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The Truth About Black Crime
by: R Jeneen Jones

Early last year, I wrote an article entitled "Who's Afraid of Black Men?", which raised the issue of how society views black men as criminals, regardless of their true nature. After posting the feature, I received tons of email. While most African Americans praised my comments, many non-blacks agreed that black men are generally violent and aggressive law breakers. After all, one just has to look at the statistics. In all fairness, I decided to do just that and discovered some very interesting details:

Among men, blacks (28.5%) are about six times more likely than whites (4.4%) to be admitted to prison during their life. Among women, 3.6% of blacks and 0.5% of whites will enter prison at least once. (U.S. Department of Justice) Based on current rates of incarceration, an estimated 7.9% of black males compared to 0.7% of white males will enter State of Federal prison by the time they are age 20 and 21.4% of black males versus 1.4% of white males will be incarcerated by age 30. (U.S. Department of Justice) Some have noted that more black men are in prison in America than are in college. (The Black and White of Justice, Freedom Magazine, Volume 128)

Statistics on black crime are, on the surface, very bleak. There are, however, some very important factors that help to influence the numbers. Consider those and a strong case for a much different view unfolds. Since 62% of persons admitted to Federal prison and 31.1% of those admitted to State prison for the first time were sentenced because of drug offenses, let us first take a look at the racial disparity in the war on drugs:

The National Institute of Drug Abuse estimated that while 12 percent of drug users are black, they make up nearly 50 percent of all drug possession arrests in the U.S. (The Black and White of Justice, Freedom Magazine, Volume 128)

According to the National Drug Strategy Network, although African Americans make up less than one-third of the population in Georgia, the black arrest rate for drugs is five times greater than the white arrest rate. In addition, since 1990, African Americans have accounted for more than 75% of persons incarcerated for drug offenses in Georgia and make up 97.7% of the people in that state who are given life sentences for drug offenses.

In six California counties independently surveyed in 1995, 100% of those individuals sent to trial on drug charges were minorities, while the drug-using population in those same counties was more than 60% white. (The Black and White of Justice, Freedom Magazine, Volume 128)

A CNN article in 1996 cited U.S. government figures that show more than 90 percent of all federal prosecutions for crack cocaine in 1995 were of African American defendants. In addition, unlike convictions for powdered cocaine and other drugs (which wealthy, Caucasian defendants are more likely to use), a conviction for selling crack cocaine can carry a lengthy prison term without benefit of parole.

I know some people might think that African Americans are arrested so often for drug offenses because police officers target drug dealers and most blacks fit that profile. If that is indeed the case, why did an analysis by the Georgia State Board of Pardons and Paroles find that 77% of the offenses leading to the first conviction and 79% of the offenses leading to a second drug conviction involved less than one gram of a controlled substance. In addition, that same study found that 60% of the cases involved drug values of less than \$50. I'm sure Georgia isn't the only state in which such statistics hold true.

What about figures for other types of crimes? According to the U.S. Department on Justice, property and drug offenses account for 76.4 % and 56.4% respectively of crimes by individuals admitted to Federal and State prison for the first time. Most criminal convictions are, therefore, not for violent crimes. Even still, there is evidence to suggest that race also plays a factor in those types of cases:

In 1997, the American Bar Association observed that quite often public defenders, who are most likely to be assigned to poor and largely minority defendants, are inexperienced, underpaid, overworked, and largely indifferent to their client's plight. (Philadelphia Bar Association Calls for Moratorium on Death, A-Infos News Service, 12/19/97)

Even though it is illegal, throughout the nation, there are incidents of local officials influencing jury selection to include mostly white males. This is done mainly because local police and law officials are afraid that randomly selected jurors will be more liberal and less likely to convict defendants. (Prosecutors Object to New Method of Jury Selection, St. Petersburg Times, 12/28/98 and The Race of Decision Makers, RSTL Study) A 1990 study by The U.S. General Accounting Office, indicated that racial

bias has influenced prosecutors' decisions to charge a defendant with a capital offense and/or to proceed to trial rather than plea bargain. (U.S. General Accounting Office Report, Death Penalty Sentencing, 1990)

What do all of these findings suggest? For starters, we cannot conclude how many African Americans or black males are actually guilty of committing crimes. We can only obtain data on the number of black males who are arrested for and convicted of a crime. While arrest rates are highly subjective, one could argue that a conviction is a guilty sentence in the eyes of the law. Though that is true, given the racial undertones and biases still present in the American judicial system, it seems highly unjust to assume that black crime statistics are a valid indication of the state of the entire community of African American males.

Am I implying that African American males do not commit crimes? Not at all. In my opinion, there is an equal distribution of criminals (and law abiding citizens) among all racial and ethnic groups and blacks are no more likely to be criminals than are whites. The data shows, however, that African Americans more likely than others to be arrested and convicted. It is for that reason that I propose we use our intelligence and humanity to look beyond the numbers. Even though it has been shown time and time again that racial discrimination still exists in almost every segment of our society, (Driving While Black, Police & Civil Rights Leaders Sit Down to Build Bridges, Painting Insanity Black, Avis Charged with Discrimination, The New Face of Racism, Race & The Death Penalty, Bell Atlantic Sued for Discrimination, Judge OKs Boeing Bias Settlement, Black Customers Sue Denny's) why do some people find it impossible to consider that it also exists in our judicial process?

Will we ever be able to agree on the truth about black crime (or know the real story on white crime) in this nation? I doubt it. I do hope we will open the lines of communication and learn to discuss all of the facts. Only then will we be able to make changes and overcome the tremendous effect that race continues to have on the perception of black males in America.
