Do People's Perceptions of the Causes of Crime and Punishment Align with Reality?

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ABSTRACT

Do people's perceptions of the causes of crime and punishment align with reality? The current work aimed to address this question. First, the current work reviewed extant literature from various areas of psychology (developmental, social, cognitive) on laypeople's perceptions of why others become incarcerated. This work shows that people largely attribute incarceration to individual-level factors (e.g., bad behaviors, bad morals). Next, the current work reviewed literature examining the real factors that underlie why people come in contact with the criminal legal system. Specifically, this work largely suggests that criminal legal system contact stems from factors outside the individual, such as negative interpersonal and societal circumstances. Together, these separate streams of evidence suggest that laypeople's perceptions of the causes for crime and punishment do not align with reality. In other words, people's reasoning about the criminal justice system seems to be inaccurate. In unearthing this novel discovery, the current work highlights the dire need to help correct laypeople's faulty assumptions. Implications for the potential benefits of correcting such assumptions are discussed.

Introduction

When talking about the U.S. criminal legal system, there are a lot of statistics that are concerning. Following the rise of crime from the 1960s to 1980s due to the drug market, there were consequent increases in drug penalties as well as harsher sentencing laws (Enns, 2016). Those factors combined added up to a state and federal prison population of 1.5 million, up from 200,000 in 1973; at that, there was also an annual jail population of close to 13 million people (Enns, 2016). This growth was "internationally unique." As of 2021, the U.S. still had the highest incarceration rate in the world, resulting in approximately 664 incarcerated people per 100,000 residents (Prison Policy Initiative, 2021). This trend continues into today's world, seeing as though the US incarceration rate still greatly exceeds that of other countries (Alexander, 2012; Gramlich, 2021).

Of course, incarceration has important consequences. Most proximally, incarceration impacts individuals who are behind bars. While incarcerated, people in the U.S. often live in degrading conditions (e.g., Forbes, 2016), experience brutality from carceral facility staff (Eisen, 2020), and lose many of their freedoms (e.g., voting in certain elections (Fellner, 1998). Importantly, incarceration has a ripple effect across time. Although people sometimes describe incarcerated individuals as paying a debt for a moral wrong (e.g., breaking the law), predominant cultural narratives within the U.S. portray incarcerated individuals as forever unable to repay their debt. In other words, cultural narratives in the U.S. often suggest that people who have experienced incarceration are irredeemable (e.g., Alexander, 2012; Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2021; Kleinfeld, 2016). Such perceptions shape the experiences of people even after they transcend the bars of prison or jail. Those who have experienced incarceration can apply for some jobs *legally*, but will be rejected *socially* because those who have a criminal record are discriminated against in the context of hiring (e.g., Alexander, 2012; Pager, 2008). This leads formerly incarcerated individuals to find jobs in places that do not sustain them financially or to look for employment through channels that are not legally sanctioned (e.g., selling drugs, firearms, Bushman, 2016; Kramer, 2000). Ultimately, being locked out of the mainstream labor market puts formerly incarcerated individuals at-risk for re-incarceration (Kramer, 2000).

While approximately 50% of families residing in the U.S. have a family member who has experienced incarceration, some specific groups make up the majority of that percentage (Enns, 2019). All the way back to the year that the U.S. was founded to the present, there have always been marginalized members of society. While the groups who took the brunt of this disproportionate incarceration are no longer foreign-born and non-English speaking European immigrants like they were from 1850 to 1940, there are still groups that are continuously targeted by racism and face the oftentimes unfair incarceration that comes with it: Black and Latino people (Vera, 2023). In 2015, Black and Latino people made up about 55% of those incarcerated in federal or state prison (Vera, 2023). By 2021, Black and Latino people were still being incarcerated at exorbitantly high rates relative to White people (Wessler, 2022). In fact, Black people are incarcerated at approximately five times the rate of White people, whereas Hispanic people are incarcerated at approximately double the rate of White people (Wessler, 2022). In comparison, in 2020 it was shown that only 11.9% of the U.S. population was made up of Black people and only 19.5% of the U.S. population was made up of Latino and Hispanic people (Boschma, 2021).

