

Mis-bereavement of the Formerly Incarcerated Black Man

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research project was to capture both the narrative and visual lived experiences of formerly incarcerated Black men in Los Angeles County. Formerly incarcerated Black men are negatively stigmatized by their racialized identities, criminal record, and incarceration experience. Further, they are disproportionately represented and experience significant disparities (as compared with other racial groups) in their interactions with the criminal justice system. As a result, policy, practice, and research frequently focus on understanding their criminal behavior and decreasing recidivism rather than exploration of culturally relevant treatment, effective re-entry interventions and the lived experiences of this population. The objective of this project is to merge narrative approaches with photovoice methodology to enhance understanding of their lived and living experiences through storytelling and photography from incarceration to reintegration in the community. Two (n=2) formerly incarcerated Black men had the opportunity to share their stories about their lives before, during and after incarceration. The aim of this article is to bring about awareness and change through honoring the voices of two formerly incarcerated Black men in Los Angeles County.

Keywords: mis-bereavement, black men, incarceration, photovoice

Introduction

In any country, prison is where society sends its failures.
But in this country, society itself is failing.

Ice Cube, 1993

African Americans experience disproportionate representation and racial disparities related to direct or indirect contact with the criminal justice system. The three persistent explanations for racial disparities that have emerged from numerous studies over the past decade include 1) structural racism embedded in policies and practices that drive disparities; 2) the role of implicit bias and stereotypes in legislative and judicial decision making; and 3) structural disadvantages in communities of color, which are associated with high rates of offending and arrest (Carson, 2015; Drakulich, 2015; Krivo & Kuhl, 2009; Richardson & Phillip, 2013; Rothwell, 2015). Multiple propositions have been proposed to address the glaring disproportionality and disparities in the correctional system; however, many previously incarcerated Black men consistently lack adequate services and resources to assist with reintegration after serving their sentences (Carson, 2015). Prevention and resolution of these concerns entails dismantling racist structures, policies, and practices as well as the implementation of culturally relevant treatment and re-entry strategies.

Racial stereotypes and biases have had a significant role in shaping attitudes toward and perceptions of Black men. Survey data has found that, regardless of respondents' race, African American men are associated with terms such as "dangerous," "aggressive," "violent," and "criminal" (Rothwell, 2015).

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Pre-sentence reports reflect that people of color are frequently given harsher sanctions because they are perceived as imposing a greater threat to public safety and are therefore deserving of greater social control and punishment (Richardson & Philip, 2013; Rothwell, 2015). These unfavorable characterizations are rooted in systemic racism and structural inequities that impact Black men long before they encounter the criminal justice system, manifesting as disparities in poverty, rates of unemployment, law enforcement scrutiny, socio-economic differences, increased violence and crime, housing instability, and school dropout. As a result, Black men are frequently misunderstood and misrepresented in media, public policy, practice, and research.

While there is a plethora of deficiency-focused research on Black men with intentions to understand their “criminal behavior” and incarceration, there is a dearth of research that incorporates the voices and lived experiences of those men (Jarldorn, 2019). Using a photovoice methodology, this study aims to examine the perspectives, narratives, and voices of formerly incarcerated Black men. Awareness of the lived experiences of discrimination, trauma, loss, and grief faced by previously incarcerated African American men adds complexity to single storied stereotypes and helps enhance prevention efforts, inform culturally relevant mental health interventions, and facilitate successful re-entry into the community after serving time.

Racialization and discrimination

In America, Black (African American and Black will be used interchangeably in this article to denote the racialized experience of being Black bodied) men are racialized as dangerous and criminals. Stereotypes of Black men as angry, hypermasculine thugs and savages feed misconceptions and prejudices, reducing the nuances of Black male identity to a single story (Adichie, 2009) that is easily criminalized. Racialization involves the identification, perception, categorization, imposition, and projection of a racial context. Black men have historically been demonized as aggressive, violent, savages, and brutes, contributing to systemic racism, criminalization, and mass incarceration (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016).

