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Collateral Consequences: The Impact of Incarceration on African American Fathers and Their Sons

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Throughout history, the role of African American fathers has been plagued by oppression and persecution. As predicted by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," centuries of mistreatment and racism would plague African American families for generations and deem them in a constant state of despair and dysfunction. Relentless rhetoric about African American families and the father's role has been significant in the systemic degradation of African American men. The systemic oppression of African American men has led to more than 1.1 million imprisoned in the United States, and approximately 500,000 are fathers. Many of these fathers inherited their father's incarceration, and their children continue to fuel the cycle. For decades researchers linked the effects of parental incarceration to adverse childhood outcomes, including increased likelihood of imprisonment, particularly for African American males. Therefore, this study explored the impact of incarceration on African American fathers and their sons. The data revealed four major themes: caregiving, stigma, paternal bonds, and reentry. The findings implied that specialized knowledge through a forensic social work lens might offer more comprehensive solutions by focusing on paternal relationships, long-term consequences of incarceration, and objective criteria that can assist with treatment outcomes.

Keywords: African American fathers; parental incarceration; reentry; recidivism; stigma

INTRODUCTION

In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan published "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," which predicted that three centuries of mistreatment and racism would plague African American families for generations and deem them in a constant state of despair and dysfunction (Coates, 2015). Throughout the history of the United States, the role of African American fathers has been plagued by oppression and persecution. Relentless rhetoric about African American families and the father's role has been significant in the systemic degradation of African American men (Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2018). In addition, societal constraints have contributed to the attack on their self-worth and ability to produce for their families, casting them into a system comprised of merciless anguish and hopelessness (Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2018).

From the inception of slavery, laws and policies have been designed with the sole intention of policing African Americans, particularly men (Alexander, 2012; Blackmon, 2008; Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2018). As a result, these men are born into a system that functions nearly as effectively as the Black Codes, Convict Leasing, and Jim Crow laws once did (Alexander, 2012; Morenoff & Harding, 2014). By 1999, 30 percent of non-college African American men in their mid-thirties had been to prison. This further led to the destruction of families, as women and children in low-income communities were left to cope without husbands and fathers (Western & Wildeman, 2009). The systemic oppression of African American men has led to more than 1.1 million imprisoned in the United States, with approximately 500,000 being fathers between 25-29 years of age (Modecki & Wilson, 2009; Thomas et al., 2022). In 2017, African American men were sentenced six times more than white men (Thomas et al., 2022). In 2021, The Sentencing Project estimated that 1 in 12 African American men are in prison or jail on any given day, and 1 in 3 are at risk of going to prison in their lifetimes (The Sentencing Project, 2021). There are many reasons why the criminal justice system continuously impacts African American men; however, to understand, one must forensically analyze the historical adversity and oppression that African American men have endured.

BACKGROUND

Fatherhood

Consequently, most parenting research examining children's social-emotional health focuses on the mother's role in their children's lives (McLanahan, 2009; Phua et al., 2020). Nevertheless, fathers significantly impact the child's well-being beyond providing for their material needs, although traditional parenting models have separated the emotional and financial responsibilities between the mother and father (Charles et al., 2019; Lestari & Alam, 2020; Threlfall et al., 2013). More equitable parenting models have shown that fathers engage in multiple roles similar to what is expected of mothers, such as being nurturing and responsive to the children's emotional needs (Lestari & Alam, 2020; Threlfall et al., 2013). The importance of paternal influence on a child's emotional well-being further highlights the significance of statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau stating that 8.4 million children live without a biological, step, or adoptive father in the home (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2021). An estimated two-thirds of African American children do not live with their biological father, compared to just over one-third of Hispanic children and less than one-third of white children (Threlfall et al, 2013).

Despite the shift in the perceived role of fatherhood, much of the discussion in the African American community continues to emphasize the negative financial impact of the father's absence. Hence, African American fathers are often labeled as violent, underemployed, inattentive to their children, and marginal to their families (Jones, 2013; Maldonado, 2006; Skinner-Osei & Osei, 2020). These stereotypes disregard many of the positive influences of African American fathers on their children's lives. Cooper (2015) noted that their idea of fatherhood is rooted in the ideology of masculinity that mirrors restricted emotionality and emotional connectedness, self-reliance or autonomy, family connectedness and responsibility, toughness or physical strength, and competitiveness. This is especially true for African American fathers, who are more likely to be in contact with their children than any other ethnic or racial group (Alexander, 2012; Maldonado, 2006; Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2018). Thus, many play an active role in their children's lives, even if they do not live

in the same household or provide direct financial support (Jones & Mosher, 2013; Threlfall et al., 2013). Furthermore, research has suggested that fatherhood involvement helps some children to refrain or transition from deviant behavior (Murray et al., 2015; National Fatherhood Initiative, 2021). Moreover, children with paternal relationships perform better academically, are less likely to be mistreated or live in poverty, and their chances of offending are significantly reduced (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2021).