Importantly, research suggests that Black and Latino people experience worse outcomes than their White peers across a variety of encounters with the criminal legal system. Not only are Black people incarcerated at extremely high rates, but they are also more likely to be surveilled, stopped, shot, and killed by law enforcement agents (i.e., police officers, Correll et al., 2014; Del Toro et al., 2022; Harcourt, 2008). The reason behind this is shockingly enough not always due to blatant racism. It was shown that merely thinking about Black individuals can lead people to evaluate ambiguous–or even innocuous–behaviors as harmful. For instance, prior work has shown that priming people to think about Black individuals can lead people to miscategorize harmless objects (e.g., a cell phone) as a weapon, to shoot quickly and, at times indiscriminately (see Cornell et al., 2002; Eberhardt et al., 2004; Payne, 2001). Additionally, Black people who appear most stereotypically Black may be the most vulnerable to false identifications in real criminal lineups, therefore wrongfully imprisoned -or worse- executed under the death penalty (Eberhardt et al., 2004). In a large majority of studies conducted, the results showed that the race of the victim was associated with the likelihood of being charged with capital murder or receiving the death penalty (Death Penalty Information Center, 2023). Specifically, people who mur-dered White people were found more like-ly to be sen-tenced to death than those who mur-dered Black people (United States, 1990).

In sum, there is a robust body of research examining the social and economic consequences of incarceration within the U.S.. The current work builds on this past research in an important way--namely, by gauging the extent to which people have correct or incorrect perceptions on incarceration. The first possibility is that some people may have *correct* views on the criminal legal system. This may be due to the nature of their career (i.e. Lawyer, judge, law enforcement) that offers them close, daily contact with the legal system itself and also its varying effects on different races and ethnicities. Another feasibility is because many people in the US know individuals who are incarcerated and/or have experienced incarceration. As such, they might be intimately aware of the causes of incarceration since they saw what led to someone undergoing it first hand. The second possibility is that people may have *incorrect* views on the CLS (criminal legal system). There's a rich literature in social psychology that suggests that people commonly make errors in social perception (e.g., Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020; Epley et al., 2004; Kardas et al., 2022). This is oftentimes credited to the spread of false information that frequently causes lapses in judgment. This paper will test these two possibilities and by the end show the scientific reasoning behind which perceptions are accurate vs inaccurate. Doing so may provide educators and justice advocates the opportunity to fix incorrect views on the reasons behind incarceration. Such an opportunity may be consequential. When an increased amount of individuals think intelligently when it comes to severe subjects such as incarceration, more changes can be implemented in order to break the cycles that lead to it time and time again. These causal cycles, such as those of poverty (Kramer, 2000) and racism (Eberhardt, 2004), can only be improved if those who are able to implement important changes are aware of what will have the biggest effect on the issue at hand. For example, there may be people who care about the large rates of

incarceration in the US. However, their reforms may make little to no difference if they seek to address the incorrect causal underpinnings of incarceration. For instance, they may spend funds setting up more mental health programs because they have picked up from social media that it is a leading cause for the emergence of criminals. In reality, there are other more direct correlates to incarceration than mental health. Situations similar to the one described oftentimes lead to time and money being wasted while the underlying issues of imprisonment remain unaddressed. Second, understanding the true attributions for incarceration may help lessen the frequently unfair portrayal of criminals seeing as though the continuous mis-comprehension of the reasons behind imprisonment has led, and continues to lead, to many negative bias' such as stereotypes surrounding certain minorities (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020, 2022).

Perceptions Underlying Why People End Up in The Criminal Legal System

In general, when adults hear that someone was incarcerated, more times than often they attribute incarceration to individual-level characteristics (e.g., Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2020; Kleinfeld, 2016). Importantly, individual-level characteristics can come in different "flavors." One type of individual-level characteristic includes a person's internal characteristics. Here, internal characteristics refer to factors that reside within an individual. Internal characteristics can either focus on temporary qualities–such as mental and emotional states, desires, and preferences–or stable qualities such as genetics, traits, and "essences." Anecdotal evidence suggests that many people in the U.S. often view a person's stable internal characteristics as a reason for their incarceration (Kleinfeld, 2016).