African American men are the largest incarcerated demographic group and are disproportionately represented in the United States prison population (Mahaffe, Stevens-Watkins & Leukefeld, 2018). In twelve states, including California, more than half of the prison population is Black, whereas only 13% of the overall population is Black (Carson, 2015). The targeting, profiling, arrest, conviction, and incarceration rates of Black men reflect gross disproportionalities and disparities. Black men have a 29% probability of serving time in prison, as compared with 4% of white men, and are six times more likely to be incarcerated than white men (Assari, et al, 2018; Carson, 2015; Warde, 2012; Wright, 2019). Further, Black males spend more time incarcerated than white males for committing similar crimes (Williams, Wilson & Bergeson, 2019). Racialization contributes to substantively increased challenges and stressors for Black men, resulting in increased criminal justice and/or carceral contact.

For Black men and others with multiple stigmatized identities (race, gender identity, sexual orientation, substance use, and mental health conditions), they may experience multiple forms of oppression based on their complex intersectional identities in conjunction with their criminal record (LeBel, 2003). Black men in America without a criminal record face increased stressors and discrimination due to historical trauma, systemic oppression, prejudice, and economic disparities rooted in racism; those with a criminal conviction and incarceration history experience substantial additional challenges (Lipscomb & Ashley, 2018). Petersilia (2003) describes a criminal conviction as “a scar for life, no matter how trivial or how long ago it occurred” (p. 19). Ex-convict stigma and perceptions of discrimination may have a detrimental impact on psychological stability and successful re-entry and reintegration (Anderson, et al, 2018; LeBel, 2012). Post-release, Black men face additional challenges in earning and maintaining employment, obtaining health insurance and care, and experience a denial of access to essential public welfare benefits (including housing, educational loans or grants and food subsidies) (Assari, et al, 2018; Hatcher et al., 2009; Mahaffe et al., 2018; Warde, 2012). Lack of access to adequate housing, employment, economic resources, and physical and mental health services puts Black men at an even higher risk for instability, disconnection, and recidivism post release.

Incarceration and masculinity

The widespread criminalization and mass incarceration of Black men fundamentally impacts their intrapsychic and relational well-being. While incarcerated, exposure to violence by guards or inmates poses a direct threat to safety and psychological stability while incidents of individual, interpersonal or systemic discrimination and ongoing microaggressions can destabilize one’s sense of dignity and identity (Wright, 2019).

Racial tension and the denial of sexual expression may contribute to a prison dynamic where Black men amplify dominant, hypermasculine traits to position themselves as aggressors and not victims (Williams, Wilson & Bergeson, 2019).

This positionality feeds stereotypes of Black male masculinity that have been socially and historically racialized to vilify or racially castrate them. The effects of racialization in conjunction with incarceration experiences and the stigma of a criminal record severely impacts Black males' sense worth and value, often resulting in stigma and shame.

Incarceration itself can be a source of pain and distress that is challenging to overcome, and the coping methods men employ may be adaptive or maladaptive. Prison hierarchies and power structures influence how incarcerated men maintain their identities. As a result, posturing, hyper-masculinity, strength, and dominance may be required for self-protection and survival (Iwamoto, et al, 2012). An adaptive stance of defining masculinity through violence and strength may be a strategy Black men utilize to cope with the stress of racism, lack of opportunity and a method of demonstrating power while concurrently expressing bitterness and rage towards the dominant society (Lipscomb, Ashley & Riggins, 2019). The loss of masculine identity indicators can have a significant psychological cost, influencing the attitudes and perceptions men have about their manhood and negatively impacting their mental health. While incarcerated, many men develop a "prison mask" which involves limiting affect, characteristics that are perceived as weak, and emotional vulnerability to appear stronger (Toch & Adams, 2002 as cited in Turney et al., 2012). This mask is protective while incarcerated; however, upon release it can cause disengagement and discord in social relationships.

