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Incarceration of African-American Males: Impact on African-American Families

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Introduction

African-Americans make up 13 percent of population. Yet, 48 percent of all prisoners are African-Americans males (Prison Activist Resource Center, 2006). In 1997, there were nearly 1.2 million African-American males incarcerated. African-Americans were found to be imprisoned at six times the rate of their white counterparts (Ziedenberg & Schiraldi, 2002).

This is an alarming number considering African Americans-both men and women- represent such a small percentage of the total population. From the statistics it is quite clear that black males are over represented in the criminal justice system and institutions. When considering African-American as a whole population, one might argue that they are even targeted.

African-American males are not the only ones who are affected by their incarceration; children of these men and the mothers of their children also suffer from their partner's physical absence and their inability to provide for the family. This is a significant problem because African-American male incarceration potentially limits the social mobility of their families, and it also perpetuates the cycle of poverty among these African American families.

I want to understand the experience of women whose partners have been incarcerated. In particular, I am interested in their use of government assistance. African-American mothers are overrepresented in terms of those receiving welfare assistance in terms of Medicaid, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Food Stamps, and Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). For example, 38 percent of African American mothers receive TANF in

comparison to 31 percent of white mothers (O'Hara, 2002) and 56 percent of African American mothers receive WIC in comparison to 21 percent of white mothers (Lugaila, 2001).

Literature Review

In recent years there has been a sharp increase in the number of African American men who are incarcerated in the U.S. Incarceration has been a growing problem and yet it seems that the only way this problem has been addressed in recent times is with the building of more prisons which cost tax payers even more money (Marable, 2000). Surely this is not the correct way to rectify the situation if Black men constitute half of the incarcerated population of two million in federal, state, and local jails.

In 2000, approximately \$41 billion was spent on putting people behind bars; this amount was more than double the allotted welfare budget (Hausman, 2000). According to criminal justice researcher David Barlow, in the recent years,

“Corrections expenditures for building new prisons, upgrading existing facilities, hiring more guards, and related costs, increased approximately one thousand percent. Although it currently costs about \$70,000 to construct a typical prison cell, and about \$25,000 annually to supervise and maintain each prisoner, the U.S. is currently building 1,725 new prison beds per week”

(Marable, 2000, pg3). Americans pay a huge cost to house these men but what about the families they leave behind? Who supports them while these men are unable to provide financially? Why is the government eager to jail these men and then support left-behind families?

In 2003, the U.S had the highest incarceration rate in the world (Arditti et al, 2003). According to a survey conducted by the Department of Justice, its estimated that more than 1 million prisoners in the U.S are convicted of nonviolent crimes, federal

prisoners represent 87 percent, state prisoners represent 53 percent, and 74 percent of those imprisoned have no convictions that include harm or threat to the victim(s) (Arditti et al, 2003). There are large amounts of incarcerated parents resulting from drug offenses; these parents tend to receive longer sentences on average about 12 years for those in state prison and at least 10 years for those parents in federal prison (Arditti et al, 2003). In recent times much attention has been given to the millions of imprisoned parents and spouses convicted of nonviolent offenses, the majority of which were drug charges, and how they have an increased risk of being estranged from their families because of longer prison sentences. Many criminologists have agreed that the drug control policies are the primary reason for the U.S prison population increase, largely due to the incarceration of nonviolent drug offenders (Arditti et al, 2003). Mandatory minimum sentencing is a major contributing factor to prison population growth that greatly affects minorities and women (Arditti et al, 2003).

Just how many families are affected by the 1.5 million incarcerated Black males? Many of these men have families to which they belong to as either fathers, husbands, and/or significant others. Although it is just the male who is physically imprisoned, everyone surrounding that male is somehow affected. The community in which the male lived is also impacted by his absence because there is one less male figure for young males to model. If there are no male figures, how are male children suppose to learn male roles? The incarceration of African-American males at such high numbers poses significant problems because it potentially limits the social mobility of their families and perpetuates the cycle of poverty among these African American families. There is literature to support the issue of a father's absence in the home negatively impacting the

lives of their significant others and their children. Unfortunately in the U.S, African-Americans are negatively perceived to be the “welfare problem.” Literature has also been published about female-headed households and its link to poverty (Tschoepe, 1999).

There are nearly 2 million children who have an incarcerated parent. Since 1991 there has been a noticeable increase of nearly a half of million children affected by a parent’s incarceration (Mazza, 2002). In a period of only eight years (1991-1999) state and federal prisons increased from 452,500 to 721,500, that’s 60 percent to house parents who were convicted of crimes (Travis, 2005). In a 2004 study by Mumola, statistics showed that 3.7 million parents were under some form of correctional supervision (e.g. in jail, on probation or parole) at the end of 2002. However, this number of children (nearly 2 million) with an incarcerated parent would greatly increase to an estimated 7 million if you were include parents with any involvement with the legal system (e.g., correctional supervision) and parents who were recently released (Travis, 2005). Fathers represent 93 percent of incarcerated parents and African-American children tend to be at most risk of having an incarcerated father. In the U.S it’s estimated that 7 percent of African American minor children and close to 3 percent of Hispanic minor children have an incarcerated parent in comparison to 1 percent of all Caucasian minor children (Travis, 2005). Statistics show that African-American children are nine times more likely to have an incarcerated parent in comparison to their white counterparts. With so many men absent from the homes, female-headed households have been on the rise, which further limits male involvement in families (Travis, 2005). According to U.S. Department of Justice, in 2000 there were 750,000 African-American children and 400,000 white children with an incarcerated father. Children with an

incarcerated parent have five times the risk of also being incarcerated. With an increased risk of replicating a parent's action these children need special assistance to deal with the effects on incarceration (Mazza, 2002).

