

Punishment Beyond Bars: Pursuing Higher Education with the Degree of Incarceration

Michelle Fretwell: McNair Scholar

Dr. Arthur Scarritt: Mentor

Sociology



Abstract

There are over 2.3 million people currently incarcerated in the United States (Wagner and Rabuy 2017). This incarcerated population represents this nation's poorest, most isolated, most mentally ill, and least educated persons (Thompson 2013). And, even though the Pew Research Center recently argued the racial gap in prisons had narrowed, people of color continue to be significantly overrepresented (Tucker 2016; Gramlich 2018). Legal scholar Michelle Alexander asserts that upon reentry into society, formerly incarcerated individuals are sequestered into what she has termed America's new undercaste—"a lower caste of individuals who are permanently barred by law and custom from mainstream society" (Alexander 2012; pg. 13). Despite recent research that concludes that individuals with a conviction history and incarceration experience are the most successful of those who are released and "enrich institutions of higher education" (Halkovic and Greene 2015:760), they continue to confront many unique barriers while pursuing higher education. I utilize the narratives of four formerly incarcerated students to illuminate the most enduring barriers that this population faces. I have found that institutional discrimination, surveillance, and media shaming criminalize and stigmatize formerly incarcerated college students encouraging them to conceal their conviction and incarceration history on campus which in turn undercuts the efficacy of their education and maintains their second-class status.

Meet Aurora

Aurora is a 34-year-old white woman and mother who recently graduated from university with a bachelor's in social science. While this achievement may be a commonality for some, graduating from college seemed impossible to Aurora after her entanglement with the criminal justice system in her twenties. Before then, she was attending college full-time while taking care of her young daughter. One night, she went out to a campground with friends where they all drank together. Later in the evening, she decided to drive herself and her daughter home. Aurora was charged with two felonies that night resulting in conviction and incarceration in the middle of the academic semester.

She was released roughly a year later, shortly before another academic semester began, after displaying good behavior. Fearing that she may lose her financial aid, she rushed back into school. At the same time she had full custody of her then three-year-old daughter all the while her parole officer urged her to seek employment. Finding an employer that would hire her with a conviction history proved arduous. Eventually, she was hired by the local homeless shelter during her final semesters of college until their funding ran low and they let her go.

Legal scholar Michelle Alexander asserts that upon reentry into society, formerly incarcerated individuals are sequestered into what she has termed America's new *undercaste*—"a lower caste of individuals who are permanently barred by law and custom from mainstream society" (Alexander 2012:13). Alexander's claims regarding the undercaste coupled with the breadth of research indicating that going to college is one of the greatest potential ways to work against one's undercaste status (Chappell 2004; Kelso 2000; Anders and Noblit 2011; Karpowitz and Kenner 1995) led me to investigate the perspectives and experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals within higher education.

For the students of this study, college has not helped as much as one would expect. Their stigma and struggles go unacknowledged by higher education institutions and mainstream society. Despite recent research that concludes that individuals with a conviction history and incarceration experience "enrich institutions of higher education" (Halkovic and Greene 2015:760), I have found that they continue to confront many unique barriers while pursuing higher education. This specifically includes the struggle of having to break away from the continual processes of intrapersonal and institutional criminalization.

Beyond those closest to her, I was the first person with whom Aurora shared her whole story. She admitted that she never includes the part about her daughter being in the car. There was a heaviness in her words as she expressed the guilt she feels for making the biggest mistake of her life. For many, the stigma she experiences may seem justified, which is exactly why it is imperative to examine how stigma affects formerly incarcerated individuals and whether it helps or hurts them in their process of reintegration. I have found that institutional discrimination, surveillance, and media shaming criminalize and stigmatize formerly incarcerated college students encouraging them to conceal their conviction and incarceration history on campus which in turn undercuts the efficacy of their education and maintains their second-class status. I also use the undercaste framework to examine how my participants interact with success as it is societally constructed. As they all actively choose to conceal their stigma, the stigmatizing forces have mainly internal effects causing them to perpetuate a mental undercaste.

