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Race Matters in New York
by Andy Humm
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Most New Yorkers think of racism as yesterday's news. They prefer to think we have moved beyond not just the city's dependence on slavery, its attempts to remain neutral in the Civil War so it could keep trading with the Confederacy, and Draft Riots that saw black people strung up from lampposts, but also the kind of contemporary blatant racial attacks that turn thousands of protesters out in the streets led by the Rev. Al Sharpton.

When the chairman of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee is Harlem's own Charlie Rangel and Time Warner and Merrill Lynch -- not to mention the city itself -- have been led by black men (Richard Parsons, Stanley O'Neal, and David Dinkins respectively), most people think that overt racism is a thing of the past or, at worst, an isolated problem -- especially when an African American named Barack Obama could very well become the next president of the United States.

But evidence to the contrary persists. Just ask yourself who is homeless in New York, who the beggars are on the street and who does the lowest wage and hardest jobs from checking your groceries and emptying bedpans to cleaning your office.

The report from the Urban Justice Center's [Human Rights Project](#) goes beyond such anecdotal evidence. Presented at a forum in mid-December the study documents how even in multicultural New York, we have a long, long way to go before race no longer matters.

The report, "[Race Realities in New York City](#)," covers employment, health, criminal justice, immigration, education, voting rights, domestic violence, housing, and child welfare. The study by leaders of non-governmental organizations was prepared under the [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#), a human rights treaty that the United States has ratified. Under the terms of that agreement, the Bush administration issued a report earlier this year on how it is dealing with racial disparities in the United States, but the Urban Justice Center cited the thinness of that official report, especially for failing to note "the government's disgraceful response to Hurricane Katrina" or the issue of police brutality. "Moreover," the center report says, "despite persistent racial discrimination that affects thousands of New Yorkers, the U.S. report contains very little New York City-specific information."

The Report's Findings

The center's 131-page report is an attempt to supplement that. And in doing so, it presents a stark picture of racial disparities. For example, it notes that "98 percent of 17,000 children in foster care in New York City are black and Latino." It also makes note of what it calls the "school to prison pipeline," which it describes as a "nationwide system of policies that pushes students from the school system into the juvenile justice system."

To start with, students of color are disproportionately suspended for the same infractions: 8.3 percent of all black students, 4.8 percent of Latinos and 2.5 percent of whites in the 2001 school year according to a recent report by Elizabeth Sullivan, "[Deprived Of Dignity](#):"

[Degrading Treatment And Abusive Discipline In New York And Los Angeles Public Schools](#)" from the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative.

In addition, according to the Urban Justice Center, "In 2006, 43 percent of black students and 41 percent of Latino students in New York City graduated on time, compared to 67 percent of white students and 68 percent of Asian students."

In employment, African Americans, Latinos and Asians "make up 37 percent, 16 percent and 4 percent respectively of the city's workforce," but hold just 18 percent of the senior and executive staff positions.

African Americans and Latinos comprise about half the population of the city, but account for 91 percent of those in jail. In 2006, half of all police stops were of African Americans, 29 percent were of Latinos and 11 percent were of whites. The report says that this occurred despite the fact that "white suspects were 70 percent more likely than black suspects to have a weapon."

The infant mortality rate is 10.5 per 1,000 live births for African Americans and 5.9 for whites. Women of color have three times the HIV rate of white women. The vast majority of domestic violence victims are women of color. The list goes on and on.

Looking for Solutions

Mayor Michael Bloomberg was making his tour of the Far East when the Urban Justice Center released the report. It hopes that he and the City Council will adopt international human rights principles in looking at whether New York City is plagued by racial disparities and what it can do about it.

In light of persistent racial disparities, the Urban Justice Center, in coalition with other groups, for several years has been trying to pass a City Council bill that would go beyond protecting individuals who can prove they have been illegally discriminated against and move toward remedying systemic discrimination. The measure, called the [Human Rights in Government Operations Audit Law](#), would require city agencies to "disaggregate data" at least on the basis of race and sex and, when appropriate, on immigration status, sexual orientation and gender identity.

The measure is currently stalled. Bill Perkins, who is now a state senator, originally sponsored the bill. He has on called for getting the 2009 mayoral candidates to support the measure. The bill's current sponsor, Councilmember Helen Foster of the Bronx, in a passionate address at the December forum, highlighted the racial dimensions of everything from stadium siting to congestion pricing, which she said would lead people to park their cars in Harlem and other neighborhoods of color to avoid fees.

Andy Humm, a former member of the City Commission on Human Rights, has been in charge of the civil rights topic page since its inception in 2001. He is co-host of the weekly "Gay USA" on Manhattan Neighborhood Network (34 on Time-Warner; 107 on RCN) on Thursdays at 11 PM.

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