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OPINION

Mass Incarceration is a Women's Issue, Too

Breaking up families and endangering children

BY JESSICAH PIERRE

Over the last few years, our broken criminal justice system has become a national issue as horrific stories of victims of mass incarceration have made their way into the mainstream media.

The dominant narrative around this issue is usually that it disproportionately affects people of color, particularly men.

Many folks have heard of Kalief Browder, a New York teenager who took his own life after suffering nearly three years in sol-



itary confinement, all for allegedly stealing a backpack. He was never tried.

Fewer people know Maria Elena Hernandez, a retired California housecleaner who was jailed after police rejected her protests that they'd mistaken her for someone else.

Although women represent a small portion of it, they are currently the fastest growing segment of our prison population.

There are 219,000 women currently incarcerated in the United States. A new report by the Prison Policy Initiative and the ACLU's Campaign for Smart Justice found that "a staggering number" of them haven't even been convicted. "More than a quarter of women who are behind bars have not yet had a trial," they found.

Worse still, there are a number

of public health and economic consequences for the conditions that women suffer in prison.

Firstly, many prisons and jails are ill equipped to support the health needs of women, including basic hygiene and reproductive health.

According to the ACLU, pregnant women who are incarcerated are still being shackled during childbirth. Shackling makes the already painful process of childbirth and postpartum recovery even worse.

The American Medical Association and the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists have spoken out against this, deeming it medically unsafe. Yet there are at least eight states that have yet to propose legislation to ban this inhumane practice.

Secondly, incarcerating women also has long lasting economic

effects, further exasperating the gender pay gap — and endangering children.

Pretrial detention disproportionately affects women because incarcerated women tend to have lower incomes than incarcerated men, making it even harder to afford cash bail. The Prison Policy Initiative found that the annual median income of women who cannot make bail is \$11,071 — and "among those women, black women had a median annual income of only \$9,083."

Since 80 percent of women in jails are mothers and primary caretakers of their children, this can mean incredible hardship for their families.

Criminal justice reform groups are spreading awareness about this system's devastating impact on women and families. And lawmakers in both major parties are

starting to pay attention.

This past summer, Democratic U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris from California and Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky introduced the Pretrial Integrity and Safety Act, a bill designed to empower states to replace the use of the cash bail system with something fairer. That wouldn't just be better for families, they wrote in a New York Times op-ed — it could also save American taxpayers roughly \$78 billion a year.

It's important that we keep women at the center of criminal justice reform. As we continue to push for gender equity in this country, we cannot ignore the devastating effects that mass incarceration has on women and their families.

Jessica Pierre is the inequality media specialist at the Institute for Policy Studies. Distributed by OtherWords.org.

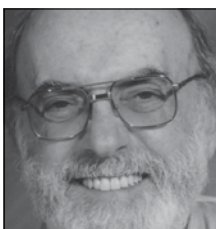
A Holiday Hijacked by a Militaristic Congress

Armistice Day becomes Veterans Day

BY ARNOLD OLIVER

How in heck did Armistice Day become Veterans Day? Established by Congress in 1926 to "perpetuate peace through goodwill and mutual understanding between nations," and later as "a day dedicated to the cause of world peace," Armistice Day was widely recognized for almost 30 years. As part of that, many churches rang their bells on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month — the hour in 1918 that the guns fell silent on the Western Front by which time 16 million had died in the horror of World War I.

To be blunt about it, Armistice Day was hijacked in 1954 by a militaristic Congress and renamed Veterans Day. Today few Americans understand the original purpose of Armistice Day, or even remember it. The message of peace seeking has been all but erased. Worst of all, Veterans Day has devolved into a hyper-nationalistic quasi-religious celebration of war and the putatively valiant warriors who wage it. We no longer have a national day to recognize or reflect upon international



peace.

And the identification of warriors as heroes is pretty shaky too. If you are a veteran, and honest about it, you will admit that most of what goes on during wartime is decidedly un-heroic and actual heroes in war are very few and far between.

I have to tell you that when I was in Vietnam, I was no hero, and I did not witness a single act of heroism during the year I spent there, first as a U.S. Army private and then as a sergeant. Yes, there was heroism in the Vietnam War. On both sides of the conflict there were notable acts of self-sacrifice and bravery. Troops in my unit wondered how the North Vietnamese troops could persevere for years in the face of daunting U.S. firepower. U.S. medical corpsmen performed incredible acts of valor rescuing the wounded under fire.

But I also witnessed a considerable amount of bad behavior, some of it my own. Among US troops, racism against any and all Vietnamese was endemic. There were countless incidents of disrespect and abuse of Vietnamese civilians, and a large number of truly awful war crimes. Most un-heroic of all were the U.S. military and civilian leaders who planned, orchestrated, and profited greatly from that utterly avoidable war. I should have taken action to resist the war while still on active duty,

but I did not.

The cold truth is that the U.S. invasion and occupation of Vietnam had nothing to do with protecting American peace and freedom. On the contrary, the Vietnam War was fought to forestall Vietnamese independence, not defend it; it bitterly divided the American people.

Unfortunately, Vietnam wasn't an isolated example of an unjust conflict. Many American wars — including the 1846 Mexican-American War, the Spanish-American War in 1898, and the Iraq War (this list is by no means exhaustive) — were waged under false pretexts against countries that didn't threaten the United States. It's hard to see how, if a war is unjust, it can be heroic to

wage it.

But if the vast majority of wars are not fought for noble reasons, and few soldiers are heroic, have there been any actual heroes out there defending peace and freedom? And if so, who are they? Well, there are many, from Jesus down to the present. I'd put Gandhi, Tolstoy, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the list along with many Quakers and Mennonites. And don't forget General Smedley Butler, who wrote that "War is a Racket".

The real heroes are those who resist war and militarism, often at great personal cost.

Because militarism has been around for such a long time, at least since Gilgamesh came up with his protection racket in

Sumeria going on 5,000 years ago, people argue that it will always be with us.

But many also thought that slavery and the subjugation of women would last forever, and they're being proven wrong. We understand that while militarism will not disappear overnight, disappear it must if we are to avoid economic as well as moral bankruptcy — not to mention the extinction of our species.

This year on Nov. 11, Veterans for Peace will bring back the original Armistice Day traditions. Join them and let those bells ring out.

Arnold "Skip" Oliver, syndicated by PeaceVoice, is professor emeritus of political science at Heidelberg University in Tiffin, Ohio.

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