The participants of this study reported perceived discrimination during job and scholarship application processes. Reinforcing this discrimination is the harmful, hyperbolic depiction of criminality in the media which they noted serves as a post-incarceration shaming sanction and informal educator on criminality. As a result, they perceive and anticipate negative reactions from others caused by the attachment of the stigma of criminalization causing them to actively conceal their involvement with the carceral system. Such suppression of self results in social withdrawal, severed social capital opportunities, and psychological distress. Together these limit students' level of achievement despite being the most successful of the formerly incarcerated population.

The Undercaste, Stigma, and Reintegration

“[The system] is no longer concerned primarily with the prevention and punishment of crime, but rather with the management and control of the dispossessed” (Alexander 2012; pg. 188).

There are over 2.3 million people currently incarcerated in the United States (Wagner and Rabuy 2017). This incarcerated population represents this nation's poorest, most isolated, most mentally ill, and least educated persons (Thompson 2013). And, even though the Pew Research Center recently argued the racial gap in prisons had narrowed, people of color continue to be significantly overrepresented (Tucker 2016; Gramlich 2018).

Alexander (2012) elucidates many mechanisms that maintain second-class citizenship. She takes on this complex task by detailing racialized practices that disproportionately funnel blacks and, to a lesser extent, poor whites into penal institutions. This research applies the concept of the undercaste to all formerly incarcerated people to illuminate the severe shortcomings of America's criminal justice system as well as the social processes that surround deviance. Alexander, with an emphasis on racial injustice, details the three stages of entrapment: the roundup, the period of formal control, and the period of invisible punishment that keeps formerly incarcerated individuals in a “closed circuit of perpetual marginality” (p. 186). This period of invisible punishment is the step with which this analysis is primarily concerned.

Alexander emphasizes the permanence of one's position in the undercaste cemented by the legal discrimination the incarcerated face upon reentry. This legal discrimination, also commonly referred to as the collateral consequences of incarceration, includes the complete loss of voting rights, decreased access to housing, disadvantage in the job market, and inundation of debt (Tyler & Brockman 2017; Alexander 2012; Pager 2007). These barriers stack up to effectively impede an entire population's path toward achieving what is societally defined as the successful citizen. Rather than being considered structurally, the current caste system is normalized as crime is seen as an individual, voluntary choice (Alexander 2012).

The most effective way to overcome second-class status is to gain a college degree (Chappell 2004; Kelso 2000; Anders and Noblit 2011; Karpowitz and Kenner 1995). For this reason, this research examines the experiences of formerly incarcerated college students to expose the most enduring barriers posed by the stigma of criminalization and criminal justice institutions. Universities as educational institutions can offer immense benefits to these students, yet their passivity and inaction with regard to this stigma are still major impediments. These students are continually dehumanized under the mask of justice while they endure self-stigmatization, modes of surveillance, harmful media depiction, and having to redefine their success.

A breadth of research indicates that of the people who are released from penal institutions, those who choose to attend college prove most successful (Chappell 2004; Kelso 2000; Anders and Noblit 2011; Karpowitz and Kenner 1995). Recently, increased opportunities (Sokoloff and Fontaine 2013) as well as economic and social mobility (Strayhorn et al. 2013) have been specifically documented as benefits for formerly incarcerated individuals who pursue higher education. Additionally, a recent study found that attending college as a method correlated to reduced rates of recidivism (Sturm et al. 2012; College and Community Fellowship 2012). While the positive effects of college on formerly incarcerated individuals are clear, limited research has been dedicated to exploring the

specific experiences of formerly incarcerated college students. Being some of the first research on this subject, I aim to show that these students' successes remain in stark contrast to their non-formerly incarcerated counterparts as they encounter the most enduring interpersonal and structural barriers to living a conventional life.

The little literature that accounts for the benefits of formerly incarcerated individuals pursuing higher education seldom includes reference to students' experiences of stigma. Similarly, the research that has examined stigma's effects within formerly incarcerated populations has not considered those attending institutions of higher education. McTier, Santa-Ramirez, and McGuire (2017) recently documented four formerly incarcerated college students' transitions into higher education. Though their research acknowledged stigma as a barrier for these students, they did not collect data on their experiences with stigma. Two questions emerge that this research will explore: how do formerly incarcerated individuals interact with the stigma of criminalization and what stigmatizing forces most impact their educational and personal success?

