

# CATHOLIC COURIER

DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER, N.Y.  
Vol. 104 No. 29 Thursday, August 1, 1991 16 pages 75¢



Illustration by Matthew Morgaine

## Minorities trapped by system

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

**T**he City of Rochester is heading toward a dubious record.

Thirty-six murders occurred in the city between Jan. 1 and July 26, 1991. At the current rate, Rochester will exceed its 1978 record of 52 murders.

And although Monroe County's overall crime rate has decreased during the past decade, the rates of aggravated assault, sexual abuse and child abuse are on the rise.

Drugs are at the root of the increasing violence, according to Monroe County District Attorney Howard Relin.

"I think having an increase in drug usage leads to increased criminal actions and increased violence," Relin remarked in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

"When I was an assistant district attorney 20 years ago, there were no drug-related homicides in Rochester,"

Relin said. "Today, at least 50 percent of the homicides are drug related."

A sharp rise in drug-related violence can be seen across New York state and the entire country. It defies the much-ballyhooed war on drugs and the nation's "get-tough" approach to crime during the past few years.

**O**bservers of the so-called war on drugs continue to debate its effect on drug trade and use. But most acknowledge that the battle has changed jail and prison populations — and poses unforeseen consequences for society as a whole.

In June of this year, New York state's prison population hit a record 56,000 inmates, according to the state Commission of Corrections. Ten years earlier, the state prison population was only about 25,000.

Monroe County's jail population has grown from an average daily level of 263 inmates in 1981 to 970 in June, 1991.

In the same 10-year period, the national jail and prison population has

doubled, according to the Washington, D.C., based Sentencing Project. U.S. jails and prisons now house more than one million inmates, noted Marc Mauer, assistant director of the project.

The United States now leads the world in incarceration, the Sentencing Project pointed out in a study released this January. The study shows that 426 out of every 100,000 U.S. residents is incarcerated.

The incarceration leader of the last decade — South Africa — trailed the United States as a distant second. South Africa's rate of incarceration was 333 individuals for every 100,000 population. The Soviet Union came in third with a rate of 268.

**C**ritics of the U.S. justice system quickly note that funds being spent to build prisons and maintain prisoners could have been spent on programs to fight drugs, promote education and provide job training.

"At one time people thought that jailing people would be the solution," Relin said. "Now I don't think you get

many people (involved in law enforcement) who think that."

The district attorney's comments echo those of groups calling for reform of the U.S. justice system.

**"W**hile its true we have a lot of crime, I think much of the increase (in incarceration rates) is the result of criminal-justice practices that have been implemented," Mauer observed.

"The problem is addiction to punishment," asserted Jim Murphy, former director of the New York State Coalition for Criminal Justice. "It's the sloganeering by politicians: 'We have to get tough on crime,'" he said in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

Indeed, the rise in arrest and imprisonment rates directly coincides with the launch of the war on drugs and the tough attitude toward crime that became popular in the 1980s.

Police began to stage more drug raids. Legislatures, meanwhile, passed

Continued on page 2