Building social capital for stable employment: The postprison experiences of Black male exprisoners

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether and how Black male exoffenders take the support they receive from personal contacts and build social capital to get and maintain a job. Data were collected using in-depth, semistructured interviews with 20 formerly incarcerated males who were transitioning from state and federal prisons to Chicago, IL communities. The findings indicate that family members, including fictive kin, can provide valuable assistance that facilitates Black male former prisoners obtaining postprison employment.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of individuals leave prison and return to community living. The vast majority are male and a substantial percentage are Black. During 2011 alone, nearly 700,000 men were released from U.S. prisons (Carson & Sabol, 2012). In 2013, the U.S. prison population stood at 1,574,700, with more than 38% Black men (Carson, 2014)—a significant percentage of whom could be expected to be released and return home. Most Black men leaving prison have high hopes of doing well and plan to lead successful lives as fathers, sons, husbands, and workers. However, most do not have the personal or social resources, often referred to as social capital, that are typically associated with a high standard of living and the American dream. The majority of Black men in prison are poor, have low levels of formal education, and lack the skills needed for the contemporary job market (Petersilia, 2003; Rubenstein, 2001). A significant number return to live in impoverished communities that have limited social services, few jobs, and major social problems including high rates of violence, homelessness, and crime (La Vigne, Visher, & Castro, 2004; Visher, Yahner, & La Vigne, 2010). Consequently, criminal recidivism is high and visions of success are tempered by the reality of day-to-day survival.

Building social capital is a challenge for many Black male former prisoners. Their prolonged absence from the community (Swartz-Solcher, Offira, Geller, & Garfinkel, 2011) and return to socially isolated communities contribute to this challenge. Yet, despite these challenges, some former prisoners reintegrate

successfully into community and family life. They find and retain jobs, assume responsible family roles, and manage the affairs of daily living. They also avoid being rearrested and are not sent back to prison. We have a sense of factors—obtaining employment, being middle-aged, and having strong family ties (Barreiro, Novo, & Ramil, 2013; Hairston, 1991, 1998, 2003; La Vigne et al., 2004; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Travis, 2000)—that decrease recidivism and increase the chances of postrelease success. We, in addition, know that while finding work is a critical element of their success, former prisoners face major challenges in the job market (Sabol, 2003). Social scientists have a limited understanding, however, of the postrelease employment experiences of men returning home from prison and even less about how their family ties are related to their transition from prison and their employment experiences. The experiences of Black males is exceptionally challenging as they have to not only secure employment while having a criminal record, but must also navigate through systems of racial discrimination. They also often carry the social stigma often associated with having nontraditional family structures (Pager, 2003). Knowledge of this kind should be an important element, however, in shaping community reentry and reintegration programs and strategies.

The current study examined the employment experiences of Black men leaving prison and their use of informal support from families and personal contacts. Additionally, this study looked at how these resources were leveraged by former prisoners to find and obtain postprison employment. Past research has indicated that employed exoffenders have better outcomes related to a reduction in future criminal behavior than unemployed exoffenders (Harer, 1994; Seiter, 2002; Uggen, 2000; Visher, Bakken, & Gunter, 2013). Furthermore, researchers and scholars have documented that families are an important source of support for returning prisoners (Hairston & Rollin, 2003; La Vigne et al., 2004; Novo-Corti & Barreiro-Gen, 2015; Visher & Farrell, 2005). While community reentry research has begun to discuss the challenges Black men with criminal records face in obtaining social capital for employment (Smith, 2005), this research does not clearly identify the role of family resources in producing and sustaining postprison outcomes such as employment. In the current study, we examined how the informal support of Black male exoffenders received from family was accessed and mobilized after prison to achieve the desired goal of employment.

Social capital functions

The literature on social capital provides a useful framework for conceptualizing how disadvantaged individuals obtain the resources they need to advance (Hairston, 2003). Researchers have, in fact, used a social capital framework to examine prisoners' support networks during incarceration as well as during

community reentry (Hattery & Smith, 2010). Social capital generally refers to resources which individuals access and/or mobilize in purposive actions (Lin, 2001). Access to opportunities and resources is typically obtained through social ties within a social network.

Social capital is a popular concept in the sociological, criminal justice, and social work literature and is often used interchangeably with social support. Generally, the terms refer to an individual's emotional, instrumental, and informational aid. Lin (2001) explained that social capital is an umbrella term that encompasses sociological concepts like social support. Social capital has become a core concept in the examination of the process of empowering marginalized populations and in theoretical discussions of the social mobilization of members of marginalized populations through social networks (e.g., Briggs, 1998; Lang & Hornburg, 1998; Portney & Berry, 1997; Servon, 1998).

