follow—"Play the hand that was dealt you." In the other words, make the most of what you have and waste no effort crying over the hands you wish you had.

I recently took a Caribbean cruise with more than 50 members of the Haiti Support Project (HSP), which is a group of African Americans who try to help Haitians better play the lousy hand they were dealt. From what I saw, they need help.

Before our Haiti stop, the ship stopped in St. Thomas, one of the U.S. Virgin Islands. It seems to me United States would do well to adopt St. Thomas's education and low income housing rules.

All levels in St. Thomas agree that uneducated youths are drags on their tourist-based economy. Therefore, if a student has two consecutive unexcused absences from school, the parents are

fined \$35.

That puts the onus on the parents by making them pay dollars out of their pocket for their child skipping school. It brings the compulsion in compulsory education right to the parent's front door, where it should be. That's an idea worth adopting.

In subsidized housing, the renter gets good looking, deeply subsidized units with the admonition to take care of the unit. That admonition is followed by an inspection every four months. If it hasn't been taken care of, that tenant is out on the street forthwith. Another adoptable idea.

From St. Thomas we went to Haiti. Once away from the cruise ship-owned and controlled spit of Haiti land, Labadie, it was like stepping into a long ago 19th century world.

Our HSP was taken from the ship to two of Haiti's premier national historical attractions, La Citadelle and Sans Souci.

La Citadelle is a giant for-

ress on top of a 3,000-foot mountain with 20-inch thick walls and innumerable slots for cannons. It took about 20,000 men and 13 years to complete the fort. It was to deter a French invasion. For Haitians, it was a success—the French didn't invade.

Sans Souci was constructed as the palace of the ruling monarch, Henri Christophe. It was built to rival France's Versailles and they even diverted streams to cool marble floors by running under them.

La Citadelle and Sans Souci are being restored and promoted as tourist attractions. They also serve as a source of pride for present day Haitians to see what their ancestors did almost two centuries ago. That gives them that individual feeling of, "We can do."

However, looking backward at what happened then and what is happening now brought this question to my mind, "Do present day Hai-

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## Mislabeled of black children requires parental attention

By Nancy R. Tidwell  
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A wise man once said, "The best way to suppose what may come is to remember what is past." So it is that African-American parents of children who are struggling in school should be aware of the overrepresentation of minority students in special education in order to best prepare their children for the future.

As far back as the 1960s, this issue has received national attention but little has been done to correct the mislabeling that has occurred. Statistics from the U.S. Office of Education for 1998-1999 show that African-Americans represented 18.3 percent of students placed in the special education category of specific learning disability, 26.4 percent in the category of serious emotional disturbance, and 34.3 percent in the category of mild retardation—even though African-Americans represented only 14.8 percent of the overall population.

According to a series of new national studies released this year by the Civil Rights

Project at Harvard University, "school districts nationwide continue to improperly and disproportionately place minority students in special education classes despite an increase in civil rights protections and special education services over the past 25 years." The report also stated, "When compared with their White counterparts, African-American children (in data from 1997) were almost three times more likely to be labeled "mentally retarded."

This common denial of educational opportunity requires the immediate attention of African-American parents nationwide. Although the input of teachers, principals, and school psychologists is important to the process, parents cannot allow school placement to depend solely on the opinions of these individuals. Parents must be aggressive and actively seek information about their legal rights and responsibilities provided under federal and state law. They must learn to understand their child's educational needs through the many resources available and then become

that child's strongest advocate.

Knowledge of past discrimination tells us what can be expected and how much work is required of parents in educating their children. Although many minority children have been misdiagnosed and inappropriately placed in special education, the reality is that the current legal process must be used to obtain the appropriate services and supports that every child is entitled and needs for school and later life success. Parents should not resist evaluations for a foundering child but they should be vigilant, making sure that the findings are accurate and that the interventions rendered result in continuous academic and social progress.

Parents can become involved in the special needs decision-making process for their child by learning about the federal law that guarantees a "free appropriate public education" for all children—the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Although there are widespread reports of noncompliance

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## Sharpton touting merits of presidential candidacy

By Ronald Walters  
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The Rev. Alfred Sharpton has announced the formation of an exploratory committee headed by Harvard scholar Cornel West to determine whether or not he should run for the Democratic nomination for President. It was an expected event, carefully planned while he was incarcerated and carefully staged to take advantage of his emergence from jail after serving a 90-day sentence for trespass on to U.S. military property protesting the use of Vieques as a weapons testing site.

The work of the exploratory committee will test the strength of his national political resources, as it seeks to determine whether or not Sharpton is a viable candidate based on whatever factors they will take into consideration. No doubt they will consider his past and present image, his issues, his financial resources, his potential voter support and other factors—or perhaps he has already made up his mind and this is show.

Nevertheless, stature stands out as a factor in this age of television politics. Sharpton may not be very telegenic, but neither was Ross Perot, nor Michael Dukakis. Like them, he may not have much if he is able to find and push the right buttons within the Black community.

Like Perot, he would be an insurgent candidate—one who is not blessed by the Establishment, neither Black nor White: one running against the party's issue orthodoxy.

The two attempts by Pat Buchanan to win the Republican nomination were insur-

gencies and the first Jesse Jackson campaign was such. However, the basis of this insurgency should be troubling to many inside the Democratic Party.

The Jackson campaign was an insurgency because it attempted to force into the political culture a progressive discussion about policy as a counter to Reagan conservatism. But for many people, it was simply the raw audaciousness of a popular figure in the Black community running against the odds and against the wishes of the political hierarchy.

Sharpton, however, may develop a different basis of appeal to voters than Jackson. This appeal could lay in the force of his challenge to the emerging dominance of the Democratic Party's right wing, as contained in his stated reason for considering a campaign. At his announcement, he berated the "rightward drift" of the Democratic Party and the extent to which it disrespected Black voters who had been faithful and vitally important in Democratic victories in successive elections.

This is a discussion that almost broke open during the Gore campaign when Joe Lieberman was selected as the Democratic vice presidential nominee, without prior approval by Black political leaders. It happened again shortly after the election, when Black political veteran Maynard Jackson jumped in the race for Democratic Party chair because Blacks had not been consulted on the choice of the new chairman, Terry McAuliffe.

This potentially destructive discussion

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