Methods

In-depth one-on-one qualitative interviews were conducted with four formerly incarcerated college students. Empirically collected interviews are used to study the effects of involvement within the American carceral system. In order to be participants of this study, they had to have a conviction history, incarceration experience, and be enrolled in or a recent graduate of a state college. I utilize the participants' narratives, three students at the largest state university in the area and one student at the local community college, to illuminate the most enduring barriers formerly incarcerated students face. The table below shows the self-identified characteristics of each participant.

Characteristic	GW	Aurora	Johnny	Alice
Age	45	34	31	37
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female
Race/Ethnicity	African-American	White	Indian	White
Employment Status	Unemployed	Unemployed	Unemployed	Unemployed
Conviction(s) Disclosed	Injury to a child (wrongfully convicted); Perjury (wrongfully convicted)	Felony DUI; Felony DUI; Injury to a child	Injury to a Child; Aggravated assault; Intent to deliver and manufacture a controlled substance; Probation Violation	Trespassing
Time Incarcerated	4 years, 6 months	1 year	1 year, 2 months	1 night

Internalized Surveillance

Individual interactions with institutions are dramatically altered when one becomes involved with the criminal justice system. Once one is burdened by incarceration experience and a conviction history one is subject to legal institutional discrimination. I have found that discriminatory practices during application processes and intense surveillance by parole officers cause these individuals to self-audit their behaviors effectively keeping them from opportunities and social connections that are crucial to personal, educational, and professional growth.

Meet GW

GW is a 45-year-old African American man who is attending the state university to earn his second Bachelors of Science degree. As regulated by his parole officer, GW must either work or attend university full time. GW said he cannot get a job due to the two convictions on his record, of which he claims he was falsely accused and convicted: injury to a child and perjury. So, he attends the university full-time to appease his parole officer. He does not believe that even a second college degree will help his chances in attaining a job, let alone a career. When asked how he feels stigmatized, he spoke about the discrimination he faces in his interactions with various institutions that require him to disclose his conviction history.

I'm stigmatized by employers, the state, state agencies, landlords and a plethora of others. Fortunately, I do not have to register as a sex offender or the stigma could be even worse. But it is always someone trying to "label" someone else in a way they can put them at a disadvantage. (GW)

There are no laws in the state of Idaho that restrict the use of an applicant's conviction history as a reason to deny employment, housing, or schooling. So, the stigma GW identifies is reinforced by the legalized discrimination from myriad bureaucratic agencies—"employers, the state, state agencies, landlords"—and supported by the lack of state protection. This echoes the foundational work of Devah Pager (2007) who found that the negative credentialing of formerly incarcerated individuals makes them less likely to attain jobs or careers in the workplace when they must disclose their history. While it is possible that this reality could be a motivator for formerly incarcerated individuals, it often deters them from applying for jobs, college, and funding.

Aurora admitted that she has been deterred from applying to employment and scholarship opportunities when the applications require her to disclose her conviction history: "there have been some [scholarships] that I was going to apply for that I just didn't." She elaborated that "some applications you fill out don't ask you to clarify. It's just 'have you been convicted?' Or, well, it's discouraging if you have to clarify because then you have to write out what you did." Aurora was ultimately discouraged from applying for funding that would have made her college experience and life easier. Moore, Stuewig, and Tangney (2013) found that people often do not apply for jobs when they expect to be treated unfairly. Movements like Ban the Box seek to counteract this type of institutional discrimination. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and many scholarships also have the requirement of disclosure. Halkovic and Greene (2015) recommend that colleges and universities also abolish the box from their admissions applications.

Meet Alice

Alice is 37-year-old white woman in her last year at the university earning a sociology bachelor's degree. Many years ago, she and her friends went out at night to look at a beaver dam in the pond near her house. She was convicted of a misdemeanor charge of trespassing. Despite this being the only conviction on her record, she has experienced employment discrimination and is fearful she will experience the same when applying to graduate programs.

Alice recounted her experience on the other side of the application when she was a manager at a supermarket, "if applicants did check that box, they were just thrown away." Alice was instructed to pass over applications of those who disclosed they had a conviction history without considering any of their other qualifications. Here, the lines of legality are blurred, and questionably legal discrimination goes unchallenged.

