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Mass incarceration and adolescent development: Connecting identity and trauma in black  
adolescent males

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*Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College,  
December 2018*

### Abstract

Mass incarceration has been described as the new form of slavery and systemic racism in the United States. In this thesis, it is explored as the main societal cause of the disproportionate representation of black individuals in jails and prisons, disrupting black communities and destroying the lives of so many black youth. Specific policies are discussed and identified as direct links to the growth of incarceration and the criminalization of black youth, particularly black adolescent males. While numerous studies have revealed the dangers of incarceration and the increased risk of recidivism for justice involved youth, little research has been done to explore the impact on development and identity formation during adolescence. This is of particular importance in light of our current understanding of brain development during adolescence, and the unique challenges youth face during this developmental stage. This thesis seeks to understand the connection between mass incarceration, trauma and adolescent development with a particular focus on identity and self worth in young black males. The goal is to shed light on the ways this connection creates a cycle of criminalizing and incarcerating black adolescent males, which perpetuates mass incarceration and systemic racism in this country. By bringing attention to the alarming impact of mass incarceration on adolescents, the writer hopes to decriminalize and rehumanize young black males, reduce youth incarceration, and encourage restorative responses and trauma informed treatment for black youth involved in the justice system.

### Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the continued support and guidance of my advisor, Barbara Schechter, M.A., Ph.D., who has continually encouraged me to pursue my passion for social justice and advocacy for youth, as well as my field advisor at New York University and second reader, Kirk James, MSW, DSW, for his unmatched wisdom and patience as I learn to navigate my role in this work. This thesis is the product of years of conversations, interactions and support from the many incredible colleagues, peers, coworkers and friends who have challenged me to think more critically about this work and taught me to care more deeply about the people who are most impacted. They encourage me daily to never stop believing that a more equitable world is possible. I especially want to thank my sister, for the countless ways she has supported me, including endless hours of unofficial supervision as we grew to understand these issues together. Most importantly, I want to acknowledge the many clients I have worked with, who, as experts of their own stories have contributed greatly to my understanding of these issues. I am grateful for the privilege of being able to share spaces with them, hear their stories and be part of their lives.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Over the last three decades, policy changes in schools and the justice system have resulted in an expansion of incarceration that disproportionately impacted black communities. This led to further oppression, marginalization and trauma that continue to impact black families today. The current justice system does little to rehabilitate those who are detained or incarcerated and leaves individuals, families and communities who have faced historic and systemic oppression more traumatized and impoverished. For youth, we understand the risks of becoming involved in the justice system to include disruption to education, perpetuation of mental illness, decreased options for future employment and increased likelihood of recidivism. However, little has been done to understand the impact of incarceration on adolescent development and identity development, particularly as it relates to mass incarceration and trauma. The goal of this paper is to understand the dangers of incarceration during adolescence and how mass incarceration has led to narratives that create a cycle of criminalizing black boys.

Section II of this paper will address the societal causes of youth incarceration by discussing the impact of mass incarceration and the role it has had in creating an overrepresentation of black people behind bars. We will start with a brief history on mass incarceration, and then consider the agenda of the War on Drugs, with focused attention on how it changed school policies and created the school-to-prison pipeline. These changes ultimately influenced social and political attitudes about black youth and the treatment of black youth throughout the country. It became the catalyst for increased incarceration of black boys and contributed to mass incarceration.

Section III of this paper will begin by identifying and discussing the problem of youth incarceration. We will explore the impact of incarceration on youth, with particular focus on

young men of color, who are disproportionately represented in jails and prisons in the United States. We will take a deeper look at how identity is formed and then shift our focus to adolescent development and brain development to better understand what adolescents are experiencing during this stage in their lives. Last, this section discusses trauma among justice involved youth, how it relates to development in adolescents and contributes to recidivism.

Section IV brings the previous sections together by addressing the impact of mass incarceration during adolescence and how it has damaged identity in black youth and how young men of color view themselves in the world. The section will begin by discussing the importance of community in identity development and the potential risks of disruptions in black communities as a result of mass incarceration. We will again focus on adolescents and describe how mass incarceration resulted in internalized messages of devaluation and assault. We will conclude the section by describing the harms of such narratives and how they perpetuate trauma and keeps mass incarceration functioning.

## **EXPLANATION OF VIGNETTES**

I have had the privilege of working with many incredible and resilient young people the past six years, many whose lives have been impacted directly and indirectly by mass incarceration. These experiences have led to my commitment to criminal justice reform and to challenging the discriminatory (and racist) nature of systems in the United States. This paper will include reflections on those experiences and conversations, not only as examples of topics under discussion, but also in an effort to humanize and bring the issues to life. These vignettes will appear as indented, single-spaced and italicized bodies of text. Quotations are based on my memory of the situation and pseudonyms have been assigned to protect the identity of the young

men I worked with. I will introduce the individuals who will be mentioned in the vignettes, with a brief history and background.

### **SCHOOL BASED WORK EXPERIENCE**

Many vignettes will be reflections from my work experience with an agency providing mental health services to children and families who had experienced severe trauma, between 2012 and 2015. I worked in a middle school as a classroom counselor, where I provided behavioral, emotional and academic support to students ages 11 to 14, in a 12 to 1, “counseling enriched” special education class.

#### ***Kharmello, 13 years old***

Kharmello was among the first group of students I worked with, and to this day is one of the clients who made the strongest impression on me and the rest of the staff who worked with him. There was just something about Kharmello. He was intelligent, witty, humorous, mature and thoughtful. He had great insight, enjoyed deep conversations and always knew how to put a smile on anyone’s face. Kharmello’s father, who was not involved much in his life, was a pimp and did not want his son to have the same lifestyle. His mother struggled with substance abuse, and other mental health issues and while loved Kharmello and wanted nothing but the best for him, was having a hard time knowing how to care for and support him. Kharmello had a history of being kicked out of schools and would often come to school high, a form of self medication and his way of coping. As much as staff tried to work with and support Kharmello, he eventually was sent to juvenile detention. He had physically threatened another student and stolen a necklace from him in the boy’s bathroom at school. That other student’s parents pressed charges. Kharmello was held in a juvenile detention facility for over a month. He missed his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, and Thanksgiving.

When Kharmello first returned home, he shared with me that he would never go back and this was a turn around for him. He told me he read nine books while he was locked up and had a lot of time to think about his life. He was motivated to change. Less than two weeks after that conversation, after failed attempts to meet the unrealistic expectations set by the school, Kharmello had given up on that change and told me this was who he was now. He eventually AWOLed and as a result, he was transferred to another school. When I visited that school in 2013, I was told he had been in and out of juvenile detention. Later that year, I learned Kharmello's mother passed away while he was incarcerated. A staff at school showed me a newspaper article of Kharmello at his mother's funeral, in an orange jumpsuit, with his hands cuffed and a chain connected to his shackled feet. This was the first time I had any experience with the school to prison pipeline. Kharmello was a young black man, a boy, really. His mistakes were not responded to as mistakes teenagers make, but ones that grown men make, and his history of trauma had little influence on how society reacted to his actions. Kharmello visited the school in 2014 and with a big smile on his face, told me he had passed his driving test and was in high school. By his account, he was doing well. Last I heard, he was spotted at a Black Lives Matter rally in 2016.

I thought about Kharmello long after he left our school, often wondering about his statement, "this is who I am now." Who did we say he was? The team and I told him he was a smart, caring young black man with a great sense of humor and a bright future. We often referred to him as "mini Kevin Hart" because of how often he made us laugh, or "mini Malcolm X" for his insightful comments. However, the rest of his surroundings told him something else and gave him a different narrative. Kharmello is turning 20 in 2018, what future do we, as a society, want for him?

