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Spring 5-26-2019

## **“It’s Hard Out Here if You’re a Black Felon”: A Critical Examination of Black Male Reentry**

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### **MSU Digital Commons Citation**

Williams, Jason M.; Wilson, Sean K.; and Bergeson, Carrie, "“It’s Hard Out Here if You’re a Black Felon”: A Critical Examination of Black Male Reentry" (2019). *Department of Justice Studies Faculty Scholarship and Creative Works*. 175.

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# “It’s Hard Out Here if You’re a Black Felon”: A Critical Examination of Black Male Reentry

The Prison Journal  
2019, Vol. 99(4) 437–458  
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sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/0032885519852088  
journals.sagepub.com/home/tpj



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## Abstract

Formerly incarcerated Black males face many barriers once they return to society after incarceration. Research has long established incarceration as a determinant of poor health and well-being. While research has shown that legally created barriers (e.g., employment, housing, and social services) are often a challenge post-incarceration, far less is known of Black male’s daily experiences of reentry. Utilizing critical ethnography and semi-structured interviews with formerly incarcerated Black males in a Northeastern community, this study examines the challenges Black males experience post-incarceration.

## Keywords

reentry, employment, familial support, Black masculinity, stigma

## Introduction

When compared with other industrialized nations, the United States incarcerates more of its citizens than any other nation (Clear & Frost, 2015). While 95% of imprisoned individuals return to their communities, the outlook remains bleak for often unattainable employment (Bushway & Apel, 2012;

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Stafford, 2006), personal relationships and social networks that are criminogenic or fragile for time in prison (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Travis & Waul, 2003), and unaddressed substance use and mental health disorders (Binswanger et al., 2012; Mallik-Kane & Visser, 2008). Those who reenter are also more likely to be without family support and post-secondary education, and experience basic needs' insecurities (e.g., food and shelter; Middlemass, 2017; Petersilia, 2003). Reentering Black males have to deal with the historical impact of race, which continues to weigh on present-day issues of reentry (e.g., Jim Crow, War on Drugs, the criminal code; Balko, 2013).

Prisoner reentry is an important policy issue that disproportionately impacts Black males throughout the United States. Reentry is the process of returning to society after a prison or jail sentence (Travis, 2005). On average, 600,000 prisoners are released from state and federal prisons throughout the United States each year (Carson, 2018). Although reentry is an issue that impacts individuals across racial and ethnic groups, research has found that reentry is difficult for Blacks (Frazier, 2014). Petersilia (2003) argued that race is the "elephant sitting in the room" for reentry. Black males are over-represented in state and federal prisons throughout the United States. For example, Black males accounted for 41.3% of prisoners in both state and federal prisons in 2016 (Carson, 2018). The imprisonment rate for Black males 18 years of age or older was 1,609 per 100,000, compared with 857 per 100,000 for Hispanics and 274 per 100,000 for Whites (Carson, 2018). When sent to prison, Black males spend more time incarcerated than White males for committing similar crimes (Alexander, 2012; United States Sentencing Commission, 2010). Researchers relate these stark disparities in incarceration to racial bias in public policy. For instance, the War on Drug that fostered punitive criminal justice policies expanded the prison population substantially, disproportionately incarcerating Blacks for drug offenses, even as research documents that Blacks and Whites use illicit drugs at similar rates (Clear & Frost, 2015; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013). To illuminate the distinctiveness of Black male imprisonment, Petit and Western (2004) argued that Black males are more likely to have criminal records than military service or bachelor's degrees.

After incarceration, Black formerly incarcerated persons deal with collateral consequences of incarceration that often limit their abilities to reintegrate into society. Such collateral consequences include disenfranchisement, public service ineligibility, student loan restrictions, child custody restrictions, employment restrictions, housing restrictions, and felon registration laws (Chesney-Lind & Mauer, 2003; Garretson, 2016). Black males who return to society after incarceration do so with limited social capital, education, and employment skills to assist them throughout the reentry process (Jackson,

1997). Before incarceration, incarcerated persons often lack vocational skills and employment history, further complicating their prospects for employment after incarceration (Petersilia, 2003). Reentry does not impact all formerly incarcerated persons similarly. Research by Pager (2003) found that employers are often unlikely to hire formerly incarcerated persons, especially minorities. Thus, Black formerly incarcerated males often find it extremely difficult to not return to prison after release.

