

The Experiences of Black Mothers of Incarcerated Children: With a Focus on Their Sons

by

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ABSTRACT

The thesis for this study is that structural racism within the U.S. criminal system causes Black mothers to assume the emotional work of caring for incarcerated sons. This project was designed using an interpretive approach that employed a combination of qualitative and auto-ethnographic methods, drawing on grounded theory principle. Six interviews were conducted with mothers in order to gain in-depth insight into their lived experiences. An auto-ethnographic method was used to analyze the author's own personal experiences as a family member of the incarcerated in dialogue with the experiences of the broader research population. Studies on the key finding of the psycho-social impacts on mothers with incarcerated sons have explored the relationship between the mental depression of mothers and their son's incarceration. They have found that financial challenges, dwindling social connections, lousy parenting evaluations, as well as the burden of care of the grandchildren of the incarcerated sons are some of the mediating factors of this relationship. A second key finding also showed that incarceration have had social-economic effects on the prisoner's families. These families experience extreme financial hardship as a result of incarcerated loved ones. Another finding showed the unique coping strategies for mothers included assuming care taking responsibility, maintaining family relationships, and budget control. Finally, this study found that there are challenges to re-entry experienced by mothers with incarcerated sons when their released. Research findings and original contribution to scholarly knowledge uncovered that Black mothers of the incarcerated in addition to working the Second Shift, are experiencing the phenomena of what is coined to be the "Third Shift."

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IN MEMORY OF MY STEPDAD, MI-CHA-EL FOUCH

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It has been said that if you want to know the condition of the family, look to the mothers. Therefore, since there is twenty million Black families in the U.S. (Morris, 2014) the voice of Black mothers are an entryway to understanding the condition of the Black family. There is much literature on the impact of children with incarcerated mothers, in terms of higher rates of teenage pregnancy, depression, school drop-out rates and issues of anger management (Myers, et al., 1999). Additionally, there are even studies on mothers whom are incarcerated themselves in terms of how they experience parenting adolescent children from the inside (Loper and Tuerk, 2006). The effects on spouses and significant others has also been researched and heavily discussed (Einat et al., 2013). However, a gap exists in our knowledge of how the incarceration of Black men impacts their mothers. This population has been all but forgotten in the incarceration debate.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The U.S. Incarceration Trends

There is limited literature on the experiences of African American mothers of incarcerated sons since most of the studies focus on incarcerated parents and how this impacts their families, especially children. Mass incarceration in the U.S. disproportionately influences the Black American population within the country, and mostly the imprisoned consists of Black men (Ruiz & Kopak, 2014). Since the 1970s, the incarceration rates in the U.S. have grown with an average increased rate of 35,000

annually. Among the OECD countries, the U.S. has the highest imprisonment rate, which stands at 655 per 100,000 of the general population while Iceland houses the least number of prisons at 38 per 100,000 of the general population (Statista, 2018). A 2018 report presented and extracted from the Bureau of Justice Statistics suggests that approximately 2.2 million individuals, mostly adults, were imprisoned and jailed in the U.S. (Statista, 2018). It means that the U.S. incarceration rate is exceptionally high and is more than half the world's overall prison population. [According to Statista (2018), the focus has recently been on the number of individuals incarcerated for minor offenses, Data suggests that a significant amount of the country's prison population constitutes inmates imprisoned for minor crimes such as low-level drug associated offenses, which could be punishable through fines, or alternative ways as in other developed nations (Stata, 2018).]

From an ethnic perspective, African Americans represented 34 percent of the population within the U.S. prisons in 2014, which is about 2.3 million of 6.8 million inmates (NACCP, 2018). During the same period, the African Americans were incarcerated five times more than the White population, and that of Black women was double. 32 percent of children detained in the U.S. are African American. According to Ruiz and Kopak (2014), evidence suggests that African Americans, particularly men, are imprisoned disproportionately in comparison to the past 25 years. Incarceration of African Americans for drug charges is six times that of the Whites. Some of the drivers to the growing imprisonment of the Black population include the “get tough laws” of the 1970s, inequalities in judgment, as well as compulsory minimum sentences (Ruiz & Kopak, 2014, p. 15). NACCP (2018) suggests that the inmate population could be

decreased by 40 percent if the rate of incarceration of Hispanics and African Americans would be equal.

Children With Incarcerated Parents

The National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated (NRCCFI) fact sheet of 2014, shows that the increasing population of children with imprisoned parents demonstrates one of the most apparent collateral effects of the high American inmate population (NRCCFI, 2014). The population of incarcerated parents also constitutes the sons of African American mothers. According to the fact sheet, over 2.7 million children, representing one in every 28 children, have an imprisoned parent. About 10 million children had experiences of parental imprisonment through their existence. One in every nine African American children (11.4%), one in every 28 Hispanic children (3.5%), and one in every 57 White children (1.8%) have an incarcerated parent in the U.S. (NRCCFI, 2014, p.1). The male inmate population is 82 percent while the female is 8 percent showing more men are incarcerated in the U.S. than women. Between 44 and 55 percent of men incarcerated cared for at least one child prior to imprisonment. According to NRCCFI (2014), imprisonment of parents is currently considered an “adverse childhood experience.”

Facts About the High Incarceration Rates in the U.S.

Among the ripple effects of the U.S. high imprisonment rates are increased prison expenditures. According to a Police Policy Initiative report, the U.S. government spends about \$80 billion annually on correction facilities which dwarfs the \$68 billion discretionary allocations of the Department of Education (Kann, 2018). A string of reasons exists behind the high U.S. incarceration rates. According to Kann (2018), most

inmates have been housed in state prisons as well as local jails rather than the federal prisons, with over 1.3 million inmates in prisons and more than half a million in the 3,000 plus jails across the country. A report also suggests that money often decides the incarceration decisions in most cities and states, since approximately two-thirds of the people in jails were not convicted (Kann, 2018). Kann (2018) also points out that although the minority groups are still over represented in prisons, there is a shrinking racial and ethnic disparity. Regardless, the African American population even disproportionately represents the amount of incarcerated people in the United States.

Impact of Incarceration on Families

According to Green et al. (2006), it is imperative to study the effect of adult son's imprisonment on mothers because evidence suggests that the behaviors and problems of children affect the quality of life for their parents. Barker, Morrow, and Mitteness (1998) found that adult children are critical to the support networks of their parents, and imprisonment of a son eliminates the emotional and financial support. Furthermore, Green et al. (2006), suggest that the mother is the most secure family relationship for an incarcerated son. The consequences of incarceration are not only limited to inmates, but also to their families and society. Most of the people in prison belong to a family unit and a friendship network both of which experience second hand impacts of imprisonment. According to Codd (2008), the families and friends of inmates live a life known as "the shadow of prison," while the inmates experience the direct impact of incarceration. Mothers, daughters, siblings, and grandmothers suffer a heavy burden when their sons and relatives are imprisoned. According to Comfort and Colleagues (2016), the loved ones left behind by incarcerated individuals should adapt to the physical absence of their

family member, in addition to filling the monetary and practical support voided by the member's absence. These families incur fiscal, emotional, and social costs in striving to sustain contact during and post-incarceration. They hold emotional weight besides the added responsibility in caring and maintaining their households.

The inmates' mothers and the wider family group have been neglected by both scholars who have not studied this topic in detail and by the United States criminal justice system that does not provide adequate prisoner support programs that involve the family. Most literature examining the impact of imprisonment on family members as well as other outsiders often overlook the inclusion of parents, particularly mothers, in the discussions. Also, most of the existing literature that addresses the plight of inmates' families focus on the wives or children of incarcerated husbands; these studies typically examine the financial and emotional turmoil that wives experience or the negative impacts on children's behavior and schooling outcomes (Green et al., 2006).

Psychological Effects of Adult Sons' Incarceration on Their Mothers

It is common to sympathize, or empathize with mothers who have lost their children or spouses. However, what is often overlooked is the pain and agony mothers endure when the justice system incarcerates their sons. The U.S. favors a punitive approach to criminal justice that results in the stigmatization of incarcerated individuals. The common justice tropes are "Do the crime, do the time," or "all they deserve is three hot and a cot."

According to Green et al. (2006), imprisonment causes a significant family disruption, which includes triggering of mixed emotions like grief as well as anxiety related to forced separation. Also, there is a loss of emotional and financial support.

Incarceration of an adult son significantly influences the psychological depression of their mothers. Different studies have examined this relationship by comparing the mothers of imprisoned and free sons. The studies have investigated the relationship and these effects through the lens of resulting financial problems, dwindling social connections, lousy parenting evaluations, as well as the weight of care for the grandchildren of the incarcerated son. They are the mediating factors of the relationship between the mental health of the mother and the imprisonment of the sons. Long-term depression, as well as trauma experienced by mothers due to the incarceration of their sons can lead to psychological and physical problems.