*Isaiah, 13 years old*

Isaiah was another student I worked with in the counseling enriched classroom. He joined our class the second semester of my first year there. Academically, Isaiah had no presenting concerns and was able to start in our program with three of his six periods in mainstream classroom (which were with the rest of the school). He was relatively quiet when he started, with few behavioral issues. To our understanding, Isaiah had a very supportive mother but had little interactions with his biological father. He was incredibly silly but also knew how to debate and argue like no 13 year old I had ever met. We often told Isaiah he would make a great lawyer one day. He was smart and determined and had a great sense of humor, one that drove us crazy when we needed him to take a situation seriously. Most of Isaiah's behaviors were typical for a teenage boy. He was a class clown and a follower in many ways, something he and his mother both identified as an area in need of improvement.

Isaiah often dealt with teachers and staff who did not like him and expected more from him than other boys, even other boys of color. Shortly before he graduated from our program, Isaiah lost two of his cousins, who were brothers, within one month of each other. Both were shot and killed due to gang affiliation. Despite these tragedies, Isaiah was able to meet his goals and move into a full mainstream status, graduating from our program. A couple months after he left our class, I checked in with him and his teachers and found out he had been getting kicked out of class fairly often and his grades were slipping. I wondered what kind of environment our students were graduating into, particularly as black boys. Isaiah had straight A's in our class and was emotionally in a much better place when he finished our program than when he started in our classroom a year earlier. Despite having an incredibly supportive and involved mother, Isaiah seemed to now lack the support and understanding from his teachers. I began to shift my

understanding of what was needed for youth to be successful and started to recognize the depth of discrimination Isaiah would likely face for the rest of his life.

### **REENTRY WORK AND VISITING ADOLESCENTS IN JAIL**

Vignettes will also include reflections of my work in 2017 and 2018 with an agency focused on reentry for 16-24 year old males with involvement in the criminal justice system. Some vignettes will be reflections of my work in jail, where I would visit once a week to introduce our program, provide counseling support and court advocacy for adolescents and young adults. Other reflections are based on my time at the office, where I met with young men in the community, providing support in obtaining their GEDs, attending job readiness workshops and facilitating groups focused on emotional and mental health.

#### ***Damion, 24 years old***

Among the young men I worked with, was Damion, a young black man who enjoyed spoken word and deep meaningful conversations about life, race and psychology. Damion was incredibly insightful and often shared about his past neglect and abandonment when trying to understand his behaviors and current relationships. He and I never talked in depth about his upbringing, but to my understanding he did not know his father and had a difficult relationship with his mother, who lived with severe mental illnesses. This resulted in homelessness at times throughout his life and being cared for by his aunt. Damion's understanding and perspective of life was one that included loss and abandonment, despite a deep longing for love and care.

Damion was also a father, and often shared that his daughter was his reason for living and staying out of jail. He had a difficult relationship with his daughter's mother and was struggling with finding work and housing for most of the time he and I worked together. Damion would often come into my office and discuss the many challenges he was facing that day or week or

month. He was intelligent but felt extremely restricted by ongoing hopelessness and an inability to get to where he wanted to be. While he was deeply aware of how his past trauma impacted him as a young adult, he struggled with believing a better future was possible. Damion often discussed the difficulties of living as a young black man with a criminal background and often expressed desire for change, new experiences and new surroundings. He felt trapped by his past and stuck in a narrative he could not break out of.

***Trey, 17 years old***

I spent a lot less time working with Trey than I would have liked. His situation is one I still think about. I first met Trey in jail. I would see him every week during school hours. He never said too much to me. He was well liked, and I was told he was someone his friends looked up to, especially when he was able to return home from jail.

Four months after meeting Trey, I had the privilege of welcoming him home. It was great to see him smile, and show a completely different side of himself. In the office, Trey was not hard or trying to act hard. He was like any 17-year-old boy, slightly intimidated, a tad shy, but eager to change and start over. I also had the privilege of completing Trey's psychosocial assessment and came to understand that Trey's involvement with the justice system started young. He spent about a year in a juvenile facility between the ages of 12 and 15. I also found out what brought Trey to jail in the first place: punching a security guard at school, who was trying to arrest him for having marijuana. His 90-day sentence in jail ended up becoming a year in jail due to a couple more assault charges while he was incarcerated. Trey was a classic case of getting caught in the system, a system he expressed is "meant to fail you." The more time Trey spent in jail, the more charges he picked up. He was stuck in a cycle.

About a month after Trey returned home, he was rearrested. This time, for murder. I knew few details about his case, but was told he had explained it as self-defense, while he was trying to help a neighbor. It is still unclear what happened and in some ways, the details are not what is important. Trey's story highlights the problem of incarcerating youth and the cause of recidivism and is an example of risk and potential harm of youth incarceration among black adolescents.

## **II. THE SOCIETAL CAUSES AND IMPACT OF MASS INCARCERATION ON ADOLESCENTS**

In this section, we will begin with a very brief history of how racial discrimination and bias has changed in the United States but managed to maintain an agenda of legal discrimination and the dehumanization of black people. A closer look at the War on Drugs helps the reader understand how it eventually led to changes in school policies and resulted in the school to prison pipeline, which has become the lifeline of mass incarceration. The section will conclude by looking at how these policies heightened preexisting social perceptions of black youth and created even more harmful narratives for black adolescent males.

### **LEGAL DISCRIMINATION AND DEHUMANIZATION: SLAVERY, JIM CROW AND MASS INCARCERATION**

...mass incarceration, is a system that locks people not only behind actual bars in actual prisons, but also behind virtual bars and virtual walls -- walls that are invisible to the naked eye but function nearly as effectively as Jim Crow laws once did at locking people of color into a permanent second-class citizenship. The term mass incarceration refers not only to the criminal justice system but also to the larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those labeled criminals both in and out of prison. Once released, former prisoners enter a hidden underworld of legalized discrimination and permanent social exclusion (Alexander, 2010, p. 12-13).

Although discrimination and segregation were deemed illegal many years ago, systemic racism has simply taken on a new look in the United States since the time of Jim Crow laws (Alexander, 2010). The current criminal justice system continues to stigmatize and permanently marginalize individuals based on race (Alexander, 2010). Involvement in the criminal justice

system, particularly conviction of a felony, results in ongoing discrimination in housing and employment, losing the right to vote, losing the right to serve as a jury member, losing educational opportunities, losing access to food stamps and other public benefits (Alexander, 2010). This means an individual who has been labeled a felon, once released from jail or prison, is not only educationally and economically disadvantaged, but is also unable to access services that would assist them in creating new lives when they return home.

The shift from slavery to mass incarceration has been a gradual one. Despite the changes in laws, the view of black men during slavery is reflected in how black men are viewed and treated in 2018. Though we have moved away from ruling black people as  $\frac{3}{5}$  of a human, we continue this form of dehumanization by reducing black men to criminal history, taking away rights and opportunities as we go (Alexander, 2010). Slavery was used to increase supervision and discipline black people who were seen as dangerous and inhumane, much like prisons and jails are used to supervise and control black people today (Alexander, 2010). Though slavery became illegal, segregation and Jim Crow laws continued the narrative that black individuals were “second class citizens” in the 40s and 50s (Alexander, 2010). When segregation was ruled unconstitutional, white communities responded in violence, leading to the death of black men, women and even children. Today, we see mass incarceration as the new form of violence against black people and black communities and the continued narrative of a “second class citizen.”

Despite racist structures and systems in the United States, all throughout history, black people were told they were the source of the problem (Alexander, 2010). The message was that black individuals, families and communities somehow brought this fate upon themselves – for running away, sitting at the wrong counter, being in the wrong neighborhood, living with the wrong family or being part of the wrong community. The burden has always been on black

individuals and black communities for staying in poverty and causing social disorder (Alexander, 2010). That is, black culture and a failure to act right, live right and escape the statistic are to blame for the disproportionate representation of black individuals behind bars. Yet, with what we know about historic and systemic racism, where we find ourselves today is exactly where we were intended to be, continuing the pattern of dehumanizing and criminalizing black bodies.

