

LISTEN TO THE VOICES BEHIND BARS

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All Americans should salute President Clinton's recent journey into the poorest areas of this country. As a nation, we share a responsibility to take care of all our citizens. The president's commitment to increasing job training, education and economic empowerment is welcome news.

President Clinton went to deliver a message to folks in need and to listen and learn from those who reside in our most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. During his visits to our urban denizens, however, there was a large population in need of hearing his message—and in need of being heard—that was noticeably absent. Whether in Watts, Memphis, South Phoenix or East St. Louis, a significant proportion of young men of color were not available to meet the president or hear his words of encouragement and promise of a better future. They weren't there because they were incarcerated.

Virginia, like many other states, is being overwhelmed by a rapidly growing elderly inmate population that consumes a disproportionate amount of prison resources. In 1995, for example, Ohio projected that it would need 3,000 beds for elderly inmates by 2003. It exceeded that figure in 1997.

The National Center on Institutions and Alternatives recently conducted a national survey of correctional agencies. It found nearly 50,000 inmates age 55 and older in state and federal prisons, a 750 percent increase in the past 20 years. More than 50 percent of these prisoners are convicted of nonviolent offenses. In the Federal Bureau of Prisons, nonviolent offenders make up an astonishing 97.4 percent of elderly inmates.

By visiting jails and prisons, the president might have learned more about urban problems and solutions than at his luncheon with Magic Johnson. He certainly would have had a more readily available audience of young men in the 21,000-bed Los Angeles County Jail, or the state's 43 penal institutions than in the community centers of Watts or the campus at USC. Perhaps such a visit would spur him to question both the conditions in society and the political policies that seem destined to lead young men of color into jail cells more reliably than across the commencement stage.

The incarceration of minorities is an issue worthy of a president's consideration for a number of reasons. From an economic perspective, every citizen removed from a community and sent to prison for a year costs the taxpayers \$25,000. Every 100 young men sent from Watts to a California state prison represent a \$2.5-million "investment" for that community in that year. Jobs may be created in rural communities where prisons are located, but that is no help to the communities these young men return to when released.

The second reason worth addressing is that of the unintended consequences of locking up such a large segment of our population. Single-parent families, educational failures, lack of employment and employability, pervasive pessimism among youth about their futures and a general distrust of government agencies and authorities all feed into and result from the choice to incarcerate so many Americans of color. A president who has visited prisons and the home neighborhoods of

most inmates might ask himself if a society that relies heavily on incarceration and an economy that is increasingly dependent on prison as an industry can sustain a democracy.

Half a century ago, the great sociologist C. Wright Mills stressed that when a critical mass of people experience something, we have to look at the “something” as a public issue itself. With the majority of young minority males in many cities enmeshed in the criminal justice system, we are at that point. We must look not only at their behavior but at the implications of our social policies as well. It is at the juncture of our nation’s history and these young men’s biographies where the president will find clues to unraveling this conundrum.

The challenge to Clinton, then, is to make another trip, this time including the jails and prisons where 2 million individuals now reside. In passing them by on his last trip, the president missed an important piece of the puzzle.

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