Intergenerational Incarceration

Children with a parent in jail or prison are five to six times more likely to become offenders (Martin, 2017; Skinner-Osei & Levenson, 2018). In 2018, more than 48,000 youth were in correctional-style facilities such as detention centers, group homes, residential treatment, long-term secure facilities, and adult prisons and jails (Sawyer, 2019). Intergenerational incarceration is higher for African American boys as many of their fathers inherited incarceration from their fathers (Western & Pettit, 2010). Multiple studies have indicated that an African American boy with an incarcerated father is more likely to offend himself (Hattery & Smith, 2014). One of the reasons is that the expectation is ingrained in these children through social networks such as family, teachers, and the media (Alexander, 2012). Many children have stated that they have been told they will end up in jail like their fathers. In the Cambridge study of 400 boys, 62 percent who had a father convicted also were convicted compared to 30 percent of boys who did not have a father convicted of a crime (Murray et al., 2015).

Some research has shown that, in many ways, prisons are fostering paternal bonds because there has been an increase in fathers and sons being incarcerated in the same institutions. A former justice-involved individual imprisoned with his father collected data in Pennsylvania and found that in its 25 state prisons, an estimated 243 fathers were imprisoned with their sons in 2018 (Crime and Justice News, 2018). At Graterford prison, he identified 41 father-son pairs, including 17 sets that were cellmates (Crime and Justice News, 2018). There were seven families in which a father, son, and grandson were in the same institution (Crime and Justice News, 2018).

Impact of Parental Incarceration

Approximately five million children in the United States have experienced the incarceration of a parent (Bryant, 2021; The Sentencing Project, 2021). In 2016, an estimated 684,500 state (47 percent) and federal (58 percent) prisoners were parents to an estimated 1,473,700 children (Maruschak et al., 2021). The average age of a minor child with a parent in federal prison was ten years old, and in state prison, 1 percent were younger than age 1, about 18 percent were ages 1 to 4, and 48 percent were age ten or older (Maruschak et al., 2021). In total, with the inclusion of parents in local jails, it is estimated that more than 2.7 million children have a parent actively incarcerated (Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2020; The Sentencing Project, 2021).

The severity of having an incarcerated parent is considered an adverse childhood experience (ACE) (Byers, 2014; Skinner-Osei et al, 2018). Children with incarcerated parents often experience more adversity, such as dissolution of marriages or relationships between parents, parent's substance abuse, extreme poverty, residential instability, and homelessness (Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2020; Skinner-Osei & Levenson, 2018). Approximately one in three children impacted by parental incarceration experiences clinically significant externalizing problems such as aggression, antisocial behaviors, persistent lying, and deceit compared to one in ten children in the general population (Martin, 2017; Murray et al., 2012). An estimated one in five experience increased anxiety, depression, loneliness, and a disregard for authority compounded by separation, emotional trauma, stigma, and shame, all of which increase their chances of becoming offenders (Hattery & Smith, 2014; Murray et al., 2012; Skinner-Osei & Levenson, 2018).

Furthermore, research has shown that paternal incarceration induces household instability, increases the risk of childhood homelessness, and dependence on public assistance when compared to mothers (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2018). In state prisons, 48 percent of Black males, 51 percent of Hispanic males, and 40 percent of white males reported having a minor child. Among federal prisoners, about 3 in 5 black (64

percent) and Hispanic (64 percent) males and 3 in 10 white (34 percent) males were fathers with minor children (Maruschak et al., 2021). Wakefield and Wildeman (2018) implied that paternal incarceration increased internalizing problems like depression and anxiety (5–6 percent), externalizing problems (4–6 percent), and aggression (by 18–33 percent). Boys are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems, such as violence, while girls are more likely to internalize problems, such as anxiety and depression (Poehlmann-Tynan & Turney, 2020). It is estimated that children with an incarcerated parent are six times more likely to be incarcerated themselves (Martin, 2017). Murray and Farrington (2008) found that nearly half of boys who experienced parental incarceration before age ten were convicted of a crime as an adult.

