

Public housing's 'one strike' rule vicious, misguided

By George E. Curry
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Even President Bush has come to the realization that ex-offenders need job training and transitional housing. In his State of the Union speech last January, Bush observed, "This year, some 600,000 inmates will be released from prison back into society. We know from long experience that if they can't find work, or a home, or help, they are much more likely to commit more crimes and return to prison." In proposing his Prison Re-Entry Initiative, Bush said, "America is a land of the second chance — and when the gates of prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life."

But more often than not, it doesn't. Human Rights Watch, an independent organization that monitors human rights abuses around the world, has issued a recent report that shows that when ex-offenders seek public housing — and even people who have been arrested but never convicted — they are often arbitrarily denied an apartment. The report is titled, "No Second Chance: People with Criminal Records Denied Access to Public Housing."

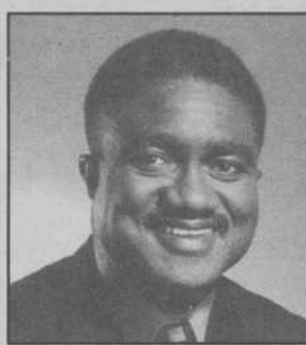
"Exclusions based on criminal records ostensibly protect existing tenants," the report notes. "There is no doubt that some prior offenders still pose a risk and may be unsuitable in many of the presently-available pub-

lic housing facilities. But U.S. housing policies are so arbitrary, overbroad, and unnecessarily harsh that they exclude even people who have turned their lives around and remain law-abiding as well as others who may never have presented any risk in the first place."

The report explains: "The tenuous relationship between public housing restrictions and legitimate safety goals is exemplified by policies that, for example, automatically deny housing to a person convicted of a single shoplifting offense four years earlier, or to someone convicted of simple possession of marijuana ten years earlier. But it can cause homelessness or transient living for those excluded — and it can be counterproductive for community safety, as it is difficult to be law-abiding while living on the streets."

According to the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, there are more than 13 million ex-felons in the U.S. — 6.5 percent of the adult population. It noted that if the current trend continues, nearly 1 in 15 persons born in 2001 will go to state or federal prison during their lifetime.

"These stunning numbers are less a reflection of rates of serious crimes in the United



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States than they are of 'tough on crime' sentencing policies that have emphasized harsh punitive policies — mandatory prison sentencing and three strikes policies, for example — for even low level and nonviolent crimes," the Human Rights Watch report concludes. "Arrest rates also reflect the U.S. 'war on drugs' which results in over 1.5 million arrests per year, over 80 percent for simple possession."

The FBI's Uniform Crime Reports show that drug abuse arrests far exceed the number of arrests for any other category: "Racial and ethnic minorities suffer disproportionately from exclusionary housing policies because of their overrepresentation among those who experience arrest and prosecution, those who currently live in poverty, and those who seek public housing," the report says. "Human Rights Watch is not aware of any other country that deprives people of the right to housing because of their criminal histories."

Restricting the admission of former offenders in public housing masks the larger problem. The national goal, as articulated in the United States Housing Act of 1937, has been to provide "decent and affordable hous-

ing for all citizens." But that's not being done. "Millions of American families [are] unable to afford safe and decent rental housing," the report finds. "Wages have failed to keep pace with rental costs, rental costs have increased faster than costs of other basic needs, affordable housing is being lost to homeownership and market-rate rentals, and little or no new affordable housing is being built."

Consequently, the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty estimates that between 2.5 million and 3.5 million people will be homeless over the course of a year; 7 million over five years. Approximately 12.5 million, or 6.5 percent of the U.S. population, has been homeless at some point during their lives.

It's time to end the shell game. We shouldn't proclaim that we have a national goal of providing decent and affordable housing for all citizens while erecting barriers on the basis of one-strike and you're out policies.

Realizing that demand for affordable housing far exceeds the supply, we should commit ourselves to building more units. Public housing has provided the foundation for millions of poor Americans. I know because I was one of them.

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Ethnic Drugs

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any interesting biology aside from that fact," said Root.

But to make-believe that there is no value in distinguishing populations on the basis of race is childish, Cohn said. "There is richness in that diversity, and knowing about that diversity helps us to understand people," said Cohn. "Now, the fact that that distinction leads to social prejudice is completely outside of my arena," he said.

Kahn also questions the A-heFT trial because it did not test whether BiDil works better for Blacks than Whites; yet, its rationale was based, in part, on that idea.

