THE EFFECTS OF MASS INCARCERATION ON INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT: Over two million individuals are incarcerated in the United States. This paper examines the negative impacts of incarceration on individuals and their communities. Since most of the individuals affected by high rates of incarceration are people of color, this produces harmful effects in communities of color. The negative impacts of removing individuals from communities and imprisoning them include decreased social control within those communities, higher rates of medical problems, decreased well-being, and relationship problems. Minimizing these impacts is a goal that doesn't address the systemic racism and poverty perpetuated by incarceration. A widespread change in mass incarceration can be achieved through a change in attitude toward race, crime and punishment

In the 1980s and 90s, American lawmakers combined the tough on crime philosophy of punishment with the war on drugs to make prisons a first resort for people who broke the law (Wildeman, 2017). Being tough on crime became an essential platform to running a political campaign, which meant that elected officials competed with each other on how brutally they would be willing to punish people who broke the law. Meanwhile, legislators enacted policies that led to more people being imprisoned over smaller offenses for longer amounts of time. This combination helped to exponentially grow the prison population. Over two million individuals are now incarcerated in the United States, a number that is quadruple the prison population of the 1980s (Blankenship, 2018). This increased rate of incarceration has disproportionately affected people of color and has, in turn, produced more harmful effects on communities of color (Wildeman, 2017). However, incarceration has negative effects on everyone imprisoned and increased incarceration means more people experience those negative effects. Such negative impacts include decreased social control and support in communities, higher rates of medical problems for inmates and their families, decreased mental and physical well-being, and the disruption of relationships.

While it's true that legislators have passed a lot of new, tougher sentencing laws over the past 30 or 40 years, and it's true that more people have been imprisoned for nonviolent drug offenses, there are other things that play a role in explaining prison growth. The deinstitutionalization of people with mental illnesses, mandatory minimum sentences (long sentences for specific offenses, even for some first-time offenders), and policies such as three-strike laws (life imprisonment for third offenses of even relatively minor felonies) have also contributed to the growth of mass incarceration (Wildeman, 2017). Most people would expect that removing criminals - those who have or would victimize others - from a community would be welcomed by that community, and that residents and their property would be better off as a result (Wildeman, 2017). However, there are consequences that imprisoned people accrue during and after their time in prison, and those consequences come back with individuals to their communities. The United States remains substantially racially segregated in terms of where people live, and it's economically

segregated as well. It's not surprising that poor people of color have been disproportionately incarcerated since the 1980s; it is from these communities that large numbers of felons are removed, and where they return when they are released (Clear, 2008). This constant turnover has a number of negative effects on individuals and communities, as Robert DeFina (2009) has noted:

> Excessive incarceration disrupts a neighborhood's informal mechanisms of social control and social support by, for instance, breaking up families, removing purchasing power from the neighborhood, increasing reliance on government support programs, and generally erecting even higher barriers to legitimate development and financial well-being (p. 565).

On the individual level, incarceration might actually decrease mortality and physical morbidity for some groups in the short-term, as prisons and jails are some of the only places in the United States where healthcare is guaranteed by law (Wildeman, 2017). However, the quality of medical care varies from one correctional facility to another, and the protective effects of imprisonment only appear to hold true for black male prisoners (Wildeman, 2017). Compared with the non-incarcerated population, incarcerated individuals experience higher rates of infectious disease, chronic medical conditions, substance use disorders, and mental health disorders (Wildeman, 2017). While mortality declines for black inmates, overall physical and psychological wellbeing is worse for the imprisoned population. It doesn't improve much when an individual is released; past incarceration affects the average prisoner for around six times as long as they were incarcerated, which has potential lifelong impacts (Wildeman, 2017).

These potential impacts can be felt in the lives of people who may never go to prison themselves. Todd Clear (2008) writes that the most commonly expected community-level consequence of incarceration is the control of crime; that is, communities expect crime to be reduced or prevented when individuals are arrested. However, the crime rate today is around the same as it was in the 1970s, when the expansion of the prison system started (Clear, 2008). This would suggest that higher rates of incarceration haven't resulted in a significant reduction of crime (Clear, 2008). Instead it has had an effect on the children of people who are locked up and their families; it affects community infrastructure. It also affects how safe a community is to live in. Incarceration of a loved one has been shown to decrease socioeconomic status, compromise family functioning, and negatively impact stress levels and mental health (Cox, 2018).

Incarceration also affects social networks, which "are the building blocks of human and social capital" (Clear, 2008). Social networks provide the foundation for informal social control in two ways: parochial and private. Clear (2008) writes that parochial controls are provided by contact with adults in the community whose living circumstances put them in a child's life, while private controls are provided mainly by family members. Theories of social control also propose that communities are made safe when people share an expectation of collective efficacy, or "the degree of social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good" (Clear, 2008, p. 107). Community-level processes can bolster social control and potentially reduce crime, but when incarceration removes members of the community, people tend to respond by isolating themselves in ways that undermine the expectations of cooperation and mutual support (Clear, 2008). So, by incarcerating a member of someone's network and community, there is less social support, diminished access to resources for the imprisoned individual and their communities, and reduced informal social control and collective efficacy in the neighborhood from which they were removed.