According to the Urban Institute Justice Policy Center, 2003, these children are also more likely to immediately suffer from weakened ties to the parent, changes in family composition, shame, social stigma, poor school performance, increased delinquency, and increased risk of abuse or neglect. In addition to the immediate effects of parental incarceration there are also long term effects for these children. They include but are not limited to a loss of parental authority, negative view of law enforcement personnel and the criminal justice system, and increased chances of criminal involvement.

Children who lived in the same household with their father before incarceration experience the most change after incarceration. In the Parents and Their Children study about incarcerated parents, 40 percent of the incarcerated fathers reported living with the child at the time of arrest. Of these men most were also living with the child's mother. After the father's incarceration 90 percent of the children remained in their mother's care (Travis & Waul, 2003).

In addition to the various effects of parental incarceration on children, the mothers/caregivers of their children feel the more immediate impact of a parent's absence. In a 1993 study conducted by Bloom and Steinhart (1992) statistics showed that 44 percent of mothers/caregivers of children with an incarcerated parent were participants in the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program (formerly known as

Aid to Families with Dependent Children). A description of the TANF program will soon be discussed (Travis, 2005).

There is little known information about how many African-American families are affected from the high incarceration rates of African-American men. I was unable to locate any published literature that specifically addressed African-American women's dependency on government assistance programs after the incarceration of her husband/partner.

It should be understood that often these men are the primary providers for their families. The incarceration of these men has a huge impact on the financial stability of their families. Sixty percent of fathers in state prisons reported holding a full-time job prior to arrest and being the primary provider in their households (Travis & Waul, 2003). The mothers of their children are faced with the challenges of single-parenthood, childcare issues, abandonment, and providing for the children. These women with little or limited education are not financially able to obtain employment with pay sufficient to support their families.

It appears that black males are more likely to be jailed for their "criminal" acts. Because black men are punished more harshly than white men, they usually have little faith in the criminal justice system. They have witnessed on numerous occasions that white men are most often dealt with much differently at every stage of the judicial process, from arrest to incarceration. According to the labeling theory, police officers are more likely to arrest people with the following characteristics: male, minority and low class status. These officers may also give preferential treatment to more favorable groups. In these cases, members of minority groups with low incomes have greater chances of

being prosecuted and more harshly punished if convicted of a crime. “Judges may sympathize with white defendants and help them avoid criminal labels, especially if they seem to come from “good families,” whereas minority youths are not afforded that luxury” (Siegel, 2002). One may think that white men do not need to be labeled, as not to hinder their chances of future advancements. On the other hand, black men have been viewed as being a threat to the society, so they must be locked up for committing their “criminal acts.”

In the case of African-American males, all aspects of the society can be related back to the criminal justice system. Once black men become a part of this system other areas of their life are greatly affected. The labeling theory would explain this kind of view on life, meaning if a person perceives themselves as being negatively labeled the more likely they are to choose a deviant career. This negative labeling may lead to the exclusion from legal employment opportunities. This type of isolation may also cause labeled individuals to seek company with other negatively labeled individuals and cement themselves in criminal activities (Siegel, 2002). For instance, it is very hard to find decent employment when you have a criminal record and little education. So they eventually start believing that they are unable to succeed in corporate America; often they resort back to crime. There is also a perception that black males can not get ahead in today’s society with a criminal record to either pursue an education or get a good job, and this only perpetuates the cycle of crime.

When black males have criminal records their life prospects are severely limited. They are unable to obtain high paying employment to support their families. And, if they

can not work this only adds to the poverty in low income communities. Most often this leads to dependency on government programs for the mother's of their children.

Why are Black males being incarcerated more than any other race? Much research has been done on the reasons why African-American males are incarcerated at such high rates. Statistics have shown that these men are "locked up" due to the Rockefeller Drug Laws that were implemented in 1973 by Nelson Rockefeller. Under these laws those convicted of drug possession could receive stiffer punishments, possibly including a minimum prison sentence of fifteen years to life for selling or possessing small amount of drugs (Drop the Rock, 2005).

Government Assistance Programs

Food Stamps are the primary source of federally funded food assistance programs. Its program provides low-income family's money in the form of an Electric Benefits Transfer (EBT) to purchase food at their local food stores (Food Stamp Program). Women comprise most of the participants at 68 percent and breakdown of those receiving benefits is as follows, Whites 42 percent, African-American 34 percent and Hispanics 18 percent. Over half the households eligible to receive food stamps have children and reported monthly income (Food Research and Action Center, 2005a). Most mothers without help from the Food Stamp Program would be unable to feed their children on such limited incomes.

The Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) was initially a pilot program set up by Congress in 1972 to provide pregnant women, new mothers, and children nutritional food, information and accessibility to health care. In 1974, it became a national program for low-income women funded by the federal

government. The WIC program since its creation has been credited with increasing the number of women receiving prenatal care which results in lowered pregnancy health problems.

