

Economic Inequality, Racism and Trauma: Growing Up in Racist Combat Zones and Living in Racist Prisons

by

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Abstract

Previous research explains inner city violence through neighborhood mechanisms of social control without recognizing the traumatic conditions that resemble conditions of combat. This grounded qualitative analysis based upon interviews with incarcerated men illuminates the combat-like conditions in which boys become men resulting in multiple traumatic experiences and significant loss of family members and friends. Moreover, these life history narratives also reveal that many young men of color are victimized by systemic institutionalized racism within the criminal justice system. We propose a radical alternative to current practices that offers legitimate job opportunities and mental health treatment rather than harsh punitive responses.

Introduction

Living in a sanctioned combat zone is physically dangerous and psychologically traumatic (Humphries, 2010). Similarly, living in a high crime urban area and witnessing your friends and relatives die as the result of gang related or drug related violence is similarly psychologically disturbing. In both scenarios, practicing the necessary hyper-vigilance necessitated for survival over the course of time also becomes psychologically exhausting.

Young boys and girls who become men and women in communities surrounded by violence and poverty, with little political or social recognition of these hardships or attempts to provide assistance are not unlike our soldiers who survive war in spite of government inaction after their return home. (Harding, 2009; Humphries, 2010). Living in constant fear and witnessing combat or neighborhood violence is traumatic (Boelen & Prigerson, 2012; Stroebe, Schut, & Van De Bout, 2013; Bowlby, 1969, & 1988). (Humphries, & 2010; Chamberlin, 2012). Specifically one scholar argues; “trauma related nervous disorders became the mark of someone who had failed to live up culturally constructed notions of the ideal male citizen soldier. Thus victims were blamed for the unmanly behavior by way of stigmatizing medical diagnoses” (Chamberlin, 2012, p. 358). Similarly, our government labels inner city poor men of color who act out their pain after witnessing neighborhood violence/combat, as criminals rather than victims of the corporate-government abandonment of such places. Historical attempts to deny and complicate the trauma of soldiers in combat is likened to historical attempts aimed at emasculating Black men while differentiating them from real men, who are socially constructed as white and not criminal. Therefore, our social, economic, and political denial of the humanity and worth of the masculinity of men of color is similarly replicated in the social denial of their psychological injuries suffered in economic deprivation, inequality and their early childhood and adolescent neighborhood trauma (Boelen & Van Den Bout, 2007; & Bowlby, 1947). Moreover, both White men and men of Color subsequently suffer the pains of imprisonment compounding the psychic pain of their early experiences in abusive families and economically abandoned rural or urban areas. Among men of color locked in Southern rurality dominated penal institutions, they experience employees’ own racist attitudes are similar to poor white inmates’ racist ideologies (Hassine, 2009, 2012).

Methodology

Semi-structured interview protocols were utilized to interview twenty-one adult incarcerated men in two medium security prisons over the period of March 2012 through February 2013. The University Institutional Review Board on Human Subjects approved the protocol as well as State Department of Corrections and the two prison wardens. Neither Warden permitted a personal solicitation of volunteers directly. One Warden at the prison with a higher a level of security asked unit administrators to request that interested men place their names on a list to be scheduled for the life history interviews. In the second facility, a slightly lower level of a medium security facility, I spoke directly with Unit Staff asking them to encourage incarcerated men who might be interested in participating and would be forthcoming. I met each man on the unit where he lived in the second prison and in the first prison I met with men in the Education wing separate from living quarters. While my undergraduate research fellow observed several interviews, I was the only interlocutor throughout the data collection process.

As a former mental health therapist in a variety of settings from group homes and psychiatric hospitals to two prisons, I established a therapeutic rapport to gain the trust of each interviewee firstly expressing my interest in their lives. Secondly, I demonstrated my interest in them by exhibiting genuineness, empathy and respect. Moreover, my experience as a Therapist has provided with me a unique skill set to be present in the moment with each man and earn their trust through the demonstrating the previously mentioned qualities and engaging in appropriate self-disclosure with each individual.

The questions included eighty-six open-ended items querying men about their experiences inside and outside their respective institutions including the following: neighborhoods where they grew up, favorite activities, most pleasant and most painful memories, favorite relatives, the history of involvement in substance abuse as well as delinquency, romantic relationships, prison visitation, prison program participation, educational changes, and new attachment relationships. We also queried early family relationships love relationships and same-sex friendships, work histories, educational histories, history of harmful and helpful behavior, and gang involvement. These questions were developed based upon extant research on systemic neighborhood theory, strain theory, and social learning theory. One coder was utilized for the research simply because this project was designed and conducted by a single social scientist with the assistance of an undergraduate research associate and the graduate assistant who were trained throughout the process of this research project.

We also informed each interviewee that we were attempting to understand their life story and how they have become who they are now. I engaged each man by mindfully listening to their life story and attending to verbal and nonverbal responses. I communicated a sincere understanding of the man's individual experiencing by demonstrating warmth, genuineness, empathy and respect of the individual. In addition to the experience of institutionalization (Karp, 2010), we argue that providing a nurturing and warm responsiveness to each man in a semi-private room, allowed us to penetrate the protective armor that men in prison often wear to remain psychologically guarded. I utilized additional probing questions as necessary to develop the life history narrative of each individual in order to know them more fully as human beings. I took voluminous notes during each interview capturing quotes when possible. Nevertheless, I tried to capture the totality of each man's life as best as is feasible through my field notes. After each interview session notes were typed into an electronic document file. . This paper includes an analysis of eight of the men of color and one White male whose life course resembled that of the other men particularly with regard to his gang related experiences and because his racist beliefs mirrored some of the other White males' racist ideologies. .

With regard to coding data, only the primary researcher reviewed each written interview question by question and typed responses from each man individually and then subsequently integrated each man's story into a coherent chronological order from their early environment through adulthood and various periods of incarceration. There is no literal quantitative coding of this data, as it is the story of their lives as they told me, it is a *verstehen* in the original operationalization of the term as Max Weber intended it. Readers will come to know these men as I did with their frailties and strengths as you read through their stories. Emergent themes within the narratives of the responses were identified and summarized below.