Loss and social relationships

Incarceration, by nature, consists of detention and confinement. Thus, incarcerated men endure a loss of freedom, agency and autonomy while serving time in jail or prison (Valera & Boyas, 2019). Social norms, gender and cultural expectations emphasize dominance, independence, autonomy, and sexual proficiency as fundamental factors for manhood; however, inmates' daily schedules, activities and movements are dictated by guards and administrators (Andersen, et al, 2020; Assari, et al, 2018). In addition, prison protocols maintain a same-sex environment that prohibits sexual interaction, expression, and gratification. While consensual sex among prisoners is banned, nonconsensual, coercive, and assaultive sexual contact is an ongoing fear that shapes prison culture (Awofeso & Naoum, 2002; Borchert, 2016; Smith, 2006). The inherent power inequities within prison settings further compromise prisoners' psychological well being and perceptions of choice and control (van der Kaap-Deeder, et al, 2018).

The incarceration of Black men also has a disruptive effect on the lives of their partners and children. Western and Lopoo (2004) note that the penal system operates by inhibiting prisoners from committing crimes, but also inhibits their capacity to nurture prosocial roles of spouse and parent. The physical, emotional, and financial separation of an incarcerated partner, as well as the limitations of supervised visitation, telephone calls and written contact adds stress to intimate or romantic relationships (McKay, et al, 2016). Family geographical proximity to the facility, access to reliable transportation, burdensome application procedures, invasive visitor searches, the financial capacity to accept collect calls, lack of child friendly visitation spaces, and highly restricted visiting times are additional barriers to maintaining connection while incarcerated (Hairston, et al, 2004; McKay, et al, 2016). However, if incarcerated men can maintain strong family ties, these relationships can be sources of support while they are serving their sentences and a source of stability, resources, and reduced recidivism after release (Comfort, et al, 2016). Many formerly incarcerated Black men view fatherhood as an opportunity to redefine their masculinity, maintain their mental health, and to make amends for past mistakes (Williams, Wilson & Bergeson, 2019). However, the collateral consequences of incarceration, including locating legitimate employment, public service ineligibility, housing restrictions and child custody regulations impact the reconstruction of independence, autonomy, and prosocial engagement for Black men.

Release post incarceration presents both internal and interpersonal challenges. Serving time has profound negative consequences for formerly incarcerated Black men, impacting their health and family relationships (Wright, 2019). Partners may experience reconciliation post release as emotionally awkward and a challenge to reconnect (Comfort, et al, 2016). For many parolees, the infinite choices available every day as a "free" citizen may feel overwhelming (Liem & Kunst, 2013). Numerous formerly incarcerated men describe suspicion of others and difficulty trusting people based on experiences of constant fear while incarcerated (Turney et al., 2012). Distress, isolation, and disconnection create barriers to obtaining adequate services and resources and impeding a stable re-entry for African American men.

Mental health and Incarceration

While research suggests that most psychiatric disorders begin before incarceration, mental health challenges are prevalent among incarcerated men (Iwamoto, et al, 2012; Turney, Wildeman & Schnittker, 2012).

Rates of depression and anxiety are estimated to be approximately 40%, presenting challenges for men while incarcerated and barriers to stabilization after serving time (Muñoz-Laboy, et al, 2014). Loss of freedom, disconnection with loved ones, loss of social support, adaptation to a restrictive context, hopelessness, and a history of prior traumas (such as child physical or sexual abuse) are additional factors that can create conditions for depressive, anxiety and trauma related symptoms (Iwamoto, et al, 2012).