Lin (2001) conceptualized social capital as resources embedded in a social structure, which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions (p. 12). It is through their social ties within a social network that individuals obtain access to opportunities and resources. It is also through social capital that the less advantaged could acquire human capital to navigate systems such as hiring processes or "networking" to develop job opportunities.

Briggs (1998) indicated that social networks provide two types of social capital. First, they provide coping capital, which is in essence informal support and includes financial, emotional, and informational aid. Second, social networks provide social leveraging capital, which provides "bridging" from disadvantaged populations to individuals with status or power (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Social leverage supplies connections to get ahead. Prisoners' coping capital would include material aid and emotional support such as having prison visitors or a place to stay when released. Their leveraging capital might consist of knowing employers willing to hire prisoners or actually receiving job offers. In the case of exprisoners, the social coping function helps in managing the demands of everyday life and other stresses (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003). Social leverage capital, on the other hand, promotes their upward mobility by providing access to education, training, and employment.

Obtaining social capital is challenging for Black male former prisoners

Families are a common source of social support for exoffenders (Hairston & Rollin, 2003). According to Hairston and Rollin, "Families and friends provide returning prisoners with basic necessities and are often the primary sources of emotional support and of information about community norms and activities and about how to get help from other sources" (p. 67). For example, families can help resolve the issue of initial housing stability when

prisoners are released. Visher and Farrell (2005) report 88% of exprisoners returning to Chicago communities lived with family members after release. Beyond providing housing, families can help ease the transition back into the community by helping the exprisoner deal with complex personal issues, such as facilitating visits between noncustodial fathers and their children.

Although family members may be willing to provide assistance to former prisoners, they may not be able to do so. Rose and Clear (2003) reported research findings that indicate that the viability of social capital may be very limited if the former prisoners' social networks are composed of family and friends who are disadvantaged. In addition, the material hardship endured by families of incarcerated men may have created an additional burden on the families' capacity to provide assistance. The economic deficiencies of the communities they are returning to limit the levels of available resources. Many prisoners return to communities that are socially isolated from the mainstream. Visher and Farrell (2005) reported that of a sample of 400 male former prisoners returning to Chicago, 54% were returning to seven of Chicago's 77 communities. All seven had high levels of poverty and unemployment. These communities' social isolation and economic status make it difficult for residents to earn incomes from legitimate activities.

Former prisoners' social networks in these isolated communities may be able to provide significant amounts of emotional support but be less prepared to provide resources and connections to produce employment opportunities. Henly, Danzinger, and Offer's (2005) examination of the contribution of social support to the economic mobility and survival of 632 former and current Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients found, for example, that the family and friends of the TANF recipients were able to help on a day-to-day basis, but their support was unable to facilitate higher incomes or better jobs.

The notion that social ties are a critical means to obtaining employment is a consistent theme in literature on marginalized populations and low-income communities (e.g., Fernandez & Harris, 1992; Granovetter, 1973; Marsden & Campbell, 1990), but the relationship between such ties and employment experiences of exprisoners has been scarcely reported in the research literature.

Methods

Data for this qualitative study were collected using in-depth, semistructured interviews. The study sample included 20 Black men, all of whom self-identified as having served time and as having been released from prison within the two years prior to the study. All had tried to find a job after being released from prison.

Two methods were used to recruit for the study. An agency based in Chicago, Illinois that provided postprison employment services for former

prisoners was used for recruitment of the initial five participants. The agency's program manager obtained permission for participants to be contacted directly by the principal investigator for the purpose of being invited to participate in the study. In addition, the principal investigator made presentations about the study at agency meetings and invited men in attendance to participate. Of the initial five participants, three were unemployed. Working with the agency was a rather smooth process; only two men who contacted the researcher were turned away because in both cases the men had been out of prison longer than two years.

The second method of recruitment involved snowball sampling, which is particularly useful when members of a population are difficult to identify and locate (Gabor & Ing, 1997). While using agency clients was a convenient way to jump-start developing a sample, using only agency clients would have limited the sample to exprisoners who had used a formal program to find jobs. Therefore, the researcher asked the five men recruited from the agency and subsequent participants to identify and refer other exprisoners. These initial informants were asked to identify through their social networks men who met the eligibility criteria and could potentially contribute to the study. They were given the principal investigator's business card and a recruitment flier to share with potential participants. The snowball sampling approach resulted in eight additional men who were employed and seven who were unemployed at the time of their interviews.

