

Where Are the Men? The Impact of Incarceration and Reentry on African-American Men and Their Children and Families

Overview

By the end of June 2005, there were over 2.1 million people incarcerated in jails and prisons in the United States – equivalent to one in every 136 U.S. residents (Beck & Harrison, 2006). The mass incarceration of individuals in the U.S. has had a detrimental impact on people of color, particularly African American men. Due to the vast numbers of African men who are incarcerated, they bear a substantial burden in this mass imprisonment movement.

African American men who are incarcerated and then reenter their communities upon release confront numerous obstacles including unemployment, disenfranchisement, limited housing, poor health, and lack access to health services. These obstacles have health and socioeconomic impact on their children, families and communities.

Incarcerated Parents

There were 721,500 parents incarcerated in state and federal prisons in the 1999 (Mumola, 2000). These men and women were parents to approximately 1.5 million minor children. African Americans represented the largest ethnic group of parents in both state (49%) and federal prisons (44%). African American children were 9 times more likely to have a parent in prison than white children in 1997 (Mumola, 2000).

Health Status of Inmates

Those who are incarcerated suffer from a myriad of health care problems including HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, hypertension, diabetes, asthma, cancer, Alzheimer's, and mental illness. Many inmates also have poor oral health which can complicate chronic conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Treadwell & Formicola, 2005). Once released, these individuals will

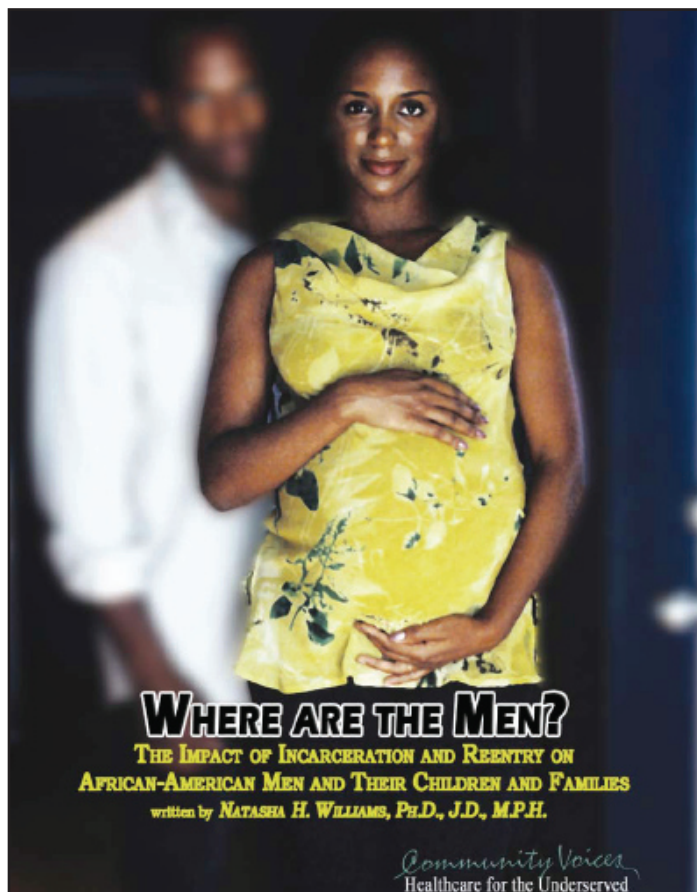
return to their communities, children and families, many of which are overburdened and underserved, in poor health with limited or no access to health care resources.

Collateral Consequences of Incarceration

Disenfranchisement

Due to voter disenfranchisement, the political voice of many African American men has been muted while incarcerated and as they return to their communities because their right to vote is either restricted or denied. Moreover, communities lose

their political power and access to resources when those who could vote are either incarcerated or unable to vote once they are released, thus not only reducing the political power of African American men but the entire African American community.



Medicaid

Many ex-offenders do not have health insurance when they return to their families and are unable to receive Medicaid when they are incarcerated. Even though ex-offenders are eligible for Medicaid upon release, they still may not receive medical care due to delays in reapplying for benefits which may take weeks or months. Meanwhile, these individuals are not receiving treatment or a continuum of care for infectious diseases, chronic diseases, substance abuse, or mental illnesses.

Welfare Assistance and Food Stamps

Anyone who is convicted of a federal or state felony that involved the possession, use, or sale of drugs is barred from receiving cash assistance and food stamps for life (Finzen, 2005; Cooper, 2003). States have the choice to modify, limit, or opt out of the lifetime ban provisions. Fifteen states have adopted the ban in its entirety, 12 states and the District of Columbia opted out of the ban, and 23 states have modified it (The Sentencing Project, 2006).

Housing

Over the years, federal legislation has restricted the access to public housing for many ex-offenders who are returning to their families and communities. For example, under the Housing Opportunity Program Extension (HOPE) Act of 1996, the public housing authorities (PHA) “may deny public admission to or evict individuals who have engaged in criminal activity, especially drug-related criminal activity, on or off public housing premises, regardless of whether they were arrested or convicted for these activities.” (Cooper, 2003, p. 6) Even though the PHA may take into consideration rehabilitative factors in rendering their decision, those with criminal records are at a definite disadvantage when applying for limited public housing (Travis, 2005).

Employment

When released, many ex-offenders face barriers to employment due to employers’ unwillingness to hire people with criminal records, legal restrictions on certain types of federal and state employment for those with felony convictions, and the ex-offender’s inability to improve their labor skills for employment in the workforce (Finzen, 2005). Moreover, many are unskilled, uneducated and feel stigmatized from being incarcerated.

Other Collateral Consequences

The impact of incarceration itself on children and families is significant. While the father is incarcerated, children and families lose financial and emotional support and suffer the social stigmatization of having a family member in prison or jail (Travis and Waul, 2003). More importantly, the children and families lose connectedness with the individual. While incarcerated, many fathers are unable to maintain ties with their children and families because of distance, restrictive visitation rules, and the high cost of telephone calls. Over 60% of parents in state prison were held more than 100 miles from their last place of residence (Mumola, 2000).