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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Jena, O. J. and the Jailing of Black America


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THE miscarriage of justice at Jena, La. — where five black high school students arrested for beating a white student were charged with attempted murder — and the resulting protest march tempts us to the view, expressed by several of the marchers, that not much has changed in traditional American racial relations. However, a remarkable series of high-profile incidents occurring elsewhere in the nation at about the same time, as well as the underlying reason for the demonstrations themselves, make it clear that the Jena case is hardly a throwback to the 1960s, but instead speaks to issues that are very much of our times.

What exactly attracted thousands of demonstrators to the small Louisiana town? While for some it was a simple case of righting a grievous local injustice, and for others an opportunity to relive the civil rights era, for most the real motive was a long overdue cry of outrage at the use of the prison system as a means of controlling young black men.

America has more than two million citizens behind bars, the highest absolute and per capita rate of incarceration in the world. Black Americans, a mere 13 percent of the population, constitute half of this country's prisoners. A tenth of all black men between ages 20 and 35 are in jail or prison; blacks are incarcerated at over eight times the white rate.

The effect on black communities  is catastrophic: one in three male African-Americans in their 30s now has a prison record, as do nearly two-thirds of all black male high school dropouts. These numbers and rates are incomparably greater than anything achieved at the height of the Jim Crow era. What's odd is how long it has taken the African-American community to address in a forceful and thoughtful way this racially biased and utterly counterproductive situation.

How, after decades of undeniable racial progress, did we end up with this virtual gulag of racial incarceration?

Part of the answer is a law enforcement system that unfairly focuses on drug offenses and other crimes more likely to be committed by blacks, combined with draconian mandatory sentencing and an absurdly counterproductive retreat from rehabilitation as an integral method of dealing with offenders. An unrealistic fear of crime that is fed in part by politicians and the press, a tendency to emphasize punitive measures and old-fashioned racism are all at play here.

But there is another equally important cause: the simple fact that young black men commit a disproportionate number of crimes, especially violent crimes, which cannot be attributed to judicial bias,

racism or economic hardships. The rate at which blacks commit homicides is seven times that of whites.

Why is this? Several incidents serendipitously occurring at around the same time as the march on Jena hint loudly at a possible answer.

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In New York City, the tabloids published sensational details of the bias suit brought by a black former executive for the Knicks, Anucha Browne Sanders, who claims that she was frequently called a “bitch” and a “ho” by the Knicks coach and president, Isiah Thomas. In a video deposition, Thomas said that while it is always wrong for a white man to verbally abuse a black woman in such terms, it was “not as much ... I’m sorry to say” for a black man to do so.

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Across the nation, religious African-Americans were shocked that the evangelical minister Juanita Bynum, an enormously popular source of inspiration for churchgoing black women, said she was brutally beaten in a parking lot by her estranged husband, Bishop Thomas Weeks.

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O. J. Simpson, the malevolent central player in an iconic moment in the nation’s recent black-white (as well as male-female) relations, reappeared on the scene, charged with attempted burglary, kidnapping and felonious assault in Las Vegas, in what he claimed was merely an attempt to recover stolen memorabilia.

These events all point to something that has been swept under the rug for too long in black America: the crisis in relations between men and women of all classes and, as a result, the catastrophic state of black family life, especially among the poor. Isiah Thomas’s outrageous double standard shocked many blacks in New York only because he had the nerve to say out loud what is a fact of life for too many black women who must daily confront indignity and abuse in hip-hop misogyny and everyday conversation.

What is done with words is merely the verbal end of a continuum of abuse that too often ends with beatings and spousal homicide. Black relationships and families fail at high rates because women increasingly refuse to put up with this abuse. The resulting absence of fathers — some 70 percent of black babies are born to single mothers — is undoubtedly a major cause of youth delinquency.

The circumstances that far too many African-Americans face — the lack of paternal support and discipline; the requirement that single mothers work regardless of the effect on their children’s care; the hypocritical refusal of conservative politicians to put their money where their mouths are on family values; the recourse by male youths to gangs as parental substitutes; the ghetto-fabulous culture of the streets; the lack of skills among black men for the jobs and pay they want; the hypersegregation of blacks into impoverished inner-city neighborhoods — all interact perversely with the prison system that simply makes hardened criminals of nonviolent drug offenders and spits out angry men who are unemployable, unreformable and unmarriageable, closing the vicious circle.

Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton and other leaders of the Jena demonstration who view events there, and the racial horror of our prisons, as solely the result of white racism are living not just in the past but in a state of denial. Even after removing racial bias in our judicial and prison system — as we should and must do — disproportionate numbers of young black men will continue to be incarcerated.

Until we view this social calamity in its entirety — by also acknowledging the central role of unstable relations among the sexes and within poor families, by placing a far higher priority on moral and social reform within troubled black communities, and by greatly expanding social services for infants and children — it will persist.

*Orlando Patterson is a professor of sociology at Harvard and the author of “The Ordeal of Integration: Progress and Resentment in America’s ‘Racial’ Crisis.”*

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