



**AFRICAN-AMERICAN AFFAIRS COMMISSION  
STATE CAPITOL  
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06106-1591  
(860) 240-8555  
FAX (860) 240-8444**

**Testimony before the Judiciary Committee  
Tuesday November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2007  
1.00 pm in Room 2E of the LOB**

Good afternoon, Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Frank Sykes and I am the Legislative Analyst with the African-American Commission (AAAC), an independent non-partisan agency committed to improving the lives of African-Americans through research, policy analysis and advocacy.

Before I begin the Commission will like to express its sympathy to the victims of the Cheshire tragedy. This was an unfortunate incident, considering that such a tragedy could have been avoided with the proper administrative procedures in place. However we must also caution that the parole ban is an unfair policy and punishes others for the crimes that a few committed. It is a wrong on many levels.

Firstly 43 percent of inmates in Connecticut's prison system are African-American.<sup>1</sup> The majority of this population are incarcerated for drug offenses and not for the home/burglary invasion as has received so much attention recently. Not surprisingly it is also reported that as of November 1<sup>st</sup> roughly 40 percent of inmates affected by this ban on transitional supervision, happen to be African-American.<sup>2</sup> There is also no doubt that there are a number of inmates who have earned their parole through proper conduct and behavior. These inmates must be allowed to transition into the community setting and not held hostage for the crimes of others.

The AAAC is on record for supporting recommendations initially outlined in the 2004 Prison Overcrowding Report. That report proposed a number of recommendations that if implemented, will comprehensively address the public safety concerns before as of today. One of these proposals was improving the quality and availability of mental health facilities for inmates from the pre-arrest stage to the post release stage. Efforts to address the lack of mental health facilities must be a priority. A survey by the Department of Justice reports that 56 percent of inmates in state jails were diagnosed with some sort of mental disorder.<sup>3</sup> Incidentally an earlier report by the Bureau of Justice noted that the mentally ill were more likely than other inmates to be violent repeat offenders.<sup>4</sup>

The second was the hiring of adequate probationary staff to facilitate the release of ex-offenders, by providing critical support services such as identification for ex-offenders and the assessment of ex-offenders ninety (90) days prior to release. As research tells us the first three months after release are critical in determining whether an individual stays out of the prison system or is re-arrested. These are two key areas that need immediate attention.

---

<sup>1</sup> Connecticut Department of Correction, *Incarcerated Population Breakdown By Race and Ethnicity*

<sup>2</sup> Connecticut Department of Correction, *Information on inmates on Transitional Supervision*

<sup>3</sup> Department of Justice, *Mental Health Problems of Prisoners and Jail Inmates*

<sup>4</sup> Bureau of Justice, *Mental Health and Treatment of Inmates and Probationers, July 2000*

In conclusion prevention or diversion must be the focus of any new state policy. In view of this the Commission has made education a top priority on its agenda, recognizing that educational attainment is a strong predictor of whether an individual is successful or ends up in the criminal justice system. The vast majority<sup>5</sup> of inmates in Connecticut's prison system today lack a high school diploma, consequently are caught up in an endless cycle of crime. This trend can be reversed by investing more resources in education instead of building more space to warehouse prisoners.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

---

<sup>5</sup> Connecticut Department of Correction, *Data on high school graduation as of November 2006*