In 2004, WIC provided services for approximately 8 million women and children monthly at a cost of \$4.9 billion (Food Research & Action Center, 2005b). In 2001, African-American mothers represented 56 percent of the WIC program in comparison to 21 percent of White mothers (Lugaila, 2001). The WIC program has been a successful program for pregnant women and women with young children in providing needed health care and nutritious foods that might otherwise be unattainable for women with limited incomes (Food Research & Action Center, 2005).

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) which is operated by the Office of Assistance replaced the program formerly known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) programs in 1997. The program resulted from Welfare Reform Law of 1996 with a goal to aid families making the transition from “welfare to work” smoother by offering help with work related expenses and job opportunities (Administration for Children & Families, 2005). African-American mothers receive 38 percent of all TANF benefits in comparison to 31 percent of whites and 25 percent of Hispanics (Ohara, 2002). Although TANF is a form of welfare reform it is my belief that most mothers want to be employed sooner but faced with low-paying jobs that barely meet living expenses and child care costs they need additional financial help to move from “welfare to work.”

During the time of a husband/partner’s incarceration the mothers of their children are often faced with the challenge of providing for the children and her. Two studies

conducted found that 44 percent of caregivers for children with an incarcerated parent were recipients of TANF (Travis and Waul, 2005). Welfare reform legislation has led to a 60 month lifetime cap of benefits to families before and after incarceration, pushing mandatory employment, and restricting those with drug convictions and parole/probation violators (Travis and Waul, 2005).

The Medicaid program was established in 1965 to pay the medical services received from low-income families. Funding for the program comes from both the Federal and State governments. To date it is the largest funding source for individuals and families meeting the eligibility requirements (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2004). Without the Medicaid program most low-income families would go without medical attention and would be less likely to take preventative care measures.

Much research has been done on incarcerated men and the impact of incarceration on children. However, there is limited information about incarcerated men and its affects on their wives/partners. Of the preexisting literature about African American families there are many inaccuracies due to researchers overlooking within group-differences. These within-group differences include incomes, regions, life-cycle changes, values, and family compositions (Allen & James, 1998). Literature in the voices of single African-American women has been difficult to locate. Often these women who live the experience are not given a platform to speak about their issues and/or their concerns. Their voices are often substituted by others who think they know and understand their situations. These perceived thoughts by others tend to promote myths and reinforce negative stereotypes (Dill, 1998). Therefore, the purpose of this study will be to better understand the experiences and circumstances of women whose partners have been or are

currently incarcerated. This study will allow women who have been personally touched by the effects of incarceration to honestly voice their thoughts on an issue where little is known.

Data and Methods

Locating Subjects

For this study, I wanted to interview women who met my pre-determined criteria of belonging to one of three groups: 1) Must be a partner or wife of an incarcerated male (or have been incarcerated), 2) couples must be married or in a mutually exclusive relationship living together or 3) couples must be married or in a mutually exclusive relationship living separately. By partner, I am not narrowing it down to just husbands. I am also including significant others who at the time of incarceration were involved in committed relationships. At times I interchanged the words partner, significant other, and mate. Initially I thought locating this sample from the population would be difficult because I would be requesting sensitive information from participants and had no ideal how to access this sample. Because of privacy and confidentiality issues I knew I would be unable to gain access to the names of women who participate in government assistance programs through the Department of Social Services and would thus have to find other ways to obtain a representative sample. Despite that obstacle, my goal was to have at least 8-10 respondents to share their experiences of government assistance programs.

In order to gain access to my research sample, I was informed about the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA), which is located in downtown Syracuse, New York. I was given a particular CCA staff person to contact (who was also closely affiliated with Syracuse University) about my research. The Center for Community Alternatives is a

community-based alternative to incarceration. Its programs offer resources to “at risk” individuals which include rehabilitation, support systems, counseling, drug treatment, employment related services. In my first meeting with the CCA contact person I explained my research and identified my target population. I agreed in that meeting with CCA staff that I would also address specific questions/concerns of CCA in exchange for gaining access to their recovery community. The CCA recovery community program is in place to provide substance abuse treatment to its many clients and de-stigmatize addiction and ex-offender status. CCA is located in the middle of downtown Syracuse an area easily accessible to the people in the community they serve.

Institutional Review Board Approval Process

Before I could gain access to a qualified sample, I had to first obtain Syracuse University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. The SU Institutional Review Board is in place to protect human subjects from excessive risk/harm and inform study participants that their participation is voluntary. In order to obtain approval I had to first complete the necessary application process. My mentor and I filled out the IRB application which addressed the purpose of my research, method, my qualifications, characteristics of the potential participants, special groups involvement (e.g. Center for Community Alternatives), type of informed consent I will use, precautions to ensure confidentiality, possible risks to the participants, managing risk, and the benefit to participants and society at large. This application was extremely important because without approval I would not have been able to conduct any interviews. You have to work under a faculty researcher to ensure you go about conducting research and protecting potential participants the right way.