Financial Problems

Many families, particularly African Americans, face financial difficulties due to parental imprisonment. The challenge is pronounced within families that strive to maintain the convict as a family member. The fiscal problems are household maintenance costs, lost income of the inmate that contributed to the household, legal fees related to the case, cost of maintaining contact through phone calls and prison visits, and inmate maintenance costs. According to Green et al. (2006), the financial problems experienced by mothers of the imprisoned sons is one way in which incarceration causes the mothers' psychological distress, because incarceration removes a vital source of family income.

Lee, Porter and Comfort (2014), point out that when an adult family member is removed from a household due to varied reasons including incarceration, the family loses the financial contributions of that person. Moreover, this impacts the most socially and economically disadvantaged society members. Comfort et al. (2016) studied the financial cost of relationships with partners and found that those left behind incur financial costs

on phone calls and visits of the inmate, which should otherwise be used to support the household, like purchasing food. The study also found that individuals who lost communication with their loved ones suffered both emotional and social costs of a hiatus in the relationship (Comfort et al., 2016). These study findings were in tandem with the 2015 survey by Who Pays on the actual cost for incarceration towards the family units. The investigation also discovered that family members who could not afford phone calls or visits lost communication with their incarcerated loved ones and suffered health problems like post-traumatic stress disorder, nightmares, and anxiety (Who Pays, 2015).

Also, the study found that women, especially African American, were vulnerable to most of the physical, emotional, and financial distress arising from the incarceration of a family member, or when they are involved in the judicial system (Who Pays, 2015). The survey found that women constituted 83 percent of those responsible for paying the fees as well as costs related to apprehension and prosecution. The study also discovered that one in every five families had to take a loan to settle these costs. A third of the respondents went into debts to sustain their connection with imprisoned loved ones.

Green et al. (2006), highlight other financial burdens incurred during these times, which include attorney fees, settling debts incurred by their sons, and costs to the commissary accounts. Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll (2002), suggest that mothers continue to experience the financial burden even after their sons are released from prisons due to poor employment prospects. Studies by Turner and Roszell (1994), as well as Link and Phelan (1995), found that financial problems increase emotional distress of the individual. The financial difficulties are closely associated with common mental health problems like anxiety and stress.

Dwindling Social Connections

The impacts on family members result in dwindling social connections to prisoners. Hairston (1991) notes that the family relationships to the inmates and their social networks outside of the prisons emerge as a critical correction concern, as well as a social service concern. Evidence shows that both marital and social connections for family members are compromised during incarceration (Hairston, 1991). According to Green et al. (2006), social relationships have mediating effects on the psychological depression following the imprisonment of a son. Imprisonment is relatively stigmatizing, which can cause the affected individuals to withdraw from institutions as well as support (Green et al., 2006). Codd (2008) points out that the experiences of stigma among family members of imprisoned individuals are a re-emerging theme within the existing literature.

The stigmatized individuals are treated with hostility and lack support. Stigmatization is also characterized by secrecy, which can result in further psychological distress (Codd, 2008). Family members of the incarcerated individuals are also treated as ‘guilty by association’ because people tend to blame them for their situations. According to Codd (2008), stigmatization mainly occurs when the family members of the incarcerated individuals interact with the official agencies, such as during their visits to the correctional facilities. They often report humiliating, hostile, and disrespectful experiences during their visits to prisons (Codd, 2008).

Hairstone (1991) investigated social ties during incarceration and found that family connections played a critical role including maintaining the family unit, improving the well-being of the family members, and facilitating the success of the inmate upon release. A study found that women experienced stress associated with external

relationships (Hairstone, 1991). Separation during incarceration resulted in painful emotions with mothers describing their incapacity to visit their sons as the most disturbing feeling. Evidence suggests that family members' well-being is related to communication with the incarcerated relatives (Hairstone, 1991). A lack of communication causes worry and distress among the family members. Therefore, mothers' lack of social ties can result in psychological problems (Green et al., 2006).

Poor Parenting Appraisals

Green et al. (2006) discovered that self-assessment parenting has a mediating effect towards the psychological distress of mothers of imprisoned sons. During this time, some mothers may blame themselves for their son's imprisonment. It is because some feel like they failed to help their sons to avoid engaging in criminal activities, thus, affecting their mental health. A conclusion that a convict is a product of bad parenting may satisfy a theory, but overlooks the fact that people, including children, make their independent choices at an early developmental stage. Besides, criminals emerge from different backgrounds. Evidence suggests that the feeling of failure surrounding imprisonment can cause poor mental health (Green et al., 2006).

The Burden of Caring for the Grandchildren

According to Ruiz and Kopak (2014), the ripple effects of incarceration also impacts grandmothers. Imprisonment can increase the challenge of supporting the grandchildren, which has adverse implications on the mental health of the mothers (Green et al., 2006). According to Lee, Ensminger, and Laveist (2005), the grand parenting load exists whether the grandmother is the primary care provider or not. Grandparents offer vital service to the children as well as the children's parents, yet the

effect of this practice on the health of the caregivers remains a concern (Hughes et al., 2007). Hughes et al. (2007) investigated the impact of grand parenting towards the grandparents' health. The authors found that grand parenting has dramatic as well as widespread adverse implications towards the grandparents (Hughes et al., 2007). According to Green et al. (2006), grandmothers are often less likely to become the primary care provider when sons rather than daughters are imprisoned. Although Mumola (2000) discovered that most of the prisoners had children and had listed their grandparents as the primary caregivers.

Nevertheless, their service to provide care may still grow, which may burden them and adversely impact their health. The increased responsibility also causes the mothers to neglect their health to provide the best care for their grandchildren at the expense of their own health needs (Green et al., 2006). The concern emerge from the fact that the grandchildren add significant demand to the lives of their grandparents (Hughes et al., 2007). Burton (1992) studied the mothers whose sons had been incarcerated for drug-related criminal activities that are a common reason for imprisonment in the inner cities. The results show that mothers who cared for their son's children experienced increased physical illness, stress, anxiety, as well as poor health behaviors (Burton, 1992).

According to Hughes et al. (2007), the daily care of the children, particularly the younger ones, is physically exhausting and risks sleep deprivation as well as disease exposures. The increased physical needs could increase for care services that coincide with the beginning of physical aging. Hughes et al. (2007) also points out that grand parenting affects the health of grandmothers indirectly, which is related to the shifts in

their lifestyles, relationships, and social roles. Grand-parenting reduces the time for the grandmother's self-care like physical exercise and seeing a physician as well as time to socialize and engage in hobbies. Evidence suggests that grandmothers whose grandchildren moved in without either of their parents experienced increased depression and this effect has also been found among the co-resident grandparent caregivers (Hughes et al., 2007). Nevertheless, it is imperative to note that most of these studies discover that the declining health of grandparents have focused on custodial grand-parenting under depressive conditions.

An investigation of how the financial problems, dwindling social connections, lousy parenting evaluations, as well as the weight of care for the grandchildren of the incarcerated son, increases to the psychological distress of their mothers demonstrate a critical relationship that exists between a son's imprisonment and the mother's mental suffering (Hughes et al., 2007). These studies provide evidence of how incarceration of a loved one can cause psychological pain to the mothers.

Summary of Literature and Knowledge Gap

The literature describes a string of adverse effects of incarceration among family members. The African American population is disproportionately incarcerated in the United States. The review of existing research demonstrates that family members report negative experiences due to the incarceration of a member in a family, including mental health problems like psychological distress. Studies on psychological distress on mothers of incarcerated sons highlight different mediating factors including fiscal problems, shrinking social relationships, lousy parenting appraisals, and increased burden of care by grandmothers. The fiscal problems such as a loss of family contribution, household

maintenance costs, legal costs, and expenditures to maintain contact with the convicted loved one can cause mental problems like anxiety and stress. Since incarceration is highly characterized by stigmatization, the affected family members become disrespected, neglected, and experience hostility that increases their mental distress. While there is broad understanding of the impacts of incarceration on families, there has been limited research with mothers of incarcerated sons. I meet this gap by using grounded theory and interpretive analysis to develop a more holistic understanding of the experiences of African American mothers, setting the foundation for broader research into this topic.

The next chapter describes my research design and explains my mixed methods framework, which combines in-depth interviews with six mothers with auto-ethnographic coverage of my own experience coping with the incarceration of my cousin whom I view as a brother. In Chapter Three, I present my research findings by employing a monologue framework to maintain the distinct voices of each of the women that I interviewed, ending with my own auto-ethnographic scholar voice. Chapter Four discusses the common threads across these voices. In Chapter Five I provide a deeper analysis of the emotional labor that is assumed by mothers of incarcerated sons. I conclude the thesis in Chapter Six defining the “Third Shift” as my contribution to the literature. I determined that the emotion work extends well beyond the second shift of household labor, and this emotional labor represents that third shift in the lives of Black mothers with incarcerated sons.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Problem Statement

The topic of my thesis is *The Experiences of Black Mothers of Incarcerated Children: With a Focus on Their Sons*. My research is important in providing a deepened view and new understanding of how the mass incarceration of Black men impacts African American families, with a focus on mothers of the incarcerated and giving them a voice through their own narrative. With the use of Qualitative and Auto-Ethnographic methods of research my study sought to bring the issues of Black mothers of the incarcerated to the forefront of the discussion in a way that my findings from the semi-structured interviews help readers emotionally understand and connect to the experiences of Black mothers.

