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Childhood Factors and Incarceration for African American Men: How Early Life Community Experience Influences Adult Outcomes

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Abstract

There is a dearth of research that analyzes childhood influence on adult incarceration, and an associated lack of emphasis on the relationship between childhood poverty, lack of educational attainment, and family structure on criminality among African American men – a population wherein individuals are both incarcerated and generally socioeconomically disadvantaged at disproportionately higher rates. Consistent with the recent demand for criminal justice reform, the need for systematic research pertaining to tendencies in criminality has become apparent. Resulting from secondhand statistical data analysis on aggregate state factors such as childhood familial poverty rate, rate of single-parenthood, and high school drop out rate, the intention of this study is to fill the existing void through examination of the effects of these childhood familial conditions on incarceration in adulthood among African American men.

Literature Review

Over the past three decades the prison population in the United States has increased six-fold (Pettit and Western 2004). For particular subpopulations, this prison boom has been especially detrimental. Beginning in youth, African American men are incarcerated at disproportionately higher rates as compared to their white counterparts and other minority groups, and this trend extends into adulthood (Mauer and King 2007, Pettit and Sykes 2015). The national black-to-white ratio of incarceration is at 5.6-to-1, though state ratios range from 14-to-1 in Iowa to 2-to-1 in Hawaii (Mauer and King 2007).

High School Dropout

-Factors that encourage high school completion and discourage high school dropout, such as two-parent households and stable family socioeconomic status, are among the factors that disadvantage the African American population the most (Kao and Thompson 2003, Merlo and Wolpin 2009).

-Low educational attainment has been shown to be linked to propensity to crime. In 2012 more than one-third of young African American men without a high school diploma were incarcerated on any given day (Pettit and Sykes 2015).

Childhood Poverty

-Poverty is a risk factor for participation in criminal behavior. The black community falls at the lower end of income distribution in the United States, which happens to be the statistical location that puts youth at a greater risk of being involved in serious crime (Holzer et al. 2008).

-Many studies are in agreement that much of the crime that is committed by impoverished people is a result of seeking illegitimate means to support themselves or to support their family members (Kendig, Mattingly and Bianchi 2014, Holzer et al. 2008).

Single-Mother Households

-Since the 1960s the percentage of children living with single parents has increased from nine-percent, to 28-percent in 2012 (Amato, Patterson, Beattie 2015). Among the groups disproportionately affected are African American children who experience the highest percentage of those living in homes with single parents.

Hypotheses:

- 1.) States with high rates of high school drop out will exhibit higher rates of incarceration among African American adults compared to states with low rates of high school drop out.
- 2.) States with high rates of childhood poverty will exhibit higher rates of incarceration among African American adult males compared to states with low rates of childhood poverty.
- 3.) States with high rates of single-parent households will exhibit higher rates of incarceration among African American adult males compared to states with low rates of single-parent households.

Data and Methods

The data employed for the independent variables come from STATES10 – a compilation of geographic socio-political information by Stephen Sweet and Karen Grace-Martin. For the purposes of this study, the community factors, or the independent variables, are rate of high school dropout, childhood poverty, and single mother households. The sources for STATES10 include National Education Association, Department of Labor, U.S. Census, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the Internal Revenue Service.

The data pertaining to the dependent variable, state rates of African American male incarceration, was compiled by myself using data from the Prison Policy Initiative. This is a non-profit organization that produces research that exposes the extensive harm and the racial and ethnic disparity found within the criminal justice system in the U.S.

Analysis:

Using SPSS a bivariate analysis of the data tables was run to find the correlation coefficients of the relationships between and within the three independent variables and one dependent variable.

Findings

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N=50)

Variable	Range	M	SD
PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL DROP OUT RATE 2007	2 - 7.6	4.28	1.573
% CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY 2008	9 - 30.4	17.298	4.827
% HOUSEHOLDS HEADED SINGLE MOTHERS 2008	5.4 - 10.4	7.092	1.068
AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE INCARCERATION RATE 2010	1032 - 7360	2606.06	1030.839

Findings

		African American Male Incarceration Rates 2010	Percent of Children Living in Poverty: 2008	Percent of Households Headed by Single Mothers: 2008	Public High School Drop Out Rate: 2007
African American Male Incarceration Rates 2010	Pearson Correlation	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)				
Percent of Children Living in Poverty: 2008	Pearson Correlation	.238	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.095			
Percent of Households Headed by Single Mothers: 2008	Pearson Correlation	-.281	.672	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.048***	.000***		
Public High School Drop Out Rate: 2007	Pearson Correlation	-.126	.251	.312	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.392	.082	.029***	

Conclusion

At the significance level of .05, there are three statistically significant relationships between the variables provided in the chart:

- Most notably, the positive correlation of .048 between state percents of households headed by single mothers and state rates of African American male incarceration provides initial support for the third hypothesis. This indicates that states with high percentages of households headed by single mothers also exhibit higher rates of African American incarceration.
- The most highly correlated relationship is found between two of the identified independent variables: state percentage of poverty and state percentages of single mother households, which is at .000. This relationship can largely be attributed to the lower average income of single parent (especially single mother) households, as there is typically one source of household income as compared to two potential sources when there are two parents present in one household.
- The second-most significant relationship is again between two of the identified independent variables: state percentages of single mother households and state public high school dropout rate, which provided a p-value of .029.

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