The IRB has two types of research review: expedited and full board. The expedited review would be appropriate for studies that expose participants to minimal risk and a full board review would be suitable for studies that would involve more than minimal risk to a special population. Initially I filed an expedited IRB application for my prospective study but my application was returned unapproved. Because my study would involve a special population and involved more than minimal risk for the subjects I was informed that my application would have to undergo a full board review which meets only once a month. Not only did this delay my interviews, I had to provide additional information about the study and explain my reasoning for only wanting to interview African-American women. I did so by adding more statistics to my rationale and further explaining how such disproportionate numbers of African-American men that are incarcerated is economically detrimental for their families. I also had to make other minor modifications and wait for upcoming IRB meetings before I was finally approved. This was a timely process for my mentor and I that was started during the fall semester and did not get full approval until spring (mid March). I would strongly advise anyone dealing with special populations to start this process at least 3 or 4 months in advance of their approximate interview/contact with participants to allow for unforeseen problems, modifications, and application processing time.

The African-American women I wanted to interview for the study were considered to be a special population because their mates were incarcerated or had been incarcerated. Because the men were incarcerated/once incarcerated, I was ineligible for an expedited review. The IRB determined that my study would pose more than the minimal risk to potential participants because the interviews could raise sensitive issues

that might have legal implications. I had to therefore explain the importance of the study and specify what measures I would take to minimize the risk to potential participants which included such things but not limited to providing confidentiality, offering supportive resources, and obtaining informed consent (see Appendix A for the informed consent letter).

CCA's Role

The IRB required that CCA not actively recruit participants for the study thus I had to provide CCA with several things before gaining access to my sample population. CCA needed general script for the staff to explain the study and an informational flyer that included my name, contact information, university affiliation, student status, and my research interest. The flyer also had to include the location for future interviews, approximate time allotted for interviews, and that the participant would be compensated with \$15 for their time (see appendix B for the CCA script and flyer).

The interviews were conducted in CCA provided meeting rooms which were normally used to facilitate recovery community meetings. Conducting the interviews at CCA was ideal because most of the women frequented CCA everyday anyway for the recovery community meetings. If the women did not show up for a scheduled interview, it was easy to find other women meeting the criteria to take their appointment times. This was an advantage to me because I did not have to wait long in-between interviews and was able to remain productive while at CCA. If I was not conducting an interview, then I was making appointments with qualified women for future interviews.

Study Sample

It was difficult to locate a random sample of women for the study who had children with an incarcerated husband/partner and participated in the government assistance programs of interest. This difficulty led to the collaboration with Center for Community Alternatives to make this study possible. In this study I interviewed 10 African-American women who were between the ages of 28 and 47. Despite the fact that many of the women came from different states and participated in government assistance programs in different states, all 10 women resided in Syracuse, New York at the time of the interviews. Of the 10 interviews that were conducted, two of them were not fully transcribed because they contained missing values for the demographic characteristics, children/family, work experiences, government assistance program, husband/partner, and/or CCA questions. The missing values were due to equipment failure and/or the audiotape recording being unclear. Most of the women involved in the research were currently receiving government benefits and their mates were also incarcerated at the time of the interview. Nine of the 10 participants self reported residing in low-income neighborhoods and participation in multiple government assistance programs. The educational levels of the women involved ranged between a ninth grade education and a two-year college degree.

The interview

The study design was cross-sectional in nature for which I used a self-constructed interview schedule to address my specific questions (See Appendix B for the interview guide). The questions were divided among seven areas of interest: demographic characteristics, children/family, work experience, government assistance programs,

husband/partner, questions requested by the Center for Community Alternatives, and snowball sample recruitment. The interview schedule consisted of opened ended questions to allow participants to answer in their own words in addition to expanding on the thoughts/issues they felt were important.

During the interviews study participants were asked questions about their demographic characteristics: How old are you? What is the highest grade level completed?

Study participants were asked questions about their children/family such as: Tell me about your child(ren)? How many children do you have? What is/are the age(s) of your child(ren)?

Study participants were asked questions about their work experiences. The questions included can you tell me about your work history? Are you currently employed? What is/are your occupation(s)?

Can you tell me about your experiences with “government assistance programs??” How did you come to know about government assistance programs? Do you feel there is a negative stigma attached to your participation (see appendix for the entire interview guide)?

There were four types of government assistance programs that I focused on in the interview 1) Medicaid, 2) Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, 3) Food Stamps, and 4) Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

Study participants were also asked about their relationship with their husband/partner. The questions included: tell me about your relationship with partner (incarcerated father of children). What is his relationship with his child(ren) before incarceration? During

incarceration? After incarceration?

At the request of the Center for Community Alternatives study participants were also asked very specific questions in regarding child custodial issues, legal services, barriers to family re-unification, etc. Their questions included did any childcare issues arise as a result of the father's incarceration and if so, what was the nature of those issues? What legal services have you needed as a result of the incarceration of [name of child (ren)'s father]? What types of barriers to family re-unification did you encounter during incarceration (e.g. phone problems and visiting)?

In an effort to focus more on what the women were saying and not worry about what I missed, the 10 interviews were audiotaped, with the subject's prior consent. All of the subjects were given the option to not have the interviewed audiotaped. The audiotapes and interview notes were transcribed and then analyzed for common themes. Because of the large amounts of time needed for transcription and the limited amount of time to write up the final thesis, the transcription was completed by a paid work-study student. Of the 10 interviews, there were over 100 pages of double-spaced interview data in question and answer format. Upon completion of the transcriptions, each interview was examined for common themes that were identified by statements, emotions, activities, and so on that kept surfacing throughout the 10 interviews.