My study sought to expand scholarly understanding by examining how the families of incarcerated Black men were impacted, focusing on psycho-social and socio-economic impacts on their mothers. I combined an auto-ethnography of my experience with my cousin's incarceration with qualitative interviews. I conducted six semi-structured interviews with mothers of incarcerated sons that investigated if and how mothers were affected by incarceration and what strategies they employed to cope with the incarceration of their sons. The semi-structured interviews provided me with the opportunity to investigate psycho-social issues and coping strategies in a more qualitative and intimate way. Given the importance of this issue for understanding racial justice and equality, it was important to go beyond looking just at Black men, to examining the broader impact on Black families.

Since women's concerns are relegated to a specialized and marginalized sphere, women's issues must become part of the mainstream... (Burn, 2011). Additionally, my findings may inform prison policies and practices when working with families of the incarcerated. By asking open-ended interview questions, I have unpacked their experiences of coping, re-entry and the psychological impacts of incarceration, guiding me through the uncharted territory by scholars of the experience of Black mothers with incarcerated sons to get at the answers to my research questions:

- * How do mothers experience the loss of their sons to the prison system?
- * What coping mechanisms do mothers use during the period of incarceration to face the loss of their sons?
- * How do mothers face challenges of re-entry into family life when their sons are released from prison?
- * What are the psychological impacts on the mothers with incarcerated sons?
- * How is the family affected economically from the incarceration?

Project Design

This project was designed using an interpretive approach (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) employing a combination of qualitative and auto-ethnographic methods, drawing on grounded theory principle (Charmaz, 2014). I conducted face-to-face and phone interviews with mothers in order to gain in-depth insight into their lived experiences. I also used an auto-ethnographic method to provide analysis of my own personal experiences as a family member of the incarcerated in dialogue with the experiences of the broader research population (Skott-Myhre et. al, 2012). Interviews are

valuable tools in acquiring greater understandings of an individual's situated meaning making processes (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Therefore, in the context of my research, face-to-face and phone interviews were conducted primarily with African American mothers of the incarcerated themselves, with supplemental interviews with African American family members and loved-ones. The interview questions were divided into three sections that included 1) mother's coping mechanisms during incarceration, 2) mother's experiences of re-entry of their sons into free society, and 3) mother's psychological and economic impacts from incarceration of their sons. This three-part ordering of interview questions helped to provide some structure to the study, which was intended to open rather than narrow the narratives of these mothers.

It also provided the advantage of setting up possible comparisons across interviews and allowed for asking detailed follow-up questions of family members to triangulate and deepen critical experiences and stories of these women from others perspectives. In the end, the focus was on capturing each mother's authentic perspective and adding additional layers of details to these perspectives from family member's perspectives. Interviewing family members and loved ones gave a broader view of the impact of incarceration on the families and also allowed the study to develop a fuller analysis. Interviews with mothers and family members yielded insights directly relevant to real life experiences at ground zero of the mass incarceration debate.

I interviewed six mothers from three states: Illinois, Arizona and Texas. I chose those states because I had access to my targeted demographic, and I chose those specific mothers because I know them personally. I am considered an insider due to my personal connections to the respondents which allowed me the space to do qualitative research,

and additionally, these states have high rates of incarcerated Black men. The interviews were conducted as in-person as time and travel permitted; any interview that was not able to be conducted in-person was conducted over the phone or through Skype, an internet communication system. I believe that the sensitive and emotionally charged nature of the topics under discussion necessitate the closest connection obtainable, both for the sake of rapport maintenance and continued building, and due to the “rich” information obtainable through non-verbal communication (Lofland, Snow and Anderson, 2006; Weiss, 1994; Woliver, 2002).

Timeframe

All research and writing for this thesis was completed in time to defend prior to Spring 2019 graduation. I wrote a journal reflecting on my experiences with my cousin’s incarceration and gave myself a week at the end of June to write it all out from start to finish. I answered my own research questions from my own experience during that week of personal writing and reflection. Face-to-face and phone interviews took place during July, August and September. The time was divided between travel-time and writing-time in Illinois, Texas and Arizona. I spent two weeks in the month of July conducting phone interviews, and talking to mothers in Texas with incarcerated sons. Those interviews were conducted over the phone due to expenses and lack of adequate lodging available to me during that time period. I also spent two weeks of August in Chicago conducting in-person, face-to-face interviews with mothers, family members and loved ones of the incarcerated. I only had the time and the funding to do one round of interviews. The face-to-face interviews were scheduled to take approximately 45 minutes to an hour, depending on the openness of the respondents, but I allowed for longer time due to the fact that I

was unable to do any follow-up interviews with the respondents. I also took time for myself between interviews to journal all of my impressions about the interview. The rest of my time was spent in Phoenix conducting interviews with mothers of the incarcerated and doing a preliminary analysis of the data collection.

Methodology

My auto-ethnographic approach was used as a way to tie my personal experiences as a family member of an incarcerated loved one to the broader social issues relating to the impacts of mass incarceration. Auto-ethnography is a set of issues relating to studies by anthropologists of their “own people” and one’s ability to transcend everyday conceptions of selfhood and social life as related to the ability to write or do auto-ethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Therefore, as a researcher and family member, I felt it necessary to reflexively bend back on self and look more deeply at self/other interactions (Skott-Myhre, 2012). Under these parameters, a self -representation of my positionality included reflexivity that intentionally recognized the multiplicity of identities that I inhabit as an auto-ethnographer-the person who is simultaneously not only a native, not simply an ethnographer and not innocently African-American (Reed-Danahay, 1997)) or family member with an incarcerated loved one.

My interpretive approach prioritized capturing the experiences of the participants, including explanation of how society has normalized incarceration with a grounded theory of narratives. I used a monologue format to share the emotive voices of the mothers through the patterns that I identified from their answers to my interview questions. I located common experiences across the experiences of Black mothers to generate my four findings: psycho-social impacts on mothers, socio-economic impacts on

mothers, coping strategies used by mothers, and challenges of re-entry experienced by mothers. I added to scholarly knowledge by introducing the third shift that I have defined as the emotional work of maintaining familial connections to the incarcerated and their loved ones as well as budget control. I contend that Black mothers engage in a third shift as a coping mechanism for dealing with their loss. I turn to my next chapter to present my findings in a monologue form that gives a collective voice that speaks to the shared experiences of Black mothers with incarcerated sons.

CHAPTER 4

WHO AM I?

The biggest concerns of Black mothers for their sons have always surrounded unavoidable encounters with the police. Ever since they were little girls growing up in Jim Crow, they have seen first-hand what happens to Black boys when they encounter the police. So, when those little girls became mothers of Black boys, they vowed to keep their sons out of harm's way, and that meant away from the police. Black moms have historically raised their children with principles that taught them to always be respectful of authority. They taught that when encountering the police, don't act, react, stay calm, and never escalate the situation. They didn't know that keeping them safe also meant keeping themselves safe.

This has been the collective cry of Black mothers since the time of Chattel Slavery, when babies were ripped from their mother's arms right after childbirth. These cries continued throughout the Jim Crow era, when Black mothers found themselves in sundown towns after dark, and had their sons taken from them to become servants of the state's White land owners. Those same cries wailed into the millennium as incarceration rates for Black men soared in the U.S. It can be heard each time a Black mother cries out to society that her son's Black Life Matters, and it can be heard in the voices of the Black mothers of incarcerated sons. The voices of these mothers are worried and angry, guilty and political, struggling and spiritual but collectively rooted in care and loss.

Who Am I? Worried 1

I am so worried. It has been a month since they sent my son to prison and I have not slept a wink. I can't sleep; I can't eat. How will he survive 23 years in prison, how

will I? I have not visited him yet. I have heard so many war stories about that jailhouse it brings me to pause. I've been told how they treat the visitors like prisoners, keeping them held in unclean waiting rooms for long periods of time, waiting with impatient mothers holding their crying babies whose fathers will be laying their eyes on them for the very first time.

I am so worried. I'm worried for his safety behind bars. It's like he has no rights in there and I have no rights to him out here. Justice in America has become a diluted soup, and it needs to get its strength again. When I was young, I feared getting pulled over by the police and being ticketed and my mom and dad would have to pay for it. Now that fear has gone ballistic in me and I can't trust a blue light. I don't know who I worry for more, me out here, or him in there. Neither place is a safe space for either of us and the commonality of our Blackness... makes it so...