Converging evidence suggests that adults living in the U.S. often view incarceration as due to a person's bad moral character (Dunlea & Heiphetz, 2021, 2022; Kleinfeld, 2016). This is especially believed of incarcerated individuals who are being punished because of a serious or repeated crime (Kleinfeld, 2016). Several also think that a person can even be born with these bad morals if that individual's parents had a poor moral compass themselves (Johnson et al., 2023). Further, people tend to believe that children who have parents who were incarcerated are very heavily affected and have little to no choice when it comes to ending up on the same path as their parents (Dunlea et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2023). This is why a large sum of people choose the phrase, "bad genes" to describe why someone followed in their parents criminal footsteps (Johnson et al., 2023). In reality, however, children of incarcerated parents are often incredibly resilient and often experience many positive life outcomes (Johnson et al., 2023).

Another largely thought of internal contribution for incarceration is poor mental health. In the context of school shooters, it is true that 61% of them experienced severe depression, 78% considered or attempted suicide prior to the shooting, and 43% committed suicide during the incident. However, when speaking generally, only 4% of violent acts are attributed to mental health (Dunlea, 2020; Bushman, 2016). In fact, even though a greater number of those incarcerated have some mental health concerns, only 10% to 25% of people who are incarcerated within the U.S. experience severe mental illnesses (i.e. schizophrenia).

Next, an individual factor that can be viewed as either stable or temporary is a person's behavior. In the U.S., people are ostensibly incarcerated because of their behaviors (and not their moral character) (Kleinfeld, 2016; *People v. White,* 1840). However, adults often conflate what should occur with what does occur (i.e. they believe that "bad" people are punished as opposed to averagely moral people who just did bad things) (Dunlea et al., 2020). As such, they might reason that people receive punishment because that is what is supposed to happen instead of reflecting on what made incarcerated individuals act poorly in the first place.

It is noticeable that people oftentimes attribute incarceration to individual level causes and do not think that incarceration stems from structural/external factors. However, they are mistaken. Just like internal characteristics have many different subcategories, external factors do too. These structural factors include influences that are usually out of a person's control such as: family, neighborhood, economic status, race and the inner workings of the law. Though, people are generally bad at seeing past the internal characteristics of a poorly

behaved individual to these external factors. In fact, most adults think that by attributing external factors for incarceration, people are creating excuses instead of identifying reasons. This is oftentimes why adults fail to see external pressuring factors in a child's life that could possibly lead them down a path of incarceration until it is too late.

To sum up, the perceived reasons for incarceration largely stem from individual level causes. Many people think of internal factors and behavioral factors as being at fault and consequently fail to consider whether external factors play a role instead. To recap, along with thinking that mental health is a big reason for incarceration, a large sum of people also think that bad genes, bad morals, bad behavior and bad personality are some of the largest factors to blame. However, it's important to note that human's judgments regarding the social world are notoriously inaccurate. A common judgment people make is about their peers' economic status (i.e. by making conclusions based on the size of their house and the way they dress). By extension, it is very well possible that humans' judgments regarding the causes for CLS contact may also be inaccurate. Thus, the next section of the current paper explores this possibility by reviewing evidence concerning the real drivers of incarceration.

Actual Reasons Underlying Why People End Up in The Criminal Legal System

There is no doubt that most people perceive others who were incarcerated in a negative and oftentimes unfair way, as well as generally fail to question whether external factors play a potentially bigger role than the commonly blamed individual-level factors mentioned. Indeed, converging evidence within human development suggests that factors external to an individual play a powerful role in shaping developmental outcomes (e.g., Arditti, 2005; Fields et al., 2021). For instance, one leading framework–Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977)–suggests that developmental processes are sensitive to contextual factors in the environment such as family structures, neighborhoods, and broader structural factors (e.g., poverty). The current section leverages past learnings from past ecological models to examine the external, contextual factors that may play a role in leading a child to ultimately have contact with the CLS later in life. This approach holds theoretical promise in terms of informing legal practitioners', justice advocates', and social workers' about the root causes of incarceration (also see Arditti, 2005 for a similar argument). Ultimately, understanding the root causes of incarceration may help such well-intentioned individuals develop and implement interventions that protect youth from coming in contact with the criminal justice system later in life.

