

# OPINION

## THE CHRONICLE

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### The war on communities of color in America



**Jesse Jackson**  
 Guest Columnist

For decades the United States has been trying to solve the complex social problem of drug abuse through an expensive criminal justice approach. Millions of non-violent drug offenders have been arrested and imprisoned. Drug offenders now account for almost one-fourth of all state prisoners and more than half of all federal prisoners. While the so-called war on drugs hasn't stemmed the drug tide (illegal drugs are cheaper, purer, and more prevalent than ever), its primary effect has been to fill our jails and prisons with the poor and the young, disproportionately African American, Latino and Native American.

The evidence shows that white Americans in 1999 sold and used drugs at the same or higher rates than minorities. According to the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, white youth ages 12-17 are more than a third more likely to have sold drugs than African-American youths. During the period 1991 to 1993, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) included questions about drug selling in their annual National Household Survey on Drug Abuse. While it is regrettable that SAMHSA no longer includes survey questions on drug sells, the data they collected during this three-year period is very informative. On average over the three-year period, blacks were 16 percent of admitted sellers and whites were 82 percent. Despite the fact that studies show that people of color use and sell drugs at similar rates as whites, African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans are arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned at dramatically higher rates than whites for the same crimes.

African-American men are admitted to state prisons for drug offenses at a rate that is 13.4 times greater than that of white men. In seven states, African Americans constitute 80 percent to 90 percent of all drug offenders sent to prison. In 15 states, African-American men are committed to state prisons for drug charges at a rate that is 20 to 57 times the rate for white men. While African Americans constitute only 13 percent of drug users, they represent 35 percent of arrests for drug possession, 55 percent of convictions and 74 percent of prison sentences. African-Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans are incarcerated and whites receive rehabilitation. This is not fair.

While racial disparities stem in part from racial profiling, economic inequality and an unwarranted concentration of drug-war activities in inner cities, state and federal sentencing structures—in particular, mandatory minimum sentencing law—play a large role in intensifying disparities. Mandatory minimums intensify racial disparities by granting too much power to prosecutors, mandating long sentences for low-level drug offenders (disproportionately African-American, Latino and Native American), and applying disparate sentencing structures.

The most disturbing aspect of the current federal sentencing law is the crack/powder cocaine sentencing disparity. This 100-to-1 sentencing disparity raises fundamental questions about our nation's commitment to fairness, justice and racial equality. There is no scientific or pharmacological evidence that justifies treating crack offenses a hundred times more severely than powder cocaine offenses.

The penalties for crack cocaine are unfair not just because they are more severe than those for powder cocaine, but because the penalties are inherently too severe. Even if the sentencing disparity was eliminated by increasing penalties for powder cocaine to equal those of crack cocaine, the crack penalties would still be unfair (as would the new penalties for powder cocaine). This is because the current crack penalties are out of line with the organizing principle applied to other illegal drugs, which provides for a five-year sentence for serious drug sellers and a 10-year sentence for major drug traffickers.

The impact of these out-of-line crack sentences falls disproportionately on African Americans. Nearly 85 percent of all offenders convicted in federal court for crack cocaine distribution are African Americans. In 1986, before mandatory minimums for crack offenses became effective, the average federal drug offense sentence for African Americans was 11 percent higher than for whites. Just four years after implementation, the average sentence for African Americans was 49 percent higher than for whites.

The Rainbow/PUSH Coalition urges the Drug Sentencing Commission to reduce the crack/powder disparity as much as possible. Maintaining a wide sentencing disparity is simply unacceptable.

We also urge commissioners not to lower the threshold for powder cocaine in any way. Severe racial disparities already exist in arrests and sentencing for powder cocaine offenses; subjecting more offenders to mandatory minimums will only intensify these disparities. Increases in powder cocaine sentences will also disproportionately hurt all communities of color. Moreover, we also encourage the use of rehabilitation for all members of society and not only the privileged.

Keep hope alive!

Jesse L. Jackson Sr. is founder and president of the Chicago-based Rainbow/Push Coalition.



## Letter(s) to the Editor

### Awards banquet was wonderful

Dear Editor:

What a marvelous celebration was the Chronicle's Community Service Awards Banquet! We at Green Street United Methodist Church appreciated being honored with a Human Relations Award. It was especially gratifying that mistress of ceremonies Denise Hartsfield invited our group to come forward and join Pastor Kelly Carpenter in receiving the award—thus showing the community our vision of "A Church for ALL God's Children."

We were in very good company, too. As United Methodists, we are proud of the pioneering work of Marion Wooten at Bethlehem Center. Your citations carried a great deal of information, but there was no way to tell the range of the Bethlehem Center's influence in this town. Thank you for selecting Marion Wooten for a Lifetime Achievement Award.

As one who has long admired the creative commitment of Marjorie Northup, I was delighted that her early work coordinating inter-racial dialogue groups was cited. It

should be noted, however, that this started not at the YMCA as stated—but as part of the mission of the Young WOMEN'S Christian Association. The leadership of Marjorie and others through the YWCA meant a lot to this community as the schools were integrating and as folks all over town were extending our definition of "neighborhood."

