

Finding Timothy: Breaking the Cycle of Violence, Addiction & Incarceration in Communities of Color

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Most of us have them in our families - the relatives that we are ashamed to speak about hidden in our familial closets: the brother who keeps going back to jail on drug-related charges; the father who is abusive when he drinks or even when he's sober; or the uncle who touches his nieces in places he shouldn't. Although males are not the only offenders, they are the ones who make up the majority of inmates in our jails and prisons today. According to the 2009 Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), 82% of the correctional population was male, and 18% was female.

Women offenders tend to have trauma histories as victims of male violence due to gendered-victimizations such as sexual assault or domestic violence. According to Dr. Stephanie Covington, an expert on Gender-Responsive Intervention, "most female offenders are trauma survivors when they enter the system, and then they are at risk for retraumatization by the system" (Gender-Specific Programming for Female Offenders: What is it and Why is it Important, 1998). Further, women's crimes tend to involve alcohol, other drugs, or property. In addition to trauma histories, most of these women have chronic substance abuse issues, a form of self-medication, and also struggle in poverty, thus committing economically motivated crimes.

The rate of women's incarceration has been growing ever since the government declared War on Drugs in the mid-1980s when an unprecedented number of mothers were locked-up at a higher rate than at any other time in U.S. history (Levy-Pounds, Children Of Incarcerated Mothers And The Struggle For Stability, 2006). Although men are 10 times more likely to be in jail or prison, women's rate of incarceration has increased 14% since 1990 (One in 100: Behind Bars in America , Pew Center , 2008). For black women in their mid- to late-30s, the incarceration rate has hit the 1-in-100 mark. Most of the incarcerated women are mothers, and the majority of them are the primary caregivers to children under the age of 18 (Gender-Responsive Treatment and Services in Correctional Settings, Covington , 2006) Children with an incarcerated parent are more likely to become incarcerated themselves (Levy-Pounds, 2006).

Overall, non-violent offenders make up over 60 percent of the prison and jail population according to the 2010 Center for Economic and Policy research. People of color comprise the majority of inmates in jails and prisons today, even though Whites comprise 72% of the U.S. population according to the 2010 US census. BJS indicates that in 2009 Blacks comprised nearly 40% of the total prison and jail population, while only making up about 13% of the US population. Latinos comprised over 20% of the total jail and prison population, although their national representation is only 16%.

The rate of incarceration of Americans, and for people of color in particular, has reached epidemic proportions. The United States incarcerates more people than any other country in the world (One in 100: Behind Bars in America , 2008). However, caging people en masse has not necessarily made us safer neither in our communities, nor in our homes where domestic violence and child abuse are still daily occurrences.

According to the 2008 Pew Center Report, over 7 million people are under some type of correctional supervision: probation, parole, jail, or prison. That breaks down to 1 in 31 adults, 1 in 18 men, and 1 in 11 Black males. According to the Sentencing Project's report, Schools And Prisons: Fifty Years After Brown V. Board Of Education (2004), 1 in 3 Black male babies will be incarcerated in his lifetime (citing Bonczar, Thomas P., US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 2003). The report highlights that "there are more Black males in their 20's who are incarcerated now than the total number of all

incarcerated African Americans in 1954" when Brown V. Board was decided ending legal segregation in public schools.

Latino rates of incarceration are increasing as well. According the Pew Hispanic Center 's 2009 report A Rising Share: Hispanics & Federal Crime, only about 6% of all offenders are prosecuted in federal courts. However, Latinos accounted for 40% of all sentenced federal offenders, up from 24% in 1991, more than triple their share of the total U.S. adult population (16%). 80% of those sentenced for immigration offenses were Latino.

