

**Secondary Prisonization: The Effects of Involuntary Separation on  
Families of Incarcerated African American Men**

**By  
Hassan Bailey**

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Chairperson Dr. Shawn Alexander

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Dr. Dorthy Pennington

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Dr. Ebenezer Obadare

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The Thesis Committee for Hassan Bailey certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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## **Abstract**

The analysis of this present study focuses on the impact and resiliencies of African American families due to involuntary separation of the husband/father from incarceration. This analysis studies the financial and emotional impact while also examining coping mechanisms from family support to religious involvement. It notes that the criminal justice system in the U.S. is disproportionately populated when it comes to minorities and that poor and underprivileged offenders are more likely to do more time and serve longer sentences than more affluent offenders. Thus, when the system punishes the offender, it also punishes his family. Five interviews of selected offender's wives/girlfriends were conducted to test the level of impact. Using the grounded theory of narratives, the text argues that although the studied subjects were impacted negatively, their impact was minimized with the help of family and religious support.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Our society—the society we have made—creates criminogenic conditions in our sprawling urban ghettos, and then acts out rituals of punishment against them as some awful form of human sacrifice. -- Glenn C. Loury

Since the late 1960s and early 70s, the American criminal justice system began the phenomenon the “Prison Boom.” The numbers of men and women funneled through the system after this time increased dramatically. Most of this rise occurred during the 1980s with the emergence of new and tougher drug laws. During 2009, a staggering 7.2 million people were under some form of correctional supervision whether it be probation or parole, prison or jail. Of this 7.2 million, more than 1.6 million prisoners were under the jurisdiction or legal authority of state and federal correctional institutions, while 746,620 inmates were held in custody in local jails.<sup>1</sup> This can be classified as the era of “mass incarceration”.

This present study shows that current trends of the criminal justice system suggest that this new system was constructed for a purpose other than responding to the United States’ crime rate. In fact, while the number of people in the correctional population skyrocketed, crime rates have decreased. Statistics show that the incarceration rate grew

steadily during the period between 1970 and 2000, while serious crimes reported to the police increased in the 1970s and declined in the 1990s, clearly showing that the incarceration rate is not correlated to the crime rate.<sup>ii</sup> Political campaigns and media purposefully manipulated the public's perception using skewed statistics and negative images, targeting specific races and ethnicities. For example, studies show that between 1992 and 1996, the homicide rate showed a 20% decline but there was a 721% increase in coverage of homicides on major news channels. Political campaigns sought to increase the concern over crime in the American public. For instance, from 1990 to 2000, the arrest rate for index crimes declined 6.6%. Despite this fact, in 2000, politics of inequality<sup>3</sup> influenced 47% of the American population in believing that there was more crime in the United States than the year before.<sup>4</sup>

Other trends reveal that prisons are becoming more punitive and less rehabilitative. Recidivism rates have also reached new heights. In a 15 state study, out of nearly 300,000 prisoners who were released, more than two-thirds (67.5) were rearrested within three years.<sup>5</sup> Parolees violating terms of parole between 1990 and 1999 increased. In 1990, 131,500 parole violators were sent back to prison and by 1999 that number increased to 200,000. Prisons across the United States have cut back on education programs. In 1982, prisons had up to 350 college programs whereas by 2001, that number had decreased to less than a dozen.<sup>6</sup>

The final and most disturbing trend is that the prison system targets the marginalized and underprivileged. It's almost impossible to talk about prisons today without talking about race and ethnicity. This study details, in Chapter 2, that there is a disproportionate number of African American and Hispanic men in the system. The

majority of prisoners in the criminal justice system are uneducated and poor. For example, African Americans make up 48.2% of adults in federal, state, and local jails while making up 12.7% of the U. S. population. Statistics from the 1998 federal National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) show that out of the total number of drug users, 72% were white and 15% were black. In 1996, 36% of jail inmates were unemployed prior to incarceration and 64% had monthly incomes under \$1000 in the month before their arrest.<sup>7</sup> The bottom line here is that the prison system is growing disproportionately and at a rapid rate.

The population mostly impacted by mass incarceration is African Americans and their communities. Michelle Alexander attests that the strain on the African American community may be potentially greater than that experienced by any other ethnic group. The above statistics show that African American men are disproportionately incarcerated when compared to any other race or ethnicity. In the era of mass incarceration, more African American men are being jailed today than in 1850 when slavery was still in practice.<sup>8</sup> Released from prison, these men fall into a new social caste system of legal discrimination. Voting, higher education, and employment rights, among others are revoked, many cases permanently.<sup>9</sup>

With its contribution to the already high rate of single-parent families, the prison system has a unique way of institutionalizing the family. With high levels of incarceration among African American men, African American families become more vulnerable to economic, social, and psychological consequences. In general, African American families experience hardships on a daily basis, and the incarceration of a primary caretaker can often lead to more economic and psychological problems. This

weakens the African American family, for they too become victims of the prison system. They too feel a sense of imprisonment when their significant other is involuntarily separated. The process of dealing with an incarcerated mate can be financially and emotionally draining and place a heavy burden on these women. When public services fail, it forces the family to rely on other resources primarily family members and religion. Thus, not only does mass incarceration punish the inmate, it punishes the family as well. With the African American community experiencing the hardships of from poverty, which inevitably breeds criminogenic conditions, this human sacrifice that Glenn Loury speaks of in the above quotation spreads from the inmate to the family as they too become destabilized.<sup>10</sup>

Where does this leave their families and how severely are they impacted? What are the effects on the children? What are their coping strategies and how do they adjust and respond to the criminal justice system? This present study focuses on these questions and will contribute to the overall literature of African American families by studying married and unmarried African American relationships. This study argues that the examination of African American families affected by the criminal justice system is a major constituent of this mass incarceration phenomenon and is essential in order to understand the full scope of its injustice.

The reviewed literature focuses primarily on the phenomenon of mass incarceration. The first section of literature discusses the above trends in further detail. The social injustice among African American families became of primary concern due to their overwhelming involvement in the United States criminal justice system. As stated, the majority of these men come from low-income, inner-city communities. With high

levels of incarceration, the premise is, that which affects the inmate affects the family. My purpose was to understand the history, inner-workings, and explore trends of the criminal justice system, while also understanding the necessary components of mass imprisonment. The last section reviews literature of the impact on African American families by the prison system, then ends with a discussion on approaches to studying African American families.

Recent punishment policies, to the contrary, have destabilized disadvantaged inner-city communities, without significantly reducing crime or achieving their ostensible objectives. -- Michael Tonry

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

This study examines two disturbing elements in the United States criminal justice system. First, mass imprisonment, coined by sociologist David Garland, refers to the high rate of incarceration in contemporary times, and second, the significant and increasing inequality particularly in regards to the disproportionate number of incarcerated African Americans. These two elements are virtually inseparable in the discourse on race and ethnicities. African American men outnumber other races and ethnicities across the country in terms of incarceration, more specifically, young black males who are high school dropouts in underclass communities.<sup>11</sup> This comes at a crucial time in a man's life where he begins, defends, and supports a family of his own. Due to African American men being the majority of incarcerated inmates, this study focuses on the impact of this phenomenon on the African American family.

