

# Bearing the Burden: How Incarceration Weakens Inner-City Communities

by Joan Moore, Ph.D.  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

## *Abstract*

*The majority of prison inmates come from and return to disadvantaged, minority communities. This paper explored how high rates of incarceration might weaken already fragile inner-city neighborhoods. At low levels, the experience of incarceration was largely an individual and family matter. However, at high levels of incarceration, communities must support increasing numbers of economically and socially impaired men, women, and children. That burden might exacerbate existing strains within the community, such as unemployment and crime. Ways to measure the discrete effects of incarceration on community destabilization are discussed near the end of the paper.*

In the past two decades, the rate at which the United States puts people into prison has risen sharply, with close to a million people now behind bars. Several observers believe that this rate will increase even more rapidly in the future.<sup>1</sup> Most of the rise is attributable to tougher drug laws. The impact falls most heavily on minorities-- particularly African-Americans. In 1989, 8% of Black males aged 20 to 29 were locked up in prisons and jails, and an additional 15% were under correctional or court supervision (Mauer, 1990.)<sup>2</sup> Latinos show a lower rate, with 3% locked up, and 7% under supervision, but the youthful age structure and high poverty rates of Latino communities foreshadow higher incarceration rates in the future.

Michael Tonry (1995, p. 151) asserts that the effect of these "recent punishment policies [has been] to destabilize inner-city communities." At low levels of incarceration what happens to felons, both in prison and when they are released, is largely an individual and family matter. Whatever happens to them is not terribly important to their communities; there aren't enough of them to matter. However, at higher levels of incarceration, what happens to them *is* important to their communities. Anti-drug laws have resulted in a dramatic increase in the imprisonment rates in inner-city communities. There are more men and women from such communities in prison, more ex-offenders on their streets-- not just isolated individuals, and more of their families are affected. In turn, people who have not been directly involved with the criminal justice system begin to be affected. Existing strains within the community are exacerbated. This is the scenario the author follows.

What is the research evidence for this line of argument, and how can we test it? There is virtually no direct evidence on this topic, and it is difficult to acquire for a number of reasons. Interviews with inmates, no matter how extensive, do not help us understand the communities they leave behind. And, community researchers are likely to overlook the effects of imprisonment because they study people who remain in the community, not

those who leave or are removed. Finally, increased incarceration rates rarely operate alone at the community level; they add to, rather than solely generate, local problems. Inner-city communities vary considerably in the extent to which they have a capacity for containing their problems and written reports rarely give us enough information to tell where the community stands.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, then, there is considerable extrapolation from information that is only partially relevant. This article concentrates on the effects of prison. This choice ignores the impact of jail incarceration and of parole and probation supervision: Short-term incarceration and alternatives to incarceration pose different issues for communities. First, the weakened condition of inner-city communities in the 1990s is discussed. Then the direct impact of increased rates of imprisonment on communities is discussed: Specifically, what does it mean that those communities now house more families disrupted by a member's imprisonment and more former inmates than when imprisonment rates were lower? Other central questions include: What is the indirect impact on inner-city communities? What is the effect on the larger national community? What kind of research can be done?

### **The Setting: Inner-City Communities in the 1990s**

The increased rate of imprisonment in the past two decades has coincided with a number of deleterious changes. For the past decade, the rise of an urban underclass and the decline of inner-city minority communities have been major research issues: that is the literature drawn on here. There is considerable variation in the extent to which those communities have deteriorated, but in general, they have been severely weakened by the combined impact of economic restructuring and the decline of many welfare state resources. De-industrialization, in particular, has ravaged job opportunities for poorly educated men and women of color. Many are unemployed or have dropped out of the labor market altogether. To take up the slack, we have seen the expansion of a poor-paying service economy and a lively informal economy that features illicit as well as legal jobs.

One important new aspect of inner-city communities is that a significant segment of their economy has become criminalized, with an emphasis on drug marketing (cf. Hagedorn, 1994). In this economic climate, the risk of imprisonment is almost "a form of business license tax" (Bullock, 1973, p. 113).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, many of their communities have been hard-hit by drug abuse and the violence that is often associated with drug dealing. Increased imprisonment of local dealers has rarely helped.

The resources--external and internal--to deal with these problems and those caused by widespread unemployment have been shrinking. Government funds and services have dwindled. Welfare has been harder to get and has not kept up with inflation. Drug treatment programs have a low priority in the so-called war on drugs. And government-funded community-based organizations have been disappearing since the late 1970s. Though most inner-city communities exhibit vigorous self-help efforts--through churches and ethnic organizations--bootstrapping is very difficult for them (cf. Moore &

Pinderhughes, 1993). Internal resources are stretched very thin. Meanwhile, a steady flow of political demagoguery stigmatizes the poorest African-Americans and Latinos, groups with little capacity for political influence.

