

The effects of incarceration essay

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Running Head: EFFECTS OF INCARCERATION ON BLACK FAMILIES The Causes and Effects of Incarceration on Black Families Jasmine Myrick Prof. Marsha Allman The College of New Rochelle Abstract Mass black incarceration has a myriad of effects on the culture and society of black communities across the nation.

This paper examines these effects, including the reasons for black male incarceration, the widespread nature of it, the effects it has on black women, children and the community. The research was taken from several social scientists well-respected in African-American culture and includes interviews, surveys, raw statistics and data. By compiling this research, it is clear that a common theme is that the black women of African-American communities are somewhat forgotten victims of the mass incarceration of black males. But most researchers concluded that black male incarceration has immense negative effects on not only the stability of the individual black family but the black communities in the United States. Widespread incarceration of black adults, both male and female, disrupts black family life across the inner-cities of the United States; in some cases, irrevocably. With the incarceration of a family member, black families left behind often find themselves reeling in the face of added pressure, both sociological and psychological. The negative effects of incarceration reverberate not only through an individual family, but through the black community.

The problem lies in the high incarceration rate of young black males; however, whether the problem lies within the community and the family, or outside forces, such as policy and biases in law enforcement has been researched extensively. Either way, incarceration has quantifiable and

unquantifiable negative effects on families, especially in the black community, and this trend must be researched and treated, for the sake of the normal function of black families across the United States. This paper will primarily discuss the effects of black incarceration of families, including data, sociological research and interviews about the history and also the causes of incarceration.

This paper will also integrate prior research of this trend with research that has been more recently conducted to demonstrate the changing face of the black community and the worsening state of this epidemic. Black Male Incarceration and its Effect on Black Females A great deal of research has been done concerning the effects of incarceration in the black family. Much of the research focuses on the female plight of black male incarceration—the effects of losing a husband, brother or father on the family, and how black women attempt to fill the void. In a 1990 study by Darity and Meyers, research shows that “ the proportion of families headed by females has surged to new heights during recent years. Black families long have experienced greater incidence of female headship than have white families. During recent decades, however, the proportion of black families headed by females has increased from about 25 percent to 44 percent. ” (Darity & Myers, 1990, p.

15) The effects of black women having to fill both roles of father and mother often included added pressure for the women, which sometimes manifests itself in drug culture and illegal activity. On the other hand, while the women struggle to fill both roles, the children of the black family, who are exposed

to inner-city lifestyles and hardships, often lose vital education and social movement opportunities that would come had they not been without a parent. Research in 1985, by Lewis and Garfinkel, shows that, in fact, “ older and more educated family heads were less common in female-headed families. ” (Garfinkel & Lewis, 2007, p. 83) Darity and Meyers suggest, based on their statistics, that female headship of the household destabilizes the black family.

Their basis for this suggestion is that, according to data collected in 1987, 74% of black families with both a father and a mother reported that their household was primarily patriarchal. The researchers, from this data, concluded that black families in America were most commonly headed by men, barring any outside factors. However, the researchers feel that the foundation of the black family in particular—due to the high rate that their nuclear families are headed by men—is taken away due to incarceration. (Darity & Myers, 1990, p. 8) Additionally, their research shows that black women see welfare as incentive to create a women-headed household, in order to maximize welfare benefits.

Darity and Meyers proposed, in 1990, policy changes to the American welfare system, in order to “ reduce the incidence of female headship and thus help stabilize the black family. ” Throughout the years of studying and treating the widespread incarceration of blacks in America, welfare benefits have been a controversial topic often the subject of debates of policymakers in Washington and in the state legislatures. (Darity & Myers, 1990, p.

5) Still, Darity and Meyers acknowledge the cost of cutting welfare to low-income black families. Any widespread welfare changes would substantially affect the well-being of many women-headed black families, especially those with young children. Their research shows that “ curtailing welfare income — either by limiting eligibility or by cutting guarantees — also can reverse the rise in female-headed families, according to the estimates. But at what price? The homicide and incarceration impacts come by way of a circular route... One would need a reduction in homicide rates of more than 10 percent to derive a 1.

percent decrease in black female-headed families. ” Through formulations, Darity and Meyers conclude that often times, it is not worth cutting welfare benefits to reduce incarceration. (Darity & Myers, 1990, p.