### **American Prison Boom**

There are many differences of theories among scholars as to the cause of mass imprisonment, although because of staggering statistics, all are forced to agree that African American men are indeed the main patrons of this newly evolving system. The

purpose of reviewing this literature was to examine the complexities and popular trends of this new phenomenon in order to better understand and evaluate the conditions of my personal research of mass imprisonment's effect on the African American family. The literature reviewed mainly highlights the debilitating effect of the African American underclass family and its many contributing factors, although this particular study focuses specifically on the effects of mass imprisonment and its use of *secondary prisonization*.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the United States prison system went through a major reform. Its form of punishment changed from cruelty, corporal punishment, and repression to rehabilitative programs. Two institutions in New York and Pennsylvania led the way of this reform. A Quaker-inspired method had an immense influence on the rest of America's prisons and the larger global community. In 1829, Eastern State Penitentiary of Pennsylvania opened and broke away from the common operations. The word penitentiary was coined to describe a place of confinement that was more designed to reform the prisoner rather than merely punish him. The Pennsylvania Quakers used this word and their prison reform agenda to represent self-examination and penitence as a way to salvation.<sup>12</sup> Nearly two centuries later, America's prison system reverted back to its old repressive and punitive ways. According to the Shah, "51.8% of prisoners released in 1994 found themselves back in prison." In conducting a 15 state study, the research associates concluded that in 1983, only 62.5% inmates were rearrested whereas in 1994, over two-thirds (roughly 67.5%) of prisoners released were rearrested within three years.<sup>13</sup>

The history of *mass imprisonment* goes back only 40 years and is a fairly new phenomenon of the United States criminal justice system with respect to its history. The

basic facts show that the United States prison system is growing at a dramatic rate. Many scholarly studies have concluded that between 1970 and 2003, state and federal prisons grew sevenfold to incarcerate 1.4 million convicted felons who were serving at least one year. During this time, scholars such as Bruce Western have found that offenders in county jail serving shorter sentences, or offenders awaiting trial, added another 700,000 felons by 2003. The number of men would increase by another 4.7 million from those who were under probation or parole supervision. Therefore, there were nearly seven million men in the entire correctional population of the United States in 2003, which is 6% of the adult male population and .7% of the entire United States.<sup>14</sup>

Western also found that when compared to other developed nations, the scale of the U.S. system dwarfs its counterparts. From 1983 to 2001, the United States' prison population grew from 275 men per 100,000 to 686 per 100,000. In other Western nations, their numbers are far lower: the United Kingdom growing from 87 to 126 per 100,000, Sweden from 65 to 68, the Netherlands from 28 to 95, Italy from 64 to 95, France from 68 to 7, and Germany decreasing from 103 to 96. Even repressive regimes such as China and Iran do not compare with the U.S.<sup>15</sup>

It appears that America's "get tough on crime" policies have worked, seeing that so many men were incarcerated during this time. But, due to its overrepresentation of a particular few, we will see that the system is actually severely flawed. The 'tough on crime' movement refers to a set of policies that emphasize punishment as a primary, and often sole, response to crime. Mandatory sentencing, three strikes, truth-in-sentencing, quality of life policing, zero tolerance, and various other proposals that result in longer and harsher penalties and the elimination of rehabilitation and other programs are all

contemporary examples of ‘tough on crime’ policies.<sup>16</sup> One would be led to think that since the incarceration rates are high, that the crime rates are low. This is not so. The get tough on crime theory rests on the notion that if you lengthen the sentences for a particular crime, then that will deter individuals from committing this particular crime. For example, if the law lengthened the sentence for assault from one year to five years, this would discourage individuals from committing crime based solely on the severity of the sentence. The increase in incarceration is not in response to increase in crime; rather it is due to social and political influences over crime control legislation.

Western uses two insights to analyze this point:

- Sociology of Politics – state powers rest on social inequality, prison boom was a white response to the civil rights movement and rising violence in the black community due to low education and high unemployment rates.

- Sociology of Crime – the normal sequence of life course stages (completing school, finding a job, getting married, and starting a family) is disrupted due to incarceration making the re-acclimation process difficult.<sup>17</sup>

### **Racial Injustice**

Western dates the new “prison boom” back to politics and the presidential election of 1964 and Republican candidate Barry Goldwater. Although Goldwater had no basis of crime trends or public opinion, he warned the public of the country’s growing menace of crime and disorder as a threat to our personal safety, property, and ultimately freedom. During this time, Western attests that fewer than 4% of Americans considered crime as the country’s most important problem as opposed to foreign affairs or civil

rights. Republicans associated civil rights with street crimes, and the civil unrest of whites in regard to the Civil Rights Movement, placed crime on the national agenda.<sup>18</sup>

Michelle Alexander takes Western's argument a step further by positioning the beginning of mass incarceration specifically within the Civil Rights Act of 1964, where racial issues became a national concern and the search for new strategies to be developed to quell the advancement of the majority of blacks with newfound power and right became a priority.<sup>19</sup> She explains it as an "intense controversy over the implementation of the equality principle."<sup>20</sup> Coupled with the Poor People's Movement, civil right activism and protests were a threat to conservative whites and their racial order. Throughout the history of blacks in America, Alexander argues that since the ending of slavery, conservative whites have always been in search of new means of social control according to the new rules of American democracy. She claims that the "law and order" rhetoric was officially mobilized by Southern governors and law enforcement officials during the Jim Crow era with the intent of mobilizing white opposition to the Civil Rights Movement and putting the majority of blacks back in their place by using race neutral language.

As Jim Crow replaced slavery, mass incarceration replaced the old Jim Crow. As civil rights activists protested with direct action, Southern governors and law enforcement officials claimed these actions were criminal and a threat to the existing law and order. Using crime to mask race, conservative whites were seeing blacks, not crime, as America's number one threat and began to exploit black crime as national crime. New political rhetoric against crime grouped civil rights activism with everyday, violent "street crimes". After the Civil Rights Act, public debate went from segregation to

crime, effectively grouping crime policies to racial ideology. Intense resentment to racial reform programs, such as The New Deal by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, from the poor and working class whites led conservative Republicans to appeal to racial fears and antagonisms and use southern racial strategies for the purpose of creating a “new majority,” one that would support harsh new crime policies.<sup>21</sup>

As president of the United States, Richard M. Nixon advocated for his administration to use similar racial strategies. “H.R. Haldeman, one of Nixon’s key advisors, recalls that Nixon himself deliberately pursued a southern, racial strategy: ‘[President Nixon] emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to.’”<sup>22</sup> Nixon was known for subliminal appealing to the anti-black, racist voter.

Republican strategists argued for a restructuring of the new Republican majority of the South that would “campaign primarily on the basis of racial issues, using coded anti-black rhetoric,” in the hopes that they could appeal to the racial resentment of southern democrats who had become restless and alienated from the Democratic Party’s support for civil rights reform, and could be persuaded to join the Republican Party.<sup>23</sup> In 1965, the damage of the Moynihan Report by Daniel Patrick Moynihan added salt to an already malignant wound creating a disturbing image. In his report on the black family in America, Moynihan concluded that poverty is the result of culture, particularly black culture, rather than economics or class. Like many scholars who focus only on the weaknesses of the black family, Moynihan grouped and described their lives as a entanglement of social pathologies that included street crime, illegal drug use, and

delinquency, while these pathologies continuously reproduce themselves and are passed along from generation to generation.

Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign's central theme was "law and order." Using Moynihan's "culture of poverty" rhetoric, "Nixon dedicated seventeen speeches solely to the topic of law and order, and one of his television ads explicitly called for voters to reject the lawlessness of civil rights activists and embrace 'order' in the United States."<sup>24</sup> During the 1968 election and for the purpose of law and order, class had taken a backseat to race, and racial issues claimed America's priority over socioeconomic status. As Thomas and Mary Edsall explain in their book *Chain Reaction*, the low and lower class whites had deep resentment for living under the same conditions as, and competing for, employment and education with the new progressive blacks. They attest that "the pitting of whites and blacks at the low end of the income distribution against each other intensified the view among many whites that the condition of life for the disadvantaged—particularly for disadvantaged blacks—is the responsibility of those afflicted, and not the responsibility of the larger society," fueling the reasons for the poor and lower class whites' resistance to desegregation, busing, and civil rights enforcement.<sup>25</sup>

With the new realigned race relations coupled with rising crime rates of the 1960's and 70's, the law and order rhetoric took hold among the poor and working class whites, particularly the southerners, and the "war on crime" by the Nixon administration was declared. In his 1970 State of the Union address, "Richard Nixon declared war on 'the criminal elements, which increasingly threaten our cities, our homes, and our lives.'"<sup>26</sup>

In 1982, Ronald Reagan continues the campaign and established the “war on drugs” which would introduce mandatory federal prison sentences for drug offenders.<sup>27</sup> First lady Nancy Reagan also joined in with the “Just say No” slogan in support of the “war on drugs” agenda. Obviously this declaration was not due to public concern. Reagan declared this war at a time when less than 2% of the American population viewed drugs as a priority issue. This deepened the backlash against African Americans. Reagan effectively accomplished this by two elements: 1) manipulating the public’s perception using a new weapon, the media, and 2) by taking street crimes out of the hands of local and state law enforcement and making it a federal concern.

Some scholars such as Michael Tonry attest that the conservative Republican agenda was to convert the topics of criminal justice and social welfare from subjects of policy to objects of politics. To appease the poor and working class whites’ negative feelings and resentments about such topics and to further his own agenda, Reagan and his administration used the media to paint a picture of crime and welfare at the expense of African Americans.<sup>28</sup> Caricaturing of Willie Horton, who is characterized as the violent, useless, black criminal, and Linda Taylor the “Welfare Queen” who is characterized as a lazy, greedy, black mother, Reagan and his administration effectively put a black face on America’s two most pressing domestic issues.

Willie Horton was an African American male who, while awaiting incarceration in 1975 for a murder in 1974, continued his violent spree by raping and killing a woman in 1976 during a furlough from an institution in 1976. Linda Taylor was an African American woman who supposedly collected welfare checks using different aliases to mask her identity. By applying racially coded rhetoric, these racial politics used Willie

Horton and Linda Taylor as examples to represent the failures of such programs and the need for strict resolutions. This shifted the public focus from problems of social institutions to problems of society, which favored governmental policies of social control of the poor by exacerbating racial tensions and simultaneously produced a cynicism that prevented sensible public policies.<sup>29</sup> Reagan's racially motivated agenda worked. The Democratic Party lost 22 percent of its members who joined the Republican Party to vote for Reagan. In fact, 34 percent of all Democrats who felt that civil rights activism had gone too far, defected.<sup>30</sup>

After elected, Reagan and the United States Justice Department implemented the war on drugs by shifting their focus from "white collar crimes" to "street crimes" and increased the use of drug-law enforcement. The budgets and spending of federal law enforcement during the 1980s increased dramatically. The FBI's anti-drug funding increased from \$8 million to \$95 million from 1980 to 1984. During the years between 1981 and 1991, anti-drug allocations from the FBI and the Department of Defense increased from \$38 million to \$181 million and \$33 million to \$181 million respectively. Alexander states, "By waging a war on drug users and dealers, Reagan made good on his promise to crack down on the racially defined 'others'—the undeserving."<sup>31</sup> It is these policies that Michael Tonry refers to in the quote above that severely affect the African American community.<sup>32</sup>

### **Racial Isolation: the Declining African American Community**

In studying the affects on incarceration on the African American community, many scholars focus on the social pathologies that perpetuate the culture of poverty. The

culture of poverty is a social theory that basically states that attitudes and behaviors of poverty are being socialized within the children. But, if we examine the system instead of the family in this case, we would see that the African American community where most of these prisoners come from has been systematically disconnected and isolated from mainstream society which has put them at a disadvantage for escaping their underclass status. This understanding helps to explain the conditions in which these people are forced to live under. Economist Glenn C. Loury affirms that there are four elements of the ghetto; stigma, constraint, special confinement, and institutional encasement that permit the economic exploitation and social ostracization of a population deemed innately inferior. The criminal justice system was not created to stem crime, but to manage dispossessed and dishonored populations marginalized by economic transformation. Tommie Shelby argues that the power of stigma, the new prejudice, affects our personal racism and leads to institutionalized racism.<sup>33</sup> Shelby, like Loury, believes that public policies serving the black community need to be reformed and that although equality remains a priority, injustice is the principle.<sup>34</sup>

In the 1970s, the African American community started to become economically destabilized due to deindustrialization and globalization and only exacerbated in the 80s. Industrial and manufacturing jobs that took little education disappeared because of outsourcing of major corporations in other countries with little union power.<sup>35</sup> From a historical perspective, Thomas Sugrue, a well-respected historian, illustrates that in the 1940s, racism and discrimination played a heavy role in causing the creation of the black, underclass ghetto. He argues that through jobs and public housing, blacks were systematically and deliberately isolated and dislocated from the more affluent areas that

had better housing and employment. After WWII, the north's automobile industry and steel corporations accepted unskilled labor which caused the Great Migration of blacks in the agricultural South to guaranteed work in the North.<sup>36</sup>

Upon their arrival, they were greatly mistaken, as few jobs were available, and this forced them to move to white low class neighborhoods. This caused a "white flight" of the middle class to the outskirts of the city taking their money and businesses with them. Sugrue writes of many accounts where it was residential redlining (to keep blacks out and force white homeowners to sell cheaply to realtors), political ignorance, corporate arrogance, and residential mismanagement that changed the northern economy for years to come. Most people in the segregated, affluent neighborhoods had little or no need to visit the inner city, leaving it dry of resources and capital. The highway system was strategically placed in the black community for the purpose of keeping out unwanted members in affluent areas by further dislocating it from the rest of society. Although the members of the black underclass were a prime influence, Sugrue argues that lower taxes, better schools and services were also influences to leave the inner city for those who could afford suburban housing.<sup>37</sup>

Sociologist William Julius Wilson calls this underclass population the truly disadvantaged. In his book *The Truly Disadvantaged: the Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, Wilson argues that in the 1960's, the issue lied in the national discourse on race and poverty. The liberals dominated the debate about poverty, the inner city, and race. They felt that they understood the problem well enough to provide solutions. Wilson argued that the inner-city economy was *structurally* transformed. The relocation of employment to the suburbs, the migration of whites from the inner city, and

the rise in low-wage work all were factors that contributed to the demise of the black underclass community. This inevitably led to high rates of joblessness. Female-headed households and unwed childbearing also proliferated due to the shrinking pool of “marriageable” men, those capable of supporting a family. This left the African American community vulnerable and susceptible to crime and violence which the Nixon and Reagan administrations had the pleasure of exploiting, and thus used as a springboard for their inner-city war declarations.<sup>38</sup>

As capital resources diminished and employment opportunities declined in inner-city African American communities, violence and crime increased. Selling drugs became a way to make ends meet for many crack cocaine infested communities. Crack, the cooked and cheaper form of powder cocaine, spread throughout the African American communities across the country a few years after Reagan’s declaration of the war on drugs.<sup>39</sup> During the 1980’s, joined forces of politicians, the DEA, and the media exposed crack cocaine as an epidemic with clear racial overtones while making the “welfare queens” and “Willie Horton’s” the users and abusers. Through the power of the media, crack was heavily associated with violent crimes and black people. In 1986 President Reagan signed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act that effectively established harsh penalties for drug offenses along with mandatory minimum sentencing for distribution of cocaine. Although crack cocaine, (which is predominately associated with blacks), is made up of the same chemicals as powder cocaine, (which is associated with whites), it warrants more severe sentencing.<sup>40</sup>

According to some scholars like Alexander, the 1988 revision of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act became more punitive and included new “civil penalties” for drug offenders

which would authorize “public housing to evict any tenant who allows any form of drug-related criminal activity to occur on or near public housing premises and eliminated many federal benefits, including student loans, for anyone convicted of a drug offense.”<sup>41</sup>

Expansion of the death penalty for drug-related offenses and new mandatory minimum sentencing accompanied this new Act. Under previous drug laws, before the 1988 Act was revised, one year was the maximum penalty for any amount for any drug offense. Under the new laws, a first time offender could receive a mandatory minimum of five years for simple possession of cocaine.