In the prison context, Foucault explains that the main effect of the panopticon, the all-seeing tower of the criminal justice system, is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 1975). Once individuals are released, they do not get away from the panoptic schema. They are often directly surveilled, instead, by their probation or parole officers. GW provided an example of his experience under his parole officer's surveillance: "[I] can't meet with groups in the evening because I would have to be home by 8... just run the risk of having to tell my story." Students with a conviction history must navigate the structural challenges of college while also managing the psychological challenge of their attached stigma(s) (Halkovic and Greene 2015). The pressure on participants to hide such a significant part of their past causes them to socially withdraw and sacrifice social capital that is imperative to educational, professional, and personal success (Moore and Tangney 2017).

GW's personal life has been significantly repressed as well. He revealed: "I can't have a relationship without getting permission from my treatment provider and my P.O. So, dating is not an option for me. Hasn't been for seven years." Here, GW chooses to view personal relationships as "not an option" instead of dealing with the

added hurdle of acquiring permission. Aurora provided examples of arduous regulations imposed by her parole officer: “They want me to have a job at the same I’m going to school and raising a kid [...] I have to hand in my grades every 16 weeks to them.” Probation and parole are institutions meant to support formerly incarcerated people’s reintegration into society as successful citizens, but these are clear examples of the exact opposite taking place. This post-incarceration panoptic schema causes even formerly incarcerated college students to intensely self-audit their own behaviors (Foucault 1975). As external surveillance becomes internal, opportunities and connections are curtailed limiting their success and maintaining their positions in the undercaste. Through seeking their humanity, they cut themselves off from a key resource of humanization—human connections and the extrinsic benefit they provide. Higher education functions much differently for formerly incarcerated students and can ignore how stigma undercuts the benefits of their education.

Media Shaming

Alongside institutional discrimination, the formerly incarcerated suffer from shaming sanctions that are defined in the Harvard Law Review as “punishments that are directed primarily at publicizing an offender’s illegal conduct in a way intended to reinforce the prevailing social norms that disapprove of such behavior and thus to induce an unpleasant emotional experience in the offender” (Schwarcz 2003). While some scholars have supported shaming sanctions as crime deterrents and citizen shapers (Braithwaite 1989), Massaro (1991) makes a compelling argument that shaming in America’s societal context is ineffective at accomplishing this goal. Media is both a shaming sanction and a key component of the socialization process. The social construction of reality occurs when people take what they learn from the media, whether true or false, to construct their reality (Surette 1992). Negative (often racialized) images of criminality in the media embed themselves in the public’s perception of those with incarceration experience and conviction history (Dowler et al. 2006). One who learns of incarceration through the media rather than first- or second-hand accounts becomes a penal spectator. This separation from actual incarcerated people creates an apathy in the spectator that is predominantly influenced by the media construction of the ‘criminal’ (Brown 2009).

In GW’s experience, stigmatizing forces “are perpetuated by the media who put fear into people instead of educational information.” Communication scholars McRobbie and Thornton (1995) speak to media representation in that “[s]ocial reality is experienced through language, communication and imagery.” Fictional depictions in television and movies create popular images of racialized, one-dimensional ‘hardened’ criminals. Meanwhile, news outlets showcase individuals who have committed the most heinous of crimes while also depicting them as one-dimensional. GW continued to express that “[p]rison life on television is still designed to produce negative images of marginalized groups.” Crime and punishment in the U.S. are represented by popular theatrical images and exploited for dramatic entertainment. This process has caused the distinct separation between the reality of formerly incarcerated populations and an audience of penal spectators on and off screen effectively dehumanizing the penal subject (Brown 2009).