A semistructured interview guide was used to collect data for this study. A structured interview would have forced the interviewee to follow a set pace and to choose between limited or fixed responses. The semistructured guide permitted the interviewer to follow the lead of the interviewee in shaping the order and structure of the interview.

The first part of the interview guide asked questions about demographic characteristics and participants' work and criminal histories. The remaining questions focused on respondents' social networks during and after incarceration, their sources of help in getting readjusted, the process and sources they used to find work, and their on-the-job experiences.

All interviews were conducted by an African American male with experience and training in both social work and conducting research interviews. The interviews took place in a research office at a local university or in an office of a community agency near the participants' homes. Interviews were conducted in private and were scheduled to accommodate participants' daytime and evening availability. Informed consent forms were read to respondents and respondents were given a chance to ask questions. The confidentiality of the participants was augmented by the use of pseudonyms at all stages of data collection and analysis. In addition, any potential identifying information was changed or removed from the transcripts.

The interview guide did not ask questions about individuals' participation in postprison criminal activity or their association with family members or friends who were involved in illegal enterprises. It is acknowledged, however, that even those men who have no desire to be involved with criminal activity in any way could maintain relationships with people who remain involved in criminal lifestyles. The possible detrimental effects of these connections and the impact of negative social capital on exprisoners' reintegration, though important, was not the primary focus of this study.

Data analysis

The research team used the core principles of grounded theory to analyze the interview data. Grounded theory involves initially coding qualitative data by developing themes and concepts and, after constant comparisons of data, moving to build connections between coded themes and concepts, emerging themes, and the conceptual framework that is the underpinning of the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As described in Strauss and Corbin (1990), grounded theory data analyzes includes three broad stages of coding: open, axial, and selecting coding.

Coding was first conducted within each interview transcript and then between and across interview transcripts. Transcript analysis thus involved the identification of concepts, patterns and themes that emerged across interviews. The thematic codes to guide the data analysis were developed independently by the lead researcher and a second researcher whose area of expertise included qualitative studies of incarcerated Black males. A third coder with knowledge and expertise of the subject matter examined coding to ensure that codes could be used reliably to derive relevant information. The analysis involved both manual and computer software–aided processes. To facilitate analysis, charts were created for each question and the responses to each question from each transcript were recorded on the charts. Quotes were recorded on charts that illustrated common and emerging themes that reinforce the empirical relevance of the data. Specific quotes from interviews were extracted to provide evidence of common and emerging themes. The use of quotes was also helpful in identifying responses that did not fit within a specific thematic category and therefore required that new thematic categories be created. ATLAS.ti, a computer software program for qualitative data analysis, was used to store and retrieve data. The ongoing analysis produced major themes and new concepts that cut across questions and interviews. Following the non-linear process of thematic analysis, responses were examined in the context of the empirical and scholarly literature, conceptual framework, and research questions. Moving toward major themes and new concepts involved continuous interaction across and between interviews. The resulting major themes and new concepts played a major role in shaping the findings.

The researcher took steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. To enhance credibility, the researcher held two meetings with three participants. In the first meeting the researcher presented an overview of the thematic analysis as a check to see if it reflected their experiences and the information they had shared in the interviews. The feedback from the first meeting produced a slight change of the wording of themes and concepts that the men felt more aptly described their experiences. In the second meeting, preliminary findings were presented to determine if findings captured the experiences of men. Overall the men concurred with the preliminary findings; however, they did raise the point that former prisoners are engaged in supportive roles for men coming home from prison. Using their feedback, the researcher reviewed transcripts and found that there were coded thematic categories within the transcripts that confirmed that some participants had, in fact, spoken of former prisoners providing support and, in some cases, social capital. The role of former prisoners providing support was included in the final analysis of the data.

