



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 20  
Issue 4 December

Article 2

---

December 1993

## African-American Males in Prison: Are they Doing Time or is the Time Doing Them?

Anthony E. O. King  
*Case Western Reserve University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Criminology Commons, Race and Ethnicity Commons, and the Social Work Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

King, Anthony E. O. (1993) "African-American Males in Prison: Are they Doing Time or is the Time Doing Them?," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 4 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol20/iss4/2>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



# African-American Males in Prison: Are they Doing Time or is the Time Doing Them?

ANTHONY E. O. KING

Case Western Reserve University  
Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences

*African-American males comprise a disproportionate percentage of the individuals imprisoned in State correctional institutions across the United States. The purpose of this paper is to describe how incarceration affects African-American males. The author recommends more rigorous and systematic analysis of the prison experience, and how it affects the mental, physical, and social well-being of African-American males. Given this nation's commitment to using imprisonment as the principal means for punishing convicted felons, it is imperative that society ascertain the social, psychological, and economic effects of such confinement on millions of African-American males.*

I will never forget the strange feeling I experienced when I first entered the yard of a large medium/maximum State prison facility approximately four years ago. I had never seen so many African-American men in one place in my entire life, which includes over 18 years of military service. For the first time, I truly understood why there is a shortage of males in the African-American community.

After serving as a clinical social work consultant in a State prison system in the Southeast, and working with hundreds of African-American inmates, it became clear to me that thousands of these young males were spending their late adolescent and early adult years confined to State correctional institutions that breed crime, despair, anger, and frustration. It also was obvious that prisons are a threat to their psychological, social, economic, and physical well-being. More importantly, I realized that most, if not all of these men ultimately would be returned to their communities more confused, angry, and frustrated than they were before their incarceration. Furthermore, it became equally

clear that the African-American communities to which these men would eventually return suffer tremendously for the price they paid for "doing time".

This paper examines the potentially lethal effects imprisonment can have on African-American males. I describe how social, psychological, and health-related problems that many African-American males enter prison with are exacerbated by the prison experience. Finally, I recommend a more rigorous and systematic analysis of the prison experience, and how it affects the mental, physical, psychological, and social well-being of African-American males, particularly those who enter prison with specific economic, social, and psychological problems.

### The Problem

The United States of America has the highest incarceration rate in the world, because it incarcerates more men of African ancestry than any other country on the planet (Hawkins & Jones, 1989). African-American males are incarcerated at a rate (3,109 per 100,000) four times higher than the rate (729 per 100,000) for indigenous South African males (Brazaitis, 1991). Over 48% of all males confined to State prisons in the United States are African-American, even though these males comprise less than 6% of the U.S. population (U.S. Department of Justice, Correctional Populations in the United States, 1989, 1991).

African-American male adolescents and teenagers also are over represented in correctional facilities. For example, African-Americans comprise 15% of the 11 to 17 year old males in the United States, but are approximately 40% of the 11 to 17 year-old males incarcerated in State-operated, long-term juvenile facilities (Statistical Abstract of the U.S., 1990; U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 1988). African-American male adolescents age 11 to 14 comprise 46.7% of the children confined to State-operated long-term facilities even though African-American males comprise approximately 16% of the males in this age group nationally (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 1988; Statistical Abstracts of the U.S., 1990). There are more African-American men confined to jails, State or Federal prisons than there are walking the college and university campuses of this nation (King, 1992). It is not surprising,

therefore, that 60% of all African-American college students are females (Evangelauf, 1992).

### Who really cares?

In the last decade, a significant amount of data have been published and presented at conferences and workshops throughout the United States in an attempt to raise public awareness about the plight of a significant percentage of African-American males (Gary, 1981; Gibbs, 1988; Madhubuti, 1990; Staples, 1987, 1982). African-American scholars have warned that "the Black man is an endangered species," (Gibbs, 1988) and rapidly becoming "obsolete, single, and dangerous" (Madhubuti, 1990). Yet, few social scientists have openly discussed or examined the impact incarceration continues to have on African-American males. Surprisingly, the nation has not heard much protest from the African-American community regarding the disproportionate incarceration of African-American males.