Incarceration has monumental mental health consequences for Black men. Incarcerated Black men have a higher association with substance use, severe mental illness, infectious diseases, and are frequently exposed to physical or sexual violence (Wright, 2019). Addison and Jacoby (2021) found significant associations between incarceration history and poor mental health for Black men, manifesting as higher levels of psychological distress, increased severity of depressive and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, and delayed treatment of psychosis. Factors associated with this relationship included discrimination, negative police encounters, solitary confinement, and difficulty finding housing and employment. The consequences of structural racism, exposure to abuse and childhood trauma, interpersonal conflict, violent crime, poverty, homelessness, incarceration, and addiction increase the risk of mental health challenges for incarcerated Black men (Assari, et al, 2018; Lipscomb & Ashley, 2018; Lipscomb, Ashley & Riggins, 2019; Muñoz-Laboy, et al, 2014).

Formerly incarcerated African American men are an underserved population in need of comprehensive, culturally relevant mental health assessment and treatment practices. Black men access mental health treatment at significantly lower rates than other populations, citing stigma, provider mistrust and culturally unresponsive care as primary reasons (Lipscomb, Ashley & Riggins, 2019; Wright, 2019). For formerly incarcerated Black men to access mental health services, they must navigate multiple stigmas, discrimination associated with imprisonment, negative attitudes towards mental health care and recognizing depression as a legitimate medical illness (Muñoz-Laboy, et al, 2014). As a result, lifetime prevalence rates of serious mental illness are elevated among formerly incarcerated men (Wright, 2019).

The stigma from incarceration, ongoing mental health challenges and fears of criticism or rejection can impact the social and relational interactions of formerly incarcerated men. The anticipation of being rejected can be just as harmful to mental health as actual rejection (Turney et al., 2012). They may try to avoid stigmatizing conditions by isolating, socializing solely with other formerly incarcerated men, or trying to hide their status, which can lead to mental health symptoms or exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions. For many inmates, religion or spirituality is a factor in mitigating distressing experiences. Religion or spirituality has been found to be a key source of social support, enhanced psychological adjustment, and preventing recidivism (Valera & Boyas, 2019).

This study sought to illuminate the voices, narratives and lived experiences of formerly incarcerated Black men using a photovoice methodology. Photovoice is a qualitative, community-based participatory action research (PAR) methodology that is both culturally appropriate and culturally sensitive for research with African Americans (McIntyre, 2008). With formerly incarcerated Black men, stigma and researcher bias can unwittingly direct the research and contribute to oppression of vulnerable populations rather than emphasize the groups' strength, creativity, and resiliency (Jaldorn, 2019; Maruna, 2001). Through photovoice, the power of visual imagery is used to capture the stories and lived experiences of formerly incarcerated Black adult males. The participants were comprised of two formerly incarcerated Black men who shared their stories about their lives before, during, and after incarceration. The goal of this research is to enhance the literature and heighten consciousness of the unique experiences and needs of formerly incarcerated Black men in Los Angeles County, while illuminating the visual voices of this marginalized population.

Methods:

This project utilized photovoice methodology with formerly incarcerated Black males to explore issues related to the following six themes: (1) experiences in the prison/corrections (including transitioning out of prison and reintegrating in the community); (2) current circumstances (including housing, education, employment & economic well-being); (3) mental and physical health (including substance abuse); (4) family connectedness (home, family, love, support); (5) peer relationships and social support; and (6) ideas for social change (what do they want to change about the system, the world, and the Black males experiences in it).

Photovoice provides individuals with the opportunity to share their experiences through creative means (photography), thus validating their experiences and highlighting their voices. Photovoice places the data collection in the hands of the participants; those who are being affected by social injustice. This is not research done on Black males, it is research *with* Black males. This project aims to allow the individual to speak for themselves, rather than be spoken for or about.

Participants

Participants in this study were formerly incarcerated Black men, ages 18 and older, who previously resided within a correctional facility in the state of California within the last 5 years. Criteria for participation included: Participants must have resided within a correctional facility for at least 1 year; must have been “former corrections involved” and not currently residing in a correctional facility; and could not be on probation, parole or under current supervision by corrections, law enforcement or other state, county or city enforcement entity. Participants were recruited from community-based venues, community agencies and through word of mouth. Specifically, recruitment of participants took place through flyer distribution and word-of-mouth at various reintegration serving social service agencies and community-based organizations that perform advocacy with and on behalf of Black males who served a prison sentence in the state of California. Finally, internet recruitment took place via relevant list serves and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook).