An oversimplified explanation as to why communities of color are hardest hit by incarceration is that they are inherently more violent. A more accurate and less racist explanation is that communities of color have higher risk factors for offending: higher rates of unemployment, lower paying jobs, entrenched poverty, sub-standard educational systems, and a lack of treatment options for substance abuse addiction. In other words, communities of color as historically overly exploited, under-resourced and systematically criminalized peoples have had less protective factors built-up over the generations. Higher risk factors and fewer protective factors to pass on to their children have resulted in a pervasive disruption of positive influences, activities and opportunities that leads to wealth building, the process whereby one acquires more assets than deficits over one's lifetime.

Protective factors include access to high quality education from birth to career, the means to save and invest money, a safe and healthy environment to live, access to healthcare, etc. The Bell Policy Institute in its 2005 report on Colorado : The State of Opportunity defined these protective factors as gateways to opportunity concluding, "These gateways are like steps on a long staircase—missing one doesn't mean you cannot succeed, but it does make the next step much steeper. Miss too many and the climb may become impossible."

It is within this context of hyper-criminalization that I examine my own family's shame and silence about coming to terms with my Uncle Timothy's impending August trial for an alleged domestic violence assault resulting in serious bodily injury to the victim. If convicted, Timothy could face an "enhanced" sentence meaning a more severe penalty of 30 years if he is prosecuted as a habitual offender. Colorado was one of many states that passed a wave of tough on crime laws in the 1990's, such as California's three strikes law, that allows for additional penalties resulting in longer sentences when a person has prior felony convictions.

The justification by lawmakers for longer sentences is that repeat offenders must be kept off of the streets at all costs, yet the costs are astounding. According to the Pew Center 's study on the State of Recidivism : The Revolving Door of America's Prisons 2011, "Total state spending on corrections is now about \$52 billion, the bulk of which is spent on prisons. State spending on corrections quadrupled during the past two decades, making it the second fastest growing area of state budgets, trailing only Medicaid."

Almost all of the people sentenced to prison, violent and non-violent, are eventually released. However, they are coming back to their communities without competitive job skills or a way to effectively address significant barriers to successful reintegration such overcoming housing or employment discrimination as felons. Stigmatized, lacking legitimate means to support themselves, or coming out of prison worse than they went in due to violence, rapes and lack of enough rehabilitative programming behind prison walls, it is no wonder that nationally about half of the people who are released from state prison return within three years either for a new crime or for violating the terms of their release (State of Recidivism: The Revolving Door of America's Prisons 2011, Pew Center). Meanwhile, our families and our communities are no better off, while the cycle of criminalization and incarceration continues.

Contrary to popular belief, most crimes are not committed by the lurking faceless stranger, horrific as that is. Most crimes are intra-racial, meaning occurring within the races with the exception of Native American women whose perpetrators tend to be non-Native men (Maze Of Injustice: The Failure To Protect Indigenous Women From Violence, Amnesty International 2007). Most offenders know their victims who are usually family members, intimate-relationship partners, friends or acquaintances. Therefore, if we are going to stop the cycle of victimization within our families and communities we must take a long hard look

at what is going on in our block, in our homes and in our lives as unpleasant and as painful as it may be.

We must examine the hidden shame by bringing the secrets to the light. We must unpack the guilt to move beyond it and use it as a catalyst for healing and change. We must define what accountability means for those who have hurt others in order to bring justice to those who have been harmed. We must scrutinize those laws that only punish without rehabilitating. We must never blame victims; and, as hard as it is at times, we must find compassion for offenders. Understanding the roots of violence can help us to eradicate it, family by family, block by block, community by community.

In my future columns, I will be writing about my exploration to find my Uncle Timothy, specifically his humanity, by looking honestly at how one Mexican American child, so full of promise and hope, developed into an adult "offender." I will examine where systems failed, and how poor life choices from poor options compounded the tragedy of lost potential. It will be difficult and even painful to talk about the loss and sorrow of having a family member incarcerated, and for the grief for any victim who has suffered. Yet, if talking can cure what ails us emotionally, we are overdue for a long and honest conversation about addiction, violence, mental illness and incarceration within our communities. Our silences will not protect us, but uncovering the truth makes redemption possible for us all.

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