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## The Cost of Incarceration

"The Cost of Incarceration" is an eight-part occasional series written by Patrice Gaines, former Washington Post reporter, author and co-founder of The Brown Angel Center, a program in Charlotte, N.C. that helps formerly incarcerated women become financially independent. Gaines received a 2009 Soros Justice Media Fellowship from the Open Society Institute to research and write articles on the impact of mass incarceration on the Black community. The National Newspaper Publishers Association News Service has agreed to make this exclusive series available to its membership of more than 200 black-owned newspapers.

### PART I

By Patrice Gaines

NNPA Contributing Writer

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - In communities around the country, Black people are missing. Neighborhoods languish. Dreams deferred rot in distant warehouses we call prisons. The similarities between the correctional system and slavery are eerie: Families ripped apart. Traditions lost or never made. The shipment of flesh, the pipeline that nearly guarantees black children go from the cradle to the prison; the insane profits made by warehousing human beings; the burden borne forever by those labeled as "convicts."

Today, a brutal recession which dictates the need to cut budgets and proof that mass incarceration does not reduce crime is changing conversations in legislative halls around the country. Some politicians, who in the past have only paid attention to fearful constituents who want to make sure people who commit crimes are locked up, are beginning to consider alternatives to imprisonment. Meanwhile prison reform advocates are wondering if a Black president and a Black attorney general means a quicker end to the disparity in incarceration between Blacks and whites.

Prison "was never a tool to fight crime. It is an instrument to manage deprived and dishonored populations, which is quite a different task," says Loic Wacquant, a renowned ethnographer and social theorist who teaches at the University of California at Berkeley. Still, speaking by email, Wacquant warns that the journey between slavery and mass incarceration must include two other "peculiar" institutions created to define and confine Blacks: "Jim Crow and the urban ghetto." Now, he says, "in the post-Civil Rights era, the penal system has gradually been recast to mean Black - and increasingly, Latino."

"The explosive prison growth of the past 30 years didn't happen by accident, and it wasn't driven primarily by crime rates or broad social and economic forces beyond the reach of state government, - according to a report by the PEW Center on the States entitled, "One in 31: The Long Reach of American Corrections." The report states, "It was the direct result of sentencing, release and other correctional policies that determine who goes to prison and how long they stay."

Report after report tells exactly who goes to prison. Consider: "One in every three Black males born today can expect to go to prison if current trends continue. More than 60 percent of the people in prison are now racial and ethnic minorities," according to The Sentencing Project, a Washington, D.C.-based research and advocacy organization. "For black males in their twenties, 1 in every 8 is in prison or jail on any given day."

These trends have been intensified by the disproportionate impact of the "war on drugs." The Sentencing Project says three-fourths of all persons in prison for drug offenses are people of color.

It may be too early to answer the question about Obama's administration, though it did announce in April that it favors reform of a 20-year-old law that mandates a sentence of at least five years for possession of 500 grams of powder cocaine with intent to distribute and the same penalty for five grams of crack cocaine.

This summer the House Judiciary Committee passed legislation intended to equalize federal sentences for offenses for crack and powder cocaine. The Senate is expected to introduce similar legislation. Driven by the recession, states are reducing their prison populations.

This month, North Carolina announced it is closing seven small prisons to save money. In

California, a panel of judges for the state's Eastern and Northern federal district courts ordered the state to reduce its prison population by about 40,000 persons within the next two years. The ruling was made because of overcrowding and the failure by the state to provide adequate medical and mental health care. Sen. Jim Webb (D-VA), a longtime critic of the prison system, has introduced a bill to create a bipartisan commission to review the U.S. prison system and offer recommendations.

In every area of the country people are waiting and working for the change they hope will come. Others - those who have been in prison and those who have loved them - are living with the byproducts of incarceration, putting their lives back

together, trying to forgive and heal.

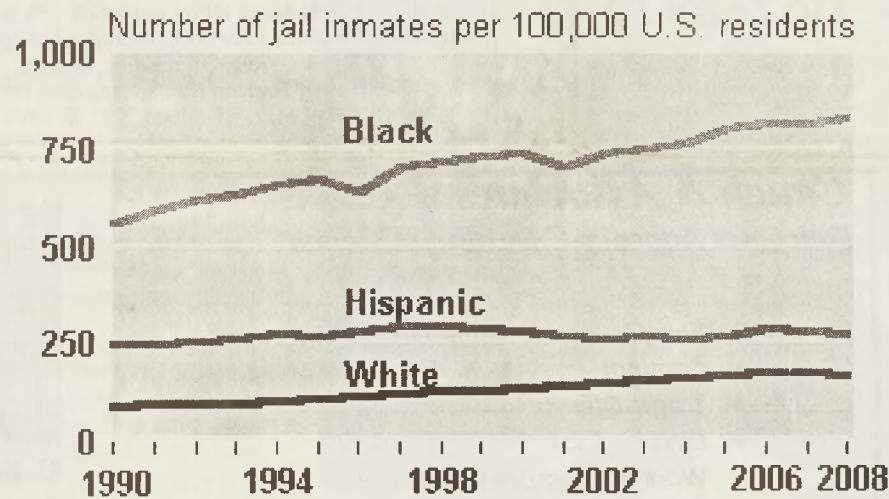
"After an extraordinary quarter-century expansion of American prisons, one unmistakable policy truth has emerged: We can't build our way to public safety," Adam Gelb director of the Pew Center on the States' Public Safety Performance Project said in the "One in 31" report.

