



Make justice racially fair

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African Americans make up 14% of Michigan's population -- but slightly more than half of its prisoner count. Black children also make up half of the kids in foster care, even though they're only 17.5% of the young population.

Those numbers have been lopsided that way for some time. Together with other disturbing trends -- the low number of blacks on juries in Wayne County, the state's all-white Judicial Tenure Commission, the scandalously low pay for court-appointed attorneys in Michigan -- they have the Detroit branch of the NAACP thinking about the need for change.

"And Justice For All," a campaign launched with the support of the Michigan ACLU and the state Department of Civil Rights, will target specific improvements in the way Michigan ensures fairness and justice.

Up to now, mainstream civil and human rights organizations have given too little attention to the disproportionate impact the state's criminal justice and social service systems have had on African Americans. The new campaign is an overdue but welcome return to focus.

Among the ideas: Creating state standards for the defense of indigents, adding racial diversity to the Judicial Tenure Commission, and encouraging all counties to have courthouse and courtroom access plans that meet federal disability laws, something that seems so basic it should not even be an issue. What building has more reason to be accessible than a courthouse?

The NAACP also seeks to expand jury pools to include ex-felons and people on public assistance and work with churches to encourage jury participation. A package of bills just introduced by Rep. LaMar Lemmons Jr., D-Detroit, would help by expanding the lists used for selecting jury pools.

These reforms and others proposed by the NAACP will require action by the Legislature, Michigan Supreme Court, local governments and the governor's office. But they would ease some of the unacceptable racial and class disparities that now plague Michigan's criminal justice system. Unfair to one is unfair to all.

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