Research has found that 68% of state ex-convicts were rearrested within 3 years, 79% within 6 years, and 83% within 9 years of release (Alper, Durose, & Markman, 2018). For Black males, their recidivism rates are higher than Whites (Alper et al., 2018). Throughout the United States, structural inequality and economic disparity have created conditions in urban environments that often foster crime and criminal justice involvement (Kubrin & Stewart, 2006). The inability to find legitimate employment can propel the formerly incarcerated to turn to illegitimate means to make money to support themselves and their families (Visher & Travis, 2003). Communities into which Black formerly incarcerated males return often lack the resources necessary to support successful reintegration (Clear, 2007). Particular to Black communities, over-policing of Black males, failing educational systems, and the breakup of Black families because of the removal of Black fathers have contributed to a crisis in these communities, negatively affecting the quality of life for Black families. These factors have also created a process that has destroyed the psyches of Black formerly incarcerated males while significantly limiting their employability (Browning, Miller, & Spruance, 2001; Davis, 2017; Kozol, 1991). A Florida study found the reentry experiences of Black males returning to communities with high levels of racial inequality contributed to the likelihood of their reengagement in crime (Reisig, Bales, Hay, & Wang, 2007). Therefore, it is important to study societal inequality and its relationship to reentry.

In New Jersey, economic disparity is alarming. According to a report published by the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice (2018), the median net worth for Black families is US\$5,900, compared with a median net worth of US\$271,402 for White families. Thus, the communities to which Black formerly incarcerated males return rarely have the resources necessary to support their reintegration (Clear, 2007). Disparity in incarceration for Blacks in New Jersey is also concerning. Blacks represent 60% of the New Jersey prison population, although they only represent 15% of the state's general population (Carson, 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Criminologists, legislators, and society should label Black male reentry as a societal crisis, based on the disproportionate number of Black males returning from prison to disadvantaged communities with minimal resources to promote successful reintegration.

This study seeks to add to the criminological body of knowledge on reentry by examining the challenges that disadvantaged formerly incarcerated Black males experience during the reentry process. Accordingly, this study focuses on Black males reentering Paterson, New Jersey, applying a mixed qualitative methodology and uncovering four themes: stigma, masculinity, employment, and family support.

## **Method**

Data collection for this study was accomplished using a mixed-qualitative methodological approach. Two methods were dominant: critical ethnography and interviews. The use of critical ethnography provides researchers with a critical lens, an epistemic frame that foregrounds the standpoint of the participants (Collins, 2013), especially socially, economically, and politically oppressed subjects (also see Bhattacharya, 2017). Furthermore, critical ethnography provides a methodological structure through which to privilege meanings and practices of institutions from the vantage point of a study's participants (Bhattacharya, 2017). For researchers, this underscores the understanding that institutions that govern society are administered in uneven ways, often producing inequity in varying contexts. Interviews were conducted to gauge the thoughts, perspectives, and experiences of respondents, and were applied as a means for triangulating with the first method. Interviews in this study gauged narrators'<sup>1</sup> notions of their structural reality around the question of reentry, giving them an opportunity to make meaning of their lived experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017). Specifically, interview questions sought narrators' perceptions and experiences around employment, family life, and reentry more broadly. Due to the semi-structured nature of interviews, narrators led the interactions in thoughtful ways, generating rich textual data.

One study team researcher attended community-based non-profit meetings that resulted in contact with a gatekeeper who then ushered two of us throughout the community as we observed and interviewed narrators using snowball sampling as a data collection method. Snowball sampling is often the best research option for hard-to-reach populations, as potential narrators are often hesitant to communicate with outsiders without validation from his or her in-group (Bhattacharya, 2017). The gatekeeper, being part of the population of those interviewed, made it easier for potential narrators and the broader community to accept the team. At the time of this writing, five trips were made into the field to gather narratives and observational notes.<sup>2</sup> In this study, we present findings from nine Black male narrators who have been to prison and are experiencing the process of reentry. Narrators spoke to us of their own volition, and pseudonyms have been assigned to all to ensure

confidentiality. The William Paterson University Institutional Review Board approved the study.

