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## **The K- 12 Experiences of African American Criminal Offenders**

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The K-12 Experiences of African American Criminal Offenders

Ashley P. Booker

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Education

Augsburg College  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

2014

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K-12 EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CRIMINAL OFFENDERS ii

Master of Arts in Education

Augsburg College

Minneapolis, Minnesota

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the Action Research Final Project of

Ashley P. Booker

has been approved by the Review Committee, and fulfills the requirements for the  
Master of Arts in Education degree.

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Committee:

Adviser: Elizabeth Madson Ankeny  
Dr. Elizabeth Madson Ankeny

Reader: Dee Cole Vodicka  
Dee Cole Vodicka

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores some of the most persistent and significant racial gaps in our society today, focusing on the intersections of race, academic achievement, and criminal incarceration via an analysis of the K-12 experiences of African American criminal offenders. The purpose of this research is to gain additional knowledge and insight about the racial disparities that persist in academic achievement and punitive methods of social control, hopefully contributing to the ongoing discussion of the ways in which to improve teacher practices and develop strategies for effectively engaging African American males in the classroom.

There were three participants in this study, all adult African American males with varying levels of school success who have been criminally incarcerated. Each participant was interviewed about his school experiences. The interview data was analyzed and coded, and three primary themes emerged: school engagement, race, and violence. While incidents involving race and violence were present in each of the participants' stories, the participants' level of school engagement seemed to have the most profound effect on academic achievement and subsequent criminal involvement.

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The K-12 Experiences of African American Criminal Offenders

**Chapter 1**

**Introduction**

Imagine a world where time stands still  
Where nothing you do is of your own free will  
Stripped of your freedom, your hopes, your pride  
Surrounded by strangers with no place to hide  
Imagine a place where you're told what to wear  
A place where no one is allowed to grow hair  
You are told each day you're not to talk  
And where and when you can and cannot walk  
A world where you sleep, surrounded by hate  
Where all you can do is just sit and wait  
Imagine a world where you have no choice  
Where you can't even think because of the noise  
A world where you work but get no pay  
And made to feel worthless each and every day  
A world where days crawl like a snail  
Where all you have hope for is a piece of mail  
A world where you have to eat real quick  
Does this sound like a world that would make you sick?  
Imagine a world surrounded by wire  
Able to walk from this place is my greatest desire



A world like this is hard to conceive

Yet here I am and cannot leave.

Poem by *an unnamed California prisoner (May 2006)*

Although this poem depicts one man's experience as a prison inmate, an unfortunate reality is that many students of color are experiencing these same thoughts and emotions in our nation's schools as the line between the education and criminal justice systems has become increasingly blurred. Gone are the days when minor disruptions would be handled in the classroom, and trips to the principal's office were considered to be a last resort. School disciplinary policies are now mirroring crime legislation, and students of color are being hit hardest, with African American males experiencing the highest rates of school suspensions and expulsions.

In Florida, a sixteen-year-old was arrested, charged with a felony, and expelled from school after a science experiment resulted in a small explosion. School officials have admitted that the student did not intend any harm but have stood by their decision to expel citing their policies (Dolan, 2013). In Georgia, a six-year-old was handcuffed and arrested after allegedly throwing a tantrum at school. The kindergartener was charged with battery and suspended for the rest of the school year (D'Arcy, 2012). Another six-year-old was arrested in Indiana after kicking the principal in the leg. The student was taken to a local police station and charged with battery and intimidation (Danielle, 2012). In New York City, 95 percent of the 882 arrests made by the NYPD School Safety Division in 2012

were of Black or Latino students, with the vast majority of these offenses being categorized as disorderly conduct (Denvir, 2013).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The systemic criminalization of school behaviors deemed disruptive have a host of negative implications, perhaps none more significant than school disengagement, with academic failure being a nearly inevitable consequence. Through this study, I intend to explore the relationship between race, social exclusion, academic achievement, and criminal behavior by focusing on the K-12 experiences of three African American criminal offenders. The specific research questions are:

1. What are the K-12 experiences of African American criminal offenders?
2. Is there a relationship between the school experiences of African American criminal offenders and the decision to engage in criminal behavior?

The purpose of this research is to gain additional knowledge and insight about the racial disparities that persist in academic achievement and punitive methods of social control, hopefully contributing to the ongoing discussion of the ways in which to improve teacher practices and develop strategies for effectively engaging African American males in the classroom. While high school graduation and college matriculation rates have gradually increased among African American students over the last decade, racial disparities in academic achievement persist. Although some strides have been made toward achieving equality in the United States, African Americans continue to be incarcerated in disproportionate

numbers (Patton, 2012). It is for these reasons that this study is both necessary and appropriate for the current landscape.

### **Importance of the Study**

There is no shortage of research on racial disparities in education. The correlation between low educational attainment and increased rates of incarceration is well documented. It is clear that the better you perform in school, the less likely you are to engage in criminal behavior (Peckham, 2008). Countless studies have shown that:

African American boys are more likely than any other group to be suspended and expelled from school. In most American cities, dropout rates for African-American males are well above 50%, and they're less likely to enroll or graduate from college than any other group. African-American males are more likely to be classified as mentally retarded or to be identified as suffering from a learning disability and placed in special education. They're more likely to be absent from gifted and talented programs, Advanced Placement and honors courses, and international baccalaureate programs.

(Noguera, 2012, p. 8).

However, there are no known studies that have directly explored the K-12 experiences of African American criminal offenders. The information presented in this study will add a much-needed perspective to the conversation on closing the racial gaps that continue to persist in education. The voice of the presumed disengaged African American male is markedly absent from the discussion of this

hot topic in education policy, and this study ultimately serves as an attempt to fill that void.

### **Definition of Terms**

There were three participants in this qualitative study – all adult African American males with varying levels of school success – who have been criminally incarcerated. For the purposes of this study, the terms “African American” and “Black” will be used interchangeably. Additionally, the term “incarceration” for our purposes refers to imprisonment of one or more years in a state or federal prison.

Each participant was interviewed about his school experiences. The interview data was analyzed and coded, and three primary themes emerged: school engagement, race, and violence. Though the themes of race and violence are self-explanatory, school engagement is a term that requires an explanation. “School engagement” is defined here as a student’s investment in the school experience. Some of the indicators used to identify participants’ levels of school engagement included completing assignments, participating in class, quality of relationships with school personnel, connection with peers, and involvement in school-based extracurricular activities. Though often used interchangeably with the term “student engagement,” I seek to differentiate the two. “School engagement” will be used to describe the participants’ level of connection to school, while “student engagement” will be used when describing the school’s practices for effectively reaching out and engaging students in the learning

process. Though undoubtedly similar concepts, it is important to highlight the significance of directionality here.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

Despite a thorough examination of the current research, I was unable to uncover a previous study that has ventured to directly explore the K-12 experiences of African American criminal offenders. With that said, there is an abundance of research that addresses the many racial gaps that continue to persist in the United States. For the purposes of this study, our discussion will be limited to just three of these racial gaps: (1) the academic achievement gap between Black and White students; (2) the school discipline gap between Black and White students; and (3) the incarceration gap between Black and White criminal offenders.

In recent years, many scholars have turned their attention to the *School-To-Prison Pipeline*, a literal culmination of the three aforementioned racial gaps. The school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) refers to the systemic funneling of students of color, particularly African American males, away from the education system and toward the criminal justice system (Elias, 2013).