Seven of the incarcerated men were Black, twelve were White, and one was an Asian Pacific Islander and one was Latino. Two men had been incarcerated for over twenty years and two for over ten years. Four of the men who committed murders were white, and three were Black. One white man was incarcerated for assaulting a police officer following a car accident and the discovery of drugs in his automobile. Three Black men murdered other men in drug related transactions. One white man was incarcerated for physically abusing his infant and five men were incarcerated for burglary or robbery. Three other men, one white and two African American were incarcerated for drug sales, although two reported that they witnessed, shot at and probably killed others and had been shot or stabbed themselves 'on the streets'. Only one young African American male was incarcerated for a minor parole violation. Twenty of the interviews were completed, however in this research we primarily discuss the men of color, all which are based upon completed interviews.

Results

Each of the men in our study (White and men of color) were seriously psychologically damaged, often resulting from early childhood wounds which remained largely ignored and untreated within correctional institutions. Specifically, most of the men grew-up in violent families, were physically or sexually abused and or witnessed violence in their family or neighborhood. More importantly we also found that the psychic pain of these men resonated with the findings of other studies of men and violence, particularly longitudinal work accomplished in Loeber's (1998) Pittsburgh Youth Study as well as Farrington's & Joffille's work (2012) work with London men (Joffille, Farrington, & Vannick, 2012; Loeber & Farrington, 1998; Loeber & Farrington, 2014). Specifically, the men who came of age in poor violent urban neighborhoods encountered a great deal of violent victimization both precluding and following involvement in perpetrating violence themselves. These nine men experienced long periods of their youth in psychiatric (predominately white men) or juvenile institutions (primarily men of color and some inner city poor white men).

The juvenile justice and mental health systems failed to treat the mental health problems of these men and boys when the opportunity presented itself. We find this particularly alarming given current trends in recent mass shootings revealing that many shooters suffered from untreated mental illnesses (Heinz, 2014, & Meloy, Hempel, Grey, Mohande, & Andrew, 2004).

Several central themes emerged across these men's lives. Each man experienced insurmountable or prolonged loss and were poorly equipped to manage such intense loss (emotional abandonment and or abuse) and subsequently acted-out or performed violence and engaged in drug use and sexual promiscuity to suppress or manage that anguish. Additionally, many of these men experienced insecure attachments and poor parenting as boys and as adults similarly demonstrated the same inability to parent their own children (Laub & Sampson, 1993, 2003; Stroebe, & Van Den Bout, 2013; Hagan, McCarthy, & Foster, 2002.). This failure to develop a secure attachment with a primary caregiver resulted in significant empathy deficits for most of the men constraining their ability to develop long-term emotional relationships as adults. This coupled with most men's traumatic losses also constrained their ability to appropriately express their psychic pain in socially appropriate ways (Frederick & Goddard, 2008 Jolliffe, & Farrington, 2006, & 2007).

Given the context of poor parent child attachment experiences, the experience of early traumas and interpersonal losses, as well as violent or economically deprived urban and rural communities; these men developed what we refer to as a fractured masculine identity and in some cases a kind of cowboy masculinity. This cowboy masculinity facilitated to survival in a chaotic urban or rural context and family context. While some men viewed themselves as successful economically whether gained legitimately or illegitimately, also they often viewed themselves as physically powerful, and thus fully capable of withstanding street life as well as the pains of imprisonment.

These cowboy masculine performances included successful demonstrations of athletic prowess as youth, promiscuity (only one of the White men reported being gay) supplanted by concurrent involvement in street corner or rural masculinity where expectations included acting physically tough, engaging in violence, and using drugs and alcohol or in the case of the one normatively economically successful men of color, becoming a member of the upper middle class. Among this group of men of color, most came of age in urban spaces where joblessness and its concomitant resulting poverty also limited their opportunities for legitimate economic success.

One man's early family life was characterized by significant mobility revolving around an unannounced parental separation that he described a 'devastating' community move. All the other men of color were psychologically, physically or sexually abused or abandoned by a parent or an immediate family member or other adult, or witnessed parental intimate partner violence, or neighborhood violence. For all these men, such traumatic losses resulted in the inability to emotionally connect on an intimate level to another human being in a long-term relationship whether platonic or romantic. Two of the men reported that their fathers arranged sexual encounters with prostitutes for them when they were boys. Two other men were sexually abused within the community by drug abusing adult women when they were minors. Five of these men of color were locked up in group homes or juvenile facilities off and on throughout their teen years without significant mental health treatment. All of these early psychosocial deprivations left all twenty-one of the white men and men of color with few socially competent skills with which to navigate life's travails as well as with deeply painful psychological wounds with little opportunity for treatment or healing. These wounds in addition to the abuse of drugs and alcohol by all of the men with one exception, provided an opportunity to numb the pain and facilitated on-going criminal involvement.

Among those who engaged in promiscuity and abused drugs and alcohol, their female sexual partners were often characterized by the same kind of chaotic lives as the men. Most men had limited legitimate job experience and when they worked legitimately, it was often sporadic. All of these men's masculine mentors or fathers and mothers were often antisocial, absent, abusive and or addicted to mood altering chemicals.

The Survivalist Masculinity of the Inner City

Given the cultural constraints of performing successful masculinity in modern urban or rural economically deprived zones, expectations of strength become normative, not unlike the expectations of military masculinities structured into the institution of military service (Henojosa, 2010). Violent neighborhoods and communities produce trauma, fear, and educational deprivation and early teen pregnancy among the boys and girls who come of age in these damaging places (Loeber & Farrington, 2011; Messerschmidt, 2000, 2004, 2005, 2010, & 2012; Websdale, 2010; Collins, 2008; & Harding, 2009). These disadvantaged neighborhoods are the result of the abandonment by American businesses, the government and institutionalized white racism and classism (Sampson & Wilson, 2012). These inner city youth and men of color were forced to navigate the racist social welfare system, law enforcement system, juvenile justice system, and corrections (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011).

