

# Poor receive poorest amount of coverage

By George E. Curry  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The poor will always be with us. Just not on TV news. That's the headline of a recent report by FAIR, Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, the New York-based media monitoring group.

According to the Census Bureau, 37 million Americans — one in eight — lived below the federal poverty line in 2005, defined as an annual income of \$19,971 for a family of four.

However, other studies show that it takes at least twice as much as the official poverty figure to have a decent standard of living in the United States. That means a more accurate figure for people living in poverty is more like 90 million, nearly one-third of the nation.

FAIR did a three-year study of weeknight network news programs on ABC, NBC and CBS, examining every story that contained the words poverty, low income, homeless, welfare or food stamps.

The study can be viewed online at [www.fair.org](http://www.fair.org).

"Yet despite being an issue that directly or indirectly affects a huge chunk of the U.S. population, poverty and inequality receive astonishingly little coverage on nightly network news," the FAIR study concluded.

"An exhaustive search of weeknight news broadcasts on CBS, NBC and ABC found that with rare exceptions, such as the aftermath

of Katrina, poverty and the poor seldom even appear on the evening news — and when they do, they are relegated mostly to merely speaking in platitudes about their hardships."

The three networks used a total of 14,632 sources for stories in 2001, according to one FAIR report. Assuming that figure has remained steady over the years, that means roughly 46,000 sources were used in the 38-month period recently studied, from September 11, 2003, to October 30, 2006.

"During the more than three years studied, there were just 58 stories about poverty on the three network newscasts, including just 191 quoted sources," the study found. That means that sources appearing in stories about poverty represented just 0.4 percent of all sources.

NBC led the way with 25 stories about poverty, followed closely by CBS with 22 and in distant third-place was ABC, with only 11 stories, or one every 15 weeks.

"In a handful of stories — primarily on CBS — poverty issues were discussed solely by experts, with no poor people appearing on-screen at all. A CBS story (2/7/05) on George W. Bush's proposed budget cuts to both farm aid and block grants to fight hunger and homelessness quoted solely elected



GEORGE E. CURRY

officials, think tankers and executives of food banks.

The study points out, "Another CBS story on problems with the new Medicare prescription drug plan (1/16/06) cited only the Republican governor of Minnesota (who was concerned) and U.S. Health and Human Services secretary Michael Leavitt (who wasn't); one on the push for increase

in state minimum wage workers (6/27/06) interviewed several ACORN activists behind the campaign, but no actual minimum wage workers. (Advocates for the poor, such as ACORN [Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now], and food bank officials, are an important part of the discussion, but they can't substitute for the perspectives of those who actually live in poverty.)"

The problem also occurred in stories about the poor that did not address policy questions.

"CBS, again, is the prime culprit, having run segments on predatory lending (9/5/03), the difficulties of finding child care (11/25/03) and increasing economic polarization (12/8/05) that studiously avoided asking how government policies had helped to cause or failed to alleviate these problems," FAIR observed.

Many stories left the impression that poor people don't know what's best for them.

"In story after story, poor people were in-

cluded to tell generic stories of suffering, before turning to 'experts' who discussed what policies should be pursued to address the situation," the study found.

Not surprisingly, there is an economic aspect to reporting on poverty, especially in this era of media consolidation.

"What FAIR's study cannot do is show why network journalists assign such a low priority to stories that affect so many," the report stated.

"For that we must rely on the journalists themselves, many of whom tell us that the poverty narrative is neither compelling nor good for business, as advertisers aren't fond of negative stories."

What attracted me and many other Black journalists to the field of journalism was the notion that the purpose of the media is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. But that is quickly going by the wayside.

"Unlike the powerful sources who are over represented on the nightly news, the poor don't have public relations staffs or corporate communications offices," FAIR stated.

"They are left to the increasingly quaint journalistic ideals that once implored journalists to be champions of society's underdogs and to comfort the afflicted."

George E. Curry is a keynote speaker, moderator and media coach.

## Jena 6: How can we handle this huge disgrace?

By Ron Walters  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Unless you have been on vacation or otherwise under a rock, a case that is rocking Black America involves the racist conviction of six Black youths, by an all-White jury, to the tune of a potential 100 year sentences, while White youths were given the comparative leniency of in-school probation and non-prosecution for committing violent acts.