Researchers have also explored the effects of labeling, overrepresentation in special education programs, negative stereotypes, parental involvement, and Black masculine identity development as related to African American student engagement.

### **It's All Connected: Understanding the School-To-Prison Pipeline**

A growing body of research describes the concept of a school-to-prison pipeline as:

A set of interactions between and among children, youth, their families, school personnel, other service providers, and gatekeepers of outcomes. These interactions contribute to a cycle of negative encounters that can lead to or exacerbate a student's behavioral or academic problems, disengagement from learning, and disconnection from school. These interactions also contribute to dropouts, delinquency, arrests and incarceration. (Osher, 2012, p. 284).

### **So, Are These Schools? Or Prisons?**

While more punitive punishments, such as suspensions and expulsions, were once reserved for acts of violence, students are now being suspended for behavior that is simply deemed “disruptive.” These behaviors have systematically become criminalized as a means of strengthening safety, with many schools' disciplinary policies mirroring controversial criminal legislative trends such as the implementation of “zero tolerance” and “three strikes” rules (Lewis, 2010). These rules are “immediate; automatic; applied to all instances of the behavior without specific regard for the level of safety, disruption, or risk; often involving expulsion or suspension from school” (Sander, 2010, p. 6). Many schools across the nation install metal detectors, maintain a regular police presence in their buildings, and utilize force to manage student behavior (Raible, 2010).

In addition to the increased use of punitive measures in the schools, the United States has simultaneously devolved into an increasingly carceral nation as

a whole, claiming “the dubious distinction of locking up more people than any other nation... with 5% of the world’s population and 25% of the total prison population” (Meiners, 2011, p. 549). Further, “the number of people incapacitated in the U.S. has increased since the 1970s, not because of an increase in violence or crime, but because of policies including three strikes and you are out legislation, mandatory minimum sentencing, and the war on drugs” (Meiners, 2011, p. 549).

These same types of policies are being utilized in schools across the nation in the name of increasing safety, and managing student behavior. Schools throughout the country are employing “discipline policies that push students out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system at alarming rates” (Elias, 2013, p. 39). Some researchers attribute this policy shift to a growing fear about school safety that has been fed by popular media; with juvenile delinquency, youth gang participation, and school violence commonly being featured on the evening news.

Despite these widely held concerns, the state and national crime data do not substantiate these fears. According to FBI crime statistics, there are “an average of 300 shootings everyday, but very few of them occur in or near schools...Children are almost 100 times more likely to be murdered outside of school than at school” (Cornell, 2014, p.1). Even though our nation has experienced horrific instances of school shootings in recent years, this is still a rare occurrence. Despite the fact that school violence is rare, school punishment has been increasing in frequency and severity since the 1970’s (Fowler, 2011). It



has been consistently documented that these punitive policies “not only deprive students of educational opportunities, but fail to make schools safer places” (Gonzalez, 2012, p. 282).

### **Babies in Handcuffs: Diving into the Discipline Gap**

Countless researchers have investigated the disciplinary policies and practices utilized by schools and their subsequent impact on the African American student experience. The findings of these studies have consistently shown that African American boys in particular are at an “increased risk for experiencing disciplinary practices that exclude them from the school environment... contributing to their involvement in the criminal justice system as they approach adolescence and enter adulthood” (Darensbourg, Perez and Blake, 2010, p. 196). This is a troubling fact that is well documented. A study of public schools in twelve major US cities found that students of color were more likely to be suspended or expelled than Whites, with Black students being 3.3 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White counterparts (Wallace, 2008).

Another study found that during the 2009-2010 school year, one in six Black students in the United States were suspended from school, as compared to one in twenty White students (Elias, 2013). Not only are African American students “subject to disciplinary actions in school settings more often than White students, [but] often for less severe infractions. Additionally, African American students often receive more severe forms of punishment for the same infractions committed by their White classmates” (Boyd, 2009, p. 574).

These findings have been replicated in numerous studies, lending credence to the growing body of research on the school-to-prison pipeline. Despite the clear racial disparities in school punishment, “investigations of behavior, race, and discipline have yet to provide evidence that Black students misbehave at a significantly higher rate than other students” (Skiba, Michael, Nardo and Peterson, 2002, p. 322).

### **The Role of Culture**

The majority of the existing research attributes racial disparities in academic achievement and school punishment to fundamental cultural differences. Scholars point to a lack of racial/ethnic diversity among educators and a long-standing tradition of culturally-biased curriculum and policies (Gordon, 2000). Studies have shown that students of color often display an improvement in learning when alternative teaching methods are invoked, such as culturally responsive teaching (Perry, 2003; Gay, 2000). One proponent of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) described the practice as having an “understanding of students’ home life, their language, music, dress, behavior, jokes, ideas about success...and more. It is bringing the experiences of their 24-hour day into the seven-hour school day to give them information in a familiar context” (Kopkowski, 2006, p. 28).

In a similar vein, some scholars have turned their attention to the use of Culturally Responsive Classroom Management techniques as a means of closing the discipline gap. With this approach, educators are required to recognize their own ethnocentrism, build knowledge about their students’ cultural backgrounds,

and utilize culturally appropriate behavior management strategies (Weinstein, 2004). The most effective practitioners are “aware of students’ cognitive needs, their social needs, their academic needs as well as their political needs. They have the mindset to understand equity and equality and power structures among students... [and they] immerse themselves in the students’ life worlds... understanding themselves in relation to others” (Milner & Tenore, 2010, p. 591).

Further, the perception of inappropriate or undesirable behavior differs between varied social groups (Becker, 2003). An analysis of the experiences of Black girls in the classroom discussed the conflicting opinions about the girls’ behavior. While some teachers found the girls to be strong, confident, and assertive, many of the White teachers attempted to curb the behavior, describing them as “challenging to authority, loud and not ladylike” (Morris, 2007, p. 501). If teachers fail to acknowledge the values, ideas, beliefs, and ultimately the biases they bring into the classroom, then a lack of cultural synchronization (a mismatch between school and student cultures), can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations regarding student behavior. As a result of this incongruence between teacher and student, racial disparities in school punishment persist (Monroe, 2006).

Some also cite fear of African American boys as a contributing factor regarding the racial disparities in academic achievement and school punishment. Oftentimes, preconceived ideas about race impede relationship building, and a pattern of avoidance ensues. If a Black student behaves in a way that is not

understood by a White educator, the easiest course of action is to remove the student, and sweep the core issues of race and oppression under the rug (Peterek-Bonner, 2009).

### **The Power of Labels: Individual Factors Contributing to the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

Identifying the existence of a school-to-prison pipeline, and the underlying cultural dynamics, offers a structural view of racial disparities, but other perspectives feature individuals as the unit of analysis. According to the principles of Labeling Theory (Becker, 2003), people commit criminal and deviant acts as a result of socially applied labels. This theory suggests that the dominant elite deem certain acts as deviant in order to further the subordination of oppressed groups. Once a person has received a negative label, a self-fulfilling prophecy ensues. Ultimately, if a person feels they are perceived as a criminal, they are more likely to succumb to those beliefs, and engage in criminal activity.