I believe that there are at least three reasons why most African-Americans refuse to discuss this problem publicly. First, some feel that their complaints would draw more negative attention to the African-American community. The media and mainstream social scientists focus so much attention on the weaknesses, problems, and pathologies-real and imagined-of the African-American community, that African-Americans are often overwhelmed by the negative light cast upon their community. Thus, they frequently turn away from additional reports of doom and gloom.

Secondly, African-American men have been overly represented in this nation's State correctional systems for so long that it no longer appears to be unusual for an African-American male teenager or young adult to go to prison. Malcom X once stated that going to prison is what America means to African-American men (Burns, 1971). George Jackson (1970), a former inmate at Soledad prison, wrote that "Black men born in the U.S. and fortunate to live past the age of eighteen are conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison. For most of us, it simply looms as the next phase in a sequence of humiliations" (p. 9).

Finally, many African-Americans do not complain about the disproportionate incarceration of their males because the African experience in this nation has taught them that their complaints frequently fall on deaf ears. There is a strong belief among African-Americans that social problems have to affect large segments of the non-African-American community before the nation responds in any meaningful way.

Human service agencies and professionals also have ignored the plight of incarcerated African-American males. Most social service and mental health agencies do not offer services and programs that address the unique needs of inmates, former inmates, or their families (King, 1992). Even child welfare advocates have been conspicuous in their silence about this matter, even though a disproportionate number of the children whose interests they claim to represent have fathers, brothers, uncles, and cousins warehoused in State prisons from one end of this nation to the other.

Few schools of social work offer courses or concentrations on social work practice in correctional settings. Professional human service associations also have failed to challenge the necessity of incarcerating hundreds of thousands of African-American males from the most impoverished cities and rural communities in this nation. Social work researchers and scholars have completely ignored this problem and its impact on African-American males and their communities.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons why *everyone* in this nation needs to be concerned about the impact of incarceration on African-American males. First, the cost of incarcerating more people per capita than any other nation in the world is staggering. The United States spends nearly 20 billion dollars a year to incarcerate almost 800,000 citizens (Butterfield, 1992). These funds could be better spent rebuilding the nation's infrastructure, improving education, and providing preventive health care for those individuals who can't afford to purchase their own.

Secondly, social work practitioners and scholars who are genuinely concerned about African-American children and senior citizens must be equally concerned about this problem because of its deleterious effect on African-American family

life. The African-American family will never be able to improve the environment in which it nurtures, educates, and raises its children, or cares for its aged without the contributions of both African-American women and men. If a significant percentage of African-American males continue to be subjected to the emotional, psychological, and health-related risks associated with the prison environment then the supply of able-bodied African-American males will continue to dwindle. In turn, the quality of African-American family life also will continue to deteriorate.

Increases in public aid, child care services, or health programs are inadequate replacements for healthy and socially functional males. No group of people can achieve and maintain a relatively stable family life when a significant percentage of its citizenry is handicapped by the lingering and often devastating effects of incarceration.

Most Americans, including professional social workers have no idea what it is like to be in prison. Moreover, few understand the dangers and difficulties that await individuals sentenced to prison in the United States. In order to contribute to the amelioration of this knowledge gap, this paper identifies and describes some of the most obvious effects of imprisonment on African-American males. It also argues the need for additional research to ascertain a greater understanding of these effects on the well-being of African-American males.

### Paying the price

From the beginning, prisons in the United States were designed to punish the incarcerated individual (Sellin, 1976), and this philosophy has not changed much over the last 200 years. Politicians, a wide variety of citizens groups, and even correctional administrators frequently claim that rehabilitation is one of the principal goals of imprisonment. Few people in this country either believe this or desire prisons to make rehabilitation their number one priority. A recent Gallop Report, for example, revealed that less than half of the people polled felt that the purpose of prisons was to rehabilitate the offender (U.S. Department of Justice, Sourcebook of Criminal Statistics 1989, 1990).

