

Editorial

Save endangered African American males

The plight of the African American male is an oft-discussed topic. Whenever it is taken up, the conclusions are invariably depressing. The basic conclusion is that the black male in the United States has become an endangered species.

There is reason to be concerned. Available statistics paint a horrifying picture. They show that, for example, while black males account for less than 7 percent of the U.S. population, they make up about 50 percent of all the inmates in city, county, state and federal prisons and jails. At any given time, too many African American males, especially those between 18 and

25, are in some way involved with the judicial system by being in prisons/jails, on parole or probation.

That number far exceeds that of black males in college, working or engaged in other socially or economically redeeming ventures. That is depressing and discouraging.

Unfortunately it is only too true.

It is also unfortunately too true that blacks are disproportionately involved in drug and alcohol abuse. Racism contributes to this, because prosecutors, courts and judges are more likely to sentence black defendants to prison than they would white defendants. The

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result is a judicial system that seems to be stacked against blacks.

Far too many young black males are dying today, many of them the victims of the so-called black-on-black crime. Some might assume that there is a conspiracy to eliminate or reduce the number of African American males.

Certainly, the rate at which we are killing each other off is worrisome.

Others think that the answer is to build more prisons, impose harsher sentences, forget about rehabilitation and keep those convicted of violent crimes locked up. Some proponents of this approach have come up with the so-called "three strikes" and you are out.

Basically, it would mean that anyone convicted three times of a violent crime would be imprisoned for life, regardless of any extenuating consequences. The idea has a certain appeal to it. It would appear, on the surface, to solve the problem of what to do with violent offenders—lock them up and throw away the key.

That, however, is a simplistic approach. It would not solve the problem—regardless of what the proposal's supporters may say. In the past the

clamor was for building more prisons. Millions of dollars went into prison construction. More people were being arrested and more of them were going to prison. But the crime rate has not gone down. Simple solutions are no panacea.

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The spiraling crime problem did not start overnight. It is not going to be solved overnight. It will take time to find solutions that will help address this problem. What are needed are sober, well thought-out solutions, not sound bites. There is a need to address the problems thoughtfully and carefully. There is a need to seek short and long-term solutions.

These can be found in better schools, better trained employees, hope in place of despair, throwing a lifeline to those at the bottom of society's ladder of hope. Where there is hope, where people can look to the future with hope, where there are jobs and salaries commensurate with one's training and education, there people will look to the future with optimism.

Young people have to be taught to realize that education and training are an escape route from a life of depression, despair and

deprivation.

They have to know that there are other avenues available; that they do not have to deal in or use drugs; that they do not have to commit crimes to make it; that they do not all have to end up in minimum wage jobs flipping burgers.

Hope should replace despair. Instead of the "lock 'em up and throw away the key approach," we should also look at rehabilitation, so that those who are imprisoned learn skills that will make them more job marketable when they return to mainstream society.

If they can come out and get jobs, they are less likely to return to prison.

In the long-run, it is cheaper to rehabilitate than to keep people locked up. Society should consider other alternatives, if we are to turn this problem around and begin seeing more of our young black males in school and employment, instead of in prison or under the criminal justice system.

And those who are in law enforcement or the judicial system, from police officers and sheriff's deputies to prosecutors and judges, should become more sensitive to racial issues.

They should learn to treat black and white defendants equally, instead of the present system which seems too harsh and too racist against blacks. Now that's something to think about.

Letters to The Editor

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Letters must be brief, preferably no more than 300 words long, and should, if possible, be typed and double-spaced. Hand-written letters will also be accepted. The Editor reserves the right to edit all letters for brevity, accuracy, taste, grammar and libel.

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