Who Am I? Worried 2

I need to talk to someone, anyone. I am a worried mother of four children, three of adult ages and a 10-year-old son. My eldest son was convicted of a crime and is now in prison. He is 32 and the whole experience has devastated me. Sitting through the trial, I cried the whole two days. Everyone was looking at me obviously knowing that I was 'THE MOTHER'. His sentencing was a day I shall never forget; I had to write a letter to the judge about my son: about his drug use, about his father not being in his life since we divorced, and his downfall. I also wrote about how I loved him and would stand by him. There is an old saying that "Mothers love their sons and raise their daughters." I'm sorry I failed him and he turned to drugs to take away his pain, but underneath all that was a wonderful, creative boy who just took a wrong turn. The judge started reading my letter

word for word out to the court room. I looked at my beautiful boy and there were tears running down his face. I think he finally realized what he had done, not only to himself, but to me AS HIS MOTHER. That image is burned into my memory, for once in my life I could not protect my child and it killed me. His sentence was given and they took him away. I cannot tell anyone and the stress is unbearable; I have to lie to people to excuse his absence.

He is clean and sober now and has turned his life around. He is doing all the courses to correct his life while in prison and is deeply regretful of his choices; I do not excuse his behavior, but I AM HIS MOTHER and I have to stand by him. I look at all the other families visiting in prison and it is so sad that it affects the whole family. This is the first time I have said this out loud. It is so hard to live with this “secret.” I just don’t know how to live with this.

Who Am I? Guilty 1

My son witnessed my abuse at the hands of his father during his childhood. His first interaction with the police was a domestic violence dispute between his father and me, where he had to call the police. He witnessed his father’s brutality of me in our home, and he was a witness to the police brutality of his father as he was being removed from our home. After his father’s absence I started worrying about my son with girls. When he was 12, he looked under a girl’s skirt, but because he was handsome (just like his father), his bad behavior was excused (just like his father) by his female teachers, and I imagine it didn’t hurt him to know how to be respectful too. While I was teaching my son one thing about respect, he was learning another thing about domestic violence. So, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that my son’s first arrest was for a domestic violence

dispute with his girlfriend. Like father, like son. When I went down to the police station to find out what was going on the police made a point to tell me how respectful he was during the entire ordeal. How my son just didn't seem to belong there, but there he was. I just don't know what to say to him. I feel guilty for exposing my son to my abuse, I question my motherhood, and my nightmares meet me at the door of my dreams. Is this my fault? Could I have done something different? I thought I was doing right by my son. I clothed him and kept him fed. Without much of an education myself, I made sure to send him to school every day. I knew how to teach him how to be a good person, but I just never knew *that* didn't teach him how to be a good man.

Who Am I? Guilty 2

I should have given him more, but how could I give what I didn't get for myself? My mama didn't have anything to give me nor did her mother have anything for her, a generational poverty that's been passed down through slavery with each generation leaving less and less to the next. We are told to pick ourselves up and to pull yourself up by the bootstraps. That if you work hard and stayed out of trouble that "you would make it on your own." But when has a Black man ever accomplished anything beneficial to his group in America as an individual? Black folks have only achieved success in this country as a collective group. I was a young mom. I wish I knew then what I know now and I feel guilty that I didn't learn soon enough to save my son.

I should have given him more, but how could I give what I didn't get for myself? They say "when you know better you do better," and I did the best I could do, I know I did, but I feel guilty that I couldn't do more, and my head and my heart are in constant battle with each other. The pain of a mother with an incarcerated son is a difficult one to

describe: mourning, peppered with guilt and salted anger and anxiety. It's a heavy burden for a mother to carry; the pain of her child. I feel unjust to be free, enjoying life while he is behind bars, so I'm doing time with him. I feel like I should've given him more, but now I know I should've given more to God. So when I say I should have given him more, I guess what I'm really saying is, I should have given him more of the word of God. Since his arrest, I've struggled with the appropriateness of my happiness and I've been holding my breath ever since, waiting for the day he is released, so I can exhale.

Who Am I? Struggling 1

“You have a collect call from an inmate at Arizona State Prison. Will you accept the charge?” YES.

I tell you these damn collect calls are gone be the death of me. It's his third collect call this week. But how can I not accept it? I'm his only connection to the outside, to his son, to his family. I'm all he got, but hell, I ain't got much. I feel like I gotta make a life decision every time my phone rings. Do I pay the gas bill? Or, does my grand-baby get to speak to his daddy? I swear these private prisons are the love child of super capitalists and the politicians that they buy. They benefit from every aspect of having prisoners in custody, and I do mean every aspect, including their families.

When was the last time you had to buy a stamp to send your loved one an email? They require that he wears a certain kind of boot. The boot is sold cheaper in just about any department store, but the prisons make you buy it from them for twice the price. Now how can a prisoner afford an expensive shoe? He can't and this cost is routinely expected to be paid by his family. So let's be clear, I have to pay for everything at home, he is no longer here to help me, and now I gotta pay for him too. The way I have to juggle these

bills, robbing Peter to pay Paul; either I was a circus act or an accountant in my past life. But in this life I am neither, and my arms get tired, and I don't have enough to account. But that's my son; I have to accept the charges. I hope don't nobody ask me why it's so cold in here and just put on a sweater. Make sure to answer the phone when it rings.

Who Am I? Struggling 2

In our community every time we exercise our basic human rights, we are punished. Punished for being Black in Starbucks, Punished for being Black in a non-black neighborhood. We are punished for being Black while driving. We starve from failure and Black punishment placed in our communities, so that other groups can eat off the fruit of White privilege everywhere else, and I'm mad as hell. Some days I just want to run away from everyone and everything, but I know I can't, because I have too many people relying on me, and your parents are supposed to be someone you can always trust to be there for you no matter what. My heart is bleeding for him and yet I am so angry.

I don't condone what he did, and I have always told him that I'm a firm believer in consequences for bad actions, repeating ad nauseam, "Do the crime, do the time" in my own home. I also believe in restorative justice, but our prisons aren't synonymous with rehabilitation, and there is a stigma associated with those who have served prison time. Our prisons aren't set up for successful re-entry into society, but each of us are more than the worst thing we've done, so there has to be a way to allow persons who've made mistakes to make amends for misbehavior and receive rehabilitative help. Some don't think they deserve help; think they deserve nothing more than "three hot's and a cot." Some say they've aged out of the systems help, aged out of rehabilitation, aged out

of second chances, no matter how old or how young they were when they got arrested. This system is just not made for our boys, but my son will never age out of our family.

Who Am I? Political 1

14 years old, his first arrest and he is facing 23 years of imprisonment. Oh no my baby, they got my baby! I ain't never had no warm and fuzzy feelings about the police and that's mostly because I have never seen them mean nobody in my community no good. They got my sister's son when he was just 14, and my neighbor's boy about the same age just before he entered high school. It is no coincidence that at the same time puberty arranges a meet and greet with our sons as they leave the dimmed light of the societal glare placed on them as little Black boys, and step into society's spotlight and the penetrating glare placed on them as young Black men that they are rendered strange fruit, just ripe for police pickings.

Who am I fooling, thinking that I could keep my son away from the police throughout his lifetime. To think that a poor Black mother, could deny a Criminal Justice System that mass incarcerates Black males, disproportionately sentencing them to unfair predatory prison terms, *deny them*, when my son is a cog in the machine! The school to prison pipeline machine that make charges and withdrawals at its own discretion using our sons as commodities. The criminal justice machine that no longer requires maintenance and has been in full operation since Ronald Reagan's war on poverty-a war on poor people of color, and Bill Clinton's super predator prison policies which also preyed on people of color. Some folk say that our justice system is broken and needs to be fixed, I say it's doing just what it was designed to do and doing a damn good job. It is a well-oiled machine.

Who Am I? Political 2

Recidivism! Now what is that supposed to mean to me, when a revolving door has been put at all the entries and exits in the Black community alongside the cost of failure. Like a monopoly game when there are no passes and you go straight to jail, except in Black monopoly you don't get to collect \$200 dollars, and there are no get out of jail free cards, not for him, and certainly not for me, so we pay the cost of that failure.

I have always known that the poor living conditions of Black communities meant that our communities are under surveillance. I thought that as long as I taught him to obey the law, I thought that if he stayed out of their way, I thought that if he went to work and was a productive citizen, well, I thought that he would be alright...that he would be alright...

One of the White men that came to carry him to jail said "Oh I don't care if you did it or didn't do it, you're going pay the price for it on account that you're Black, you're going to have a White lawyer, a White judge, and more than likely a White jury, and you have a prior conviction for theft of property. "You know what that spells" he said, "Conviction, Conviction, Conviction, Conviction, Conviction!" He was right, when I looked around that courtroom the only things in common with our Blackness was the robe the judge was wearing and the ink from the pen that he used to sentence my son. They tell you that justice is blind. I'm telling you that justice can see very well. She sees what race you are, she sees where you went to college, she sees economics, she sees everything there is to see and if I see my son home again all depends on what she sees, and her vision is very clear. I thought he was a citizen. I was wrong in my thinking.

