

OPINION

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Letter to the Editor

Offensive Talk Radio

Lars Larson made a statement June 14 on his radio show that I found to be racially offensive. He said that according to a poll, black people believe that Michael Jackson was innocent and that white people believe he is guilty and that either black people have a lower standard of child molestation, which he didn't "think" was the reason, or it was the skin color of Michael Jackson.

Mr. Larson, you know that polls can be very bias depending on how you ask the question and who you ask the question.

Black people serve on juries everyday and they seem to convict black defendants who are guilty. (Since there are a lot of black people in prison, I would hate to think that only white juries convicted them).

A poll which asks black Americans and white Americans separately is unproductive. It only divides Americans. I am an American and an individual. My opinions are my own.

Mr. Larson, when you state your opinions, are you speaking for all white people? I notice that the media likes conflict between Americans. It must improve ratings. The fans that were at the courthouse supporting Michael Jackson appeared to be mostly white, but maybe I can't tell the difference between Americans like you.

Mr. Larson, Americans speak many languages. I didn't think asking the jurist to answer a question in Spanish for Spanish-speaking Americans was stupid. I have listened to your show and although we don't always agree, I never thought of you as a racist, but your comments on June 14 were. This is my opinion and I urge you to talk to your black friends. (I know you have some) Get their opinions and see how we vary.

Ted Smith Troutdale

America's Misguided Response to Crime

A 'lock 'em up' reality gap

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Last month the National Urban League published its annual report, "The State of Black America 2005." The annual report was devoted to examining the causes and consequences of the "equality gaps" that divide blacks and whites and discussing what can be done to close them.

Now, new statistics just released by the federal government further another kind of gap that afflicts African Americans and the larger American society. They show that the nation's prison and jail population in mid-2004 stood at 2.1 million, a slight increase of 2.3 percent from the previous year. This occurred even as the rate for both violent crimes and property crimes continued a decade-long decline.

Some assert the figures indicate America is winning the fight against crime. Actually, it's further evidence that society is bedeviled by a gap between reality and of ideology and inertia.

Many in America just can't seem to give up the idea that a simplistic, get-tough and lock-'em-up-for-as-long-as-possible response to the problem of crime



'We need to reduce, not increase the number of people we're locking up.'

is all that's needed. They couldn't be more wrong. We need to reduce, not increase the number of people we're locking up.

In far too many instances the dynamic of punishment that is pushing more and more people into prisons is not in the best interests of rehabilitating the individual offenders, nor in the long-term interests of the larger society.

Despite get-tough policies, the overwhelming majority of those sent to prison, many of whom have low educational and occupational skills, can't be locked up forever. That is particularly so because the surge in prison and jail populations has been driven by locking people up for first-time low-level drug offenses.

According to The Sentencing Project, a criminal-justice think tank, since 1998 nearly 600,000 people have been released from prison every year. Federal data shows nearly two-thirds of those released are

arrested for committing another serious crime within three years, and one-quarter end up being sent back.

As several government and private studies have shown, in-prison rehabilitation programs, by raising inmates' job and educational skills, improve their chances of going straight once on the outside. Unfortunately, the dollars devoted to in-prison rehab programs is paltry.

The Sentencing Project found that in 1996 just 6 percent of state prison budgets were allocated for inmate rehabilitation programs. As a result, only 27 percent of re-entering prisoners had taken part in vocational programs, only 35 percent had participated in educational programs and just 18 percent of those re-entering with substance abuse problems had received treatment while incarcerated.

If a significant number of ex-felons were burdened with such problems, why would

we expect them not to commit crimes again? It's as if part of the nation's approach to crime is minimizing the chances that offenders will be able to go straight.

America's "reality gap" about crime and incarceration operates most corrosively among African and Latino Americans, alarming and rising numbers of whom are in prison or likely to be in prison at some time in their lives. Members of these two groups now constitute nearly two-thirds of the nation's inmates. That's not a good sign for the present or the future of any sector of American society.

In our "Prescriptions for Change" manifesto in this year's "The State of Black America 2005," we propose attacking the nation's crime problem from both ends: by improving educational quality in public schools that serve black and Latino youngsters, expanding those job-training and career-counseling programs that target poor urban males, and by establishing rehabilitation and reentry programs within and outside of prisons that give those who've committed crime a substantive chance to go straight.

It's time to eliminate America's "reality gap" about fighting crime.

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

Double Dose of Racial Justice in Texas, California

White juries backfired for prosecutors

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

The criminal justice system and the African-American community were dispensed a long-overdue dose of racial justice June 13 when the U.S. Supreme Court and a California jury sent a very clear message: racial discrimination has no place in the jury process.



(Jurors) should rely on the evidence presented and the witness testimony. However, studies show that jurors also bring their racial and economic backgrounds into the jury room.

On the same day that Michael Jackson was acquitted by a jury that included no

black or Latinos, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered a new trial for a Texas man who was convicted of murder after Texas prosecutors eliminated nine of the 10 eligible black jurors based, presumably, on their race.

When the jury composition of singer Michael Jackson's trial was made public, there was an outcry from the black community, and with good reason. A black defendant is hard pressed to receive a fair trial if there are no minorities on the jury. Additionally, all white juries are more likely to convict a black defendant if the victim is white.

Perhaps the prosecutors thought Jackson's almost color-

less jury - there was only one minority, a woman of Indonesian descent - would ensure a win. This plan obviously backfired; the pop star was acquitted on all 10 counts of child molestation and related charges.

In the Texas case, the court ordered a new trial for death row inmate Thomas Miller-El. Miller-El was charged and convicted for the 1985 murder of a Dallas motel clerk. His jury included only one black; prosecutors managed to strike nine of the eligible 10 blacks in the jury pool. In the 6-3 decision, the Justices wrote that there was strong evidence of prejudicial jury selection, noting that more time was spent questioning black jurors about their thoughts on the death penalty and that prosecuting attorneys scrambled the juror pool more than once, perhaps to increase the chance a white juror would be chosen.

When a jury begins its deliberations, it should rely on the evidence presented and the witness testi-

mony. However, studies show that jurors also bring their racial and economic backgrounds into the jury room. This racial injustice is not limited to the jury pool. A 2003 study of the Philadelphia court system shows prosecutors exercised peremptory challenges - a challenge where a juror can be removed without reason - to remove over 50-percent of black jurors; less than 30-percent of non-black jurors were removed using these challenges. Comparable numbers can be found in jurisdictions throughout the U.S.

Let's record June 13 as the day this country took a tentative step towards leveling the steep slope that is the criminal justice system. If lower courts adhere to the ruling, perhaps African-Americans and other people of color can increasingly find justice from juries.

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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