Research Inquiry

The narrative qualitative study involved a research design utilizing in-depth interviews and photovoice methods with Black identified male adults (i.e., ages 45 and 42) who were formerly in a California correctional facility(ies) within the last five years. One identified as cis-gender, gay and the other one identified as cis-gender and heterosexual. In-depth interviews were conducted with two ($n = 2$) individuals who identify as Black men and who served a prison sentence in the state of California within the last five years (from the time of the study).

Topics that were covered and explored: The research intended to explore grief, loss, separation and coping experiences in correctional facilities; individual and community experiences of being Black, a man and involved with corrections; relationships with family peers, and communities; school and employment based experiences; experiences with court systems; experiences with services/resources while serving their sentence; strengths and challenges associated with incarceration; substance use and abuse; experiences of religion and spirituality; and, resilience, social support, and future goals as related to being formerly corrections involved (i.e. residing in prison) as a Black man. Specifically, we were interested in the narrative life experience of these individuals, the response to loss and how they navigated across the different stages of their lives (before, during and after incarceration), and identification of what helps them be healthy (i.e., what is protective for them). Specifically, the interviews elicited meaning questions about the essence of their experience (a phenomenological strategy); descriptions of values, beliefs, and coping practices associated with serving a sentence in prison and reintegrating back into the community and family and being a Black man (an ethnographic strategy); and process questions to identify cultural protective processes and quality of life. Moreover, the researchers wanted to have the opportunity to learn about themes, ideas, experiences, strategies, psycho-social-emotional health needs, discriminatory experiences, histories and pathways into the correctional system and formerly incarcerated Black male experiences of transitioning out of prison and their lives after incarceration with emphasis upon issues related to housing, social support, employment, economic well being, mental and physical health, and family connectedness.

Procedures

Data was collected from consenting participants via face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted in English utilizing an interview guide with open-ended questions and probes where appropriate. Participants were recruited from community-based venues, community agencies and through word of mouth via snowball sampling. Specifically, recruitment of participants took place through flyer distribution and word-of-mouth at various reintegration serving social service agencies/programs and community-based organizations, as well as internet recruitment through relevant list serves and via social networking sites (eg. Facebook and Instagram). The in-depth interviews were intended to capture stories about the experiences of this population and to identify key themes. Everyone interviewed was asked a standard set of 10 -12 key questions. They were encouraged to tell their stories with as little interruption as possible by the research team. However, demographic data (i.e., Race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, country of origin, and age) was collected. Participants received a \$50.00 Amazon gift card for their participation in the interview. Data was audiotaped and later transcribed.

Once the individual participated in the interview, then they were invited to participate in the photovoice portion of the research study. The participants were able to use their own cameras (digital, point-and-shoot, cell phones, or disposable cameras). The participants were instructed to take approximately 3-5 photographs for each of the six themes, with a maximum of 30 photographs. Once the participant captured their photographs, they contacted the Principal Investigators to set up an individual meeting to discuss their photographs. Prior to this individual dialogue session, the participants were able to share their photographs electronically (via e-mail) to the Principal Investigators to be printed prior to the meeting.

Both participants engaged in the individual, in-person interview/dialogue session with the Principal Investigators. This was an opportunity for the participants to verbally share their experiences about being a formerly incarcerated Black male. The interviews were completed between 45 and 90 minutes.

Data Analysis

The research team transcribed each participant's interview and analyzed the data by coding for important life events and reoccurring themes via Nvivo software. The researchers then compared codes across participants by looking at similar life intersectional points (e.g., before incarceration, during and after incarceration) and common themes as Black males in the same age cohort.

