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Challenges of Reentering Society for Incarcerated African-American Men

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Abstract

African-American men are at the greatest risk for incarceration. Upon their release from prison, they face tremendous challenges to successful reentry, which explains in part their high recidivism rate. In the current paper, we review the existing literature on the challenges faced by African-American ex-offenders as they strive for successful reentry into society, namely challenges to secure employment and living arrangements, social support assets and challenges, as well as broader community-level challenges of reentry. Policy solutions are then identified to offset these obstacles. Lastly, the limitations of existing literature and future research directions are addressed.

Challenges of Reentering Society for Incarcerated African-American Men

In 1973, slightly more than 200,000 people were in prison; by 2003, 1.4 million individuals were in prison in America (Travis, 2005). The majority of the prison inmate population is comprised of Hispanic and African-American men, with an increase of Hispanic and African-American women, indicating that in these communities of color, an entire generation is being lost to the prison system (Marbley & Ferguson, 2005). The lifetime likelihood of incarceration in the United States during 2001 for African-American men was 32.3% or 1 in 3 compared to Whites and Hispanics. An African-American man's chances of incarceration are 6.5 times greater than the chances of a European-American man (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007). An overwhelming 47% of reentering prisoners are African-American. Between 1980 and 2000, three times as many African-American men were added to the

prison system than to higher education (Justice Policy Institute, 2002). The most disproportionately incarcerated remain African-American men (Cooke, 2005), particularly with little education (Travis & Visher, 2005). All of these statistics are overwhelming and portray the need for a closer look at what can be done to help those at risk. Most of the above statistics display trends that force African-American men back into prison but one of the biggest challenges they face once they are released is finding employment.

Most people think that once criminals are off of the streets, they are out of mind as well. However, in reality most "offenders" reenter society at some point. The process of transitioning from prison back to the community has been termed prisoner reentry (Shivy, Wu, Moon, Mann, Holland, & Eacho, 2007). These scholars further note that offenders are released back into the community with or without supervision. Conditional release, which is termed community supervision, is a form of supervision that is ordered by a court and usually managed by a probation or parole officer. Nearly half of all ex-offenders are African American.

Upon release from prison, ex-offenders embark upon a tumultuous transition of reentry into society. Not only do most have to worry about finding employment and shelter, but they are reconnecting with their family and support system (Travis, 2005). Although there are many programs and opportunities for ex-offenders to improve their lives after prison and minimize the chances of going back, the challenges often outweigh the support systems resulting in a high recidivism (an arrest for a new crime,

Travis & Visher, 2005) rates. Recidivism signifies taking a giant step backward for released inmates. The majority of inmates will return to prison 3 to 5 years from their release with the highest increase of recidivism in the 1st year (Marbley & Ferguson, 2005). In a study done by Wehrman (2010), race strongly predicts recidivism. Based on the Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report on Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994 (2002), African Americans were 72.9% more likely to be rearrested and 51.1% more likely to be reconvicted than European Americans. Although the specific crimes were not stated, Jones (1997) found that violence from African-American men is about attempts to achieve manhood. Given this reality, the purpose of this paper is to review the challenges faced by ex-offenders, specifically African-American adult men, as they strive for successful reentry into society. Specifically, we will begin by discussing challenges to secure employment and living arrangements followed by a discussion of their social support assets and challenges. Thereafter, broader community-level challenges of reentry are discussed. After identifying possible policy solutions to offset these challenges, we conclude with a delineation of the limitations of existing literature and future research directions.

For the purpose of this literature review, the terms prisoners, inmates, and ex-offenders will refer to African-American men.

Employment

Finding permanent employment is perhaps the most common obstacle for many ex-offenders (Finn, 1999). Employment is so important to acquire after being released because finding a job is a way of securing income for oneself and others as well as establishing a positive role in the community and keeping a distance from negative influences and opportunities or illegal behavior (Travis, 2005). Two of the biggest challenges ex-prisoners face while trying to obtain steady

employment is the stigma of criminal conviction and the possible erosion of job skills and social ties to those who could provide employment opportunities (Travis & Visher, 2005). Some offenders are not functional when they get out of prison and may be lacking the experience to hold at least a part-time job. Many lack occupational skills, have little or no experience seeking employment, and confront employers who are uneasy about hiring individuals with criminal records (Finn, 1999). Some ex-offenders may shy away from the work force and find income in other ways. Finn (1999) states that it is important for ex-offenders to buy into the mainstream philosophy of holding an honest job and preferring the "straight life" to a life of crime. Some of the offenders who may not hold a mainstream job may be lacking an employment history. Individuals with a history of joblessness are at high risk for criminal involvement and locating stable, high-quality work can provide an important pathway out of crime (Travis & Visher, 2005). A job could replace some of the social structure in an ex-offender's life as well. Instead of being surrounded with criminally involved friends, co-workers can make up a new social structure. Employment prospects for ex-prisoners are further complicated by the fact that many of them have already developed behavior patterns that make holding a job difficult (Travis & Visher, 2005).