Data analysis was conducted by all three co-authors who met multiple times to listen to recorded interviews, review field notes, and code. During the first meeting, we listened to the recordings to become “one with our narrative accounts” and to pinpoint immediate themes before transcription; this gave us an opportunity to build an inductive consensus around our narratives (Bhattacharya, 2017). After transcribing interviews, we engaged in systematic coding via NVIVO, and in later meetings, we discussed our coding schemes and triangulated each other’s coding to improve the rigor of our analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017). After the coding process, we discovered themes that represented narrator-specific knowledge areas (meaning-making) that are summarized in the next section.

### **Research Setting**

This study took place in Paterson, New Jersey, a small (8.7 square mile) urban community, which is densely populated (nearly 150,000 individuals; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Currently, 30% of the population lives below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). This community is also racially and ethnically diverse, with 80% of residents identifying as Black or Hispanic and an additional 35% of residents identifying as foreign-born citizens (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The historical context of Paterson is that this was once a thriving industrial hub. Yet, over time, it has endured harsh periods of unemployment, poverty, and substance abuse. Currently, this small and heavily populated urban community is saturated with nearly 200 liquor stores and 400 tobacco-selling establishments.

## **Literature Review With Findings**

### **Stigma**

There is prejudice attached to prisoner reentry that creates a sense of “othering.” That is, “others” is tagged as socially unacceptable and/or illegitimate within society (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Often, individuals and groups are “othered” based on multiple intersections of their identity (e.g., race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation). This leads to both symbolic distinctions between groups and the social exclusion of certain individuals and groups (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006). Racial bias continues to be reinforced by social media in the depiction of criminals (e.g., *Brock Turner vs. Trayvon Martin*), framing social narratives around who is a criminal and deserving of

compassion while fueling racial conflict (Christie, 1986; Goff, Jackson, DiLeone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014). Thus, Black formerly incarcerated males are viewed as even more socially unacceptable based on their multiple intersections (e.g., race, gender, and criminal record).

Moore and Tangney (2017) examined anticipated stigma and criminal behavior for male prisoners during 3-month pre-release and 1-year post-release periods. Results showed more anticipated stigma during incarceration as an indication of a more likely withdrawal from social interactions on release for White males. Race moderated several post-incarceration stigma effects, likely because of the stigma and stereotyping Black males face socially without incarceration effects.

Few qualitative studies have explored former prisoners' perceptions of criminal record-based stigma, with findings reporting that prisoners perceive significant stigma especially regarding employment, child care, and negative attitudes and discrimination from society (Moore, Stuewig, & Tangney, 2013). Moore et al. (2013) indicated that those who anticipated stigma had higher levels of depression and anxiety. Even those who secured housing and employment struggled with the stress and stigma of their "diminished status" within society (Schnittker & John, 2007). Another study showed that reentering individuals who perceived incarcerated discrimination were more likely to have chronic health conditions (Turney, Lee, & Comfort, 2013). This study also noted a statistically significant association between criminal record discrimination and psychological stress, even when controlling for stress associated with racial discrimination (Turney et al., 2013). As Pager (2003) noted, the mark of a criminal record has followed many offenders, post incarceration. The stigma associated with their criminal past and incarceration has impacted relationships with family, community, criminal justice agents, and the ability to find meaningful employment. A common theme found during the current study was the feeling that one's "jacket" or criminal record has prevented many narrators from experiencing successful reintegration to society. Randy testifies,

I tried it, I gave it up. But when I can't find a job because my jacket. I got caught lying on an application before that's why I don't lie on applications no more. But then they hold that against you still even though you have been truthful.

The stigma associated with their criminal background does not just impact narrators'.