Findings

The study sample consisted of 20 formerly incarcerated Black males who had been out of prison for two years or less. One man had been out of prison only a month and another only three months. The rest of the men had been out for six months or more. The sample included men with a variety of incarceration experiences. For 16 of the men this was their first prison sentence. The other four men had a prior prison record. Of the four men who had been to prison more than once, two of the men had been to prison three or more times. Most of the sentences served were for six years or less. Two men had served sentences of only six months. Three men served 20 years or more in prison, one of whom had served a 33-year sentence. These men ranged in ages from 23 to 56, although most were in their early to mid-30s. The interview did not entail questions about fatherhood or marriage, but over half the men in their responses to questions indicated they were fathers. As a whole, the interviewees were highly educated and had more education than in other research studies on exprisoners. All but two men had finished high school. Five men had only a high school education or G.E.D. There were 13 men who had attended college; of the 13, four graduated. Only two of the men had not been employed before going to prison. The jobs held by the participants before prison were in the following occupational categories: warehouse workers, restaurant employees, sales, retail, grocery store, clerical, military, social service, and automobile service. See Table 1 for a summary of the findings.

Family members were found to be at the core of men's social networks and provided instrumental support that provided the foundation for job

Table 1. Description of the Participants' Backgrounds and Employment Experiences.

Interview No.	Age	Education No. of years	Number of times in prison	Time served for last sentence	Employed before prison	Preprison occupation	Employed at the time of interview
1	24	12	1	6 months	Yes	Warehouse	No
2	32	12	1	5 years	Yes	Warehouse	No
3	34	12	3	6 months	Yes	Warehouse	No
4	28	16	1	3 years	Yes	Counselor	No
5	34	11	3	2 years	Yes	Laborer	Yes
6	34	15	1	4.5 years	Yes	Clerical	Yes
7	23	14	1	3.5 years	Yes	Store Manager	No
8	32	10	3	1 year	No	n/a	Yes
9	32	14	2	5 years	No	n/a	Yes
10	35	12	1	14 years	Yes	Sales	Yes
11	34	13	1	2.5 years	Yes	Warehouse	No
12	36	14	1	5 years	Yes	Restaurant	No
13	35	12	1	4 years	Yes	Restaurant	No
14	51	16	1	20 years	Yes	Auto Mechanic	Yes
15	56	16	1	30 years	Yes	Salesman	Yes
16	43	12	5	2.5 years	Yes	Retail	Yes
17	38	14	1	20 years	Yes	Restaurant	Yes
18	51	16	1	33 years	Yes	Marines	No
19	34	16	1	4 years	Yes	Sales	Yes
20	26	15	1	4 years	Yes	Grocery Store	No

seeking and provided job connections. Family members included individuals related by blood or marriage and also fictive kin (individuals with close personal ties who were not related by blood or marriage, but were viewed as family).

Female family members

Female family members were the men's primary sources of support during incarceration and the primary persons who helped them get stabilized when they first came home from prison. Seventeen men reported that a female family member was a source of support after prison. Prisoners' mothers were significant in this regard. They were the initial points of contact for the majority of men. Mickens, who served five years in prison, spoke of receiving help from his mom after prison:

Interviewer: Who has helped you get reestablished after prison?

Mickens: My mom and she is supporting me even now, four months later. It is a burden on her financially but she has provided clothing, housing, the most important things like shelter.

When men's mothers had died or were otherwise not available due to substance abuse or incarceration, an aunt or grandmother received the men back into the community after prison. Donzell was in prison for 4.5 years. Donzell's grandmother served as a proxy for the maternal relationship he

lacked due to his mother's death. Donzell spoke about reconnecting with his grandmother:

> My grandmother, definitely my grandmother because, like I said, she and my mother's death—from the time I went to prison and my mother passed away shortly before I came home—and that was something that, you know, it was a void that was there that could never be filled on the loss of my mother. And, the only thing I had left was my grandmother, so, that would be something that would be very, very difficult at that time for me, you know, not to have her in my life because, a lot of the business that my mother had left, my grandmother was in control of a lot of things. And we had other things that we was doing together, you know, and she pretty much was there for me at every turn, when I came home. Pretty much, a person needs that type of support when they coming out. So, without her, it would have been, man—it would have been very, very, very difficult—me getting back on my feet. Since she is right there in my corner, it has truly been much easier for me, especially when I came home and that period of not knowing what would take place, which, you know, how your life is going to go from that point on; now what do you do? She was there for me—someone who life would have been much harder if she had never been there.

Sisters were also a primary source of aid after incarceration. Romell spent a year in prison; he indicated that his sister allowed him to be a roommate after prison. Jeffery was in prison for only six months and moved in with his youngest sister after prison. Ferris was in prison for two years. Ferris said he received help from sisters when he came home although they did not provide help during his incarceration.