In the past, incarcerated individuals were often subjected to brutal physical torture, such as whippings, paddlings, beatings, long hours of meaningless physical labor, and hours running on a treadmill. Even the gainful work inmates were forced to perform in an effort to teach them valuable skills and trades was structured in such a manner that the more obvious goal of punishment seemed more important than any effort to equip a poor illiterate individual with the resources necessary to thrive in a competitive society (Adamson, 1983 & 1984; Sellin, 1976).

Although most forms of physical punishment, other than capital punishment, have been ruled unconstitutional. The goal of imprisonment is still to inflict punishment on the convicted felon. During the latter half of the 20th century, the principal penalty for being convicted of a felony in the United States has been imprisonment for an indeterminate period of time. African-American males have suffered disproportionately as a result of this policy.

#### *Separation from family and community*

The abrogation of an African-American male's freedom, by physically isolating him from familiar surroundings, primarily family, friends, and community, is worse than the treadmill, lash or whip. Social scientists have argued that being separated from family, friends, and community, is probably the most devastating social and psychological experience an African-American person can encounter (Gutman, 1976; Houston, 1990; Lester, 1968; Mellon, 1988; Nobles, 1976). In order to understand this assertion, one has to first understand the general world-view and ethos of African-American people. Although the focus of this paper is not on African-American culture, a brief description of this cultural perspective is imperative to fully comprehend the punishment African-American males experience as a result of being separated from family, friends, and community.

At the center of the African world-view is the group and interpersonal relationships (Baldwin & Bell, 1985; Houston, 1990; Nobles, 1976, 1982; Mbiti, 1990; Richardson, 1989). In other words, African-American people value, above all else, the social relationships they enjoy with other human beings, particularly

family members and friends. These relationships provide people of African ancestry with the emotional, psychological, and spiritual energy needed to maintain intrapersonal harmony and balance, or what mainstream mental health professionals often refer to as a healthy mental outlook.

African-American males have been taught to value and depend upon their social, family, and community relationships for sustenance and strength during good and bad times. Moreover, their identity within the community is tied to the family and extended social relationships they share with a number of African-Americans. This ethos is best expressed in the African proverb, "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am," (Mbiti, 1990: 106). Thus, when African-American males are incarcerated, they are being separated from the source of their identity and reason for being.

The intrapersonal stress generated from being separated from family and community can, and often does, lead to mental health difficulties such as depression and suicide among African-American people (Moore, 1989; Houston, 1990). Moreover, it has been argued that much of the social disorganization in the African-American community can be attributed to those African-Americans, particularly males, "who have failed to establish, maintain, or reestablish meaningful interpersonal relationships" (Houston, 1990: 149). Anyone who has worked closely with African-American men in and outside of juvenile and adult correctional institutions would agree that African-American males are particularly susceptible to feelings of alienation.

The fact that African-American men have a suicide rate six times higher than African-American women lends further support to this contention (U.S. Statistical Abstract, 1990). Unfortunately, the U.S. Department of Justice does not report inmate suicide rates according to race, and therefore, one cannot determine what percentage of the 100 or so suicides that take place each year in State and Federal prisons are committed by African-American males. Given their cultural orientation there is a need to ascertain the relationship between incarceration and suicide among African-American male inmates.



In addition, incarcerated African-American males experience a great deal of stress related to the violence that frequently permeates correctional institutions. The boredom, and uncertainty regarding when their prison sentence will end also contributes to the high level of stress that incarcerated African-American males experience. Since prisons reflect the values and attitudes of the larger society, African-American males also have to cope with prejudice and institutional racism in correctional settings, which increases and intensifies the level of stress they experience.

### *Destabilization of family life and relationships*

Given the overwhelming presence of African-American males in U.S. prisons, it is not surprising that in 1990, only 35.8% of all African-American households were married couples. The excessive incarceration rates of these males is partially responsible for the fact that in 1989, only 38% of all African-American children under the age of 18 lived with both parents, and 51% lived with their mothers only (U.S Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1991, 1992). Similarly the imprisonment of African-American males contributes to large numbers of poor female headed households in the African-American community. Over the last two decades this problem has reached epidemic proportions. In 1987, African-American children under the age of six and living with their mother represented 75% of the African-American children in poverty (Statistical Abstracts of the U.S., 1991).