For several years I have counted on The Chronicle to bring news about Winston-Salem that I might miss without its perspective. Keep on keeping us awake and alert.

Ellen S. Yarborough

### Open letter to WSSU Rams

Rams, lots of exciting things have happened at Winston-Salem State University over the past few years that make us beam with pride. Our institution was recently ranked #1 among comprehensive colleges in the South. Our softball, football, and men's and women's basketball teams have represented us well in playoff games and have won several championships. "Campus of Champions" is a title very befitting for our institution.

Over the past four years, the National Alumni Association has also experienced success. We have seen an increase in membership. More notably, last year our Annual Fund alumni participation increased by 300 percent. While we are basking in accomplishments, I'd like for us to add more link to our circle of success.

The upcoming election of national officers for 2002-2004 represents an opportunity for each of us to ensure continued progress of the National Alumni Association. This letter is an open plea to all WSSU Rams to let your vote be your voice as we prepare to select the individuals that will lead this association over the next two years. After the painful voting debacle of the November 2000 presidential election, people everywhere should feel more inclined to exercise their right to vote whenever the occasion arises. One vote does make a difference!

It's easy to brag about the acclaim that WSSU is experiencing right now. As I travel in Ram circles, I hear the accolades about the significant and positive changes that are taking place at WSSU. However, we must not rest on these accom-

plishments, for they are temporary.

Just as you verbally express your pride in WSSU, please make the conscious effort to express your choice for new officers. When you receive your candidate information, take the time to read the information and respond. Unlike voting day, you can cast your ballot in the comfort of your home. Just be sure to respond by the deadline so your vote can be counted. Let's become a proactive organization and let our collective voices be heard. Don't leave the leadership of your organization to chance and "let the chips fall where they may." We have all matured since we left these hallowed halls and should care enough to vote your choice. One vote does make a difference!

"Ram pride" is more than a slogan to me. It is an attitude. Just as you must register to vote in an election, you must be a Ram in good financial standing with the National Alumni Association to voice your vote for candidates. If we want our institution to continue to be a champion, it must be supported financially.

Catherine Pettie Hart  
 Atlanta Alumni Chapter

## Homosexual adoption



**Armstrong Williams**  
 Guest Columnist

The adoption system in this country is broken. Thousands of kids languish in substandard facilities that lack the resources to properly educate and nurture them, thus perpetuating the cycle of underachievement.

...OK, so far I'm in agreement.

Then: one possible solution is to open adoption up to homosexual couples.

So said the Rosie backers during my recent appearance on CNN's "Talk Back Live" with Rev. Jerry Falwell.

My response was straightforward: the manner in which two adults treat their bodies—whether hurling themselves at life, members of the same sex, the horizon, etc.—is a matter between them and their creator.

However, it is another thing to use children as instruments to push alternative lifestyles into the mainstream. And that is precisely what advocates of gay adoption are doing.

A brief lesson in perspective: History, social science research and all three major religions tend to agree that a loving union between man and woman provides the bedrock for a child's emotional health. I say this not out of fear or loathing of the homosexual lifestyle, but merely to point out that raising a child requires more than love or money. A child requires emotional consistency, gender stability and self-esteem.

(The jails and madhouses are crammed with emotionally confused kids who came from seemingly well-off suburban neighborhoods.)

For an adoptive child, establishing an identity that meshes with social conventions is essential to constructing a healthy sense of self.

To abruptly break with social conventions by placing the child in a homosexual household can create the sorts of gender confusion and social scrutiny that ignite a lifetime of emotional confusion. Consider: studies indicate that children in homosexual households are four times more likely to test the extremes of their own sexuality by experimenting with homosexual behavior. Now consider that the highest suicide rate in this country is among homosexual teen-agers. Plainly, the social pressures associated with this sort of gender confusion are tremendous. That is the reality that confronts us. To subject adoptive children to this sort of emotional trauma by design is worse than misguided; it amounts to socially martyring a large segment of adoptive children, just to make a cultural statement about homosexual rights.

Nonetheless, advocates for homosexual rights continue to place themselves at the center of adoption law in this country. Their justification: that the eroding nuclear family—through divorce and the general liberalization of the culture—has precipitated a change in traditional social structures. They have a point; they simply miss it: the crucial issue is not whether traditional social structures are changing, but whether



Talk-show host Rosie O'Donnell has been a longtime advocate for kids. She is the regular host of Nickelodeon's Kid Choice Awards.

embracing these changes is in the best interest of adoptive children.

Get it? Adoption law ought not to be about cultural statements in general or gay rights in the specific; it ought to be about the best interests of the children. While debate regarding homosexual rights has its place in the national dialogue, such issues are not central to the issue of adoption.

What is central to the debate is a proper understanding of cultural norms and how they influence our sense of self—or, more to the point, how common law, common sense, history and science all tell

us that the very nature of a homosexual relationship deprives a child of the emotionally stable environment that he/she requires.

While I am deeply sensible about the need to place adoptive children with families, this need does not justify placing adoptive children in any home—or inappropriate homes.

Nor, for that matter, does it justify risking the emotional well-being of adoptive children just to make a political statement about homosexual rights.

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