The “war on drugs” was carried out through the 1990s and the Bill Clinton administration. Clinton established the “three strikes and you’re out” law, which mandated life sentences for some three-time felon offenders and the Justice Policy Institute has credited him as being the toughest on crime than any other president in U.S. history.<sup>42</sup> Clinton also passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act and effectively replaced welfare with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), which imposes a five-year limit on assistance, and bans anyone with a felony drug conviction. From the above facts and statistics, it’s clear that there is a deliberate attack on African Americans in inner-city communities. Alexander also claims that Clinton made it easier for public housing authorities to exclude and evict anyone with a criminal history, not only effectively displacing the offender, but the family as well.

Current trends suggest that the system has chartered a new course in its demand for law and order. Although incarceration rates have soared, the crime rates in the United States have actually decreased, particularly with violent and property crimes. The misconception here is that the greater use of imprisonment has reduced crime. Tonry

proves that this isn't so. Recently, violent crimes have declined to its lowest rate ever from 51.2 incidences per 100,000 victims in 1994 to 21.0 incidences per 100,000 victims in 2003. Property crimes have also been on the decline since 1993. Even homicide rates have taken a plunge, falling in 2001 and 2002 to 5.6 per 100,000 victims, the lowest rate seen since 1966.<sup>43</sup> Historically, the harshest of punishments by incarceration were reserved for those who committed the most serious crimes such as murder. Today, most people who are incarcerated are there for crimes far less severe than murder and are subject to the same type of punitive conditions.

The manipulation of the public's perception regarding crime by political campaigns is highly inaccurate. For example, between 1992 and 1996, the homicide rate declined 20% but the news coverage of homicides on major new channels increased 721%. Studies show that media coverage also fuels racial stereotypes. Some states such as California skew the perception of youth involved in violent crime by reporting a high amount of its violent crime stories (70%) involve youth when the statistics are fairly low (14%). Also, homicides and robberies were reported many more times than the actual numbers represented. Homicides account for 28% of all crimes reported on the news and the actual number of incidences is less than two tenths of 1%. The public's knowledge about crime via the news has been misdirected. Shah also reports that as a result of criminal propaganda, 47% of Americans in 2000 believed that there was more crime in the United States than the prior year while between the years 1999 and 2000, the arrests rates for index crimes decreased 6.6%.<sup>44</sup> Thus, this misinformation contributes to the high volume of support for "get tough on crime" policies, which contributes to the

marginalization of inner-city communities and overrepresentation of minorities within the system.

Another interesting set of statistics reveals the discrepancy in class and racial disparities within the system. The consequences of the “war on crime,” and the “war on drugs,” and the political policies they carried have had devastating effects on the marginalized and underrepresented African American communities as per incarceration. Western continues his analysis by establishing that the highest incarceration rates are among the less educated, less skilled, financially disadvantaged, minority men. African American and Latino men make up at least two-thirds of the prison population. The scope of paper concerns itself with African American men more specifically. As of 2000, African American men are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than white men. In 1989, arrest rates for African American men soared to 1,460 per 100,000 compared to 365 per 100,000 for whites. This issue becomes clearer when discussing the comparison of percentages of African American men in prison versus Latinos and whites.<sup>45</sup>

Between 1980 and 2000, African American men aged twenty to forty saw their incarceration rates rise from 4.8 to 11.5 percent as opposed to Latino men which rose from 2.1 to 4.6 percent and white men .6 to 1.6 during the same period. For non-college educated men aged twenty to forty: African American incarceration rates rose from 6 percent to 17 percent; Latino men went from 2.6 to 5.5 percent; and white men .9 to 3.2 percent. High school dropouts face an even tougher challenge to overcome. For high school dropout men, African American rates rose even more from 10.7 to 32.4; Latino men rose from 3.2 to 6 percent; and white men rose 2.1 to 6.7 percent.<sup>46</sup> In fact, more African American men were under the control of the penal system in 2007 than there

were in 1850, at the height of slavery. As Tonry reports that although blacks make up less than 13 percent of the U.S. population, they comprise nearly half of the population of U.S. prisons and jails and, in recent years, more than half of those sent to jails and prisons.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the proportions of those African Americans admitted and held in jails and prisons are growing to historical heights.

Recidivism rates are also high among incarcerated felons. Many of these men are released with no money, no place to live, no job or ability to achieve sustained employment, and no social support. Without adequate resources, many times these men fall back into the same behavior of what has gotten them incarcerated in the first place. The result is that nearly 7 out of 10 of these men return to prison within 3 years.<sup>48</sup>

Possessing little to no skills and lacking resources such as money management, resume writing, work ethics, relapse prevention, and goal setting, these men are subject to a disadvantage into an already competitive and unforgiving society.

Because of such huge numbers and discrepancies, Alexander argues that a new caste system has been created. According to Alexander, this caste system includes those who are labeled and stigmatized as felons and criminals and are legally discriminated against just like black Americans were during the times of Jim Crow in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Felons in America today are discriminated against through public housing and employment and are stripped of voting rights and jury duty service. The implications are that these men feel dehumanized and demoralized. She attests that racial stereotypes and maintaining the status quo inevitably maintains racism.<sup>49</sup> Thus today's mass incarceration system is modern day slavery. The public consensus is colorblind to incarceration of black men, which perpetuates the racial caste system that allows the

disparities to continue, and that racial indifference and blindness form the sturdy foundation for all racial caste systems.<sup>49</sup>

### **Secondary Prisonization**

Many of these men are in some type of personal relationship, be it marriage, engagement, or girlfriend. These women and their families are often times subject to what can be called “secondary prisonization,” which means they are often subject to secondary prisoner status during visits of their inmate loved ones, along with carrying the brunt of the financial responsibilities through mailings, packages, and phone calls. For these families, the loss of a spouse or father indicates the beginning of “a series of financial, emotional, personal and social demands and challenges that threaten their interpersonal relationships, personal aspirations, family structure, and ultimately their relationship to a larger society.”<sup>50</sup> Any institution that interferes, separates, or breaks up ties within the most basic institution of a society (the family), stands as an enemy to that society. Most social and mental health services in the African American community fail to offer sufficient programming for African American families. Liddell asserts that by excluding most culturally appropriate services, programs and services that are offered are inadequate to meet the needs of African American inmates and their families.<sup>51</sup>

After the incarceration of her mate, the wife or girlfriend must undergo a number of changes and adjustments. Depending on the adjustment made prior to the separation, the nature of impact can vary. Liddell finds evidence shows that the wife or girlfriend of a first time offender have a tougher time adjusting than does the wife or girlfriend of recidivists due to the belief that their significant other has received and unfair sentence.