But, paradoxically, these very changes make the neighborhood a more salient feature of life for inner-city residents. High unemployment means that people remain at home, living with their families, and on the streets of the neighborhood much of their time. The gradual informalization of the labor market places more emphasis on friendship and kinship networks. Increased neediness means that these same networks are more active than ever. The rise in racist rhetoric from the larger society combines with economic deprivation to revitalize and deepen the defensive coping strategies that people of color have developed over the centuries. This is the context in which increased imprisonment operates.

### **Direct Effects**

Who in the community is most directly affected by the experience of imprisonment? First, the families of imprisoned men and women; second, the men and women who return from prison to the community; and third, the families of those ex-inmates. Traffic in and out of prison sets up a complex dynamic (J. Fagan, personal communication, 1995)<sup>5</sup> that is the focus of this section. Earlier research identifies sources of strain for these people, and by extrapolation we can argue that inner-city communities now have many more weakened families and individuals who have been directly affected by the prison experience. The stated goals of imprisonment have been to incapacitate problem-causing individuals and--at least in the past--to rehabilitate them. Rehabilitation has been largely abandoned as a goal, and whether incapacitation has had the desired effect is debatable.<sup>6</sup>

**Effects on inmates' families.** Most research on prisoners' families is only partially relevant to my topic, because it focuses on White male inmates, and assumes-- or selects--a nuclear family structure, with wives or stable girlfriends and children (e.g., Brodsky, 1975; Carlson & Cervera, 1992; Fishman, 1990).<sup>7</sup> In such a nuclear family, imprisonment of the husband/father creates serious strains, whether the family is living the "fast" or the "square" life, and whether the relationship was good or bad (Fishman, 1990). Finances have to be shifted; roles have to be reorganized, and existing spousal conflicts are exacerbated. The longer the sentence, the greater the difficulties when the inmate is released (Carlson & Cervera, 1992).

But for many African-American and Latino inmates, family life is much more complex, and the effects, while just as serious, are more difficult to trace. For example, even though most male inmates have dependent children (Carlson & Cervera, citing Hairston, 1990), an inmate may have been living with different children and a different mate at the time of the arrest. Or he may have been living with his parents and contributing significantly to their household income. The point is that several households may be affected by a single imprisonment.

In poor African-American and Latino communities, spousal unions may be fragile and extended kin more important (see, for example, Jarrett, 1992; Stack, 1974). The sequence of events from arrest through imprisonment often involves the inmate's extended family, especially when the inmate is young (Brodsky, 1975; Moore & Long, 1981). For an older male inmate, it is more often his wife and her family that fills the financial and social gaps. For all members of the family, the experience can be extremely stressful--financially and emotionally. In particular, in recent years many more grandmothers have been recruited as care givers for the children of imprisoned parents. Grandparent care givers face special problems--both personal and with bureaucratic regulations (Minkler & Roe, 1993).<sup>8</sup> Though grandparental foster care is traditional in African-American and Latino communities, an element of coercion has been added to what is historically an economic and social expedient. What happens when grandparents cannot care for the children of prisoners may become increasingly important in the future.

For male inmates, no matter who takes what role in his family, the data leave little doubt that the influence of his wife's family is strengthened. Resentment from her family is usually strong enough to weaken the influence of his family. This contributes to the long-standing devaluation of males, and to the enhancement of the all-male peer group. For children, all social bonds, inside and outside the family, are attenuated (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Does the arrest stigmatize the family? Neighbors may define the arrest-imprisonment sequence as a crisis that commands support or, by contrast, it may be highly stigmatizing. If parents are seen as having done their best, the family may receive support (R. Jarrett, personal communication, 1995). Several studies find that the degree of stigmatization also depends to some extent on the incarceration rate in the local community. Working-class and inner-city neighborhoods, where arrests are more commonplace, are likely to be less censorious of an inmate's family, unless the family as a whole is defined locally as "bad" (Achor, 1978; Fishman, 1990; Moore & Long, 1981; Schneller, 1976).

The increasing number of female inmates poses different problems for inner-city communities. Contemporary drug laws have sent large numbers of women to prison.<sup>9</sup> Most of them are mothers and, unlike male inmates, most were primary care givers prior to imprisonment (B. Krisberg, personal communication 1995; Schaenman, 1995). One of the few studies of the families of jailed mothers (who were predominantly Chicana and African-American) paints a picture of severe disruption during the mother's jail term (Stanton, 1980). In addition, the usual problems faced by an inmate upon release--finding money, a job, and a place to live--are exacerbated for women with children. Children of inmate mothers suffer even more displacement than when an imprisoned father returns home. In this study, children of mothers on probation did better than those who were incarcerated, but the probation mothers were also less deviant to begin with.<sup>10</sup>

**Post-prison marginalization.** After family, getting work is the most pressing concern for men and women released from prison (Moore, 1978), and they are rarely successful. In 1991, only 21% of California's parolees were working full time (Irwin & Austin, 1994). The prison experience is profoundly destructive of work habits. Most time in prison is

idle, and most of the relatively rare prison work is characterized by a slowdown that represents resistance to authority (Correctional Association of New York, 1984; Vigil, 1989). Inmates rarely come out of prison with enhanced job skills, and they often acquire very dysfunctional work habits and attitudes. The ordinary strains of a civilian workplace are difficult for them. In general, the earlier the prison experience, the more dysfunctional the work habits (J. Fagan, personal communication, 1995).