The stigma associated with criminal background is a barrier to locating housing, consistent with extant research (Travis, 2005). Several states have

enforced laws that prevent formerly incarcerated persons, who are overwhelmingly disadvantaged, from receiving supplemental housing assistance. Andre spoke about his housing challenges with the mark of a criminal record: “I was trying to get my own place, but being that I have a conviction I can’t get a TRA,<sup>3</sup> Section 8,<sup>4</sup> or whatever.” Housing restrictions often prevent formerly incarcerated persons from being added to their partner’s lease, often forcing them to hide their presence from landlords or child services. For example, some women present during interviews mentioned how the New Jersey Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCPP) was active in their family-life—DCPP mandated that they not have anyone with criminal records living in their homes for the sake of their children. Randy lives with the mother of his children, and he lives in a constant state of “paranoia” because he feels that DCPP will take his children if they find out.

Like I told you they [DCPP] trying to come at me now because of my jacket, they tried to use my jacket against me telling her [his children’s mom] that they don’t want us living in the same house. I got to hide in the closet. I’ve got to take my clothes and put them where they can’t see it and all that. Man, they gonna question the kids . . . My oldest daughter nine years old. They gone question a nine and a seven year old. And they tried to question my three-year-old son.

Black males often face some of the worst job prospects and disrespect on the job; this may correlate with the status of being an ex-offender and being a Black male. This produces an intersection of oppression. Randy recalls,

When you find a job, you get a boss that treat you like shit because you’ve been locked up, and they talk to you fucked up. Like you’re supposed to take it. When I found another job, they found out I was locked up and I just did 21 and a half years. The first thing the man said out his mouth was, “motherfucker when I tell you to do something, you do it.”

### *Masculinity*

Compared with the broader U.S. society, male inmates have the lowest status of masculinity (Karp, 2010). Male inmates cannot express standard cultural markers of masculinity during incarceration, as they are often without work and are unable to express sexuality. “Without the resources normally available for the enactment of manhood, men in prison are forced to reconstitute their identity and status using the limited available resources” (Phillips, 2001, p. 13). Also, race is strongly connected with social segregation in U.S. culture (Massey & Denton, 1993), and racial tension persists in prison settings where



Black males are disproportionately represented (Karp, 2010). From the vantage point of hegemonic masculinity, certain males are considered “lesser than” (e.g., gay men, men of color; Connell, 1995). Therefore, expressions of hyper-masculinity may be used “as a defensive strategy to counter their feelings of marginality” (Gibbs & Merighi, 1994, p. 80).

Evans and Wallace (2008) reported that inmates characterized by masculine norms (e.g., violent, dominant, and powerful) are often seen as the aggressor within the prison setting, as opposed to victims. Reports found that male prisoners may find it advantageous to exemplify or amplify certain masculine traits during incarceration to secure safety and prevent becoming a victim (Evans & Wallace, 2008) and as a means of survival. McKelly and Rochlen (2010) noted that because of hyper-masculinity, incarcerated males may view seeking help (e.g., emotional and physical) as stigmatizing.

Gordon et al. (2013) studied 139 African American men in a prerelease program to examine the relationship between masculine norms, peer support, and individual length of incarceration. They found that when participants engaged in less masculine norms and more peer support, there was a decrease in individual incarceration length (Gordon et al., 2013). Similarly, Iwamoto et al. (2012) reviewed the role of masculine norms and informal support on depression and anxiety of 123 incarcerated men. Findings suggest men who report using more masculine traits (e.g., asserting power and strength) and lower emotional control encountered more depressive symptoms (Iwamoto et al., 2012). Unfortunately, even with the rise of men’s studies and masculinity research, nearly no attention is being given to interventions that could aid inmates in redefining masculinity to help them succeed during reentry (Karp, 2010).

Many of the narrators in this study experienced a desire to be more involved in their children’s lives. They saw being a part of their children’s lives as central to maintaining their hetero-normative views of masculinity and mental health. Many saw their fatherhood as an inspiration to find legitimate employment, and this often resulted in desistance from crime. For example, Jermaine speaks about how participation in his children’s lives helped motivate him (a recovering addict and gang member) to change his life:

And that’s what keeps me strong. To be involved for my kids. I just learned how to be a father for my kids. When I turned 36, that’s when I really started feeling that I was a father and needed out here. I get so much love, so now I really know what I’m here for because they don’t got to tell me. I could feel it. And that just make me go harder.