Crime television shows and movies do not hesitate to depict, and in fact highly promote, retributive punishment. Through this exposure, the public has established a desire for retribution motivated by the punishment of individuals who have been convicted. Retributive goals are met when an individual is said to deserve punishment proportionately equal to the violation of rules set forth in society (Gerber and Jackson 2013). Similarly, Alice considered where the stigma of criminalization comes from and articulates that it “comes from the idea that the criminal is a ‘type’ of person. That someone would break a law means that they would break any law.” Aurora echoed this idea:

I think that people that have gone through a period of incarceration are seen as hardened criminals...as thugs. When in reality, for most people it was just a bad decision that they got caught for. Media outlets focus on the really nasty people locked up and don’t show the average person. (Aurora)

There is rarely any consideration of the social preconditions that influenced someone to disobey the law. For once the act is performed, they transform from a person into a deviant or criminal. Each participant alluded to how the media reinforces the dichotomous conceptualization of ‘normals’ and ‘criminals.’ Alice elaborated that “the media repeats the idea that criminals are a type. Even if they’re ‘good’ criminals, it is because they are able to use their ‘loose morals’ for a higher cause.” She highlighted a predetermined morality that is constructed by both the media and the carceral system. The popular image of criminality as immoral and unforgivable supports the

stigmatization of those with conviction and incarceration history so much so that it is embedded in the lives in of the participants of this study.

Stigma of Criminalization

The stigma of criminalization is the discrediting mark that follows one's conviction and sentence served in a correctional facility. Its harmful effects manifest in many ways. However, the individuals of this study primarily experience intrapersonal interactions with the stigma as they choose to conceal their history of involvement with the criminal justice system. Concealing the stigma causes them to truncate their social relations and therefore cut themselves off from the social capital central to educational success. To understand these dynamics, this research focuses on two different types of interactions with the stigma of criminalization that scholars have distinguished as *anticipated* and *perceived* stigma.

Anticipated stigma

Anticipated stigma refers to an individual's anticipation of rejection or discrimination from the public based upon their stigmatized identity (Moore et al. 2013). In 2013, Moore, Stuewig, and Tangney first examined how anticipated stigma among incarcerated persons affects future psychological and social adjustment. With their research, they concluded that the behavior of incarcerated individuals nearing release and reentry is affected both positively and negatively by perceived and anticipated stigma due to the context-driven nature of stigma. Furthermore, Modified Labeling Theory states that individuals who belong to a stigmatized group internalize the stigma and related stereotypes causing them to anticipate stigma and develop coping strategies (Link et al. 1989). A primary coping strategy of the participants of this study is actively concealing their formerly incarcerated identity causing them to socially withdraw from other students and beneficial opportunities.

To investigate this strategy, participants of this study were asked how vocal they are about their conviction history on and beyond their campuses. GW explained:

The biggest thing is that nobody knows. To them, I am a regular person on campus. If they knew, I'm sure I would have a totally different experience. I don't want to know what it would be like if people know.

GW is not openly communicative about his conviction history. As a result, he does not face any challenges related to this part of his identity. He is very fearful of what would happen if people on campus knew his history. He cannot build solid social capital, a prime resource for educational success, because he feels he has to avoid the effects of the stigma of criminalization. Aurora also believes she would be confronted with additional barriers due to the stigma. She stated, "I'm sure I would have more barriers if I actually talked about some stuff."

Meet Johnny

Johnny is a 31-year-old Indian man who is finishing an associate degree at the community college. He is finishing his parole sentence and will no longer be mandated to either work or attend university full-time. He has experienced significant difficulty in finding a job but is hopeful that his degree will help him when he enters the job market after graduation. Johnny's hopeful disposition is due, in part, to his rehabilitative experience with the criminal justice system. Before turning 18, Johnny had already become involved with the system as a juvenile that struggled controlling his anger. He explained to me that his anger was just one of the several mental issues he endured that went unaddressed for many years. During his last encounter with the system, he was able to receive psychiatric attention. With the help of his parents, Johnny was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, hypomania and severe anxiety. His parents paid for a lawyer who was able to get Johnny into mental health court despite his violent convictions. He went through a private program targeted to address his mental health and is now actively working on his improved well-being. Johnny similarly anticipates discrimination resulting in the concealment of his past. He admitted: "I know everything's fine as long as they don't know."

Alice explained, "I don't think anybody knows that I have a criminal record. I think I look—I don't feel like a look like the typical 'criminal.'" Her anticipation of stigma leads her to be more self-conscious about her appearance causing her to conceptualize and present herself in a particular manner. Alice does not disclose her conviction history at school and relies on the fact that she does not look like stereotypical "criminal." In addition to the difficulties they face in navigating the college admissions process, receiving funding, finding housing, gaining

employment, and finding a supportive community, formerly incarcerated students are in constant contention with concealing their ascribed criminality (Solomon et al. 2008). Every participant chose not to disclose their history in anticipation of social ostracization, which cuts them off from the larger campus community hindering their ability to make connections and accrue social capital.