A prison record presents an obstacle to finding a job, and so does the intense postrelease parole surveillance, which often interferes with work. Parolees return to prison more often for technical violations than for new crimes (Irwin & Austin, 1994). Immediate postrelease difficulties in obtaining work lead many former prisoners to adopt lifestyles, vis-a-vis both peers and mates, that are based on idle time and preprison associations.<sup>11</sup> They *hang out*, and their wives continue to bear the burden of supporting the family financially and emotionally (Fishman, 1990). These lifestyles impede adaptation to work, even under the most supportive working conditions (as in Padfield & Williams, 1973). Marginalized men and women become more marginalized (cf. Glasgow, 1981). Ex-inmates' joblessness may have the most significant effect on their communities: If released inmates went immediately into full time jobs, this paper would be very different.

Marginalization is also enhanced because prison erodes inmates' sexual, social, and coping skills. In particular, prison erodes marriages, and newly released inmates have difficulty in re-establishing old relationships or forming new ones that extend beyond casual sex. Men often lack money, a car, and other resources necessary for dating. Once in a domestic setting, former inmates may be prone to greater domestic violence. It is particularly difficult for women to form relationships after prison (cf. Moore & Mata, 1981). Increased rates of imprisonment mean there will be greater numbers of such economically and socially impaired men and women on the streets.

**Prisonization and the strengthening of gang and neighborhood peer groups.** Most of the extensive literature on prison subcultures lies outside the scope of this paper. However, the literature on prisonization is relevant because it is concerned with the "negative effects of institutionalization on prisoners' commitment to prosocial norms, values, and beliefs" (Bowker, 1977)--in other words, what the inmate carries out of prison. These subcultural effects are more serious for younger inmates and are exacerbated by longer sentences. And, in recent years, sentences have been lengthening (Tonry, 1995).<sup>12</sup>

I am also concerned with some narrower social after effects of the prison experience. Most prisons are violent and dangerous, and new inmates search for protection and connections. Many find both in gangs. There is substantial literature on the importation of street gangs into prison and the processes through which gang membership is reinforced or developed (Hunt, Riegel, Morris, & Waldorf, 1992; Moore, 1978; Vigil, 1989). Inevitably, these gang loyalties are again exported to the neighborhoods. The revolving door strengthens street gang ties. One researcher commented, "In California, . . . frankly I don't think the gangs would continue existing as they are without the prison scene" (P.

Bourgois, personal communication, 1995). Of course, many of these gangs are crime oriented (Davidson, 1974).

Other neighborhood ties are also reinforced in prison. One researcher remarked that concentrated neighborhood-based law enforcement strategies (like New York's Tactical Narcotics Teams) have turned Rikers Island, a New York City jail, "into a [neighborhood] block party!" (Curtis, 1994). All of the drug dealers in the neighborhood, gang and nongang alike, are swept into jail at the same time. Prisons and jails are ideal institutions for strengthening peer-group relationships that have later repercussions on the streets.<sup>13</sup>

However, not all inmates come to prison with strong ties to the outside world. State-raised youth--whose adolescence involves frequent probation supervision and trips to juvenile detention facilities and whose young adult years are spent in and out of prison--have only the most fragile ties to family and friends in the community.<sup>14</sup> These youth are the most fully prisonized. In California, they have been held responsible for the development of the more violent prison gangs, such as the Mexican Mafia and Nuestra Familia (Moore, 1978). Although these gangs developed in prison, they were exported to the streets and by now are established criminal organizations. In several states, law enforcement and media allege that criminal street gangs are controlled by prison inmates. Increased imprisonment, at younger ages, enlarges the numbers of state-raised young men.

The export of prison criminality is not the only negative aspect of street networks that include high numbers of ex-offenders. Prisons are single-sex, very racist, and often very violent. Researchers and practitioners speculate that the increased violence in street networks may be affected by the export of violent prison interpersonal styles. A similar speculation may be appropriate for racism. There is some evidence that ex-inmates hang around with younger men, who are impressed by these "veteranos." These are "dinosaurs, roaming the streets long after their time is gone," according to one former gang member (Moore, 1991, p. 123). Often these younger street groups are the only people from whom ex-inmates can command deference.

Such street networks may be relatively impervious to sanctions--formal *or* informal. Their members become inured to criminal justice sanctions, and their friends don't stigmatize them if they do wind up in prison. The prisoner subculture is intensely hostile to established authority, and these attitudes, too, are exported to the streets. In the early 1980s, surveys attempting to measure criminal employment were conducted among inner-city African-American youth in several cities. Among those who admitted committing a crime, approximately three-quarters felt that they faced very little chance of going to prison, and even if they did, the vast majority--92%--felt that they would not lose friends (Viscusi, 1986, but see also Brodsky, 1975).<sup>15</sup>

The tendency of prison experiences to increase crime in the community is the topic of another conference paper (Clear), but the processes outlined above may help explain some of the statistical relationships (e.g. Grogger, 1991).

