

# Our Debt to Society

By: William Reed  
—Guest Columnist—

Now that Black voters have exercised their electoral franchises, isn't it time they demand that the people they elected correct America's system of racially selective policing, prosecution and mass imprisonment? The operation of the crime control industry continues to devastate lives of millions of Black families and the economic and social fabric of their communities.

The "law and order" priorities of legislation and judicial actions over recent decades have plagued Black families worse. The nation's lowest wages, life expectancy, highest unemployment and number of single parent households are among Black prisoners, former prisoners and the ruined communities they come from and are discharged into.

American legislators have run a costly con game on Blacks. Through "law and order" legislations and judicial processes enacted over the past two decades, Blacks are 8.2 times more likely to be in prison than Whites. Their practices have created a situation where nine percent of Blacks are in prison and jails, and nearly as many more are on probation, parole, bail, house arrest or court supervision.

Blacks, who comprise 13 percent of the national population, are currently the main fodder of America's era of incarceration. We are 30 percent of the people arrested, 41 percent of people in jail and 49 percent of those in prison. Building and running prisons is one of the fastest growing industries in America, supported by a judiciary eager to keep them filled. Combined, state governments spend \$40 billion a year to operate their prison systems.

The U.S. has a higher percentage of its citizens behind bars than any other country. The remarkably high and increasing rates of incarceration since the 1980s have not been driven by increases in violent crime; the burgeoning prison population is the result of changes in penal policies and practices and the soaring number of drug offenders given prison sentences. America's "War on Drugs" has created a social situation among young Blacks where more have done prison time than military service or earned college degrees.

The U.S. spends an average of \$7,000 per year to educate each youth, and over \$35,000 to lock up one. Black voters need to ask their elected officials to answer: "How can lawmakers justify continuing to spend such money annually per an inmate from neighborhoods where we spend one-fifth of that per pupil?"

The problem is that public policy in America only moves to address human needs when under the insistent pressure of mass movements. When will a mass movement come to change America's racially selective policies of incarcerations? Will Blacks demand more from officeholders on this issue?

We need moratoriums on prosecution of juveniles as adults; advocates for the extension of health care, job and educational opportunities, rights of citizenship to the prisoner class; and more questions regarding the economic and social effects of the crime control industry on Black children, families and communities.

Lawmakers need to do more toward allocating funds toward community-based crime-prevention programs. Most offenders can be dealt with through much cheaper community programs—half the cost of imprisonment. Prevention programs for disadvantaged youths can pay considerable dividends in the future. For every dollar invested, taxpayers get from \$3 to \$5 in return later in terms of crimes prevented, taxes collected from the youth working, etc.

It's time for a return on the votes Blacks have invested into the electoral system. Nothing can excuse policymakers from the responsibility to end racist criminal justice practices impacting Black families. More than merely a symptom of the tangled mess of problems that create, sustain and deepen America's savage patterns of class and race inequality, mass incarceration of Blacks has become a central part of the mess. Thus, it will be an especially worthy target for creative, democratic protest and policy formation.

Blacks' current debt to society is to place "law and order" issues at the forefront of each of our political agendas and address ways to dismantle a vast prison industrial complex that feeds on our people.

(This column is reprinted from  
[www.BlackPressInternational.com](http://www.BlackPressInternational.com).)

## Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

First, I would like to say hello, and I hope that you are being blessed. My name is Greg Caldwell and I am a Federal Inmate. I have a desire to start a running dialogue with the Black Community to help give understanding to the need for community-based support for those incarcerated, or those who may be released soon or in the future.

I am curious as to what programs are available, if any. I would like to encourage you to share it with the inmate population. Specifically, are there any organizations that provide re-entry support of other related services to those imprisoned? What is available to someone like myself that has been away for several years and may be released soon?

These are very important questions to one who has been locked up and has a desire to return to his/her community to become a productive citizen. Additionally, these programs or services can be utilized as an intervention or prevention program to slow the flow of our young brothers and sisters into the prison system. Further, these efforts could lead to a developmental process that will assist in unifying our communities and bringing about improvement in social, educational, and economic conditions.

Re-entry programs are vital to the inmates and also to the community. They need to be established by concerned citizens and organizations, with the understanding that all of these people are not dangerous. Yes, some may be and need to be monitored. However, these communities are their homes and therein lays a responsibility to assist and lead them into living purposeful and productive lives. Of course, the inmate has a responsibility to become a good citizen and a solution to problems in the community. My hope is that the spiritual community is getting involved to ensure well-structured programs are established to make the transition from prison to the community a successful one. If the programs have strong mentors and people who have a genuine interest in seeing former inmates do well, then the inmates has the opportunity to become a good citizen. Accountability has to be imposed to help with the transition and each and every participant should know up front that he/she is expected to succeed and not become a detriment to the community.

I would like to thank you for reading this article and encourage you to respond with any ideas or information that would lead to further dialogue. I would greatly appreciate any feedback and there are many here who are looking for solutions.

Thanks to the publisher of this paper and I hope to hear from you soon.

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