

Prison in the Cards

Many black men face a rough new rite of passage. *By Silja J.A. Talvi*

ACCORDING TO TWO recent research studies, the path that awaits young, undereducated African-American men is more likely to lead them to prison than anywhere else.

In fact, with the expansion of the nation's sprawling prison industrial complex since the 1980s, things have gotten far, far worse for black men everywhere.

Consider that in 1954—the year that the Supreme Court weighed in favor of desegregation with their *Brown v. Board of Education* decision—an estimated 98,000 African-Americans sat behind bars. Today, that figure stands at 884,500, or

nine times the number of black men and women incarcerated at the advent of the Civil Rights movement.

Given current trends, one of every three African-American men born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime. According to the authors of The Sentencing Project's recent report, "Schools and Prisons: Fifty Years After *Brown v. Board of Education*," the situation is largely attributable to the War on Drugs, particularly the grossly disparate crack and powder cocaine federal sentencing guidelines. Despite a U.S. Sentencing Commission recommendation to fully eliminate

such sentencing differentials, these guidelines have been supported by both the Clinton and Bush administrations.

Imprisonment is now so common for young men of color that it serves as a veritable rite of passage. And no community has been as badly impacted as African-American inner city neighborhoods, leading to a phenomenon that many sociologists have begun to call the "mass incarceration" of young, low-income black men.

"American society loses the contribution of those men going to prison, in their roles as parents, workers, and citizens," says Professor Bruce Western,

professor of sociology at Princeton University.

Along with University of Washington sociology professor Becky Pettit, Western recently co-authored an extensive research study, "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration," which was first published in the *American Sociological Review*. Their study, conducted over a period of several years, demonstrates conclusively that African-American men are now more likely to end up in prison than to earn a bachelor's degree or even serve in the military.

"I think the findings also indicate an institutional failure," says Western. "The idea of universal rights of citizenship, social membership, is a central part of American political culture, yet mass incarceration has systematically limited the full

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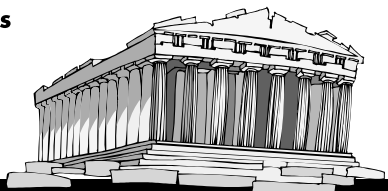
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The future of the young black man?

participation of low-education black men in American society. Democracy and civil society are diminished and that is a collective loss."

Pettit and Western's dramatic findings further demonstrate that fully 60 percent of African-American male high-school dropouts born between 1965 and 1969 ended up doing time in prison by 1999.

These statistics cannot simply be reduced to notions of overt or subtle racial prejudice in arrest, sentencing and incarceration rates, says Western. Access to opportunities plays a key role.

In fact, when Pettit and Western analyzed Census 2000 data, they found that while racial inequalities in imprisonment rates continued at exactly the same exorbitant rate, class and education inequality had become the more significant marker of the American mass incarceration trend. Based on Pettit and Western's analysis, the lifetime risks of imprisonment for all men roughly doubled from 1979 to 1999, but nearly all of this increased risk was experienced by those who never make it to college.

"Virtually the whole burden of the prison boom has fallen on those with just a high school education," Western notes.

The Bush Administration has taken a do-nothing approach to the fact that the imprisonment

of underprivileged African-Americans has reached epidemic proportions.

On July 23, President Bush stood before the Urban League's National Convention in Detroit and lauded the diversion of additional funding to federal prosecutors, before asserting that "progress for African-Americans ... depends on safe streets."

The only mention of prisoners during the President's speech related to the fate of the more than 600,000 men and women who are released from prison each year. "Let's make sure we're the country of the second chance," President Bush told the crowd, without mentioning how his administration would rectify the federally-instituted denial of student loans, public housing, or welfare to any person convicted of a drug crime. (Most states still have such bans in effect, although some legislatures have taken minimal steps to ease the plight of ex-offenders.)

The White House spin, in this regard, seems to be working. Even in this crowd of seasoned civil rights supporters, President Bush's comments were met with a strong round of applause. ■

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APPALL-O-METER

0.3 Recovery With Class

"Jason, if you wake up and you live, I'll buy you a Corvette." With these magical words, reports the *Boston Globe*, a heartsick father summoned his son away from death's door. It is not known how decisive the promise of a bitching ride was in clinching Jason Stackiewicz's startling recovery from severe brain injuries. But his father, Thomas, owner of three Corvettes, vows to make good his promise to the young man, who was injured in February while celebrating the victory of his team in the Super Bowl.



Almasi, who, oddly enough, turns out to be white. As Joshua Holland reveals on Gadflyer.com, the group's representative was to appear on C-SPAN to rebut charges by NAACP President Kwesi Mfume that Project 21 and other such outfits were "make-believe black organizations."