**Dereliction.** For a significant fraction of ex-offenders, the obstacles to obtaining jobs and establishing stable families become insuperable. Anecdotal data from several field researchers supply substantial evidence of what Irwin and Austin (1994) call dereliction. After they exhaust family resources, many ex-offenders wind up on the streets, homeless.<sup>16</sup> Merging the findings of 12 studies of the homeless, Rossi (1989) found that an average of 21.3% had served prison sentences.<sup>17</sup> Many die on the streets.

Increased numbers of derelict ex-offenders means that in some inner-city communities, like East Los Angeles, homeless men appeared on the neighborhood streets in the 1980s for the first time in residents' memory. These are neighborhood men, who may migrate between the downtown Skid Row and their home neighborhoods where they feel safer and where they can occasionally panhandle from more fortunate associates.

### **Indirect Effects: Depletion, Routinization, and Distortion of Gender Roles**

The higher the rate of imprisonment, the greater the number of socially and economically handicapped ex-inmates and their strained families in a community. But prison indirectly affects other people in the community as well, and these effects are the topic of this section.

**Marriage: Is it the imprisonment rate, or records, or both?** It has been argued that the mere fact of taking a community's men away to prison has strong negative consequences for family formation. Perhaps the most widely discussed impact of the so-called depletion effect is that it contributes to the shortage of "marriageable males." Wilson (1987) framed this discussion by noting the sharp decline among African-Americans in the ratio of men with jobs to every 100 women of the same age. To determine whether imprisonment contributes significantly to this decline, one must first know what proportion of young males from inner-city communities are absent and in prison at any given point in time. Unfortunately, we do not have such data (J. Lynch, personal communication, 1995).<sup>18</sup> The 1989 imprisonment rates cited at the beginning of this paper may already have created a significant depletion effect: Those rates have been increasing more than 6% a year (Blumstein, 1995), and are projected to increase even more (Irwin & Austin 1994). Thus whatever the depletion effect is now, it may well become even more significant in the future.

However, Bowser (personal communication, 1995) argues that if one is concerned with the effect of the criminal justice system on marriageability, the depletion effect--that is, the absence of men--is less important than the fact that having a prison or jail record lowers employment chances and thus lowers marriageability (cf also Sampson & Laub, 1995, who follow similar reasoning). This broadens the concern: Instead of focusing only on those who are in prison, we must look at men living in the community who have criminal records of any sort and at the ways in which short-term incarceration affects work. Though data are not firm, conservative estimates suggest that as many as a quarter to a third of young African-American males have records.<sup>19</sup> Field studies of low-income communities leave no doubt that in some neighborhoods and in some networks there are

even higher percentages (B. Bowser, personal communication, 1995; P. Bourgois, personal communication, 1995; R. Jarrett, personal communication, 1995; Moore, 1978).

Taking records into consideration makes the impact of the criminal justice system on marriageability stronger. And it's not only a matter of employment: ethnographic data also show that women take the risk of imprisonment into account in calculating marriageability: Many women are reluctant to get permanently involved with men who are likely to wind up in prison (Jarrett, personal communication, 1995; Williams & Kornblum, 1994). This, in turn, reduces the chances that such men will marry conventional women.

**Routinization.** For many families, the criminal justice system, including prison, is a painfully familiar bureaucracy, bordering on the routine.<sup>20</sup> For others, there may be an omnipresent threat of imprisonment, since many inner-city families that are basically conventional are also involved in petty hustling (Valentine, 1978).<sup>21</sup> The pervasiveness of prison in these communities means that parents and spouses of inmates can expect to receive support from extended kin, neighbors, members of their churches, and friends, as I have discussed earlier. Does this fact relate to the much-discussed--but also little-studied--issue of whether inner-city communities are more tolerant of deviance?<sup>22</sup> It is doubtful; although the answer probably involves variation both in inner-city community composition and also in what is meant by deviance.

Routinization of prison, however, may have a different effect on inner-city youth: they may become presocialized to prison. Every additional inmate released to the community increases the chances that community youth will learn directly about prison and become yet more persuaded that prison lies in their own futures. For inner-city youth, anticipatory socialization to prison is exacerbated by the fact that prison permeates the national youth culture, well beyond the ghettos and barrios (Krisberg, personal communication, 1995). Prison-oriented ghetto items (for example, prison-style clothing, celebrity "gangsta rappers," and images of prison on MTV) pervade middle-class White youth culture. For at-risk ghetto and barrio youngsters, this commodification of prison glamorizes the prison experience. What is trendy play for the children of the middle classes is all too real for those in the inner city. Finally, going to prison enhances one's status in the subculture; whether a neophyte can withstand the rigors of prison social life is often a topic of intense discussion (Bourgois, personal communication, 1995). Routinization, then, does not mean that the prison experience is taken casually, but rather that it is a pervasive feature of life. And coping with it is an issue for adults and youth alike.