A study done by Uggen (2000) found that work programs decrease recidivism. Uggen's study also found that work appeared to be a turning point in the life course of criminal offenders over 26 years old. As long as offenders were provided some type of marginal employment opportunity, they were found less likely to reoffend than were those who were not provided those opportunities. There are many prison-based programs that prepare inmates and parolees for employment and searching for a job by providing intensive educational and life skills services, social support, and

postemployment follow-up, in addition to traditional job preparation and placement assistance (Finn, 1999). Some prisons offer opportunities for inmates to work in a prison industry such as making license plates, linens for prison beds, or furniture for state agencies (Travis, 2005). In Finn's (1999) article about job placement for offenders, he cites four programs that assist with training and skills to help offenders prepare for employment once they are released. Chicago's Safer Foundation offers basic educational and life skills classes and job placement assistance. New York City's Center for Employment Opportunities assigns ex-offenders to day-labor work crews soon after they have been released to capitalize on the discipline they have acquired in prison. Texas's Project RIO devoted themselves to job placement for ex-offenders. Washington State's Corrections Clearinghouse offers several prerelease employment-related courses. All of these four programs cited in Finn's article go into detail about how they help fight recidivism by offering job assistance to ex-offenders. The exclusion of people of color in the job market is a significant, contributing factor in the number of men and women being incarcerated and re-incarcerated. Data show a major gap in the absence of employment opportunities for young African Americans compared to their European-American counterparts (Marbley & Ferguson, 2005).

Living Arrangements

Because of the difficulty finding ongoing work, many African-American ex-offenders experience ongoing homelessness that required them to live with relatives, in shelters, or on the streets (Cooke, 2005). On top of finding employment, finding a place to live is another thing on an offender's to-do list once they are released from prison. In a study done by Cooke (2005) about African-American men returning to their families and communities, most men described feeling uncertain about the setting or whether they would remain welcomed in their

new living situation. One other participant in Cooke's study described an ongoing feeling of insecurity of place and home.

Once out of prison, offenders are most likely going to return to communities that are severely impoverished. Wehrman (2010) describes these communities as marked by high rates of poverty, unemployment, low educational achievement, low homeownership, and high rates of single-parent households. Finding shelter can be difficult if an offender does not know where to stay and a history of incarceration can limit one's ability to secure long-term housing (Cooke, 2005). Family support can ease this transition if the family of the incarcerated opens up their doors and hearts to help. Family ties can help an ex-offender cope more easily with re-entering the community.

Most prisoners do not find a new community to live in when they are released from prison (Travis, 2005); instead, they typically move back into where they were living prior to their incarceration. Because the people who go to prison are overwhelmingly poor and disproportionately persons of color; they are drawn from and return to characteristically poor, ethnic neighborhoods (Travis & Visher, 2005). The conditions of disadvantaged neighborhoods pose unique barriers to African Americans because of the hyper-segregated conditions of the modern inner-city (Wehrman, 2010). There are not many options for ex-offenders besides living with family, friends and relatives, or going to a homeless shelter when they are thinking about shelter. These living situations are often temporary, with former prisoners moving back and forth between family and friends (Travis, 2005).

There is a huge overlap of those who are homeless and those who have been involved in the criminal justice system. According to Travis (2005), sometimes some correctional agencies provide housing in the community as a buffer between prison life and life in the free world. These "halfway houses" offer a structured and

regulated environment while ex-offenders adjust to life in the community. For instance, Vasoli and Fahey (1970) tracked 77 new ex-offenders who lived in such housing, which provided vocational training, as they sought employment. The vocational training they received was in the form of general work routines rather than job skills. They also learned about matters such as payroll deductions, union membership, and the conditions of parole. They study noted a 100% success rate in securing employment. Halfway houses seem like they help make the transition from prison to community easier, but according to a public opinion poll, 77% of people approve of the concept of halfway houses, but 50% did not want one in their neighborhood (Travis, 2005). Although they are logical, halfway houses are not implemented in many states due in part to this public resistance.