The unfortunate reality we must face is that racism manifests itself not only in individual attitudes and stereotypes, but also in the basic structure of society...the current system invites observers to imagine that those who are trapped in the system were free to avoid second-class status or permanent banishment from society simply by choosing not to commit crimes. It is far more convenient to image that a majority of young African American men in urban areas freely chose a life of crime than to accept the real possibility that their lives were structured in a way that virtually guaranteed their early admission into a system from which they can never escape (Alexander, 2010, p. 184).

Rather than viewing black communities as victims of crime, incarceration and improper education, Alexander (2010) directs our attention on systems that have created these narratives. The explanation for why so many black men are incarcerated in the United states today is not explained by poverty or lack of resources, rather it is a “new racial caste system” at work (Alexander, 2010). More specifically, Alexander (2010) identifies the drug war as the “new Jim Crow” an explanation for the vast number of black men, and black boys, being stripped from families and thrown into jails and prisons.

### **A LOOK AT THE WAR ON DRUGS**

...the drug war from the outset had little to do with public concern about drugs and much to do with public concern about race (Alexander, 2010, p. 49).

Since slavery, black people have been educationally and economically disadvantaged in the United States. After slavery was abolished and segregation was ruled unconstitutional, employment in the United States took a drastic shift in the 1970s and 80s as a result of deindustrialization, globalization and the advancement of technology (Alexander, 2010). As factories shut down all over the country, black folks suddenly found themselves “trapped in jobless ghettos, desperate for work” (Alexander, 2010, p. 218). As employment opportunities declined among inner-city residents, unemployment rates rose and the incentive to sell drugs rose with it. During this time, media images perpetuated the already existing racial stereotypes of black men and women as crack addicts, crack whores and crack dealers. In 1971, Ronald Reagan declared the “War on Drugs” and financial incentives gave police more reason to engage in this “war” (Alexander, 2010). New mandatory minimum prison sentences and “three strikes” laws, which mandated life sentences for anyone convicted of a third offense, meant accepting plea bargains in order to avoid unreasonably long prison terms for first time offense, low-level drug dealing and possession of crack cocaine (Alexander, 2010, p. 87), even if the person was innocent. The result: black families stripped of fathers, husbands and sons; separated from families and enslaved to the criminal justice system, leaving black communities nearly destroyed.

The War on Drugs did not make even a fraction of the same impact on white communities (Alexander, 2010) and the reason is not because drugs were less prominent in white communities. According to Bigg (2007) and Goode (2013), despite the lack of difference in illicit drug use between black Americans and white Americans, black Americans are nearly ten times more likely to be incarcerated for drug related charges (as cited in Netherland & Hansen, 2016). Similarly, while white youth are found to have higher levels of drug and alcohol abuse

risk than black youth (Ford, Hartman, Hawke & Chapman, 2008), black youth are more likely to face criminal charges. For decades black and brown communities have faced consistent criminalization of drug use, leading to increased incarceration, while white communities have faced decriminalization of drug use and the recognition of substance use as a mental health disorder (Netherland & Hansen, 2016). The criminalization of substance use and abuse disproportionately impacts individuals who come from low income and ethnic minority backgrounds (Bowen & Walton, 2015; Netherland & Hanson, 2016). Despite no difference in rates of substance use, black adults face heavier policing and enforcement of drug laws and are arrested at three times the rate of white adults for possession of marijuana (Bowen & Walton, 2015). According to a report by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2015, of the sentenced prisoners for drug offenses under federal jurisdiction, more than 50% are black, while only 15% are white. Unfortunately, criminalization of drug use and experiences of racial trauma begin well before adulthood. Despite being less likely to use drugs, black youth are more likely to be arrested for drug related offenses than white youth (Franklin, 2016).

### **THE WAR ENTERS THE CLASSROOM: SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE**

According to Advancement Project et al. (2011), the school to prison pipeline is best understood as a set of policies and practices in schools that make it more likely for students to face criminal involvement with the juvenile courts than to attain a quality education (as cited in Mallet, 2016).

The birth of the school to prison pipeline began in the 1980's during a period where the "tough on crime" approach was rampant and there was widespread fear of adolescents as a response to media reports of increased crime among young people (Mallet, 2016). As part of an effort to fight the War on Drugs, the Reagan Administration passed the Drug-Free Schools Act in 1989,

prohibiting drug and alcohol possession with school districts enacting “zero-tolerance” policies that expelled students for any drug or gang-related activity (Mallett, 2016). In the early 1990s, policies like the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 and the Safe Schools Act of 1994 were efforts to create safer school environments in the wake of school shootings. The problem? School shootings were happening predominantly in white communities, yet these policies had the biggest impact on low-income communities that were predominantly made of students of color (Mallett, 2016). Furthermore, Zero tolerance policies meant increased suspensions and expulsions, predominantly impairing the learning of black and brown boys.

A desire for increased surveillance, meant schools added the presence of School Resource Officers, or “SROs,” who were trained police officers assigned to school campuses. SROs search students and subject them to other punitive practices and most commonly occupy underserved and impoverished schools where, again, the majority of the student populations are youth of color. According to Mallett (2016), schools where suspension and expulsion rates increased resulted in decreased academic achievement, decreased school and student body cohesion, increased student misbehavior and likelihood of school dropout and delayed graduation (Mallett, 2016). School dropout often results in increased involvement in behaviors that lead to arrest, especially for young black boys, whose typical adolescent behaviors are criminalized and viewed as suspicious, dangerous and violent.

*My supervisor was in the vice principal’s office with Kharmello. The SROs were there too. My co-counselor and I knew whatever the outcome of that meeting, we may not be seeing Kharmello anymore. The school was trying to get rid of him. They were tired of his behaviors.*

*Another student asked if I could take him for a walk, he needed a break from class. This was standard and something we often did to support the students in our classroom. As we walked, I was receiving messages on my phone about Kharmello’s situation. “They just handcuffed him.” “Keep away from the front.”*

*By this time, we were around the corner from the front office. I tried to walk the student in another direction, but the student heard ruckus and yelling and quickly began walking toward the front of the school.*

*Fuck.*

*Unable to redirect the student, we ended up at the front of the school. Kharmello was in the cop car at this point, with his hands cuffed behind his back. He was crying and screaming because his shoulder was hurting from how he was handcuffed. He was yelling out of the back of the cop car, begging me to tell the officers that his arm was hurting. "Miss Michelle! Please! My shoulder! They fucked up my shoulder! Tell them to take these off! My fucking shoulder hurts! Miss Michelle! Please!"*

*I turned to my supervisor, who was already trying to let the officers know. They told us the situation was no longer in our hands, and that we needed to let them take over. I was repeatedly ordered by the officers to move away from the car and to not engage with my student.*

*The other student was crying. I looked at my supervisor. There was nothing we could do now.*

*I tried to comfort the other student as we walked back into the school, silent.*

*Kharmello was 13 at the time.*

Stories like these are all too common for youth of color, and mistreatment by student resource officers continues to occur today, in 2018. Part of this excessive use of force could be linked to a term coined in the 90's, which portrayed black youth as animalistic and dangerous to society.

### **THE MYTH OF THE TEENAGE SUPERPREDATOR**

In 1995, John J. Dilulio, a political scientist and professor, predicted that the teenage homicide rate would double as a result of increasing crime among youth (Haberman, 2014).

Dilulio coined the term "teenage superpredator" which he described as

a young juvenile criminal who is so impulsive, so remorseless, that he can kill, rape, maim, without giving it a second thought" (Haberman, 2014).

Dilulio described these youth as "fatherless, godless and jobless" and by doing so instilled widespread panic and fear of juveniles in the 1990s. Though Dilulio states he was not describing or targeting a particular race, in a report in 1996, he wrote that nearly half of the superpredators "could be young black males" (Haberman, 2014). Barry Krisberg, a criminologist, explained how race was an essential issue and concern regarding the "teenage superpredator," and the

belief was that the increase of black and Latinx children in society would be followed by increased crime (Haberman, 2014). Krisberg explains, “When you describe another group as godless, you can do anything to them” (Haberman, 2014).