John Cooksey, co-owner of C & M Diner, a threadbare soul food cafe, has watched his block of Mack Avenue on Detroit's East Side gasp for breath because of crime and because of over incarceration of its residents.

"I know people who come in here and say, 'I've been away for a while.' Well, I already know: I've

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### Jail incarceration rates by race and ethnicity, 1990-2008



Blacks are three times more likely than Hispanics and five times more likely than Whites to be in jail. - Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice

### Ted Kennedy: Family senator, patriarch, dead at 77

By David Espo

WASHINGTON (AP) - In the quiet of a Capitol elevator, one of Edward M. Kennedy's fellow lawmakers asked whether he had plans for a family Thanksgiving away from the nation's capital. No, the Massachusetts senator said with a shake of his head, and mentioned something about visiting his brothers' gravesites at Arlington National Cemetery.

In his half-century in the public glare, Kennedy was, above all, heir to a legacy - as well as a hero to liberals, a foil to conservatives, a legislator with few peers.

Alone of the Kennedy men of his generation, he lived to comb gray hair, as the Irish poet had it. It was a blessing and a curse, as he surely knew, and assured that his defeats and human foibles as well as many triumphs played out in public at greater length than his brothers ever experienced.

He was the only Kennedy brother to run for the White House and lose. His brother John was president when he was assassinated in 1963 a few days before Thanksgiving; Robert fell to a gunman in mid-campaign five years later. An older brother, Joseph Jr., was killed piloting a plane in World War II.

Runner-up in a two-man race for the Democratic nomination in 1980, this Kennedy closed out his failed candidacy with a speech that brought tears to the eyes of many in a packed Madison Square Garden.

"For me, a few hours ago, this campaign came to an end," he said. "For all those whose cares have been our concern, the work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives and the dream shall never die."

He was 48, older than any of his brothers at the time of their deaths. He lived nearly three more decades, before succumbing to a brain tumor late Tuesday at age 77.

That convention speech was a political summons, for sure. But to what? Kennedy made plans to run for president again in 1984 before deciding against it. By 1988, his moment had passed and he knew it.

He turned his public energies toward his congressional career, now judged one of the most accomplished in the history of the Senate.

"I'm a Senate man and a leader of the institution," he said more than a year ago in an Associated Press interview. He left his imprint on every major piece of social legislation to pass Congress over a span of decades. Health care, immigration, civil rights, education and more. Republicans and Democrats alike lamented his absence as they struggled inconclusively in recent months with President Barack Obama's health care legislation.

He was in the front ranks of Democrats in 1987 who torpedoed one of President Ronald Reagan's Supreme Court nominees. "Robert Bork's America is a land in which women would be forced into back-alley abortions, blacks would sit at segregated lunch counters, rogue police could break down citizens' doors in midnight raids, children could not be taught about evolution," he said at the time.

It was a single sentence that catalogued many of the issues he - and Democrats - devoted their careers to over the second half of the 20th century.

A postscript: More than a decade later, President Clinton nominated a former Kennedy aide, Stephen Breyer, to the high court. He was confirmed easily.

There were humiliations along the way, drinking and womanizing, coupled with the triumphs that the Kennedy image-makers were always polishing. After the 1980 presidential campaign, Camelot took another hit when he divorced. He later remarried, happily.

In later years came grumbling from fellow Democrats that his political touch had failed him, and that he was too eager to strike a deal with President George W. Bush on education and Medicare.

"I believe a president can make a difference," he said over and over in that campaign of 1980, at a time the country was suffering from crushing combination of high interest rates, inflation and unemployment.