Claude Steele (2003) studied this very concept in an academic context, and found that racial minority students displayed poorer performances when faced with the possibility of succumbing to negative stereotypes. Through a series of experiments, researchers administered tests to Black and White students, but the experimental group was asked to indicate their race on their test forms. Although the test scores did not change for the White students, there was a marked difference between Blacks in the control and experimental groups. The Black students in the control group, who did not indicate their race on the test forms, answered twice as many questions correctly. The researchers attributed this

disparity to the power of negative stereotypes. If students of color feel that they have obtained negative labels, then their levels of achievement will reflect that perception. If expectations for academic success are low, then their efforts will be limited (Aronson, 2004).

### **The Overrepresentation of Black Boys in Special Education**

An investigation of special education programs exposed the inconsistencies among teacher referrals. Although African Americans only account for sixteen percent of students in the United States, they comprise thirty-five percent of the total special education population. The label of *special ed.* carries an undeniable stigma. This process of stigmatization hinders academic achievement, exhausts student motivation, and lowers expectations (McNally, 2003).

Gold and Richards (2012) argue that referring African American students for special education services is often counterproductive, as the label comes with “extra baggage that may be a burden too heavy to carry” (p. 144). They also draw historical comparisons, likening the special education label to the longstanding stereotypes characterizing African Americans as “lazy, shiftless, and inferior” (p. 144).

The process by which students’ eligibility for special education services is assessed is also mired in controversy:

Methods used to assess African American students, particularly in relation to special education, have generated controversy among educators, parents, and policymakers for decades. Such

controversy stems, in part, from perceptions that standardized measures of intelligence, which are often used to help determine students' eligibility for special education services, are biased toward African Americans. (Proctor, Graves and Esch, 2012, p. 268).

Scholars cite a number of factors that contribute to the overrepresentation of African American males in special education programs, including but not limited to a “lack of parental involvement and broadly defined cultural disadvantage, the failures of both the regular education and special education systems, and pressures from parents and teachers to place African American students [in special education programs]” (Kearns, Ford and Linney, 2005, p. 297).

### **African American Parent Involvement in Education**

The positive implications associated with parental involvement are well documented:

Students with actively involved parents are, by and large, more engaged in the classroom, more positive about school and learning, more likely to enroll in advanced courses, and less likely to drop out. Additionally, parent involvement has been positively linked to student grade point averages, including increased achievement in mathematics, science, and language arts. (Wallace, 2013, p. 195).

Parent involvement can take on many forms, but is typically characterized as behaviors and attitudes on the part of the parent or guardian that support the

academic achievement and psychosocial development of the student (Hayes, 2011). According to one study, “Levels and types of parent involvement vary for myriad reasons, including socioeconomic status, educational background, residential status, and sex of the parent. Fathers, in general, tend to be less involved than mothers” (Abel, 2012, p. 162).

Increasing African American parental involvement has been a major focus in urban schools and districts across the country as a means of addressing the academic achievement gap for the last two decades (Camm, 2009). A number of studies suggest “African American parents are less engaged in their children's academic experiences than their White counterparts” (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2008, p. 143). This notion seems to stem from African American parents reporting that they experience more external barriers to increased involvement than parents of other racial/ethnic backgrounds (Wallace, 2013).

After a thorough review of the literature, I find it difficult to determine whether African American parents are indeed less involved in their children's education, or if “involvement” is defined and assessed differently based on varying socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Despite being a fairly common topic amongst researchers, there seems to be an absence of strong empirical data regarding the actual levels of African American parental involvement. More work in the areas of school and parent perceptions of parental involvement appears to be needed.

### **Black Masculine Identity Development**

There is a growing body of research on the topics of racial and identity development, particularly as it relates to the concept of Black masculinity. Many African American men:

Experience education in a manner unlike most groups in the U.S. and these experiences are rooted in a historical construction of what it means to be Black and male. These experiences are often guided by a less than flattering account of the academic potential, intellectual disposition, and social and cultural capital possessed by Black males. (Howard, Flenbaugh, and Terry, 2012, p. 86)

Pervasive stereotypes and negative social imagery have resulted in the portrayal of African American males in media as successful athletes and entertainers (at best) and “dangerous criminals and hypersexed misogynists” (at worst). While this has become a part of the American social consciousness, it too has seeped into the identity development of African American males (Henfield, 2012, p. 179). Although I will refrain from diving too deeply into this particular subject, the major takeaway for the purposes of this study is that there may be a cultural mismatch between the values and expectations of the schools, and African American boys’ perception of what it truly means to be a Black male. While many studies show that African American students have a strong desire to achieve academically, the methods, attitudes and behaviors exhibited by Black boys in a school context can sometimes appear to be in direct conflict with this desire (Wright, 2009).



While there are many theories that attempt to address the racial disparities in criminal behavior and education, an integration of these concepts is necessary if we hope to gain any insight into why African American males are disproportionately experiencing lower levels of academic achievement, and higher rates of criminal incarceration. It is likely that some combination of societal and intrinsic factors is responsible for the racial disparities that continue to persist in our education and criminal justice systems. Considering the existing body of work in this area, it is clear that discriminatory trends in school punishment, culture clashes, and stereotypes are having a negative effect on the school engagement of African American boys. Further, if school engagement, family involvement, and racial/ethnic identity development are all contributing factors in the decision to engage in criminal behavior, then the K-12 experiences of the three participants from this study strongly support and coincide with the current research.

### Chapter 3

#### **Methodology**

A disproportionate number of African Americans are failing academically, and are criminally incarcerated in the United States. The education and criminal justice systems are two of the most important institutions in American society, and I am interested in learning how these systems interact in shaping the life course of an individual. In this study, I ask one critical question: What are the K-12 experiences of African American criminal offenders? Through the stories of three African American criminal offenders, I am able to gain insight into the impact of socially exclusionary school disciplinary practices on academic achievement and criminal incarceration.

#### **Procedure: A Grounded Theory Approach**

This study is qualitative in nature, and is based on the thorough examination of primary data collected from interviews conducted with three African American male criminal offenders. A Grounded Theory approach was utilized, allowing the data that was collected to drive the study forward. Rather than relying on preconceived notions or assumptions, Grounded Theory allows the researcher to focus solely on the data at hand in order to develop a more objective system of describing and explaining human behavior (Glaser, 2009).

My cousin, an ex-offender who runs a private support group for African American men who have recently been released from prison, identified the three participants in this study. I provided my cousin with a list of selection criteria, and he sought out volunteers based on those requirements.

Each participant was interviewed once over a two-week period. The length of each interview ranged from thirty to ninety minutes. The interviews were all tape-recorded, and transcribed prior to analysis. The analytical process consisted of coding the data, uncovering recurring patterns, and identifying overarching themes. Although the participants in this study are each unique and distinct individuals, a number of recurring themes are present in all of their stories. For the purposes of this project, I have chosen to limit those themes to school engagement, race, and violence.

### **The Research Participants**

**Victor.** A 38-year-old African American man from a large metropolitan area in the Midwest, Victor is approximately 5'10, with an average build. He is a dark-skinned man, with a broad smile and hair trimmed neatly in a fade. He is clean-cut, with the only noticeable blemish being a 3-inch scar on his forehead, just above his right eyebrow. Dressed in a plaid button-up shirt, relaxed fit jeans, and white sneakers, he appears coolly confident. His voice is deep, and raspy at times. He smells of a clean fresh scent with a hint of cigarette smoke.