In addition, many times it is the first time being confronted with the criminal justice system for the wives or girlfriends of first time offenders.<sup>52</sup>

The prison system transforms, shapes, and infiltrates the daily lives of the family members of the incarcerated population. In positioning the penal system as a social institution, prison aids in developing unhealthy relationships among the members of the incarcerated.<sup>53</sup> The visitation process may be an extremely degrading and demeaning orientation for the wives and girlfriends of first time offenders. This institutionalized process takes place as a “rite of passage” with “ceremonies of degradation.” The grueling waiting process for many of the visitors creates high levels of stress and anxiety. It also causes feelings of inferiority as their time is devalued. This process of waiting coincides with the distribution of power, subjecting the less-privileged to a line up process by the higher ups that are meant to take advantage of the visitor’s time and mimic the incarceration process itself. This inevitably leads to a diminished worth and feelings of stigma, confusion, trepidation, and humiliation, much like the prisoner.<sup>54</sup>

The penal system communicates the loss of status, especially for those already in the lower class. All visitors, mainly women, are subject to prisoner status as prison staff may use their authority as means of control. For example, many women go through an uncomfortable search process that entails dehumanizing searches from men. Studies show that the women lose a sense of self emotionally and are demoralized as though they too are prisoners in what can be called the “pains of imprisonment.”<sup>55</sup> Since the prison population is primarily from the lower-class communities, it complicates their world even further. Through the waiting process (which often lasts for hours), the prison’s intrusive scrutiny such as being searched and fingerprinted and the use of rigid rules like dress

code, these women are subjected to an environment of strict social constraint, effectively turning them into quasi-inmates by eroding the boundary between home and prison and altering their sense of intimacy, love, and justice.<sup>56</sup> For many, especially those (without transportation or live out of town) with few resources, this can be an exhausting process, often taking up multiple days.

To further illustrate the argument of the penal system being a social institution, Comfort explains how these women come to somewhat depend on prison. To help mitigate the pain of prisonization, these women take care of a lot of the duties for the inmate. Through letters, packages, phone calls, and what Comfort calls “presence creation,” the woman maintains a certain level of control and maximizes the use of communication and therefore shoulder and share the burden of “doing time.” Prison also helps these women to sustain relationships with their marginalized men as prisons help nurse a docile nature of the inmate.<sup>57</sup> Thus, families not only experience this prisonization process inside the institutions waiting rooms, they suffer outside of the prison walls and into their own homes, many times putting them at a social disadvantage. Their lives take on a new meaning as they strive to bridge the distance between the outside world and the world inside.

Harrety and Smith suggest that the study of the contemporary African American family must be contextualized within the history of race relations in the United States. As shown earlier, the social institution of many inner city African American families begins at a disadvantage and mass incarceration only worsens these conditions. This thesis recognizes that there is no single type of African American family, therefore will not attempt to define it. They are diverse in size, shape, membership, and social class.

Due to the diverse nature of African American families today, one must first begin with a clear understanding of what a family means. Although there are many definitions in regards to family, my research identifies with and is based upon only three conceptual definitions:

-Nuclear Family – a set of people with whom you live and with whom you share biological and/or legal ties

-Extended Family – a set of people with whom you may or may not live but with whom you share biological and/or legal ties

-A set of people with whom you live but with whom you may or may not share biological and/or legal ties, a contemporary definition of family that is designed to recognize several changes in family life, but specifically the rise of cohabitating couples who are increasingly likely to be raising children together.<sup>58</sup>

There is much scholarly debate as to how to study and research the African American family. Harrety and Smith suggest that although there are many theories of study on the African American family, there are two main theoretical approaches that dominate the discourse more than the others: social pathology and the strength approach. The first approach identifies with the belief that there is something different and wrong with African Americans and their families. Social pathology logic uses terms such as “savage” and “uncivilized” to identify with these deficiencies much in the manner in which it was said that Africans were living this way before they were captured and held captive in America. In addition, the social pathology rhetoric believes that the low morals and uncivilized behavior in parts of the African American constitutional culture

and family formations were deeply rooted in the behaviors brought over from the African slaves.<sup>59</sup>

The second approach is more contemporary and is in direct response to the first approach. Hattery and Smith claim that social pathology critiques such as Robert Hill and others have developed a new perspective when examining the African American family. “Whereas the social pathology paradigm interpreted alternative family forms such as low marriage rates and high rates of teen pregnancy as deviance and evidence for the inherent inferiority of African Americans, the strength approach interpreted these same behaviors and patterns as evidence for the inherent strength of African Americans, especially women.”<sup>60</sup> According to Hill, his operational definition of family strength is “those traits which facilitate the ability of the family to meet the needs of its members and the demand made upon it by systems outside the family unit.”<sup>61</sup> Hill states that these traits are necessary for survival and maintenance of effective family networks. These adaptations, which are necessary for survival and advancement in a hostile environment, take the form of strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, adaptability of family roles, strong achievement orientation, and strong religious orientation.<sup>62</sup> Thus, focusing on the resilient nature adds a new dimension to the African American family picture.

The higher proportion of families headed by women among blacks is usually assumed to be an indicator of disorganization and instability. But it need not be so. The self-reliance of black women who are the primary breadwinners of their families best exemplifies this adaptability of family roles. -- Robert B. Hill<sup>63</sup>

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Because of the sudden separation, many women experience grief in the form of fear, shock, sadness, and loneliness. As mentioned before, most felons come from underclass communities that are already experiencing hardships on a daily basis, and incarceration is likely to exasperate these conditions; thus, mass incarceration inevitably contributes to the breakdown of African American families. Mass incarceration of black men has dramatically increased the number of African American single-family households headed by mainly women. A lack of a father figure in the home can leave the home vulnerable and weak and more susceptible to more violence and crime. The purpose of this research project is to examine the question: How are these families impacted by mass incarceration and what coping strategies do they use to maintain a stable household in while limiting my study sample to northeast Kansas.

This study is to explore and explain the social and psychological impact of mass incarceration on African American inner-city families, and how the criminal justice system shapes their idea of American citizenship. It also investigates and examines how the African American family responds to the criminal justice system and their coping

strategies and looks to explore whether this impact dictates the response or whether it affects the response depending on the level of coping strategies used. The methodology used to conduct this study relies on empirical research based on oral interviews by face-to-face and telephone calls. This study uses a sample of five families, who will be chosen for interviewing from referrals through the criminal justice system. The interview process has captured the types of difficulties, attitudes, emotional reactions, psychological behaviors, and coping strategies of wives or girlfriends and children of inmates.

This thesis employs the narrative mode of inquiry used by scholars such as Dorothy Pennington who states that while using the hermeneutic approach of interpretation and explanation, the narrative mode takes it a step further and calls for a more holistic approach that allows the respondent to express their stories as they understand it. Pennington researches that the narratives are means through which people make sense of their experience and can communicate its meaning. Furthermore, in the tasks of using the narrative, mode of inquiry includes how the qualitative researcher should phrase questions of the interview in everyday language rather than sociological language, derive enough data by asking about participants experiences, thoughts, and feelings to shed light on the sociological problems. The second mode is that the relationships formed with the respondent affects the quality of the responses to the questions.<sup>64</sup>

As this study was conducted, the use of the “grounded theory” became important. Grounded theory allows for the emergence of descriptive concepts to come from the data and acknowledges the validity of the narratives of a small number of subjects.<sup>65</sup>

According to Pennington, “grounded theory is a theory that is generated from the data, rather than being superimposed on the data.”<sup>66</sup> Grounded theory should lead to a number of conclusions: it must be understood by the scholar as well as the layman; it must suit the situation being researched; it should provide clear categories and hypotheses so the crucial ones can be verified in ongoing research; because it is based on data collected, other theories or data can’t discredit it; with its strong connection to the data, it is destined to last, despite its inevitable modification and reformulation; the format for the interview questions is not limited: it can be interactional organizational, biographical, psychological, etc; and comparisons are appropriate.<sup>67</sup>

Participants signed an informed consent and their identity will be held confidential. No questions will be asked in regards to their names or any other information that will reveal their identity. This study will use a numerical code to assign to participants as a safety precaution.

