

Columnists

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Time to face facts of crime and race

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Put down the latest from John Grisham or J.K. Rowling or whomever. I've got some required summer reading for you.

I'm talking about the key findings and recommendations from the Minnesota Council on Crime and Justice on the issue of racial disparities in the criminal justice system in Minnesota. Sexy stuff, huh?

Imagine this main character: a dark-skinned Harry Potter from a poor family, a kid judged by skin color who struggles to get by in substandard housing and bad schools. He's also forced to live and survive — and maybe thrive — in a neighborhood plagued by crime.

But this is no fantasy genre. It's real life. The great disconnect is that most of us, as long as these kids are penned in certain areas, don't want to acknowledge any connection at all to these youths or young men. That attitude will haunt us all one day.

Last week, the Minneapolis-based crime and justice council released a review of 17 studies it has conducted in the past five years on the issue of racial disparities within the criminal justice system and how the problem might affect us all.

The report was released and discussed extensively during an all-day session Wednesday in Minneapolis that drew more than 700 people. The participants included an eclectic mix of attendees from ex-cons to Minnesota Supreme Court Justice Alan Page.

The council underlined several major findings in its report:

- Two years ago, Minnesota's overall racial disparity was more than twice the national average. Analysis of poverty rates from 1980 to 2004 showed blacks in Minnesota were the only racial group to experience an increase in poverty.

"Given these trends, it appears that racial disparities, if left unaddressed, will merely become more extreme in the future, further jeopardizing public safety and hindering local economic growth," the report noted.

- The racial disparity in the justice system originates predominantly at the point of first contact with law enforcement. Depending on the level and type of crime, the disparity might increase, remain about the same or, in some cases, decrease as the case moves through the system.

- Law enforcement officers stop and search black, Hispanic and American Indian drivers at a greater rate than white drivers.

- The racial disparity of arrests for black to white offenders was 10 to 1.

- In 2001, the equivalent of one out of four black Minneapolis residents were either arrested or cited for such low-level offenses as disorderly conduct, loitering or lurking. For white offenders, the number was one in 60.

A significant issue discussed last week at the seminar was the disproportionate frequency of kids of color cited, suspended or expelled for behavioral incidents at schools, primarily in inner-city neighborhoods.

The report found that inner-city schools are a "significant feeder into the juvenile system for offenses committed on school property, such as disorderly conduct."

Another finding highlighted the difficulties that those with past criminal offenses have getting jobs.

"In essence, the present process for transitioning ex-offenders does not meet their immediate needs, thereby undermining public safety," the report noted.

"In considering whether to take action, three points must be kept in mind. First, the racial bias in the justice system lies primarily in institutional policies and practices, rather than individual racism," the report stated. "It is time to take action. The truth is known. The racial disparity in Minnesota's justice system is one of the worst in the nation. While this disparity has many causes, racial bias is a significant contributor. We must do better."

Barbara Lickness, a session panelist, longtime South Minneapolis resident and community activist, is my street-level litmus test to the report. She has heard this all before. However, she still believes the presentation was something that needs to be known outside the confines of the event itself, as well as placed in historical and sociological perspective.

"Not much has changed in 30 years," she said at the session's last and perhaps most insightful panel. "We have concentrated poverty and people of color and services for people who require assistance to a very small area of this state and this region.

"We have done so for years," she added. "This is a segregated state and a segregated city. We don't have that healthy, socioeconomic balance in many of these neighborhoods to provide the role modeling that these kids need to see a different way of life."

Until that happens, nothing much really will change. OK. Turn over those grill items before they burn too much.

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