26) Dorothy Roberts focuses her research on the implications of mass black incarceration on not only individual black families and the women left behind, but the black communities as a whole. Roberts’ biggest concern is that incarceration becomes common in black neighborhoods, and that incarceration could become a prevalent, accepted part of daily life (Roberts, 2004, p. 1). Roberts comes to this deduction by citing the well-documented effects of widespread black incarceration, researched by social scientists Clear and Rose, who state that “ an ethnographic study of male incarceration in the District of Columbia found that families ‘ lose income, assistance with child care, and bear expenses related to supporting and maintaining contact with incarcerated family members.

” (Roberts, 2004, p. 1) Roberts herself concludes that “ dealing with an incarcerated relative causes stress, both from worry about the inmate’s well-being and from tension among relatives as they struggle to survive the ordeal. These enormous burdens fall primarily on the shoulders of women caregivers, who customarily shore up families experiencing extreme hardship women struggling to manage budgets consumed by addictions; women trying to hold families together when ties are weakened by prolonged absence; women attempting to manage the shame and stigma of incarceration; and women trying to prevent children from becoming casualties of the war on drugs. ” (Roberts, 2004, p. 1) The struggles of men and women in black communities are inexorably linked to one another. But most important is the concept is that the individual families are linked to the mass incarceration as a whole in black communities, which perpetuates the social and economic disadvantage that they are already facing (Painter, 2006, p. 65). Comparisons Between the Plight of Female and Male Blacks There have been questions about whether the black male or the black female is facing a larger crisis in America.

In a study in 1997, Pedro Noguera suggests that the comparisons are inconclusive, due to the different hardships that the two often face; “ for example, black males in the U. S. ave higher rates of incarceration than black females, but black females experience substantially higher poverty rates. ” (Noguera, 1997, p.

149) However, Nogeura implores that we ignore these comparisons and instead focus on the overall effect that both hardships cause on the stability

and normalcy of the black family. Still, Noguera realizes that there is not enough attention paid to the hardships of black women, being overshadowed by the plight of black men. He states that “ beyond these kinds of comparisons of adversity, there is the more important and pervasive reality of patriarchy. Noguera cites research that shows, much like the research done by — that “ on a public level, black males occupy most leadership roles. ” The research shows a clear trend of male dominance within black families in the United States. Again, this concept of male dominance and patriarchy in black families often exacerbates the father’s incarceration, while at the same time, drawing attention away from the social oppression of the black woman. (Noguera, 1997, p.

148) The Black Male Dilemma Still, the socioeconomic situation and the widespread incarceration of young black males are of utmost importance, and must be tended to. Black males often face increased bias and enforcement from law enforcement, while being exposed to more illegal activity than all other demographics (Johnson, 2004, p. 120) This combination of these two factors, which are symbiotic, are contributors to the fact that black males are the highest demographic that are currently incarcerated in the United States. (Painter, 2006, p. 180) In New York City, much of these incarcerations stem from the 1980s and 1990s, when enforcement of drug laws became far more aggressive than years past. The increased aggressiveness in many neighborhoods across the nation originated through “ The War on Drugs,” stronger police forces and increased drug use, especially in New York City (Roberts, 2002, p. 81) Research from Fagan, West and Holland shows that “ for over a decade,

drug-related offenses have accounted for an increasing proportion of prison admissions: from just twelve percent of all New York State prison admissions in 1985, to thirty-one percent in 1990, to thirty-eight percent in 1996. ”

(Fagan, West & Holland, 2003, p.

9) Their research shows that the drug laws of New York were tailored specifically towards the black community, and need immediate restructuring. Further research shows that “ in New York City, arrests and incarcerations, both for drug and non-drug crimes, have long been spatially concentrated in the poorest neighborhoods... The City’s patterns of racial residential segregation all but ensures that the effects of racially-skewed street-level police enforcement will translate into racially and spatially concentrated incarceration in the City’s poorest minority neighborhoods. Data shows that incarceration is most rampant within the most vulnerable families and communities (Fagan, West & Holland, 2003, p. 29).

