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OPINION

Time to Get Smart on Crime

We must do better for the sake of our families and future

BY BENJAMIN TODD JEALOUS

The United States has five percent of the world's people but 25 percent of the world's prisoners. For the sake of our families and future we must do better.

Our nation leads the world in the incarceration of our own citizens, both on a per capita basis and in terms of total prison population. The problem stems from the decades-old "tough on crime" policies from the Nixon/Reagan era. We are stuck in a failed "tough on crime" mind state that is characterized by converting low-level drug addicts into hardened criminals by repeatedly locking them up when they should be sent to rehab for drug treatment.

More than 500,000 of the 2.3 million people behind bars in the U.S. are incarcerated for nothing more than a non-violent drug offense. And over 40 percent of them are people of color. Although rates



of drug use and selling are comparable across racial and ethnic lines, blacks and Latinos are far more likely to be criminalized for drug law violations than whites. One in nine black children has an incarcerated parent, compared to one in 28 Latino children and one in 57 white children.

This failed approach to criminal justice has both a direct and indirect impact on our children. Immediately, many children are faced with foster care as their parent is locked away for a non-violent drug offense. In our report, "Misplaced Priorities: Over Incarcerate, Under Educate", we found that situations like this lead to achievement gaps as early as grade school in communities that have high incarceration rates. The report also shows that mass incarceration siphons funds from our schools, leading to skyrocketing public education costs for students

hoping to attend college.

There is no question that violent criminals must be locked up. Unfortunately, the "tough on crime" strategy of the last four decades has become a dangerous distraction for law enforcement, diverting attention and resources away from violent offenders and onto non-violent acts that require counseling, not incarceration.

The fact is that so called "tough on crime" policies have failed our nation and its families. It is time to move to "smart on crime" policies that reduce sentences for drug offenses - most notably mandatory minimum sentences - and focus on rehabilitation and prevention rather than punishment. Encouragingly, this kind of reform is being sought on the state, local and national levels.

In the U. S. Senate, Chairman of Judiciary Committee, Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), and Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) have introduced the "Justice Safety Valve Act of 2013." The bill would allow federal judges to bypass federal mandatory minimum sentences when the sentence does

not fit the crime. It is encouraging to see a bipartisan effort on criminal justice reform, based on the notion that mass incarceration is draining state budgets and national prison capacities.

Meanwhile, President Obama released his budget proposal this month and called for the largest increase in drug treatment and prevention funding in at least a decade. This is a promising sign that key players in the White House are looking at drug addiction as a public health issue, instead of an issue of crime and punishment.

Progress is also being made in statehouses, where rising prison costs are straining state budgets. In Georgia, South Carolina and Texas, the NAACP and progressive groups have teamed up Republican legislatures to reduce mandatory minimum sentences and increase options for parole. In Texas, the NAACP worked with Tea Party leaders and a coalition of activists to pass 12 "smart on crime" reforms that resulted in Texas scheduling its first prison closure in state history.

Support for criminal justice re-

form is not just limited to civil rights activists. This month, the NAACP, hip-hop pioneer Russell Simmons, Dr. Boyce Watkins, and coalition of over 175 artists, actors, athletes, elected officials and advocates brought national attention to this issue by presenting an open letter to President Obama, urging him to double down on his efforts to move to a criminal justice model based on prevention and rehabilitation. With signers like Will Smith, Scarlet Johansen and Richard Branson, the letter has expanded the movement to bring an end to the failed "tough on crime" policies.

If we allow the current trends continue, one in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his life. The time has come for all of us to do all that we can. The future of our families, states, and nation demand it. If we are going to find our way back to first in education and job creation, we must first decide to stop leading the world in incarceration.

Benjamin Todd Jealous is president and chief executive officer of the NAACP.

Let's Lace Up and Keep Running

We can't let bombings close down the world

BY CHRIS SCHILLIG

I started running about four years ago to lose weight.

At first I hated it. My lungs burned and my head hurt and every footstep felt like sledge hammers pounding on my calves.

I persisted out of stubbornness. I'd bought a good pair of shoes and I didn't want to waste them.

A few months later, everything still hurt, but not as often and not as long. I grew to tolerate running and, eventually, to love it. The solitude of the open road spoke to me, giving me a place to sort out my thoughts, to plan my day, or just unwind.

When solitude grew too, well, solitary, I started running races — 5Ks, 10Ks, even a half-marathon. I was never going to be the fastest runner — not overall, not even in my age group — but that didn't matter.

Camaraderie was a new experience. Imagine me, shunner of everything athletic, bonding with other athletes, encouraging and being



encouraged, crossing the finish line with a feeling of euphoria while family and friends looked on.

Crossing the finish line. That's one of the things I pondered after I learned of the bomb explosions at the Boston Marathon — that the rat bastards responsible had corrupted yet another place that should be associated with victory and joy.

First, terrorists stripped Americans of our sense of security on 9/11. Since then, it's been one reduction after another. Shooters in schools, in malls, in airports, in churches. Some with guns, some with bombs, one crazy in Texas with a knife.

And now the Boston Marathon, probably the Super Bowl of races, one that runners dream of qualifying for, if not competing in. At least three dead, more than 100 injured.

Where are we safe anymore? The answer, of course, is everywhere and nowhere.

Everywhere because, despite the horror and tragedy, the loss of life and the injuries, most places are perfectly safe, at least from the kind of homicidal cruelty that took place in Boston, because the bad guys still are few and far between.

Nowhere because it's impossible for anybody — police, volunteers,

government officials, the courts — to protect us 100 percent of the time. We wouldn't want to live in a world where they did. A poster by comicbook master Frank Miller shows a young woman with her eyes, ears and nose covered by Band-Aids. A pair of hands reaches toward her mouth to place another Band-Aid there. "Just one more and you'll be safe," the caption reads.

The post-Boston 2013 world is one we know too well already. Races will now begin with totally appropriate moments of silence for lives lost in Boston, another painful reminder of innocence lost. Runners will cross finish lines and remember images of another finish line, one choked in smoke and raining blood and body parts. They will wear T-shirts and ribbons in colors yet unchosen to mark lives senselessly lost.

Another moment of joy will be tainted by the unfathomable actions of a person or people who consider decency to be just a word and for whom life is cheap.

And yet we soldier on. Americans still fly, despite 9/11. We still send our kids to school, despite Columbine, Texas A&M, Sandy Hook and too many others. We still go to the movies, despite Aurora.

And now we will still run, despite

Boston. We will persist out of stubbornness, to lose the weight of the world, despite the burning in our lungs and the pain in our hearts.

Because we can't stop congregating. We can't close down the world and huddle in our houses, and we can't teach our kids to do that either.

Just one more and you'll be safe.

We've got to lace up and keep running.

But are we running toward the future or away from the past? Sadly, that answer isn't as clear.

Chris Schillig is an English teacher in Alliance, Ohio.

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