Social Relationships

Parents

In most cases, the people who have the most immediate, and oftentimes the most damaging, effects on an individual are none-other than their parents. Parents are often the first people newborns lay their eyes on; they are the people they go to for advice and the people they frequently get their culture and ideologies from (Miller, 1995). Parents are the individuals who are oftentimes among the most influential people in their offspring's lives. Due to this, there are a myriad of ways a parent can deeply affect their child in a negative way as well as lay the groundwork for children to interact with the social world in a way that may lead to incarceration. In particular, youth violence is often associated with carceral outcomes for youth (Bushman, 2016). Researchers report that many of the best established risk factors for youth violence are actually family based including: harsh and rejecting parents, interparent violence, child abuse, neglect, chaotic family life, inconsistent discipline, and inadequate monitoring by parents of children showing early signs of aggression (Bushman, 2016).

In the case of traumatic events in a child's life, in particular abuse and interparental violence (domestic abuse), researchers report that such adverse childhood experiences can change the functioning of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical axis in ways that compromise productive reactions to stress (e.g. the ability to emotionally regulate) (Bushman, 2016; Desteno, 2013). One potential non-optimal reaction to stress may include aggression (Bushman, 2016). As such, an aggressive youth will likely be socially rejected in their school life by peers who do not have such reactions to stress and instead be accepted by other violent youth. This can possibly direct the youth to exemplify further intensified aggressive behavior (Bushman, 2016) due to a phenomenon called Homophily (McPherson, 2001). Homophily explains the idea that similarity breeds connection (McPherson, 2001). As such, in the case of a violent youth, they will likely be more drawn to people that share that behavior trait with them in the same way that (e.g. lawyers are more likely to socialize with peers in the business world rather than those with blue collar occupations) (McPherson, 2001). Though, even if the youth itself is not being abused, watching their parents act violently towards one another can lead them to act aggressively towards others as well (Bushman, 2016). As such, parents who demonstrate aggressive behavior themselves may model negative behavior to their children. In turn, their children may carry forward such behavior in their everyday lives.

While parent's actions may play a deleterious role in children's outcomes, parent's *inactions* may also have a negative effect. One type of inaction may include the failure to appropriately monitor children's potentially harmful behavior. Poor monitoring by parents can be just as severe of a risk factor for youth violence as interparental and child abuse (Bushman, 2016). For example, it was proven that exposure to violent media is a significant risk factor for extraordinarily aggressive behavior (e.g., school shootings) in youth (Bushman, 2016). Importantly, it was shown that when parents got involved and reduced their children's media consumption, it significantly decreased the child's likelihood of getting into a fight from 44% to 35% (Bushman, 2016). To add on, parents that are unable to correctly monitor their youth will likely fail to see that their child is exhibiting signs of youth violence until it is too late (Pager, 2011). In fact, an appalling statistic perfectly outlines just how important watching children's behavior really is in that 68% of school shooters have a known history of weapon use by their parents and utilized a gun found in their own home to commit the crime (Bushman, 2016). However, poor monitoring by parents is not always due to pure neglect. Sometimes, parents are absent for other reasons. For instance, they may be working multiple jobs or be preoccupied with caring for their sick parents or other children. Sadly, whatever the case, the outcome tends to be negative. In fact, in predominantly poor neighborhoods where parents are oftentimes stretched thin with competing responsibilities, children are more likely to join gangs compared to children whose parents are able to be entirely present. This is because children crave the social connection, emotional support, and protection that parents typically provide (Bushman, 2016). In joining a gang, the child is likely to get caught up in illegal practices such as drug dealing, gang fights, etc. that will oftentimes bring them in contact with the CLS (Bushman, 2016).