This necessitates a unique kind of survival masculinity enabling a boy and later a man to adapt to these hostile institutions (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011). Living through chronic individual racist insults and institutionalized racism are traumatic as well and lead to the incorporation of an identity grounded in a survivalist/combatative type of masculinity, precluding the development of all other kinds of masculinities (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011). Sometimes this necessitated a concerted effort to numb the pain through alcohol and drug abuse as well as serial monogamy (Edin & Nelson, 2013).

With regard to rural and suburban white masculinities, surviving in economically deprived communities amidst growing economic inequality with perceptions that they must compete with white women as well as men of color for access to jobs, leaves them with few remnants of white male privilege and entitlement, leaving them feeling embittered, what Michael Kimmel calls ‘aggrieved entitlement’ (Kimmel, 2013). These men are angry too. Both white men and men of color living in economic hard times are finding that weak social institutions fail to assist men and boys in developing adequate opportunities for traditional masculine success (Messerschmidt, 2000, 2004, 2005, 2010, & 2012).

Dominating Masculine Identity: Growing-Up in Combat, the Hood

A number of these men mirrored the identity of their fathers who were deeply involved in criminal activities, White and Black as well as across rural and urban spaces. Specifically, both Steve and John’s (pseudonyms) fathers were drug dealers and gang members in highly urbanized environments, both men’s fathers were sexually involved with multiple women and demonstrated little ability to engage in nurturing fathering. Both Steve and John also became drug dealers but failed to see themselves as criminals. For example, John characterized himself as a simple businessman providing a consumer good while the other described selling drugs as a sideline while simultaneously engaging in legitimate work. John’s inability to connect to other human beings was illuminated in our conversations over time as described by long verbal monologues.

Steve, on the other hand, was engaging and disquietingly happy about fathering seventeen children even though he was completely disengaged from each of them. While only three African American men were convicted of selling drugs; two other Black men convicted of murder also sold drugs previously. Eight of the nine men of color grew-up in neighborhoods surrounded by violence and poverty. However, two of the men believed the most painful event in their lives were neither violence nor poverty; but rather a substantial geographic move. For example, Kevin experienced a parental separation that he called the most painful event of his life during which there was no communication about what led to the separation.

The result was a significant geographic relocation across the country until his parents reconciled a few years later., While Kevin described his boyhood community as a relatively poor inner city neighborhood, he referred to those times as enjoyable but felt more significant sadness about a female cousin whom he believed was provided with more nurturing and affection than was he. The one Latino men, Lucas, reported that when he was growing-up, he and his mother moved forty-five to fifty times he explained:

“Moving so much [was painful]. It was rough being Chicano and new gangs. Trying to fit in cause they didn’t want to fit, cause of where you were. I was anxious and fearful.

Mobility as a simple dummy variable in quantitative work fails to capture the comprehensive and pervasive experience of the loss of friendships, the familiarity of place that provides a sense of grounding.

Gang membership was more common among the men of Color than among the White men. Eight of the nine men of color were in gangs as adolescents, while only two of the twelve white men reported gang experiences as youth.

Patrick, an Asian-Pacific Islander, often mistaken for an African American, had become enamored with gang life by the time was eight years old.

I was attracted to the camaraderie. My brother had his own little squad. They had gang sweaters...the Ghetto Gangster Sweaters. After school, the gangs would meet...the Latin Kings and the Imperial Gangsters. I wanted to follow my brother with his posse that he ran with”.

Admiring and thus imitating his brother became a highly valued activity and thus provided him with another opportunity to become immersed in a male homo-social environment performing masculine domination through threatening postures. Thus he gained a sense of belonging that he was unable to find elsewhere. Although Patrick had friendships with groups of boys as a youth, he described no male friendships in adulthood. Similarly, other men reported most of their homo-social relationships as centered around neighborhood violence and drug use. Patrick believed his difficulties with the law began in adolescence after he was observed riding a stolen bike to school. He helped a group of boys steal it by ‘borrowing’ his Dad’s bolt-cutters and giving them to the other boys who then stole the bike. He lied to his father about the incident and when his father found out:

“My Dad backhanded me”.

His fathers' fear that his son was becoming like him, led his father to subsequently send him to live with his birth mother in another state. Patrick again became involved in delinquent activities and was returned, like a commodity, to live with his father. These delinquent behaviors were serious, yet he felt abandoned each time he moved from one parent's home to another. Subsequently, his younger brother and himself were moved to a more rural community in the South in order to avoid urban gangs, however, Patrick's involvement in growing marijuana and drug dealing followed. His later fatherhood was not central to his identity, he had two adult children as the result of relationships with two different women; he failed to maintain relationships with either child.

Terry was a thirty two year old white man, who grew-up with an addicted mother. Following his mother's incarceration he moved into his Grandmother's home. He relayed that she needed money so he began selling drugs to help her financially. He told me that he learned about how to sell drugs from:

"A bunch of guys on the street corner.... We hung out on the street corner, there were no gangs. We looked out for each other. If you got into it, we'd take care of each other, no blacks, all white kids. It was the white side of two but it was still [a] degraded town".

Later he contradicted himself by telling me that he was a part of a criminal organization on the street.

"I'm in it now. We're all Irish, all white. We all grew up together, selling is a part of the organization, dealing in stolen cars, guns, gambling, porn. They would love for you to stay straight, no pressure. I have a couple of buddies in here who are in for murder-robbery gone bad."

He disclosed that he had been involved in gang fights on the outside and he called his gang the "Bank Lick Gang" claiming a membership of about one hundred other guys. He reported that women were in the gang too but were not involved in the same criminal activities as the males. He described his neighborhood as characterized by violence and drugs sales. His neighborhood also contained racialized violence, some of which he perpetrated. Specifically, when he was about thirteen or fourteen he recalled seeing whites burn out Blacks or Mexicans homes by pouring gas all over their homes. He also stated:

"I saw people shot and stabbed, I saw one guy get punched in the face so badly his face was bashed in"

I asked him he felt about that and he replied:

“I had no feeling, it was an ordinary occurrence. My grandparents tried to tell us not to get involved and we’d say okay but we didn’t. I made my own decision I’m not going to blame my Mom or grandparents. I lived by myself by the time I was 14. I lived with Mom and had my own apartment, I was selling crack”.

