

# black males entering prisons

## healing words by dr. mike

The average crack cocaine federal sentencing is roughly 120 months (10 years); more than the average sentence for arson, sexual abuse, robbery and even manslaughter. While the average user of crack cocaine is white or Latino, the majority of those persons convicted for possession of crack cocaine in federal courts are African American. The majority of those persons convicted of crack cocaine trafficking offenses are also African American. The federal minimum mandatory sentencing went into affect in the mid '90s, and state laws nationwide followed suit. Ten years later many of these inmates—some of whom were non-violent offenders initially—are set to be released in the first quarter of 2005 without parole; they served their full sentences.

Nationally, it is estimated that between 9,000 and 21,000 prisoners will be returned to the streets. In the state of Georgia, inmates are given \$25, a fresh set of clothes and a one-way bus ticket to the county where they were convicted. Approximately 7,000 of Georgia's inmates populated were convicted of either drug sales or possession. With Georgia's minimum mandatory sentencing mirroring the federal government's, there will be a number of incarcerated individuals returning to local



Georgia communities; a conservative estimate is between 2,000 and 3,500. These individuals will come from both state and federal penal institutions. These individuals, too, will probably reflect the percentage of prisoners convicted of crack cocaine possession and trafficking; 85 percent for African Americans, 10 percent for whites and 5 percent for Latinos.

It is easy to point out racial and legal disparities in sentencing (the aforementioned percentages support that claim). The United States Sentencing Commission's rec-

ommendations to more fairly equalize the crack cocaine quantity ratio used in sentencing have been rejected by Congress and the president. However, the most difficult and less apparent component to discern is the public health implications of these inmates' return to society and the local community.

Georgia prisons, like many nationwide, require HIV-testing for convicted offenders and repeat offenders. Yet, inmates are not provided with any testing for sexually transmitted infections prior to their re-admittance/release back into society. So, whether the bid is short- or long-term, it is believed that what goes on behind prison walls stays behind prison walls. Nothing could be further from the truth. These inmates will return to their local communities and carry with them—physically, psychologically and, most possibly, sexually—all that happened during their time as an inmate. This speaks volumes to the spike that will be seen in STDs, including HIV, around this time next year.

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