An interview questionnaire has been given to all families (under the criteria stated below), with an adaptation to each participant. For example, one family may have required more attention on the family adjustment where another may require focus on their sense of prisonization. All participant families will be a wife or girlfriend of an African American felon, at least 18 years of age and with at least sharing one child. Information on participants socioeconomic and income status will be used to show the impact financially. No inmates will be interviewed because this study focuses on the inmate’s families, due to the inmates’ incarceration; it is assumed that they possess little understanding of the child’s development during incarceration.

A background questionnaire was conducted and will explore characteristics of participant and information on the husband or boyfriend; the number of family members in the household; the level of education of both the participant and inmate; employment status of the participant and partners' employment status prior to incarceration; incarceration history and current length of incarceration; marital status and history; religious affiliation, etc. The criteria for participation in this study is as follows, 1) partners must have together at least one male child, which must also reside in the home; 2) participants must be classified as a wife or girlfriend; and 3) and the inmate must be serving at least a 10 month sentence. The reason to serve at least a 10 month sentence is to provide ample time for any significant changes to occur and adverse behaviors of the subject to emerge. This project is not merely concerned with statistics, but also it interests itself with the narratives of the participants.

### **Design**

Qualitative research is the primary approach conducted for this study. The qualitative component will emerge out of the in-depth, open-ended, face-to-face interviews. Phone interviews are used as an alternative to face-to-face interviews due to the fact that that's what some participants preferred. Also, this study uses this questionnaire to assess associations between wives or girlfriend's psychological distress and their perceived social support, perceived discrimination, individual and family strain, coping strategies, economic impact and their views on visitor treatment. Finally, this questionnaire was used to discover the psychological repercussions and coping mechanisms—of partner incarceration—for participants and their children, e.g. depression,

anxiety, loneliness vs. joy, relief, and comfort. A description of results will note the participants' thoughts and feelings, and their strategic choices.

There are no risks involved in this study. For security and ethical purposes, the name and information of the participant is kept confidential. I, the researcher, am the only person reviewing the information. No other instruments other than a tape recorder will be used. There are no direct benefits to participants of this study, although the information gathered will be used in a larger context in hopes of benefiting the African American community and the United States society as a whole by advocating for prison reform.

For the sake of security of participants, names will not be associated in any publication or presentation with the information collected or with the research findings from this study. Instead, the researcher will use a study number rather than the participant's name, and identifiable information will not be shared.

The following section deals with the families and children of African American men who are now or have been once incarcerated by the criminal justice system of northeast Kansas and their qualitative results. Please note that all incarcerated members have been released up to this date except for one.

## **Results**

This section presents a description of the qualitative analysis. The second part of the questionnaire asked open-ended questions for the purpose of allowing the participant to elaborate and explain their answers. The present study finds that in terms of the impact of incarceration, the women were affected primarily financially and emotionally.

The demographics for each participant are as follows: participant 1 is 42 years of age and works full-time as a manager at Wal-mart and two part-time jobs; participant two is 39 years of age and owns one daycare center and is in the process of opening up another; participant three is 49 years of age and works as assistant manager at a consulting firm; participant four is 28 years of age and works full-time as a receptionist and part-time as a store clerk; participant five, whose mother has since been deceased, is 58 and graduated from law school, ran his own law firm, and is currently a judge in northeast Kansas.

Financially, all participants described a major decrease in lifestyle. For participant 1, her household income dropped from above \$80,000 to between \$15,000 – \$30,000. Her groceries were cut more than half. When asked how did her standard of living change, the participant responded, “With everything on me (referring to responsibilities), it became a struggle.”<sup>68</sup> Her and her children’s extra curricular activities were cut off. For example, participant explained how she was no longer able to do family activities such as going to the movies or vacation trips. Her children’s active life including sports was cut due to having to pay team fees to play. Her savings depleted to zero while her health insurance went up because she now had to claim both children.

Participant 2, whose household also earned over 80,000, reported that she lost her home after her partner’s incarceration. The difference from participant one is that she was unemployed, meaning her boyfriend was the only breadwinner. She attested that, “My boyfriend was my complete support system.”<sup>69</sup> After the incarceration, she was forced into full-time employment that was hard to come by. Her boyfriend was a drug dealer and was going for a buy with most of his savings while he was arrested. Participant expressed not having enough money in her savings and was forced to sell

household items because she couldn't get a job right away. After losing several cars and pawning items to pay for attorney fees, the participant moved to live with her grandmother.

For participant 3, her family adjustment consisted of now living below \$15,000 and taking care of her kids by herself. She communicated that she suffered no extreme impact. The participant rented a cheap apartment and she could handle that herself. She also didn't need an extra job like the other participants. Participant 4 was a student and worked part-time until her partner's incarceration. After, she was forced to quit school and work full-time. She also lost her public assistance for food and daycare due to making too much money at her new job.

Participant 5, who reported for his mother, stated that they lost their home and were forced to move with his paternal grandfather. He shared that they made "quite below"<sup>70</sup> \$15,000. Although his mother only earned \$6 a day, he lived in a town where much of his extended family still resided, so the impact was moderately low. Along with losing their home, they lost their car. This proved to be an inconvenience because participant stated "Well we didn't have a car anymore. I remember because daddy used to drive momma to the next town 24 miles away. That's where we would do our main shopping to try to get a good deal on food or whatever. That was cut."<sup>71</sup> Also, before incarceration, his parents bought land and were planning to build their own home and unfortunately, this plan sopped.

When asked whether they experienced any emotional differences after incarceration, most participants shared the same feelings from anger to loneliness. Participant 1 stated that she felt anger at first response, not so much against her partner

incarcerated but because of the circumstance that the family was now put in. She also expressed that the anger didn't last long and her feelings turned into compassion. Participant reports, "The compassion came from me connecting to my spiritual growth and realizing that we all make mistakes. This was his first offense and he really wouldn't want to hurt his family and put his family through the situation that we were put through. And I knew that inside, he was deeply hurt. I felt compelled to show compassion because I would want someone to do the same for me."<sup>72</sup>

Participant 2 responded "So many." Loneliness was the primary feeling for her. "He left one morning and never came back. There was a lot of isolation, not only because he was gone, but also because society, who looked at me as a bad person due to my boyfriend being incarcerated. When asked whether participant felt stigmatized, she responded, "Absolutely! It got to the point where it became a secret. I wasn't telling anybody at work that my boyfriend was incarcerated. I shared with my family only to a degree."<sup>73</sup>

Participant 3 and 4 expressed similar feelings as 1 and 2. Participant three stated that the loss of her husband was very depressing and angry because she was forced to undergo major adjustment of raising the children by herself. Participant 4 shared that she was under a lot of stress. Participant 4 is the youngest of all participants at age 28. She states, "I get a little depressed, but I try not to think about it." She also shared that she feels anger towards the system attesting, "I think what he did was wrong and he should have been punished. But, I think 5 years is a little bit severe for what he did."<sup>74</sup> Her boyfriend was incarcerated for the possession of crack cocaine. Participant 5 could not remember any emotional changes with his mother, so none will be reported.