Throughout most of Victor's interview, I get the sense that he is not being genuine or transparent. I feel like he is trying to say the right things, instead of speaking his truth. He smiles often, leans forward while talking, and stares intently. I suspect that he is used to relying on his self-perceived charisma when interacting with women.

All of Victor's K-12 experiences took place in a large public school district in a Midwestern city, and he is a high school graduate. Beyond taking a

few culinary arts courses, Victor has never pursued post-secondary education, and has no plans to do so. He has been incarcerated multiple times, and is currently unemployed.

**Wesley.** A 31-year-old African American man from a large metropolitan area in the Midwest, Wesley is heavy-set and approximately six feet tall. Although he is a large man, he has a gentle presence and is soft-spoken. Wearing a t-shirt, denim shorts, and sneakers, he appears friendly, but a bit timid and uneasy. His face is friendly, with dimpled cheeks, and a neatly groomed mustache and beard. His hair is closely cropped, but is still long enough to coil into tiny curls.

Wesley smiles often, though this primarily seems to be an indication of his nervousness. I find him to be extremely guarded, and struggle to get him to speak openly and honestly. His answers are short, and lack depth. Based on his body language when discussing his past (looking down, shrugging, slumping in his seat, etc.), I get the sense that he has a lot of shame associated with his criminal history.

Wesley's K-12 experiences took place in several private schools in a large city in California, as well as in a large public school district in a Midwestern city. He is a high school graduate, and has successfully completed three semesters of college. Wesley has been incarcerated one time, and is currently seeking employment. He also is considering returning to college to complete a four-year degree sometime in the near future.

**Xavier.** A 49-year-old African American man from a large metropolitan area in the Midwest, Xavier is short and stocky. He is a light-skinned man, with green eyes, and his hair is cut close to the scalp, appearing nearly bald. Despite originally being from the Midwest, Xavier speaks with a slight southern drawl, and he vacillates between confidence and arrogance. Dressed in a sky blue linen shirt and matching shorts, he also dons sky blue high-top sneakers and sunglasses. Gray hairs have started to creep into his mustache, but otherwise his face is smooth, round and clean-shaven. He is missing his top two front teeth, lost during an altercation with several police officers.

Xavier is by far the most emotional and talkative of the three participants. He is open, and oftentimes appears honest and raw. There are other times when I wonder if Xavier says certain things purely for shock value. He seems to have a great deal of pride in his criminal past, and only expresses regret when referencing his current difficulties as a middle-aged felon seeking employment. With that said, of the three participants, Xavier also seems to possess the greatest level of insight into his own behavior. This might be due largely to his age, and comparative maturity.

Xavier's K-12 experiences took place in both public and private schools in large cities in the Midwest and South. Xavier dropped out of high school, but did obtain his GED several months later. He attended college for a short time, but was expelled for fighting on campus. Xavier has been incarcerated for more than half of his life for a number of different offenses. He also has a history of substance

abuse. Xavier was most recently released from prison three years ago, and is currently seeking employment.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

The research questions for this study were twofold: 1) What are the K-12 experiences of African American criminal offenders; and 2) Is there a relationship between the school experiences of African American criminal offenders and the decision to engage in criminal behavior? Through the interview process, three primary recurring themes emerged from the participants' stories: school engagement, race, and violence. When examined separately, school engagement appears to be the most strongly related to criminal behavior. However, when examined together, there is a clear indication that for these participants, there is indeed a connection between negative school experiences and criminal behavior.

### School Engagement

Victor, Wesley and Xavier all spoke at length about their level of school engagement as indicated by a desire to learn, the opportunity to be challenged by rigorous coursework, motivation to achieve, parental involvement, and the development of positive relationships with teachers, staff, and peers. While Wesley was by far the participant who recalled the highest level of school engagement, even he expressed dissatisfaction in several of these areas.

**Dislike of school vs. desire to learn:** "Even though I didn't like school, I liked to learn things." The participants in this study seemed to have a love-hate relationship when reflecting on their experiences in education. Victor smiled broadly, "I enjoyed school very much. There was times that I had to get beat to get up to go, but that was for good reason." All three admitted to enjoying the act

of learning, but they did not always like school as an institution. The participants provided a number of reasons for their dissatisfaction with their school experiences, many of which will be discussed in this section, but all of them were adamant about their love for learning new things.

Both Victor and Wesley spoke of being good students, earning A's and B's and graduating on time, and even Xavier, a self-proclaimed hater of the entire public education system, talked about doing well in school throughout his elementary years. All of the participants possessed very positive self-images as students, and asserted that any instances of poor academic performance were not a reflection of their abilities or true intellect. Xavier sat up in his chair and proclaimed, "You can give me a test right now, and I'd probably pass it...I'm not stupid."

There is some indication that the participants did not like the structure or perceived rigidity of their K-12 school environments, as both Wesley and Xavier commented on how much more they enjoyed their college experiences. In addition to the having the freedom to select their courses, they also were able to establish strong relationships with peers of the same race. Wesley smiled while recalling:

(College) was actually a lot of fun. I mean, that whole learning experience, it's a good thing. And I think that everyone, these kids from around here, everyone should actually attend college somewhere else, just so they can get the full experience.



Xavier, displaying a rare smile, reflected on the social aspect of his college experience:

It was an all Black college. And there was people from everywhere. New York, New Jersey, Detroit, you know, just from everywhere. And it was just a lot of fun, you know? It was a lot of fun.

Further reiterating the importance of greater freedom and independence in the school environment, Victor chose not to attend the high school that his friends were going to based simply on the fact that the administrators lock the doors once the school day begins. With a furrowed brow, Victor recounted, “They locked the doors behind us. And we was like, what? What it is this? But they did – they locked the doors behind us after we got in. So I had to go to [another school] without my classmates there.”

That same desire to learn new things is something that all of the participants still possess today. Xavier spent his last prison stint studying sociology, psychology, and political science. “Anything I could get my hands on, that looked interesting to read, I would read it. You know, I would read it, and it helped me. It helped me.” Despite having no concrete plans to return to school, Victor did express a mild interest in continuing his culinary arts courses while noticeably shifting in his seat, and appearing slightly uncomfortable. Wesley seemed to have a greater interest in continuing his education. He smiled genuinely while expressing his hopes of returning to college to complete his four-year degree sometime in the near future.

**Absence of rigorous coursework:** “I started getting bored with school. It felt like they weren’t teaching us anything.” Even though all three participants recalled having a strong desire to learn, all of them remembered being bored throughout their K-12 experiences. This boredom seemed to stem the participants feeling neither challenged, nor stimulated by the coursework. Wesley attended a private school for most of his elementary years, and expressed some dissatisfaction once making the move to a public school for junior high:

I have to say that [private school] was probably one of my best school experiences. They just taught you more there. And once I was in the public schools, I kinda saw that the things I was learning in 8<sup>th</sup> grade in the public school, I had already learned in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade at the private school.”

Xavier, arms crossed, and wearing an expression of moderate annoyance, spoke about school becoming less fun, and thus less interesting over time:

Back then [elementary school], it was just fun. You playing, and [you have] your fun things, and then you get in here [junior high], and it’s like, ‘tonight we want you to read chapters 3 and 4,’ and I’m thinking, no, I got [more interesting] things to do tonight.