Terry’s white racist street masculinity was embedded in his identity well before his adolescence.

“Mom was still drinking; her boyfriend was a crack head, one night they were sitting in the kitchen drinking. I was setting on the back porch; a crack dealer came up to sell to my Mom and boyfriend.”

He explained that this drug dealer was concerned about his living conditions with his mother and told Terry to leave his Mom’s home and he would take care of him. Subsequently, he retrieved his clothes and left with this man. He was fourteen at the time and began living in an apartment with this stranger and five other children. While Terry described this man as if he was a hero or savior, the man mentored him in drug sales. This apparent savior was nineteen years old at the time.

“I dealt with him. The guys we hung out with out on the street, we felt related.”

His favorite memories are related to these relationships with co-drug dealers. Terry admired this man and referred to him later as:

“...the Man who raised me. He’s always been around, he used to kick my ass if he caught me skipping school. He fed me and gave me money...looked after me. He still writes. Every Sunday we played neighborhood football, basketball, baseball, street ball and softball. Some of the guys even played semi-pro football. We were very athletic. The older guys in the hood also went to watch sports, a couple of us are still here together. I was young, I hung with older guys and chased girls like they did”.

He reports that he was eight years old when he began pursuing girls and that,

“I can’t remember no advice..my grandmother caught me out in back with another girl and they made fun of me...none of my uncles or my Mom gave me the talk. I figured it out as I went. Some of the older guys showed me how to make it with girls [how to get a girl to have sex with you].”

Terry reported numerous delinquent adjudications and spent time in each juvenile facility across the state. He counted seven facilities where he resided from six months to a year. As an adolescent he was involved in stabbings, robbery, assault, as well as arson (abandoned buildings). Also important to him was garnering the fear of other boys and young men as he expressed here.

“Other guys would see us coming and walk away.”

In school he reported he had fun and explained why.

“I didn’t deal with bullies, I’d bully him, whatever he did to them, I’d do to them”. “I done a lot of dirt in my day. I carry a gun every day. I won’t stop carrying a gun. I’d rather be by judged by twelve than carried by six”.

He also shared with me with that he had been involved in fights with thirty-five different guys and these men incurred scars as well. I asked why so many and he replied that he knows when somebody is about to do something bad to him, like take out a friend or hurt a friend, so:

“I see the bad in a person. He’s gonna steal my buddy, so I’ll steal him first”.

So I responded by calling it a preemptive strike.

“Yes, take people by surprise and by the time that they figure out what’s going on, the fight is over.”

Then I asked how he planned to avoid these kinds of confrontations in the future he replied:

“I’m gonna live in the country.”

Many other men similarly planned unrealistic methods of avoiding future involvement in crime and drug and alcohol abuse including becoming youth workers, preachers, or counselors.

Terry played football in high school because:

“That is where you found out where the parties were that weekend.”

Terry’s suburban neighborhood was poor, although some people worked in the legitimate economy. Terry dropped out of high school in the 11th grade and reported that although he liked school he also sold drugs at school. He began using drugs and alcohol at age eight.

He told me that he was drinking to get drunk by the time he was 12 or 13 years old. He recalled being involved in fights by the time he was five years old and selling marijuana by the time he was eight years old. He reportedly preferred marijuana and alcohol but also experimented with cocaine, heroin and lots of different pills. Terry smoked marijuana daily and was drunk at least three nights a week on the outside. One night he received a DUI after driving into a police car, leading to this incarceration:

“I was dead when the ambulance had to revive me”.

Terry’s dangerous lifestyle was similarly reflected in the lives of the men of color across a variety of different inner cities. For example, Roy was a thirty-year-old black male incarcerated for murder. Roy grew-up in a large urban area that he identified as ‘*rough*’. When I asked him what he meant by that he indicated that he was introduced to violence and drug dealing at early age. He also told me that his neighborhood consisted of normal activities as well and that he could have been involved in those too, such as boys’ clubs and youth centers, but with regard to his involvement in those activities, he said:

“I wasn’t. I did not live a child’s life from middle school on.”

He acknowledged that he was present when the murder transpired but reported that he did not kill the victim. Roy told me about his more recent crime that brought him to prison.

He stated it was ‘*drug deal gone bad.*’

“He pulled out a weapon, the guy that I was with pulled out a weapon too, I didn’t shoot him...manslaughter...it got knocked down for that reason. I was facing the death penalty. The judge could have reversed it entirely. I have shot people. I didn’t have regard for human life, yeah I know I killed others, eye for an eye. I might not be here If I hadn’t killed”.

Included in his life sentence are convictions for burglary and drug trafficking. Similarly, Mark was a twenty-eight year old African American man who grew up in a housing project in a highly urbanized large American city.

“You know it took a village to raise me. There was a whole lot of love with rough moments. They were good Christians. A lot of my family was close. We all loved each other. My friendships will last forever. Experience is priceless, I learned values instilled, family is most important. Sticking together no matter what”

While Mark stated the above in the initial stages of the interview process, Mark later acknowledged that the village he was referring to was mostly gangs within his neighborhood. He further explained the rough moments.

“I realized the seriousness of the situation. It was a war zone in its own way. Kids killing, by big stray bullets, gang wars, drugs being sold, corrupt police officers, family members selling and a single mom using an addicted to crack cocaine.”

Mark was one of seven other men of color men who grew up in poor inner city violent communities. While other scholars frame such communities as socially disorganized, such conceptualizations ignore the constant exposure to criminal victimization resulting in multiple youthful traumatic experiences. Mark’s characterization of his neighborhood as a ‘war zone’ exemplifies the level of cumulative collective trauma he and others like him experience. He stated that his mother was addicted by the time he was five or six years old and with regard to his father:

“He was in and out of the household as he had another household with another woman and other kids. Three guys I was really close to, they got killed, two were together every day, they were both killed in gun battles, one of my best friends in 2003”.