At the time of transcription, the two other responses from the study were unable to be used because in the earlier part of the interview when the question was asked it was either missing from the audio tape due to equipment failure or not clear enough to make out.

Reoccurring themes

After interviewing 10 African-American women who fit the study's criteria I found many reoccurring themes of interest. These themes included mothers multiple participation in government assistance programs, CCA involvement, children with multiple partners, mother's drug use, rehabilitation, domestic violence situations, children no longer living in the home, men being the sole providers before incarceration, and families resided in low income areas.

Results

Participation in multiple government assistance programs

One of the themes I noticed was that all the mothers who took part in the study reported their participation in multiple government assistance programs. Ten of the 10 women interviewed, reported having had participated in the WIC, Food Stamps, Medicaid and TANF programs. Although many of the women had temporarily received Food Stamps, Medicaid, WIC, or TANF at other times in their life, many said they never needed to participate in all the programs simultaneously until their partner was incarcerated and the burden of supporting their family was solely upon them (the mothers). I defined temporary use of benefits as that of during pregnancy, first five years of baby's life (for those who participated in the WIC program), and when employment earnings were not sufficient to support the family in instances where the mother worked.

CCA

As I mentioned earlier, CCA requested certain questions be addressed during my study. For the question, "Did any child custody issues arise as a result of the father's incarceration and if so, what was the nature of those issues?" Of the 10 women interviewed, 1 interview response was missing due to equipment failure, 6 of the

responses were no and 3 of the mothers said there were custody issues. One of the mothers (at the time of interview) was currently in a custody battle with her baby father's mother to get her son back. She explained that the baby's paternal grandmother had taken her son in when both her partner and she were incarcerated. Her most recent attempts with the child's grandmother to have her son come and visit her have been denied and her parole status makes her unable to legally travel to her child's location. She has been informed of the only action she can take at this time which is file a petition against the father even though he is still incarcerated because there was no law where one can take the grandmother to court.

Another woman briefly spoke of her experience with the child protective services. She had been in a violent relationship with her child's father and would leave her home on different occasions with her child to avoid being physically abused. She said that by the time her mate was incarcerated, she and her child had already frequented many of the shelters in her town and was now unable to return. In the end the child was taken away from her and placed in the custody of child protective services. She is currently going through the process necessary to regain custody of her child. One of the other women in the study also had a similar experience with the child protective services. Her situation was similar to the other women's because she found herself after her partner's incarceration unable to properly provide food and other things for her children. She and her children also stayed in shelters until her children finally went to stay with the paternal grandmother. After working hard to straighten her life out, this mother was only able to regain custody of her eldest child from the grandmother.

In the next question asked of the participants, "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? The incarceration of (name of child(ren)'s father was a crisis.

1=strongly agree, 2= strongly disagree, 3=neutral, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree.

What is your reason for assigning that score?"

Nine of the 10 women responded by assigning number 1 which on a scale from 1 to 5 means that they strongly agree with the statement. The other remaining response was unable to be used due to equipment failure and/or the audiotape recording was unclear.

The women gave many reasons as to why their partner's incarceration was a crisis which included him being the sole provider, abandonment, separation from children, and being left to struggle. One woman (who was also incarcerated for a period during the same time as her partner) said, "I wouldn't have to go through what I'm going through right now with a [paternal] grandmother saying I can't see my son...because he knows how it feels not to see your child." Another women reflecting back on her experience after her partner was incarcerated said,

"It was a crisis. I mean God. The whole thing...Feds running in and raiding your house at 6:00 in the morning. That's a crisis let alone when you got 4 kids. They took my kids. I was just in mental shock about everything...now I gotta be on welfare, get PA, I don't have a car no more, I don't got nothing no more cause they took everything."

Another woman who's partner was the sole provider spoke of his absence by saying, "I feel like...I guess that's a part of me being selfish. I feel like he took my life by putting himself in that situation when we had a family." Although, all nine responses were different, they all seemed to work out to the same meaning. These women were dealing with the issue of trying to support a family which was never really their primary role in the relationship. They blamed these men for now having to do something they never had to do before.

Of the 10 women in the study, when asked, "What legal services have you needed as a result of the incarceration of [name of child (ren)'s father]?", 7 of the women said they

did not need any legal services, 2 of the women responses were unable to be used due to equipment failure and/or the audiotape recording was unclear. However, one woman said she needed the legal services of two different lawyers as a result of her partner's incarceration for assistance in family and criminal court.

"What types of barriers to family re-unification did you encounter during incarceration (e.g. phone problems and visiting)? For this question, 5 of the women stated they experienced no problems keeping in touch with their partners during his incarceration. From these 5 women, two of these women kept in contact with the incarcerated mate by telephone in which one woman would also visit her partner while he was locked up. One of the women did not visit her partner in jail/prison but did talk with him on the telephone. Two of the other women interviewed said they experienced no problems. The last of the five women said she experienced no problems visiting her partner in jail/prison but instead of accepting expensive collect calls they chose to write letters, in addition to visits.