**Gender role modeling.** Ample literature on poor Black males (e.g. Anderson, 1990; Hannerz & Schulz in Wilkinson & Taylor, 1977) argue that street subculture plays a major role. Its importance is inversely proportional to the men's weakened job chances, and perhaps, to their vulnerability to arrest and imprisonment--although the latter is rarely mentioned. Street subcultures are substantially influenced by the presence of ex-offenders, and by the expectation of many members that they, too, will wind up doing time.

Street subcultures have many aspects, but this researcher is primarily concerned here with what Majors and Billson (1992, p. 8) call the cool pose, a stance adopted by many inner-city men to cope with the many threats to their self-respect. This facade of aloofness and control, according to the authors, "Counters the . . . damaged pride, [and] shattered confidence . . . that come from living on the edge of society." The cool pose is particularly well suited to the inmate role--the prison norm that one should "hold one's mud"--and in this respect the pose transcends racial subcultures. The prison experience and the post-prison adaptations of inner-city men contribute to the all-male street orientation and reinforce the cool pose--with all of its ramifications.

The cool pose also inhibits the formation of nurturant relationships, according to Majors and Billson. Young Black fathers who cannot find jobs experience severe strains. They lose power in relationships with their children and girlfriends and, as a result, depreciate the institution of marriage altogether (Laseter, 1991). Their scorn for marriage is part of the cool pose. Anderson (1989) paints an even bleaker picture of the deleterious effect of male peer group influences on the willingness of young African-American men to marry. Disparaging references to women in rap music have at least one source in "older 'underground' oral traditions such as men's prison poetry." and "a recurrent fear of being 'pussy-whipped'" (Williams & Kornblum, 1994, p. 108-109).

Jarrett (1994) analyzes the female counterpart. Poor African-American women in her studies idealize marriage, but are dubious about their chances of finding a reliable husband. There is a continuing yearning for "normal" marriages, and there are enough two-parent families in most poor communities to provide models. But among many women, there is deep skepticism. Marriage has become "a little White girl's dream."

### **Tertiary Effects: Related Concerns About Inner-City Communities**

Beyond direct and indirect effects of increasing rates of imprisonment, there are what might be called tertiary effects, which impinge on a community's capacity to control its own problems. These effects occur largely because increased imprisonment intensifies male street activities. The male peer group is pivotal to this argument. Street networks become broader and deeper. The enhanced influence of ex-inmates operates at every age level. In youth, the peer group competes with adult authority, both at home and in school (Vigil, 1988); in adulthood, the peer group occupies substantial blocs of time, discouraging work, deterring family formation, and competing with the family once it is formed. Street activity causes problems at the private level of control, which is based in family and friendship networks and at the community and broader public levels. (See Bursik & Grasmick, 1993, and Hunter, 1985, for useful analyses of these three levels of community social control.) Intensified male street activity also evokes concerns about police. Both heavy policing and underpolicing can reinforce feelings of alienation. These are the topics of this section.

**The private level: problems for parents.** There is a voluminous body of literature on the perils of child-rearing in communities with high levels of street activity. Parents in high-risk neighborhoods expend an enormous amount of effort sheltering and protecting

their children (Williams & Kornblum, 1994). Constructive neighborhood networks become very important for effective parenting. In their absence, parents "must be super motivated, that is, exceptionally adept at working the system and unusually diligent in monitoring their offspring . . . avoiding the omnipresent dangers [rather] than cultivating scarce opportunities" (Furstenberg, 1993, p. 255). Effective parenting is quite different in such communities compared with low-risk neighborhoods.

**The parochial level: tolerance and community social control.** Just as effective local networks are important for family control, family strength is a key to making community controls possible. Families can provide critical supervision of youth peer groups (Sampson, 1993; Sullivan, 1989). In addition, local friendships, acquaintanceships, and voluntary organizations help to control local problems.

How such networks attempt to control problems caused by intensified street activity is a favorite topic of journalists. But there is another side to the story. Limited research indicates that in some neighborhoods with high imprisonment rates, residents are tolerant of and willing to relate to ex-convicts (Moore, 1978). What does this mean? Jarrett (personal communication, 1995) suggests several possibilities: "Is there a belief that former inmates can be rehabilitated? Is there a folk understanding that the system disproportionately targets minorities? Does the fact that former inmates are family members or the children of neighbors and friends allow community residents to still see them as people 'just like us'? Or is there an element of fear of retaliation by former inmates which would discourage efforts toward social control?"

