A Whole Community Faces a Life Sentence of Neglect

**War on Drugs:** Draconian punishment only increases the suffering of African Americans without addressing the causes.

By HALFORD H. FAIRCHILD

A 22-year-old African American man was sentenced early this month in Los Angeles to life in prison without the possibility of parole for distributing crack cocaine. It was California's first implementation of President Bush's war-on-drugs policy.

The sentencing illustrates misguided policy and, in fact, contributes to the ravaging of the African American community and our society through poverty, drugs, crime and a host of related maladies.

Incarcerating drug dealers distracts us from the true causes of drug abuse and crime. To the extent that we are so distracted, the underlying causes of these problems remain untreated, and we can expect the continued proliferation of drugs and related crime.

More important, the war-on-drugs mentality is a metaphor for our approach to social problems in general. Those who display pathological symptoms are treated as the cause of those symptoms and then prescribed "appropriate" treatment. We therefore ignore the socioeconomic realities that produce these pathologies.

Crack cocaine and other drugs of devastation are equal-opportunity toxins. They permeate every ethnic group and socioeconomic stratum. But drug abuse and other social poisons hit hardest at the more vulnerable segments of our society: the racially isolated, unemployed, chronically impoverished and socially disfranchised.

It is no surprise, then, that drug abuse and related criminal activity are problems on a larger scale in the poor, ethnic-minority inner cities. This fact provides a clue to the causes of these problems.

If we can understand the cause of social isolation, of chronic and intergenerational poverty and of anomia and despair, then we can understand the causes of drug abuse and related crime. And if this is true, then one thing is clear: That 22-year-old African American man facing a lifetime in prison is not the cause of segregation, poverty or social distance. His incarceration is not the cure.

The causes of poverty include unemployment and underemployment. The causes of unemployment are tied to the training of the work force and the availability of jobs. Inner-city schools are marked by overcrowding, underfunding, less-experienced teachers and academic failure. In some areas, the drop-out rate for junior high school is nearly 25%. In many areas, the drop-out rate for high school exceeds 50%. Without the necessary academic skills of reading, writing and computation, the people living in inner cities are disproportionately ill-equipped to compete in a highly technological workplace. Moreover, the presumption of incompetence results in continuing racial discrimination in employment.

Capital-intensive fiscal priorities, particularly within the military arena, serve to eliminate jobs in favor of hardware for death and destruction. We marvel at the technological sophistication of the B-2 Stealth bomber, but how many jobs can such a weapon produce relative to more humane endeavors? How many of these jobs can serve the employment needs of African American men?

The welfare system ensures that millions of Americans live in unremitting poverty. This economic parachute opens only for the desperately poor, and scarcely softens the fall from catastrophe to subsistence.

Drugs are the narcotic that eases the pain from this hardship. Funding drug addiction requires ill-fated activity that preys on other residents of the already economically impoverished community.

To end the cycle of drug addiction and related crime—and the victimization of people in our inner cities—requires ending the underlying causes. We must focus on improving access to quality education in the inner cities. We must guarantee equal attainment of basic academic skills. We must increase access to jobs and careers. We must eliminate employment discrimination. We must move beyond mere equal opportunity to equal achievement in health, education and general well-being. We must eliminate the motive for narcotics.

Instead, current government emphasis is on building jails and prisons; the current construction program is the biggest in our history. And with a prison population that is nearly 50% African American, the new cells promise the continued removal of these men from the community and from positive economic contributions to their families.

Misguided policy interventions, such as incarceration for life, actually contribute to the perpetuation of the very problems they seek to ameliorate. A 22-year-old spending life in prison will have little chance to be a productive member of his family, and no chance at all to be productive in his community. Both will go on, vulnerable to the unrelenting devastation of drugs and crime, while society at-large assumes the burden of housing him for the next 50 years or so.

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