This is particularly harmful when considering what other researchers called the “ patriarchal” nature of black families. Effect on Communities

Furthermore, incarceration, though contributing to steady declines in crime in New York City, only leads to more incarceration, as research from Fagan, West and Holland shows. Instead, “ incarceration threatens to become endogenous in these neighborhoods, or “ grown from within,” seeping into and permanently staining the social and psychological fabric of neighborhood life in poor neighborhoods of New York and many other cities. Incarceration thus is part of the ecological backdrop of childhood socialization, whose effects are multiplied by grinding poverty, and an everyday contingency,

particularly for young men, as they navigate the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

” (Fagan, West & Holland, 2003, p. 29) Incarceration affects black communities not only physically, but also psychologically; not only subtracting able-bodied members of the black community, but instilling in their people a cheapened form of incarceration and loss. Fagan, West and Holland’s inquiry into the effects of incarceration from a sociological standpoint is also crucial in order to understand the deeper effects of incarceration on children.

Not only are men—fathers, brothers and sons—being taken from their families, where they are needed most, but open the door for further incarceration of the youth. Social scientists Harry, Klinger and Hart conducted a study focused on the reverberating effects of incarceration on the schools in black communities, specifically the makeup of remedial and special education programs to exemplify the effect of incarceration on the community’s children. The study found that, in a particular low-income school in New York City, children instituted into the special education programs were often of poorest families. They also found that the families of these children were often (11 out of 12) effected by incarceration or other form of loss of a family member; “ it turned out that only 1 of the 12 families fit the model of the nuclear family headed by two biological parents that is assumed to be the ideal in American society. However, these children, when further studied, seemed not to fit the ideal role of the special education child found outside of the black community; instead, these children were facing

psychological limitations placed on them by the pressures of their lives in poverty and dysfunctional family life.

The children were found to be of sound mind, capable of learning as well as the other children. The reason, the scientists concluded, that the children were placed into remedial programs was because of the effects of poverty and familial disruption that caused stress for the children. Harry, Klingner & Hart, 2005, p. 102) Incarceration, therefore, clearly has a negative effect on the future of these black communities and families, and often offer little to no opportunity to break this continuous chain of poverty, dysfunction, and incarceration. Coping methods, outside the family Despite these factors that contribute to socioeconomic pressure and missed opportunity, the black family has learned to cope with incarceration, which includes the danger of becoming “ endogenous” to the black culture. Studies by Wilson and Tolson show that black families are far more willing to reach outside of the blood-kin family to other members of the community for mutual support. Research shows that “ low-income families, for example, are more likely to be involved in co-residential sharing as a way of reducing the effects of low income than are other income groups.

” Also, research shows that “ detrimental effects of rearing children in single-parent homes are reportedly minimized by support from the extended family, which offsets the absence of the father. Women in black communities affected by mass incarceration have found ways to offset the lack of added support from an absent or imprisoned father, and seek outside support from “ adopted” family members: cousins, grandparents, friends and etc. In order

to continue life, black mothers have reached out to their extended family network [which] indirectly benefits the child of an adolescent mother by allowing the mother the opportunity to improve her situation. Adolescent mothers who remain in their mother's household are more likely to complete school and are less likely to continue to receive public assistance as compared to young mothers who set up separate households. " (Wilson & Tolson, 1990, p. 351) Other similar cases suggest that black families, despite widespread incarceration, have found ways to cope for the time being, by asking for help from their community, and creating bonds with those outside of their blood-kin family Conclusion Still, the research shows that there is a strong correlation between incarceration and the struggles and the instability of the black family in American communities. The plight of the black family and the disappearance of the so-called " nuclear" family in black communities are inexorably linked to the mass incarceration of the black communities' able-bodied males.

The mass incarceration of blacks is also strongly linked to the strict drug laws around the nation, and the cyclical nature of poverty that blacks are often situated in. Though the research is not definitive on whether the primary reason for incarceration is a product of law enforcement aggressiveness or socioeconomic factors, the research points to both as significant reasons to why incarceration happens at such a high rate in black communities. Many researchers seem to agree that the danger of incarceration lies mostly in the event that incarceration becomes commonplace, trite and expected in black neighborhoods, causing a shift of ideals, morals and self-expectations of black youth in the community. Policy

changes must be made to drug laws as well as welfare laws so that communities, black and otherwise, around the nation are given more equal opportunity and support (Shihadeh & Steffensmeier, 1994, p. 729). Though many overlook the negative effects of black incarceration on our prison system, our black communities, our budget, it is imperative that we do not forget the tragic effects of incarceration on the women and children they leave behind.

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