"Um ... Project 21 ... a program for conservative African-Americans," stammered host Robb Harlston, gobsmacked by this ironic situation. "You're not African-American."

Apparently good black help is hard to find in the world of conservative think tanks.

Project 21, Holland reports, is a subsidiary of the National Center for Public Policy Research, an organization founded in the 1980s to support President Ronald Reagan's policies in Latin America and that, since then, has developed a number of policy hobbyhorses reflecting the interests of the oil and tobacco companies that fund it.

2.5 The Greatest of These is Charity

Could it be that the Republicans rule this country because they spare no effort to help the least of their brethren? Consider this compelling act of charity: Campaign workers for Ralph Nader needed to collect 30,000 petition signatures to get their man on Michigan's November ballot. They collected barely 5,400. They were gratified to learn, however, that the state's Republicans had taken the trouble to collect more than 40,000 signatures for their man, according to ABC. Now that's love.

2.5 The Ol' Whiteface Act

A funny thing happened when the spokesperson for Project 21, a leading organization of black conservatives, got a flat tire on the way to a C-SPAN interview. The group had to send its director, David

2.0 Time To Buy Bigger Pants, America

Looking for a more efficient delivery system for the sugary pap the Krispy Kreme Corp. fashions into doughnuts? Breathe easy. CNN reports that the company has transformed its celebrated glazed treat into frozen drink form. "We feel our expanded beverage offerings will provide tremendous growth opportunity for both the company and the Krispy Kreme brand," explained President and CEO Scott Livengood.

—Dave Mulcahey

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Freedom Reborn

Youth activists learn techniques for anti-racism, voter registration *By Maya Schenwar*

FORTY YEARS AFTER MISSISSIPPI Freedom Summer, poll taxes, literacy tests and Jim Crow laws are history—but not the electoral system that disenfranchised many voters.

To change that, organizers of a new generation of Freedom Schools are spearheading a massive voter registration campaign and mobilizing youth activists across the country.

"In the original Freedom Schools, it was mostly young people organizing to get adults the vote," says David Billings, an organizer with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISB), one of the organizations sponsoring Freedom Schools this summer. "Right now, we're trying to direct the political energy and enthusiasm in the youth culture toward voter registration, to bring together a youth politic which is larger and more varied than the one that existed in 1964."

The percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds who vote has fallen from 42 percent to 28 percent since 1972, when the voting age was lowered to 18. Freedom School activists with PISB and the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) hope to make this year the one that breaks the trend.

There are 71 Freedom Schools, including 64 sponsored by CDF, in operation, training young people to register voters and build anti-racist political movements within their communities. Three new

schools were established this summer. All are free and draw participants mostly from historically disenfranchised groups like African Americans and Latinos.

Students at the Manhattan Freedom School, which opened July 6, are working in conjunction with college-age volunteers, called Freedom Crews, to register 15,000 New Yorkers by September, says CDF Deputy Director Sandy Trujillo.

"These kids go out every day to knock on doors and talk to people on the streets," says Trujillo. "We recognize that this year is particularly important for a voter registration campaign."

The New Orleans PISB Freedom School kicked off a similar registration drive in July.

Besides promoting direct action, organizers from both PISB and CDF Freedom Schools work to educate students about the history and politics of anti-racist work in the United States. Students are encouraged to examine the specific needs of their communities.

"The purpose is to have the youth experience an educational setting and curriculum they're not receiving in their school situation," Billings says, "a curriculum that talks about race and power and the importance of organizing." ■

For more information, visit www.thepeoplesinstitute.org or www.childrensdefense.org.

Kisses Kept Quiet *By Alix Rule*

The U.S. District Court in Kansas blocked enforcement in late July of the state's Kiss and Tell Law, which requires doctors, psychologists and counselors to report all sexual activity involving youths 16 and younger as child abuse.

Kansas Attorney General Phil Kline issued this interpretation of the state's child-abuse reporting law last year, because, he argued, teen sex is "inherently injurious."

The nonprofit Center for Reproductive Rights challenged the AG's opinion, arguing that it violates adolescents' right to privacy and deters them from seeking healthcare or counseling. Judge J. Thomas Marten agreed that the interpretation was "a monumental change in policy" and ruled that it "could have large implications for the well-being of minors."

Studies show that fewer teens would seek medical attention if confidentiality weren't guaranteed. Forty-seven percent of sexually active teenage girls say that they would stop seeking reproductive health services if their parents were made aware, though most would continue having sex, a 2002 American Medical Association study found.