

## Invisible Punishments, Rights And Wrongs

"America has become a nation of ex-cons" with over 13 million former prisoners, quotes Human Rights Watch (HRW) in its recent report on how public housing authorities nation-wide are using arbitrary policies to deny public housing to ex-offenders, as well as people with criminal records. That's 6.5 percent of the adult population.

Calling itself "tough on crime" with its mandatory prison sentences and three-strikes policies, the justice system in this country has generated a prediction by the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics that "if rates of first incarceration and mortality remain unchanged, nearly 1 in 15 persons born in 2001 will go to state or federal prison during their lifetimes." The so-called "war on drugs" itself locks up 1.5 million people a year, with 80 percent for simple possession.

Despite these firm statistics wrought by an over-zealous justice system, the hands of federal housing laws wash those of the public housing authorities, by permitting them broad discretionary boundaries to disqualify former prisoners, and those only arrested and charged, never convicted, from public housing.

In its report, "No Second Chance," HRW details its research on authorities that reject applicants for minor, non-violent offenses, such as writing bad checks, jaywalking, not paying for video rentals and shoplifting. One woman was denied because she lifted some chap stick and a few small items from a department store. Kept homeless, she lost custody of her children around the same time for lack of housing. The human rights group also criticizes the arbitrary and extensive length of the exclusionary time periods, which vary greatly from state to state.

"Exclusions from public housing are among the harshest of a range of punitive laws that burden people with criminal records," charged HRW in the report, also pointing out that "Racial and ethnic minorities suffer disproportionately from exclusionary housing policies because of their overrepresentation among those who experience arrest and prosecution, those who currently live in poverty, and those who seek public housing."

Why must people be burdened with their past criminal records, if they have proven to be rehabilitated from a life of crime—or more infuriatingly, never truly posed a violent threat to society at all.

Not only are these stark realities sad, they leave the government bordering on bitter hypocrisy and twisted irony, since this country was built by the unwanted prisoners languishing in England's jails who were let loose and sent across the seas to forge a new reality in the "New World."

Are the prisoners languishing in America's jails today any less deserving of the opportunity to forge a new reality for themselves? And more basic and fundamental, is any human being so irredeemable that they do not deserve the dignity of decent housing? HRW notes that they do not know of any country that "deprives people of the right to housing because of their criminal histories." The right to housing is recognized throughout the world in several documents of international human rights law; it is equated with food, clothing and health care.

The glaring truth is that the system of the U.S. government—federal, state and local—shuts down when it comes to dealing with the poor masses crushed in this country. Access to true freedom—ex-felons need not apply. Access to true equality—ex-felons need not apply. Access to true justice—ex-felons need not apply.

It is wrong to deny an entire class of people a new beginning, a second chance, if that is what they seek and commit themselves to attain. Instead of reinforcing invisible punishments that shadow people for the rest of their lives, a true government should work diligently to shed beaming light on a new road of redemption, recovery and rehabilitation for those who stumbled in the darkness of its society.

## Magazine Confronts HBCUs On AIDS

By: Charreah Jackson  
Black College Wire

The silence among Black students on HIV/AIDS is being disrupted by the new HBCU magazine, Ledge.

With the slogan "Don't Fall Off," the free, Black AIDS Institute-sponsored publication seeks to create conversation and change by offering statistics, prevention tips and other information to "students of color." "The magazine is by Black college students, for Black college students, and the content reflects that," said Freddie Allen, Ledge managing editor, "so you're going to see pieces in the magazine about sexuality, dating on campus and what scares students the most about unprotected sex."

Howard University alumnus Christopher Cathcart first envisioned the publication more than a year ago and pitched the idea to the Black AIDS Institute, of which he is a board member, as a way to connect with Black students.

"A student-driven HIV/AIDS awareness magazine is the perfect tool to mobilize Black college students in the fight against the epidemic," said Mr. Cathcart, who received a B.A. in public relations from Howard in 1986.

Along with 62 ways to fight AIDS, Ledge's premier issue features exclusive Jill Scott poetry and a story with a headline on the cover that asks, "AIDS, sex and trust on campus: Where is the Love?"

Contributing writers were Tameeka Mitchum of Norfolk State, Mark Stringfellow of Grambling State, Shantella Sherman of Jackson State, Melantha Murphy of North Carolina Central, Julius Jones of North Carolina Central and Mr. Allen, of Howard. Dasherick Talbert, of Grambling State, provided illustrations and photography. Larissa Hale of Jackson State is listed as a contributor and Yanick Rice Lamb of Howard as faculty adviser.

"HIV/AIDS is real and it's on campus right now, whether we want to admit it or not," Mr. Allen said. "It's not going away unless we deal with it through open dialogue and by making healthier decisions in our personal lives."

Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that Blacks total 12.3 percent of the U.S. population and disproportionately account for more than 39 percent of the AIDS cases estimated since the epidemic began. Though United States data might appear bleak, they in no way compare to the catastrophe the disease has caused in Africa.

"Entire generations of sub-Saharan Africans face extinction today because of the devastation caused by this disease," Mr. Allen said. "We need to get in front of this thing now, in our own country, and be more active in helping our brothers and sisters abroad."

The creators of Ledge envision their audience taking an active part in the publication.

"We want students to take ownership of the magazine and the very important roles they must play in fighting the HIV/AIDS epidemic," Mr. Allen added.

Students interested in contributing to Ledge or obtaining additional information on HIV/AIDS and its effects on the Black community can log onto [www.ledgemagazine.com](http://www.ledgemagazine.com).

*(Charreah Jackson is a student at Howard University who writes for The Hilltop.)*

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