In contrast, the participants seemed to find the motivation to achieve when they were challenged, either by their teachers or the coursework. Xavier recalled with a hint of defiance how much he enjoyed his drama class, not only because he was engaged in the subject matter, but also because the teacher pushed him to get involved:

It was like being up to a challenge when somebody says you can't do something, then provin' 'em wrong. You know, cuz I remember when I first was in the class, and the lady [the teacher] was like, you wasting my time if you can't do nothin' in here. And I was like, 'I can do anything you ask me to do.' And that's how that started. So I just ditched everything else, and went to that [class], you know?

The ways in which the participants chose to respond to their boredom varied. Xavier began skipping classes, and eventually dropped out of high school. Reflecting on that decision, he stated, "I just got sick of [school], and went on ahead and got a GED." Conversely, Victor found a legitimate way to limit his time in the school environment by joining the On The Job Training Program (OJT). "Through the grace of God, I was on the OJT from 10<sup>th</sup> grade until I graduated. So I was only in school for 3 hours, you know?"

Although each of the participants acknowledged that their boredom affected their level of school engagement, both Wesley and Xavier expressed feelings of regret about not making the most of their time in school. Wesley, breaking eye contact, and looking at his hands, spoke of the importance of personal accountability:

It's more so about responsibility for yourself. And then on from high school to college, it's something you have to prepare yourself for. I would say I let other things occupy space in my mind, and I

didn't take the time to prepare myself for other things that I wanted to do in life.

Xavier, with tears welling in his eyes, spoke both about regrets that he had related to school and the crimes he has committed over the years. "I just would hope that, you know, that nobody would ever have to go through some of the things I went through in life. To somehow, let people get that out there, to let them see, you know...this is not gonna last forever. And, you can still have everything [you want to] have, legally."

**Capitalizing on low expectations:** "I did just enough to get by." Each participant spoke about doing the bare minimum, or taking the easy way out when it came to completing school assignments. Xavier talked about the absence of rigorous coursework during the early part of his schooling leading to his own misconceptions about what school was supposed to be like:

Had I been prepared for [hard work] when I went [to junior high], I probably would've, you know... Had I actually been working on stuff, instead of just playing... See I get [to junior high], and I'm thinking it's all gonna be fun and games like it was [in elementary school], and then I get there and find out, oh no, you got to do some work here. And I'm like, oh no, I don't want to do none of this stuff. You know?

For Victor, this approach to learning is something that also persisted into adulthood. After serving time in prison, Victor was placed in a half-way house. In order to adhere to the terms of his parole, he was required to obtain a job or enroll

in some sort of school or training program. Victor opted to pursue a career in Culinary Arts, and spoke candidly on the issue:

I was going to school to get my chef...I mean my...uh... cooking license. I wasn't go[ing] there to be no chef or nothing like that, cuz I know the responsibilities that go along with being a chef, and that is not for me. That's too much work.

I found this admission to be one of the few moments in Victor's interview that felt completely genuine. He spoke confidently and openly, and I found myself wondering if this was indicative of a failure in the development of a strong work ethic.

The issue of "buy-in" also came up during the participants' interviews. All of the participants admitted that they had trouble recognizing the benefits of school while they were students, and were unable to see any significant payoff to do doing well academically. This became an even bigger barrier to school engagement when there were extremely attractive and tangible benefits to participating in criminal activities. Xavier remarked matter-of-factly:

All I went to school for was to get money [by gambling]. I didn't even go to class. I remember [being] 12 or 13 years old, and [I'm] running around with two or three thousand dollars in my pocket.

What do I need school for? You know? What do I need the school for?

The participants also provided some insight into the expectations they had set for themselves in terms of their own academic achievement. Victor's primary

goal was to graduate from high school on time, and it is an accomplishment that he remains very proud of to this day. In reference to some of his peers who did not graduate from high school, Victor shook his head, seemingly in disgust, and remarked:

I've thought about... some of those people that I went to [school] with... They didn't graduate when they were supposed to. And maybe I probably would have been one of them idiots hanging out with them, and I probably wouldn't have been one of the ones that made it.

Despite getting good grades, and having positive relationships with his teachers and administrators, like Victor, Wesley never made plans for life after high school. Graduation served as the endpoint, and he did what he needed to do to reach that goal. Interestingly, Xavier, the least engaged of the three participants, still held on to his dream of becoming a lawyer, even after getting expelled from countless schools and dropping out of high school. Xavier was the only participant to pursue a college education immediately after completing his high school coursework. This could at least in part be explained by the fact that several of Xavier's family members were college graduates, some of whom held advanced degrees. Becoming very animated, raising his voice, and talking with his hands, Xavier said:

Two of my mom's sisters, one was a retired professor, and the other one's a teacher. Her husband's a professor. Two of my cousins went to law school... But you know, I can do anything that

they do. You got to realize, we all cut from the same gene. I'm doin' this [crime] because this is what I choose to do. Now if I choose to do [college], watch me. And that's why I went. To let them know that I'm more than what you see. I'm way more than what you see.

**Relationships with teachers and school staff:** “School was exciting for me, throughout my elementary years ‘cause there was teachers who got close to me.” It is clear that the level of school engagement that the participants exhibited depended heavily on the nature of their relationships with school staff – particularly teachers. Victor and Wesley both recalled fond memories of teachers and administrators in their schools. Victor, while laughing, said of his teachers, “After sixth grade, when I went on to junior high, they cried. They said, oh Victor, we’re gonna miss you, and uhh... It was like I had that vibe in me that teachers liked me.” Wesley smiled while recalling his relationship with one school staff member who served as a mentor to him, stating, “Me and one of my former administrators have a good relationship to this day.”

Just as positive relationships with teachers and administrators can lead to increased levels of school engagement, the absence of these types of bonds can have negative implications. This is most apparent upon examining Xavier’s experiences in this area. With the exception of his high school Drama teacher, he did not speak of any positive relationships with school personnel. In fact, Xavier described having adversarial relationships with all of his teachers from very early on, and he appeared to grow angry when recalling these memories, becoming

loud, tense, and tapping his foot incessantly. He believes that his negative feelings towards teachers began as a result of corporal punishment being used in the schools at that time:

See back then, I went to [a Catholic school], and if you messed up, they take you in the book room, and they had this paddle with holes in it, and it would be in water, and you'd have to bend over, and they'd tear your butt up... I felt it wasn't nobody supposed to put their hands on me except my mom and my dad... And here's a total stranger...

Although Xavier has admitted that he dealt with severe anger issues throughout his adolescence, it is entirely possible that he could have developed more positive relationships with his teachers had his early experiences with teachers been better, and had his reputation for violent behavior not preceded him. It is reasonable to think that he could have enjoyed a higher level of school engagement. While Victor and Wesley embraced the opportunity to connect with school staff, Xavier's intense desire to rebel against authority prevented such positive relationships from developing.

**Relationships with peers:** "When I got to junior high school I started hanging around with the wrong people and... that led to a path of destruction for quite a long time." While relationships with school staff are indeed an important indicator of school engagement, so too are peer relationships. Wesley spoke of having a close peer group in school, and admitted that some of them got into



trouble from time to time, but typically just for minor offenses, such as “cutting up [and] being a clown in class.”

