

Cynthia,

I have so much to say and have no idea where to begin. You know everything I want to express already. Marcel Johnson was lucky. Like the impoverished black kid in *The Blind Side*, despite everything working against him, fate intervened and he got the help he needed. But we live in a society so ill designed that hundreds of thousands or millions of others have no such opportunities.

Our fear of the black man has caused our nation to deprive generations of children of fathers. Our reliance upon police to deal with every social ill, no matter how small, has taxed our criminal justice system to the breaking point and has led to unnecessary incarceration and devastating criminal records. Our fear of recidivism has created an underclass of ex-cons who have few opportunities to rebuild their lives. Our failure to treat drug addiction and mental illness has led us to warehouse drug addicts and the mentally ill.

At the same time, I believe that much could be achieved if the reforms advanced by the NACDL were adopted. If states reduce the number of misdemeanor prosecutions we can move more resources where they are most needed, into the juvenile courts. If we begin to treat drug addiction and mental illness instead of incarcerating drug addicts and the mentally ill, we could drastically reduce the numbers of people in our prisons. If we could eliminate mandatory minimum sentences we could put people on probation who could be working and raising families. If we had more robust reentry programs we could reduce recidivism and make it possible for more offenders to truly rehabilitate their lives. [Did you know that in Russia it is easier for an ex-con to get a job because his/her record is expunged upon release]

But while I see all these elements advance in various NACDL initiatives, I have not seen them articulated as a coherent program for reforming the criminal justice system. Nor have I seen anyone argue how such reforms could benefit society as a whole while reducing state and federal deficits. Maybe it is just me.

Anyway, great column. Thanks for listening to me vent.

Jon

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