All but one of the six men who spoke of having a wife or girlfriend were reunited with their female partners after incarceration. One of those relationships, however, did change course. Kent was incarcerated for four years. Kent's girlfriend broke up with him the day he was released from prison. For others, the wife or girlfriend continued to be part of the social network after prison. Even after 33 years of prison time between them, Alfredrick and his wife remained together.

Male family members

Based on the interviews, male family members were barely engaged with the participants while they were in prison, but after prison they became involved in the lives of the participants. The participants conversed about their brothers, brothers-in-law, and uncles as being part of the collective that embraced them when they returned to the community. Though some of these male family members took on their traditional family roles in providing support to the men, some of the participants identified a brother or uncle as taking on the additional role of a father figure.

Only three men talked about their fathers at all. Ferris mentioned, "My dad has his own problems he is dealing with." Rico was in prison for four years.

His dad was also a former prisoner. During the interview Rico said, "The only person that I looked forward to for help was my father and didn't receive it." Lorenzo served two and one-half years in prison. This was his fifth incarceration. Lorenzo expressed his desire to be a good parent: "The way my daddy didn't do, so I'm trying to reverse the cycle." Even though Ferris' dad continued to have a problem with alcoholism, they were making attempts to repair their relationship.

Fictive kin

As the men became integrated into community life, their social networks expanded beyond the family. The initial point of community contact for the participants was their family members who were related by blood or marriage. As they began to establish themselves further in the community, the participants began connecting or reconnecting with former prisoners and community members.

Of the 20 men interviewed, more than half of them reconnected with men whom they had met in prison. The community became a setting for further development of friendships that began in prison. Morris was in prison for five years. According to Morris, "When you're locked up with a person for so long, you know, you become bonded, just like friends." Other men shared similar sentiments. Men who had served decades in prison had built strong bonds with their fellow prisoners.

While in prison and separated from family, inmates can become stand-ins for family members to each other. These relationships can be transferred after prison. Donzell, who was incarcerated for 20 years, talked about reconnecting with a prison buddy on the outside:

> One of my buddies got out back in April. He did 20 years. And his family had a get-together, and he went to Rockford, and I took my grandmother up there. 'Cause he used to call the house when I was in one prison and he was in another; he talked to my grandmother and they developed a rapport. And we went up there and she met his mother and we had a good time. Yeah, I like to see my buddies that I was in prison with out here. I know some of my buddies that ain't gonna ever get out.

For some of the men, social ties were reestablished with members of the communities where they lived. In some instances, the people whom the men became associated with were unlikely allies. For example, while Morris was in prison, his mother befriended someone he referred to as a former "enemy," but when Morris returned to the community the two become friends. Herman was in prison for five years and nine months. Herman was welcomed back into the community by individuals who had been transformed from sources of negative social capital to positive influences. When I asked

him who helped him reconnect to the community, he spoke of these transformed individuals:

> It's funny it's some guys from the block, strip, whatever, who was like the who's who of what not to do back in the day and now they are like the guiding lights. … They like was gangster gangster and now they have flipped the whole thing to say, "If you followed me in that, come follow me in this because this is what is popping now; everything else you throwing bricks at the penitentiary." In other words keeping it gangster now is getting a job and taking care of your family and trying to do something for the community like helping these kids out here.

Romell described how transformed individuals helped him after prison:

> They put in good words for me for job opportunities; financially, one of them helped me. Whether it was paying bills when I was behind or supporting activities I did in the community. I could say he did more financially to help and mentally with conversation and counseling.

Coping capital prepares former prisoners for job search

One form of coping capital that the men received was material support. Since most men were pulling their lives back together from scratch, they had numerous things that they needed; however, there were four types of material support from families that remained consistent among the majority of the men: housing; clothing; financial assistance; and a way to get around town to employment agencies, training programs, and interviews. Another form of coping capital is emotional support. Emotional support is the support that family members provided in the form of words or deeds that motivated the men, made them feel better, or validated their self-worth. A key aspect of emotional support provided by family members and friends was "real talk." Over half the men interviewed indicated that it was important to have someone who would speak candidly with them about potential character defects or temperaments that were not beneficial to their being rehabilitated.

When talking about assistance they received after prison, most of the men spoke of being the recipients of housing, food, and clothing. Most of the providers of this aid were family members. This aid was needed to support the men after prison. Housing, food, and clothing were rarely talked about separately. More often when referencing the support they received, two or all three forms of assistance were combined. It was described as if the combination of assistance were a package required to sustain them until they were able to be independent.