The fear that came with the term “superpredator” had a significant impact on how society viewed, treated and responded to black youth and conveniently fit into the mission of the “War on Drugs.” It helped label black youth as dangers to society, resulting in social support for treating young black males as adults when it came to crime and punishment. This fear also led to changes in policies in the juvenile justice system and in schools, ultimately shifting the focus in schools from education to discipline. Dilulio, however, was wrong in his prediction of crime among youth. It did not double in the 90s, but was actually cut in half and there was no “superpredator” to be found (Haberman, 2014).

It was a myth. And unfortunately it was a myth that some academics jumped on to. The fear over the superpredator led to a tremendous number of laws and policies, that we’re just now recovering from. (Haberman, 2014)

The myth of the teenage superpredator and subsequent policy changes created the school to prison pipeline, which disproportionately impact youth of color and resulted in the drastic increase of incarcerating black boys and young black men. The root of the issue can be traced back to the changes in school policies, which increased suspensions, expulsions and school dropouts. This ultimately led to a shift in the juvenile justice system as well. During the expansion of incarceration between 1985 and 1995, youth of color became the majority of youth incarcerated in the United States (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2013). The detained white youth population increased by only 2%, while the detained minority youth population grew by 76%. According to The Sentencing Project, in 2017, black youth are five times more likely to be

detained or committed than white youth. White youth make up approximately 56% of the youth population in the United States and yet only 32% of incarcerated youth are white (Sentencing Project, April, 2016). Black youth, who make up only 16% of the youth population in the United States, make up 44% of incarcerated youth (Sentencing Project, September 2017). The current system of mass incarceration means 1 in 3 black men born in 2001 can expect to go to prison in their lifetime (Sentencing Project, n.d.). The difference in arrest and detention rates do not reflect a difference in crime rate among white youth and youth of color (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2013). While white youth and youth of color commit several categories of crime at the same rate, youth of color are more likely to be arrested and less likely to have access to good legal representation, programs or services (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2013). Youth of color will also more likely face stereotypes and implicit biases by those involved in their case. For white youth, crimes are often explained as a product of their environment or issues with mental health, while crimes by youth of color are viewed as a result of personal failing and personality flaws (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2013).

The War on Drugs and the myth of the teenage superpredator meant changes in school policies that regulated behaviors through a punitive rather than rehabilitative process, including trying adolescents as adults, expanding severity of sentences and a minimization of rehabilitative alternatives to sentencing (Mallett, 2016). Policy changes in schools meant the presence of metal detectors, SROs, searches and in-school detention, all of which create a prison-like environment in schools, particularly in low-income and inner-city public schools (Mallett, 2016). These environments are not conducive to learning and result in fear and anxiety for children who likely already have negative interactions with police from the community. The policies put in place were intended to increase school safety but resulted in poorer educational outcomes, which

disproportionately impacted youth of color, youth with learning differences, LGBT youth and youth from impoverished communities (Mallett, 2016). It resulted in a school to prison pipeline, sending youth from suspension and expulsion to detention and incarceration. It contributed to mass incarceration and damaged the future of black youth and the health of black communities. These messages and perceptions on black youth fueled biases, impacted how educators and police view and treat adolescent boys of color and became the narratives for young black males. The teenage superpredator, prison-like school environments, suspensions, expulsions and early involvement in the justice system were all internalized in black youth, influencing how they viewed themselves. During this vulnerable developmental stage, these messages became the narrative and single story for young black males.

## **II. THE PROBLEM OF YOUTH INCARCERATION: TRAUMA AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT**

This section will begin by introducing concerns with youth incarceration and will then discuss potential harm of incarcerating youth. An explanation of identity development and adolescent development will set the stage for the rest of the paper as we seek to understand the specific impact of mass incarceration on adolescents. A focus on the particular changes during adolescence, including brain development, help explain this unique developmental stage and the danger of inflicting or perpetuating trauma. A more in depth discussion on trauma as it relates to the juvenile justice system, the impact on the body and mind during adolescence will help the reader understand the risk of recidivism for justice-involved youth.

### **YOUTH INCARCERATION, WHY IS IT A PROBLEM?**

According to a press release by the Prison Policy Initiative in 2018, nearly 53,000 youth are held in facilities as a result of criminal justice involvement every day. While the types of youth detention facilities may vary, most experiences reflect one of incarceration, with 2 out of 3 youth held in the most restrictive facilities and 1 in 10 youth held in adult jails or prisons (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018). In a Justice Policy Institute Report examining the negative impact of youth incarceration, Holman and Ziedenberg (2013) found placement in secure detention facilities only deter a small proportion of youth from further criminal activity. According to Bezruki, Varana, and Hill (1999), 70% of those who were released from detainment would be arrested again within a year (as cited in Holman & Ziedenberg, 2013). Involvement and experience with incarceration is the most significant predictor of recidivism, or rearrest, (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2013) and studies show involvement with the justice system only results in further justice involvement. This is in part due to the punitive rather than rehabilitative approach

of incarceration. Behaviors that lead to involvement in the justice system are often left uncorrected, and youth are not taught prosocial behaviors or how to positively cope with past trauma that likely relates to justice involvement. Golub (1990) found incarcerating youth disrupts engagement with family, as well as school and work, which likely interrupts and delays the aging out process (as cited in Holman & Ziedenberg, 2013). That is, research suggests many youth eventually outgrow delinquent behaviors as they mature, and incarceration hinders this natural process (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2013; Lambie & Randell, 2013; Mallett, 2016). This is especially true for young black males, whose typical adolescent behaviors are often responded to with school suspension and expulsion, police involvement, violence and incarceration. Unlike their white counterparts, whose age and developmental stage are often considered when facing criminal processing, young black males are often viewed as dangerous and are treated as future career criminals. This narrative has plagued black communities for decades and has contributed to the disproportionate and overrepresented presence of young black males in jails and prisons across the United States.

Incarceration interrupts education and makes returning or continuing school extremely difficult. As a result, many youth do not return to school and of the ones that do, many will drop out within a year (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2013). Aizer and Doyle (2013) found juvenile incarceration reduces the chance of graduating high school and increases the likelihood of incarceration later in life. Incarceration may also lead to reduced self-control, increased risk taking behaviors and reduced attentional performance (Meijers, Harte, Meynen, Cuijpers & Scherder, 2018). Meijers et al. (2018) suggest this may lead to more impulsive and risk taking behavior, making it more difficult to avoid contact with the criminal justice system after imprisonment. It also suggests impoverished prison environments may negatively affect

executive functioning, making one's return to society more difficult. For adolescents, this is particularly concerning as the part of the brain responsible for executive functioning is not fully developed, thus making adolescents more likely to engage in behaviors that will lead to further involvement with the justice system and likely result in future incarceration.

## **IDENTITY AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT**

There are numerous risks for those who come into contact with the justice system and even more so for those who are incarcerated. These risks are especially concerning when considering the emotional and mental disruption to development among youth, and ways in which youth internalize messages regarding self worth and identity. According to Tatum (1997), the messages children receive have a significant impact on self-perception and identity. We come to understand ourselves based on what we are told and on what is reflected back to us by those around us. These messages can come from family, the community and society at large, including media. As children and adolescents grow and engage with the world, messages are internalized and influence who they believe themselves to be. Positive messages help create positive self-perception while negative messages will lead to negative self-perception. Tatum (1997) expresses the dangers of negative images perpetuating racism and marginalization that inevitably exist in the lives of children of color. While negative messages are inevitable in life, they do not necessarily lead to negative self-perceptions. Messages that support growth and creativity can encourage children to see the strength and power within themselves. A range of messages is required to create rich narratives that lead to a healthy sense of self. For many children of color, the ongoing negative messages are not met with positive messages that would otherwise support the creation of a strong sense of self. The stories we hear and messages we receive from those around us follow us through life. As we grow, we continue to develop a sense of self that is a

reflection of what we hear from the world around us. Negative perceptions of the self can be rejected or affirmed based on what we hear throughout adolescence and young adulthood. However, for many young black men, the messages of reduced self-worth and diminished value in society reinforce negative images of the self. As I continued my studies, I learned why these narratives exist and how they contribute to the incarceration of black youth and perpetuate mass incarceration.