Results

Emergent Themes

Pseudonyms have been provided to each participant's quote utilize in the following section to humanize their lived experiences and illuminate their narratives.

Challenges while incarcerated. A common theme among participants was the harsh carceral environment. Both participants described having to adapt to survive the violence in carceral facilities; however, they adapted differently. Jacquese survived by making himself a resource to others who were also incarcerated and was well respected because of his financial means and connections. Darnell opted for solitude. He spent most of his time alone to avoid conflict. Adjusting to life in prison was made even more arduous due to frequent transfers to different facilities, sometimes in different states. Participant Darnell averaged almost one transfer to a different facility for every year he was incarcerated.

An additional challenge for both participants was the racial division within facilities. Both participants noted the self-segregation within facilities among inmates as well as racial division among staff. When describing the racial segregation in facilities, Jacquese stated, "*The Latinos can't talk to the Blacks, can't talk to the Whites, the Whites identified as the Woods, Latinos who identified as the Southsiders or the Eastsiders-, cholos, and stuff*". Darnell noted that guards often looked out for incarcerated persons of their same race/ethnicity, with the exception of Black guards, who he felt did not look out for Black inmates. Participants also felt especially unwelcome as Black men.

Both participants rarely used mental health services, if at all. Jacquese did not use services because he felt that the counselors were limited in what they could do. Darnell stayed away from counselors (and guards) to avoid rumors of being a "*snitch*".

Self-Empowerment and Resilience while Incarcerated. Participants recounted passing their time in jail by educating themselves and planning for life upon release. Darnell expressed that reading about the legal system allowed him to better understand the institutional and systematic issues that have impacted and continue to impact his life. He also felt somewhat protected from racist policing once he had learned his rights and could self advocate. Jacquese also spent time in jail learning about the legal system and was able to help others with their cases. Both participants found themselves self-learning, as courses offered by the facilities were difficult to access.

Early into his sentence, Jacquese found an employment opportunity for formerly incarcerated individuals of color. Of this opportunity, he said, "never while I was in prison I did not have hope that I would be able to get out and re accomplish things". Darnell also focused on his release instead of thinking about being incarcerated.

Relationships with Others. Contact with loved ones was highly valued by both participants. Whether by person, phone, or mail, most of their contact was with family members; at the same time, they often lost touch with friends.

Despite the value of contact with loved ones, participants described having many turbulent relationships before, during, and after incarceration. Darnell mentioned never living "married life" despite being legally married to his wife and mother of his children. He described the relationship as "not strong to start with" and weakened further when he was arrested relatively shortly after they got married. Being incarcerated simultaneously strained his relationship with his children due to his absence while incarcerated for a total of 15 years. Jacquese had strained family ties because of his sexuality and because he had victimized his family.

Along with strained relationships, participants also had to cope with the death of multiple loved ones while incarcerated. Incarceration augmented their grief process in that they had to limit the visibility of their sadness, which prohibited engagement in parting rituals. Darnell expressed an inability to fully process the deaths of his mother and grandmother until it came time to receive a letter or call from them and none came. He stated that he still had not grieved the loss of his loved ones at the time of the interview.

Pathways into Incarceration and Transitioning out of Prison. Jacquese and Darnell disclosed they became involved in illegal activity around junior high school. They were attracted to the money they made on the streets and continued to maintain the ongoing financial reimbursement. However, while in grade school, Jacquese indicated he enjoyed school and attended regularly. Darnell mentioned that he made sure not to stay out too late so that he could be ready for school in the morning. Both participants were incarcerated two separate times. After their first release from incarceration, participants ultimately slipped back into old behaviors to manage financial challenges. Jacquese began using drugs again which led him back to criminal behavior and eventually prison. Darnell continued to sell drugs after his release because he could not find employment that paid enough to provide for his family but later, a small altercation sent him back to prison.