Incarceration exacerbates any existing family and social problems these African-American male inmates and their families experienced prior to incarceration. The confinement of fathers, sons, uncles, and brothers creates a host of new problems for the families they leave behind. Most notably economic hardship, emotional distress, and strained interpersonal relationships (King, 1992).

There is a paucity of research, particularly longitudinal studies, concerning the impact incarceration has on the family life and relationships of African-American inmates and their families, despite the fact that for over a century their communities have endured the havoc that imprisonment emanates on the families and family relationships of these males (Christianson,

1981). This inattention and "neglect represents an astonishing admission on the part of the intellectual community and society as a whole" (Christianson, 1981: 369).

#### *Loss of personal autonomy*

The abrogation of the African-American male's freedom also undermines his right to choose the people with whom he wishes to associate and when. The revocation of this basic human entitlement further erodes what little sense of social and political autonomy they enjoy in this country, and increases feelings of personal desperation, helplessness, and dependence. Furthermore, the rigid, authoritarian, and emasculating organizational structure and environment that characterizes State and Federal correctional settings encourages and rewards inmates for assuming a dependent posture. This experience undermines the incarcerated African-American male's capacity and willingness to think and act independent of coercive or authoritarian influence (Lichtenstein & Kroll, 1990).

Studies have found that "model" inmates have a more difficult time adjusting to the outside world, while more rebellious inmates have a less difficult time adjusting (Newton, 1980; Goodstein, 1979). After years of being told when to get up, when to eat, what to eat, and how to eat, "It is unrealistic to expect [ex-prisoners] to function as autonomous and independent individuals in society after their release" (Lichtenstein & Kroll, 1990: 12).

#### *Imprisonment and health status*

In spite of laws that prohibit correctional staff from physically harming an inmate, the prison environment can pose a significant threat to the physical health of incarcerated African-American males. Imprisonment exposes inmates to dangerous individuals and life-threatening conditions, such as violent assaults, drugs, rape, the HIV, and AIDS.

##### *Prison violence*

Correctional settings are often more violent than the streets. In 1973, the national homicide victimization rate in State prisons was 74.4 per 100,000 inmates, compared to 9.4 per 100,000 residents in the general United States population (Newton, 1980). Hence, the victimization rate in State prisons was over seven

times that found in the general population. Even when the homicide victimization rate in State prisons is compared with the high African-American male homicide rate in the general population the disparity remains. For example, in 1970 and 1975, the homicide rate for African-American males was 67.6 and 69.0, respectively, per 100,000 male residents (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States:1991, 1992). In 1988, the African-American male homicide rate was 58 per 100,000 male residents in the general population (U. S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1991, 1992).

Admittedly, the homicide rate for certain age cohorts of African-American males surpasses the rate cited for State prisons. In 1986, Twenty to twenty-four year old African-American males had a homicide rate of 100 per 100,000, and the rate for 25-34 year old African-American males was 104.3 per 100,000 African-American males in the resident population (U. S. Department of Justice, Black Victims, 1990). The point, however, is that prisons-like urban blight, poverty, and unemployment-breed anger, desperation, and frustration. These are all emotions that frequently lead to interpersonal violence and unhealthy social behavior.

#### *Drugs and prisons*

The consumption of drugs and the drug trade flourish within prison walls (Bowker, 1977). With the massive incarceration of younger inmates who have grown up within a more permissive drug using society, drugs in the prison system has become a more serious problem (Bowker, 1977). Moreover, a significant percentage of the individuals sentenced to State prisons either have serious drug use problems or were using a drug (alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, or crack) when they committed their crime.

Some studies indicate that maximum security institutions have more serious drug problems than less restricted correctional institutions (Bowker, 1977; Akers, Hayner, Gruninger, 1974). Inmates have told me that drugs in prison are better (more powerful or pure) than drugs on the streets. It has also been reported that some correctional staff ignore the use of some drugs such as marijuana because it tends to "mellow-out" inmates and reduce prison violence. In addition, social workers

in correctional institutions frequently lament how difficult it is to provide drug treatment to inmates, because the prevalence of illegal drugs in prisons makes maintaining a "drug free" environment difficult at best, and impossible in most cases.