Lorenzo and Morris did not receive housing from their families. Instead, they utilized available housing programs. Lorenzo explained why he chose

to stay at a halfway house after prison:

> I didn't want to do this again, so I had to change something. I normally get out, go home; sleep on the floor at my momma's house or my niece's house. This time, before I even left, pride come before the fall; pride got in the way. What's somebody gonna say about me going to a half-way house? You ain't got nowhere to go. Let's face it—I was homeless, man! Ain't nothing in my name! So I ain't gonna continue to go squat on them peoples.

Only four men did not receive money from family and friends. Romell and Morris talked about receiving financial help. However, neither man specified how the money was used. Romell received financial assistance from a close friend who ran a grassroots organization. Morris received financial support from former prisoners who were released before him: "And when I got home, the financial support was there for a brother. Because they've been through it like I've been through it, so they know what it's like to come home and not have nothing."

There were other men who received cash. However, those men provided the details of what the intended purpose was for the money they were given. Mickens served five years in prison. Demetrius was incarcerated for 33 years. As previously mentioned, Jeffery was only incarcerated for six months, but had two previous incarcerations. Here are some of the ways they explained they used money they received:

> *Mickens:* When I'm looking for a job, they [family] provide me with cash. For transportation and so forth. They provide me with cash for clothing—clothes for interviews, clothes for church.

> *Demetrius:* Whatever I need—monetarily, of course, limited; buying me bedding, a bed; buying me furniture for my apartment that I have. Buying me groceries when it gets to the point when I can't provide for myself. Basically necessities.

> *Jeffery:* If I don't have money, she [sister] gives me money for carfare to seek jobs from time-to-time. My brother-in-law, he gives me money.

Being in a situation where they had to ask for money did not sit well with all of the participants. Whereas a couple of men expressed being frustrated from having to start from scratch, Alfredrick spoke specifically about how difficult it was for him to ask his wife for money: "I've always been self-sufficient. So to ask my wife for some money, it was humiliating, not frustrating, it was humiliating. Not that she had any problem giving it to me; it was something that I had to deal with."

In order for the men to get around town independently, they needed access to public transportation or to utilize an automobile. Providing bus fare or the use of a car are ways personal contacts can provide assistance. Donzell's mother let him use her car. After serving three and a half years in prison, Devin returned to the community and his mother helped him purchase a car.

Emotional support also played an important role. Another intangible but valuable method of support was having someone available to talk candidly to the former prisoners. These straightforward one-on-one conversations both grasped the men's attention and inspired them into action. For this population, the words "real talk" denotes unfiltered truth or not mincing words. Donzell used the phrase in describing the importance of his work: "I'll always have an opportunity to affect lives and see lives change, and that's real right there, so, that's real talk."

In making their transition from prisoner to citizen, some of the men needed someone who could talk to them in very firm and direct ways. Tony had been incarcerated for 20 years. Tony described how talking to former prisoners he knew helped him readjust from prison to society:

> *Tony:* Being back in society has a whole pace that is much different than doing time. Then, too, I am trying to play catch up and be happy. That is why I have to talk to guys that can tell me from experience stuff that someone else may miss.
>
> *Interviewer:* So you are talking about emotional support?
>
> *Tony:* Yes, you can call it that. But I guess also if you call it that, I am also talking about emotional support planning. The guys I talk to are helping me plan what may be pitfalls emotional and otherwise so that I do not find myself in a situation where I am unprepared.

Real talk was especially needed to alert the participants to potential disreputable associations. Alfredrick spoke about friends' talking him through staying away from negative social capital. He said friends helped to guide him away from people who might tarnish his reputation by asking him very candid questions: "Well, do you know, if you want to be in those guys' company? Do you really know what those guys are into right now? You don't want to get stuck in their quicksand."

Candid conversation could also pinpoint flaws in participants' behavior or thinking that were warning signs. Demetrius was actively involved in a prison reform group with other former prisoners. After becoming frustrated with the challenges of reentry, members of the prison reform group were able to talk him into understanding the value of being outside of prison:

> There was a time when I even contemplated even calling my parole officers and said, "Man, I can't." But then I realized what institutionalization does to an individual—that's what institutionalization—that you can't function without the confines of the steel and concrete. So, I reached out to my support system of former inmates and I had to do that, and they assisted me to just remember that there ain't no better thing than you being out in the world.

