

Column: Black lives don't matter

By William Felice, special to the Tampa Bay Times

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Even under fire from his boss about the Russia investigations, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions is obediently carrying out the Trump administration's double assault against prison and police reforms.

These measures send a clear message: "Black Lives Don't Matter."

First, Sessions ordered the Justice Department to review the reform agreements with police departments (including Baltimore's) that consented to changes based on acknowledged racism in policing practices. This hands-off approach to local police oversight has proven exceedingly dangerous to the black community.

And second, Sessions ordered federal prosecutors to "charge and pursue the most serious, readily provable offense" in drug cases that could trigger mandatory minimum sentencing. This new policy cancels the Obama administration's efforts to end the harsh sentencing strategies that produced a huge increase in our prison populations and were seen by both Republicans and Democrats as unfair, ineffective and costly.

As American and global citizens it is more important than ever to challenge these dangerous policies. We cannot let fear of bullying and assaults from the alt-right silence our voices or limit our actions.

The mass incarceration of African-American men is perhaps the most pressing human rights crisis confronting our country. The United States imprisons more of its racial and ethnic minorities than any other country in the world. While representing approximately 13 percent of the general adult population, African-Americans constitute more than 37 percent of federal prisoners.

The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that black males are six times and Hispanic males 2.5 times more likely to be imprisoned than white males. In fact, black males ages 18 to 19 were almost 9.5 times more likely than white males of the same age group to be in prison. Overall, the Pew Research Center reports that while one in 100 American men is behind bars, the number for African-American men is one in nine.

The United States is the world's leader in incarceration. We outrank every other country for which there is data on incarceration, including Russia, Rwanda, China and Iran. No other industrialized country comes close to the high U.S. rate. Even U.S. neighbors Canada and Mexico have much lower incarceration rates. The United States locks up its citizens at 6.4 times the rate of Canada and 3.7 times that of Mexico.

This tragic situation is a result of too many young African-American males caught up in a police and judiciary system that often denies them basic human dignity and rights. Obama and former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder moved to address this situation. In 2014, Holder announced the Department of Justice's support for retroactively reducing the sentences of some prisoners locked up on federal drug offenses.

The Obama administration began to roll back the mandatory minimum sentences enacted as part of the "War on Drugs," which targeted poor minorities and nonviolent offenders. The DOJ estimated that 50 percent of federal inmates were incarcerated on drug offenses.

Conservatives, including Newt Gingrich, and liberals, including George Soros, have joined bipartisan efforts in support of sentencing and probation reforms intended to drastically reduce incarceration rates.

While Attorney General Sessions and the Trump administration have vowed to end these Obama judicial and prison reforms, thousands of other individuals and organizations from the left and the right are working to continue these endeavors. Leaders in this effort include the American Civil Liberties Union, the Innocence Project and the Sentencing Project.

This movement to end the mass incarceration of African-American men is not just taking place in America. Individuals from Latin America, Europe and around the world who take human rights and duties seriously are speaking out against the mass incarceration of African-Americans in the United States. These citizens are pressuring their governments to forcefully confront the United States to change these practices.

The targeting of young black males has led to severe violations of basic human rights norms and laws and has metastasized into America's most severe human rights crisis. This widespread suffering has directly impacted millions of families throughout America, ripping apart our soul. We are a better and stronger country when we practice what we preach about human dignity and rights.

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