Only one woman said that family re-unification was a problem because her partner was moved even farther away from where she and the children lived and she could no longer afford to pay the telephone bill. Another woman said there was no communication between her partner and herself because she was in rehabilitation at the time. Another woman said she stayed in contact with her partner until she was no longer able to pay the telephone bill and her jail/prison visits were limited because she had very young children to care for. One of the women was unable to maintain communication with her partner during his incarceration because she was also incarcerated at the time. She stated that inmates are not allowed mail from other inmates (they were not at the

same institution). One of the 10 respondents was unable to be used due to equipment failure and/or the audiotape recording was unclear.

When I asked the women, “Have you encountered any fees and/or surcharges as a result of conviction-related financial penalties imposed by the state and if so, please explain your experience (e.g. mandatory surcharge and incarceration fee)?”, 6 of the women responded that they did not encounter any fees and/or surcharges. One woman was not sure whether or not she encountered any fees and/or surcharges as a result of conviction-related financial penalties imposed by the state. Two of the women said that they have encountered fees and/or surcharges. Of these two, one of the women had to pay a \$200 fine to keep her partner from serving an extended sentence because he had broken a door in the facility where he was being held. The other woman said her partner had a \$375 surcharge from court but she did not have to pay it because she was incarcerated herself. However she was sure that either his mother or another family member paid his \$375 surcharge. Due to equipment failure and/or the audiotape recording being unclear 1 of the 10 responses was unable to be used.

Other unexpected themes

Mothers have children with different fathers

In the study, each of the women interviewed had in between one to four children with an incarcerated partner/husband. However, not all of the children were the children of the incarcerated partner. Two of the women had children from prior relationships in which their current partner raised her child(ren) as his own and provided support. In one interview, a mother explained her situation of having two children with different fathers who were both currently incarcerated. In an effort to make the information she shared

less confusing when it was time to code, I asked her to choose one of her children's daddy to answer questions about. I thought that would be easier for her and I rather than discuss two different daddies and rather than later be unsure what information was for one and not the other. There was no mention of extra tension because the mothers had children from prior relationships, instead partners accepted the children as if they were their own children. One woman said after having been asked if both her children were by the same father, "No my son has his own [father], I have two baby daddies." Another woman said, "I have three different (baby) fathers." She said her first child was only nine months old when they started their relationship and he has been a father for her first child and the two they have together ever since. The eight remaining women had either one or more children with the same partner.

Drug use (alcohol, cocaine, crack, marijuana)

Another major theme mentioned by the women, although not related to a specific question the study addressed, was drug use. Some of the mothers interviewed spoke of drug use to deal with problems they experienced. Although this study was meant to focus on how the incarceration of African-American men affects black families (mothers of their children and their children), many of the women who participated had drug issues because CCA gave me access to their Recovery Community. As stated earlier, the Recovery Community provides services for people with histories of substance abuse and tries to de-stigmatize addiction and ex-offender status. Many of the women who qualified for the study were also participants of the Recovery Community that were dealing with their individual drug issues which included alcohol, cocaine, crack, and marijuana. Of the 10 women interviewed, 5 women had drug issues while the other 5 women did not. When

asked about their relationships with their partners the women who participated in the recovery community would often speak of their drug use during the course of the relationship. One woman said of her relationship, “We really don’t have a relationship now. He’s been in and out of jail and in the beginning I’d tried to hang in there with him but I had my own issues. I’m recovering. I’m a recovering addict.” Drugs and alcohol were a part of the last six months of another woman’s relationship as a means to cope with a physically abusive partner. One woman never realized her dependency on cocaine and marijuana when her partner was not incarcerated, “I never considered myself to be an addict because I had what I wanted and I didn’t have to go out and get drugs or anything like that because he had everything (her partner was a drug dealer).”

Rehabilitation

Some of the women mentioned the names of local inpatient rehabilitation programs that they participating in. However, attending the Recovery Community group meetings were one of many ways the women committed themselves to rehabilitation. Half of the women (5 out of 10) I interviewed that were dealing with drug issues were at the time of the interview many months clean from using their drug of choice. As one woman put it, “Going to meetings is important when it comes to dealing with any type of addiction. Having the same camaraderie of people who’ve gone through the same thing you have gone through and going through.”

Domestic violence in relationship

Some of the women interviewed also experienced domestic violence during the relationships with their children fathers before his incarceration. This was a topic that usually surfaced when I asked the women about their relationships prior to incarceration.

Four of the 10 admitted having been victim to domestic violence during the relationship. One woman described her relationship with her partner who was the sole provider for the family as “one with a lot of stuff involved...drugs and fighting. I would never leave.” She said, “I would never leave because I didn’t want to have no money, so I would just stay.” This is what another woman shared about her relationship, “It was rough. It was nice at first but as time went on it became very abusive. The damage he caused me, I will be scared for life.” I thought it was worth mentioning that the women reported that none of the children in the homes were ever physically abused by the partners/fathers. However, the children were often witness to the mental, verbal and emotional abuse their mother experienced which may have affected them in other ways. The other 6 women made no mention of domestic abuse during the interviews.

