



Rep. Frederica Wilson: Honor Trayvon Martin by closing opportunity gap

Rep. Frederica S. Wilson

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Like so many high-profile court cases, the tragedy of Trayvon Martin is now a whirlwind of legal arguments and cable news punditry.

Similarly, the heartbreaking case of Martin Lee Anderson — the young man beaten to death by guards at a Panama City, Florida boot camp in 2006 (the guards were acquitted of any criminal conduct) — turned into a difficult national debate over the impartiality of medical examiners and conditions in correctional facilities.

But both of these complex cases symbolize a simple fact: young black men in America rarely enjoy the benefit of the doubt.

Regardless of your views on what exactly transpired on that suburban street in Sanford, Florida last spring or at that camp in Panama City seven years ago, it's

impossible to deny that racial profiling and legal discrimination—particularly against black men and boys—remain rampant in 21st Century America.

As a mother and an educator, I can attest to this fact. My own children, and nearly all of the young men I know, have been stopped by the police at least once, for no apparent reason.

Recent statistics also attest to these realities. According to a study by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, more than two-thirds of African American male dropouts are expected to serve time in state or federal prison. According to the Center for Law and Justice, 75 percent of people in state prison for drug convictions are people of color despite recent studies showing lower levels of drug-use in the African-American population

than in the general population. Beyond the unequal arrests rates, a 2010 U.S. Sentencing Commission found that African-Americans receive 10 percent longer federal sentences than whites convicted of the same crimes.

These startling statistics only begin to describe the devastating effects of the discrimination black men in America face. An initial conviction can lead to a lifetime of unemployment or underemployment due to the stigma of being required to “check the box” declaring a criminal history. In some states, it can also lead to long periods of voter disenfranchisement. Barriers to employment and voting rights worsen the already severe consequences of the educational “opportunity gap.”

These combined challenges have bred another crisis: Negative self-

perception. The syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts frequently asks groups of black students how often the individual who murders a white person is black. Many of these students—informed primarily by the nightly news—assumed the figure is around 75 percent. Pitts writes that they are often shocked to learn that the real statistic is only 13 percent.

There's no easy solution to this national shame.

While it can be useful to pass additional laws to strengthen rules against profiling and discrimination, we must ultimately go deeper to address the root causes of the crisis. We must address the underlying lack of economic and educational opportunity for black men and boys.

In Congress, I am proposing the establishment of a Federal Commission on the Social Status of Black Men and Boys to examine the interdisciplinary causes and consequences of our opportunity gap. This Commission would collaborate with school districts, agencies and businesses to foster economic growth in communities of color and identify and implement intervention programs to increase graduation rates, improve student performance, and ultimately break the school-to-prison pipeline. I was proud to work successfully toward the creation of a similar body in the State of Florida that has been instrumental in reducing the opportunity gap there.

We can do justice for Trayvon Martin, Martin Lee Anderson, and other victims in the courtroom. But the work of reversing discrimination must ultimately be done in the classroom as well as places of business.

Until we eliminate the opportunity gap, people will still be profiled and harassed for driving while black, walking while black, shopping while black, and just plain being black.

By creating economic and educational opportunity, we can end this shame and honor the legacies of these boys who died far too young.