

African-American females also victimized by the U.S. criminal justice system

Written by Dr. Elsie Scott, NNPA Special Commentary
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When the subject of the criminal justice system and its impact on the African American community is discussed, the emphasis is usually placed on males.

This is understandable if we focus exclusively on numbers. Black males are victimized, arrested and incarcerated in much greater numbers than Black females. For example, in 2007, Black males were incarcerated at a rate of 3,138 per 100,000 Black males in the population; Black females were incarcerated at a rate of 150 per 100,000.

The number of females arrested and incarcerated has been steadily increasing, but the criminal justice system has been slow to make the accommodations necessary to address their needs. The physical facilities and institutional policies are often designed to address a male population.

When I worked for the New York Police Department, I headed a group that looked at the integration of female police officers into the department. We found that the precincts were built with no female showers, locker spaces and bathrooms; there was no pregnancy policy; and no accommodations were made for officers with children. Similarly, female prison facilities tend to be designed by males for a smaller female population. Maximum-security inmates are housed with nonviolent offenders; and in the older jails female detainees are confined to spaces that were not designed to accommodate the special needs of females.

The unique social needs of female inmates often are not addressed in prison policies and programs. The cost of incarcerating a female tends to be higher because convicted females are more likely to have dependent children, and female inmates are more likely to need mental health services.

It has been estimated that over 60 percent of incarcerated Black females have dependent children. Many of these children have to receive governmental assistance after their mother is imprisoned.

Many Black female inmates were victims of abuse as a child and/or as an adult. The history of abuse contributes to the need for mental health services, which may not be available at the facility where they are incarcerated.

President Obama's agenda calls for support for ex-offenders, eliminating sentencing disparities between crack and powder-based cocaine, and expanding the use of drug courts. If implemented, these programs will help improve the plight of males and females who are caught up in the criminal justice system.

In addition, the agenda also calls for measures to reduce domestic violence and strengthen domestic violence legislation. A number of highly publicized cases of Black female domestic abuse draw attention to the need for these measures.

There is, however, a need for additional policies and programs to target specific conditions and circumstances that directly affect females, especially Black females. The President's agenda calls for job training, substance abuse and mental health counseling for ex-offenders. Similar programs are needed as crime prevention tools and for females in prison.

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Job training at female prisons tends to prepare women for “female” jobs such as cosmetology and culinary arts, which is needed. But there is also a need for training that will prepare them for the new technology-driven jobs. Mental health counseling can help them prepare psychologically for what they will face in the job market after they are released.

One of the biggest needs relates to keeping mothers connected to their children. Studies have shown that the disconnection to a mother can lead to psychological scars to a child. The female prison in many states is located in rural areas, creating challenges for family visits, especially for poor families and young children.

Most Black female inmates are from urban areas, and most are poor or in the lower income category. Creating more community-based corrections programs can help incarcerated mothers remain connected to their children and can create more job opportunities for those inmates who qualify for work outside the prison facility.

Elsie Scott, Ph.D., is the president and CEO of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and a contributor to Black Women’s Roundtable, the sponsor of this series.