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...and Justice for Panthers

If anything were needed to point up the advantages of law over violence, it has been provided in the recent judicial treatment of the Black Panther party, dramatized by yesterday's indictment of high Chicago officials in the case of Fred Hampton, slain Panther leader.

Consider the record: Last spring a New York jury took three hours to clear thirteen Panthers of conspiracy, following a trial that lasted eight months. A Connecticut judge soon after dismissed murder charges against Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins when a hung jury produced a mistrial. The court acted not out of any declared belief in their innocence but because "massive publicity," the judge felt, had prejudiced their chance for another fair trial. In California an appeals court had earlier reversed the conviction of Huey Newton, Panther leader accused of killing an Oakland policeman, and a Federal court threw out an indictment against David Hilliard for threatening the life of the President.

The major injustice to the Panthers has always been the case of Fred Hampton, shot to death in a police raid on his Chicago apartment. But here, too, belated though the action is, a measure of justice appears in prospect.

Some time ago the state of Illinois dropped counter-charges of attempted murder against the other members of the party, who had been seized in that raid. This week announcement is made of a special grand jury's indictment of State's Attorney Edward V. Hanrahan and thirteen other officials, mostly police officers, on charges of attempting to obstruct justice. Specifically they are charged with having tried to prevent criminal prosecution of eight of the raiding policemen.

The trial will not restore life to Mr. Hampton and a fellow-victim, but taken together with the freeing of Panther leaders in the other cases cited, it should indicate that the courts are not so blind to justice for black men that acts of unrestrained violence are warranted.