Having their children in their lives gives many of these men a second chance at life. This reoccurring theme demythologizes the narrative that

Black men do not want to be active in their children's lives. They see fatherhood as a way to make amends for some of their past mistakes. Being a father to their children is directly connected with their ability to achieve masculinity. According to Roy and Dyson (2010), low-income Black men often create their own alternative masculinities to fulfill normative expectations of masculinity while living in structurally disadvantaged communities. It was within structural inequality and a career of crime and a lifetime of substance abuse that Jermaine became a man and a father. Thus, the construction of masculinity for men like Jermaine and others, in particular, is uniquely divergent.

A common theme that emerged among the narrators was the notion that they believed they were not men but rather lost boys who committed crimes that resulted in their incarceration and separation from their children. Thus, many of them believed being active fathers gave them a chance to fulfill hetero-normative masculinity and motivation to live a life without criminal justice system involvement, substance abuse, and unemployment. Anthony expresses his fatherly yearnings,

That's why I'm taking that chance to take that positive route. Because I do want to become somebody. I do want my daughter to have a better life than me. I do want my daughter to have a father around.

Anthony believed his incarceration was mostly related to his past immaturity and his inability to be what he considers a man. Playing a role in his daughter's life brings him a sense of importance. A common theme among narrators was the notion that they want their children to see them as positive role models who can provide them with financial, emotional, and parental support. Alonzo spoke about some advice he gives his sons, "I always tell my sons that if they are gonna follow my footsteps do what I do now, don't follow what I did in the past."

Alonzo is an active member of a local community organization that seeks to rid the community of violence. His connection to community organizing and to his children provides him with hope for the future; albeit, he has experienced many reentry hardships, such as employment issues and settling child support debt. Being unable to fulfill the standard cultural markers of masculinity causes mental strain for many of these men. Societal stereotypes often paint urban Black men with criminal records as men who are over sexualized, irresponsible, and incapable of supporting their families. In contrast, many of the interviewees stated that they want to actively engage in their children's lives. For example, Ed made recommendations about what reentry programs should focus on when assisting formerly incarcerated males regarding support to gain custody or visitation of their children:

The other thing that gets me about these guys on the street too, and I think they need a program for this. You let these guys know that men that want to be active in the children's life because mothers try to keep them away from the kids or keep the kid away from the father, well, they have rights. We have rights out here.

Often missing in reentry research is a thorough analysis regarding strains that fathers face on returning home after incarceration. Many states continue to charge fathers for child support during their imprisonment, resulting in insurmountable child support costs upon release. This can limit their ability to gain custody of their children and complicate relationships with their children and their mothers. For example, Alonzo accounted the challenges he faces raising his children post incarceration. He also highlighted challenges paying child support while his son lives with him, "I'm paying her child support, which I never understood because I had him living with me. Feeding him, coating him."

Andre spoke about not being able to save money to support himself and his family as a result of his inability to find stable employment and the insurmountable costs of child support:

You can't get money. You can't afford to have health insurance and your child support is kicking your ass. I got to pay medical, dental, all that shit for my kids. The court don't care. You know, they don't care how much you bring home. They're going to tell you that they aren't making any changes, and you got to pretty much survive on what you got. I got to survive, I can't take care of my kids without taking care of me.

Often, justice system-impacted families are affected by the interrupting logistics of courtroom barriers that do irreparable harm to the relationships between Black men and women. Tony further spoke about the difficulties he has faced dealing with his child's mother regarding child support. Through this quote, we see how system-impacted families are disrupted and ultimately broken by courts:

I can never be together on the same level with her. You know what I'm saying? She beat me down for this child support shit man. But not looking at things I do for my daughter. Like I didn't even know I was on child support. I was locked up all that time, and I came out owing all this money. It's hard man.

Many narrators shared similar experiences of desiring to support their children but often finding it difficult to do so, based on their inability to find gainful employment and housing and to pay child support.