Unlike Wesley, Victor never established a strong peer group during his high school years. In fact, he went from having a close-knit group of friends in his primarily Black junior high school, to only having one friend at his predominantly White high school. In another candid moment, Victor spoke with a hint of sadness:

There wasn't no friend group at [my high school]... See it was weird. See, because you got a handful of minorities, coming from one [housing] project, and then you got another handful coming from [another] project area, and we're all getting on different buses to get to school. So when we got to school, that crowd that came from River Bluff [housing project], when they got in that building, that's who they hung with. River Bluff hung with River Bluff. And the project area that I stayed in, I was the only one going to [that school], so I had to go sit on the bus stop and make me [some] friends. But I only hung around one person in school. Maybe one or two people, you know?

Victor's level of school engagement decreased dramatically during his high school years. Despite being a star athlete in junior high, Victor even refrained from participating on any of his school's sports teams:

I played basketball in my 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade year. We won those championships 2 years in a row. [When I got to high school] I was

the kind of student that... I was just a student. I didn't get involved with any activities. I was the type of student that I didn't participate in [sports] because [my high school] wasn't a winning school in sports. Nothing. I didn't play nothing! [The school] just couldn't win in nothing, and I felt that, if I would have helped them, we still wouldn't have went nowhere. So, I just wasn't a sports player [in high school].

Xavier did not speak of having any positive relationships with other male students, but he did mention having some connections with female students:

I was surrounded by women. And I had a lot of problems behind that because a lot of the women liked me, and I never really associated with none of the guys, unless it was gambling or something like that, you know?

With that said, Xavier did have close friendships outside of school. As he became more intrigued by crime, he began to surround himself with known criminals in his neighborhood:

I was kinda drawn to the streets. It was like, you know how you see on tv, 'it's my destiny!' You know? And I looked at it like, 'this is my destiny.' To be out here doin' the things that [the criminals are] doin'."

Just like Wesley's peer group allowed him to become more engaged in school, Xavier's peer group enabled him to delve deeper into a life of crime.

The concept of social acceptance also surfaced in some of the interviews. Victor took great pride in being voted Homecoming King twice, suggesting that he might have had more positive peer relationships in high school than he reported. Conversely, Xavier spoke of school engagement as being counterproductive to gaining social acceptance. In reference to peers who lived on the opposite side of the highway divide, he recalled, "We used to call that the square side of [the city]. You know, they went to school, they didn't come out, they didn't go to parties. They didn't do nothing."

**Parental involvement in education:** "My daddy said that as long as I can count my money, I be fine." Wesley did not speak of his parents, family, or any other outside influences. However, both Victor and Xavier talked about their home lives. Victor, in speaking of his favorite school subject, fondly made reference to his father's influence:

Math was my favorite subject. I love numbers... It comes from my past... money was around me all the time. So I was always interested in counting it. It wasn't mines, it was my dad's but I was like, 'dad can I count it?' And he was like 'yeah, count it.' And he would give me the whole thing, and I would count it.

Given the fact that Victor expressed some apprehension about sharing this information, and spoke about how this particular topic was "a part of [his] past," I believe that he was alluding to his father's involvement in criminal activity.

Unlike Victor, Xavier struggled in math, but he had a similar exchange with his father:

I remember that's why I'm no good in math now. I was telling my dad, and I guess, from being so far back [growing up in the rural South in the 1940's], I told him, 'Dad, all this counting and stuff...' and he was like, 'well as long as you know how to count your money, you be alright.' So, I was like 'cool.' And I even told the teacher that. And she said, 'well you need to learn,' and I told her 'my daddy said that as long as I can count my money I be fine.'

While some might look at both of these exchanges and accuse these parents of being uninvolved and having low expectations for their children, I would argue that they were simply drawing upon their own experiences. If neither of these fathers had ever used mathematics in their adult lives beyond managing their finances, then it might be difficult for them to recognize or communicate its importance beyond that particular function. Additionally, there is evidence in Xavier's case that his parents were invested in his academic success, making the decision to send him to live with relatives in another state in the hopes of helping him to turn his life around.

### **Race**

Though I did ask one specific question about race in each of the interviews, this was a topic that came up repeatedly throughout all of the conversations. Although Wesley only made reference to race one time in his interview, Victor and Xavier mentioned it multiple times. This difference could be explained by the fact that the number of racial incidents might have depended

on the school itself. Wesley is also the youngest of the participants, and race might have been a subtler issue given shifts in demographics and ideology over time. Although the context for the ways in which people experience racism has become more subtle in recent years, I suspect that the effects will be no less harmful.

Both Victor and Xavier found ways to integrate race into the conversation – even when we were talking about issues that some might say had little or nothing to do with race. The overarching message that I took away from these exchanges was that when your race is at the forefront of your identity (as it often is due to the racial identity development of African Americans) you become more in tune with the racial undercurrents that exist in the most basic and seemingly innocuous of interactions.

### **Race as a source of conflict**

“We used to go in the school and be called niggers, and we had to fight. We had to fight the White people just to let them know that that’s not what we are.”

Although Victor and Xavier were the two participants who made frequent references to race, all three participants admitted to getting into fights where race was a factor. Wesley reported that the only time he got into trouble at school was during a fight that he felt was racially motivated. This was the only time that Wesley exhibited a strong emotional response during the interview. His body tensed, and with his eyes downcast, he said, “A White guy threatened a Black

pregnant girl, and a fight took place. That's what led me to get kicked out of [school]."

While Wesley felt strongly that there were racial undercurrents at play in the incident he was involved in, Victor and Xavier encountered more blatant racism, facing frequent discrimination and racial slurs. Some of the most extreme examples of racism occurred when the participants were attending schools that were predominantly White. Victor recalled with anger:

At that point [I was attending] a White school. Umm...somewhat to me, [it] was somewhat of a uh... uh... racist school. Because we used to go in the school and be called niggers, and we had to fight. We had to fight the White people just to let them know that that's not what we are. You know what I'm saying? And you will show us some respect.

Similarly, Xavier spoke of making the journey home from school, which sometimes proved to be dangerous:

I remember when Daddy had an apartment in [a suburban area], if you missed the bus, you had to walk, and I remember walking home with two pistols in my pocket, hands in my pocket, and then I heard, 'nigger where you goin'? Nigger where you goin'?' And I just kept walkin', and I said to myself, 'you just don't cross this street, and we won't have no problems. Cross this street? Oh, you gon' get it.'"

Despite the fact that each of the participants were leading separate lives, and having their individual experiences with racism, they all had some appreciation for the macro-level implications of racism and recognized the broader social context for these incidents. In some cases the participants expressed regret for turning to violence in these situations, but felt like they had no other alternative. Victor commented, “It’s a shame that it had to come to [violence], but it had to come to that. You know, we had to umm... think about Dr. Martin Luther King, and we had to umm... make it so that his statement could become true.”

### **The significance of African American school personnel**

“We had allies. We had those Black teachers who stood up.” As the participants experienced racial bias and discrimination from Whites, they also found refuge in African American students, teachers, and staff. They all spoke fondly of being around people of their own race. The impact of seeing African American teachers and administrators was also quite positive, serving as yet another indicator of school engagement. As Victor made the transition from a predominately African American junior high, to a predominantly White high school, he discussed the importance of seeing himself reflected in the school staff:

My ninth grade year I had a job in the office... and don’t get me wrong, in the office as well, some of those administrators and the directors were Black... Yeah, and come to think of it, they were Black women. There were Black women, working at [the school]

in the office, along with the White folks... and that made it feel better too.

