

By Al

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"Don't Ever Give Up"

Houston accounts for one-third of Texas death row

HOUSTON (AP) — In Harris County, which has earned the unofficial title of being the nation's death-penalty capital, blacks have been sent to death row nearly twice as often as whites during the last 10 years, according to a published report.

Some death penalty foes insist that racism has driven this growing disparity, but death penalty proponents argue that a growing and increasingly violent underclass, not bigotry, is to blame, the Houston Post reported Sunday in a copyright story.

Harris County juries sentenced blacks and whites to die in relatively even numbers from 1975 through 1984, but they have condemned 50 blacks and 26 whites since 1985.

"It saddens me," says U.S. Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., a longtime civil rights activist. "I thought we had come a distance much further along. I think it represents a part of our dark past."

Since Texas resumed executions in 1976, 82 men have died by lethal injection in Huntsville.

Of those, 33 have been from Harris County, as many as Florida has executed since resuming executions in its electric chair in the mid-1970s. Only Texas, as a state, has executed more convicts than Florida.

As of Oct. 5, 111 of the 392 inmates on the Texas death row were from Harris County. Four more are on the way from the county jail.

The state's three other most populous counties — Dallas, Tarrant and Bexar — have a combined 77 inmates on death row.

There also are eight Hispanics on death row from Harris County and three more on the way from the county jail.

(The Houston Post said that while some Hispanics are classified as white, they are not included in any of the Sunday article's statistics. That ethnic group has not yet become part of the argument over racial disparities in death sentencing.)

The man who takes the most heat for

Texas Department of Criminal Justice rapidly expanding, forced to hire less-experienced guards

HOUSTON (AP) — The Texas prison system's phenomenal growth over the past three years, some argue, has put younger faces on the 18,000 men and women who work as prison guards.

Therein lies one of the problems that led to the recent beating death of an inmate, said Carol Vance, chairman of the Texas Board of Criminal Justice.

The fatal beating occurred after a recreation yard melee and other events of sporadic violence at the Terrell Prison Unit outside Livingston on Oct. 7.

Two guards have been charged with murder in the death of Michael McCoy, 30, who died after being stomped and kicked in the head. Both guards started working for the prison system earlier this year.

In the first eight months of this year, the system hired 6,180 guards. An additional 10,000 to 12,000 will be hired over the next 12 to 14 months, said James A. "Andy" Collins, executive director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

Prison officials are uncertain how many of those new guards meet the minimal requirements of a high school equivalency diploma — as opposed to college graduates.

But officials said they are being forced to hire younger and less-experienced people to staff new prisons, the Houston Chronicle reported Sunday.

Collins said the rapid hiring means that "a good portion of the guard staff doesn't have long tenure."

TDCJ spokesman Glen Castlebury said the agency does not compile figures on average age or education levels of the people they hire.

Officials have defended the image of prison employees after the incidents at Terrell.

But the problems there also prompted renewed calls for more extensive training of guards. Because of limited funds, however, it is unlikely guards will get more time in the classroom before they go on duty.

Harris County's hang-'em-high reputation is District Attorney John B. Holmes Jr., who blames conduct, not color.

Holmes said he rarely knows the race of a defendant or victim when deciding whether to pursue the death penalty. But he said he doubts that black defendants do not rate the ultimate sentence in any greater proportion than they kill.

Since 1984, blacks have been accused in about half of Harris County's homicides and accounted for 54.8 percent of those sentenced to die, state crime figures show.

Mark Vinson, one of Holmes' chief prosecutors, believes the system is fair. Vinson is black.

"I think it would be doing everybody an injustice to say, 'Hey, we should let this kid get away because of his skin color.' What about the victims? I think it would only be encouraging that kind of conduct," he said.

But Stephen B. Bright, director of the Atlanta-based Southern Center for Human Rights, said he wonders how Holmes can justify seeking death sentences for so many prisoners when other Texas prosecutors do not.

Holmes responds that he took an oath to uphold the statute and he's doing it indiscriminately.

"We are a nation of laws, not a nation of men," he said.

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