Who Am I? Spiritual 1

I'm a spiritual warrior and if I don't know how to do nothing else, I know how to pray. Our Father which art in heaven hallow be thy name, thy kingdom come, Thy Will Be Done! Is this God's plan? This must be some divine intervention for my son. My grandma always said God don't make no mistakes and I do trust God. But maybe granny was mistaken, so I pray. I pray for strength where my son has been weakened. I pray for my son to come out a better man than when he went in, but he was just a boy to begin with and I wonder if that is even possible, so I pray for the possibilities.

I'm praying that God will begin to help you make sense of *His* plan for your life, and for all life. I'm praying for myself that I understand what God wants of *me*—not just as your mom, but as an apprentice working for His Kingdom right now. I get hints of it—scattered notes carried on the wind, a glimpse of something just over the horizon, a whiff of strange perfume on the air. I pray every day for my son. He is the first thing on my mind in the morning when I awake, and my last thoughts are of him before I fall asleep. I feel so helpless on my own, but through my God that strengthens me, I am more than a conqueror. I know that God answers prayers, so I thank God that he is in jail and not in the grave. I pray I will see my son again.

Who Am I? Spiritual 2

I am a mother whose son is in prison. I am spiritual, I am worried, I am angry, I am scared, and I am lost. The thought of him behind those walls is sometimes too much for me to comprehend. I am a mother whose son is in prison who would give my life for his freedom. My son tells me that he “was locked up in order to be free.” This experience has changed us all for the good. I pray more, I love harder, I don't take small things for

granted, I have more hope, more faith and I realize that we are living under God's amazing grace and his mercy. A wonderful thing about the heart is that it gives us the audacity to hope, so I cling to the day he walks out into my arms.

I am a mother whose son is in prison who has seen the power of God's healing at right hand. I am a mother whose son is in prison believing that what the devil meant for evil, God will turn it for good. No weapons formed against me shall prosper. I am a mother whose son is in prison filled with the pride and joy of the man my son is becoming. I love him no less today, but more than the day he walked in. I know the mercy and grace we all have in our lives, for we are all in prisons of some sort. I am a mother whose son is in prison who knows that they can take some time, but they can't break his spirit, not his and not mine.

I am a mother whose son is in prison who when leaving the prison, left not knowing when I will see my baby again. I looked back and I saw him crossing the yard yelling, "I love you mama!" I am a mother whose son is in prison who chooses this day to choose life, to stand on the word of God and just believe. Who am I? I am a mother with a son who is in prison.

Who am I? Scholar

According to Staff (2016), 67.8 percent of ex-convicts are re-apprehended within three years after release. From an ethnic perspective if recidivism seems to be inevitable, does that mean then that incarceration is simply unavoidable for Black males? American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) make up only 14 percent of the United States population, but represented 34 percent of the population within the U.S. prisons in 2014, which is about 2.3 million of 6.8 million inmates (NACCP, 2018). During the same

period, the ADOS were incarcerated five times more than the White population and that of Black women was double. American society have been socially engineered to see Black people, Black men in particular as a threat, which means they face major challenges of being racially profiled. White women clutch their purses in elevators when a Black man enters, and as seen on T.V. Black men are consistently caste as the “bad guy” in everything from movies to commercials; just to be seen as normal is a challenge. American Descendants of Slavery have been and in many ways, still are fighting for freedoms and equality since before America got her own freedom in 1776. It is even more of a challenge for the ex-offender whom once incarcerated, is faced with second class citizenship for the rest of their lives; they are paying a never-ending debt to society. As Michelle Alexander (2012) writes in the *New Jim Crow*, “black = criminal,” so I guess that must mean that white = normal.

My personal experience sitting in the courtroom as a sister of the incarcerated was devastating. The trial took an enormous emotional toll on me. The constant praying and uncertain future of my brother drained us all. Although my brother was not the first male in my family to see the inside of a jailhouse, he was the first family member to face years and perhaps life in prison. Half of my mind was with him and his fate while I had half a mind with me contemplating my own fate, because I had taken time off work to attend my brother’s court hearing. His trial affected me greatly and the stigma associated with having an incarcerated loved one kept me from full transparency when explaining my time-off to co-workers. In many ways I felt like I was the accused, always having to explain myself and trying to keep up with the lies in order to protect my family’s reputation. This stigmatization got reinforced every time my family stepped into that

courthouse. From the endless searches to the harsh vernacular of the court officers when they spoke to us; which went unchecked by anyone with any kind of authority, made me question my next appearance? All eyes were on us upon entering the courtroom and everyone, the clerk; the bailiff; the state's attorney; the judge; and our public defender, whom we thought was representing us, but were playing for both teams; were all offended by our Blackness. I was enraged by how he was being represented, but unless I had \$7000 lying around to pay for my brother's defense, there was nothing I could do. All of the frustration that I felt, emotionally and financially made me want to just give up. I was taught that I am my brother's keeper, so I can't give up. My brother was sentenced to 20 years in prison and my life has not been the same since. When that judge spoke those words aloud, "20 to life" it took my breath away. It felt like I was suffocating in the courtroom that day and I have been trying to catch my breath every day since.

As a young woman growing up in the 70s and 80s the police presence in my neighborhood was constant regardless to which hood we were in, and I can remember my family moving at least three times as a child. My mother worked hard to raise our socio-economic status by moving us to better areas, but those communities were still Black, and so were we, which meant oppression was business as usual. Each decade of my adolescence was marked by police presence and ongoing systemic surveillance. However, even with bad actors on the force and the bullying behavior that I witnessed in my community as a child, my first cousin was a policeman, so I still trusted them, although I never felt I could trust them fully. My family including my brother were always taught to honor and respect authority. Amazingly after seeing police corruption on the streets of Chicago, I still had faith in the judicial system, I had faith in lady liberty and

I told myself that no matter what skin you are in if you are innocent, you would get justice. I was wrong. I watched how the system wrongfully convicted my brother. I watched the attorneys orchestrate a trial with no evidence, no defense witness testimony and a judge whom appeared to be almost asleep the entire trial. I watched a room full of people that did not look like us decide my brother's fate. The future of our entire family rested in the hands of two attorneys' and a judge that couldn't look my mother in the eye; they knew that they were railroading a mother's only son.

I know now that the penitentiary is filled with innocent Black men. I know now that one's freedom in a capitalist economic system and a White supremacist judicial system is not necessarily a by-product of innocence. I know now that how much money the accused has matters when determining convictions and what race you are matters when it is decided if you get to go home to your family. We have strong family ties and it helps both us that my incarcerated loved-one has remained positive over the years. He has used his time to achieve vast levels of growth, from learning to play four different instruments, to being given the nickname preacher by the other inmates as an ode to his spiritual growth and enlightenment for himself and others. He has earned three degrees while imprisoned and has helped to start the Black Prison Caucus at the facility. Having external things that show proof of his progress has aided me in overcoming my isolation and my apprehension to discuss his incarceration with anyone outside of my family. Honestly, it has given me more to be proud of where he is concerned and gives me more willingness to support him and to fight for his freedom.

I would be lying if I said that the last thirteen years has not been challenging, but I cope by keeping intact familial ties with him and his children through constant letters,

emails and video visits. I help my mother with her coping mechanism of working the third shift: the taking care of her grandchildren (his kids), paying phone bills, school tuitions, and most importantly, keeping his memory and presence felt while he is away. I'm teaching his children the crucial importance of family ties and unbreakable bonds, because twenty years can be a long time to hold on. This third shift work has had a crucial psycho-economic impact on my mother, and caring for grandchildren as a senior has disabled her plans for a peaceful retirement. At the same time the emotional work of caring for her grandchildren has served her as a way to cope with her son's absence. It is my position that the emotional work of the third shift is a gift and a curse for my mama and she would not have it any other way. Simply stated, we are our brother's keeper.

In the next chapter I will provide an in-depth analysis of the broader patterns that I located across the experiences of the mothers that I interviewed by returning to a broader review of the literature. I conclude with my last chapter sharing my final thoughts surrounding the impacts and the experiences of Black mothers with incarcerated sons.

CHAPTER 4

JUSTICE IS NOT BLIND

In this chapter, I examine the psycho-social and socio-economic impacts that mothers of the incarcerated experience then consider their coping strategies and address the challenges that mothers experience when their sons undergo re-entry into society. My analysis suggests that Black mothers are impacted and experience the incarceration of their children differently, as a result of structural racism that occurs within the U.S. criminal justice system. Inequality in this form has been the subject of extensive scholarship and activism alike. Alexander (2012) states that African-American men are disproportionately mass incarcerated. Thus, Black mothers of incarcerated sons experience difficulties during this period including grief, financial hardship, social isolation, stigmatization, and discrimination. They are impacted by the incarceration of their sons in many ways which are social, psychological and economic-related as well as the challenges of re-entry into society faced by ex-offenders. Psycho-social impacts of incarceration include increased depression, impaired mental health, loss of social connections, and compromised familial relationships which arise from family disruption.