The prison drug trade often leads to violence among inmates. Disagreements over drug turf within the prison, the absence of sufficient drugs to meet the demand, and outstanding debts incurred for the purchase of drugs fuels inmate conflicts that frequently result in violence. Violence also erupts when intoxicated inmates argue over daily living conditions or violations of personal codes of conduct. Ironically, the same types of drug related activities and violence that results in the deaths of thousands of African-American males in the U. S. every year also threaten the lives of African-American men inside of prisons.

#### *Homosexual assaults*

Homosexuality has long been a major feature of prison life. Some men were involved in homosexual relationships prior to being incarcerated, others engage in consensual homosexual relations only while incarcerated. Many, incarcerated inmates do not engage in homosexual sex. Nevertheless, homosexual assault or rape is a problem that endangers the physical health and well-being of incarcerated African-American males. According to a United States Prisons Bureau investigation, "five of eight homicides that occurred (in one prison) between March 1974 and May 1976, were motivated by homosexual activity" Newton (1980: 140). Moreover, random surveys of State prisons have discovered that over 25% of inmates were targets of sexual attacks at least once during incarceration (Newton, 1980). Usually, smaller (in size) and less aggressive inmates are singled out for sexual attacks (Bowker, 1977; Heffernan, 1972; Newton, 1980).

Since age is somewhat correlated with physical size, the younger the inmate, the greater the probability of a sexual assault. Over the last decade more youthful offenders, including teenagers, and young, adults between the ages of 17 and 25, were incarcerated in adult institutions than in previous years. A significant percentage of these younger and smaller inmates are African-Americans.

Without studies that routinely measure the incidence of homosexual assaults in State prisons, it is difficult to determine with any precision the number of young African-American males who are victims of homosexual assaults. Nevertheless, it is clear that they are at risk for this type of violent attack. It is imperative that social scientists and correctional institutions study this problem. In addition to being a *direct* threat to the immediate physical and emotional health of young African-American male inmates, homosexual assaults also pose a significant *long-term* threat to the health of this population and the entire African-American community.

*Increased exposure to the HIV and AIDS*

Another threat to the physical health and well-being of incarcerated African-American males is the HIV and AIDS. The recent increase in the incarceration rate of intravenous drug abusers, and the tendency of many male inmates to engage in homosexual acts, exposes a significant portion of African-American males to HIV positive individuals (Dubler-Neveloff & Sidel, 1989). African-American males are already disproportionately represented among AIDS cases and deaths from AIDS, and AIDS related diseases (Health Status of the Disadvantaged CHARTBOOK, 1990).

Imprisonment only exacerbates a very serious public health problem among African-American males. In 1990, the national AIDS incidence rate was 17 cases per 100,000 residents (CDC, HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, November 1990). The AIDS incidence rate among State and Federal prisons during that same year was 181 per 100,000 inmates (Hammett & Daugherty, 1991). As of 1990, 2,125 inmates in State and Federal Prisons had died of AIDS (Hammett & Daugherty, 1991). Since 1987, AIDS has been the leading cause of death among male inmates in the Maryland correctional system, a correctional system where approximately 74% of the inmates are African-American males (U.S. Department of Justice, Correctional Populations in the United States, 1989, 1991). Moreover, AIDS among inmates in State correctional institutions has yet to level off. Eighty-eight percent and 38%, respectively, of the incoming inmates in the North Carolina and New York State prison systems who tested seropositive for the HIV were African-American males (Eales,

1990; New York State Department of Health, Bureau of Communicable Diseases, 1990).

The imprisonment of African-American males also exposes more African-American women to the HIV. African-American women are already overrepresented among HIV and AIDS victims. For example, African and Hispanic-American women comprise only 19% of all women in the United States, but they are 72% of the females diagnosed with AIDS (Center for Disease Control, 1990). Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of incarcerated African-American males will eventually return to their communities. If they are infected with the HIV while in prison, they will become a major source for the spread of AIDS in their communities, particularly among heterosexual and intravenous drug using women. Eight-three percent of all women who have the HIV were exposed through intravenous drug use (32%) or heterosexual contact (51%) (Centers for Disease Control, 1990).