One other death included his cousin in 2004. Later in 2008 a second cousin was murdered in 2008 while he was incarcerated for this crime. He explained in more detail.

“Those people who were attached to me when I was a kid. We always represent the gang in my neighborhood; they ran the whole housing project, the Gangster Disciples. It was a double standard, they provide for families during Christmas. When I was coming up nobody had a job. They provided for the neighborhood through illegitimate economy, it kept everybody afloat. These guys were getting harassed by the cops. They hurt others through getting people killed, people were affected by the drugs and killings, the good fellas, close friends and associates in [name of city], the Gangster Disciples, we looked out for each other. We were always affiliated with Gangster Disciples. I’ll be affiliated with them for the rest of my life.”

According to Mark and most of the other men who were involved in gangs, leaving is never an option even if your gang involvement is minimal. While, Mark was surrounded by violence in his neighborhood, his own violent behavior resulted from this traumatic early exposure to violence.

“I was involved in shootings. The first time I was ten or eleven. We were at school and a kid came out and shot at us. A bullet grazed a guy’s head but nobody got hurt”

Mark was involved ten to twenty shoot-outs all of which he described as drug or gang related. He claimed that the Vice Lords or the Cobras often shot at them and apparently they returned fire.

“It’s a forever {never} ending problem. You ain’t from their gang, more than one gang from the same projects, their share the same stores and schools. It was crazy. A handful of times I have shot at people before. To this day, I had changed things and could do things differently I would. I do have regrets about it. I know I didn’t kill anybody. The first time I shot a gun I was fifteen or sixteen. The guy tried to take the gun from me, I was selling drugs. I shot him because he was trying to take the drugs from me, he was older. I did what I was taught to do, stand my ground. I was afraid he was going to shoot me. Usually it’s fear and anger and being stupid.”

I asked why he sold drugs and used drugs. I also asked about the presence of legitimate jobs in the neighborhood.

“To provide for myself, if I depended on the adults to get it I knew it wasn’t going to happen. My mom and her boyfriend were using drugs, so I got it myself the best way I knew how. Dealing with poverty, surrounded by pain and poverty...do something to numb the pain. I think most do something due to the circumstance[s] of the situation to deal with it. Everyone in the projects that I lived in, people got it, including the people I lived with. I didn’t see much work. I didn’t see people working from my hood. I did see some people doing janitorial work. There were metal detectors and security in the projects and people got those jobs. The only people who own stores were Jews and Arabs where I come from.”

Growing up in this war like zone as well as being unable to cope with his mother’s addiction and his father’s periodic absences left Mark with few options. I asked Mark about his feelings on the outside and he told me about using drugs and alcohol simply to remain numb.

“Numbed by weed every day, all day. I was depressed coming of age. Life, a whole lot of things were happening that I didn’t know how to deal with, death, funerals, nobody to help you grieve. I grieved by drinking and smoking weed. The community didn’t know how to deal with it. My day might be coming any day, it’s kinda depressing. It made me kinda messed up, I carried a gun. I didn’t want to be the next person to be killed. I thought about my daughter.”

When I asked Mark what he could have done differently, he told me this.

“A lot of things, stayed in school. I was gifted in sports, basketball and football. If I’d had an encouraging person in my life to keep me in sports. Instead I did as the Romans do. I could have done performing arts, nobody ever encourage those gifts. I could draw. I was crazy about dreams. I could draw a lot.”

Subsequently, I asked what individuals or institutions could have done differently.

“Public school system could have been better in [name of city]. They knew the level of our community was in. They looked at us like another statistic, that is how you felt about it. It didn’t matter if you were a black or white woman [the teachers], it didn’t really connect. The whole school, all the kids were from the projects.”

Like many of the other men, Mark’s entire boyhood and adolescence were surrounded by violence and loss with few opportunities for it to be avoided. However, reenacting the violence does facilitate a means of gaining emotional control over the trauma. More specifically, with no chance of recovery or escape, the only option is to re-enact the trauma as method of gaining some semblance of control as well as providing the chance to have an emotional catharsis of sorts (Baker, 2006). Repetitive traumatic experiences may irrevocably damage one’s identity. Mark’s early life story centered around his exposure to violent victimization and crime. Unfortunately, Mark, like many of the other men interviewed; also was sexually victimized by an older woman. When he was initially sent to a juvenile camp, he reported that a female employee initiated a sexual relationship with him.

“It got in trouble for touching her butt, she blew the whistle on me, she didn’t get in trouble. I was doing what I needed to do program wise. I was angry. I got put in an isolation cell every day at the camp, it caused problems I was beating on the doors. They restrained me and stuff. I did it intentionally to get out of there.”

The loss childhood innocence within these neighborhoods, among men like Mark, Don, Shaun, and Roy who experienced the violent death of friends and family members in the context of serious economic deprivation made life extraordinarily painful. When I asked Mark about friendships with other men, although he previously labeled fellow gang members as friends. It appeared that Mark experienced these friends more as military comrades rather than as emotionally supportive friendships. This seems to be the case for most of these men whom I interviewed. Their male friends were comrades in arms, surviving combat not long-term friendships. Mark explained:

“When you come to prison, it’s a touchy situation. Your friends are not the same when you came to prison. It’s like you’re dead. They forget what you did for them. They forget about the love. Some have written and sent me money. A lot of my friends are in and out of prison and kids from different women. I feel kind of cold and bitter, I believe people still think of me. They should tell me that they miss me. Life has gone on without you [himself]. I wonder what they are doing but I guess if they’re thinking about me they don’t do anything about it.”

Mark was a twenty-eight year old African American male incarcerated for robbery and drug sales. He reportedly committed the robbery for money to support a new baby. Mark grew up in a poor housing project and described many of his neighbors as good people. However, he indicated there many rough moments too:

“I realized the seriousness of the situation...it was war zone....in its own way kids killing by big stray bullets...gang wars...drugs being sold...corrupt police officers...family member selling and a single mom using and addicted to crack cocaine“ I realized the seriousness of the situation...it was war zone....in its own way kids killing by big stray bullets...gang wars...drugs being sold...corrupt police officers...family member selling and a single mom using and addicted to crack cocaine.”

