

# Pursuing Peace Amidst the Mass Incarceration of Black Males

## A Challenge for Community Engaged Researchers

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There can be no peace in this nation without first addressing the crisis of mass incarceration among Black males. To address this concern, it is necessary to explore the experiences of those affected through community engaged research *and* involve these individuals in developing solutions to address this problem. I am a graduate student in the IU School of Education at IUPUI pursuing a doctorate in Urban Studies. I am studying about the impacts on communities when Black boys are poorly educated in leaky K-12 pipelines and grow up to be disproportionately incarcerated. My research asks, what were the motivations, barriers and resources impacting the experiences of African American males who were incarcerated and then decide to pursue an education after they have been released into our communities. I want to know in what ways does achieving more education, getting a high school diploma or a bachelor's degree, affect their lives and our communities? Community engaged and community based participatory researchers need to ask questions about the effects of this phenomenon.

The United States of America incarcerates more of its citizens than any other industrialized nation (Alexander, 2010). An evaluation of data from the U.S. Census and the Federal Bureau of Prisons reveals that while African Americans comprise only 13% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), they represent 38% of those incarcerated in the U.S. (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020). Further, the U.S. Justice Department reports well over 40% of those who have been incarcerated in state and federal prisons lack a high school diploma or its equivalent (Palmer, 2012; Patrick, 2016; Sakala, 2014). The absence of a quality education or ability in a skilled trade often creates a challenge for ex-felons searching for employment upon release.

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The prison industrial complex does not exist in a vacuum. Other social systems create conditions that funnel individuals into it. The seeds of the system are sown by the nation's miseducation for Black youth, which has consistently failed to adequately serve African Americans in this country (Beaudry, 2015). Many schools serving Blacks in urban communities are in disrepair, underfunded, or overcrowded (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018). There is significant disparity in the way students are disciplined in schools (Gregory, 2008; Okonofua, Walton & Eberhardt, 2016). This last condition is particularly harmful as the excessive discipline endured by African American male students can precondition them for the correctional institutions in which they may find themselves when they join the 7% of African American males between the ages of 16 and 24 who dropped out of high school in 2017 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). While these numbers may seem a reasonable rate of attrition to some, it is important to consider the last comprehensive survey of correctional institutions by the Department of Justice showed 41% of the nation's state and federal inmates and 31% of the nation's probationers do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent (Harlow, 2003; Klick, 2011). Moreover, African Americans, who currently comprise only 13.2% of the U.S. population, make up more than 37.5% of those incarcerated creating another category in which they are over-represented, a disproportionate measure by any standard (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2020; Sakala, 2014).

For African American males involved as defendants in the criminal justice system the stakes are high. Upon release, many of those unable to find work resume habits, which were the source of their initial troubles with the law. Soon, they find themselves back in jail. Studies have shown the recidivism rates, defined as the rate of re-arrest and conviction, has increased over the last twenty-plus years. In 1997, Stevens & Ward reported a recidivism rate of 43% in the U.S. across all racial categories (Stevens & Ward, 1997). Nearly twenty years later, Bureau of

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Justice Statistics data on individuals released from custody in 2005 reports 67.8% of inmates return to prison within three years of release and 76% returned within five years of release; with 56% of those being re-arrested within the first year (Bureau of Justice, 2018). Studies also indicate inmates who participate in correctional education and vocational programs have a 43% better chance of not returning to prison (Brower, 2015; Chappell, 2004; Irving, 2016; & Halkovic, 2014). These results demonstrate the value of such programs and should drive our justice system and correctional institutions to increase educational availability because of the possible impact on recidivism *and* the concurrent reduction of taxpayer burden to incarcerate citizens.

Approaches such as these are in alignment with a rehabilitative approach to incarceration that values the humanity of ex-offenders offering them an opportunity to successfully transition back into society, to our communities. Significant research exists on the variety of benefits for education both pre-and post-incarceration with former inmates (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013). These benefits include: increased self-efficacy and self-esteem (Rose & Rose, 2014); decreased disciplinary infractions while incarcerated (Karpowitz, 2017, Lagemann, 2016); development of skills to improve their employability upon release (Ross & Richards, 2009), and reduced recidivism (Lichtenberger & Ogle, 2006; Nally, Lockwood, Knutson, & Ho, 2012). So, is there a way to make a difference, reduce recidivism, offer better educational opportunities, and increase self-efficacy using our research capabilities?

Community-engaged researchers (CEnR) strive to form partnerships and involve community

members as co-researchers in all aspects of a study, with people in the community contributing their knowledges and sharing in the decision-making and ownership to make a difference. The aim is to increase and deepen understandings of a given issue and to develop ways to bring about social change benefiting the community members. According to Miller, 2009, cited in Evans, et al., community-based research can improve the lives of individuals in the community, organization, or association, or can affect the larger social agenda for comprehensive social action bringing about social change. This is community empowerment.

The benefits of a high school education have been documented for those both within and outside the criminal justice system. Those who participate in correctional education and vocational programs have a 43% better chance of not returning to prison (Irving, 2016). Additionally, individuals with a college degree earn more over their lifetimes than those with only a high school diploma (Torpey, 2018). Thus, community engaged research has the potential to create conditions where ex-offenders can legally increase their earning potential while becoming productive and contributing members of their communities.

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The current economic crises have affected families from all backgrounds and looks to get worse the longer the COVID-19 pandemic continues. When inmates are released, they have responsibilities for rent, transportation, and food just like anyone else. However, the label of being a felon made the experience of acquiring those resources more difficult for the men in this study.

Thus, institutions would be wise to develop clearinghouses of information for such resources for the benefit of all its students, not just ex-offenders. CEnR may improve outcomes by helping coordinate access to educational resources, institutions can help reduce financial anxiety allowing the students to concentrate on their academics and ultimately graduate. Again, this is community empowerment.

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