



THE
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Family Matters: The Impact of Incarceration on the Black Family

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Abstract

Beginning with the War on Drugs Era, the United States prison population has increased at alarming rates. This mass incarceration has disproportionately affected the African American community. Incarceration has detrimental effects on the immediate family of those incarcerated. Children of incarcerated parents often develop emotional and mental disorders like social anxiety, antisocial disorder, learning disabilities, and depression. In addition to the harmful emotional effects, incarceration causes financial strains on the household. The financial and emotional instability of households affected by incarceration are often interconnected as food insecurity can lead to maternal depression.

Introduction

America's prisons and jails represent almost a third of the world's prison population (NAACP). Mass Incarceration is especially a problem impacting the African American community, given that African Americans are incarcerated at five times the rate of white Americans (NAACP). Mass Incarceration in the U.S. is considered a crisis that not only impacts the lives and social mobility of inmates, but also of their families. This paper sets out to explore the financial and emotional strains that incarceration has on Black households across America. Over 5.1 million children in the US have had a parent in jail or prison at some point in

their childhood (Annie E. Casey Foundation). Because of mass incarceration, this burden has fallen primarily on Black children and households. U.S. crime policy has thus, in the name of public safety, produced more vulnerable families and reduced the life chances of their children.

Thesis Statement

- By removing primary wage earners and caregivers, incarceration has detrimental effects on African American households by straining their financial stability creating possible food insecurity, and causing emotional trauma.

Research Question

- How does incarceration impact the financial and emotional stability of African American households?

Methodology and Literature

For this paper, secondary research was utilized from a variety of national sources. The NAACP compared the U.S. incarceration rates to the African American Incarceration rates. The ACLU was also referenced, which outlined reforms to address mass incarceration. The Haas Institute is also referenced, which compared the child emotional state before and after the incarceration of a guardian. The majority of the quantitative data used in this paper has come

from those sources. A multitude of research has been done in regards to Mass Incarceration and the impact it has had on communities of color, and throughout the research, several scholarly articles discussed the economic strains of mass incarceration and policy solutions in general, but there are still gaps surrounding solutions or programs to combat the emotional strains that incarceration causes Black families.

Synthesis of Findings

Economic Impacts of Incarceration on Black Households

In the case of parental incarceration, losing a wage earner in the family can severely impact the income that supports a household. Between 1980 and 2015, the number of people incarcerated in America increased from roughly 500,000 to over 2.2 million. A study in 2010 unsurprisingly found Black Men and Women were more likely to be incarcerated than White Men and Women, meaning Blacks were more likely to be absent from the labor market, leading to income strains.

In addition to the strain that incarceration causes due to the absence of a wage earner, this strain also persists even when incarcerated people return to their families. Specifically, formerly incarcerated fathers have a difficult time getting a job or end up with a low paying job which means that they will have a more difficult time supporting their families. Getting out of the legal debt that has accrued since their incarceration. Incarceration also causes an increase in spending for families because they often have to pay for travel in order to visit, they have to pay to

communicate with their incarcerated family member, not to mention the legal fees and funds given to their incarcerated family member while in prison. For example, every 15 minute phone call in prison cost almost \$25(Greenberg) Incarceration clearly impacts the finances of families who have a loved one in prison. Coupled with the racial discrimination experienced by African Americans in the work force, the economic impacts are particularly disastrous for Black families.

Research indicates that paternal incarceration, specifically, can threaten food security. Due to the debt that will accumulate while the father is incarcerated, combined with additional economic strains, the family often struggles with acquiring adequate nutrition. These challenges caused by food insecurity create harmful, long-term health outcomes due to undernourishment. Even greater deficits in health occur when the cost of healthcare becomes too high for those with food insecurity to afford.

Emotional effects of Financial Instability

Although the incarceration of a family member is a contributing factor to emotional strains on the family, emotional stress is also linked to the economic strains put on the family. For example, maternal depression is worsened by food insecurity and financial instability. Additionally, antisocial behavior in children is associated with household economic strain (Murray and Farrington 174). In the meta-analysis by Lipsey and Derzon (1998), low family social class was one of the two strongest family predictors of serious and violent delinquency in young adulthood. (Murray and Farrington 174).

Emotional Effects of Imprisonment on the Family

In addition to the economic strains incarceration places on Black families, incarceration also impacts the emotional stability of a family in a variety of ways. Having a parent incarcerated elevates the risk of divorce and separation of the family. This means that the family structure is impacted by incarceration even after a family member's sentence has been served. Specifically, incarceration of a parent is linked to increases in children's aggression, behavioral problems, and social marginalization. "As incarceration rates have soared, poor women and children have been left to deal with the separation, visitation, and return of their progeny, partners, and parents. By further reducing the well-being of fragile families, mass imprisonment lays the groundwork for a vicious cycle in which the criminal justice system does not diminish—and may even increase—addiction, abuse, and crime."(Christopher Wildeman and Bruce Western 158)

Conclusion

By removing the parents/guardians from the household, financial resources are often stretched thin when one parent is incarcerated. Financial strain comes when there is little to no money being made in the house, which can lead to food insecurity and debt. Incarceration can also lead to emotional stress and break families apart through high divorce rates and distance caused by incarceration. The ACLU suggests eliminate incarceration as a penalty for certain classes of low-level, non-violent offenses. Some suggestions that may help or bring attention to this problem are given by ACLU. In addition to reforms made by ACLU that directly seek to reform the prison system as a whole, another needed change is access to a means to help parents

returning from incarceration regain financial stability. An idea is a federal job guarantee that, specifically helps the formerly incarcerated, which would help combat the struggles of re-entering the workforce. A reform for emotional stability is free therapy sessions which can help some of the mental strain and stress of prison life to civilian life.

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