Mark indicated that the “innocent times” were only in elementary school.

“I’ve been involved with gangs since I was9 or 10....they run everything.... Friends were all in gangs....it was good stuff...I had no brother growing up--- these guys treated me like a brotherwe would fight with other gangs...at first innocent fighting with sticks...then guns...my family was afraid that something would happen”.

After attempts by his family to remove him from this inner city surrounded by drug sales and violence, he returned at the age of nineteen. He describes his surroundings like this.

“I was still selling drugs and carrying a gun...when I came home to a situation where it was the survival of the fittest. The only people who embraced me were drug dealers. “

Mark told me that where he grew up people didn’t have hopes and dreams for the future, no starts as he put it.

“There was no starts in my neighborhood...my heroes were drug dealers...they were the people who were providing and putting smiles on people’s faces”.

Moreover, the most painful memories Mark has are those surrounding the multiple deaths he saw or friends and family members, who died sometimes violently, sometimes from disease, like his mother.

“Being locked up and watch people die...family members and friends. I saw somebody beat to death with a baseball bat...right before I was locked up. One of my friends got killed ...a fight broke about ...and he got shot outside the club. We were drinking and hanging out. Some guys got arrested for it but don’t know if these guys did it. It made me drink more. I was paranoid. My uncle had drank himself to death (grandmother’s brother). A cousin died in Texas, he got shot and was a teen.”

Mark also experienced violence at the hands of police officers, both White and Black.

“ I was mad about it. .I seen stuff like this going on before...cops roughing up kids”.

Don, like Mark, grew up in the projects in a large urban inner city. Don was thirty-three year old African American man who had spent the last fifteen years of his adult life in prison. He was locked up one month after turning eighteen. He described his neighborhood:

“It was challenging....poverty. You are forced to be around people that you don’t need to be around. People with a lack of education, a lack of money, people who sell drugs, robbing due to lack of money, people who don’t get proper upbringing, family values, no Fathers, Moms are playing two roles. Those who do have Dads, he is not a shining Dad, he is trumped down, meaning no job.”

I asked him if there were any good times and responded briefly and stated:

“There was some fun and enjoyment. But there was drugs and robbing because of poverty”

While Don knew that his neighborhood was poor and crime ridden, he never overtly identified the crime problem as caused by poverty. Only near the end of the interview process, Don officially acknowledged that lack of money was significant cause of street crime. Don told me he was incarcerated for murder and robbery. He was serving a twenty-five year sentence. He explained what transpired.

“I played dangerous games. I played like I robbed somebody and then he tried to take the gun, he didn’t know I was playing. The other guy was shot twice. It was adrenalin.”

Don’s somewhat ambiguous description of the incident that brought him to prison may appear to be a way to minimize his involvement. However, it is also likely that the events transpired as he relayed mirroring an innocent adolescent prank turned deadly. Readers should recall he was only eighteen years old at the time of the crime. Like many of the other men, Don’s involvement in crime began as a youth. He was involved fights in school as early as the third grade and was placed in a class for behavioral disordered children.

The teachers believed that he suffered from ADDH and tried to get his mother to have him medicated but she refused. However, Don believed that the medication might have changed his life course. Interestingly, Mark also was diagnosed with ADDH and also never took the recommended medication. Don was mainstreamed by middle school and became involved in vandalism, car theft, drug possession, and assaults. He spent nine and half months in a juvenile camp for delinquent youth as a result. Don also used mood-altering chemicals and began regular use of marijuana by the time he was ten. Don's experience with racism outside the prison system was exceeded by his experience in prison.

"I've experienced this all my life, but I've recognized it more since I've been locked up".

Every man of color similarly reported a life characterized by repeated racist insults. We characterize these types of experiences as traumatic as well.

Racism Inside and Outside Prison

Each African American man or man of color interviewed reported experiencing racism in the prison system, primarily exhibited by correctional officers. However, they also encountered racism within their neighborhoods or communities by some white residents. Most of these racist practices were exhibited by police officers. Most incarcerated men also indicated being prepared to experience racism by their family members, including keeping their head held high, or not letting it get to them. Patrick, an Asian American, explained that he is often perceived by others as Black. For example, after initially moving to the South as a boy, he experienced racism regularly, but indicated his younger brother had even more such experiences and often was involved in physical altercations as a result. Lucas, the only Latino man in the study, reported that one night before a bar fight ensued the following these pejorative words.

"What are you? They are coming over here and taking our jobs. I told him about my enlistment. I was in uniform at the time and told him, look at me, if you want to enlist, there is a recruiting office right over there."

However, he explained that in other similar circumstances, he doesn't always respond physically.

“When I come across it, I walk away. I know I worked for one guy who was very indifferent to me, but he knew I did my job. Some people you just gotta ignore them. It’s never stopped me from doing what I gotta do. Yeah the most I had to deal with it was by Hispanic cops, saying things like this to me. You’re up to no good, that’s probably most of it. I was at a phone booth and a cop came up behind me. I was twelve years old and he beat me up with a flashlight. It was a white cop. My brother was there and said, what’s going on, he said I fit the description of another guy and brother told him, look around you.”

Lucas explained that his mother and brother provided an important opportunity for him to improve his ability to cope with this kind of subtle racism.

“You’ll run in to some people who are ignorant and brought up this way and told me to try to show them differently.”

He reported that he often hears *“They’re gonna take my job”*. He argued that Mexicans and immigrants take the hard jobs that nobody else wants.

“Picking watermelons. I did that for a while, it was the worst job in my life, in the heat, heavy lifting, twenty-to twenty-five pounds each and I was fourteen years old.”

While one other White interviewee explained that prison culture vacillated between periods of privilege followed by chaos, as rules change or become inconsistently applied. Similarly, men of color reported little privilege but rather constant insults through exposure to racism within the correctional system. Each man came to recognize the imperfections with the correctional system and both the White men and Men of Color endured daily insults (racism or other forms of domination-subordination) to their identities. For example, Kevin relayed to me that the staff members do not like it when White women come to visit the Black guys. Don, Roy, and Mark also disclosed that Black men were more likely to receive misconduct reports than White inmates. They also reported regularly being treated with less respect than the White incarcerated men. Both Kevin and Steve viewed perceived the criminal justice system in its entirety as extremely racist. Steve believed he received his lengthy sentence only because he was Black.

