Incarceration and Reentry’s Effects on Family Supports: Appeal for Systems Therapists’ Attention

Benjamin Schwabe, MFTT | University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry

**Background**

- The US sends more of its African American males to prisons and jails than to college or the military (Pettit & Western, 2004; Sampson & Loeffler, 2010)
- Nearly half of all black women have a family member imprisoned (Wildeman & Wang, 2017)
- Over one third of all prison admissions are due to parole violations (Shapiro and Schwartz, 2001)

**Community in “Chronic Stress”**

- “Punishment is distinctly concentrated by place” (Sampson & Loeffler, 2010, p. 2)
- “Concentrated disadvantage”: high levels of poverty, racial segregation, unemployment, welfare use, and single-parent families
  - incarceration rates > three X higher than communities with similar crime rate (Sampson & Loeffler, 2010, p. 5)

**Acute Stress** of Family Reentry

- Over 3/4 of former prisoners will initially reside with family (Nasir & Visher, 2006; Nelson, Doss, & Allen, 1999; cited in Martinez & Christian, 2009)
- Qualitative studies capture family confusion and uncertainty regarding offering support
- Family experiences stigma

**“It is just stress. All around stress from the moment they get handcuffs around their wrists to the moment they get home and after”** (Grieb, Crawford, Fields, Smith, Harris, & Matson, 2014, p. 1189)

**Summary**

- The US incarcerated more of its citizens than any other country (Criminal Justice Facts, n.d.)
- Destabilizing neighborhoods and families
- This creates an environment of “chronic stress”
- The return of formerly incarcerated family entails “acute stress”
- Families dealing with these dual stressors are in need of supports they are not receiving
  - These supports would go a long way in increasing community health and lowering recidivism and reoffending
- MFT’s are well positioned to help in unprecedented ways as this population resembles populations that have received MFT attention: Family caregiving populations and post-deployment military families

**Clinical Considerations**

- Clinicians must recognize the multiple levels of stress that families are enduring with particular acknowledgement of systemic racism as a primary driver of these stressors
- Poverty, unemployment and housing insecurity are of particular relevance when meeting with support giving clients and should be prioritized
- Strive to approach these clients from a place of cultural humility
  - What might it look like to see clients as symptom bearers for a dysfunctional system?
- Addressing issues of race, class and criminal justice system involvement directly communicates that these conversations are not only allowed, but crucial to the therapeutic process
- Aim to be collaborative and “decentered”
  - An expert posture may serve to further reinforce a sense of powerlessness and institutionalization
- Working to help establish stronger communication within families affected by incarceration strong positive impact on family health as well as ex-prisoner desistance efforts

**Selected References**