While children require basic care such as food and a roof over their heads as well as proper parental monitoring, they also need to have meaningful relationships with their parents for the sake of their positive development (Pager, 2011). This means that the youth has to spend a healthy amount of quality time with their parents (e.g., experiencing emotional connections while engaging in behavior, such as co-watching a movie, Pager, 2011). Not only is the quality and quantity of children-parent interactions crucial to the child's development, but it also makes it easier to spot patterns in the child's behavior since the youth is more likely to want to confide in the parents (Kramer, 2000). However, in the same way it is equally important for both parents to be independently present in their child's life in a positive fashion, it is also critical that they are able to communicate both with one another, as well as to the youth, in a complementary way (Miller, 1995). That way, there is a higher likelihood that a change in behavior will be detected by the parents since they are both intimately aware of how the child usually interacts with each guardian (Miller, 1995). Thus, they will also be able to discuss the alteration in the child's behavior and stop it in a productive way. The statement, "One of the best predictors of future behavior is past behavior," certainly rings true (Bushman, 2016).

But, in order for parents to rectify their child's actions in a constructive way, the manner in which they communicate with one another as well as to their child is vital. Sometimes, when parents take notice of certain behavior on part of their children, the attributions they voice to their offspring about that transgression can be damaging. In fact, parents' attributions early in development about child behavior predict child behavioral outcomes later in development (Miller, 1995). This is because the attributions a parent makes can push the child to make it a reality. An example of this is shown with mothers of socially withdrawn children (Miller, 1995). They are more likely to attribute child behavior problems to a trait within the child than mothers of moderately social children are (Miller, 1995). By doing so, they end up discouraging the child further from socializing because they feel as though it is something about them that can never be changed (Miller, 1995). Therefore, the child keeps behaving in a socially withdrawn way (Miller, 1995). While this might not seem like a major result, researchers showed that when a child is socially withdrawn, they are likely to be excluded (Miller, 1995). In turn, excluded children tend to act out in intense ways in order to get attention from those around them (Bushman, 2016). In drastic cases, these children may even be the cause of school shootings because of how much they crave any kind of notoriety from their peers (Bushman, 2016).

Lastly, the way that parents punish their youth is extremely important (Dunlea, et al., 2020). Research has shown that children who were harshly punished ended up becoming aggressive (Cuartas, et al., 2021). This is attributed to the fact that harshly punished youth constantly perceive threats in the world that are not there (Cuartas et al., 2021). In turn, their defense mechanism is to act in aggressive, and oftentimes inappropriate, ways. Due to this, aggressive children might end up behind bars because of aggressive and/or violent behavior (Cuartas et al., 2021). However, in the same way that negative behaviors from parents to their children oftentimes lead to negative outcomes for youth, so do overly positive behaviors (Miller, 1995). Since the adult is an important contributor to the child's development, they are more inclined to believe that development is going well than to admit it is going poorly (Miller, 1995). This is because a lot of the time, parents tend to be overly optimistic both about their children's well being and about their abilities (Miller, 1995). As such, even present parents can miss negative behaviors if they are only focusing on the positive ones (Miller, 1995). Thus, it is of the utmost importance to find a balance between optimism and reality when it comes to child development (Miller, 1995).

School Life

In addition to the time a child spends at home, a large portion is spent at school. In fact, 8 hours, 5 days out of most weeks, for 12 years, most children living in the US are supposed to be in this academic institution. As a result, creating an accepting and encouraging environment at school is just as important as generating a fulfilling and comforting home environment (Bushman, 2016). In fact, a positive school environment has been shown to predict less delinquency (Bushman, 2016). To add on, school readiness, academic achievement, and school engagement put together predict lower rates of urban youth violence (Bushman, 2016). This is attributed to the fact that those who have higher grades likely spend most of their time outside of school studying and learning in order to maintain those marks; as a result, they typically spend less time consuming violent media and finding fruitless/possibly harmful ways to fill their time (Bushman, 2016). Sadly, in some cases, remaining in school and earning a high level of academic achievement is still not enough to keep children from acting out in violent manners (Bushman, 2016). Evidently, school shooters tend to have better than average educational excellence and still act out in such violent, heinous ways (Bushman, 2016). That being said, 78% of school shooters also happen to have a history of being socially marginalized by students and teachers (Bushman, 2016). The reason why school climate is so crucial is because if students feel as though they can trust each other in the school, it leads them astray from peer violence and helps facilitate positive peer-to-peer interactions (including across demographic lines) (Bushman, 2016).

