

# OPINION

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## Obsession with Incarceration

### Biased drug laws damage society

For three decades now, the "get tough" posture has distorted America's response to the problem of violent crime and other so-called street crime offenses, particularly drug use and drug trafficking. As a result, inmates in the nation's jails and prisons has ballooned from about 330,000 to 2.1 million today. Some boast that this "lock-em-

up" approach has produced lower crime rates. This ignores the turmoil that soaring expenditures for prisons has created for state-funded social programs. Others claim that a change in demographics, increased crime prevention and better economic times in the 1990s have far been more important. As the former mayor of a big city—New Orleans—who led a coalition of police and civic leaders in taking a significant "bite" out of crime, I share the later view.

Although they comprise just 6 percent of the total American popu-

lation, African-American males make up more than 44 percent, or nearly 819,000 of America's inmates. The corrosive impact of the black-male incarceration rate has been exacerbated in recent years, according to the Justice Policy Institute, because the number of African-American females being jailed has now risen sharply, too.



Marc H. Morial

And the same is becoming true of Latino Americans, who, while making up 15 percent of the nation's inmate population, which is close to their percentage of the total population, are actually the fastest-growing group of those being imprisoned.

A recent U.S. Sentencing Commission study describes the role of the federal sentencing guidelines as having been

both critical and devastating. Those convicted of possessing just five grams of crack cocaine—a cheaper drug whose users and traffickers overwhelmingly are black—receive a minimum sentence of five years. But it takes conviction for possession of 500 grams of powder cocaine—the more expensive form of the drug whose users overwhelmingly are white—to trigger a five-year mandatory sentence.

The original justification for the gross sentencing disparity was that crack cocaine was a more destructive form of the drug. But while that

argument has long since been disproved, Congress has refused to follow the repeated recommendations of the commission and many others to amend the guidelines and eliminate the disparate treatment.

Doing so, the Commission report notes, "would dramatically improve the fairness of the federal sentencing system." And it would be one step in reducing America's own addiction to the incarceration habit.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

## Chisholm was a Civil Rights Icon

The following statement in remembrance of former Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, who died on Saturday at the age of 80, is from U.S. Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus:

Our country has lost a civil rights icon who made extraordinary contributions to American history.

As a member of Congress from 1968 until 1983, Shirley Chisholm was a trailblazer who exemplified servant leadership.

In 1972, Congresswoman Chisholm became the first African-American woman to be a candidate for the nomination of the Democratic Party for the office of President of the United States.

As a founding member of the



*We must remain vigilant in our efforts to remain true to her vision of creating an America that affords equality and justice to all.*

Congressional Black Caucus, she was a driving force behind the Caucus' mission to serve as the 'Conscience of the Congress,' and to fight to include women, children, African Americans and all people of color in the public policy debate that so deeply af-

fects their lives.

Throughout her career, she exhibited remarkable political skills, and remained steadfast on the issues in which she believed.

She worked tirelessly to protect programs that supported women and children. As a member of

Congress, she introduced legislation to establish publicly supported daycare centers and to extend unemployment insurance to domestic workers.

Even after holding office, she continued her fight for equal rights by establishing the National Political Congress of Black Women.

Congresswoman Chisholm was a pioneer in public service who, through courage and wisdom, brought honesty and integrity to the legislative process.

As we honor Congresswoman Chisholm's legacy, we must remain vigilant in our efforts to remain true to her vision of creating an America that affords equality and justice to all of its citizens.

We extend our sincere condolences to the Chisholm family.

## Mixed Results in Education

BY JUDGE GREG GREG MATHIS

During the political and social tempest of 2004, African Americans experienced great highs and some frustrating lows. For the most part, things are improving. Our young people continue to achieve against incredible odds. In areas that range the spectrum from education to culture to politics, African Americans led the way in 2004. But, there were some setbacks.

The year began with the positive news that nationally, the African-American high school graduation rate reached an all-time high. More than 80 percent of all our youth graduated from high school last year, compared to only 70 percent 10 years ago. Clearly, the community's efforts to ensure that our students graduate from high school have not been in vain.

What makes this accomplishment even more impressive is that these students graduated in light of over-burdened teachers and unrealistic and out-of-touch government educational policy. Not only did "No Child Left Behind" leave plenty of children behind, it undermined and under-funded teachers' ability to do their jobs.

On the collegiate level, we saw more challenges in the area of funding. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education reported that in 2004, nationwide funding for public

collegiate institutions went up by only 1.2 percent (the smallest increase in a decade) while college tuitions rose by nearly 20 percent.

The good news is the U.S. Department of Education reported that black youth were the only ethnic group to sustain an increase in engineering graduates in the last three decades. Indeed, our youth are excelling in engineering, a curriculum that requires the mastering of math and science.

In 2005, I hope that African Americans can continue our in-

future, in addition to their own.

Our children made greater gains than ever before, even as they faced numerous obstacles on the road to excellence. The history of African Americans and education has been a storied one. Ever-denied possibility and privilege, African-Americans time and time again achieved great things in spite of negative near-certainties.

In 2005, I hope that African Americans can continue our in-

*In 2005, we must continue to encourage our youth to excel in math and science so that they can determine the world's future, in addition to their own.*

Over a 20-year period, African Americans experienced an 11 percent increase in engineering graduates. Out of this crop of engineers could come the next George Washington Carver or the next Bill Gates. This is a success for our community, our parents and grandparents, teachers and, especially, our children.

In 2005, we must continue to encourage our youth to excel in math and science so that they can determine the world's

credible educational successes without so many of the obstacles (government issued and otherwise) that crop up in our way. Don't let anyone make you believe otherwise: African Americans are an educationally achieving people—despite the odds.

Judge Greg Mathis is chairman of the Rainbow PUSH-Excel Board and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

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