**The police: overpolicing or underpolicing?** At the very least, intensified street activity creates problems of public order and of crime. In turn, these generate ambivalence toward the police--the public level of control. Vigil's study of a gang and drug-plagued Los Angeles housing project epitomizes the dilemma that residents face in relation to the police. He remarks (personal communication, 1995) that most of the time the community is like a free crime zone, with wide-open drug dealing and no police presence whatsoever, while at other times it is like a war zone, with intense and violent police activity. There is no middle ground, and residents are upset by both extremes--neglect and overpolicing. Mark Moore has analyzed the complex interaction between the police and the minority communities that are experiencing waves of youth violence. "The police could make two responses that would be racist and perceived as such. One is to ignore the problem because neither victims nor offenders are judged worth saving. The other is to use broad fears in the wider community as an occasion for cracking down." (1991, p. 19)

Distrust of the police among African-Americans is common. In a 1992 national poll conducted for the Anti-Defamation League, 74% of African-Americans, compared with 49% of the total sample, felt that police treat Black citizens less fairly than White citizens of the same class level. However, as Moore comments, no matter how critical they are of police, "the Black community as a whole yearns for an effective police response more strongly than ever" (1991, p. 14).

**Alienation and racial polarization.** In many African-American and Latino communities there is strong suspicion that the sudden burgeoning of the drug market and the resulting wave of incarcerations are no accident. They are seen by many as a deliberate plan on the part of the White establishment to weaken communities that might offer a political threat (Edsall & Edsall, 1991). Right or wrong, this view contends that the drug epidemic was designed to remove men from the community to prison and thereby depress the birth rate and the political potential of the population, and also to corrupt the lives of those remaining in the community. This alienation reinforces the social and political isolation of inner-city communities. As Glasgow (personal communication, 1995) remarks, "policies that destroy the connectedness of people with each other and the community drive people away from socialization with community institutions, and they destroy the vitality of the future."

### **Concerns Beyond Inner-City Communities**

The increased rates of imprisonment of inner-city minorities has a ripple effect throughout the society, well beyond the inmates' neighborhoods. A major effect is to exacerbate racial tensions. Increasingly, the larger society thinks of minority neighborhoods in terms of crime and welfare. Inner-city African-Americans blame a misty "White establishment."

The analysis in this paper implies that increased imprisonment rates have further weakened already vulnerable inner-city communities. Changes in the inner-city economies that led to a growing drug trade and its attendant tangle of social ills go largely unaddressed. What Scheingold (1981) calls the "symbolic politics of street crime" has been substituted for the amelioration of underlying problems. Those politics mean that for the general public, "structural problems [are reframed] as matters of crime control. . . . Here are people we are entitled to hate--but only so long as we think of them as victimizers rather than as victims" (Scheingold, 1981, p. 173). More directly to the point of this paper, Tonry (1995) argues that the so-called color-blind decision to concentrate resources on a drug policy that emphasizes increased imprisonment (rather than prevention and treatment) was consciously racist; the differential impact on inner-city communities was anticipated.<sup>23</sup>

In some respects, this discussion--about alienation in the minority communities and racial scapegoating in the larger society--echoes the analyses that followed the racial conflicts of the 1960s. A flurry of commission reports of that period warned about the prospects for increasing societal division based on the combination of race and poverty. In the general absence of regional strategies that would spread resources more evenly, the "chocolate-city--vanilla-suburbs" pattern that the Kerner Commission foresaw also presages the development of "garrison cities . . . where order is achieved by force rather than by consent" (Skolnick, 1995, p. 1). In the 30 years since the Watts riots, many believe that this society has moved closer to that apocalyptic scenario. An ominous pattern can be found in the California state budget, where prison building and maintenance mean reduced expenditures on health, welfare, and educational benefits (Skolnick, 1995). The *New York Times* cites figures on shifting expenditures in

California: in 1986, 12.6% of the budget was allocated for higher education and 2% for prisons. In 1994, both were 9%. By 2002, the projected allocations are 1% and 18%. This kind of shift in a state's priorities has deep implications.

### **Research Possibilities**

Because the effects of increased imprisonment rates are so intertwined with other problems in the inner cities, it is extremely difficult to devise research that would definitively address the issues raised in this paper. The line of argument that I have developed carries a logical research agenda. The ideal design would be longitudinal. It would use a combination of different methods to examine one or more inner-city neighborhoods over the past 20 years during which imprisonment rates have been increasing and would use a variety of measures of what I have called direct, indirect, and tertiary effects. Surveys can be used to assess some of these effects, but qualitative research is necessary for others. The guiding hypothesis would be that as the number of inmate families and ex-inmates increases in each neighborhood, the neighborhood subculture and the neighborhood social networks would change in the ways discussed in this paper. Obviously, that ideal is not attainable, and even if we had relevant data from the 1970s and 1980s to compare with current data, the results would be difficult to interpret. Since we cannot study the topic over time, we must search for a strategy that would give us some roundabout evidence of the effects of an increase in imprisonment. Basically, this means finding communities that are similar in all respects except one: The crucial difference is that one has a high rate of imprisonment and the other one a low rate. All of the effects should be more obvious in the community with a high rate of incarceration.