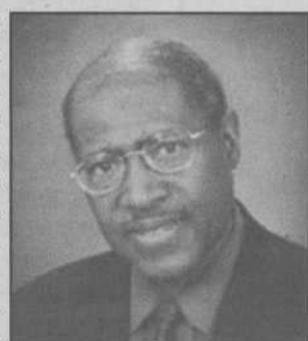
This legal lynching of six young Black students by officials in Jena, La., is not only a continuing manifestation of Southern justice, it is a symptom of a vicious period in American history now in existence emphasizing the use of the law to severely punish Blacks.

So, while there are justified mobilizations

taking place around the Jena 6 injustice, the heat of the Black community, activists, officials, church leaders, all, should be directed toward the changes in the law that have made these injustices easier to perpetrate by local criminal justice officials.

Recent data from the Department of Justice indicates that 5 percent of Black males are incarcerated; 0.7 percent of White males; 11 percent of Black men 25-34.

Moreover, in 12 states, between 10 and 15 percent of adult Black men are incarcerated and they are incarcerated at rates between 12 and 16 times greater than those of



RON WALTERS

White men.

There desperately needs to be a change in the laws promulgated during the era of the "war on drugs" that have greased the wheels of the criminal system that have focused the heavy weapons of targeted policing, ineffective legal defense, and police corruption to affect the disproportionate convictions of Blacks.

Mandatory minimum sentencing drug guidelines like the Rockefeller Drug laws, "three-strikes and You're Out", etc. — all of these devices are instruments of the problem creating run-away incarceration. They should be repealed!

On vacation recently in West Palm Beach, Fla., I noticed that in a smaller section known as Riviera Beach that was predominantly Black.

The local newspaper carried a story about police there attempting to reduce the crime rate by focusing on gang-busting tactics.

The police used "no-tolerance" measures to stop drivers for any infraction, such as not coming to a full stop at a light, not wearing seatbelts, etc., as a pretext to search their vehicle.

And by the end of June 2007, while 1,879 people were arrested, only 10 confirmed gang members were in that number; where 330 autos were also impounded.

Meanwhile, no targeted policing was occurring in the plush cocaine alleys of affluent Palm Beach or other areas. We need laws to establish a prohibition against such "targeted policing" that is racially discriminatory and amounts to racial profiling.

Mychal Bell, one of the Jena 6, was pros-

ecuted as an adult and assigned a public defender who never called any witnesses.

This situation is also common, and reports indicate that this practice of adult prosecution and incarceration of youths is out of control.

In six states, Black youth under age 18 are incarcerated in adult facilities at rates between 12 and 25 times greater than those of White youth. And they can be prosecuted and incarcerated for either non-violent or violent offenses, contrary to clear evidence in recent Zogby poll that 68 percent of the public opposes the practice.

So laws must be passed that outlaw this practice — that the evidence shows has not deterred youth crime — and return the administration of justice for youths to the juvenile system.

The Justice Department sent representatives to participate in a community forum in Jena, and the Black attorney proceeded to uphold all that local officials had done. This might have been anticipated because of the strong tie to the Bush government.

On September 9, local officials broke ground on a \$30 million detention facility, awarded them by the Department of Homeland Security.

We are coming up to the September 20 sentencing of Mychal Bell by the Louisiana authorities who have recently reduced his conviction to something they may be able to prove in court.

Much will be made of the result of the sentencing at that gathering, but the offensive should carry on into the presidential election and result in overturning the vicious and racist legislation that this case reflects.

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## Reynolds

(Continued from Page 8)

models, who are not taken to task for their outrageous behavior.

In addition, a can of worms has been opened by well-respected pastors Dennis and Christine Wiley of Covenant Baptist Church in Anacostia, Md., deciding to perform same-sex union ceremonies and preaching that "homosexuality is not a sin," despite the many scriptural references to the contrary.

One parishioner, Martha Battle, was quoted in the *Washington Post* as saying that she didn't mind Covenant's outreach to gays at first, because "everybody needs to be saved." But now, "straight people are leaving, and gay people are coming in," said Battle, who left the church with her 13-year-old grandson after the Wileys began performing same-sex union ceremonies.

"They're taking over. I'm sick to my stom-

ach over this mess. It's not right. Why should we have to leave and let them come in and take over the church?"

The Bible I read declares both adultery and homosexuality as sins. But now, since some preachers are saying homosexuality is not a sin some parishioners are concluding that neither are adultery and "shacking," and are using this rewriting of scripture as the basis for returning to their old sinful lifestyles.

In a nutshell, certain offensive conduct shows that some pastors need prayer, deliverance and spiritual counseling even more so than their parishioners. All pastors, of course, are not in error, but those that are may one day see that not only are parishioners leaving the church, but God, himself.

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