The drug was only tested in African-Americans, and therefore says nothing about it working better in Blacks than Whites, he said.

Just like police misuse statistics to justify racial profiling in law enforcement, doctors and drug makers do it in medicine, Kahn says.

But Cohn says the goal of the trial was to prove the drug worked, not that it worked better on Blacks than Whites. Cohn's 30 years of research involving BiDil led him to believe Black patients would be responsive to BiDil, so they were used for the trial. "We just showed BiDil works," Cohn said.

If BiDil works, then why isn't it being marketed as a drug for all people?

Taylor says the results of the A-heFT

study only show BiDil is effective in treating African-Americans, since it was only tested on Blacks.

"That's a society problem," Cohn says, "not a medicine problem. Now, if we had done this study in all White people, nobody would have raised their eyebrow," he said. "But why is it any different because we did it in Black people?"

"That's the policy that has to be changed," Cohn said. "All the drugs the FDA has approved thus far resulted from studies in White people. But does the labeling say that this drug works in White people? No. But this time they're going to say this drug works in Black people. What's the matter with us? Why are we distinguishing?"

"That's the social aspect of it all and where the discrimination comes in," he said. And that's how BiDil gets labeled as an ethnic drug.

Jonathan Kahn argues both doctors and drug marketers play a role creating "ethnic" drugs.

"Doctors use race as a surrogate to get at biology," Kahn says, "And marketers use biology as a surrogate to get at race. The pharmaceutical industry is trying to create new ethnic markets to sell drugs and generate profit from two generic drugs," he says. Instead of prescribing and marketing BiDil to patients who are non-responsive to standard

therapy and who have a certain type of hypertension, doctors and corporate marketers use race as a short cut.

It's difficult to market to people with a certain set of clinical factors, said Kahn. "But I can market to Blacks," he said. "It's a well-established ethnic marketing profile. There are all sorts of strategies already out there in the ad world for what they call ethnic market-

ing."

"And I am not sure what types of bad things are going to come out of it," said Kahn. "It's not going to lead to slavery, but I am worried because of discrimination. We're not past racism in the country, and discrimination is very tricky."

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am still wondering why the Republican programs around the country that stationed thugs in the polling stations to challenge the voting credentials of potential voters is not subject to the Voting Right Act protections.

The Voting Rights Act clearly prohibits any act by any individual that would intimidate potential voters or have the effect of diluting the Black vote.

The federal right to vote would also bolster the enforcement of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) that is being administered by a new commission that will set up standards to monitor voting machines. Right now, who knows what these machines are doing?

There are reports that there were 1,100 irregularities in vote counting by the machines and that in heavily Black areas of Oklahoma City and Palm Beach, Fla., some voting machines reached a prescribed number of votes and then began counting backward, with most of the tally favoring Bush. Each state has a HAVA plan which mandates committees to monitor election procedures as required by law and Blacks need to get on those committees.

A federal right to vote would bolster the National Voter Registration Act (the Motor Voter law) that prescribes standards for voter registration activities, also prohibits voter intimidation, and gives the Attorney

General power to intervene where voter irregularities occur. I have not seen this law invoked, because the administration of elections is subject to administration by state officials and a corrupt Justice Department.

Why do I say corrupt? Lets face it, where there is an Attorney General like John Ashcroft, there will not be much fair administration of the election system, because he was more interested in rooting out "voter fraud" — and there is such a thing — rather than balancing this objective by also taking aggressive steps to protect the right to vote.

To me, an administration where protecting the right to vote is not a priority and where there is a one-sided concern with administering the law in a manner that advantages the Attorney General's own political party is corrupt.

How can such an administration turn its face to the world with any integrity and say that it is promoting "democratic elections" in Iraq when it doesn't support them here? Our foreign election observers were too polite to comment on this.

Therefore, let us enhance the power of the Voting Rights Act at its 40th anniversary in 2005 by beginning a movement for the federal right to vote.

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would have been in violation of federal regulations. This did not happen. You know it; the IRS knows it; and, most especially, the Bush administration knows it.

They have chosen to not let facts stand in the way of their decisions. Given this state of affairs, you and I need to stand in favor of the Constitution. Sometimes one is called upon to speak out regardless of the consequences.

We should know by now that silence

never stopped tyranny. It never has and it never will.

When is enough, enough?

If you want to take a stand, you can write directly to the IRS, or you can use the OMB Watch site at the following URL: http://capwiz.com/ombwatch/mail/oneclick_compose/?alertid=6642526

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