## Employment

Research documents that employment is a key factor affecting successful reentry, largely because those employed are less likely to return to criminal activity (Andrews, 1995; Burton, Cullen, & Travis, 1987; Clear, 2007; Freeman, 1994; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Petersilia, 2003, 2005; Vishner & Travis, 2003). Research asserts that for many of the formerly incarcerated, employment is more than a means of economic stability; it often defines who they are as an individual (Swanson, Schnippert, & Tryling, 2014). Middlemass (2017) estimated that if we combined jobs, education, and stable housing success, reentry outcomes would improve by nearly 33%. Pager (2003) found that having a criminal record reduced the likelihood of getting called back for a job by 50%. Research also suggests that employers who do not conduct background checks are likely to avoid specific groups (i.e., undereducated Black men) because they stereotype them as ex-offenders without evidence to the contrary (Holzer & Stoll, 2001; Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2002; Pager, 2003).

Furthermore, minority status and a history of incarceration only intensify the bleak employment outlook for Black males. Pager (2003) also found that incarceration effect on employment for Black males versus White males was up by 40%. Historically, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has taken a stance that employment exclusion based on arrest and conviction records violates Title VII, as African Americans and Hispanics are arrested and convicted at disproportionate rates than their actual numbers in population (Swanson, Schnippert & Tryling, 2014). Yet, between 1996 and 2011, the Society for Human Resources Management found that the percentage of employment criminal background checks increased from 51% to 73% (Schwarzfeld, 2012). These compounded consequences of incarceration are particularly salient for racial and ethnic minorities, who have historically faced more barriers in attempting to gain work than their White counterparts (Decker, Ortiz, Spohn, & Hedberg, 2015). Tripodi, Kim, and Bender (2011) found a statistically significant relationship between employment and time to recidivism. Those who obtained employment were able to desist from crime for 31.4 months, while those who remained unemployed returned to crime sooner—17.3 months (Tripodi et al., 2011). The unfortunate and sobering reality of employment for ex-offenders is that most will alternate between legitimate work and illegal work, making a trajectory of work to crime desistance hard to track and understand linearly (Piquero, 2004), especially when looking at minority ex-offenders (i.e., Black and Hispanic minorities).

Research also confirms that returning inmates need more help than in the past, as they are more likely to be serving longer sentences. Longer prison

stays mean longer disconnections from family, friends, and larger social networks and reentry with greater needs for untreated substance abuse and mental illness conditions (Decker et al., 2015; Middlemass, 2017). Fahey, Roberts, and Engel (2006) conducted in-depth discussions regarding the effects of a criminal record on hiring decisions and factors that may further impact employability for ex-offenders. Three employer preferences were evident: completion of transitional employment programs, overall work readiness training, and ex-offender job skill trainings, all post-release (Fahey et al., 2006). In sum, decades of research identify employment as a key factor to successful reentry and lowering rates of recidivism (Bayens & Smykla, 2013; Benda, Harm, & Toombs, 2005; Berg & Huebner, 2011).

Job prospects for narrators in our study were bleak upon return to society. Several were unemployed, and those who were employed were underemployed. These narrators feared having to return to the streets to make money because they had difficulty finding steady and meaningful employment. As expressed by Chris,

Well the number one challenge, it's hard to get a job when you come out of jail. That's the number one thing. You know what I mean? Coming home it's hard, because you do your time and come home and they don't got no stuff for you. They say they'll help you, but they don't help you when you come out. And like I said, it's basically employment man when you come home, that's the number one problem. That right there could kill a lot of other smaller issues.

These responses are consistent with extant research that highlights the reality that work is the most important factor associated with success after release (La Vigne, Shollenberger, & Debus, 2009). Another employment issue for the formerly incarcerated is the belief that they are being exploited by temporary hiring agencies. Jerry gives his account,

You try to work. And then when it comes to employment, you get a job but, the menial jobs you got to work is for these agencies. They send you anywhere and then they take your \$40<sup>5</sup> a week and you're not really making enough. . . . Then when I got hurt, the temp agencies supposed to send you to a private doctor. They don't do that.

Ed echoed Jerry's contentions,

I'm looking every day, but I got to subject myself to this temp agency and I'm getting raped. You putting in 13, 14 hours, they taking \$40 and then you have jobs that pay \$13 an hour but they're giving you \$10.

Narrators fortunate to find employment often found low-paying, menial jobs that did not offer them job security. For them, job security includes being able to afford health care and family outings for their loved ones. Randy, a recent returnee, served over 21 years in prison. He was denied an opportunity by an employer because of his criminal background; he discussed going on an interview and what the process was like:

They called me before I got home. They told me I'm sorry because of your background you can't get the job. That's the first time I could've had a job that paid me \$13 an hour. I never had a job that paid that much money man, and I can't even work because of my jacket.