Children not living with respondent

Although all of the women had children, many of the mothers interviewed with children under the age of 18 were not currently residing in the same household as their children. As previously mentioned, some of the mothers were receiving drug treatment for substance abuse. Those mothers involved with the Recovery Community openly acknowledged their need for rehabilitation before being reunited with their children. There were many living arrangements for the children in these situations which included foster care, adoption, great grandparents providing care, and temporary custody of children to the maternal grandparents. Seven of the 10 mother’s interviewed had at least one or all of their children not residing in the home with her. One mother explains her separation from her child like this, “I think the best thing for her was to go to foster care because we both...as parents, were not mentally able to take care of her.” Another mother

who had her children taken away after her and partner were arrested in a drug raid said, “My mother in law has custody of 2 (children) and my mother has custody of 2 (children). It was too much for one of them to take all 4 of them.” Another mother who allowed one of her children to stay with his paternal grandmother while she was incarcerated during the same time her partner was incarcerated said, “My baby’s father mother is trying to take my son from me now. She wants sole custody of my son.” The other 3 women either had older children (at least 18 years of age) living outside of home or currently had custody of their child(ren).

Men provided almost full financial support before incarceration

Four of the 10 women reported their partner’s were the primary providers of the family. One woman said of her children’s father, “I was use to their father taking care of things, working, and taking care of everything.” Another woman said after her partner’s incarceration, “It affected me a lot. I had to deal with a lot on my own. The kids on my own...then the finances, the financial part and all that too by myself. So it was rough on me and I had 4 kids: a 7-year old, 5-year old and a set of twins a year old. It was rough cause he wasn’t there.” Some women spoke of jobs that were held in the beginning of the relationship or working from time to time for themselves but not to contribute to household expenses. These women were heavily impacted by their partner’s absence more so than those who worked to supplement their partner’s income because they never had the responsibility of supporting the family prior to his incarceration. Six of the woman said their partners shared the financial responsibilities with them.

Families resided in low income neighborhoods

Of the 10 women I interviewed, 7 self reported living in low income neighborhoods. The women used many descriptors in response to the question; tell me about the neighborhood you live in which included words such as rough, ghetto, typical ghetto, projects, “the ghetto,” and a place where you see a lot of shootings and fights. One woman described the neighborhood she lived in as a “nice neighborhood” because there was a lot of people who work and take care of their homes and lawns. I was unable to use two of the responses.

Discussion

Many researchers have acknowledged the limited amount of research available concerning the incarceration of African-American men and it affects on African-American families. After the arrests of these Black men, what happens to their families? I found that African-American mothers are over represented in terms of those receiving welfare assistance for various reasons. It is my belief that some of these women who depend on government assistance for food, clothing, shelter, and health insurance are women who have an incarcerated mate. The high incarceration rates of African-American males directly impacts these women because the men are unable to financially contribute to the family thereby forcing the women to seek government assistance in the Food Stamps, Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), and Medicaid.

I was unable to locate preexisting literature that just focused on African-American mothers participation in Food Stamps, WIC, TANF and Medicaid programs in regards to African-American male incarceration. There has been some supporting literature for my findings which include statistics from the U.S Census stating that African-American

mothers receive 38 percent of all TANF benefits. Forty four percent of caregivers/mothers for children with an incarcerated parent were recipients of TANF (Travis & Waul, 2005). These figures warrant further examination.

I think one of the strengths in this exploratory study is that it allowed the women an opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions about their experiences. In this study I wanted to know more about the issues/concerns these women faced. The open ended questions during the interviews allowed the women the freedom to discuss their experiences, emotions, and vent their frustrations as they related to the incarceration of their mate and their dependency on government assistance programs.

This study also has limitations. The first involves the fact that I was requesting sensitive information from African-American women that were considered to be a special population. Women meeting the criteria were difficult to locate on my own but with assistance from CCA I was able to gain access to women the sample group. Although CCA did not actively recruit participants for the study they did inform their clients they serve through flyers and scripts. It was difficult to get participants to share information about the government benefits they received because of the study's sensitive nature and the negative stigma attached to women receiving government assistance (e.g. welfare queen). It was only after reassuring the women selected for the study that their responses would be kept strictly confidential and that there would be no identifiers connecting their responses to them for instance, names, addresses, etc. Second because participants were self reporting, I had no way of knowing whether or not participants in the study were being honest about government benefits they receive. Third, the women used in the study were not representative of all African-American women who participate in government

assistance programs. These particular African-American women were those who participated in the CCA Recovery Community to deal with their own personal issues which included drug use, treatment issues, surrounding influences, barriers and challenges. Fourth, there was also the limitation of data; where as, only the interviews that were not missing data due to equipment failure and/or clear enough to make out were transcribed for future analysis.

Future research should address these limitations and the many factors (i.e., race, sentence length, reason for arrest) that must be considered when African-American men who are the primary providers for their families are incarcerated. Future research should also continue to examine the common themes that appear in the different experiences African-American women who participate in government assistance programs as a direct result of their husband/partner being incarcerated. The disproportionate numbers of incarcerated African-American men calls for the creation of family-friendly alternative programs for criminal offenders. These family-friendly programs should promote family cohesion and continued financial support (i.e. 5-day work program and 2-day lock ups).