After their second releases from prison, both participants began looking for deeper fulfillment and purpose. Jacquese had received his associate degree and at the time of the interview was attending a four-year university with the goal of becoming a mental health professional. He was able to recognize his criminal behavior pattern with the help of mental health counseling which, along with religion, has helped keep him out of prison. Darnell was living in a rehabilitative program at the time of the interview and trying to rebuild his relationship with his family, especially his children.

Figure 1. Photo taken by Jacquese. Theme: Challenges While Incarcerated



Figure 2. Photo taken by Jacquese. Theme: Self-Empowerment and Resilience While Incarcerated



Figure 3. Photo taken by Darnell. Theme: Pathways to Transitioning Out of Prison



Figure 4. Photo taken by Darnell. Theme: Pathways to Transitioning Out of Prison



Discussion and Limitations

The results of this research project have yielded substantive information regarding many of the challenges facing formerly incarcerated Black men. They experienced a myriad of losses while incarcerated and in order to cope with their daily experiences of loss (i.e., due to being incarcerated), they were forced to escape and or channel their focus and energy into something more productive, whereby distracting them from both inside and outside of prison world. Jacquese said, *“I felt a deep sense of relief when I got arrested. The first year of prison was the worst. I did not fit in. I wasn’t a gang member and others harassed me for “sounding white” - the way I talked. There was constant gang and race uprisings which resulted in deaths, discrimination, racism mistreatment by correctional officers and staff. I had to learn how to survive. I talked my way into a job working in the library. I got to know the other prisoners doing my job. I became friends with the biggest, baddest guy there and the black female correction officer librarian opened my eyes to reading. She was a blessing. I swear she was the only reason there were books authored by James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Claude Brown, W.E.B. DuBois, Ernest J. Gaines and Toni Morrison. I read every day and encouraged others to read too. These books help me identify who I had been and who I could become. Getting lost in a book was my freedom - my escape from daily prison life.”* What was also apparent was the power of familial support during the time of incarceration. Jacquese also said, *“My family is my support team. I believe when society does not accept you for who you are and the mistakes you have made, you can only hope your family does. Growing up and while in my addiction, I believed my family would not support me so I did things to separate myself from them. Through sobriety, I have become a more authentic person. I accept myself and I have allowed my family to love me. Today I have a great relationship with my mother, my twin brother and his family.”*

This research project also highlighted that when society does not accept Black men for who they are and the nonviolent mistakes they have made in their life—it is vital that their family does. Equally important is strengthening and creating programs within the prison that will aid their success post release, such as: 1) pre-release mental health counseling; 2) transitional professional development, including technology education programs prior to release. Jacques said, “Prison should not be a place where people fight for their lives, it should be a place where people learn how to live their lives better.” Darnell said, “Don't give up on them. Keep in contact with them. I mean...people don't understand that. I know a lot of people don't have the means, but if you do have the means it's the system is not doing. I mean people think you're in prison. You got everything taken care of, all that stuff. No, it's not like that”. Additionally, following release, there is a need for housing assistance, employment, education and greater mental health support. As noted here, there continues to be a need for ongoing dialogue and training around discussing the impact of incarceration on the overall mental health wellbeing of Black men. In addition, it is crucial to note that a major limitation of this study was the small sample size, thus limiting the generalizability of this research project as it relates to other Black men who have been incarcerated.

Conclusion

This article endeavored to understand the experiences of formerly incarcerated Black men upon release from prison and to bring awareness to their isolation, loss, and challenges during and after incarceration. The research project served as a means for the individuals to tell their stories, share their needs, and express their ideas for action in a creative and unique method. Finally, this article aims to raise critical consciousness via illuminating the counternarratives of the unique experiences and corresponding needs of racialized Black men who were incarcerated. Increased awareness of the nuanced experiences of this population may serve to provide depth to single storied narratives and stereotypes about Black men, and inform and enhance re-entry programs, mental health treatment, resources, and other services available to formerly incarcerated Black men.

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