During adolescence, we continue to form our sense of self as identity is crystallized. Messages we receive as adolescents are essential to who we become as adults. Across cultures, adolescence is a time when we long for new experiences, engage in risk taking and sensation seeking behaviors and begin to shift in our roles within the family and among peers. During adolescence we begin to take on responsibilities, start to understand our role in society and gain a sense of purpose and meaning. The role of adults is to instill purpose, promote healthy risk taking behaviors, encourage growth and help adolescents feel wanted and responsible (B. Mundy, personal communication, February 1, 2017). Adolescence is a period of physical, psychological and cognitive growth and adults can help by guiding youth during this confusing time.

Adolescents are not only growing in their identity and sense of self, they are also growing in their brains. The parts of the brain that are used for abstract thought (prefrontal cortex), emotion regulation (hippocampus) and responding to threats (amygdala) are not fully developed in adolescence (King & Alig, 2017). This translates to adolescents lacking the cognitive ability to manage impulses or think of long-term consequences when making decisions. Instead, adolescents are more likely to make decisions impulsively, based on expected rewards and emotional responses, without considering long-term outcomes (King & Alig, 2017). Therefore,

in addition to the existential confusion of figuring out who they are, adolescents lack the cognitive ability to think, plan and act as responsibly as adults wish. Cognitive development between the age of 11 and 14 is dominated by concrete thinking and understanding the world as it is, in the present (King & Alig, 2017). There is often little future planning during this developmental stage. Between the ages of 15 and 17, abstract thinking begins and connections between the present and the future begin. During this time, intellectual curiosity develops and youth are in a period of experimentation and idealistic thinking (King & Alig, 2017). Adult thinking begins to develop between the ages of 18 and 22, where future goals begin to become more clearly and realistically defined. This explains behaviors during adolescence less as behavioral *choices* and more as cognitively limited *impulses*, which are developmentally appropriate. In order to encourage healthy identity development, adolescents need support and guidance in understanding themselves, not just the consequences of their actions. Punishment for behaviors during this time will not necessarily eliminate or modify the behavior. As individuals move out of this developmental stage, impulsive behaviors tend to decrease as the brain develops, and engagement in risky behaviors generally decreases as well.

Adolescence is a difficult time of discovering oneself and finding one's place in the world. Struggles with impulse control and anger management are exacerbated when trauma is present, making engagement in risky behaviors even more likely. For black youth, this often results in criminal justice involvement, which only perpetuates risky behaviors due to the lack of or limited rehabilitative services during and after their time of incarceration. The result is often further trauma and future incarceration. This is especially problematic as several studies show youth who are involved in the criminal justice system have experienced one or more traumatic

events in their lifetime, making the experience of criminal justice involvement even more damaging.

### **TRAUMA AND THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM**

This developmental stage is already identified by more risk taking behaviors, reduced impulse control and a lowered ability to plan for the future. Incarceration may significantly affect the psychological and cognitive development of adolescents, which increases the likelihood of reoffending and causes detrimental effects on the futures of youth. Simply put, incarcerating youth is not corrective and is worsening outcomes for youth and disrupting the natural process of human development. While studies have shown criminal justice involvement for youth impacts educational attainment and future involvement with the criminal justice system, little research has examined the psychological and developmental impact of youth incarceration (Aizer & Doyle, 2013). According to Lambie (2013), developmental and cognitive needs are often left unmet in detention centers, which could impair the emotional, motivational and intellectual health of young people (as cited in Powell, 2014). Their developmental stage makes adolescents especially vulnerable to the risks and harms of incarceration. With the brain still developing, adolescents are highly reactive to their environment and experiences, and Powell (2014) suggests the conflict between development and incarceration during adolescence can have damaging psychological effects on incarcerated youth. It is likely youth experience further trauma and engage in more maladaptive coping skills as a result of incarceration.

Research now shows a prevailing presence of trauma in youth who become involved in the justice system. Abram, Teplin, Charles, Longworth, McClelland and Dulcan (2004), found 92.5% of youth detained in a temporary juvenile detention center in Chicago had experienced at least one trauma in their lifetime. Among those, 84% had experienced more than one trauma and

56.8% had been exposed to six or more traumatic events in their life. Similarly, Becker and Kerig (2011) found 95% of the adolescent boys in their study had at least one adverse experience in their lifetime. The most frequent experiences were community violence, domestic violence and witnessing community violence. Both studies found boys who were detained reported higher rates of PTSD than boys who had not been detained (Abram et al., 2004; Becker & Kerig, 2011). The studies suggest complex trauma may result in youth being more vulnerable and likely to engage in behaviors that lead to involvement with the justice system. Wasserman and McReynolds (2011) found nearly 80% of youth reported lifetime exposure to trauma, with an average of 2.6 exposures. The most frequent exposures were reports of seeing someone get badly hurt or die, being attacked or beaten badly, experiencing forced sex, or being threatened by a weapon (Wasserman & McReynolds, 2011). According to Cruise and Ford (2011), patterns of multiple and possibly repeated traumatic experiences, self-regulatory impairments and both internalizing and externalizing problems are found in justice-involved youth. Failure to assess for PTSD and trauma exposure and the absence of necessary treatment may result in judicial decisions that inevitably fail to consider the impact of traumatic stress on youth involvement in the justice system and rehabilitation of such youth.

The experience of incarceration, paired with the lack of rehabilitative services means trauma does not end when youth enter the justice system. Ashkar & Kenny (2008) found adolescent boys experienced negative feelings and emotions such as shame, guilt, fear, sadness, loneliness, frustration, anger, stress and boredom. The participants in this study also reported repeated victimization during incarceration, a lack of adaptive coping strategies, an abuse of power by youth workers, and a strong sense of interpersonal loss as a result of dislocation and geographical separation from important others (Ashkar & Kenny, 2008). The prison culture of

bullying, substance use and antagonism reinforce behaviors that are antisocial and may lead to reoffending (Ashkar & Kenny, 2008). Mental health problems are often exacerbated as a result of the adverse conditions in juvenile detention facilities. Abram et al. (2004) suggests future research on the re-traumatization or worsening of PTSD symptoms during routine processing when youth are arrested, such as the use of handcuffs, searches, isolation and restraining detainees exhibiting symptoms of PTSD.

Incarceration is often, if not always, a traumatic experience, which is likely to perpetuate maladaptive coping patterns. As a result, incarceration may actually prevent reestablishing a lifestyle that avoids engagement in delinquent behaviors. This is especially true for black boys, who are disproportionately represented in all aspects of the criminal justice system, including arrests, detainment, being charged, being sentenced, transfer to adult court and confinement in secure residential facilities (Alexander, 2010). The juvenile justice system fails to rehabilitate youthful offenders with trauma histories and is perpetuating mass incarceration through each stage of criminal processing. Rather than deterring youth from reoffending, the environment in these various facilities make traumatized youth vulnerable to re-traumatization, and without proper intervention and treatment, recidivism is almost guaranteed.