Moreover, in the case where school is not present in a youth's life anymore, 10% of young White male dropouts, and more than 40% of young Black dropouts were in prison or jail by 1999 (Pager, 2008). Indeed, recent findings uncovered that roughly 60% of Black male high school dropouts will end up in prison by the age of 30 with current rates of incarceration exceeding those of formal employment among this group (Pager, 2008). In their adult lives, less educated Black men have become increasingly likely to exit the labor force altogether with rates of labor force participation declining by 17% between 1979 and 2000 (Pager, 2008).

There is no doubt that in today's climate, education is highly valued both in the case of quality of careers and in limiting delinquency (Pager, 2008). Though, school has also been shown to have extremely negative effects if there is a poor, lacking environment (Bushman, 2016). Nonetheless, even if the school administration is doing everything in their power in order to set up an inviting, accepting education institution, there can still be children who have bad memories equated with school (Bushman, 2016). This is due to the fact that creating an affirmative school climate is oftentimes hard because of the students' home lives hence unequivocally making bullying and exclusion a component, in some capacity, of all schools. As a result, youth who are on the receiving end of bullying are five times more likely to carry weapons than peers who have not experienced bullying (Bushman, 2016). The reason behind this is simply that humans are social creatures that crave social connections (Bushman, 2016). When youth are rejected and disrespected by their peers, it is found to have more profound effects on them than if they were adults (Bushman, 2016). This is part of the reason why 7 out of 10 school shooters are under 18 years old (Smith, 2022). In summary, negative school experiences, whether due to an overall bad school environment or bullying, might lead children to exhibit violent behavior which might ultimately lead to CLS involvement (Bushman, 2016).

Aside from healthy, positive home and schooling environments, the neighborhood in which a child grows up can also have a huge effect on them (Bushman, 2016). Even if the child has positive experiences in school and their parents are doing everything on their part in order to ensure that their child has a healthy development, it *still* might not be enough to protect against youth violence (Bushman, 2016). This is due to the fact that parenting youth who are embedded in a violent street context can be very challenging (Bushman, 2016). Even if parents are attentive, it is very hard to keep a child out of the dynamics that make up communities that have experienced disenfranchisement (Bushman, 2016). Often, people who live in poverty-stricken neighborhoods (typically urban areas) are exposed to heavy violence (Bushman, 2016). This means that the children who reside there are at risk for PTSD even if they have a healthy home life (Bushman, 2016). Further, people who live in poorer neighborhoods are typically exposed to large amounts of drugs through gangs and the illegal drug market, thus making it hard for a clean youth to abstain from using (Bushman, 2016). The combination of substance abuse and PTSD as a result of enduring and/or viewing others in their community partake in violent actions may lead to youths acting out violently themselves (e.g. street shootings, Bushman, 2016). There is scientific proof that explains the reasoning behind why those who are abused often become the abusers. Specifically, strain theory explains that stress stemming from witnessing/undergoing abuse increases the likelihood of criminal behaviors (e.g. engaging in delinquent acts) because of the anger and psychological distress that results from it (Del Toro et al., 2019).

Consequent to the increased crime in poverty stricken neighborhoods, police are usually permanently stationed there (Del Toro et al.,, 2019). While in theory this makes sense, adolescents who populate such communities are at an even greater disadvantage because of it (Del Toro et al., 2019). An occurrence known as proactive policing explains that officers tending to settle in areas that have higher crime rates actually leads to the creation of a vicious cycle (Del Toro, 2019). Police stationing in such areas results in crime being upkept by the community at high levels instead of having a constructive result (Del Toro et al, 2019). This was exemplified in an experiment conducted where adolescent boys who were stopped by the police were shown to have more frequent engagement in delinquent behavior 6, 12, and 18 months following the incident (Del Toro et al, 2019). This is attributed to the fact that youth living in these neighborhoods are taught from a young age to doubt the legitimacy of criminal legal institutions such as the police (Sawyer, 2023). These results are partially

mediated by psychological distress that stems from police encounters (Del Toro et al., 2019). Actually, researchers found that the younger the boys that got stopped for the first time were, the stronger these negative relationships formed with the police in their neighborhoods (Del Toro et al., 2019; Sawyer, 2023). These young children are also taught to fear the police, being as though the police in such neighborhoods stop Black and Latino boys who are delinquents versus Black and Latino boys who are not the same amount (Del Toro et al., 2019). As a result of this, youth are likely to reject the value of nonviolence in the resolution of daily conflicts (Sawyer, 2023). To conclude, while the police force makes many positive changes, when they remain stationed in these poor, typically urban communities, they create psychological distress to the youth that leads the delinquency rates to remain raised thus leading to the possible incarceration of those adolescents (Del Toro et al., 2019).