The first task, then, is to find such communities that are similar in all respects (e.g. ethnicity, employment patterns, crime rates, family structure, age composition, etc.) but their rate of imprisonment. The second is to devise appropriate measures and methodologies to test for the hypothesized effects.

**Sampling: Finding communities that vary in imprisonment level.** There are substantial differences between the states in the levels and rates of increase in imprisonment (Baird, 1993). Three states represent a range:

**Table 1**

#### **Incarceration rates**

	<b>1979</b>	<b>1990</b>
California	93/100,000	311/100,000
Wisconsin	73/100,000	149/100,000

Minnesota	51/100,000	72/100,000
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Wisconsin's imprisonment rate in 1990 was twice that of Minnesota's, and California's was twice that of Wisconsin's; the rates of increase also differ substantially. Thus, one possibility is to study comparable neighborhoods in major cities in the three states.

A second possibility is to compare neighborhoods within one city that are similar in all respects except for imprisonment experiences. Preliminary explorations in Wisconsin indicate that it would be possible to map, by zip code or census tract, the home addresses of inmates and the home addresses of parolees from the city of Milwaukee. Preliminary discussions also indicate that most parolees are, in fact, concentrated in the inner cities. The neighborhoods with the highest concentrations may be uniquely disadvantaged, so that it may not be possible to find matching neighborhoods that have lower imprisonment rates. But that seems implausible. The most effective sampling design would be a combination of the two approaches.

**Measuring direct effects.** Measurement of the direct effects of varying rates of imprisonment on inmates' families is not the charge of this paper. Nonetheless, since these affect other aspects of neighborhood functioning, they should be kept in mind. To trace the status of ex-inmates (e.g. whether they are living with families, working, involved in street networks) is a substantial research undertaking in itself. It entails either original ethnographic research or collaboration with ex-offender researchers who are trusted within their communities. It is most important to measure the extent to which neighborhood male peer groups, including gangs, form a significant feature of the neighborhood and to assess the influence of ex-offenders within them. This topic is discussed below.

**Measuring indirect effects.** For some of the indirect effects, surveys--the easiest and quickest technique--are inappropriate unless there are extraordinary relationships between the researcher and the community. For example, the absence of family members in prison and the presence of ex-offenders in the household cannot reliably be measured in impersonal surveys. (However, this particular problem could be partially averted by the intra-city and the combined sample designs: Neighborhoods with many inmates could be contrasted with neighborhoods with few, and sensitive questions need not be asked of household members.) In this kind of community, local groups should be involved wherever possible, and local residents should administer surveys face-to-face.

The routinization of imprisonment and certain aspects of the modeling of gender roles and of cool pose might be measured partially by neighborhood surveys, although survey data must be supplemented by focus groups or ethnographic studies.

Bowser and Wingood (1992) have developed a useful typology of variations in peer groups, ranging from groups based on the street to those rooted in extended kin; from those which are highly neighborhood bound to those which are not. Survey data can

provide a rough picture of a peer group, but the actual functioning of the groups can be assessed only through working with the group members themselves.

**Measuring tertiary effects.** Most of the tertiary effects discussed in this paper (for example, attitudes toward police, attitudes toward neighborhood problems, and feelings of alienation) can be measured satisfactorily through neighborhood surveys. However, they should be supplemented with focus group interviews or ethnographic techniques.

**Methodological Note.** Neighborhood research on this set of topics is extremely sensitive. It can readily conjure stigmatizing and racist stereotypes in communities whose political capital is meager. Thus, even though some variables can effectively be measured by survey techniques, this does not mean that impersonal survey firms can be turned loose in a community. It is critically important that research be collaborative and involve community members at every stage, from the design of instruments through the interpretation of findings. Collaboration greatly enhances the validity of the research, and moreover, it permits the findings to be put to immediate use. A number of researchers throughout the nation have established procedures for studying sensitive issues in stigmatized communities, and their expertise should be utilized.

**Summary.** This research design follows the chain of logic developed throughout this paper, and it is indeed complex. If only one element of the design were to be undertaken, I would place top priority on understanding the extent to which inner-city male street subcultures have been influenced by ex-inmates. Ex-offender joblessness is critical to the entire scenario, and ex-offenders' influence in their peer groups is pivotal. Policy solutions are obvious: finding alternatives to incarceration for lower-level drug dealers and finding jobs for ex-offenders would, in my view, prevent many of the negative consequences I have outlined. And, in my view, evidence about what actually happens would demonstrate the need for such policies.

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For example, Irwin and Austin (1994) project that a ten-fold increase would result from policies promoted by President Bush's Attorney General Barr. The policies include increasing conviction rates, incarcerating more of those convicted, and extending sentences.

<sup>2</sup>A study of outmigration of adult Black males from Los Angeles County (using PUMS data) found that 25% of those who left the county between 1985 and 1990 for other California locations were living in institutions in 1990 (Grant, Oliver, & James, 1994, p. 36). The authors comment that "the criminal justice system plays an important role in the redistribution of poor Blacks."

<sup>3</sup>See Bowser (1992) & Furstenberg (1993) for taxonomies of inner-city communities.

