

A look at race, incarceration, and American values

Written by Marian Wright Edelman, NNPA Columnist
Monday, 16 March 2009 14:18



Glenn Loury, a professor in the Department of Economics at Brown University, has long been one of the nation's most outspoken Black intellectuals.

For many years he was a leading conservative voice on topics like affirmative action, and whenever he focuses on a policy issue affecting the Black community, people pay attention. In his title essay in the recent book, *Race, Incarceration, and American Values*, Professor Loury sounds the alarm on some of the same concerns the Children's Defense Fund has been raising when we talk about the pipeline to prison crisis.

Professor Loury begins the book by pointing out just how out of proportion prison rates have become in our country, citing data like a 2005 report from the International Centre for Prison Studies in London that showed the United States had five percent of the world's population, but 25 percent of the world's inmates.

As he says, "Our incarceration rate (714 per 100,000 residents) is almost 40 percent greater than those of our nearest competitors (the Bahamas, Belarus, and Russia). Other industrial democracies, even those with significant crime problems of their own, are much less punitive.... We have a corrections sector that employs more Americans than the combined work forces of General Motors, Ford, and Wal-Mart, the three largest corporate employers in the country."

This dramatic increase in incarceration rates wasn't in proportion to an equally dramatic increase in crime, as Professor Loury goes on to explain, but was instead tied to a shift in our nation's thinking about the purpose of incarceration—away from rehabilitation and towards punishment. He argues that "[d]espite a sharp national decline in crime, American criminal justice has become crueler and less caring than it has been at any other time in our modern history. Why? The question has no simple answer, but the racial composition of prisons is a good place to start."

A look at race, incarceration, and American values

Written by Marian Wright Edelman, NNPA Columnist
Monday, 16 March 2009 14:18

Professor Loury describes how incarceration trends in the United States are connected to our country's legacy of slavery and segregation. He reminds his readers that cultural phenomena like lynching, Jim Crow, and legal segregation were all part of a deep-seated pattern of racial subordination in America that lasted long after slavery ended. Scholars are now noting that in the post civil-rights era, racially skewed incarceration rates have become a new way of continuing the same old pattern. Professor Loury argues that the United States is unique in the way historically marginalized groups are disproportionately "bearing the brunt of order enforcement." As he puts it, "Crime and punishment in America have a color."

The current incarceration crisis is creating a cycle too many children and youths are finding difficult to escape and that is ravaging Black families and communities. As an example, Professor Loury talks about a large group of Black men who have been devastated by the rise in incarceration rates—the nearly 60 percent of Black male high school dropouts born in the late 1960s who were imprisoned before they turned 40. This is the generation that should be the husbands and fathers at the centers of our communities right now. But even after some of these men have gained release, they and their families continue to be affected by lasting consequences.

Professor Loury says, "While locked up, these felons are stigmatized—they are regarded as fit subjects for shaming. Their links to family are disrupted; their opportunities for work are diminished; their voting rights may be permanently revoked. They suffer civic excommunication. Our zeal for social discipline consigns these men to a permanent nether caste... [and] we are creating a situation in which the children of this nether caste are likely to join a new generation of untouchables."

Professor Loury then takes a philosophical look at the idea of justice to talk about whether any of this is consistent with our society's ideals of fairness. Ultimately, he reminds readers that we still live in a country where there is an undeniable racial gap in all kinds of life outcomes. Poor children of color simply aren't born with the same chances! He explains: "Our society—the society we have made—creates criminogenic conditions in our sprawling urban ghettos and then acts out rituals of punishment against them as some awful form of human sacrifice. This situation raises a moral problem that we cannot avoid.

"We cannot pretend that there are more important problems in our society, or that this circumstance is the necessary solution to other, more pressing problems—unless we are also prepared to say that we have turned our backs on the ideal of equality for all citizens and abandoned the principles of justice."

There is no more urgent priority for our nation than ensuring every child a level playing field from birth to successful adulthood. Our national soul and future depend on it.

Marian Wright Edelman, whose latest book is [The Sea Is So Wide And My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation](#), is president of the Children's Defense Fund. For more information about the Children's Defense Fund, go to www.childrensdefense.org.