As illustrated by the data mentioned above, African American children are impacted more than any other race because they are more likely to have an incarcerated parent(s), increasing their chances of incarceration over their life span. According to research from Lee and Wildeman (2021), nearly 60 percent of African Americans between the ages of 18 and 60 have experienced a family member being incarcerated. In 2018, 13 percent of African American children experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives, compared to six percent of Latinx and six percent of white children (The Sentencing Project, 2021). One in ten school-aged African American children has an incarcerated parent (Morsy & Rothstein, 2016). An African American child is six times as likely as a white child to have or have had an incarcerated parent (Morsy & Rothstein, 2016). Approximately four percent of White children will experience the incarceration of a parent before their 14th birthday, while parental incarceration affects at least 25 percent of all African American children (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2018). African American boys with an incarcerated father are more likely to drop out of school, become substance abusers, experience intergenerational incarceration, and commit violent crimes (Pew Charitable Trust, 2010).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Family Process theory was utilized as the theoretical framework in this study. The theory proposes that family dynamics cannot be rectified at the individual level (Chui, 2016). Instead, the relationships of all group members must be considered to improve the family dynamics. The interactions between family members that emerge from their contributions determine the efficacy of the family system. Ultimately, the family structure seeks to maintain an equilibrium state that balances all individual parts to form a coherent unit. Thus, maintaining the family structure's stability requires frequent positive interactions that produce consistent outcomes despite environmental disturbances (Chui, 2016). Introducing ambiguous circumstances into the family dynamics due to incarceration may produce system oscillations that threaten the stability of the family structure. Hence, family interactions must adjust to disturbances such as the incarceration of a family member to offset the financial, social, and emotional turmoil impacting the family dynamics (Chui, 2016).

STUDY DESIGN

The study was designed using the following research questions:

RQ#1: How has incarceration impacted African American fathers' relationships with their sons?
RQ#2: How do African American fathers define fatherhood?
RQ#3: How do African American fathers view themselves as a member of their family, community, and society post-incarceration?

METHODS

A qualitative analysis was conducted utilizing a phenomenological approach and explored incarceration's impact on African American fathers and their relationship with their sons. Interested participants had to meet three criteria:

1. Identify as African American
2. Have at least one biological son
3. Incarcerated for at least one year while a father

Sample

Nonrandom sampling was utilized, and 22 African American fathers that met the criteria were selected. The participant's ages ranged from 22–60 years and had a total of 53 children; 26 were males between the ages of 1-32. The remaining were 27 females ranging between 3- 40 years of age.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from the participants to conduct and record each interview. Informed consent procedures met the standards set by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects (Health and Human Services, 2022). The participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded and deleted once transcribed. Participants had the right to refuse to be recorded, with the option of having the researcher take handwritten notes. The interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed by the researcher. The data were kept in a secure database on the researcher's personal password-protected computer. The participants were identified by a participant number, which was not a reflection of the order of the interviews.

Measures

The first part of the instrument was a 10-question demographic questionnaire administered at sign-up. The second part of the instrument consisted of four open-ended questions and was delivered verbally in a semi-structured interview format. See Table 1.

Table 1. Interview questions

Question #1	Please describe your relationship with your parents and/or caregivers.
Question #2	How would you define a good father?
Question #3	How would you describe your relationship with your son(s) before, during, and after your incarceration?
Question #4	How do you view yourself as a member of your family, community, and society post-incarceration?

Data Collection

Study participants were recruited from a reentry program in the Southeastern United States. Flyers were posted to announce the upcoming study asking interested potential participants to contact the researcher. An information session was held at the program. After the session, participants voluntarily completed the informed consent form and the demographic questionnaire. Once the questionnaires were completed, the researcher scheduled the interviews for the following week. The interviews were conducted at the agency that hosts the program.

Analysis

The study utilized a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology helps to understand a phenomenon's universal experience through interviewing participants and emphasizes the description and narration of feelings, perceptions, and experiences (Kumar, 2012). The interviews were transcribed and entered into QSR NVIVO 10 qualitative research software. After the data were analyzed, codes were created and placed under three categories: descriptive, thematic, and analytic. Afterward, the data was interpreted by identifying

similarities and differences. After similarities and differences were analyzed, the researcher identified relationships that led to the identification of the themes.