*We walked to one of the housing areas that was a little further. I felt like every breath I took was a sigh. My heart still feels heavy when I think about it.*

*Trey was being housed alone. Behaviors. And the fact that he was just released home and was now back to jail, and for a murder charge. There was an explanation, self-defense. It was unclear. But that wasn't my focus.*

*We walked in, and saw him. Trey was standing in the day room, hunched over and dragging his feet as he walked to the window.*

*"Hey..." I said, as I felt the sadness in his eyes. All the joy I saw when he came home was no longer there. He looked so defeated.*

*We walked into the day room. We're not allowed to hug so I shook his hand and held onto it a little longer than usual.*

*We both sighed.*

*We all sat down together. A lot was said without words. Our faces carried our emotions and thoughts more than we knew how to speak them.*

*Small talk. And what you'd expect in a conversation under those circumstances. He was quiet. He expressed disappointment, and then quickly shifted and told me he was fine and everything was okay.*

*They called Trey to go to school. So we said we would walk out with him.*

*He walked to the front, stood shoulder width apart and began putting latex gloves on.*

*What's going on? I looked at the social worker I was with, confused.*

*They cuffed his hands. Then they covered his cuffed hands with this hard shell that enclosed his hands.*

*Seriously?*

*Connected to his enclosed hands was a long chain that led to the cuffs they put around his ankles. Shackles.*

*I took a deep breath, and did all I could not to react. Is this really necessary?*

*The CO held onto him and the chain connected to him as we walked out together, one small step at a time.*

*Trey was 17, I thought to myself. 17.*

## **WHAT TRAUMA DOES TO THE BODY AND MIND**

Trauma has a profound effect on the brain and how we process information. According to van der Kolk (2014), it can determine how we organize and understand our lives and results in a “shutting down” of brain areas that help us register and process emotions that are needed to build self-awareness and a sense of self. Many individuals who have experienced trauma no longer have a sense of purpose and lose touch with themselves and their inner reality (van der Kolk, 2014). The presence of trauma deeply impacts our self-worth. This is especially damaging during adolescence, a time defined by self-doubt, struggles with identity and efforts to build a strong sense of self. Trauma can leave youth with low self-concepts, poor self-esteem and identity confusion (Dino & King, 2017), making typical adolescent development even more difficult. Adolescents also feel shame and guilt as a result of their trauma, and experience impaired ability to form or maintain satisfactory relationships with peers (Dino & King, 2017). The absence of strong peer relationships can lead to isolation and feeling lost and alone during a time that is confusing and difficult to manage. Lacking support and the capacity to manage intense emotions and volatile emotional disturbances, many youth engage in self-harm behaviors, substance abuse

or criminal activity (Dino & King, 2017). While maladaptive, these behaviors may be an attempt to cope, and are sought to feel alive, in control, or connected to others. With proper and consistent intervention, some youth are able to find support, learn healthy coping skills and begin to build a positive sense of self. By doing so, these adolescents are able to move toward adulthood with knowledge on how to manage and lessen the impact of traumatic experiences. However, for many youth of color, especially young black males, these opportunities are intercepted by involvement with law enforcement and the justice system. Behaviors are not viewed as needing interventions but needing punishment, as youth of color are viewed as dangerous and having character flaws. For young black males, the response is not empathy or support, but is incarceration.

Trauma can also taint our ability to experience new encounters or events. This is because it affects our imagination, the part of us that provides opportunities to envision a desired future and the possibility for new and different experiences (van der Kolk, 2014). Imagination is the foundation for our hopes and dreams and trauma makes dreaming and hoping difficult, and ultimately dampens who we think we are and limits who we imagine we can be. This is especially problematic during adolescence, where identity formation is at its peak. Many young black men I worked with described their futures as hopeless, often stating, “this is just the way it is” and expressing little hope of things improving. Many had experienced trauma in the form of neglect or abuse, and almost every young man experienced community violence and racial bias in their day-to-day lives. There were numerous stories of discrimination in police encounters and being treated differently because of their appearance. This is a common experience for young black men and one that can lead to hypervigilance and fear of rearrest, police brutality and even

death by police. These fears make picturing a brighter future that much more difficult, and creating a new life after release extremely challenging, especially for adolescents.

Trauma can also push the amygdala into overdrive, leading people to feel agitated and aroused (van der Kolk, 2014). At the same time, the areas of the brain that enables us to observe a situation, anticipate what will happen next and make a conscious decision on how to act, are diminished. This combination will make rational decision making difficult and resisting acting on impulse almost impossible. As we already know, these things are difficult during adolescence due to an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex. Youth who have experienced trauma have difficulty regulating their mood and emotions, and often struggle to identify or describe how they are feeling (Dino & King, 2017). Mood regulation is typically difficult during adolescence; however, experiences with trauma may further hinder one's ability to develop necessary coping skills to manage emotions. Maladaptive coping skills can include dissociation, where youth experience detachment or depersonalization during a time where they developmentally crave connection to others. Instead of creating connections that support and guide them, trauma can leave youth fearful of attachment in an unsafe and uncertain world. This may lead to social isolation and difficulty relating to and empathizing with others, which will impact attachment later in adulthood (Dino & King, 2017). It may also explain why some youth have difficulty with remorse, something that often appeared in my work. Decreased empathy, along with cognitive limitations, such as, decreased impulse control and ability to consider long-term outcomes, may mean engagement in self-destructive behavior and aggression toward others.

It is unclear how trauma during adolescence impacts the development of this area in the brain. However, what we do know is exposure to trauma disrupts healthy development in youth and adolescents who have experienced trauma have a much higher risk for emotional and

behavioral problems (Dino & King, 2017). For young black males this will most likely lead to involvement in the justice system, not only as a result of their behavioral choices, but also due to biases in the criminal justice system.

#### **IV. THE RESULT: A CYCLE OF CRIMINALIZING BLACK BOYS**

This section will bring together the war on drugs, the school to prison pipeline, the risks of incarceration and trauma, adolescent development and identity, in order to better understand how mass incarceration has impacted black communities and influenced identity development in black children. The discussion on adolescent development will help the reader understand the severity of harm done to adolescents who internalize messages, such as “the teenage superpredator,” and how mass incarceration has created narratives of devaluing and dehumanizing black boys. The section will conclude by describing the dangers of narratives that continue to criminalize black boys, resulting in a cycle of incarceration and a continuation of mass incarceration.

#### **DISRUPTION AND EROSION OF BLACK COMMUNITIES**

As we continue to explore the impact of incarceration, we find that the obstacles faced by formerly incarcerated individuals are not limited to finding housing or jobs. The War on Drugs resulted in disruption to black families by removing and traumatizing fathers, husbands and sons. Many black families became single parent households, with single income and the burden of having a loved one behind bars. This emotional and financial burden has had a significant impact on black youth, in the support they receive and the narratives they grow up with. These narratives conveniently perpetuate the cycle of incarceration through generational trauma and involvement in the justice system.

Hardy and Laszloffy (2005) define community as “a place, physical but mostly metaphysical, of rootedness and belonging, where one feels a sense of connection and purpose” (p. 27). Establishing and maintaining a strong sense of community is necessary in order to feel safe, secure and connected to others (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005). According to Hardy and

Laszloffy (2005) there are three different levels of community, and each level experiences different forms of disruption:

- (1) Primary communities consist of family, and disruptions are in the form of abuse, neglect, separation or divorce, or death.
- (2) Extended communities consist of neighborhoods, schools, churches, synagogues, temples, civic groups and community centers. Disruptions in extended communities are in the form of lack of access to economic resources, outcast status, bullying, politics or natural disasters.
- (3) Cultural communities consist of communities that adolescents have membership in, based on: race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability, and religion. Disruptions in cultural communities are in the form of racism, homophobia, sexism, classism, anti-semitism, and other ism's.

Mass incarceration has contributed to all levels of disruption in black communities. Families have experienced separation and loss as a result of incarceration and the over-policing of black communities has at times resulted in death by police. Abuse and neglect, while often an individual or family issue, may also be influenced by generations of systemic abuse and structural neglect, directly impacting families by restricting access to resources. This includes limiting access to housing, education and employment. Mass incarceration results in ongoing racial trauma, resulting in complex stress that is likely connected to the abuse and neglect seen in families, as well as health issues later in life, which may result in early death. Black neighborhoods have been left with limited economic opportunities and have experienced generations of political and social marginalization as a result.