Although, in many instances this third shift work often places Black mothers into positions of tremendous hardship, I argue that mothers readily lean-in to the emotional work of the third shift as a coping strategy for their loss. As discussed in Chapter one, Black men are incarcerated at significantly higher rates than other men in the United States, which has one of the highest overall incarceration rates in the world (Statista, 2018). Thus, it is safe to say that Black mothers have to cope with incarceration of their sons more than any others.

The racial and ethnic constitution of the U.S. prison population continues to look significantly different from the entire country's population demographics. In the country, the people of color are imprisoned at a higher rate than the Whites. At least one-third of the African Americans between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five will spend some time in jail or prison (Statista, 2018). According to NAACP (2018), the African American constituted 34 percent of the overall inmate population which represents approximately 2.3 million of 6.8 million inmates. They are incarcerated five times more than the Whites, and that of the women is double. Besides, 32 percent of imprisoned children are from the African American community. The people of color are imprisoned six times that of the Whites for drug-related crimes. According to Monroe (2018), more Black men are incarcerated in U.S. prisons than all women imprisoned worldwide. Black incarceration is 15 times more among men than women. Evidence suggests that the current incarceration disparity rate is higher than when it was 25 years ago (Ruiz & Kopak, 2014).

Ruiz and Kopak (2014) attribute the growing rate of African American imprisonment to “get tough laws” of the year 1970's, inequalities in acquittal and the mandatory minimum sentences. According to Kann (2018), most inmates have been housed in state prisons as well as local jails rather than the federal prisons with over 1.3 million inmates in prisons and more than half a million in the 3,000 plus jails across the country. A report also suggests that money often decides the incarceration decisions in most cities and states since approximately two-thirds of the people in prisons were not convicted (Kann, 2018). Murray (2005) notes that a family is a critical influence on many aspects of the lives of prisoners. Families, as well as parenting elements, are important determinants of criminal behavior through the life course. A disconnection with external

relationships is regarded as one of the most painful aspects affecting inmates. Thus, family contact results in a lower risk of self-injury of the inmate while in prisons. Also, the family is a vital factor that affects the rehabilitation of a prisoner after release (Murray, 2015).

Although the increasing rate of the massive incarceration of men of color continues to receive growing attention, there are fewer talks regarding the impact it has on families as well as communities of the imprisoned persons. Greene et al. (2006) note that despite this trend, there is little evidence regarding the implication of imprisonment on the families of the inmates. Limited empirical studies have investigated the experiences of Black mothers with incarcerated sons. However, an array of anecdotes suggests these mothers undergo through difficult times with devastating experiences when the system arrests and imprisons their sons. Women, in particular mothers, face a considerable burden when their sons are incarcerated. Besides the additional responsibility of providing care as well as sustaining the families, they hold an emotional burden and must struggle to support their imprisoned sons.

According to Perez (2015), costly calls, as well as the long travels to the prisons, are some of the daily hustles and experiences of these mothers. As my own mother of an incarcerated brother has experienced firsthand the hustle of purchasing an airline ticket to fly from Chicago to Seattle, then rent a car and drive one hundred miles to the small town of Aberdeen, Washington. Here the nearest and only lodging was a cheap motel thirteen miles from the prison that is located in the middle of nowhere. She had to drive across two bridges and over a large body of water to get to the gated high security covert location. Due to the financial burden this visit placed on our family, my mama had to

make this pilgrimage alone. My exploratory research suggests that these experiences and “Emotion Work” have become a third shift for mothers with incarcerated children.

In the *Color Lines*, two women share their experiences on what it is like to have an incarcerated son (Perez, 2015). Irene Soto, mother of four, expresses that imprisonment of her son turned her life upside down. She worries for her safety and well-being every day and feels lost and lonely without him. The son who was imprisoned in 2008 is now 36 years old and is serving 35 years jail time. She says she waits once a month to hear her son’s voice to know and assure her that the son is still alive and is surviving the prison life. She travels long distance approximately 1,128 miles to visit her son. According to Essie’s Clayton, another woman who had a son incarcerated during his first year in Harvard Law School says that mothers of imprisoned sons are grieving, struggling financially, suffer social isolation, and are left to cope alone. She acknowledges mass incarceration as the most critical impediment before many and most women, especially Black women in the modern world.

I interviewed another mother who also travels more than three hours to visit her son. She had stopped working following the son’s arrest so that she could support him during the trials and sentencing. Being out of work created a severe and heavy financial weight, and the stress situation resulted in severe depression. According to the mother, the more she witnessed her son struggling in prison, the more she believed that the criminal justice system does not care about reforming the perpetrators. She points out that people do not realize that as parents besides the pain and grief they undergo due to the incarceration of their sons that they also experience system injustices. She claims sometimes she feels like she is being “treated like a criminal.”

Green et al. (2006) suggests that it is essential to examine the effect of adult son's imprisonment on the mothers because evidence indicates that the behaviors and problems of children affect the quality of life of their parents. According to Barker, Morrow, and Mitteness (1998), adult children are critical to the support networks of their parents, and imprisonment of a son eliminates the emotional and financial support Greene et al. (2006). Consider the mother as the most secure family relationship for an incarcerated son. Incarceration affects both the prisoners, the families, and the friends they leave behind as well as the communities they belong to. Most prisoners belong to a family and/or friendship networks that are impacted by their incarceration, with moms topping the list.

Justice Is Not Blind: Psycho-Social Impacts on Mothers

Wright and Wallace (2016) define psycho-social impact as the social and psychological effects of incarceration on the inmates, family members, and their loved ones. Imprisonment of adult sons often has a significant psycho-social impact on their mothers. The pain and agony mothers endure when the system incarcerates their sons is an aspect that is often overlooked. According to Greene et al. (2006), incarceration causes significant disruption to the family of the imprisoned which are psychological and social aspects of the family members. It may trigger a mix of emotions in the families including grief and anxiety which are related to the forced separation. Incarceration of the sons increases the psychological depression of their mothers. Greene et al. (2006) explored the psychological effects of incarceration of Black sons on their Black mothers.

According to Cox (2012), confinement causes a financial and emotional burden on women which causes them sometimes to feel isolated. Studies have explored the

relationship between the mental depression of mothers and their son's incarceration. They have found that financial challenges, dwindling social connections, lousy parenting evaluations, as well as the burden of care of the grandchildren of the incarcerated sons are some of the mediating factors of this relationship. Besides, Greene et al. (2006) found that long-term depression, as well as the trauma experienced by mothers due to the incarceration of their sons, can lead to psychological and physical problems.

According to Delgado (2011), evidence suggests that stable marriages, as well as healthy familial relationships, are protective factors that help to minimize the risk of reoffending. Literature shows that lasting emotional attachment in families detracts men from committing crimes (Delgado, 2011). Incarceration may exacerbate relationship problems within families as it provides one with the opportunity to undertake in worsening the connections with the offender. Evidence shows that 45 percent of the prisoners lose contacts with their family members when behind bars and that 22 percent of married couples divorce or separate as a result of imprisonment (Delgado, 2011). The phenomenon is attributed to the geographic location of the prisons since they are isolated making traveling to and from challenging. Moreover, familial relationships may further be worsened by costly telephone contacts through prepaid lines which limit the socio-economically challenged in addition to the awkward topics of discussion during the calls (Delgado, 2011).

According to Hairston (1991), the family relationships of offenders and the social connections beyond the prison walls emerge as a vital correction and social services concern. During incarceration marital and social connections are compromised. Incarceration is relatively stigmatizing which can cause the affected individuals to

withdraw from institutions as well as support (Green et al., 2006). According to Codd (2008), stigmatized individuals are often treated with hostility, and lack support. Stigmatization mainly occurs when the family members of the incarcerated individuals interact with official agencies such as during their visits to the correctional facilities. They often report humiliating, hostile, and disrespectful experiences during their visits to prisons (Codd, 2008). The individuals are also treated as ‘guilty by association’ since other people tend to blame them for their situations. Moreover, stigmatization is also characterized by secrecy which can result in further psychological distress.

Mothers are also grandparents of the children of the incarcerated children. According to Ruiz and Kopak (2014), the grandmothers also experience the ripple effects of incarceration of sons. Grandparents encounter the challenge of continuing to offer care to the grandchildren whose parents are imprisoned. This has an adverse impact on the mother’s mental health (Greene et al., 2006). According to Lee, Ensminger, and Laveist (2005), the weight of grand-parenting exists in all situations whether the grandmother is the primary care provider or not. Mumola (2000) discovered that most of the prisoners had children and had listed their grandparents as the primary caregivers. The grandparents provide vital service to the children as well as the children’s parents, yet the effect of this practice on the health of the caregivers remains a concern. Hughes et al. (2007) investigated the effects of imprisonment towards the grandparents’ mental fitness and found dramatic and widespread far-reaching negative impact on the psychological health of the individuals. The increased responsibilities of grandmothers forces them to provide the best care for their grandchildren at the expense of their own health needs which further impacts their mental health (Green et al., 2006). A study of mothers with

sons incarcerated for drug-related activities found that those who cared for their son's children experienced increased physical illness, stress, anxiety, as well as poor health behaviors (Burton, 1992).