RESULTS

The analysis identified various themes: caregiving, stigma, paternal relationships, and reentry. Additionally, numerous subthemes emerged: kinship, abandonment, self-worth, social identity, parenting while incarcerated and post-release, recidivism, and employment. See Table 2.

Table 2. Themes

Caregiving	Stigma	Paternal Relationships	Reentry
Kinship	Self-Worth	Parenting while incarcerated	Recidivism
Abandonment	Social Identity	Parenting Post-Release	Employment

Caregiving

It was surprising how the men defined fatherhood and their expectations of their fathers regarding caregiving. In addition to the other quotes, one of the participants, who is twenty-two years old, had never seen his father in person because his father lives in Haiti; however, he has seen pictures and talks to him a couple of times a year on the phone. He described their relationship as "ok." When asked if he considered his father absent, he replied, "no."

Participant #3 stated:

> "My daddy was a drunk and in and out of prison and used to give my grandfather a fifth of liquor so my grandaddy had my momma to marry him. He just up and left us- 8 of us. I got raised by foster parents. My brother them was adopted to people like Boys Town. My sisters were gave away to different families. I never got to know my brothers and sisters too much."

Participant #4 stated:

> "I didn't get a chance to see my dad until I was about 31. And at about that that time in 2005 I reunited with him and basically, he answered questions that only he can answer, like he couldn't be a dad because life was hard, and he had to hustle which landed him in jail all the time. My mom parents didn't like him so he couldn't see me. My grandparents were like my mother and father. They are deceased and they brought us up in church. And I thank God for that."

Participant #16 stated:

> "My mom died six weeks after I was born and my dad was killed when I was two, so I never really had a mother and father like that. My aunt adopted me, and my sisters and brothers helped her raise me."

Stigma

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that stigma impacted the participants pre- and post-release. All participants stated that stigma was detrimental to their rehabilitation.

Participant #5 shared:

> "One of my co-workers always tell me, you never look like one of them because you carry yourself totally different from them. I don't have dreads or gold teeth. That was a no-no for me growing up because I did too much wrong. I never wanted to stand out and identify like that. He say if you don't tell them no one would know. I don't feel like I'm obligated to tell people I feel like, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

Participant #8 shared:

> "I was a drug addict, I always hustled-you know. I had jobs when I was younger but not no more because of my record. It was easy for me to find a job. I'd work then the drugs will take over again. I got caught up in a situation and was gone for 15 years. I'm the only boy and my nephew and nieces they looked up to me. Now I feel like all they see is a drug addict and jailbird. I used to be their hero. I don't even like to be around them anymore."

Paternal relationships

While the men were discussing their relationships with their children, they were still exploring what that relationship was and what they thought it should be. They also seemed to struggle with navigating accountability regarding their children's caregivers.

Participant #11 stated:

> "I didn't talk to my son for ten months because both of us was locked up. That's when it like really hit me that I need to do better. Every time something would happen in there, I would be like what if that's my son. It hurt to be so close to him and not being able to see him or protect him. I still had to call home to see what was going on with his court and stuff although he was in the same building. That was harder than being in jail itself."

Participant #17 stated:

> "I talked to my 11-year-old son before he heard about me in the streets. One day he asked me if I ever done time and I had to break it down to him and tell him the truth because before when he asked, I had told him that I had went away to culinary school, which I did but it was in prison (laughter). My son is very intelligent so this time I knew what he was getting at. I told him he ain't going in there cause I done been enough times for the whole family."

Participant #12 stated:

> "You know I had four boys and a girl. I wasn't there for the boys, and my daughter is the oldest. They kind of strayed away, and a couple of them didn't graduate from high school. One of my sons was killed while I was in prison. I got one that's in college on a full scholarship. He's the baby boy. I got to see him play football and win the national championship on tv while I was locked up. I never really got to see him play when he was growing up because I was on drugs and in and out of jail."

Participant #20 shared:

> "I only have one son, a twelve-year-old. I haven't seen him in almost 5 years, and that's because his mother's sister has custody of him, and they keep him away from me. I had custody of him once I got out, and it didn't work out because I wasn't in my own place. I worry about him all the time. I worry about him all the time. There are so many violent things going on in the world now."

