The Loss of the Protective Effects of Relationships of Incarcerated African American Men: Implications for Social Work

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INTRODUCTION

The incarceration rate for African American males is staggering, and the projected rates for the prison population in the United States for 2005 is mind-boggling. From 1973 to 1993, the nation’s prison population grew from 350,000 to 1.4 million (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1993; Department of Justice, 1993). Current data show that the combined federal, state and local adult correctional population grew by 163,800 men and women during 1998 to reach a new high of 5.9 million people. This includes incarcerated inmates, probationers, and parolees in the community. Almost 3 percent of the nation’s adult population, or about 1 in every 34 adults, was incarcerated or on probation or parole at the end of last year (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999).

The racial, ethnic, and gender breakdowns in the incarcerated population reveal some disturbing trends. The incarceration rate, in 1997, for African American males in their late twenties was 8,630 per 100,000 residents, compared to 2,703 among Hispanic males, and 868 among white males. The rate among African American males age 45 to 54, in 1997, was larger than the highest rate among Hispanic males, age 20 to 29, and 3 times larger than the highest rate among white males, age 30.

This article examines the loss of the protective effects of marital and non-marital relationships of incarcerated African American men, and the effects on their mental well-being. The unintended consequences of policies on African American men, their families and communities are discussed. The role of social work is evaluated, and research needs are identified.
African American men and women were at least 6 times more likely than whites to have been in prison by the end of 1997 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999). The potential consequences of these high rates of incarceration for African American men, women, their families, and communities are enormous.

Reasons for Disparities

Several explanations have been identified in the literature for the disparities in the rates of incarceration:

1) change in sentencing policies, which began during the 1970s;
2) the sentencing guideline systems;
3) mandatory minimum sentences for various crimes beginning in the early 1980s; and
4) racial bias (Mauer, 1995).

As a result of liberal and conservative support for a more fixed and determinate sentencing structure with decreased emphasis in rehabilitation, the stage was set for a shift in the sentencing policy (Mauer, 1995). By 1990, almost every state and federal government had adopted some form of mandatory sentencing policy (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992). The premise behind mandatory minimums was that for a given crime, an offender would be required to receive a set minimum prison term regardless of any mitigating circumstances. The mandatory sentencings for drunk driving were modest, but for drug offenses, penalties were harsher (Mauer, 1995).

Racial disparity in the criminal justice system is a product of both high crime rates among some groups and differential treatment by the criminal justice system. Policies that have contributed to racial disparity include law enforcement policies that unduly punish African Americans and policing policies that focus on inner-city communities (Mauer, 1995).

The Ecological Perspective

The Ecological Perspective, postulated by Germain (1979) as a conceptual framework, later elaborated and refined (Germain & Gitterman, 1987) provide the analytical tools for understanding the plight of incarcerated African American males. This perspective provides a multidimensional parameter for viewing the complex interrelationships of the world of African American males. The following concepts from the Ecological Perspective provide understanding of the impact of