Correctional institutions have begun to recognize the seriousness of AIDS and the HIV (Dubler-Neveloff & Sidel, 1989). Five correctional systems (Mississippi, Vermont, New York City, San Francisco, and Philadelphia) now make condoms available to inmates (Hammett & Daugherty, 1989). In addition, "...inmates in several correctional systems are given explicit education on methods for cleaning needles" (U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1989: 4).

### *Stigmatized for life*

In addition, to the aforementioned problems, prison records stigmatize African-American males for the duration of their lives. The stigma begins to affect the future of African-American inmates before they leave prison by limiting their chances of obtaining parole or release. In most State correctional systems inmates being considered for parole must have a job before parole will be granted. I knew African-American inmates who were not paroled or allowed to participate in early or pre-release programs because they were unable to secure a job before being released from prison.

Obviously, being in prison reduces the inmates' job hunting effectiveness. As a result, many inmates must depend upon

friends and family members to find jobs for them in order to meet pre-release or parole requirements. African-American male inmates and their families are disproportionately poor and lack the social networks and resources required to locate employment. Consequently, such job requirements reduce the likelihood that these inmates will gain access to early and pre-release programs, and parole. Statistics that describe who receives parole from State prisons support my clinical observations.

African-American males are not paroled from State prisons at the same rate that they are incarcerated. In 1989, there were 435,385 adults on parole under State jurisdiction (U.S. Department of Justice, *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1989, 1990*). Only 39% of these State parolees were African-Americans, despite the fact that during the same year over 48% of all State inmates were African-American males (U.S. Department of Justice, *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1989, 1991*).

In addition, policies that require inmates to find employment as a condition of admission into pre-release or work release programs or parole, also discriminate against African-American male inmates on the basis of their educational and employment backgrounds. State prisons across this nation house almost 800,000 of the poorest, least educated, and unskilled individuals of this society. The median years of education for State inmates in 1986 was 10, and 35% had less than a 10th grade education (U.S. Department of Justice, *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1986, 1989*).

African-American males are the least educated, least skilled, and have the highest unemployment rate among major minority groups in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1991*). Their participation in the illegal drug trade and other property offenses, and their subsequent incarceration for committing these crimes, can be attributed to their marginal economic status (Lichtenstein & Kroll, 1990). Yet, once they are incarcerated, African-American male inmates find it exceedingly difficult to secure their release from prison because they are poorly educated and lack marketable job skills. This is a cruel Catch 22 situation for African-American male inmates.

A term in prison stigmatizes African-American males to the extent that they find it more difficult to support themselves once they are released from prison. Their "ex-convict" status makes it more difficult for them to obtain credit, jobs, training opportunities, and education. Consequently, African-American "ex-convicts" are practically forced to engage in criminal activities in order to support themselves and their families. Since 90% of the crimes African-American males commit are against other African-Americans, the entire African-American community suffers when their males go to prison and are released no more prepared to function in a highly competitive economy than they were before they were incarcerated (U.S. Department of Justice, *Black Victims*, 1991).

#### *Effect on self-worth*

It is not clear what effect being an "ex-convict" has on the self-concept of African-American males. It doesn't appear, however, that going to prison improves one's social status in the eyes of the *general* African-American community or the larger society. Nevertheless, some people argue that the status and respect accorded young African-American males who have served time in prison by gangs and delinquent youth offsets any negative sanctions levied by the larger African-American community. This may be the case for a small percentage of incarcerated African-American males, especially those who are extremely young and involved in gangs, but one would be hard pressed to demonstrate that this is the case for the majority of African-American males who serve time in prison. Most of the African-American males who are presently incarcerated in state prisons across this nation are not members of gangs. Hence, their personal reference groups tend to be located within the larger African-American community which abhors violence and criminal behavior.

I worked intimately with African-American male inmates age 17-60, for over 2 years, and not one ever stated or suggested to me that going to prison was going to enhance his life chances and make him a hit in the neighborhood. As a matter of fact, the exact opposite was typically the case. Since the doors of opportunity and advancement in the labor market do not open



as easily (or maybe at all) when one has served a sentence in prison, and one is labeled a deviant for the rest of his life, it can be surmised that serving time in prison can and does undermine the self-worth of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated African-American males.