Participant #14 said:

> "I got one, I can't keep out of trouble. He in the dope game. He try to idol things that I used to do. I try to talk to him every day. I told him yesterday you need to better yourself. It's like he'll listen, but he won't listen cause he got all his homeboys in his ears. He don't understand what's going to happen when he caught. I tell him you better save money for an attorney and a bond because it's going to happen. If you stay out there it's either going to be death or that. But I hope it don't be death."

Reentry

The participants expressed that reentry, recidivism, and employment were intimidating, frustrating, and frightening because they appear to be the same, but each component has different expectations and consequences.

Participant #15 shared:

> "I ain't never think about no job. My momma said, "you need to get a job, boy!" Yet and still, I had a job, but I still wanted to hustle. I used to walk across the street to work, but that wasn't enough. Eventually, I got back out into the streets, went back to prison, and did ten years. Whenever I went to prison and got out, my time was always greater. I never went to prison and less time. I mean, I did ten years straight."

Participant #6 stated:

> "I was a forklift operator. I made good money, but I was on parole. The parole officer made me quit my job because I couldn't make it to the parole office on time. She came to my job and harassed my boss. It was a whole big thing, but instead of me being educated on how the system supposed to be I got upset and quit my job. I quit and went back to the streets."

Participant #7 shared:

> "I went back to what I knew best, hustling and selling drugs and robbing I got me an apartment and violated my parole went back to prison for my violation cause I had 5 years parole. I had got a job and was working and went right back to the streets. So, I got re-arrested in 2009 for sales of marijuana and it almost caused me 15 years in prison. It wasn't because of the charge; it was because of the history."

DISCUSSION

Much of the dialogue regarding African American fathers has neglected to address the root cause of why so many of them are absent from their children's lives. Instead, many have used their political and social platforms to ask, "Where are African American fathers?" This deflects from the harsh reality that many are in jail or prison due to historical, cultural, and structural oppression. Despite the overwhelmingly negative image of fatherhood, many African American men play an active role in their children's lives, even if they do not live in the same household. However, as this study showed, the incarceration cycle will continue as long as society continues to hold them in a psychological and physical prison that disrupts caregiving, perpetuates stigma, destroys paternal bonds, and complicates reentry processes.

The role of kinship, caregiving, and abandonment was prominent when the men were asked about their relationship with their fathers. Twenty-one of the men expressed that they knew who their fathers were and how to contact them (if they were still living). Eighty percent stated that they had been raised by someone else and never lived in the same home with their fathers. This coincides with the data that estimates 61 percent of African American children reside in single-family homes and/or their parents are not married (Prince, 2016). They also shared that they had only seen their fathers sparingly, but they would not describe them as absent. Again, this coincides with the misconception that living in a single-family home means the other parent is absent (Wildsmith et al., 2018). Another example is the participant who stated that he had never met his father in the "free world" because his father went to prison before he was born. However, he stated that they have a great relationship and that his dad has always been involved through mail, phone calls, and emails.

The stigma theme correlated with all three of the research questions. As shown in the participant's responses and previous research, stigma profoundly affects how people self-identify, how they think others view them, and how their environment may impact them (Moore et al., 2015; Skinner-Osei & Osei, 2020; Tyler & Brockmann, 2017). Many of the participants in this study stated that they had felt the same level of stigma as kids before they went to jail or prison for the first time, which is supported by Winnick and Bodkin's (2008) study regarding perceived and anticipated stigma. In their study (N =450), male prisoners perceived stigma was correlated with anticipated withdrawal from society (Moore et al., 2015). Moore et al. (2015) assessed individual's perceived and anticipated stigma before they were released from jail or prison and one-year post-release and concluded that perceived stigma predicted worse community adjustment through anticipated stigma, and the extent varied by race. Alexander (2012) noted that stigma is more detrimental for African

American men because they are already regarded as criminals because of their race. Post-release, they are often considered angry and unstable, return to hostile environments, and face stigmatization from those closest to them, such as family members, neighbors, preachers, and teachers (Alexander, 2012).