My research with mothers found that they are doing time with their incarcerated loved-one. One mother I interviewed expressed that she felt guilty for her son's incarceration. Although she had never been in trouble with the law herself, she said "That if I could have given him more then maybe he would not have turned to drugs to cope with his poverty." Another mother I interviewed felt badly to enjoy life on the outside while her son is behind bars, and sometimes she feels wrong just for just laughing out loud. She said that her son has to remind her that it is okay to smile.

Socio-Economic Impacts on Families

Incarceration has socio-economic effects on the prisoner's families. These families experience extreme financial hardship as a result of incarcerated loved ones. According to Delgado (2011), imprisonment for some families means the loss of a primary household source of income. Hairstone (2003) however notes that the financial burden on the family of an incarcerated son who was not actively involved is minimal. However, there is the most significant financial burden when a family tries to maintain its relationship with the imprisoned member. Codd (2008) describes the impoverished families that support inmates as "a shadow punishment." Prisoners depend more on their families during incarceration than before which includes financial support, telephone contact, as well as personal items. These economic challenges intensify for economically challenged families. Moreover, parents of incarcerated children must depend on other family members to enable visitations of their sons, which can be expensive. Comfort et

al. (2016) studied the financial cost of relationships with partners and found that those left behind incur economic costs of phone calls and visits of the inmates who should otherwise be used to support the household like purchasing food. Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll (2002) suggest that mothers continue to experience the financial burden even after their sons' release from prisons due to poor employment prospects. According to Delgado (2011), the economic impact of incarceration goes beyond the close family members. Ruiz and Kopak (2014) point out that the ripple impacts of imprisonment of sons also affects grandparents, especially the grandmothers. Grandparents who are the caregivers of the children of the incarcerated sons experience financial challenge as one of the difficulties during the incarceration of their sons. Codd (2008) points out that in circumstances where the grandparents have to care for their grandchildren; financial hardship is a primary problem.

The mothers that I interviewed experienced significant socio-economic hardship. I found that mothers have to make real quality of life decisions. For instance having to decide rather to pay the gas bill in order to keep warm in the winter, or pay the phone bill in order to accept collect calls from her son in prison to keep their familial connections to each other and to the rest of the family. In either choice that she makes someone will suffer.

Justice Is Not Blind: Coping Strategies Used by Mothers

According to Arditti and Roux (2015), prior studies have investigated the coping mechanisms employed by family members of the incarcerated, although limited research focuses on those employed by the mothers of the imprisoned sons. The coping strategies employed depend on the length of sentence as well as support from the other family

members and the community (Arditti & Roux, 2015). One of the strategies adopted by the wives of the incarcerated men is focusing on preparations for their release as a means to ease the pain of separation (Arditti & Roux, 2015). However, some of the family members cope with the reality of incarceration by minimizing their contact with the incarcerated individuals and tries to avert severing connections entirely. Johnson and Easterling (2015) explored the coping strategies among children of incarcerated parents. Results from the study show that most adolescents employ a myriad of coping strategies including distancing themselves from the imprisoned parents. On the other hand, some adolescents neutralize the gravity of the imprisonment of their parents while others exert authority over different aspects of their lives.

Resilience during incarceration is perceived differently by different relatives of the incarcerated persons. For instance, resilience centers on managing relationships for some while for others it involves managing hardships associated with incarceration. According to Arditti and Roux (2015), family members of an incarcerated individual convicted of murder managed a stigmatized identity through avoidance of public places alone. Besides, they selectively shared sensitive information about their situation with other people (Arditti & Roux, 2015). Mothers as caretakers provide different needs to the inmate including emotional support as well as material needs. They offer this support and companionship through the letters, using phone calls, and prison visits. They adopt caretaker's responsibility with special importance since it can help the incarcerated man to succeed after prison release. The family members offering this kind of support believe that encouragement during incarceration could help to make a difference after the inmate release. Family members with more than one incarcerated member experienced

heightened caretaking responsibilities with interlinked prerogatives. According to Arditti and Roux (2015), a mother with sons in prisons was faced with the dilemma of deciding which of her sons to visit making tough choices on whom to support in the form of visitation. She understood and realized that the son serving longer sentence needed more visits compared to the other serving shorter sentence.

Visiting the loved ones in prison is one means through which the family members demonstrated their love, care, and commitment with the incarcerated (Jardine, 2017). According to Jardine (2017), different elements of the visit such as hugging, kissing, and sharing family news and stories are some of the family displays and means of maintaining familial relationships. I support Jardine's analysis as it rings true in my own experience with visiting my brother in prison after having not seen him in thirteen years. Our physical connection and our need to touch each other was so strong that even after several warnings from the commanding officers we continued our display of affection, even if it meant that we could only interlock our pinkies under the cover of soda cans, sandwiches, and whatever other overpriced item from the vending machine that I could afford to buy him to consume throughout the duration of our visit. Therefore, the role of everyday family activities including sharing meals should not be overlooked since food is considered central to displaying family (Jardine, 2017). As people eat together or share food, they remain closely connected to their families and society. Moreover, evidence suggests that love is the dominant emotion related to food. Other aspects include cooking and sharing food which all have a solid symbolic role in relationship sustenance (Jardine, 2017).

Easterling and Johnson's (2015) also studied how a wife of incarcerated husband managed the implications of incarceration, especially with the support of friends as well as family despite highly valuing self-reliance. She agreed that family and friends' support in raising her children was invaluable, and emphasized that the absence of her husband could not be compensated. Despite the duality as well as conflicting responsibilities coupled with emotional impediments, the caretakers who were mainly mothers managed the situations and benefited significantly from the coping strategies they had designed. From an economic perspective, financial hardship is one problem often associated with incarceration of a loved family member. One of the coping mechanisms employed by wives of the incarcerated is maintaining connections with their imprisoned partners to ensure that the money they spend visiting and supporting their partners does not exhaust their finances (Arditti & Roux, 2015).

As an economic provider, budget control and prioritization of time and resources are some of the strategies family members of the incarcerated employed to manage their financial obligations (Arditti & Roux, 2015). The implications of incarceration of a loved one create the need for family members especially mothers to devise ways and strategies of coping with the situation. These coping and resilience mechanisms help them to manage the impact of incarceration better, maintain familial relationships, manage stigmatized identity, and prepare their sons and husbands for re-entry. The mechanisms include but are not limited to assuming caretaking responsibility, maintaining family relationships, and budget control, all of which defines what I consider to be in essence, a third shift.

My study showed that mothers are engaging in the third shift of the *Emotion Work* of taking care of the inmate's children as a way of coping with the absence of the incarcerated. Although this third shift work has proven to cause some hardship for most of the mothers that I interviewed, it is a necessary job that operates in a dual capacity. One Mother stated "Keeping up with my grandkids while my son is in jail is hard, but keeping up with my son in jail by myself, would be even harder. My grandchildren are a gift and a curse."

Justice Is Not Blind: Challenges of Re-Entry Experienced by Mothers

When prisoners are released they face an array of problems in an environment that is challenging and actively limits them from becoming productive members of the community. According to Staff (2016), 67.8percent of ex-convicts are re-apprehended within three years after release. Recidivism impacts both the family of the offender as well as the society in general. Upon release, the ex-offenders must find employment, healthcare, and housing. With the law limiting the ease of finding public housing as well as assistance, most released prisoners tend to struggle to find the appropriate living arrangements as well as financial aid. Finding a job is also another problem experienced by these individuals which further exacerbates their situation outside the prisons walls (Travis, 2006). It is because they have limited academic background and vocational capabilities, and face legal restrictions to join particular professions. Additionally, they are discriminated by some of their potential employees. Moreover, the released individuals with a history of drug abuse also face the risk of relapse (Travis, 2006). These realities present a significant challenge to the family member upon release from prison.

Thus, the family members still carries the burden of ensuring their loved ones smooth re-entry, acceptance, and success following their release.

\ Nevertheless, a family who has struggled with the absence of a loved one continues to experience a myriad of challenges in maintaining to support their loved ones upon release (Travis, 2006). According to Travis (2006), some of the barriers experienced by the family members are new relationships, relation, constrained finances, as well as the feeling of resentment. Travis (2006) acknowledges that even in situations where the families have sufficient and robust support, re-entry of the ex-offender still presents a significant challenge. For parents, restoring the relationship with their children after incarceration becomes complicated, because new relationships may have been developed during the individual's incarceration. A lack of contact during incarceration may have contributed to such situations (Travis, 2006).