A few men found it difficult to put aside their street code of ethics and needed someone close to them to keep their old ways of handling issues in check. Real talk was a way someone close to them could bring what is important back in focus. After prison, Herman continued to hold a grudge against former crime associates who did not support him while he was in prison. He

credited his wife's talking to him as a preventive measure from his acting irrationally: "My wife gave me pep talks. Like when I would run into them guys, the old me would come out and she would see it and calm me down."

Leveraging capital helps former prisoners obtain employment

Coping capital sustains an individual through a difficult period, whereas leveraging capital helps them move beyond that period. In order to get jobs, all of the men had to mobilize available social capital. In looking for a job, their needs became more specific in order to increase their chances of getting a job. Finding work required leveraging social connections that could provide job leads regarding hiring opportunities, locate direct connections that could expedite the employment process, and vouch to address concerns of employers in regards to hiring an exprisoner.

Twelve of the men tapped family members for job leads. Four others reached out to friends to obtain information about who might be hiring. A level beyond getting a job lead involved the men having someone to "vouch" for their character, work ethic, and dependability. Vouching meant that someone was able to confirm that they knew these men, which therefore increased their chances of being hired. An even higher level of leveraging capital was "providing a direct connection." Providing a direct connection was a more advanced form of vouching in that it did more than provide a reference; the direct connection almost guaranteed the job. While anyone a hiring manager knows can provide a reference, the direct connection comes from someone the hiring manager trusts. That trust is relied upon to the extent that the manager is willing to overlook other candidates to hire the referred candidate.

Most of the men did not hesitate to try to obtain job leads from their social network. Only two men worked exclusively with agencies and one man prospected for jobs without the help of job leads. A job lead in this case was information on employers who may have a job opening. Providing job leads to the participants linked them to employers who may have job openings. The job leads helped to make job hunting less overwhelming for the participants.

Some of the men used references that served to minimize concerns employers may have about hiring an exprisoner. Rico was one of the four men who benefited from vouching. He explained the usefulness of his uncle's speaking to the hiring manager on his behalf:

Interviewer: Now I would like to ask you questions about help you may have used to look for work. How did you get your first job after leaving prison?

Rico: My uncle was a foreman, not a foreman, but a lead supervisor at an office supply warehouse and he vouched for me, then I got the job working at the warehouse.

Interviewer: When you say he vouched for you?

Rico: Just told his boss that I was his nephew and I just came home and was in need of employment and let him know that I was a good guy and gave me a chance.

For the exprisoners who had access to this type of social capital, having someone vouch for them leveled the playing field. Vouching was extremely useful for someone who had a huge gap of time in their résumé. Alfredrick was one of the men who had a long prison sentence—over 30 years. Still, he was able to get a job through someone vouching for him:

Actually, a good friend of mine recommended me to an organization. She was working at the organization at that time, when I first heard of the organization. And a friend of mine, Mr. Few, facilitated me getting an interview and vouched for me, at the organization, and I started working there in January 2005.

Three of the men were able to use direct connections to obtain jobs. A direct connection is more than a job lead or vouching and involves a strategic relationship to the hiring manager. While vouching helps the hiring manager make a decision, providing a direct connection directly influences the decision or even goes as far as to make the decision just a formality.

A participant having a direct connection was sometimes able to overcome a lack of work experience in a particular area. Romell did not have any work experience before prison. After prison, his job experience was limited to part-time counseling and volunteer work. What Romell did have working in his favor, however, were friends who had strategic connections and relationships with hiring managers for a community outreach program. He was able to leverage his connections to an outreach worker to be chosen for the job. He explained why he viewed the job as being hand-delivered to him:

At some jobs, it's a possibility you can fill out an application or a résumé, and then, it's a whole drawn out … like a random name pull; like from a raffle. Other than like this job, this job was like hand-delivered to me through some mutual friends and associates. … In this particular job, you do outreach work … actually, when the funds came out to the South Side of Chicago, I was there from Day 1. I sat in on a few meetings. I got the details of what they expected from us, what was needed for the job. Me, having the access to some of the people that they were inquiring about really led me to getting the job.

Herman was able to benefit from the assistance of men in the neighborhood whom he referred to as the "old timers." According to Herman, the old timers had strategic connections throughout the city: "They know everybody and everybody knows them." The strategic connections of the old timers were important in getting Herman hired in an industry like construction that favors people with union or other inside connections. One of the old timers made a connection for Herman to a construction job:

One of the old timers called me and said "Shorty, they looking for workers at this site in the hundreds," and he told me who to ask for and the next day I took a piss test and the next week I was hired.

