The New York Times

February 18, 2013

Prison and the Poverty Trap

By JOHN TIERNEY

WASHINGTON — Why are so many American families trapped in poverty? Of all the explanations offered by Washington's politicians and economists, one seems particularly obvious in the low-income neighborhoods near the Capitol: because there are so many parents like Carl Harris and Charlene Hamilton.

For most of their daughters' childhood, Mr. Harris didn't come close to making the minimum wage. His most lucrative job, as a crack dealer, ended at the age of 24, when he left Washington to serve two decades in prison, leaving his wife to raise their two young girls while trying to hold their long-distance marriage together.

His $1.15-per-hour prison wages didn't even cover the bills for the phone calls and marathon bus trips to visit him. Struggling to pay rent and buy food, Ms. Hamilton ended up homeless a couple of times.

"Basically, I was locked up with him," she said. "My mind was locked up. My life was locked up. Our daughters grew up without their father."

The shift to tougher penal policies three decades ago was originally credited with helping people in poor neighborhoods by reducing crime. But now that America's incarceration rate has risen to be the world's highest, many social scientists find the social benefits to be far outweighed by the costs to those communities.

"Prison has become the new poverty trap," said Bruce Western, a Harvard sociologist. "It has become a routine event for poor African-American men and their families, creating an enduring disadvantage at the very bottom of American society."

Among African-Americans who have grown up during the era of mass incarceration, one in four has had a parent locked up at some point during childhood. For black men in their 20s and early 30s without a high school diploma, the incarceration rate is so high — nearly 40 percent nationwide — that they're more likely to be behind bars than to have a job.

No one denies that some people belong in prison. Mr. Harris, now 47, and his wife, 45, agree that in his early 20s he deserved to be there. But they don't see what good was accomplished

by keeping him there for two decades, and neither do most of the researchers who have been analyzing the prison boom.

The number of Americans in state and federal prisons has quintupled since 1980, and a major reason is that prisoners serve longer terms than before. They remain inmates into middle age and old age, well beyond the peak age for crime, which is in the late teenage years — just when Mr. Harris first got into trouble.

'I Just Lost My Cool'

After dropping out of high school, Mr. Harris ended up working at a carwash and envying the imports driven by drug dealers. One day in 1983, at the age of 18, while walking with his girlfriend on a sidewalk in Washington where drugs were being sold, he watched a high-level dealer pull up in a Mercedes-Benz and demand money from an underling.

"This dealer was draped down in jewelry and a nice outfit," Mr. Harris recalled in an interview in the Woodridge neighborhood of northeast Washington, where he and his wife now live. "The female with him was draped down, too, gold and everything, dressed real good.

"I'm watching the way he carries himself, and I'm standing there looking like Raggedy Ann. My girl's looking like Raggedy Ann. I said to myself, 'That's what I want to do.' "

Within two years, he was convicted of illegal gun possession, an occupational hazard of his street business selling PCP and cocaine. He went to Lorton, the local prison, in 1985, shortly after he and Ms. Hamilton had their first daughter. He kept up his drug dealing while in prison — "It was just as easy to sell inside as outside" — and returned to the streets for the heyday of the crack market in the late 1980s.

The Washington police never managed to catch him with the cocaine he was importing by the kilo from New York, but they arrested him for assaulting people at a crack den. He says he went into the apartment, in the Shaw neighborhood, to retrieve $4,000 worth of crack stolen by one of his customers, and discovered it was already being smoked by a dozen people in the room.

"I just lost my cool," he said. "I grabbed a lamp and chair lying around there and started smacking people. Nobody was hospitalized, but I broke someone's arm and cut another one in the leg."

An assault like that would have landed Mr. Harris behind bars in many countries, but not for nearly so long. Prisoners serve significantly more time in the United States than in most

industrialized countries. Sentences for drug-related offenses and other crimes have gotten stiffer in recent decades, and prosecutors have become more aggressive in seeking longer terms — as Mr. Harris discovered when he saw the multiple charges against him.

For injuring two people, Mr. Harris was convicted on two counts of assault, each carrying a minimum three-year sentence. But he received a much stiffer sentence, of 15 to 45 years, on a charge of armed burglary at the crack den.