Friends, Family and Social Support

Imprisonment not only affects the one being imprisoned, but it affects the family as well. The family system is one of the two major social structures a person is involved in, the second being friends. Although losing any family member to the prison system can be psychologically and emotionally unsettling, we will focus on losing a parent to the system. Because many prisons are located in rural settings, families of individuals who are incarcerated must cope with the challenge of maintaining a relationship with their family member who is incarcerated and geographically harder to visit (Cooke, 2002). Moreover, some men deceive their families about their actual location while in prison or discourage their family to come visit (Cooke, 2005). Some discontinued family connections while in prison to protect their families from embarrassment. There is a tendency for families to decompose and reconstitute with surrogate parents in response to parental departures and returns to and from prison (Travis, 2005). When a parent is in jail, usually it is the father, older children

may have to assume unexpected responsibilities such as caring for younger children and possibly participating in the labor force to earn income for the family (Foster & Hagan, 2009). Overall, about half of African-American fathers expect to live with their families and children after leaving prison (Foster & Hagan, 2009). This contradicts harsh stereotypes that confront African-American fathers who are sent to prison about leaving their families behind. Most prisoners want to return to their families when they are released not only for shelter, but as a support system as well. According to Travis (2005), half of surveyed inmates said that familial support would be an important factor in keeping them out of prison. Considerable evidence by Foster and Hagan (2009) indicates that rejoining families reduces recidivism among returning prisoners. They also found that it is highly likely that a family does not wish for their family member to return to prison after they are released, especially if they have been away for a long time. Rejoining a family after being in prison for a certain amount of time can give rise to empowerment in staying away from the behaviors and circle of friends they were surrounding themselves with before they were incarcerated. Their study further showed that family support can reduce recidivism by encouraging new behaviors and by making sure a family member does not fall back into the same patterns that led to their incarceration. Family support has the potential to influence the returning prisoner in a positive way as well as a negative one. The incarcerated family member, especially when it is a man, can impact huge consequences on his family when he is away as well. When a man is removed from the family system, family members are at greater risk of poverty, school failure, and behavioral, physical, and emotional problems (Cooke, 2002). According to Travis (2005), wages or salaries were the primary sources of income among incarcerated fathers before imprisonment. If he is incarcerated, there is a

large amount of stress on the rest of the family to make ends meet.

Friends are another factor in helping an ex-offender reenter the community. As summarized by Maruna (2001), the criminal justice literature has documented the strong effects of social networks in the desistance from crime and in recidivism. Like family, friends have the potential to help ex-prisoners to get back into the flow of life outside of prison. Whether an offender makes new friends or not, the behaviors and activities the group takes part in will shed light on the chances of recidivism. The best way to ensure an ex-offender stays away from the prison system is to stay away from the people and behaviors they were around before prison. Friends who are not involved in illegal activity and who have families and jobs are the best bet for people out of prison. They can be an example for how life can be when crime is not present.

Some peers provide negative influences, while others provide positive influences. A returning prisoner should recognize the peer group that they may be returning to and think about if those people are the ones they should be surrounding themselves with. For example, forming new, positive peer groups such as mentors from a church or support networks of ex-offenders (Travis, 2005) can make reintegration easier and more successful. Thus, the role of families and friends on ex-offenders' successful reentry into society is clearly complex, but these close relationships are important socializing influences for ex-offenders.

Risk of Going Back and Problems Faced

Although friends can have a huge impact on someone, when one returns from prison they may not be welcomed with open arms. Sometimes prisoners who return to their community face the stigma of "offender," and as a result have trouble reintegrating in the community. As a result, Travis (2005) describes the sometimes necessary withdraw of an ex-

offender from his community. Withdrawal from the community may be one of few options for someone who is shunned. In this case, the prisoner is likely to encounter strained relationships with friends who are cautious, suspicious, and fearful (Travis, 2005). Big changes happen for those who reenter the world after prison. An identity transformation can occur which has the potential to bring rise to a new social network. They socialize with people who are like them and reconstruct their social relations to incorporate those who have similar experiences (Travis, 2005). There are many problems that ex-offenders face when they are released from prison, but having a tight social support network that is full of family and friends will surely make the transition much smoother.

Offenders face so many risks and problems that could lead them back to jail shortly after they are released. Not surprisingly then, the most recidivism occurs during the year after release for an inmate (Finn, 1999). This could stem from the drastic change from environment to environment in a short period of time. If an offender jumps back into behaviors exhibited prior to incarceration and gets tripped up with something like an arrest, this can have major implications. The first arrest is especially salient to released offenders, often representing a parole violation with serious consequences (Uggen, 2000). Many offenders try to build their skills and occupy themselves with employment once they are released. This provides an opportunity for a better life by having experiences and having an income. However, an experimental study done by Uggen (2000) shows that having a job available may provide a temporary safety net that reduces recidivism, but work opportunity will not have lasting effects after the program ends. This is a risk many offenders have to face and could lead them back into trouble or even back into jail. Freudenberg, Daniels, Crum, Perkins, and Richie (2005) investigated the experiences of ex-offenders in the year after their release in