Regarding paternal relationships, the findings correlated with research questions 1-3. When the participants were asked to define fatherhood, their responses varied with some commonalities. For some, fatherhood was based on residing in the same home pre-incarceration; for others, it was based on how often they communicated with their children (i.e., social media, text messages, email, and phone). Also, the findings suggested that incarceration is a barrier for many fathers because other caregivers decide if the relationship should continue and to what extent, sometimes leaving the fathers powerless. The children's maternal family was continuously cited as playing a role in the relationships. However, none of the fathers stated that their children resided with their families. Others said that the mothers used that time to turn their children against them, which further strained the relationship post-release. In addition, all the participant's fathers had been to jail or prison, and 16 had been to prison more than once. Two participants stated that they had been incarcerated at the same time in the same county jail as their fathers. Six participants said they had been incarcerated at the same time their sons were, and two were in the same county jail but on a different floor. This is in support of the data that showed that more fathers, sons, and grandfathers are being incarcerated at the same time, and also supports the literature that indicated children with a parent in jail or prison are five to six times more likely to become offenders (Crime and Justice News, 2018; Martin, 2017*;* Skinner-Osei & Levenson, 2018*).*

The final theme, reentry, correlated with the subtheme of recidivism and provided significant insight in response to research question three. Reentry is a significant element being that ninety percent of all inmates will be released. Approximately 800,000 are parents, and an estimated 92 percent are fathers (Maruschak et al., 2021; Fatherhood.gov, 2022). The results indicated that more emphasis must be placed on reentry to ease the transition post-release. For example, one participant described it as a maze. Another stated that he would be more confident if he just had to focus on one (i.e., reentry or recidivism). Another said that he participated in a reentry program while incarcerated; however, when he was released, he said the program had sold him a dream because the reality of transitioning was unrealistic. The participant's quotes support research by Skinner-Osei and Osei (2020), pointing to the various internal and external dynamics impacting the reentry process pre- and post-release, which their C.A.R.E. model addresses.

Implications

The findings revealed implications related to policy, practice, and research. Therefore, specialized knowledge through a forensic social work lens might offer a more comprehensive solution by focusing on paternal relationships, long-term consequences of incarceration, and objective criteria that can assist with treatment outcomes.

Implications regarding policy emanated from the caregiving, paternal relationships, and reentry themes. Many study participants felt powerless because those who served as caregivers to their children presented communication barriers. Policies should be revised to give fathers more access to their children pre- and post-release, similar to the rights extended to mothers. Judges, social workers, psychologists, etc., are more likely to work with mothers to ensure that they are involved in decision-making surrounding the well-being of their children. In contrast, fathers are seen only as financial contributors, although research has shown otherwise. When these fathers have a healthy relationship with their children: 1.) they are less likely to recidivate; 2.) they are more likely to maintain steady employment; and 3.) their children are less likely to be incarcerated.

Practice implications were unveiled under the stigma, paternal relationships, and reentry themes. Justice-involved persons are among the most stigmatized groups, yet this is rarely considered in practice, policy, or research. Consequently, perceived and anticipated stigma was shared amongst the participants. Combatting this trend requires more integrative programs that support family and community reunification. This can be achieved by practitioners deploying techniques that foster paternal relationships and advocacy for more family,

employer, and community mentorships. Mentoring opportunities will allow justice-involved individuals to reduce the stigma by giving them purpose and the chance to be role models despite past infractions.

Research implications correlated with all the themes but were highlighted more with reentry. Many involved in reentry are unaware that reentry starts on the first day in jail or prison. Understanding that reentry does not start post-release will allow researchers and practitioners to design more realistic programs and target resources which will assist justice-involved individuals in reintegrating into their families and communities. Additional implications revealed a need for more research on African American paternal relationships. As noted throughout the literature, the role of fathering in African American families varies significantly based on the cultural and historical oppression they have endured for centuries. Consequently, familiarity with their environment through interventions sensitive to the African American experience might yield less stressful and more familiar interactions, thereby reducing recidivism.

Limitations

The study only consisted of 22 participants, which may not be generalizable to the larger population. Additionally, the novel instrument constructed by the researcher has not been used with any other participants outside of the current group.

Future Research

Many of the participants stated that their fathers had also been incarcerated. Therefore, future research would benefit from analyzing the perspective of the fathers and their children by interviewing them simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

This study illustrates that incarceration is a destructive force in the African American community, especially for fathers. It has created a burdensome legacy that the fathers in this study and their children have inherited. However, despite the negative impact of incarceration on children, continued paternal interactions prove to be a protective factor. Ultimately, fathers want the opportunity of being role models to their children despite their past infractions. Likewise, children want fathers that are caring and protective of their well-being. Therefore, promoting interactions between fathers and children is critical pre- and post-release and must also be part of the entire prison term to facilitate their emotional bond despite the physical separation.

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