"The cops knew I was selling but couldn't prove it, so they made up the burglary charge instead," Mr. Harris contended. He still considers the burglary charge unfair, insisting that he neither broke into the crack den nor took anything, but he also acknowledges that long prison terms were a risk for any American selling drugs: "I knew other dealers who got life without parole."

As it was, at the age of 24 he was facing prison until his mid-40s. He urged his wife to move on with her life and divorce him. Despondent, he began snorting heroin in prison — the first time, he says, that he had ever used hard drugs himself.

"I thought I was going to lose my mind," he said. "I felt so bad leaving my wife alone with our daughters. When they were young, they'd ask on the phone where I was, and I'd tell them I was away at camp."

His wife went on welfare and turned to relatives to care for their daughters while she visited him at prisons in Tennessee, Texas, Arizona and New Mexico.

"I wanted to work, but I couldn't have a job and go visit him," Ms. Hamilton said. "When he was in New Mexico, it would take me three days to get there on the bus. I'd go out there and stay for a month in a trailer near the prison."

In Washington, she and her daughters moved from relative to relative, not always together. During one homeless spell, Ms. Hamilton slept by herself for a month in her car. She eventually found a federally subsidized apartment of her own, and once the children were in school she took part-time jobs. But the scrimping never stopped. "We had a lot of Oodles of Noodles," she recalled.

Eleven years after her husband went to prison, Ms. Hamilton followed his advice to divorce, but she didn't remarry. Like other women in communities with high rates of incarceration, she faced a shortage of potential mates. Because more than 90 percent of prisoners are men, their absence skews the gender ratio. In some neighborhoods in Washington, there are 6 men for every 10 women.

"With so many men locked up, the ones left think they can do whatever they want," Ms. Hamilton said. "A man will have three mistresses, and they'll each put up with it because there are no other men around."

Epidemiologists have found that when the incarceration rate rises in a county, there tends to be a subsequent increase in the rates of sexually transmitted diseases and teenage pregnancy, possibly because women have less power to require their partners to practice protected sex or remain monogamous.

When researchers try to explain why AIDS is much more prevalent among blacks than whites, they point to the consequences of incarceration, which disrupts steady relationships and can lead to high-risk sexual behavior. When sociologists look for causes of child poverty and juvenile delinquency, they link these problems to the incarceration of parents and the resulting economic and emotional strains on families.

Some families, of course, benefit after an abusive parent or spouse is locked up. But Christopher Wildeman, a Yale sociologist, has found that children are generally more likely to suffer academically and socially after the incarceration of a parent. Boys left fatherless become more physically aggressive. Spouses of prisoners become more prone to depression and other mental and physical problems.

"Education, income, housing, health — incarceration affects everyone and everything in the nation's low-income neighborhoods," said Megan Comfort, a sociologist at the nonprofit research organization RTI International who has analyzed what she calls the "secondary prisonization" of women with partners serving time in San Quentin State Prison.

Before the era of mass incarceration, there was already evidence linking problems in poor neighborhoods to the high number of single-parent households and also to the high rate of mobility: the continual turnover on many blocks as transients moved in and out.

Now those trends have been amplified by the prison boom's "coercive mobility," as it is termed by Todd R. Clear, the dean of the School of Criminal Justice at Rutgers University. In some low-income neighborhoods, he notes, virtually everyone has at least one relative currently or recently behind bars, so families and communities are continually disrupted by people going in and out of prison.

A Perverse Effect

This social disorder may ultimately have the perverse effect of raising the crime rate in some communities, Dr. Clear and some other scholars say. Robert DeFina and Lance Hannon,

both at Villanova University, have found that while crime may initially decline in places that lock up more people, within a few years the rate rebounds and is even higher than before.

New York City's continuing drop in crime in the past two decades may have occurred partly because it reduced its prison population in the 1990s and thereby avoided a subsequent rebound effect.

Raymond V. Liedka, of Oakland University in Michigan, and colleagues have found that the crime-fighting effects of prison disappear once the incarceration rate gets too high. "If the buildup goes beyond a tipping point, then additional incarceration is not going to gain our society any reduction in crime, and may lead to increased crime," Dr. Liedka said.

The benefits of incarceration are especially questionable for men serving long sentences into middle age. The likelihood of committing a crime drops steeply once a man enters his 30s. This was the case with Mr. Harris, who turned his life around shortly after hitting 30.