### **Perceptions of White people**

In addition to racial bias and discrimination being a frequent conversation, the discussion of “White folks” was also a recurring theme amongst the participants. Despite some of the negative feelings that were expressed towards Whites, the relationships were not always adversarial. Victor commented on developing strong relationships with White peers. “Some of those White folks, when they got to know me, we started to belong. You know, we knew each other, and then... Then it was good.”

Xavier even defined some of his personal success by comparing his material possessions and financial prowess to being on the level of Whites. “We could walk into the Schwinn bicycle store, and pay for a brand new Stingray at [the age of] 14 – you know, that was a big deal! Because back then, the only people that rode Schwinns was White kids. So when you could walk in, and be like, yeah, I want that cherry red Stingray, you know, that was a big deal. And then to ride through the neighborhood with it, that was an even bigger deal!”

Conversely, Xavier also reflected on the negative impact that White teachers can have on African American students, suggesting that deficit-thinking, fear and indifference can hinder educators:

Nowadays, it’s like, [teachers] are taking a little more interest, but the thing of it is, sometimes they’re pushing the kids off, saying well, he has a problem, let’s give him some Ritalin. Or give him



this, now you've messed the kid's mind messed up. Where all it is, he might just need somebody to talk to. To understand where he's at right now, you know? To understand that he's angry, and get down to the bottom of the anger, instead of just giving him some pill, you know? As long as he's calm, [the teacher is] cool.

With the exception of his racially motivated fight with a White male, Wesley refrained from commenting on "White folks" or even race in general. When he was asked if race was ever a factor in school, he said, "no" and did not elaborate.

### **Violence**

The theme of violence was present in each of the participants' interviews in varying degrees. While all three participants admitted to fighting in school, Xavier's violent acts were far more frequent and brutal. For the purposes of this study, I considered violent incidents to be any occurrence of striking another person, threatening to inflict harm, or the use or possession of a weapon or firearm.

#### **Violence as a defense mechanism**

"If it came to me, then I would defend myself, but I wasn't a troublemaker." Both Wesley and Victor admitted to fighting in school, but they were adamant about their decisions to engage in violence being completely justified. They fought only because they were attempting to defend themselves, and others. As described earlier, Victor fought to defend himself against relentless harassment and discrimination. Wesley only fought once in school, and it was to

protect a pregnant girl who had been threatened by a male student. Reflecting on his involvement, Wesley stated emphatically, “I felt that it was fair because you don’t threaten a pregnant lady. And I felt like it was racially motivated.”

Although this was Wesley’s only school fight, it was an extremely violent encounter by his own account. Leaning back in his seat, and looking downward, he said, “[My opponent] caught the worst end of the fight... He was beat up pretty bad.” As a result, Wesley was expelled from his high school, and the other participant in the fight pressed charges, introducing Wesley into the criminal justice system.

At the time, Xavier also felt that his violent behavior was justified, though he now recognizes that he had severe anger issues throughout adolescence that carried on into adulthood. For Xavier, any level of perceived disrespect could warrant a brutal beating. He coolly recalled:

I was telling a joke in class, and the teacher, it was a white lady, smacked me, and I hit her upside the head with a chair... Yeah, so I got put outta [that school]. I hit the principal upside the head with a trashcan at [another school] – got put outta there. Started a riot at [a third school], I got put outta there. Because I was at the point where, you know, doing the things that I was doing, I felt like I was grown. And, I wasn’t to be disrespected. So if you talked to me the wrong way, that’s how I was going to treat you.

As an adolescent, Xavier assaulted teachers, administrators, and other students.

As an adult, the violence continued, resulting in stints in military, state and federal correctional facilities.

Wesley and Victor attempted to distance themselves from their violent acts. Wesley talked about his fight, but refrained from using “I” statements in his account. He used phrases like “a fight took place” and “he was beat up pretty bad,” creating some separation from the incident. Victor also expressed regret for his actions, admitting that he hated to have to resort to violence. In contrast, Xavier took full ownership of his violent past, describing his assaults in great detail. I got the feeling that Wesley and Victor both had some shame as a result of their past behavior, but Xavier seemed to fully embrace that part of his life – often bragging and boasting about some of his most violent acts. While undoubtedly disturbing, I suspect that are a number of complex factors at play here that go far beyond the scope of this paper.

### **Violence as a mechanism for revenge**

“I actually told myself back then, anybody who has ever done something to me, it’s going to be payback now. And...that’s when I got real vicious.” Upon hearing Xavier’s story, some might surmise that his attacks against others were unprovoked, while Victor and Wesley only fought in defense of self and others. This however, would seem to be a matter of perception, as Xavier felt that all of his violence was warranted. Violence was a part of Xavier’s life from very early on, as he described being punished by beatings delivered by teachers and family members. Although he was unable to defend himself as a small child, as he started

to grow into a young man, revenge became a strong motivator. Xavier's eyes darkened and he confessed, "I actually told myself back then, anybody who has ever done something to me, it's going to be payback now. And...that's when I got real vicious."

It seems that while all of the participants felt justified in committing acts of violence, Victor and Wesley were able to limit their violence to isolated events where they felt that a threat was imminent. I would argue that Xavier felt the same way, however, he possessed a much lower threshold for deciding to employ violent means for resolving his issues as a result of a higher level of perceived victimization as a child. Xavier began to rely on violence as his primary method for achieving power, respect, and validation, asserting, "You're either gonna fear me, or you're gonna respect me. It's gonna be one or the other."

### **Overview of the Study**

This study examines the intersections of race, academic achievement, and criminal incarceration via an analysis of the K-12 experiences of African American criminal offenders. Specifically, the study seeks to determine if and how the K-12 experiences of African American criminal offenders contribute to the decision to engage in criminal behavior. The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the racial disparities that persist in academic achievement and criminal incarceration, hopefully contributing to the ongoing development of strategies for effectively engaging African American males in the classroom.

There were three participants in this study, all adult African American males with varying levels of school success who have been criminally

incarcerated. Each participant was interviewed about his school experiences. The interview data was analyzed and coded, and three primary themes emerged: school engagement, race, and violence.

### **Summary of Findings**

Based on the findings outlined above, it is clear that violence, race, and school engagement all played a major role in the participants' K-12 experiences. However, the findings related to school engagement provide the most insight into how these three men came to be involved with the criminal justice system in varying degrees.

There appear to be four primary barriers to obtaining high levels of school engagement:

1. A strong dislike of school as an institution
2. Boredom due to a lack of academic rigor or interest
3. Low expectations of teachers and parents
4. The absence of positive relationships associated with the school experience

Upon analyzing the data, each participant discussed at least two of the aforementioned barriers. When all four of these barriers are present, it seemingly results in the lowest levels of school engagement. While Wesley experienced the highest level of school engagement overall, he is also the participant who went the farthest in his pursuit of post-secondary education, and spent the least amount of time in prison. Conversely, Xavier experienced the lowest level of school engagement, resulting in his dismissal from college, and leading to multiple

prison stints. While more work will need to be done to further explore the relationship between school engagement, academic achievement and criminal incarceration, these findings are consistent with the notion that low levels of school engagement are related to lower levels of academic achievement and higher rates of criminal involvement.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions and Recommendations

When considering the totality of the findings, it is clear that school engagement may be one of the strongest predictors of academic failure and criminal behavior amongst African American males. Although race and violence were also primary themes, they operate in conjunction with school engagement. Racial tensions and cultural differences seem to serve as yet another barrier to school engagement, while acts of violence seem to occur in response or reaction to school disengagement. If we can find ways to engage African American males in ways that are culturally appropriate and affirming, then some of the racial tensions and acts of violence may become less prevalent in our schools. Based on the findings of this study, I am providing five recommendations to improve the outcomes of African American males in the public education system, and in turn decrease their involvement in the criminal justice system.