Moreover, the feeling of shame coupled with social stigma may create extra strain to both the ex-offender and the family members. Regardless, Travis (2006) points out that the role of family support is critical in improving the lives of the returning prisoners. Family support strategies are based on the premise that strengthening the family support of the incarcerated loved one will potentially increase his success after release (Travis, 2006). Such approaches might benefit three groups including the inmate's family, the ex-offender, and the society. According to Travis (2006), evidence suggests that strengthening the family support of the offender bolsters the outcomes for both the released offenders and their families.

One example of challenges to re-entry for a mother that I interviewed found that providing something as simple as transportation for the ex-offender presented some

hardships in keeping up with the family's scheduling for her. After her son's release he was denied a driver's license, lacked navigational skills, and was unable to find his way around on public transportation, because as she stated "he was gone so long nothing was the way he'd remembered." She said that her son felt like a foreigner in the country of his birth, so she had to take on the added responsibility of driving him around along with her current responsibilities of shuffling the grand kids back and forth to school, and afterschool programs. Admitting that there is never enough time for her to do everything for everyone and something has to be given up, and that something is usually anything she needs to do for herself. Like all the mothers I interviewed has stated "family comes first."

CHAPTER 5

THIRD SHIFT

Mothers are often seen by society as the primary caregivers. They tend to spend more time with the child and have a close bond even when they are career women. A vast majority of women experience what is known in scholarship as the second shift. This is defined as-mothers working outside of the home then returning to the full responsibilities of maintaining the household and taking care of the family as a second job (Burn,2011). My exploratory research findings add to this scholarly knowledge by arguing that Black mothers of the incarcerated in addition to working the second shift are experiencing the phenomena of a third shift. I have defined this shift as the “Emotion Work” (Hochschild, 2012) of mothers assuming caretaking responsibility for grandchildren, maintaining family relationships with the incarcerated, and budget control for the entire family. This third shift operates in a unique dual capacity. On one hand, the socio-economic impact is a financial hardship when a family tries to maintain its contact with the incarcerated member, take care of the son’s children, and support the household. While on the other hand, the emotional work of maintaining family ties to the incarcerated serves as a coping mechanism that provides for their sleep at night and affords them the mental space to have a peace of mind.

Although, there is existing literature of other family members including children who use an array of strategies to manage their situation such as some children distance themselves from the incarcerated parents, and others engage in activities to avoid the parents all together. There is limited literature that focuses on the coping strategies of mothers during the incarceration of their sons. This suggest that there are gaps in the

research that exists for Black mothers whom disproportionately takeover the caretaking responsibility to provide support for their sons, to maintain familial bonds, as well as prepare them for re-entry into the society. After prison release, the mothers and the family members of the ex-offender continue to experience the challenges of re-entry for their loved ones including financial constraints, disrupted social connections, and restricting laws. Adding that extended research on *The Experiences of Black Mothers of Incarcerated Children: With a Focus on Their Sons* and their support groups or lack thereof is needed to further inform prison policies and practices when working with families of the incarcerated. By examining the perspectives of African American mothers of the incarcerated the current research will strive to fill the gap and set precedence into future investigations.

My research findings supports that there are persistent limitations the system enforces on the ex-offender after incarceration that pre-determines the before mentioned challenges to which impedes their ability to live everyday life uninterrupted. It would seem that one never stops serving time and pays an indefinite debt to society. A debt that is paid not only by the incarcerated, but moreover paid by the mothers of the incarcerated. These outcomes and findings have changed my thoughts on the United States criminal justice system from thinking that our system is broken, to my thinking that it is operating exactly how it was designed to operate. It is a well-oiled mass incarceration machine without any need of regular maintenance. However, it is most certainly well overdue for a complete over-haul.

Conclusion

In summary, my study showed that Black mothers of incarcerated sons experience difficulties during this period including grief, financial hardship, social isolation, stigmatization, and discrimination. They are impacted by the incarceration of their sons in many ways which are social, psychological and economic-related as well as the challenges of re-entry into society faced by ex-offenders. Psycho-social impacts of incarceration include increased depression, impaired mental health, loss of social connections, and compromised familial relationships which arise from family disruption. Thus, Black mothers disproportionately take on the responsibility of the extended family and in many instances this third shift work often straddles them with a tremendous amount of hardship. My original contribution to scholarly knowledge uncovered that mothers readily lean-in to the emotional work of the third shift as a coping strategy for the loss of their incarcerated sons. They lean-in regardless of the financial hardship that it imposes on them to do so.

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APPENDIX A

DATA COLLECTED JULY-SEPTEMBER 2018

APPENDIX A
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How do mothers experience the loss of their sons to the prison system?
- 2) What coping mechanisms do mothers use during the period of incarceration to face the loss of their sons?
- 3) How do mothers face challenges of re-entry into family life when their sons are released from prison?
- 4) What are the health impacts on the mothers with incarcerated sons?
- 5) How is the family affected economically from the incarceration?

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Mothers

- 1) What were some of the key principles of behavior that you instilled in your son?
- 2) What were your biggest concerns for your son when he was growing up?
- 3) At what age and why did you start to worry about his interactions with the police?
- 4) What was your view of the criminal justice system (police and courts of law) before your son's incarceration?
- 5) What is your view of the criminal justice system now?
- 6) What challenges do you feel that black men face when interacting with the criminal justice system?
- 7) When your son was incarcerated, who did you turn to for support?
- 8) What else helped you cope with the situation?
- 9) What advice do you have for other black mothers with incarcerated sons?
- 10) What broader challenges do black families and communities in relation to this topic?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Family Members

- 1) What was your experience with your family member's incarceration? How did it make you feel and what impact did it have on your life?
- 2) What was your view of the criminal justice system (police and courts of law) before your family member's incarceration?
- 3) What is your view of the criminal justice system now?

- 4) What challenges do you feel black men face when interacting with the criminal justice system?
- 5) How did you cope when your family member was incarcerated?
- 6) How did your family member's incarceration impact his mother? How did she cope?
- 7) What broader challenges do black families and communities face in relation to this topic?

APPENDIX B
DATA COLLECTED JULY-SEPTEMBER 2018

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW CONSENT

The purpose of this interview and research project is to expand our understanding of how the families of incarcerated black men are impacted, focusing on psycho-social and socio-economic impacts on their mothers. This is a research project being conducted by graduate student, LaTonya C. White, under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Kasey, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Arizona State University. You are invited to participate in this research project because you are mother and/or family member of a past or present incarcerated son.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate in the interview, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you withdraw from participating at any time, you will not be penalized.

The procedure involves participating in a semi-structured face-to-face or telephone interview that will take approximately 45 minutes. Your responses will be confidential and all the data collected with identifying information such as your name, email address or telephone number will be replaced with pseudonyms for your privacy and protection. The semi-structured interview questions will address if and how mothers are affected by incarceration, and what strategies they employ to cope with the incarceration of their sons. The interview is intended to shed light on coping strategies and socio-economic impacts.

We will do our best to keep your information confidential. All data will be stored in a password protected electronic format. To help protect your confidentiality, the interview responses will not contain information that will personally identify you. The results of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only and may be shared with Arizona State University representatives.

At the start of the interview, I will ask for verbal consent and permission to record our conversation. You have the right to refuse consent, in which case I will take typed notes of our discussion. Whether typed or recorded, all interview responses will be stored in a password-protected electronic format.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact LaTonya.White@asu.edu or Jennifer.Keahey@asu.edu. This research has been reviewed according to Arizona State University IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

Verbal Consent: With this information, I'd like to ask a few questions before I can proceed with the interview.

1. Are at least 18 years of age and voluntarily agree to participate in the interview?

Circle whether the participant said: yes or no

2. Is it okay that I audio record the interview to make sure that I accurately represent your thoughts?

Circle whether the participant said: yes or no

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

A community activist, LaTonya C. White has spent much of her adult life in advocacy, standing up and standing out for others. She is a Master's Candidate in the Social Justice and Human Rights program at Arizona State University's New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences. She is the co-founder and President of the S.E.V.E.N Foundation, a nonprofit organization that seeks to empower disadvantaged youth and young adults. LaTonya C. White has worked as a grassroots organizer in marginalized communities on the Southside of Chicago for more than 20 years. As one of the leaders in the community she has been raising awareness and speaking out against the bullying police presence used to intimidate Black residents in the urban communities of Chicago. She has pushed back against the status quo of institutionalized systemic racism that targets Black males. LaTonya has written papers and essays as a freelance writer, outlining the racial disparities that exist in the school to prison pipeline as well as the disproportionate massive incarceration of Black men. She was selected to present her work on the impacts and experiences of Black Mothers with incarcerated sons at ASU/West SJHR 2019 talk series. In addition, LaTonya C. White was the keynote speaker for the 2018 Black Prison Caucus held at Stafford Creek Correctional Facility in Aberdeen, Washington.