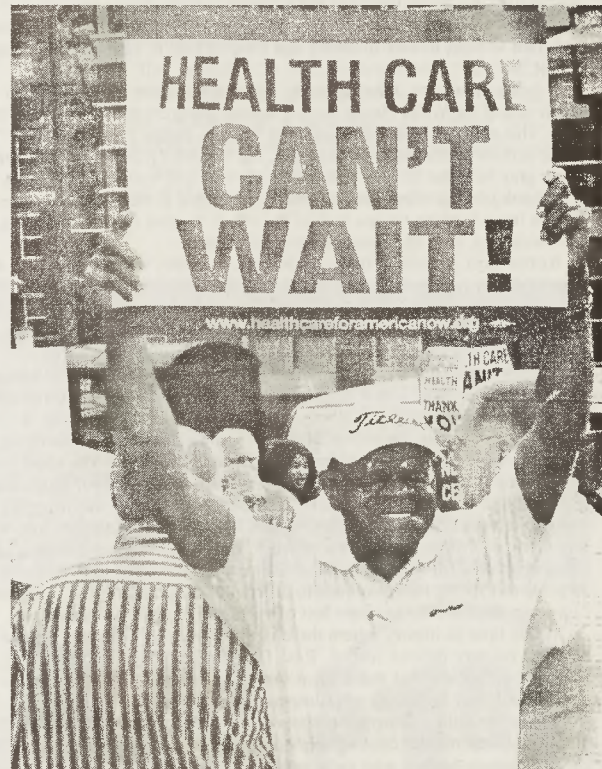
But it wasn't necessary to be a president to make a difference, or to try.

He once startled a Republican senator's aide, tracking her down by phone in Poland, part of an attempt to complete a bipartisan compromise.

For years, he left the Capitol once a week to read to a student at a nearby public school as part of a literacy program.

When a longtime Senate reporter fell terminally ill, Kennedy dispatched one of his watercolors to her room in a nursing home, and cheered her with chatty phone calls.

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George Bridgers was among the many citizens who attended a Town Hall Meeting at NCCU recently hosted by Rep. David Price. See photos on page 16. (Photo By Lawson)

### DC Vote reaching nationwide for lobbying help

By Gillian Gaynair

WASHINGTON (AP) - Advocates for a Washington, D.C., congressional seat are ramping up their lobbying efforts, seeking leverage on members of Congress by enlisting the help of their constituents far from the nation's capital.

DC Vote is reaching out to people like 62-year-old Henry Perry of Tennessee.

Not until the advocacy group visited Perry in Mississippi earlier this month did he learn that District of Columbia residents pay taxes and serve in the military, but don't have a vote in Congress.

"I think it's really a disgrace that they're denied that right," said Perry, president of the Teamsters Local No. 667 in Memphis, which also has members in Mississippi. "I was kind of shocked."

DC Vote wants Perry and others like him to persuade their own representatives to support their cause. The group said its new, in-your-face strategy will involve visits with citizens across the country and with organizations like the NAACP that are committed to civil rights and democracy. It will target congressional districts where there's opposition to voting rights for D.C., or where it could sway a vote. The group also plans for more aggressive language in ad campaigns, the first of which is scheduled to launch next month in Nevada.

"If you come after the District, we're going to come after you," said Ilir Zherka, executive director of DC Vote. "We're going to travel to your states, travel to your congressional districts and we're going to engage your constituents and make sure they know ... how you're spending your time focusing on D.C. issues and not your own issues."

The new approach has been spurred by efforts to attach to the D.C. voting rights bill an amendment that would change the city's gun laws. DC Vote's hope is that people who don't live in Washington will put enough pressure on Congress members to drop the gun measure amendment.

The challenge is to convince people to work in D.C.'s interest, without any direct reward for them.

"I think there's a certain level of 'help us because you have the power,'" Zherka said, "and because these people care about voting rights and civil rights issues, they want to do it."

D.C. residents have sought voting rights since 1801, when Congress took control of the newly created capital. The city has elected a representative since the 1970s, but that House delegate can vote only in committees, not the full House.

Hopes soared in February when senators easily passed voting rights legislation, two years after a similar measure died just three votes shy of a filibuster-proof margin.

The bill would expand the House by two seats, to 437. To offset the certain Democratic gain from giving D.C. a seat, the bill adds one for Republican-leaning Utah, which narrowly missed receiving another seat after the 2000 census.

The Senate bill was amended by Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., to repeal the city's tough gun registration requirements and restrictions on semiautomatic weapons. Ensign said he proposed the measure because the city hasn't gone far enough to comply with the Supreme Court, which last year struck down Washington's 32-year-old ban on handguns and affirmed homeowners' rights to keep guns for self-defense.

House Democratic leaders scrapped plans to consider the voting rights legislation this summer, after acknowledging they were split on the gun provision and that D.C. leaders were unwilling to compromise. It's unclear when the bill will be revived.

But DC Vote intends to keep the issue alive and continue pushing for amendment-free legislation.

Perry is doing his part, too. After meeting with the group earlier this month, he fired off a letter to Rep. Travis Childers, D-Miss., who has led a drive to repeal D.C. gun limits. Perry told Childers that D.C. residents have the right to elect their own officials to act in their interests. He also urged Childers to pass the voting rights bill without "harmful amendments."

Perry said he plans to let his members know about D.C.'s voting rights struggle and urge them to send Childers letters, too.

"We count on him for the rights of people," he said, "not to take away their rights."

On the Web: www.devote.org