**Editorial. “Ontario must stop imprisonment by race”. *Toronto Star*, Mar. 1, 2013.**

It’s a sad reality that Ontario imprisons far more black and aboriginal youth than those from any other ethnic background. None of this is new, especially to those familiar with the criminal justice system.

But [data showing a steady decline in incarceration rates](http://www.thestar.com/news/investigations/unequaljustice/UnequalJusticeData.html) for young white men show that some are treated more harshly than others — even when their crimes are no more severe. In doing so, Ontario spends vast amounts of money on cops, courts and prisons, while ignoring high-profile proposals that would cost less and, more importantly, save young lives.

As [Jim Rankin and Patty Winsa report](http://www.thestar.com/news/investigations/unequaljustice/UnequalJusticeData.html) , young aboriginal and black males are five times more likely to be jailed than the general youth population. Native girls fare even worse; they are jailed 10 times more than others, taking into account their share of the population. It’s an alarming wake-up call.

Just last week, former Supreme Court justice Frank Iacobucci released a [stinging report on bias against aboriginals](http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2013/02/26/systemic_racism_toward_natives_in_justice_system_frank_iacobucci_finds.html) in the Ontario justice system, saying natives are victimized by “systemic racism.”

The Star’s analysis of Ontario jail data, obtained by University of Toronto doctoral candidate Akwasi Owusu-Bempah, exposes the bleak future for many black and aboriginal youth. It is a terrible waste of human potential, especially when plans for early intervention are collecting dust at Queen’s Park.

Ontario’s new premier, Kathleen Wynne, has told Ontarians that she wants to create a “fair society.” Fine words, but Wynne needs to turn them into action.

Attorney General John Gerretsen has said he will follow at least some of Iacobucci’s recommendations, including setting up a committee — with substantial First Nations membership — to oversee changes. But Wynne must ensure that committee gets a quick start, especially on a study scrutinizing the quality of legal representation given to native people.

At the same time, the premier should act on key recommendations of existing reports on youth violence. The [first was commissioned](http://provincialadvocate.on.ca/documents/en/RootsofYouthViolence_volume1.pdf) after the 2005 “Summer of the Gun” and the second after the [2012 Danzig St. mass shooting](http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorialopinion/2012/08/23/ontarios_youth_action_plan_is_modest_but_in_strong_hands.html) . With three more young black teenagers shot dead so far this winter, the time to act is now.

These reports are loaded with ideas for better education, after-school programs and creating opportunities for real jobs, that actually pay well. To move the work along, Wynne should create a “youth commissioner” to oversee changes required by numerous ministries.

The disproportionately high rates of incarceration of aboriginal and black youth is the disastrous outcome of complicated social problems. Deep poverty, family breakdown, lack of education and mental health issues, such as attention deficit disorder, need major interventions. These kids struggle for a reason.

And many are given jail sentences, even when their crimes are no more serious than those who walk free. As Iacobucci said last week, “I have called this a crisis, a serious crisis. And I am not an alarmist. We are talking about the lives and liberties of people.”

He’s right. The Star’s data shows that native youth are treated more harshly by the courts — despite the fact that they are not convicted of more violent crimes.

For example, in 2009-2010, roughly 25 per cent of aboriginal youth were jailed for assault, compared to less than 15 per cent for other young people jailed with the same convictions. The same discrepancies exist for convictions related to theft or break-and-enter.

These problems will not be easy to fix. But at some point, a political leader must chart a path for long-term change and right now a rising chorus of voices is calling for justice. It’s time to go from words to action.