I also wanted to explore any adverse behavioral changes with their children. The interviewer asked all participants to describe any behavioral changes that they felt might have had to do with the incarceration of their father. The age range for the children was fifteen to one years of age. Five of the children were under the age of seven at the time of incarceration of their father and were too young to fully understand that their father was in prison. If there were any reactions here, it was when they would visit their dad in prison and would become emotionally upset upon leaving. Participant 4 states, “There was one time where something happened and he couldn’t have visitors that day and they (children) cried a lot that day because they didn’t get to see him. They understand now that he did something wrong so he has to be there.”<sup>75</sup> In regards to discipline, she has recognized her two youngest boys as “pushing the boundaries to see what they can get away with.”<sup>76</sup> The father was the primary disciplinarian, and in his absence, participant brother steps in. The interviewer asked about her daughter although the daughter is not biologically the fathers’ and she stated that she suffers the worst. She reported that her daughter is sad and cries a lot because under Lansing Correctional Facility rules, since she’s not his biological child, she cannot visit.

The interviewer clarified that the participant’s last statement meant that the children are coping better now. Participant 2 shared an interesting story about her daughter adjusting to her father being separated from the home. Her daughter was one at the time of incarceration and she describes her daughter “literally growing up in the penitentiary system.” Now age seven, Participant says, “She speaks on it as if it’s normal. She will tell people, ‘I was at the jail visiting my daddy.’” (Then laughs) For her, it’s the norm.”<sup>77</sup> That frightens the mother because of the fear when her daughter

will realize that her father is in a bad place and also of her daughter being teased and stigmatized.

For participants 3 and 5, the children shared no significant difference in behavior or attitude. Participant 1, on the other hand, described a different situation. At the time of incarceration, her children were fifteen and ten, with the boy being the oldest. She explained that her son was in high school and began to repress a lot of his feelings after incarceration. She feels that his repressed feelings led him to act out in school. According to his teachers, he began to lose focus and started acting out of his character, describing some of his behavior as “clowning.” Participant also feels that he may have gone through a slight depression. When asked about her daughter, she stated that she might have been too young to understand what was going on. She does note that the only adverse behavior that her daughter displayed was when her father was released from prison. She described, “She felt he should play his role again.”<sup>78</sup> When asked what that meant, participant explained that the father had a hard time readjusting to his fatherly duties and getting to know his children after a lot has changed. The daughter felt that she needed him to be more of a father to her. As the result of his incapability, she had a small breakdown.

When it came to visiting the incarcerated partner in prison, participants one and five both stated that they did not visit their incarcerated partners in prison due to the father did not want his children to see him behind bars. The other participants visited at least two times a month while taking the children along. Participant 2 shares the most complete story of the visitation experience. When asked to describe the ordeal, she responded, “In the county, the visits were only 15 to 20 minutes long. He was behind the

glass, so we couldn't touch him and he couldn't touch his daughter or anything like that. It smelled like pee every time I was there. There was no air ventilation, so it would be very very cold or very very hot. We stood in a line for a very long time before they let you go up and the visits were only once a week. The first year wasn't so bad. But, when he went to the federal penitentiary, it was a completely different story. That was a lot more humiliating because there were a lot of restrictions on what you could bring there to get past the metal detector. Me, being a woman, I couldn't wear a certain type of bra. If I wore a bra with a wire in it, I would get turned away because it would set off the metal detector.”<sup>79</sup>

In continuing participant 2's account, “The federal penitentiary makes up their own rules and regulations. There was one time when I took my daughter to see him and they had these tests where they rub your fingers on this paper to detect if you had any contact with drugs six hours prior to being there. I had to take this test and I failed it, so I couldn't go back. But later, after I wrote a letter, I found out that the test was malfunctioning and they apologized to me but still, I had to leave with my daughter crying. Participant continues to describe the experience as very intense and impersonal. Finally stating, “They treat you like a criminal, even though you're not the criminal.”<sup>80</sup> The other participants who visited or are still visiting also described their experiences as impersonal, sitting in big rooms with everyone with no privacy. Participant 3 stated, “When the gate shuts behind you, it feels criminal.”<sup>81</sup>

The last section of the questionnaire focused on the coping strategies to identify any strengths and resiliencies. The last question was simple stated in some form of “How did you get through it all?” I usually began by highlighting a few strengths that were

identified earlier in the conversation and had asked them to either elaborate further or add anything to them. My tone was very encouraging during this part to enhance the responses. All participants attested that family was the main source of support and most agreed that religion was the number one coping mechanism. They also responded that visits and phone calls made it easier to cope. Participant 1 states that her mother helped tremendously, by stepping in, and taking participants son to live with her. This provided a new environment for her son who was having problems in school and home, while also lessening the burden on the participant, as it was one less person to feed. Participant also became more involved in church. There, the churches pastor along with other men of the church mentored her son and even counseled at times before going to live with his grandmother.

The most vocal and descriptive participant 2 explained vividly, “When all of this happened, it’s like my life fell apart. Literally. My boyfriend was my complete support system. I turned to God and he took a very bad situation and made it work for my good. It definitely made me stronger. I had my ex-husband as he babysat for me. My two older children went to go live with their father. I started going to church. I started reading the word and studied what the purpose of my life was. I had a lot of church support because they knew my situation and what I was dealing with. They accepted me with open arms. Once I got my mental state and emotional state together, I found a job. And, once I really started living my life for God, then I started receiving blessings. I was blessed with this great idea to start a daycare center and literally cannot say it was mine because I’ve never worked in childcare before. I took the little savings I had and started the business.”<sup>82</sup>

She continued to report that her business gross \$250,000 a year since opening in 2008, and she is preparing for the opening of her second daycare center.

Participant 3 had a plan and put it into action. She also had a good sense of her circumstance that the others did not express. She never lost anything major such as a home or car. She rarely needed family to baby-sit as the others did. “I had to do what was need to be done. I planned what needed to be done monthly and budgeted accordingly.” For her added stress because of her partner’s incarceration, participant stated faith was her main coping mechanism. “I prayed a lot and studied with Jehovah’s Witnesses. That helped me how to remain strong and faithful and as time went on, it got better.”<sup>83</sup>

Participant 4’s boyfriend is still incarcerated. While he remains there, she continues to live with her mother. She shared that her family was her number one and her only support. Extended family members, for example, her aunt and brother step in also to help with discipline and finances. Participant 5 expressed that although his family was very religious, they received little support from them because they didn’t have any money either. The only way they could support was to help out when the children’s mother was away at work, but family filled that role.

## **Discussion**

In interviewing the participants, this present study found two main themes: 1) the major impacts described were financial and emotional; 2) the major coping mechanisms were family support and religion. In this particular study has also identified two separate

relationships with the themes. When it comes to finances, all participants reported extended family stepping in and supplementing the loss. For example, babysitting duties for some families were normally paid to an outside service. After incarceration and the cut of finances, extended families supported by taking over those duties. Most families recouped over time and eventually caught to the lifestyle as before or exceeded it.

Another relationship was that of coping with emotions and the tie to religion. Most participants expressed religions as being a major part of their lives. Before incarceration, participants two and three reported not having any involvement with religion. Whereas, after incarceration, these two participants expressed they found religion to be a huge support in their lives. Participant one increased her involvement and participant five reported no change, as they were always religious. Participant four is the only respondent that reported no religious involvement, although she did report believing in a higher power. There was a slight variance in the denominations of these religions. Three participants are Christians and one is a Jehovah's Witness. Religions for these families, as reported, provided support in many ways. Some participants received emotional support for their child. Others received moral support. It seems as if religion was also protecting participants from the living stigma of incarceration due to them being openly accepted in church, while those outside the church would judge and label the family. Participant two gives a detailed account of this and others expressed similar occurrences. All families are doing well and their children are becoming successes. This present study does not claim that this is happening with most black families dealing with an incarcerated member, just that it is true for these participants and that they turn their unfortunate circumstance into opportunity.