The criminalization and demonization of black men has turned the black community against itself, unraveling community and family relationships decimating networks of mutual support, and intensifying the shame and self-hate experienced by the current pariah caste (Alexander, 2010, p. 17).

During my time at the reentry program, I heard many young black men express a lack of trust in others and an expectation that others cannot be depended on for help. When asked about friendships the young men often shared they did not have friends, had very few friends or had “associates.” This erosion of social support leaves young men with feelings of severe isolation, distrust and alienation (Alexander, 2010). The lack of support from one’s community is less of a side effect and more of an intended consequence of mass incarceration and nearly ensures recidivism. Alexander (2010) explains,

As relationships between family and friends become strained or false, not only are people’s understandings of one another diminished, but, because people are social, they themselves are diminished as well (p. 169).

This is how mass incarceration destroys black communities. Shared experiences and any desire to repair one’s community are met with fear, mistrust and shame. Communities are then unable to provide the necessary support, even if young men are able to escape incarceration or when they return home.

Mass incarceration thus perpetuates and deepens pre-existing patterns of racial segregation and isolation, not just by removing people of color from society and putting them in prisons, but by dumping them back into ghettos upon their release. (Alexander, 2010, p. 196).

Individuals in black communities often believe systemic violence against their community is normal and one that cannot be escaped or changed. Put another way, mass incarceration has resulted in black communities sharing an identity of being “broken, valueless and irreparable,” making any healing and social or political activism in order to empower the community, nearly impossible (Alexander, 2010, p. 169).

The disruption to black families and erosion of black communities results in a shaky foundation for healthy development in black children. Feelings of safety, security, connectedness, and hope are foundations for developing a strong sense of self in youth, and allow for creativity as youth explore their identity. Specifically, during adolescence youth depend on these communities for a “sense of safety, security, and meaningful relatedness with others” (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005, p. 63). This provides emotional, psychological and spiritual support and contributes to a strong sense of self and creates room for positive identity development. Mass incarceration has damaged and weakened black communities, thereby greatly diminishing the very source of support for healthy development in black children.

### **COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY IN CHILDREN**

Across cultures and backgrounds, healthy development of a child requires interactions with others. All developmental theories about early childhood tell us humans are influenced and shaped by others from birth. Identities are not formed separate from surroundings and how children come to understand themselves is heavily influenced by their environments. According to the Relational model, humans are motivated and driven by interactions with others and have an innate desire to connect with others (Mitchell, 1988). These experiences help define who we are as individuals and shape our understanding of ourselves in positive and negative ways. The Developmental-interaction approach states that individuals can only develop through the

interactive and inseparable relationship with the environment in which the individual exists (Franklin & Biber, 1977). As such, the families and communities that surround children are essential in this process. Community is needed to learn who we are and where we belong in order to begin forming our identities (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005). Through community, youth grow in values, solidify purpose and find support as they maneuver through a complicated developmental stage filled with questions (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005) along with ongoing physical, cognitive and emotional changes. Community provides comfort and acceptance and can foster resiliency by providing “a buffer against the trials and tribulations of life” (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005, p. 64). Adolescents can use that resilience to resist the inevitable barriers and obstacles they will face, especially young black males.

The disruption of community in the lives of adolescents robs them of the security, connectedness, acceptance, and identity that they desperately need. When their sense of community is disrupted, something basic to their humanity is deeply wounded (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005, p. 64).

You may recall one of the ways trauma affects our minds is by impairing our imagination and ability to envision new experiences. The ongoing and widespread disruption to black communities caused by mass incarceration can also “assault one's capacity to have a future orientation” (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005, p. 65). That is,

Adolescents who suffer from disruptions of their sense of community also experience the most deadly consequence of all—a loss of hope... Community provides adolescents with a sense of their past as well as a vision for their future (p. 65).

In this sense, disruption of black communities can explain some of the difficulties black youth face as they seek to understand themselves and imagine a positive and successful future. This

diminishes the ability to create positive narratives that would otherwise help reject the racist and devaluing narratives black youth often receive from the world.

### **THE MESSAGE TO BLACK ADOLESCENT BOYS**

Children observe patterns every day and with each experience, children internalize messages about themselves and others. For young black males, the internalized message is often that they are “bad” or “unworthy” (Hardy, 2013). The “teenage super predator” was a direct attack on the identity of black adolescent males, as it shifted how society viewed black adolescent boys, which inevitably impacted how black adolescent boys viewed themselves. As we know, adolescence is a critical time for identity development and setting the foundation for a strong sense of self as we enter adulthood. As we age, we curate this sense of self, secure our interests and passions and begin to envision the person we believe we can be and the future we believe we can have. Throughout this process, how the world responds and reacts to us help determine how we see ourselves. A devaluing message based on a prominent aspect of one’s identity, such as ethnicity or race, is difficult to change once internalized. A mother of an incarcerated teenager explains how people of color receive a lifetime of messages that shame and reject who they are, resulting in a lack self respect, self esteem and self worth (Alexander, 2010, p. 168). She expresses how this kind of branding results in extreme self-hate, as people of color are programmed to believe there is something wrong with them.

How black youth are treated inevitably influences how they see themselves and will become a guide for what to expect from the world. Based on what we have discussed so far, that is not much. At a young age, black children are warned they will experience discrimination and mistreatment, simply because they look different. As black children get older, they begin to

experience and understand how the world sees them, and the reality that they will have to shift and modify their behaviors in order to be acceptable or exceptional.

*As we walked out of the vice principal's office I could tell Isaiah was upset and I knew he could tell I was too. Under other circumstances, I would have done a better job hiding my feelings, but I felt it was important for him to know that his frustration was valid and that I stood with him.*

*We approached the classroom and sat down outside. I told him how proud I was, that he kept his composure and acted in a respectful way, despite how uncomfortable and upsetting the meeting was. I pointed out how much he had grown in the time I had known him.*

*We continued to sit outside, disappointed. I let Isaiah talk. He shared his belief that the Vice Principal did not like him and that she was being unfair. He compared his 3-day suspension for throwing a piece of tan bark into a classroom, to the 1-day suspension of a white female student in our class who punched two staff and kicked another. I asked him why he thought he was being treated differently.*

*"Because I'm a black boy, and she's a white girl."*

*I sat for a moment in silence, and then nodded in agreement. Disappointed I didn't have a better response.*

*I couldn't deny it. I had seen it happen more than once. I agreed with him, validating the unfairness. We talked about what it meant for him, being a young black man, living in a society that treats black boys differently, unfairly. I expressed to him that his actions would be assessed differently, more harshly, and that he had a responsibility to be more mindful of his behaviors.*

*It was unfair, but I didn't know what else to tell him. I had to be honest, no matter how defeating it felt to put this responsibility on a 13-year old boy. I told Isaiah it shouldn't be this way, but that he needed to prove people wrong, and show them who we (his support staff) knew he was and could be.*

*Isaiah nodded silently and we returned to class together.*

Differential treatment, perceived discrimination and feelings of isolation, rejection and demonization are part of the messages black children receive. Black children are expected to manage behaviors even when those behaviors are developmentally appropriate. Other children, especially white children, are able to misbehave, act out or make mistakes with significantly fewer and less intense consequences. Black children, however, are to act in ways that even adults are not always capable of, and when they fail to do so are labeled bad, problematic or dangerous. Coates (2015), warns his son of the unfair reality that he must be "twice as good" as other children in order to protect his future and his life (p. 91).