Societal Reasons

Social relationships such as those of parents, school peers and administrators, and those created through the neighborhood have a tremendous effect on the development of children - and therefore on their life outcomes. Social relationships aside, societal reasons also play a big role in whether or not individuals end up behind bars. That being said, incarceration is both a symptom and a driver of incarceration itself. In the same way that social relationships can lead to the incarceration and even the re-incarceration of individuals, societal reasons/restraints can pave the road to the same outcomes. Nevertheless, people often have a hard time readily linking incarceration and societal reasons in their mind. Specifically, the driving forces of poverty, racism and sexism are often overlooked.

Poverty

There are many disparities that lay in who gets education and who does not (Kramer, 2000). A foremost example of this is the difference in qualities of education between poor people and rich people (Kramer, 2000). The US specifically has by far the biggest gap between the rich and poor than any of the developed nations (Kramer, 2000). While cultural narratives within the US oftentimes emphasize the American Dream–the notion that people can build social and economic capital through hard work–the truth is that this dream is oftentimes unachievable for minority individuals (Kramer, 2000). In fact, these less advantaged individuals may work really hard to achieve important life outcomes and still be unable to reap the benefits of their labor (Kramer, 2000; Pager, 2008). This is especially demonstrated by poor individuals that have been previously incarcerated (Pager, 2008). For instance, such people who earn a GED (high school diploma) while behind bars ultimately have earnings that are similar to those of individuals who did not receive a high school diploma (Pager, 2008). This suggests that the mark of incarceration is so strong that it diminishes the economic payoff often provided by this credential–a reality that strictly goes against the American notion that hard work can and should lead to personal success (Pager, 2011). This is particularly damaging nowadays, since the education premium favors those who seeked higher education and poverty creates a big barrier in achieving that (Pager, 2008). This concept usually forces youths to remain in their poverty-stricken neighborhood, thus locking them out of traditional labor markets that are lucrative (Pager, 2008). In turn, this might lead them to socialize with others in a similar economic status as well as develop economic social support networks such as gangs and dealers (Kramer, 2000). In addition, extreme deprivation has a huge effect on parents and their children (Kramer, 2000). In the likely case that extreme poverty leads to incarceration, the oftentimes single-parents ability to raise children caringly and effectively deteriorates because of the multiple stresses they are enduring (Kramer, 2000). Due to this, the children with an incarcerated or formerly incarcerated parent might end up experiencing a slew of negative life outcomes, including: lower rates of education, higher rates of poverty, and higher rates of externalizing and internalizing symptoms. Evidently, families being ripped apart by incarceration and low income is the reason behind the

increasingly rare rate of low income children (particularly african americans) that grow up in a home with 2 married parents and only their biological siblings (Kramer, 2000; Pager, 2008). A large reason behind families ending up split when faced with poverty are because of miniscule fines that land the parents in jail (Pager, 2008). In particular, poor young men are often convicted because of child support errors and court fees (Pager, 2008). These men are commonly afraid of being detected by the police for such minor violations and become less likely to show up for basic responsibilities such as the birth of their child (Pager, 2008). Due to this, even if these men happen to be formally employed despite their low income living conditions, there is a high chance that they will fail to turn up at their jobs and show up for their families if there is a warrant out for their arrest (Pager, 2008).