Perceived stigma

Perceived stigma, on the other hand, refers to an individual's perception of the public's stigma toward their group (Moore et al. 2013). LeBel's (2012) study, the first to quantitatively measure formerly incarcerated persons' perceptions of stigma, concluded that this population is highly aware of the discreditation of their group's identity. The stigma of criminalization bleeds into the core realms of one's identity undercutting psychological well-being and the possibility of achieving personal and educational success.

Johnny explained the stigma he is "faced to live with" revolves around the question of whether he "can be trusted as a member in our community? People always have doubts if 'the guy with the record' has changed." Johnny suggested that public distrust is induced by the "fear 'normal' people have about those with criminal backgrounds." With this sentiment, he reiterates the dichotomous relationship between those who are "normal" and those who are "criminals", the very framework that reinforces the existence of an undercaste. Additionally, upon reflection of his awareness of social stigmas attached to him, Johnny compared his use of cannabis and his time in prison as two socially unacceptable actions in the context of the state's laws. He stated, "it would be a lot easier for someone to say 'I smoke weed' versus 'hey, I was in prison for five years.'" It is Johnny's perception that more destructive social repercussions will result from disclosing one's incarceration history than from admitting the use of an illegal substance. The weight of this comparison's significance is compounded by the fact the use of cannabis is a highly criminalized offense in the state. 'Criminal' behavior is normalized in connection to him because he has a conviction history.

Aurora shared her own experience with this polarity as reinforced by employer and rental company policies:

I feel that people only want to see the perfect life—fancy cars, big house, great job. When people don't fall into that bracket then they are deemed less than. Employers and rental companies are looking for a certain person and usually aren't willing to accept someone that has made a mistake.

Aurora defined the "perfect life" in extrinsic terms of what is necessary to be a dignified person in American culture, which has been shown to decrease a student's ability to learn, happiness, and well-being (Deci et al. 1999; Schmuck et al. 1999). Yet, as she explained, the permanent discrediting of those who "made a mistake," and have a conviction history, make these aspirations unattainable. The practice of denying formerly incarcerated individuals jobs and housing also denies their transcendence from the undercaste. Along with these institutional obstructions to success, perceptions of stigma among formerly incarcerated individuals increase their likelihood of lower self-esteem, lesser quality of life, and recidivism (LeBel 2012).

Furthermore, adding labels like "ex-offender" or "ex-convict" to already stigmatized people exacerbates the alienation. For example, though Aurora is not vocal about her conviction history, she feels stigmatized as a mother with a felony. She explains, "I feel like they know I'm a mom and so then I break down this whole stigma of not being a good mom." Participants of this study also grapple with stigmas connected to mental illness, motherhood, and minority status. These are the specific ways in which the stigma of criminalization is experienced by the four individuals. The degree to which it is experienced by each one is extremely varied, and is highly dependent upon one's socioeconomic status, education level, mental health, and race (Link and Phelan 2001; Tyler and Brockman 2017). The way the students of this study anticipate and perceive stigma is due, to great extent, to their interactions with institutional discrimination, surveillance, and the media's depiction of criminality. As a result, they are compelled to conceal their stigma, restricting their thoughts and behaviors as related to their success.

Limited Success

Institutionalized discrimination and media shaming reinforce the stigma of criminalization. The ways in which these students interact with their ascribed stigma keeps them from achieving the same type of success achievable by their non-incarcerated counterparts. Measuring success can be understood intrinsically or extrinsically based upon the goals one aims to achieve (Kasser and Ryan 1996). Intrinsic goals such as self-acceptance are

associated with a higher well-being while extrinsic goals like financial success lead to lower well-being (Kasser and Ryan, 1996). The individuals of this study have dramatically reshaped their ideas of success as a result of their interactions with the criminal justice system. Post-incarceration, they now strive for an intrinsically-characterized success as extrinsic goals such as employment and financial excess are often unattainable.