People living in neighborhoods with high

prison admission rates tend to experience increased mental health problems as they are more likely to meet criteria for current Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), current Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), and lifetime GAD than individuals living in neighborhoods with low prison admission rates (Hatzenbuehler, 2015). Even after adjusting for demographic and neighborhood variables, a higher concentration of neighborhood incarceration is significantly associated with lifetime MDD and has similar effects on mental health for residents with and without a history of incarceration (Hatzenbuehler, 2015).

Poor neighborhoods in which there is a large ratio of adult women to men tend to be places where single-parent, female-headed families are common. Within families where a parent, usually the father, is in prison, incarceration "disrupts marital relationships, separates children and parents, and may contribute to the permanent legal dissolution of these relationships" (Clear, 2008, p. 111). The removal of black males from their neighborhoods and families produces the above ratio, which increases the rate of female-headed households. Such removal also restricts the number of male partners available in the neighborhood, which means more competition among mothers for partners that can support a family and serve as parents. Going to prison also substantially reduces the likelihood of the incarcerated individual getting married (Clear, 2008). While the effects hold across all racial and ethnic groups, they are strongest for black males over the age of 23; their likelihood of getting married drops by 50 percent after being incarcerated (Clear, 2008).

Many men maintain contact with their partners and children while in prison, but the rate at which mothers dissolve their relationships with their children's father during his imprisonment is very high (Wildeman, 2017). Parental incarceration in particular can be linked to a host of negative health outcomes among children, including depression, anxiety, asthma and obesity (Wildeman, 2017). Studies examining how incarceration affects children have found strong evidence that parental incarceration exacerbates certain problems and creates risk factors for later delinquency (Clear, 2008). Having a parent incarcerated makes a child three to four times more likely to develop a juvenile delinquency record, makes a child two and a half times more likely to develop a serious mental disorder, and puts the child at higher risk for school failure, unemployment, and illegal drug use (Clear, 2008).

Most of the people who end up in prison were engaged in behavior that created strains on their families. While arrest and imprisonment reduce some of that strain, they tend to create new problems for families, such as financial difficulties that emerge from a loss of income, court costs and a later need to support the individual in prison (Clear, 2008). Other financial and legal difficulties arise from an individual having a criminal record when released, such as problems finding housing, employment, or being unable to attend school because they don't qualify for financial aid. People who get in trouble with the law are already characterized by poor work records before they get arrested; only half of parents who are incarcerated were working full-time when they were arrested, and a third were unemployed (Clear, 2008). Going to prison further deteriorates unemployment prospects, and suffering a conviction and imprisonment has a permanent negative impact on earning potential (Clear, 2008). So, neighborhoods with high rates of incarceration not only experience the removal of social support and potential wage-earners, but the stigma of incarceration means that men tend to get stuck in low-wage or unstable jobs. This can make single mothers reluctant to marry or live with them, further degrading their work and marriage prospects.

High rates of incarceration can actually increase crime in impoverished places. The removal of young residents from a community reduces the capacity of that community to link to resources outside the neighborhood, which weakens attachment to

the neighborhood and erodes collective efficacy (Clear, 2008). Social stresses that occur when a partner or parent is incarcerated can lead to changes in the home and increased stress on the home, in neighborhoods with low social support and high economic stress. Parental incarceration often leads to juvenile delinquency (Clear, 2008). Crime also tends to increase in poor neighborhoods because those communities not only absorb large numbers of people returning from prison, but also because they are residents who tie up the limited interpersonal and social resources of their families and networks (Clear, 2008). Those families and networks are then unable to perform other functions of informal social control and collect resources from outside the community. In short, high rates of incarceration in poor communities creates a series of effects that destabilize mechanisms of informal social control.

These problems are places where community psychology can intervene, though it's important that interventions recognize the racially distinct experiences of mass incarceration, so they don't continue to maintain or exacerbate race-based inequalities. However, working to minimize the negative effects of incarceration is treating the symptoms rather than the cause. Interventions such as programs for successful reintegration into the community aren't addressing the systemic racism and poverty that incarceration perpetuates.

A shift away from punishment to treatment could be an improvement, but releasing drug offenders won't reduce the prison population as much as people think (Clear, 2008). Cutting back sentence lengths could weaken bargaining power at plea bargaining, but most people who are arrested don't serve the maximum length of time in prison, so that wouldn't have much of an effect on the prison population either (Clear, 2008). Most of the prison population consists of people arrested for violent crimes (Clear, 2008), and even that could be reduced with the development of rehabilitative and other non-prison approaches to justice. "Incarceration has consequences at the individual, family, and community levels; and these are disproportionately borne by communities of color. Society can no longer address issues of poverty and racial

inequality without also addressing the deleterious effects of incarceration" (Cox, 2018, p. 49). What would effectively reduce mass incarceration is arresting fewer people and sending fewer of them to prison, which would require a change in attitude toward race, crime and punishment.

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