

Report: American drug war tainted by racism

By Jesse Muhammad
Special to Sentinel-Voice

(NNPA) — National reports detailing racial disparities in arrests and imprisonment were recently released by the Human Rights Watch and The Sentencing Project. The groups wanted to show that the “war on drugs” disproportionately targets urban youth, and is in dire need of reform since its inception during Ronald Reagan’s administration.

“Most drug offenders are White, but most of the drug offenders sent to prison are Black,” said Jamie Fellner, senior counsel in the U.S. program at Human Rights Watch. “The solution is not to imprison more Whites but to radically rethink how to deal with drug abuse and

low-level drug offenders.”

Although Whites commit more drug offenses, Blacks are arrested and imprisoned on drug charges at much higher rates, the reports found. Atty. Fellner authored the 67-page report titled “Targeting Blacks: Drug Law Enforcement and Race in the United States.”

The report presents new evidence of persistent racial disparities among drug offenders sent to prison in 34 states. All of these states send Black drug offenders to prison at much higher rates than Whites.

The key findings in the Human Rights Watch report were that across the 34 states, a Black man is 11.8 times more likely than a White man to be sent to prison on drug

charges, and a Black woman is 4.8 times more likely than a White woman; in 16 states, Blacks are sent to prison for drug offenses at rates between 10 and 42 times greater than the rate for Whites.

The 10 states with the greatest racial disparities in prison admissions for drug offenders are: Wisconsin, Illinois, New Jersey, Maryland, West Virginia, Colorado, New York, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Michigan.

According to The Sentencing Project, its 45-page study titled “Disparity by Geography: The War on Drugs in America’s Cities,” it is the first city-level analysis of drug arrests, examining data from 43 of the nation’s largest cities be-

tween 1980 and 2003.

The study found that, since 1980, the rate of drug arrests in American cities for Blacks increased by 225 percent, compared to 70 percent among Whites. Black arrest rates grew by more than 500 percent in 11 cities during this period; in nearly half of the cities, the odds of arrest for a drug offense among Blacks relative to Whites more than doubled.

“The alarming increase in drug arrests since 1980, concentrated among African-Americans, raises fundamental questions about fairness and justice,” said Ryan S. King, policy analyst for The Sentencing Project.

“But even more troubling is the fact that these trends come not as the result of

higher rates of drug use among African-Americans, but, instead, the decisions by local officials about where to pursue drug enforcement.”

The Sentencing Project report’s critical findings:

— Black drug arrests increased at 3.4 times the rate of Whites despite similar rates of drug use;

— Extreme city variations in drug arrests point to local enforcement decisions as a prime contributor to racial disparity;

— Six cities experienced more than a 500-percent rise in overall drug arrests between 1980 and 2003: Tucson (887 percent), Buffalo (809 percent), Kansas City (736 percent), Toledo (701 percent), Newark (663 percent), and Sacramento (597 percent).

‘Perfect storm’ pushes tough laws over prevention

According to research by the Human Rights Watch, since the early 1980s, when the Reagan administration launched the “war on drugs,” the federal and state measures targeting the use and sale of drugs have emphasized arrest and incarceration, rather than prevention and treatment. The impact on the criminal justice system has been dramatic. Between 1980 and 2006, arrests for drug offenses more than tripled, rising from 581,000 arrests in 1980 to 1.8 million in 2006.

The report notes that the war on drugs was part of a larger “tough on crime” policy approach whose advocates believed harsh mandatory punishments were needed to restore law and order.

Many factors beyond drug use and abuse encouraged politicians and public officials to embrace tough mandatory sentences for drug crimes, including the deterioration of inner cities, racial tensions, fear of crime, an unwillingness to tackle social inequalities, the willingness to use crime as a partisan issue and intense media pressure.

What a group of leading criminologists have called a “perfect storm” drove the imprisonment binge.

New laws increased the likelihood of a prison sentence even for low-level offenses, increased the length of prison sentences, and required prisoners to serve a greater proportion of their sentences.

This occurred for drug offenses, as well as crimes of violence. In particular, laws establishing mandatory minimum sentences for drug law violations were enacted that replaced judicial discretion with fixed sentences determined by one or two factors.