Racism and Sexism

As previously mentioned in the section above, the "American Dream" does not apply equally to all people living in the U.S.. In fact, converging evidence across the social sciences suggests that members of racial minority groups–including but not limited to Black, Latino and Hispanic people–are often shut out from actualizing the "American Dream"(Kramer, 2000; O'Kane, 1992) Compared to members of majority racial groups, members of minority groups are especially likely to experience obstacles related to both economic and racial inequality. While explicit racism, in many ways, has been dialed back from the Jim Crow era, it is still live and well in US society (Higginbotham, 2013). Whether at work, at school, or on the street, discrimination is experienced among minority groups. Specifically, racial workplace discrimination has been found to have detrimental effects on not only those undergoing it, but also on the family waiting for them at home (Gassman-Pines, 2015). Though the precise effects differ depending on the ethnicity of the parent, common results across most families include worse marital relationship quality and worse youth-parent relationship quality (Gassman-Pines, 2015).

However, discrimination is not solely experienced by adults. Beginning relatively early on in life, minority youth also experience discrimination across domains of life. For instance, prior research has found that Black and Latino boys are especially likely to be stopped by the police (Del Toro, 2019). As previously mentioned, such police stops were found to have profound effects on adolescents' rates of delinquency due to the stress, and even PTSD, that result from youth-enforcement officer interactions (Del Toro, 2019). Though, these examples are miniscule compared to the racial disparities found deeper within the legal system. From the time tried by a jury to receiving a sentence to finally returning to society, one trend remains the same: Black people are treated more unfairly than White people (Dunlea, 2021). To elaborate, during trials, jury members and attorneys are oftentimes found to be biased towards Black people (Dunlea, 2021). In fact, jury selections are quite often partial towards certain groups of people, even though this is not supposed to be the case as stated by the sixth amendment (Dunlea, 2021). Then, even though members of racial minority groups often receive harsher sentencing punishments just because of their appearances, they are also more heavily abused in prisons and further deprived of essential needs (Pager, 2008). As if that is not bad enough, even after serving their sentences, Black people are often found to experience a worse quality of life than White people do. They have a harder time finding work and most of the time end up right back in jail because of unfair laws set in the U.S. such as the Three Strikes Law. This law makes it so that repeated crimes receive longer sentences each time they are committed (Pager, 2008; Dunlea, 2021).

Unfortunately, inequities found between different groups of people do not end with race. Prior work has found that despite the fact that girls are less likely to enter the juvenile justice system compared to boys, girls are punished to a greater extent than boys for negative behavior. This pattern may be rooted in societal expectations around gender: people oftentimes expect boys to be aggressive and rough while they expect girls to be more docile and abide by social and moral norms. As such, when girls do indeed break social or moral norms, they are especially likely to be held accountable for their transgression (Miller, 1995). As a result, girls

are met with severe punishment that is associated with severe consequences. Compared to boys, girls are especially likely to end up being expelled and ultimately leave school (Morris, 2015). In turn, this may lead them to look for work in illegal or dangerous ways (i.e. prostitution) which may lead them on a path towards incarceration.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to assess the extent to which most individuals living in the U.S. understand the real reasons as to why people come in contact with the CLS. Research has shown that people have a harder time readily linking *external* factors with incarceration than *individual* factors with incarceration. Most people find it easier to believe that for a person to be incarcerated they must have bad morals, bad behavior and a bad personality. In actuality, the process that a person goes through to end up incarcerated is very complex. Most individuals who are incarcerated end up on such a harsh path because of *external* influences. These influences can be broken down into two main categories: social relationships (family, school, neighborhood) and societal factors (poverty, racism, sexism). Especially early on in life, individuals oftentimes lack control over who they come in contact with/are surrounded by, where they live, and where they go to school. Those three big factors have the power to 'push' youth down certain paths. In a perfect world, all social relationships would be nurturing and supportive; all schools would be flawless in the sense that all children would be able to have a healthy, inclusive environment to grow both academically and socially; all neighborhoods would be safe. Of course, all these factors would be able to operate in such a well articulated, healthy fashion because factors like economic status, race and sex would not be used to measure how a person should be treated in society and protected under the law. However, these ideal circumstances do not exist in the real world. In reality, the absence of these ideal circumstances is what shapes up a criminal. Thus, working on aligning people's perceptions with what actually leads up to incarceration could set forth a more accurate precedent which could both prevent more youth from being incarcerated.

Acknowledgments

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