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Letter

STUDY TITLE: The Impact of Incarceration on African American Families

My name is Terri Barnes, and I am an undergraduate student at Syracuse University I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. This sheet will explain the study to you and please feel free to ask questions about the research if you have any. I will be happy to explain anything in greater detail if you wish.

I am interested in learning more about the relationship between the incarceration of black men and the use of government benefits among their children and partners. You will be asked to share your responses to open-ended questions and answer other questions that may arise during the interview. Questions on the following topics will be asked: demographics, education, employment, income, father's involvement, use of government services, and child custody. This interview will take approximately one hour of your time. You will be compensated \$15 for your time, even if you wish to stop the interview before it is completed.

Interviews will be audio taped, with your consent. Interview notes will be taken if you do not consent to being audio taped. Audiotapes and interview notes will be transcribed. The transcribed interviews will be analyzed for common themes. All information will be kept anonymous and confidential. This means that your name will not appear in the transcripts or on the tapes. The audiotapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in Professor Janet Wilmoth's office (408 Eggers) at Syracuse University. The audiotapes will only leave that office when they are being transcribed. In any publication or public statement based on the study we will take measures to change or disguise occupations and other potentially identifying information so that no-one will be able to identify you. Instead, they will focus on discussing the themes that emerged across all of the interviews. If quotes are used in written reports, I will remove all identifying information and I use a made-up name for you. No-one will know about your specific answers except me and Professor Wilmoth.

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping us to understand the impact of incarceration on African American families. In addition, this research will provide information that can be used to create services that will better serve the families of incarcerated men. Participating in this study carries some risks for you. Specifically, the data is not protected by law and therefore is not immune to legal subpoena about illegal activities. In addition, any child abuse or neglect that is any information about child abuse or neglect that is revealed during the interview must be reported to the authorities by the investigator. There are also risks associated with a possible breach of confidentiality that could harm your reputation or social standing and some discomfort when talking about personal issues. The confidentiality risks will be minimized by labeling your tapes and transcripts with a made-up name and storing them in a locked file drawer in Professor Wilmoth's office (408 Eggers) at Syracuse University. If you would like to talk to a professional counselor about the issues raised in this interview, we encourage you to contact one of the following agencies: The Dunbar Center (476-4269), the Syracuse Community Health Center (234-5918), and Huntington Family Center (476-3157).

Questions about this research can be directed to Professor Janet Wilmoth, Syracuse University, 426 Eggers Hall, Syracuse, NY 13244, 315-443-5053, jwilmoth@maxwell.syr.edu. Questions can also be directed to the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board, 116 Bowne Hall, Syracuse, NY 13244, 315-443-3013, regcomp@syr.edu.

If you no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.

Appendix B: CCA Script and Flyer

Script for CCA Staff

“Terri Barnes is a senior at Syracuse University and is studying the effects of men’s incarceration on African American families. Her interviews focus on public assistance and problems that may arise when fathers go to prison. If you think you may be eligible, you should call Terri at 315-378-9943 to get the details.”

STUDY PARTICIPANTS WANTED

Terri Barnes, a Syracuse University undergraduate student, is conducting a study on the effects of male incarceration on African American families.

If you are:
Female,
African American, and
Have children whose father is
currently incarcerated, or has been incarcerated,
then Terri would like to talk to you!

Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience
and will take place at the Center for Community Alternatives.

The interview will take approximately 1 hour
and you will be compensated \$15 for your time.

Interested in participating? Contact Terri Barnes at 315-378-9943.

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Demographic Characteristics

Age

Highest grade level completed?

Tell me about the neighborhood you live in? Where would you rather live? Why?

Children/Family

Tell me about your children?

- Number
- Age
- Gender

Can you tell me about the school(s) your child (ren) attends?

- School
- Grade

Work Experience

Can you tell me about your work history?

- Currently employed?
- Occupation(s)
- Pattern of work history – e.g., steady, sporadic.

If employed tell me about your childcare arrangements?

What are your future career goals?

Government Assistance Programs

Can you tell me about your experiences with “government assistance programs?”

- Use of TANF, Food Stamps, Medicaid, etc.
- Treatment as a recipient
- Areas of assistance not covered that should be covered

How did you come to know about government assistance programs?

Do you feel there is a negative stigma attached to your participation? Why?

Husband/Partner

Tell me about your relationship with your partner (incarcerated father of children).

What is his relationship with his child(ren) before incarceration? During incarceration?

After incarceration?

What has your life been like since your partner's incarceration? Your children?

CCA

Did any child custody issues arise as a result of the father's incarceration and if so, what was the nature of those issues?

"On a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being the *most* severe, to what extent would you describe the incarceration of [name of child (ren)'s father] as a crisis? What's your reason for assigning that score?"

"What legal services have you needed as a result of the incarceration of [name of child (ren)'s father]?"

What types of barriers to family re-unification did you encounter during incarceration (e.g. phone problems and visiting)?

Have you encountered any fees and/or surcharges as a result of conviction-related financial penalties imposed by the state and if so, please explain your experience (e.g. mandatory surcharge and incarceration fee)?

Snowball sample recruitment

Do you know of any women whose situation (e.g. participant in govt. assistance programs, incarcerated partner/father of children) is similar to yours? If so what are the similarities?

Do you think they would be willing to participate in this study?