“This incarceration takes the cake....they’re blatantly racist here..the town court system is racist. I’ve been discriminated against..profiled by the cops..they assume that if I’m with a white friend...he’s a buyer and I’m a dealer. It’s more divisive between races in here...not in the city where I’m from.....well let me correct that in [city name] you don’t see whites, only Blacks and Hispanics. Well I’ve seen white guys give up their homes to avoid [name] County Jail. The violence is bad [in that county jail]. As a little boy I was around white kids and Hispanics.

It was normal to be around other races. I never gave racial issues a second thought until I came here [to the south]. It brought me anger. These correctional officers discriminate a lot, it is the way they grew-up. One even said to me, what are you doing? Mocking me, because I talked with sense [didn't speak using Ebonics]. I'm smart, here when I say hi, when I walk by and say how are you doing? They don't respond, I broke one, he speaks to me now, it's a transition. My Dad told me, what are you doing in [state name], they are racists."

With regard to the criminal justice system in general, Kevin, a Black man, reported that he had a White public attorney during his trial. Also the prosecutor and the jury were all White, only the Judge was an African American.

While Kevin was the oldest Black male interviewed, he told me that things were different when he was a boy, but the younger Black men indicated police harassment was a daily battle. During Kevin's boyhood, mandatory integration of public schools did not yet exist. He explained that retrospectively, he viewed the predominantly Black schools were poorer than schools with more White students. He believed that if his education had been different, things in general for the course of his life would also have been different. He recalled an incident during which White kids threw bricks at the Black kids, but he acknowledged that Black kids also did the same to White kids. Insightfully, he argued that city and state administrators simply should have made the black schools as good as the white schools. He revealed that his parents never talked about racism until educational integration became law. His perception was that this was more difficult on the whites because of whites' minimal exposure to people of color.

"Racism is something you learn."

Kevin's insightful comment is reflected in one of the White inmates' comments. This thirty-two year old white male, Terry, previously committed a hate crime in his neighborhood by burning down a Black neighbor's home. Terry told me he didn't like of the Deputy Warden because he was Black. After asking Terry about the first time he recognized that people of different skin tones existed, he explained:

"They were a different skin color. They were not in my hood. I went to school with them when I was little. I don't mess with Black people. I was racist on the street and I'm more racist in here. They're loud, trying to talk shit to scare people. It doesn't work on me."

Terry laughed at one point in the interview when he acknowledged that his two young sons were becoming racists.

Roy a thirty-five year old Black man incarcerated for murder also relayed an early traumatic experience with racism during his first and last day as a boy scout. The scout leader used racial slurs when addressing him. He told his mother about the incident and she immediately “got me out of there”.

“We were in a mixed hood growing up. It was commonplace to see Whites and Blacks. There were some streets that we were told not to go there. One incident occurred where Whites chased some Black and they had brass knuckles”.

Roy, similar to Kevin’s revelations about another prison, also explained that prison staff members were more racist in this prison than in any other prison in the state and he had lived in each one.

“Down here, the staff are racist[s]. I feel it every day...all day. I feel like a slave sailing in a boat. I’m not going to let them get to me. When I go to court-call, a Black guy gets a write-up for something a White guy doesn’t get, or the white guy doesn’t go the hole [segregation] and the Black guy does.”

This behavior, he told me, comes mostly from the officers, who abuse their authority.

“I used to respond to that in a violent way. I don’t feel like that now.”

Roy no longer feels this way as he transformed himself during his time in prison through self-reflection and religious/spiritual study. His identification of racist prison experiences include that following Black inmates filing of grievances about racist treatment, the inmate often gets transferred to another institution while officers are treated with impunity. Another example of the pains of imprisonment and the trauma of incarceration was Roy’s sexual victimization by a correctional officer during a pat-down search during which he disclosed that the officer groped his genitals. Roy stated:

“He went too far”.

Roy also was sexually abused as a boy in a neighborhood crack house. He and other local boys would exchange crack with local women for sex. He realized retrospectively that this was a form of child sexual abuse, however he argued that he and the other boys enjoyed the sex.

“At least we could control the interaction.”

Roy’s early sexual abuse in addition to his exposure to his father’s sexual promiscuity interacted to facilitate his inability to relate to women in any intimate ways other than sexually. However, Roy expressed desire a full time monogamous relationship after his release.

In spite of Roy's negative relationship with his father and his experiences with racism; he developed a positive male relationship with a White man. This individual was an old childhood friend who occasionally called him and sent him money. They served time together too and this man reportedly saved his life by giving him hope and friendship.

Mark's believed that the current major social problems included racism and unemployment and noted the insightfully noted following.

"Like Obama, it's always negative when people talk about him".

Mark also recognized that providing more jobs is central to solving some of America's social problems. He also argued that a lack of political and elite motivation existed to make than transpire.

"More jobs.... people that are in business that used to create them. There are a lot of people are well off, but they aren't doing anything. I see em on TV. They are all talk and no show."

Mark eloquently relayed what it was like to grow up in America's poor inner cities surrounded by pervasive institutionalized racism.

"Any person of color has, in the communities where I come from, you are targeted. The police presence is always there, this whole thing was designed to be like this. It's like cat and mouse. Prisons, restaurants, stores, being followed by people who think I'm going to steal something. Cops say racist stuff. Look at where we are [He names the place were we were currently located in a southern rural community with few employment opportunities.] We are here with people who have never been around black people in their life. Guys from the inner city, you don't think guards are going to look at black guys and say the n... word? If you are a racist you are stupid."

He reveals that he has heard guards and staff call other people of color a variety of racist names. However, Mark's grandmother remembered the Jim Crow south and wanted Mark to live a proud post-civil rights era life telling him.

