

There's No Quick Fix for Crime

by Bernice Powell-Jackson

We Americans like everything instantly. Fast food hamburgers, instant oatmeal, and ten minute oil changes are just a few indications of our impatience. We also like quick fixes to our problems.

It's that quick fix mentality that popped up in President Clinton's State of the Union message last month and in the two versions of the Omnibus Crime Bill passed by the Senate and the House last fall.

"Three strikes and you're out," they cry as the solution to America's crime problem.

Americans, all Americans, are concerned and deeply troubled about crime—and rightly so. There are twice as many murders now as there were 30 years ago.

Violent crime is up 23 percent over the past 10 years. Much of this violent crime occurs in the nation's inner cities, where homicide is now the leading cause of death for young African American men.

But the reality is that while quick fixes work for oatmeal,

they do not work for people. As Congress works toward one version of the crime bill, they will be re-examining such provisions as mandatory sentences for three or more serious crimes.

Even Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware calls the three strikes and you're out provision "wacko," attributing it to who's-the-toughest-on-crime attitude of the Congress.

One of the major provisions in the Senate version of the crime bill is the building of an additional ten federal prisons. Our recent history and statistics show us that building more prisons is not the solution to crime.

Over the past 20 years we have spent \$37 billion dollars in prison construction alone, with another \$5 billion already planned.

But, instead of alleviating the crime problem, the United States has become the world's number one jailer. Some 1.4 million Americans are now in prison.

Americans are more likely to be victims of violent crime

now rather than less likely. Many states with the highest incarceration rates also have the highest violent crime rate.

If prisons worked, logic tells us that violent crime should have dropped over the past 20 years. Prisons alone do not work.

The Omnibus Crime Bill is one of the largest expansions of the use of capital punishment in American legislative history. No longer would capital punishment be reserved for murder cases.

History also tells us that the poor and people of color always suffer disproportionately when the death penalty is imposed.

Indeed, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas once said, "One searches our chronicles in vain for the execution of any member of the affluent strata of our society."

The Congressional Black Caucus has said that the crime bill has stressed the building of prisons and the mandatory

minimum sentencing too much over the more long-term solutions to crime.

What are the real solutions to crime in America? The Congressional Black Caucus bill names some. They have offered their own alternatives, including gun control, training for police, judges and court officials and more police on the streets.

We must also commit ourselves to educating all of our children. Minnesota, for instance, found that 35 percent of its inmates are functionally illiterate.

In large cities it is not unusual for half of the high school students to drop out before graduation, ensuring that they will never be able to get good-paying jobs.

We must commit ourselves to providing nurturing, supportive communities for our children. Over and over again, as we talk with young gang members across this nation, we find they are products of dysfunctional

families, with no outside support systems.

We've got to teach parents how to be parents. We've got to provide positive alternatives for gangs—recreation programs, after-school tutoring programs, and counseling programs.

We must commit ourselves to creating jobs. Tens of thousands of inner city residents have given up looking for jobs and are no longer even counted in the unemployment numbers.

Millions of jobs have been lost over the past decades, impacting all Americans, but especially the poor.

These are not quick fixes or easy answers. But had we chosen to spend that \$37 billion on people instead of prisons 20 years ago, we might not be mourning the loss of an entire generation to prisons and to cemeteries right now.

Bernice Powell-Jackson is the executive director for the Commission for Racial Justice in Cleveland, Ohio.

BRUNELL ON BUSINESS

Crack Down on Workers Compensation Fraud

by Don C. Brunell
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Recently, there has been a great deal of national attention on workers compensation fraud.

Experts believe cheating is costing employees billions in unnecessary payments, is a primary component of skyrocketing health care costs, eliminating jobs and is seriously eroding our country's competitiveness.

In many states, employers face double-digit premium increases which cause some businesses to close their doors or move elsewhere.

In California, for example, workers compensation payments have trebled over the past decade to more than \$10 billion per year—partly because of fabricated claims.

Fraud is simply stealing and is a crime. It is not just a problem with workers. Cheating also permeates the employer, medical and legal communities.

Sometimes there are networks of doctors and lawyers ferreting out unemployed workers to file fictitious industrial accident claims.

In Los Angeles, an undercover television reporter disguised himself as an unemployed data processor and was taken by a recruiter

stationed outside an unemployment office to lawyers and doctors in workers compensation cases.

A hidden video camera recorded him as suffering from severe abdominal pain, stiff and sore neck, lower-back pain, nervousness, blurred vision, dizziness and too much job-related stress.

The lawyers, expecting a cut of the claim, then referred the reporter to doctors who charged the workers comp system \$1,195 for initial consultations.

When the story was televised, it prompted California officials to step up fraud probes.

Washington's Department of Labor and Industries (L&I) has a special services investigation unit. It identified 69 fraudulent claims in 1992 totaling \$1,084,296 and to date has recovered \$212,241.

In total about 14,000 of the state's 130,000 state fund employers are in collection status for unpaid premiums and the total due is \$80 million.

Recovering that revenue decreases the need for more payments by employers who are conforming with the law.

The state's surveillance units investigated 53 individuals suspected of cheating the system in 1991. L&I estimates the potential savings from the investigations are approximately \$715,000.

In one case, an attending physician said the claimant was totally and permanently disabled due to a lower back injury, yet the supposedly afflicted party was filmed playing baseball in four games over a two-week period.

L&I set aside \$274,000 to pay the claim and had shelled out \$188,000 prior to the investigation. (\$86,000 was avoided after the fraud was uncovered).

Workers compensation was established as a no-fault insurance system. The intention was (and still is) to prevent on-the-job accidents, to fairly compensate injured workers and to treat and return them to their jobs as quickly and safely as possible.

It was not intended as a subsidy for those who do not want to work, or as a pot of gold for some in the medical and legal communities to raid.

Fraud is an attitude among those who are irresponsible. It is simply stealing, must be prosecuted, and should not be tolerated.

It can be stopped if our society adopts the fundamental value that a dollar is earned, not simply gained by "beating the system."

Anyone can report suspected fraud to L&I by calling 1-800-LISTENS. Be patient because this hot line is heavily used.

Words of Life

Hateful to me as the gates of Hades is that man who hides one thing in his heart and speaks another.

—Homer

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