"I said, 'I wasn't born in no jail, and I'm not going to die here,' " he recalled, describing how he gave up heroin and other drugs, converted to Islam and went to work on his high school equivalency degree.

But he still had 14 more years to spend in prison. During that time, he stayed in touch with his family, talking to his children daily. When he was released in 2009, he reunited with them and Ms. Hamilton.

"I was like a man coming out of a cave after 20 years," Mr. Harris said. "The streets were the same, but everything else had changed. My kids were grown. They had to teach me how to use a cellphone and pay for the bus."

The only job he could find was at a laundry, where he sorted soiled linens for $8.25 an hour, less than half the typical wage for a man his age but not unusual for someone just out of prison. Even though the District of Columbia has made special efforts to find jobs for ex-prisoners and to destigmatize their records — they are officially known as "returning citizens" — many have a hard time finding any kind of work.

This is partly because of employers' well-documented reluctance to hire anyone with a record, partly because of former prisoners' lack of work experience and contacts, and partly because of their difficulties adapting to life after prison.

"You spend long enough in prison being constantly treated like a dog or a parrot, you can get so institutionalized you can't function outside," Mr. Harris said. "That was my biggest

challenge, telling myself that I'm not going to forget how to take care of myself or think for myself. I saw that happen to too many guys."

'Crippled by Incarceration'

The Rev. Kelly Wilkins sees men like that every day during her work at the Covenant Baptist Church in Washington, which serves the low-income neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River.

"A lot of the men have been away so long that they're been crippled by incarceration," she said. "They don't how to survive in the community anymore, and they figure it's too late for someone in their 40s to start life over."

A stint behind bars tends to worsen job prospects that weren't good to begin with. "People who go to prison would have very low wages even without incarceration," said Dr. Western, the Harvard sociologist and author of "Punishment and Inequality in America." "They have very little education, on average, and they live in communities with poor job opportunities, and so on. For all this, the balance of the social science evidence shows that prison makes things worse."

Dr. Western and Becky Pettit, a sociologist at the University of Washington, estimate, after controlling for various socioeconomic factors, that incarceration typically reduces annual earnings by 40 percent for the typical male former prisoner.

The precise financial loss is debatable. Other social scientists have come up with lower estimates for lost wages after incarceration, but everyone agrees it's only part of the cost. For starters, it doesn't include wages lost while a man is behind bars.

Nor does it include all the burdens borne by the prisoner's family and community during incarceration — the greatest cost of all, says Donald Braman, an anthropologist at George Washington University Law School who wrote "Doing Time on the Outside" after studying families of prisoners in Washington.

"The social deprivation and draining of capital from these communities may well be the greatest contribution our state makes to income inequality," Dr. Braman said. "There is no social institution I can think of that comes close to matching it."

Drs. DeFina and Hannon, the Villanova sociologists, calculate that if the mass incarceration trend had not occurred in recent decades, the poverty rate would be 20 percent lower today, and that five million fewer people would have fallen below the poverty line.

Ms. Hamilton and Mr. Harris have now risen above that poverty line, and they consider their family luckier than many others. Their two daughters finished high school; one went to college; both are employed. Ms. Hamilton is working as an aide at a hospital. Mr. Harris has a job as a security guard and a different outlook on life.

"I don't worry about buying clothes anymore," he said. He and his wife are scrimping to save enough so they can finally, in their late 40s, buy a home together.

"It's like our life is finally beginning," Ms. Hamilton said. "If he hadn't been away so long, we could own a house by now. We would probably have more kids. I try not to think about all the things we lost."

Accentuating the Positive

She and her husband prefer to accentuate the positive, even when it comes to the police and prison. They appreciate that some neighborhoods in Washington are much safer now that drug dealers aren't fighting on street corners and in crack dens anymore. They figure the crackdown on open-air drug markets helped both the city and Mr. Harris.

"If I hadn't been locked up, I probably would have ended up getting killed on the streets," Mr. Harris said. His wife agreed.

"Prison was good for him in some ways," Ms. Hamilton said. "He finally grew up there. He's a man now."

But 20 years?

"They overdid it," she said. "It didn't have to take that long at all."

TIME AND PUNISHMENT

A Family's Sentence