But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you. And you must be responsible for the bodies of the powerful - the policeman who cracks you with a nightstick will quickly find his excuse in your furtive movements. (Coates, 2015, p. 71)

Black children are expected to create the narratives they do not receive from the world and must prove to others they are not a threat. Failures to meet such expectations result in shame, rejection, and the potential for harm through incarceration or police brutality. Most black adolescent boys are well aware they face a lifetime of racial discrimination, as they watch family members targeted by a racist system. Black boys grow up understanding any chance of avoiding justice involvement depends solely on their ability to escape the system through perfect behavior and being the exception. At the time same, black youth are inundated with devaluing narratives, making it a constant struggle to build a positive identity. These incessant messages can take a toll on the value and self worth of adolescents. In a poem Damion wrote and performed at an art showcase, he shared,

*The teachers told me I would never be shit.  
The police told me I would never be shit.  
My parents used to say that I would never be shit,  
So in the back of my mind I think I'm not gon' be shit.*

This is an example of what Adichie (2009) calls “a single story” or stereotypes, as the only narrative one hears about oneself. Adichie (2009) explains the danger of these single stories, and how they limit individuals and can hinder the belief that anything different is possible.

Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become...the single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only

story... stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity (Ngozi Adichie, 2009).

So what has the single story been for young black adolescent males? What has been the narrative? Many black adolescent males are told they will “amount to nothing” or will eventually end up in jail (Alexander, 2010, p. 165). These messages are a “not-so-subtle suggestion that a shameful defect lies deep within them” (Alexander, 2010, p. 165) and perhaps a future behind bars is destined, especially for those who have experience with family members being incarcerated. Adolescents are especially sensitive to these messages and begin to live out the very narratives they so desperately want to reject. These narratives are difficult to reject and often continue into adulthood.

*It was my last day of field placement. I was in the kitchen, reminding the clients that I would not be returning to the office next week and thanking them for the privilege of being able to work with them this year. One of the clients gave me a hug and thanked me for working with them, expressing his appreciation for our many interactions. He asked what I was planning to do next and I shared my desire to work with youth.*

*“Oh that’s good. Get ‘em early. You don’t need to be working with us jail n\*\*\*\*s.” He and the other young man laughed.*

*My face conveyed disapproval and disagreement.*

*He laughed, “no for real! We’re just a bunch of jail n\*\*\*\*s!”*

*“I don’t see you as that!” I explained, as he and the other young man continue to laugh.*

*“No I know,” he quickly responded, “but you know, that’s how people see us!”*

*“I just don’t think you’re the sum of your mistakes, or mistake. And a lot of people make the same mistake and don’t have the same consequences.”*

*He and the other young man both stop laughing. “Oh shit. That’s real... That’s so real!” I continued, “And in the time I’ve worked with you, I’ve seen all the other aspects of who you are, your identity, you know?”*

*The clients agreed and together we reflected on the many conversations about food and music, as we continued to talk about identity.*

*“But you know some people really see us like that. Like they really just see us a jail n\*\*\*\*! And that be making me want to act like that. Like if that’s all you see me as, then I guess that’s all I’ll ever be. So I just really be acting that way.”*

**THE NARRATIVE OF THE YOUNG BLACK CRIMINAL**

“The process of marking black youth *as* black criminals is essential to the functioning of mass incarceration as a racial caste system. For the system to succeed... black people must be labeled criminals before they are formally subject to control... Thus black youth must be made – labeled – criminals. This process of being made a criminal is, to a large extent, the process of ‘becoming black.’” (Alexander, 2010, p. 200)

Criminalizing black youth is how mass incarceration is able to remain functioning (Alexander, 2010). Internalized fears of young black men have been continually reinforced by media and the justice system, have not only validated fears but also justified how young black men have been treated for centuries. They created the narrative of the young black criminal and in turn sustained mass incarceration in the United States. They start with demonizing black boys by punishing age appropriate behaviors in school. They continue by dehumanizing black boys through justice involvement and incarceration. The result is an ongoing criminalization of black boys, because continuing the cycle of dehumanizing and demonizing becomes much easier once someone is incarcerated and labeled as a criminal. This narrative contributes to the inevitable cycle of incarceration and criminal justice involvement for black youth. It is critical to understand these narratives were not formed by accident. Instead, this is a product of ensuring recidivism of black youth and mass incarceration writing the future of young black men as one inevitably influenced by incarceration and permanent marginalization. Remember, the same behavior or crime would not yield the same result for a white adolescent.

For black youth, the experience of being ‘made black’ often begins with the first police stop, interrogation, search or arrest. The experience carries social meaning – *this is what it means to be black* (Alexander, 2010, p. 199).

These narratives push young black males on a path of criminal involvement and ensure a permanent label of “second class citizen” (Alexander, 2010). Mass incarceration, the war on drugs, the school to prison pipeline and myths of black adolescent boys being erratic and uncontrollable make it so the very identity of being black is linked to incarceration. It has not only impacted black adolescent boys through personal imprisonment, but also through watching family members be incarcerated or killed by police. Meeting other black youth with similar stories can internalize the message that being black means being involved, directly or indirectly, with the criminal justice system (Henning, 2017). The disproportionate impact of mass incarceration on black families internalizes the belief that these are not struggles white families face. This common belief fails to acknowledge the fact that differences in incarceration are not due to less crime in white communities, but due to systems designed to target black communities, especially black adolescent males. Rather than viewing these narratives as a personal failure or community flaw, it is time we turn our attention to the real problem, the racist systems and agenda of mass incarceration.

## **V. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER EXPLORATION**

All service systems for youth encounter young people of color who can be challenging to treat, reach, and teach. Our difficulty in meeting their needs is not just because of greater “pathology” or “resistance” as some assert. Rather, we fail to appreciate the ways in which race is entangled with their suffering (Hardy, 2013, p. 24).

The goal of this paper is to challenge how we view incarcerated youth, particularly black adolescent boys. The call is to move away from holding black adolescents, families and communities solely responsible for the overrepresentation of black individuals in the justice system. Instead, we must shift the attention to systems, policies and political agendas that have intentionally caused this disproportion, and critically analyze the impact of mass incarceration on youth. From slavery to mass incarceration, the narrative for black men in the United States has always included devaluing and dehumanization. There has been a culture of brutality, both physical and emotional, that seeks to disrupt black communities and in doing so, destroy the future of young black boys. Mass incarceration tears down individuals, tears apart families and tears up communities and has results in ongoing trauma in black families and black communities, which impact the foundation of identity development and impair the healthy development of black children. It diminishes a sense of self worth and quenches creativity in young black males by impeding development, damaging identity and perpetuating trauma through incarceration, without a plan to repair or restore. The policies that have most deeply impacted communities of color were intended to continue the dehumanization and devaluing of black lives. Ongoing marginalization and oppression have profound emotional and psychological effects on adolescents, resulting in trauma and damaged self worth. This creates wounds that are difficult to heal from and are likely to follow youth into adulthood.

There are next steps and ways to address the issues discussed here. Many fearless individuals, most whom are black, have dedicated their careers and lives to creating change, in hopes of a better future for black youth. We must start by identifying the problem and acknowledging the deliberate racism behind the changes in youth incarceration. We must also acknowledge the unjust treatment of black youth and begin to re-humanize black adolescent males by viewing and treating them as children and youth, rather than adults or criminals. We must also find ways to support black youth by providing new experiences, redefining black culture and bringing creativity and imagination back into the lives of black youth (L. Owens, personal communication, July 26, 2018). We externalize and counteract devaluation (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005) by continuing to create counternarratives and provide positive and empowering stories of black youth to black youth. We must demand policy changes that would restore the health of black communities and provide support to black families. Above all else, we must challenge the systems that perpetuate racist agendas and target black youth as the source for continuing mass incarceration.

There were several other factors this thesis did not explore, including the role of mental health, the war on poverty, differences in class, sex, gender identity and educational segregation. This thesis also did not include other issues within the justice system, including individuals who are falsely convicted, the damage of solitary confinement and the criminalization of the poor with excessive bail. Furthermore, while this paper focused on black adolescent males, it is important to note black adolescent females are also at risk, especially during a time when the population of incarcerated women is increasing at a faster rate than men. These issues are not less important but were beyond the scope of this paper. The reader is encouraged to explore these

topics further and utilize the “Recommended Readings and Resources” section of the reference page to continue understanding these issues.

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