### Conclusions

African-American males have comprised a disproportionate percentage of the inmates in State correctional institutions for over 100 years. I was unable to locate any studies that attempted to discern the impact of imprisonment on these males. Although some scholars have identified African-American males as a vulnerable population, few social scientists have discussed or investigated the impact of incarceration on millions of African-American males and their communities. This neglect lends credence to Scott Christianson's (1981) statement: "The public wastes little sympathy on prisoners, particularly black prisoners" (p. 370).

Based upon the data presented in this paper and my clinical experiences, imprisonment has a negative effect on the mental and physical health and well-being of African-American males. Moreover, the emotional and psychological hazards of prison life exacerbate the social, health, and economic problems that accompany many African-American males to prison.

Upon their release from prison African-American males return to their communities a caldron of emotional, health, and psychological turmoil. Their emotional, economic, and health problems and concerns contribute to the high rates of drug abuse, and violence in the African-American community. This, in turn, contributes to the extremely high recidivism rate among formerly incarcerated African-American males.

This nation's policy of incarcerating convicted felons, particularly African-American males, at record rates requires a greater understanding of the effects this experience has on these individuals and the communities and neighborhoods to which they ultimately return. No social policy, no matter how well intentioned should be allowed to consume so much of the nation's resources and affect the lives of so many people without a relatively clear understanding of its latent effects.

To continue to ignore the apparent relationship between imprisonment, future criminal behavior, community unrest and violence, is unforgivable, and based upon my observations forces the African-American community to pay a terrible price for the time African-American males serve in prisons.

### References

- Adamson, K. (1983). Punishment after slavery: Southern State penal systems, 1865–1890. *Social Problems*, 30(5), 555–569.
- Adamson, K. (1984). Toward a Marxian penology: Captive criminal populations as economic threats and resources. *Social Problems*, 31(4), 435–458.
- Akers, R. L., Hayner, N. S., and Gruninger, W. (1974). Homosexual and drug behavior in prison: A test of the functional and importation models of the inmate system. *Social Problems*, 21(7), 410–422.
- Baldwin, J. A. & Bell, Y. R. (1985). The African self-consciousness scale: An Africentric personality questionnaire. *The Western Journal of Black Studies*. 9(2), 61–68.
- Bowker, L. H. (1974). *Prison subcultures*. Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books.
- Brazaitis, T. J. (1991, January 4). U.S. is the world's top jailer with high crime, tough laws. *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 1–A, 11–A.
- Burns, H. (1971). The black prisoner as victim, *Black Law Journal*, 4.
- Butterfield, F. (1992, February 11). U. S. expands its lead in the rate of imprisonment. *The New York Times*, C18.
- Cahlan, M. (1979). Trends in incarceration in the United States since 1880: A summary of reported rates and the distribution of offenses. *Crime & Delinquency*, 23(1), 9–41/
- Center for Disease Control. (1990). *HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report*, January.
- Center for Disease Control. (1990). AIDS in women-United States, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, November, 30.
- Christianson, S. (1981). Our black prisons. *Crime & Delinquency*, 25, 365–375.
- Dubler-Neveloff, N. & Sidel, V. W. (1989). On research on HIV infection and AIDS in correctional institutions. *The Milbank Quarterly*, 67(2), 171–207.
- Eales, P. (1990). The seroprevalence of HIV infection in all incoming inmates admitted to the North Carolina Department of Correction, November 1989 - April 1990, *North Carolina Department of Corrections*, May.
- Evangelou, J. (1992, January 22). Minority-group enrollment at colleges rose 10% from 1988 to 1990, reaching record levels. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, pp. A33, A37.
- Gary, L. E. (Ed.). (1981). *Black men*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Gibbs, J. T. (Ed.). (1988). *Young, black, and male in America: An endangered species*, NY: Auburn House.
- Goodstein, L. (1979). Inmate adjustment to prison and the transition to community life. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 16(2), 246–272.

