

Study reveals incarceration's hidden wounds for African-American men

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There's a stark and troubling way that incarceration diminishes the ability of a former inmate to empathize with a loved one behind bars, but existing sociological theories fail to capture it, Vanderbilt University sociologists have found.

According to a commonly used model of stress and health, the experience of having a family member locked up does not have a significant [mental health](#) effect on African American [men](#). It was only after accounting for an individual's own [incarceration](#) history that the researchers were able to reveal both how difficult it is for former inmates to connect with incarcerated family members and how painful it is for their peers who had never shared that experience. It turned out that the lack of distress experienced by former inmates had been masking the distress felt by the never incarcerated all along.

Because African Americans are disproportionately affected by incarceration, lead author Tony Brown, associate professor of sociology, says these findings lay bare a significant blind spot in the way social science research captures their experience. "We can no longer ignore incarceration as a stratifying status," he said.

The research by Brown, Evelyn Patterson, assistant professor of sociology, and recent Ph.D. graduate Mary Laske Bell appears in the June issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*.

The Incarceration-Blind Approach

The researchers used the National Survey of American Life, a particularly detailed survey that not only includes information about the respondent's own incarceration history but also the incarceration status of his or her extended [family members](#). They then analyzed the data for African American men invoking a model commonly used by social scientists to predict health outcomes based on the relationship between a variety of stressors and coping resources.

They found that while a family member's incarceration was stressful for African American men, the effect largely disappeared when the researchers controlled for other chronic stressors like money problems, family discord, and so on. They also found that it didn't really matter how many coping resources a person had available to them.

"Had we stopped there we would have said, 'Familial incarceration is a serious issue that affects a lot of African American families, but it turns out it's not a unique stressor,'" said Brown. "I doubt anyone would have even published the paper."

It wasn't until they broke the data down further that they saw how much a difference incarceration history made.

The Cost of Caring

The researchers developed a new theory that predicted formerly incarcerated African American men would experience worse mental health than their never-incarcerated peers because they would be better able to empathize with their incarcerated relative. The new theory came out of the cost-of-caring hypothesis, which proposed that women report higher rates of depression than men when something bad happens to a

loved one because women tend to have stronger social ties and thus feel a greater connection to their loved one's suffering.

"It made perfect sense at the time, because if you care about your family, and you've been incarcerated, and you know how it can strip you of dignity, be isolating, and in some ways so damaging that you never recover from it, then you would feel much worse when someone in your family was going through the same thing," said Brown. "And what we found was the complete opposite."

Not only did former inmates with a relative behind bars cope better than their never-incarcerated peers—rather than worse, as predicted—those former inmates experienced better mental health than former inmates whose relatives were all free.

Meanwhile, never-incarcerated African American men behaved as expected—they were more distressed when a relative was behind bars.

The finding about formerly incarcerated African American men was such a surprise that the researchers went back and re-analyzed the data to make sure they hadn't made any measurement errors or missed any mitigating factors. But they didn't.

The old model had failed to capture the effect of familial incarceration on African American men because the negative effect it had on never-incarcerated men canceled out the unexpectedly positive effect it had on former inmates.

Prison's Psychological Scars

So why do former inmates seem to do better when a relative is locked up?

The researchers considered a number of reasons. One theory is that sharing the experience of incarceration makes a former inmate feel less socially isolated. "There is this other family member who is incarcerated, and now you have someone to connect with, or someone who just gets it—who gets why you're not going to talk about it," said Patterson. "Because people don't want to talk about it afterwards."

Another theory is that a former inmate may believe his incarceration toughened him up, and that it will do the same for his relative. "There's a value [behind bars] to having a 'prison mask,' this persona of a hard, tough, invulnerable, invincible exterior," said Brown. "So you might think, 'Hey, my family member's going to benefit from that,' not recognizing that the loss of empathy is a perversion of what we think of as humanity—our emotional connections with one another makes life worthwhile."

The researchers believe this *empathetic inurement*, as they term it, may well have implications for an entire socio-demographic group.

"These are black men who no longer have the ability to connect to other black men," Brown said. "That creates real problems when you begin to think about what [mass incarceration](#) means for society."

Provided by American Sociological Association

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