**Eliminate barriers to school engagement.** Four key barriers to school engagement were identified in this study: dislike of school, boredom, low expectations, and lack of positive relationships within the school environment. All of the participants indicated a strong desire to learn, but found numerous flaws with school as an institution. If we can find ways to improve students' negative perceptions of school, offer more challenging and intellectually stimulating coursework, raise expectations in regards to the quality of student work, and establish more positive personal relationships with students, levels of school engagement will undoubtedly increase.

**Find new ways to engage African American males in the classroom.**

The participants in this study described school as boring – either because the material was not challenging enough, the subject matter was not of interest, or the teaching strategies were not effective. Although culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy are frequently cited as effective strategies for engaging students of color, these techniques continue to be underutilized in many classrooms. This practice should become an integral component of teacher education programs in the United States.

**Emphasize high expectations.** All three of the participants capitalized on their teachers' low expectations, and admitted to doing just enough work to get by. However, all of the participants were able recall positive relationships with teachers, with the common thread being that those teachers held them accountable for their actions, and demanded superior work. If more of the teachers had held the participants to a higher standard, it is entirely plausible that these three men might have gone on to earn college degrees rather than receiving the bulk of their education in the prison library.

**Provide opportunities for career exploration.** Due to the absence of positive role models who had benefitted from doing well in school, the participants had no tangible proof that an education would indeed result in a successful career or financial stability. If they had been given the opportunity to explore different career options, take courses to support the development of the skills necessary for success in those fields, and connect with professionals in the



community, they might have felt like they had other viable options for supporting themselves.

**Establish key partnerships in order to facilitate buy-in.** The relationship between the school, the family, and the community is absolutely critical to student success. Students need to be able to identify the benefits of school, and those benefits need to outweigh the appeal of the streets and fast money. If students are receiving consistent messages about the value of education in multiple areas of their lives and being held accountable for performing below their capabilities by multiple parties, the desire to learn will transform into a desire to achieve.

### **Research Limitations**

Although the findings of the study undoubtedly provide some insight into the relationship between academic achievement, race, and criminal incarceration, there are several limitations associated with this project. First, only three people participated in this study. While their stories are certainly rich and informative, it is impossible to draw any generalizations or definitive conclusions from such a small sample size.

Second, the participants' ages also serve as a limiting factor. Given the fact that all of the men were over the age of thirty, they were forced to reflect on experiences that happened many years ago. In future studies, it would be pertinent to recruit participants who are teenagers or young adults so that their school experiences are still relatively fresh in their memories.

Third, as is often the case when relying solely on interview data, the validity of the findings hinges on the participants' willingness to be honest and authentic. There were several times during the interview process that I questioned the participants' sincerity, and doubted some of their claims. Without utilizing other methodologies, there was no way to substantiate these doubts.

Lastly, the participants in this study did not report experiencing high levels of school discipline, which prohibited the exploration of school discipline as a correlate of low academic achievement or high rates of incarceration. In future studies, I would consider adding high levels of school discipline to the selection criteria when recruiting participants.

## Chapter 6

### Self-Reflection

I found this project to be incredibly challenging. In fact, I would say that it has been the most difficult project that I have ever encountered as a student. I chose this topic in the hopes that I could continue the work I began as undergraduate at the University of Minnesota, studying the intersections of race, academic achievement and criminal incarceration. While my original study was a quantitative analysis of the correlation between the White-Black academic achievement gap and rates of incarceration across the United States, I was both excited and intrigued by the idea of approaching this topic from a qualitative standpoint. Little did I know that I would end up engaging in a personal struggle that ultimately led to this project becoming a three-year journey.

The gaps that exist between White and Black people in the United States have been a continuous driving force in my own educational and career pursuits. I have been studying racial disparities in crime and education for over a decade, and I have chosen jobs in education and social service where I could actively engage in helping to eliminate these gaps. Initially, I think my passion stemmed from having an intense desire to see both justice and equality realized. Over time, I think I've remained dedicated out of a moral obligation to help other African Americans to find success in a system that has never made that an easy path to walk.

I have an education and a good job. I own my home and drive a new car. I live a very comfortable life. Despite having to do some hard work along the way,

it is not lost on me that I was born into privilege. As an African American woman, I certainly don't know the advantages of White Privilege, but family and economic stability has always been a part of my life. I am both lucky and blessed, and it sickens me to know that my circumstances are the exception, as opposed to the rule.

Over the last several years, I've worked tirelessly alongside colleagues (some deeply committed, and others not so much) only to see the gaps continue to widen and persist. The saddest realization that I have had to come to terms with is that racial biases and deficit-thinking are alive and well within the very agencies, programs, and organizations that have been established to aid in the elimination of these disparities. In other words, as a practitioner, I continue to experience and bare witness to both subtle and blatant racism and discrimination from my colleagues in the education sector. I hear teachers, administrators, and other education professionals speak negatively about students and families of color on a regular basis. I no longer wonder why these gaps persist. I now wonder why and how these gaps will ever close if these are the folks who are supposed to bring about positive change.

I used to talk about racial injustices with such fervor. I wanted to be an agent of social change. I wanted Black people to finally experience the levels of achievement and success that have proven so elusive. I wanted to fight for justice. And fight I have. However, I never expected my biggest battles to be against my very own colleagues. The lack of cultural competency amongst education

professionals is both saddening and astounding, and I believe that it is the single biggest barrier to progress.

Quite frankly, I am tired. I am jaded. I am burned out. I started this project with the best of intentions, but its completion has become a chore and an emotional burden. I am literally sick of talking about race. We have countless conversations, and nothing changes. My problem is not that I no longer care. On the contrary, I care too much. However, I don't have the patience or energy to allow this to be my mission – at least not right now. I need a break. Completing this project will allow me some closure.

Throughout this process, I've struggled to balance a desire to maintain authenticity and an unwillingness to contribute to the further exploitation of the African American male. I wanted to share these men's stories. I wanted to present the brutally honest truth. I wanted to preserve the rawness of their accounts. However, I did not want to reinforce the pervasive negative stereotypes that persist about African American males – unflattering caricatures, depicted as violent, lazy, and perpetual victims.

It took me a very long time to find a way to present this information in a way that is honest, thoughtful, and respectful without stripping these stories of their authenticity. As an African American woman, it was of the utmost importance that I was contributing to the conversation about eliminating racial disparities, as opposed to encouraging more bias or deficit-thinking in regards to African American boys in the classroom. I realize that individual readers will interpret this study through their own unique lenses, and my only hope is that you

will appreciate the extreme complexities associated with this topic, and think critically about the host of contributing factors that continue to make these racial disparities an unfortunate reality.

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