The report contends that one result of the new drug laws was a soaring prison population, as greater proportions of drug offenders received prison sentences and the length of incarceration increased. Between 1980 and 1998 the total number of new admissions of drug offenders to state and federal prison exceeded 1.5 million. Between 1980 and 2003 the number of drug offenders in state prisons grew twelvefold. In 2006, an estimated 248,547 men and women were serving time in state prisons for drug offenses, constituting 19.5 percent of all state prisoners.

Grassroots campaign to change policy

The Sentencing Project and Human Rights Watch are urging public officials to restore fairness, racial justice and credibility to drug control efforts.

Sentencing Project executive director Marc Mauer sees a need for grassroots pressure.

“We want to link with grassroots organizations within every city that has power to apply pressure on city officials in regards to developing more human approaches in sentencings,” said Mauer.

His group and Human Rights Watch recommend public officials take a number of concrete steps, including eliminating mandatory minimum sentences and restoring judicial discretion to sentencing of drug offenders. Public funding of substance abuse treatment and prevention outreach, particularly communities of color, needs to be increased, and public health-based strategies to reduce harms associated with drug abuse need to be increased, he added.

A comprehensive analysis of racial disparities in all phases of drug law enforcement — from arrests through incarceration — needs to be done and stakeholders brought together to find ways to ensure drug laws and enforcement do not disproportionately burden Black communities, Mauer said.

Jesse Muhammad writes for the Final Call.

Community center opens Saturday

Special to Sentinel-Voice

“The Urban League is pleased to be a member and contributor to this community. The Urban League has long stood for health and family and promoting a certain level of quality. Our office is committed to meeting the needs of the people in this community,” said Las Vegas Urban League Board Chair Jacquelyn Shropshire in 2006.

Years of planning and (nearly two years of construction) will culminate on Saturday morning with the grand opening of the Dr. William U. Pearson Community Center, a 40,000-square-foot facility in North Las Vegas on Carey Avenue just west of Martin Luther King Boulevard.

The 40,000 square-foot center will feature a gymnasium, learning center, fitness and exercise room, a multi-

purpose room, teen room, game room. Slated for the future are an outdoor amphitheater and track and field course. An Early Childhood Development Center marked the first phase of the \$18 million project.

The Las Vegas-Clark County Urban League, an

affiliate of the National Urban League, will operate the center. The center will be open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.; those hours will expand from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. in September. Summer and Saturday programming will be announced soon. Those interested in

more information can call (702) 455-1200.

Dr. William U. Pearson was a long-time county commissioner and respected leader in the African-American community. A dentist, he served on the Las Vegas City Council and the Clark County Commission.

Taylor to kick off Vegas leg of U.S. mentoring initiative

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Las Vegas is joining a national mentoring initiative in true Las Vegas style. Susan L. Taylor, senior editorial executive Essence Communications—which publishes *Essence* magazine—will kick off the Las Vegas Cares Mentoring Movement on Saturday during opening ceremonies for the Dr. William U. Pearson Community Center in North Las Vegas.

A fourth-generation entrepreneur, Taylor founded Nequai Cosmetics, before becoming *Essence*’s fashion and beauty editor and, in 1981, its editor-in-chief. Author of three books, Taylor is also a sought-after speaker, known for delivering messages of hope and encouraging people to re-orient their lives and society and create, peaceful, productive and sustainable communities.

In 1999, Taylor became the first African-American woman to receive The Henry Johnson Fisher Award from the Magazine Publishers of America. In 2002, she was inducted into the American Society of Magazine Editors’ Hall of Fame. Taylor is also a cofounder of The Future PAC, the first national political action committee devoted to providing progressive Af-

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100 BLACK WOMEN INDUCTEES

The Las Vegas chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women held its annual Madame C.J. Walker luncheon at Bally’s Hotel-Casino on Sunday. Dr. Mona Lake Jones, left, delivered the keynote address. Capping off the ceremony was the inductions of 24 new members to the Las Vegas chapter. The newest inductees—left to right: Helen Hassel, left, Carol Rose, center and Mia Neat congratulated each other during the ceremony.

Sentinel-Voice photos by Marty Frierson