<sup>4</sup>Incarceration (except with highly concentrated neighborhood arrests) does not eliminate drug markets. Lower-level drug dealers rapidly replace those who are incarcerated (Blumstein, 1993), and localized drug markets may also be reorganized into "supermarkets" (Curtis, 1994).

<sup>5</sup>Curtis (1995) finds that this traffic also has epidemiological consequences for the spread of HIV. Drug users share needles in jails and spread the virus. When they return to the community after short terms, they lack the means to buy their own equipment and, again, share needles with friends--spreading the virus.

<sup>6</sup>For a minority of prisoners, the nationalist, ethnic, and religious organizations, which flourished in prisons during an earlier era, have had transformative effects (Moore, 1978; Wilkinson, 1995). The Black Muslims are the most notable.

<sup>7</sup>One exception, Swan's (1981) survey of wives of Black prisoners, taps into a different subculture than is at issue in this paper--that of the South in the 1970s. Swan cites Schneller's (1976) study to the effect that "poor Black families . . . tend to view imprisonment as part of the overall system of discrimination with which they always have had to cope." (p. 45)

<sup>8</sup>Grandparents may not be eligible for AFDC support, for example, unless the child is placed with them by court order. Nonrelative care givers receive more benefits, more easily (Minkler & Roe, 1993, p. 92). In 1990, approximately a million children lived in households in which a grandparent was the sole caregiver, and many more grandparents supplement maternal care. Although many of these grandparents are conventional, grandparental care still raises questions about the replication of parenting patterns that contributed to the inmate-parent's problems.

<sup>9</sup>In New York, for example, the number of women under custody grew 333 percent between 1982 and 1994, according to the Correctional Association of New York. Between 1988 and 1991, almost three-quarters of the women committed to prison were drug offenders.

<sup>10</sup>The samples were not matched on offenses, and the incarcerated mothers were less likely to have committed property crimes. They were more likely to have been drug users, to have had another family member incarcerated, to have had a juvenile record or previous adult arrest or incarceration, or to have had friends incarcerated (Stanton, 1980, pp. 30-31).

<sup>11</sup>Chicano prisoners surveyed in the 1970s expected their Los Angeles-based families and friends to help them find jobs when they were released (Moore, 1978). While those networks may have functioned in the 1970s, they tend to have collapsed in the post-industrial era.

<sup>12</sup>However, state prisoners still tend to return fairly quickly to the streets. Felons sent to state prison in 1990 serve two and a half years; those sent to federal prison serve more

time--five and a half years (Langan, Perkins, & Chaiken, 1994). Austin & Jones (1993) argue that such official figures understate the time actually served by roughly 40%. The official statistics usually omit data on jail time served and on time served for technical parole violations.

<sup>13</sup>An earlier literature on prisonization argued that inmates become receptive to the crime enhancing aspects of prison culture because their conventional identities are stripped from them (Clemmer, 1940). Clearly, this does not happen in quite the same way to contemporary inmates from the inner city.

<sup>14</sup>The concept of state-raised youth is developed in Irwin (1970) and expanded in Johnson (1987).

<sup>15</sup>The reality may be otherwise: a study in a major Illinois prison, done in the early 1970s, showed that friendships deteriorated for a third of the inmates (Brodsky, 1971).

<sup>16</sup>The meager and shrinking resources provided by General Assistance are usually not enough to provide shelter and food. GA recipients often rely on family or friends to help support them, and friends and family frequently become disenchanted and withdraw the support.

<sup>17</sup>A higher proportion (34.7%) had served time in jail, but since jails traditionally have been used by police as repositories for the homeless, this figure is hard to interpret.

<sup>18</sup>The Fortune Society cites an estimate that 80% of Rikers Island inmates come from just seven neighborhoods, but "neighborhoods" in this statement are very large areas, like Harlem and the South Bronx.

<sup>19</sup>Higher figures for justice-system contact are cited for young Black male high-school dropouts. In some studies, the figures are as high as 60%. See Mincy, 1994.

<sup>20</sup>Moore (1978) considered the presence and threat of prison to be a discernible feature of life in poor Chicano communities in Los Angeles; Bourgois (1994) comments that jail and prison are "a definite major backdrop" in his study of El Barrio in New York, "Constantly weaved into the ethnographic conversations."

<sup>21</sup>The distinction between conventional and criminal may be overdrawn. See also Moore (1978) for a discussion of the three-part barrio economy. If hustling is indeed pervasive, then so is the threat of arrest.

<sup>22</sup>Vigil (1995) argues that many families do not tolerate deviance, but rather are forced to accommodate to the presence of obnoxious street behavior by going inside the house early in the evening. This pattern is reminiscent of Rainwater's (1967) concept of the "house as haven."

<sup>23</sup>Recent Rand Corporation research modeled the relative cost effectiveness of treatment as compared with domestic enforcement for the reduction of cocaine use. The findings strongly support treatment (Rydell & Everingham, 1994).

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