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**The Skanner Newspaper**, established in October 1975, is a weekly publication, published every Wednesday by IMM Publications Inc.

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The Skanner is a member of the National Newspaper Publishers Association and West Coast Black Publishers Association.

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# Opinion

## Women of Color Disproportionately Represented in Prisons

**B**lack women today yield significant political power as the most reliable Democratic voters. Yet, despite growing political importance, they score at the very bottom when it comes to virtually every economic indicator from education to lifetime earnings to household wealth. Some past history that shapes black women's lives just aren't changing fast enough.

I grew up with no father and an addicted mother; I raised myself, became a mother at 15, dropped out of school and struggled to support my child and siblings. It was a dark time. Living with poverty, surrounded by substance abuse and being neglected, I didn't think much about the future. But nothing was as dark as waking up in a jail cell without remembering how I got there.

More than 1 million women are behind bars in the United States. Two thirds are women of color, and more than a third of those incarcerated for drug offenses. Eighty-five percent have been victims of violence, rape, sexual assault, neglect and child abuse.

A recent report shows that over the past two decades, the percentage of girls growing up the way I did who get prison sentences jumped from



Tamisha Walker

*The Safe Return Project*

20 percent to 50 percent. The number of women in prison is now rising at nearly double the rate for men. Many of these women are mothers criminalized for being addicted while pregnant. Last year, Tennessee passed a law that made it a crime to be addicted

“Many of these women are mothers criminalized for being addicted while pregnant

while pregnant.

The right intervention for addiction is treatment, not prison, but women of color disproportionately get punishment instead of treatment. Girls of color who have lived with abuse are more likely to be labeled as offenders than White girls.

I was arrested 19 times before I turned 18. No adult ever asked what was wrong or what was leading me down this road of bad decisions and bad consequences. There was no intervention before going to prison, while in prison, or

even after — when it could have helped accelerate the healing of my family. Most incarcerated women have little or no access to drug treatment, even though nearly 75 percent of them were using drugs before their arrest. Nor is there much available treatment to help abused women recover.

There's also little counseling or parenting education for incarcerated women, even though most inside, like myself, are mothers. And there's scant legal or advocate support for women coming out of

prison and seeking to regain custody of their children.

Like men, women coming home face employment challenges, but they often face more even barriers in getting assistance for themselves and their kids if they've been convicted of a drug offense.

In the six years since I came home from jail, I have earned my GED, obtained an associate's degree and become an advocate for changing policies to better serve people returning home after incarceration. I've reunited with my sons and kept them close, as-

uring them they won't experience the life I knew at their ages. I'm a trained advocate, mediator, mentor and leader in the fight to end mass incarceration.

Had I known that in my state, California, 54 percent of drug-related prison sentences go to women of color, even though women of color are only 38 percent of the population, I wouldn't have been so surprised to end up in prison like growing numbers of other young women.

My story inspires others to work for change, too. But it's an uphill fight, especially for women. I've been there, and know it takes more than inspiration, vision and dreams to change Black history.

My work now focuses on redefining public safety by helping people being released from jails and prison to become whole in our society. My goal is reduce recidivism by dealing with conditions that led to incarceration to begin with, and facilitating recovery from the pain and disenfranchisement of incarceration and the conditions that led to it.

A record number of women of color in prison is becoming part of our shared Black history, a by-product of systemic racism, sexism, and oppression that continues to persist.

## Veterans and Consumers of Color Often Targeted for Fraud

**A**lthough the former Corinthian Colleges, once one of the nation's largest for-profit colleges, closed its doors last year, many of the problems incurred by its former students persist. The now-defunct college is the only questionable actor among for-profit colleges.

To date, investigations, and lawsuits have focused on a growing list of other for-profit schools and colleges including but not limited to Computer Systems Institutes, DeVry University, ITT Tech, Marinello Schools of Beauty and Trump University.

One of the worst financial abuses perpetrated are against the men and women who sought to successfully transition from military to civilian life. Many veterans enrolled and even graduated from for-profit institutions, like Corinthian, but now find there are three strikes against them: the promised better careers and high earnings never materialized, and thirdly, educational benefits that underwrote a portion of the so-called educational cost have now been suspended.

In response, eight state Attorneys General have challenged the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to “restore the educational and vocation-



Charlene Crowell

NNPA  
Columnist

al rehabilitation benefits that thousands of veterans are deprived of due to misleading advertising, or enrollment practices of predatory institutions, such as Corinthian Colleges, Inc.” These Attor-

“One of the worst financial abuses perpetrated are against the men and women who sought to successfully transition from military to civilian life

neys General (AGs) represent the states of California, Connecticut, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Oregon and Washington.

“Most of the student relief flowing from enforcement actions against predatory educational institutions has, however, pertained to student loans — not the hard-earned benefits of our nation's veterans,” wrote the AGs.

Two taxpayer funded programs, the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill and the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program are at the heart of the AGs' concerns. G.I. Bill benefits, funded by Title IV

federal student aid, provide up to \$21,084 per year for tuition; additional funding covers housing, books and supplies. VR&E benefits are awarded for service-related disabilities that can include job training and education, workplace accommodations and career coaching.

Legally, for-profit colleges may receive up to 90 percent of their annual revenues from Title IV. VR&E assistance is not included as part of Title IV. If both Title IV funds —

which also include Pell Grants — are combined with VR&E benefits, taxpayers are almost completely funding for-profit enterprises.

“Millions of Americans look to higher education for training that will lead to meaningful employment and good pay,” said FTC Chairwoman Edith Ramirez. “Educational institutions like DeVry owe prospective students the truth about their graduates' success finding employment in their field of study and the income they can earn.”

According to New York Attorney General Eric T. Schneiderman, between 2005

and 2011, Trump University operated as an unlicensed educational institute that promised to teach real estate investment techniques. The office's investigation revealed that participating consumers paid up to \$1,495 for a three-day seminar. While in attendance, they did not receive the real estate training promised but were encouraged to sign-up for programs ranging in costs from \$10,000 to \$35,000.

In 2005, the New York State Education Department ad-

vised the enterprise of its state law violation. The enterprise's name was not changed until 2010.

Last fall the Center for Responsible Lending (CRL) released research that found how high-cost, for-profit colleges make millions each year by targeting students of color. As students of color enroll more often at for-profit colleges, they are disproportionately harmed.

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