

Some Ideas for Shrinking the Number of African Americans in Prison

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We don't like to talk or even think about it. "It" is the conflicted topic of "race," crime and punishment. We lock up an inordinate share of African Americans, especially young men – with troubling causes and consequences for all of us.

Can we reduce crime and bias at the same time? What is right morally? What works practically?

1. **Get smart about drug abuse.** The war on drugs has failed to reduce drug use and associated ills. It has "succeeded" in locking up huge numbers of African Americans – not European Americans who are also involved in the drug scene. No approach is perfect, but prevention and treatment costs less and works better to turn around lives than repeated bouts of arrest and jail. **Action:** Urge government leaders to change *how* we fight substance abuse and related crimes. Reallocate dollars for prevention and treatment, taking into account needs of people of color.
2. **Help create hope and opportunity.** Risks of crime grow when youth and adults live in pockets of dense urban poverty and disrupted families, where they lose hope of a good future including success in school, good jobs, housing and health care. Kids are more likely to stay out of trouble if they get a good education - but our schools are not educating kids of color as well as other kids. This is due to a complex mix of historic causes and present day problems – but we know strategies that can help. **Action:** Give your time or money to help kids learn, and help families get housing or jobs. Support government policies for affordable housing, economic integration, and schools and services that work for *everyone* regardless of "race."

I wonder how to make this real for you if it isn't already. Imagine a hard-working mom at a low wage job, who can't afford housing except in a "challenged" neighborhood. Imagine her young son having trouble learning in school and experiencing racial discrimination there and elsewhere. Imagine him hanging out with "tougher" kids and making the mistake of delivering some crack to impress them or get money for cool clothes. Imagine his mom crying as he goes for an extended stay in jail. Can you imagine a better story for this family?

3. **"Correct" our approach to Corrections.** Use community supervision more, and incarceration less, for nonviolent offenders. Improve Community Corrections ("Parole and Probation") to give offenders a better chance to repay society and turn their lives around. We "afford" the cost of sending people to jail or prison for nonviolent crimes and minor probation violations – why can't we afford supervision and services needed to help people stay out of trouble in the community? **Action:** Support changes in state laws, policies and budgets for more effective Community Corrections. Help offenders find housing and jobs. Call Madison-area Urban Ministry (256-0906) to learn about "Circles of Support" for returning offenders.
4. **Tackle the "race" issue directly throughout the criminal justice system.** African Americans are more likely to be arrested than European Americans. Disparity grows at each step of the system – from prosecution to prison. We need to understand disparities and their causes, to consider how to solve them. Part of the disparity is "system" policies and practices that affect poor and ethnic minority people unfairly (for example, harsher treatment of crack cocaine relative to powder cocaine - which correlates with usage by race). **Action:** Ask

officials to collect and analyze data, to weed out system problems and provide “equal justice for all.”