- Gutman, H. G. (1976). *The black family in slavery and freedom, 1750 - 1925*. NY: Pantheon Books.
- Hammett, T. M. (1989). *AIDS and HIV training and education in criminal justice agencies*. U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice. Washington, D. C: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- Hammett, T. M. & Daugherty, A. L. (1991). *AIDS in correctional facilities: Issues and options*. (Prepublication Draft) . National Institute of Justice. Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Hawkins, D. F. & Jones, N. E. (1989). Black adolescents and the criminal justice system. In R. L. Jones (Ed.), *Black adolescents*. (pp. 403–425). Hampton, VA: Cobb & Henry.
- Heffernan, E. (1972). *Making it in prison: The square, the cool, and the life*. NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Houston, L. N. (1990). *Psychological principles and the black experience*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Jackson, G. (1970). *Soledad brother: The Prison letters of George Jackson*. NY: Bantam.
- King, A. E. O. (1992). *The impact of incarceration on African-American families: Implications for social work practice and service delivery*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Lester, J. (1968). *To be a slave*. NY: Dell Publishing Company, Inc.
- Lichtenstein, A. C. & Kroll, M. A. (1990). *The fortress economy: The economic role of the U.S. prison system*. Philadelphia, PA: American Friends Service Committee.
- Madhubuti, H. R. (1990). *Black men, obsolete, single, and dangerous?: The African-American family in transition*. Chicago: Third World Press.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1989). *African religions and philosophy*. (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Moore-Campbell, B. (1989). To be Black, gifted, and alone. In N. Hare, & Hare, J. (Eds.), *Crisis in black sexual politics*. (pp. 127–136). San Francisco: Black Think Tank.
- Mellon, J. (Ed.). (1988). *Bullwhip days, the slaves remember: An oral history*. NY: Avon Books.
- New York State Department of Health, Bureau of Communicable Diseases (1990). *AIDS Surveillance Monthly Update for Cases Reported through September 1990*.
- Newton, A. (1980). The effects of imprisonment. *Criminal Justice Abstracts*, 12(1), 134–151.
- Nobles, W. W. (1982). The reclamation of culture and the right to reconciliation: An Afro-centric perspective on developing and implementing programs for the mentally retarded offender. In A. R. Harvey & T. L. Carr (Eds.), *The black mentally retarded offender: A holistic approach to preventions and habilitation*. NY: United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice.

- Nobles, W. W. (1976). Black people in white insanity: An issue for black community mental health. *Journal of Afro-American Issues*, 4 (1), 21–27.
- Richardson, D. M. (1990). *Let the circle be unbroken: The implications of African spirituality in the diaspora*. Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press.
- Sellin, T. (1976). *Slavery and the Penal system*. NY: Elsevier.
- Staples, R. (1987). Black male genocide: A final solution to the race problem in America. *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies & Research*, 18(3), 2–11.
- Staples, R. (1982). *Black masculinity: The black males role in American society*. San Francisco: The Black Scholar Press.
- U. S. Bureau of the Census. (1991). *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1990*. (110th edition). Washington, D.C: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- U. S. Bureau of the Census. (1992). *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1991*. (111th edition). Washington, D.C: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (1991). *Health status of the disadvantaged, CHARTBOOK*. Washington, D. C: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin. (1991). *Prisoners in 1990*. (NCJ–129198). Washington, D. C: U. S. Government Printing office.
- U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (1991). *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1989*. (NCJ–130–445). Washington, D.C: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (1991). *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1988*. (NCJ–124280). Washington, D.C: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (1990). *SOURCEBOOK of Criminal Justice Statistics–1989*. (NCJ–124224). Washington, D.C.: U. A. Government Printing Office.
- U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (1990). *Black Victims*. (NCJ–124544). Washington, D. C: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (1989). *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1986*. (NCJ–111611). Washington, D.C: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. (1988). *Survey of Youth in Custody, 1987*. (NCJ–113365). Washington, D. C: U. S. Government Printing Office.

I would like to thank Thereasa Benton, Richard Edwards, Sharon Milligan, and Mark Singer for reviewing this manuscript. I also would like to thank all of the African-American males who are using their time in prison to become more confident, competent, and conscious.