### *Family Support*

Literature points to strong social ties, specifically family relationships, as an aid to successful prisoner reentry (McMurray, 1993; Mills & Codd, 2008). Family connections and networks are often the driving mechanism on which returning ex-offenders rely to meet and maintain their most basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, transportation, and emotional support; Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Nelson, Deess, & Allen, 1999; Schroeder, Giordano, & Cernkovich, 2007). For many returnees with substance abuse histories, it is parental and sibling emotional supports that help to reduce relapse (O'Brien, 2001; Petersilia, 2003). Specifically, spousal support has been shown to lower relapse rates for alcohol addiction upon release (Sobell, Sobell, Toneatto, & Leo, 1993).

As early as the 1970s, Holt and Miller (1972) reported that incarcerated individuals who received consistent visits from family members tended to have more favorable parole outcomes. Those with no visitors during incarceration were 6 times more likely to violate their parole and return to prison within their first year of parole. This is a finding that has been replicated in prisoner reentry research (Browning et al., 2001; Hostetter & Jinnah, 1993).

In Visher's (2013) study, assuming traditional roles within a family, such as father or parent, could also aid in the reentry transition, with further links to positive outcomes upon release. Using longitudinal data on fathers' returning to the community post-incarceration, Visher (2013) examined how the relationship between fathers and their children might influence aspects of life for recently released fathers. Analyses confirmed that fathers who had regular contact with their children before reentry and good family support overall were more likely to be attached to their children. Fathers with stronger child attachments had a higher likelihood of working more hours per week, having better mental health, and being less likely to be arrested.

Contact between a father and his child(ren) is important for the well-being of both and the further maintenance of strong family ties, given the lengthy sentences Black men often receive (Browning et al., 2001). According to research, the relationship between intangible resources and the reentry experience is important for men in particular, a factor often neglected in male reentry research (Visher, La Vigne, & Travis, 2004; Wolff & Draine, 2004). Randy illuminates the importance of intangible resources he gained from one of his five children:

She shows me a lot of love, you know what I'm saying? She's nine years old. She always told me like she doesn't want me to go to jail, so I'm trying to do the right thing. Not to go back. But like I said, when I go out there to these jobs and stuff, I get the door closed in my face man, and because of my jacket, but I'm trying to do the right thing.

In addition, many narrators spoke about how difficult it is to build relationships with family members after incarceration. A common theme of familial judgment emerged, even as the men may have changed their lives significantly since returning home. Given the stress of the reentry process for the returnee and family alike, the support of family is crucial. It may take several months, sometimes several years, for a formerly incarcerated person to reintegrate back into society. Jerry highlighted the stress he experienced due to the lack of familial support:

Cuz see a lot of your family when you come home now, don't understand like things take time. Ok, now, your family breathing down your back to get a job, get off the couch, to do this, do that, then after a while you get frustrated and then you revert back to who you used to be. And the first thing you do if you ain't working is what? Go back to the streets.

Jerry touches on the reality that many formerly incarcerated persons often return to crime if they cannot find gainful employment that can "keep their family off their back." Jerry emphasizes the importance of familial support. Importantly, studies have shown that familial support is also correlated to recidivism (Clear, 2007; Travis, 2005). Therefore, it is helpful to overall public good if families are supportive and understanding during the reentry process.

## **Discussion**

The voices of the narrators in this study depict a profound sense of suffering. Inherent in their narratives is the extent to which the logics

that govern and sustain post-incarceration punishments are linked to past systems of race-based oppression. Alexander (2012) argued that modern day penal race disparities result directly from the “New Jim Crow.” In her book, she eloquently makes the case that race-based oppression still exists in the form of new punishment logics, only slightly latent in function in that they overwhelmingly deceive the public as to the real harms of mass incarceration and the ensuing punishments that the formerly incarcerated experience.