relation to the social and health consequences that they encountered. Young men identified unemployment, education, inadequate income, substance abuse, and housing as the primary problems they expected to face after release (Freudenberg et al., 2005). The men's anticipated problems (e.g., employment and housing) could become even more of a problem when incarceration deteriorates loss of skills associated with autonomy and independent living (Travis, 2005). If they cannot work, they have no source of income. Finding an appropriate source of income is important because many offenders reenter society in debt from owing court or supervision related costs or facing immediate financial obligations such as restitution or child support (Shivy et al., 2007). People of color are currently disproportionately incarcerated which adds to the risk of going back to prison once they reenter society (Cooke, 2005). The combination of the risk associated with being African American and the innumerable problems awaiting an ex-offender when they get out of prison is a tough barrier to penetrate.

Possible Policy Solutions

Despite the countless problems and risks an African-American man faces when he is released from prison, there is help. The programs in Finn's (1999) article as previously stated are set up to help offenders reentering society. In order for ex-offenders to move forward, they need to be treated as regular human beings. There is a clear stigma attached to being incarcerated and most people cannot look past that stigma to see the real people trying to make something better out of their life. One way to help people move past the "criminal" title is to grant an expunged record. An expunged record grants a clean slate for ex-offenders; in other words, there is no documentation that a crime was committed or that the offender was convicted (Love, 2003). According to Marbley and Ferguson (2005), an expunged record provides the reformed inmate

with advantages such as access to government jobs and educational financial assistance. With a clear record and full reinstatement, the message is clear to prisoners that their debt to society has been paid (Marbley & Ferguson, 2005).

Travis (2005) discusses the challenges that ex-offenders face when reentering society. He states that the community can take an active role in the ex-offenders' life. Specifically, community groups could partner with local police and neighborhood organizations to create a safety plan for all prisoners returning to live among them in order to minimize the recidivism risks and protect potential victims. This could have a positive effect on the reentering prisoners and give them an incentive to stay on the right path because there would be a constant watch over them, encouraging them and giving them support. He also adds that the reentry process recognizes the importance of successful integration, and therefore, focuses on success as opposed to failure. Milestones should be recognized and commemorated. Taking note of accomplishments not only serves to increase ex-prisoners' self-esteem, but they serve to reestablish such persons within the community as well. Lastly, Travis (2005) contends that it is important to remember that one of the goals of reentry should be to strengthen the ex-prisoners' capacity to succeed without support. Another way that successful reentry can be promoted is by providing mentors to guide and help the ex-offenders with this reentry transition. Pairing a recently-released offender with someone who has had a similar if not the same experience (and been successful in reintegration) may provide a sense of acceptance and offer the returning offender a place to turn while adjusting to society. George, Hosford, and Moss (1978) designed a study to determine the effectiveness of a prepared training program where inmates served as peer counselors for other inmates. The training was designed to help these individuals learn the steps involved in helping other inmates

effectively use problem-solving methods in solving their personal problems. The training was found to be effective in improving skills and knowledge and for extending needed services to a large population.

Limitations and Future Directions

This literature review served to examine the reintegration of African-American men into their communities once they are released from incarceration. The problems they face upon release have the odds stacked against them and are some organizations' inspiration for opening. Many African-American men are released each day. However this review focused on the middle-aged men. Adolescents, early adults, and older men were not looked at in this study and could limit the understanding in African-American male release. This could also bring about false stereotypes by assuming that every single African-American man faces the same exact problems upon release no matter the age. Given the dearth of background about family members of ex-offenders, future research could benefit from investigating the family system of each ex-offender more carefully to determine the extent to which such a context has the potential to be supportive as well as whether it does provide the necessary support. Another option is to implement more programs helping

the reintegration of the prisoner from prison to the community and track their progress to see if the program works and for how long the effects stick with the ex-prisoner.

Conclusion

The experiences that African-American men face are made to be even more complex by stigma and subsequent discrimination (Cooke, 2002). It is crucial for citizens to recognize that these men have paid their dues in prison, and now is the time for them to regain a normal life. Cooke (2005) suggested an increase in the number and type of community-based housing assistance programs, job programs, and counseling programs that can help the transition following incarceration. Marbley and Ferguson (2005) also found that mobilizing resources is an important factor to reform criminal rehabilitation. Actions cited by Travis (2005) such as preparing for reentry, building bridges between prisons and communities, strengthening circles of support and promoting successful reintegration will help prisoners facing these challenges easier. There are many people and programs that are out to serve the best interests of the people reentering society from prison, but ultimately it is up to the ex-offender to change.

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