"How do you prepare somebody for something like that [racism]? I don't think that they knew how to. They said how to react when something happened. My grandmother said, look people in the eyes; don't put your head down. She instilled those type of values".

Leon was a fifty-six year old black man, incarcerated for shooting his estranged wife. He had become a highly successful businessman although he grew-up as a poor farmer's son. His mother worked as the "Help" cleaning homes for whites. While he reported that he had good parents, this centered on his parents' involvement in paid legitimate labor, not around interpersonal family dynamics.

He compared his background to the common background of minority men who grew up without both parents present. Leon's father was an alcoholic who battered Leon's mother through Leon's childhood and adolescence. He did not resent his Father, but became resentful towards Whites, not the result of witnessing his mother's abuse at the hands of his Father but her exploitation by whites. He became blamed himself and other poor Black people for not doing more for the black community.

"My Mom and Dad didn't own their own home until they were in their sixties. We let the White people buy up property. I don't know why they didn't just pool their money to prevent this from happening."

Larry shot his wife after discovering her affair with another man. He believed he didn't have a chance at trial because his wife was White and so was the jury.

"I was married to a white woman" The jury was all White. He talks about the unfairness of this considering that he is a black man and a jury of peers did not exist in this case."

Leon received the minimum sentence of 10 years. While Leon grew-up in a poor rural community, he too was the recipient of racism at the hands of the White community as a boy. However, following in his father's working class footsteps was determined to become economically successful. He became a very successful businessman as he reached the peak of his earning potential at mid-life. Like many other younger Black and White men, he too had two children from two previous long-term relationships with women of color neither of whom he was close to. However, his marital estrangement from his White wife, whom he never really indicated he loved, had become an apparent symbol of his economic mobility and masculine success. So when they separated he became depressed and suicidal. The day he shot her, he had earlier in that day considered shooting himself. The loss of his wife was significant for him, as salient as the loss of loved ones to violence, natural causes, or the loss surrounding exposure to multiple incidents of neighborhood violence. Additionally, the loss of his wife to separation must have resounded to the losses surrounding his witnessing of his father's violence aimed at his mother. Leroy was drinking alcohol heavily after his wife left him and prior to the shooting. While Leroy did not experience urban neighborhood violence, his exposure to family violence mirrors similar exposure to the trauma of war that the other men of color experienced. Only one young Black male incarcerated for a minor parole violation (missing one appointment with his parole officer on a holiday) did not report experiences with neighborhood violence even though he grew-up in the projects. His athleticism, (like one other White male) appeared to offer an exit from the neighborhood until he was injured.

On the other hand he was forced to endure his mother's addiction to crack cocaine and abandonment by his birthfather. His first incarceration was for a robbery committed with a group of male peers but was not gang related. He was a soft-spoken young man who reported benefitting from prison programs as some of the other men similarly reported. Nevertheless, he saw White men and Black men as isolated from one another and in what he perceived as "cliques".

Conclusion and Recommendations

The ground must shift from painting these men of color as making simplistic individual choices to engage in violence or to sell drugs to a more compassionate and holistic perspective of men who grew up under combat like conditions within violent families and or neighborhoods within a context of cultural and institutionalized racism. Given a more empathetic approach rather than punitive perspective, several solutions become necessitated.

Firstly, American businesses and corporations must not be legally permitted to close or abandon operations in inner cities or rural communities simply to improve profit margins or assuage shareholders; particularly where much of the economic base of the local community is based on their operations. Rather, these businesses must be required to remain in America, instead of shipping operations abroad to exploit third world workers of color. If they are granted legal moves abroad, they must be required to either pay the costs for re-training all employees (including higher education) should be offered new equitably paid positions in company subsidiaries.

Eliminating institutionalized racism in the criminal justice system requires similar national legislation similar to but more rigorous than the 2002 Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act of 2002 which attempts to eliminate disproportionate minority juvenile confinement (OJJDP, 2014). Unfortunately, this was simply a fiscal generating program for states through which grants allowed them to conduct research to:

1. Identify the extent to which Disproportionate minority confinement (DMC) exists
2. Assess the reasons for DMC if it exists.
3. Develop and implement intervention strategies to address these identified reasons.
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of these chose intervention strategies.
5. Monitor the changes in DMC trends and adjust intervention accordingly.
6. States must report on their progress in 3-year plans and subsequent updates.
7. States that fail to address any DMC problems may lose 20% of formula grant allocations for the year.

This alleged solution ignores the influence of poverty, the cultural and institutional supports to continue to practice silent racism and of course the implications of this DMC of juveniles becoming cumulative into adulthood. Thus future policies must not simply fund local/state research and self-monitoring but must mandate monitoring and research from the non-partisan and non-criminal justice invested employees in order to reduce institutionalized racism as it exists within the criminal justice system and other related policy arenas as illustrated in Jonathan Simon's recent text, "Governing through Crime" (Simon, 2009).

Finally, criminal justice professionals must be degreed mental health workers who can provide mental health and substance abuse treatment for these men and women who suffer similar symptoms and have similar diagnoses as military soldiers who return from combat zones (Pryce, Pryce, & Shackelford, 2012). Interestingly, these authors' review of other substantive empirical evidence that combat can become as addictive as a mood altering chemical and if the soldier fails to rationalize or justify his or her involvement in the killing, the result will be "one or even all of the negative outcomes of PTSD, major depression, and self-destructive behavior (Pryce, et al, 2012, p. 8). Most importantly historically soldiers abuse mood-altering chemicals to cope with the emotional consequences that combat induces. Recent evidence explicates that the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have led to a hundred percent increase in substance abuse problems among soldiers. They refer to these psychological wounds as resulting as soul damaging or character changing, necessitating psychological treatment or therapy. Apparently, even the military as a social institution is avoiding dealing with these damaged men in healthy, ethical ways and thus it is clear that there are also hurdles for us to overcome to attune the government to abandon its punitive approach to poor rural and inner urban crime areas for a more empathic and ethical humane approach to the crime problem. We also must make the effort to sustain and heal those who are harmed by our racist, classist, and gendered or patriarchal social institutions and agencies.

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