This study captures the essence of Alexander’s (2012) thesis in significant ways, as the narrators’ voices and lived experiences express all too well the collective suffering that men like them face nationwide. The historical fixation of state-sanctioned oppression of Black bodies cannot be ignored in listening to the testimonies of these men whose oppression, as we argue in this study, is particularly egregious in two key aspects of their lives—masculinity and employment. For instance, several men noted how the criminal label has amounted to a metaphoric castration, as they cannot provide for their families. Yet, as men, in a hetero-patriarchal society, they are expected to be the caregivers. Despite being branded as criminals, our narrators are still held to traditional hetero-patriarchal standards of masculinity. The psychological effects of being barred from meeting this model are immeasurable and historical, for such insidious punishment relates directly to the era of slavery. Slave-owners, to establish psychological control over them, would often emasculate Black men to ensure that no one (especially Black women and children) would respect them as protectors and fathers. Black men in this study reported feelings of being devalued and useless to their children, and some were disassociated from their children’s mothers as well. Nevertheless, despite these obstacles, some reported persevering against the odds, while others maintained divergent masculinities<sup>6</sup> that kept them afloat. Thus, modern day punishment regimes, indeed, strongly evoke past practices and pain.

Regarding labor, Black men have long been the embodiment of economic deprivation (this too is discursively tied to masculinity). With mass incarceration, criminal justice mechanisms of punishment have further legitimized economic deprivation as a status ranking for Black men, under the guise of public safety. Tagging Black men as criminals has deceptively and democratically insured the mistreatment of generations of Black men who have had to face the horrors of mass incarceration and its “tentacles” even as they are “freed” into the community. Just as Blacks have been economically exploited during slavery and reconstruction, it appears this is also likely today as many matriculate reentry. Our narrators articulated feelings of exploitation as they were relegated to temporary hiring



agencies because of their criminal status. These agencies, by and large, do not offer health insurance, pensions, or other valued job security incentives. The men report these employers speak to them like nonentities—a particular harm, as employment is deeply connected to one's identity and many of our narrators indicated a sense of lost identity due to not having a job. For those returning home from prison, successful reintegration requires community resources that invest in the development of new, healthy, and productive identities—also critical to returnees desisting from crime. Unfortunately, for many Black men, reentry primarily offers them intersectional oppression and prejudice based on their race and criminal record. This seemingly endless cycle of discrimination contributes to a state of paranoia observable to the research team both in the field and during the listening sessions. In sum, the lack of employment and institutionalized stereotypes of their race and masculinity perpetuate punishment and structural barriers to successful community reintegration.

## **Conclusion**

In this research study, our goal was to investigate the experiences of Black men as they matriculate reentry. In doing so, we learned that stigma, masculinity, employment, and family support were key themes that played major roles in their reentry navigation. Notably, each theme varied significantly among narrators, especially in the areas of masculinity and family support. Future research could underscore the role masculinity may have on (un)successful reentry. Clearly, there is a critical need to further contextualize family structure in Black families impacted by poverty and other systematic needs, such that the role of the family can be better understood in the reintegration processes of Black men. Finally, incorporating historical context may help to provide a better understanding of where new policy initiatives may be directed—particularly in the area of employment and family support systems that foresee and prevent the repetition and continued institutionalization of racialized harms that society claims to longer support.

## **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Notes

1. For the purposes of this study, all participants are called narrators, as we believe this term humanizes our study participants as the true story-tellers and facilitators of knowledge regarding their lived experience.
2. This study is ongoing. Thus, this publication is exploratory in nature.
3. Temporary Housing Assistance. It provides low-income persons with temporary housing. For more information, visit <https://www.nj.gov/njparentlink/services/housing/>
4. Section 8 is a Federal Housing Voucher program. For more information, visit <https://www.hud.gov/programdescription/cert8>
5. Narrators often spoke about how temporary hiring agencies took a cut from their hourly wage. This speaking-point is representative of those contentions.
6. Divergent masculinity came across as a major theme during our coding process. It is a process by which our narrators piece together their manhood in the best way they know how from the status of a male-outsider. They have been locked out from traditional heteropatriarchy even though they too identify under the traditional banner—and so they must build their idea of manhood within the context of structural inequality and racism. Through this process, they develop divergent masculinities; the path of finding one's manhood is unpredictable, often risky, dangerous, and filled with incredible pain.

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