Before being incarcerated, Johnny characterized success as having money, owning material possessions, and dating girls. Johnny now relates success with family, friends, happiness, contentment, and “staying out of trouble.” Johnny’s definition of success—“staying out of trouble”—can also be read as following the rules. Halkovic and Greene (2015) note that formerly incarcerated college students navigate bureaucratic systems well due to their incarcerated experiences. When asked why he decided to pursue college, Johnny communicated it was “the prospect of employment.” He continued to explain that “a lot of people who can’t find work just go to school.” After being released, as regulated by probation/parole, individuals must either work full-time or go to school full-time. Because it is difficult for these individuals to get jobs, many attend higher education in hopes that a college degree will give them an advantage in the job market despite their conviction history. Educational attainment is a secondary factor in their formula of success.

Similarly, GW’s idea of success before being incarcerated was dependent upon making money, which he correlates to his middle-class background. After years of false imprisonment and the connected collateral consequences, a successful life for GW is one where he has a “great family unit” even though he has been unable to pursue a romantic relationship due to his not wanting to comply with his parole officer’s regulations and his distrust for people. The monitoring from his parole officer contributes to the limitations of his achievable success. For instance, GW explained his reason to pursue his second bachelor’s degree:

I am only pursuing a second degree because it is virtually impossible to find employment or a career that pays anything worth working for. Being on parole is a big black mark on your employment application. And, being employed full-time or in school full-time is a condition of parole. Going to school keeps the POs off my back.

GW is not motivated to gain a second degree for the sake of his educational or personal progress but to save himself from the backlash of his parole officer. When asked if he thought a second bachelor’s degree would help him find a suitable career, he simply replied “no.” His intrinsic personal goal of having a “great family unit” is completely separate from any extrinsic career or educational aspirations because he finds those impossible to achieve.

Before her conviction, Alice’s idea of success aligned with typical notions of adult success: “having a job, being self-sufficient.” Now, her idea of overall success is being content with her current situation. Alice shared her motivation to pursue higher education: “It was almost ten years after that [one class] and it was because I was tired of being dumb.” Alice’s response differs from the responses of the other students as she was not sentenced to probation or parole term after her incarceration. Though slightly differing, every participant’s current definition of success indicated the desire of a restoration to dignity after being incarcerated. These students’ definitions of success deviate away from the notion of conventional success as they find it unattainable due to their entanglement with the carceral system. Further, the concealment of their formerly incarcerated identity keeps them from making social connections necessary to optimize their success.

Conclusion

Interviews with these four formerly incarcerated college students revealed their interactions with institutionalized discrimination, media shaming, and the stigma of criminalization which effectively limits their success. The ways in which they interacted the stigma of criminalization proved most detrimental to their success. Despite being amongst the population of formerly incarcerated people that are the most successful, their internalization of external stigmatizing forces leads them to construct a mental undercaste. In other words, they shape their thoughts and behaviors in a way to avoid stigma. Resultantly, they are discouraged to engage in social connections or beneficial opportunities with others effectively holding them back from autonomous decision-making when it comes to their own success.

It is accurate to say that this research brings up more questions than it answers. It is also important to note that the data comes from four unique narratives and do not speak to the entire formerly incarcerated population. In these ways, it is a call for more research on the experience of formerly incarcerated students, the institution of higher education itself, and the stigma of criminalization. The independent effects of race, though well documented in relation to the carceral system, need to also be investigated in this context.

Although research has been conducted on the mental health repercussions of being incarcerated, there are no campus services or advocacy aimed at the formerly incarcerated. Rather, the college environment is where

incarceration and conviction history are heavily stigmatized. Allowing formerly incarcerated individuals to pursue a college education in a welcoming environment has the potential to lower recidivism rates, deconstruct the stigma of criminalization, and ultimately enable these students to live better lives (Halkovic and Greene 2015). In other words, American colleges have the great potential to help their formerly incarcerated students succeed educationally, professionally, and personally, yet they remain passive and unhelpful. This research serves to further develop the body of knowledge surrounding the enduring barriers faced by even the most successful formerly incarcerated individuals. It is critical that the conversation continue past the current discourse that largely ignores the perspective of formerly incarcerated students.

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