A direct connection can occur by someone promoting the talents and skills of a former prisoner to the point where his services become desirable before the former prisoner presents himself. While Donzell was in prison, he remained in contact with the parents of a friend. According to Donzell, the friend's parents were actively involved in connecting people to jobs and educational opportunities. Donzell spoke about the friend's parents helping to create a job opportunity for him in his absence:

> My first job, there was a friend that I would say I met through some of the guys I used to hang out with. I kept in touch with his parents when I was locked up, and when I came home, you know, just in the year before I came home, their family was really just all about trying to help people get established as far as education and jobs. So we started a plan a year before I came home on discovering what my interests were and all those kinds of things. The friend owned an advertising and multi-media company startup and he needed some help and this was like customer service for an annual ski trip, so that was how I got hired to do that. So basically, it was, I guess, a friend of a friend; a short-term opportunity that turned into a long-term opportunity.

Many of the participants had work experience and skills that were obtained before and during prison. They found, however, that they needed to tap into their social network for leveraging capital to help make a job possible. Leveraging capital obtained from or through family members and social networks was provided in the form of job leads, direct connections to jobs, or someone vouching for their character and reliability. Job leads were helpful in identifying job opportunities, but vouching and direct connections were more functional in obtaining actual employment.

Discussion

Researchers and scholars have documented that Black male former prisoners are reentering communities that lack resources and opportunities. In addition to being saddled with the brand of being a convicted felon, they are returning from prison with a variety of complex needs and deficits. The participants in this research use social capital obtained through their social networks as a means of assistance for postprison employment. The study found that family members and friends can provide valuable assistance that facilitates Black male former prisoners obtaining postprison employment. Family members provided coping capital that enabled the participants to cope with the hardship of leaving prison with little or no means. They have an essential role in meeting the basic needs of individuals who are leaving prison in need of everything, yet without the means to provide for themselves. Finding work required leveraging social connections that could lead to where hiring opportunities existed, direct connections that could expedite the process of getting a job, and vouching to address concerns employers had regarding hiring a former prisoner.

These findings do not indicate that family support negates the need for formal programs to facilitate prisoner reentry and employment. The findings do suggest, however, that formal programs would do well to find ways to use a family orientation in their programs and approaches to service delivery. It makes sense that if the goal is to help former prisoners obtain jobs then formal programs should incorporate the process of how men coming home from prison look for work. If former prisoners look initially within their personal networks for assistance in getting jobs, then formal programs should not disregard the viability of using those personal contacts in the job search process.

It is also important for individuals responsible for postprison policies to rethink some traditional practices prohibiting convicted felons from associating with each other. This research suggests that social networks that consist of former prisoners can aid community reentry for returning prisoners in a positive way. Men and women who spend several years and in some cases decades in prison come to rely on each other in the same way that college students form bonds of friendship and trust. When former prisoners are released from prison and reentering the community, they would naturally rely on those individuals who have experienced the process of reentry from prison. The former prisoners are guides to the employment process not only because they know who is willing to hire former prisoners, but more importantly how former prisoners will be viewed and how they will feel working in specific environments.

In addition, many employment programs for former prisoners have requirements to complete job readiness training and workshops that in some cases require weeks to complete and may not lead to employment. Using the aid of former prisoners, a newly released former prisoner can find out which programs should be leveraged for specific components like bus passes and interview clothing, or lead to better paying jobs. Admittedly, the potential for negative social capital exists with former prisoners because in some cases their rehabilitation may be fragile. Still, negative social capital is less likely for former prisoners with stable employment and those who have been maintaining healthy lifestyles.

An important policy and practice implication is that prisoners need help identifying where they can obtain help creating a strategy for finding employment much earlier than when they return to the community. Prisoners need people connected to the communities they will reenter to help them develop individual development plans early in their prison sentences. This will allow prisoners to spend their prison time working on the plans. Families need to be included as resources in these plans and need to spend time in discussions with prisoners identifying resources that the family network has and resources that need to be developed to assist the prisoner in obtaining employment upon release.

Finally, several men in this study had some college education and most had employment experience prior to going to prison. A large percentage of Black

men leave prison, however, without even a high school diploma or equivalent and have never worked outside of a prison job. The challenges the men in this study faced and their experiences should heighten awareness of how difficult it is overall for former prisoners to readjust to community living and find work.

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