The negative financial impact of incarceration is to be expected of these five families, as their primary caretaker was taken away. However, extended families were a strong resilient factor in supplementing this loss economic means. Evidence shows that extended families shared in the responsibility of keeping the family together by securing a safe and sound environment and assuming substitute parental duties, both of which cut the costs for the family considerably. For example, paying \$150 a week for daycare can be cut to \$0 with the help of family and housing can cut the family rent more than half, which is a savings that can benefit one in the long run. Not only have these families reestablished themselves financially, they have taken advantage of their consequential circumstance and made the best of it by securing all immediate family members affected by the loss.

All of the children represented show now immediate signs of defiance of unruliness. Additionally, they too have taken turned this advantage by turning to education and employment. Two of participants' children have already or are graduating this year. The rest of the children are either holding down stable jobs or are excelling in grade school.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear in this study that the impact of mass incarceration has had a devastating affect on these participants, yet they remain faithful and high-spirited. Even though these families were impacted negatively and initially destabilized, they found sources to counteract the consequences of incarceration. Four families began living in low-class

communities, but are now living in more affluent areas and better housing due to honest work. With the help of extended families and religious support, these families could be classified as being better off before the incarceration of their partners. Currently, three inmates have been released and returned home to stable and properly functioning families suggesting that these women were the main source of this cohesion. The success stories presented here are of five families who have coped or are coping with the consequences of incarceration really well. Over a short period, all families were impacted with particular effects. But over a longer period, they exhibit strengths and resiliencies and many show no signs of carrying a negative stigma or anymore feeling of being secondarily imprisoned. Although it is disturbing that there still exist racial issues in the criminal justice system, there is a ray of light that these families are remaining strong and determined to get through some of the toughest times described in American living. For future research, studies can be done while all inmates are currently incarcerated for the purpose of capturing the affects while they are current. This was my initial intention, but due to the complication of finding these families under the time constraints, it was easier to find participants who were out of the system who were willing to talk about there experiences. There's a lot to be done to reform the criminal justice system. This study feels that researchers and scholars alike should also focus on the family and their experience of resiliency.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>ii</sup> Western, Bruce. 2006. *Punishment and inequality in America*. New York: Russell Sage. 38
- <sup>3</sup> For further discussion, see Tonry, Michael H. 1995. *Malign neglect--race, crime, and punishment in America*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 10
- <sup>4</sup> Shah, Palak. "Defending Justice – An Active Resource Kit, Fact Sheets." 2005. <http://www.defendingjustice.org/index.html> (accessed November 10, 2010). 1-2
- <sup>5</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, "All Key Facts." March 10, 2011. <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=kfa> (accessed March 10, 2011).
- <sup>6</sup> Shah, Palak. "Defending Justice - An Active Resource Kit, Fact Sheets." 2005. <http://www.defendingjustice.org/index.html> (accessed November 10, 2010). 3-4
- <sup>7</sup> Shah, Palak. "Defending Justice - An Active Resource Kit, Fact Sheets" 2005. <http://www.defendingjustice.org/index.html> (accessed November 10, 2010). 3
- <sup>8</sup> Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*: New York: New Press. p. 175
- <sup>9</sup> Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 186-192
- <sup>10</sup> Loury, Glenn C. 2008. *Race, Incarceration, and American values, A Boston review book*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. p. 28
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- <sup>14</sup> Western, *Punishment and inequality in America*, 3
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

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<sup>16</sup> Beckett, Katherine and Theodore Sasson. *The Politics of Injustice: Crime and Punishment in America*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2004. 30.

<sup>17</sup> Western, *Punishment and inequality in America*,4.

<sup>18</sup> Western, *Punishment and inequality in America*, 59.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 30-40.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>26</sup> Western, *Punishment and inequality in America*, 60.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 60

<sup>28</sup> Tonry, Michael H. 1995. *Malign neglect--race, crime, and punishment in America*. New York: Oxford University Press. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>30</sup> Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 48.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>32</sup> Tonry, *Malign neglect--race, crime, and punishment in America*, 19-20.

<sup>33</sup> Loury, *Race, Incarceration, and American values*, 80-81

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 81-82

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<sup>35</sup> Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 40-50.

<sup>36</sup> Sugrue, Thomas J. 1996. *The origins of the urban crisis: race and inequality in postwar Detroit*, Princeton studies in American politics. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. 33-36.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 33-36

<sup>38</sup> Wilson, William J. 1987. *The truly disadvantaged: the inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 71-71.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 49.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>43</sup> Tonry, *Malign neglect--race, crime, and punishment in America*, 19-24.

<sup>44</sup> Shah, Palak. "Defending Justice - An Active Resource Kit, Fact Sheets" 2005. <http://www.defendingjustice.org/index.html> (accessed November 10, 2010). Factsheet/Trends. 1-2.

<sup>45</sup> Western, *Punishment and inequality in America*, 15-18.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 15-18.

<sup>47</sup> Tonry, *Malign neglect--race, crime, and punishment in America*, 49.

<sup>48</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, "All Key Facts." March 10, 2011. <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=kfa> (accessed March 10, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 47-48.

<sup>50</sup> Liddell, Alysia Lynette. "Length of incarceration, perceived discrimination and social support as predictors of psychological distress in African-American spouses of inmates". (Ph.D. diss., California School of Professional Psychology – Los Angeles, 1998). In Dissertations & Thesis: Full Text [database on-line]; available from <http://www.proquest.com>; accessed February 5, 2011). 15.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>53</sup> Comfort, Megan. 2008. *Doing time together: love and family in the shadow of the prison*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 25-27.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 44-50.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>58</sup> Hattery, Earl Smith,Angela J.. *African American Families*. 1 ed. 1, Cheri Dellelo. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2007. 10-11.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 22-30.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>61</sup> Hill,Robert B.. *The strengths of Black Families*. 2 ed. 1, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2003. xix.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., xix-xx

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>64</sup> Pennington,Dorthy L.. *African American Women Quitting in the Workplace*. 1 ed. 5, Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd., 1999. 3-6.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>68</sup> Interview of participant 1 by Hassan Bailey, April 7, 2011

<sup>69</sup> Interview of participant 2 by Hassan Bailey, April 7, 2011

<sup>70</sup> Interview of participant 5 by Hassan Bailey, April 14, 2011

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<sup>71</sup> **ibid.**

<sup>72</sup> Interview of participant 1 by Hassan Bailey, April 7, 2011

<sup>73</sup> Interview of participant 2 by Hassan Bailey, April 7, 2011

<sup>74</sup> Interview of participant 4 by Hassan Bailey, April 7, 2011

<sup>75</sup> **ibid.**

<sup>76</sup> **ibid.**

<sup>77</sup> Interview of participant 2 by Hassan Bailey, April 7, 2011

<sup>78</sup> Interview of participant 1 by Hassan Bailey, April 7, 2011

<sup>79</sup> Interview of participant 2 by Hassan Bailey, April 7, 2011

<sup>80</sup> **ibid.**

<sup>81</sup> Interview of participant 3 by Hassan Bailey, April 7, 2011

<sup>82</sup> Interview of participant 2 by Hassan Bailey, April 7, 2011

<sup>83</sup> Interview of participant 3 by Hassan Bailey, April 7, 2011

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