



How Your Time Behind Bars
Defines You: The Stigmatization of
Incarcerated Individuals

Jasmine Kimbrough

Introduction

One of the most universal moral principles that everyone is taught is to treat others the way you want to be treated- also known as the golden rule. This is learned as a child when your teacher is trying to convince you to share your toy with other classmates. When your mother scolds you because you left your friend out in a game of tag. As we grow, our moral values develop in a way that finds the golden rule to become conditional. While you treat others the way you want to be treated, it becomes dependent on your own judgment of character. A significant defining factor on how people are treated is their morality and actions towards other people. Society runs on unspoken norms that cannot be broken without consequences, either in the form of physical punishment or social scrutiny. Not only is the act of murder against the law, but it is also morally wrong in the eyes of the majority. The background of a person with convictions comes with the weight of negative perceptions by the general public. The way in which they are treated in society is illustrated through job, housing, and social discrimination. This will lead into a reflection of how they are viewed by the majority due to social constructs of how people viewed as criminals should be treated.

A study conducted on ex-offenders post-release examined that people with a criminal record are less likely to get a callback from a job. The statistic is even more drastic when comparing Black and White participants, showing even further discrimination based on race (Moses, 2014). Obstacles regarding jobs, housing, and social circles are just few of the many that people struggle with post-incarceration which continues to make it harder for them to transition from prison to society. Jail systems contribute to this lack of transition due to the punitive measures they focus on, leaving people in these systems with no resources or education once they have finished their time. When observing life in prison and the primary stressors, there is a significant amount of loss that an individual faces.

To Sykes, imprisonment is especially painful because an individual's confinement 'represents a deliberate, moral rejection of the criminal by the free community,' where he is not allowed to forget that 'he has foregone his claim to the status of a full-fledged, trusted member of society' (Porter 2018, p. 3).

It is important to note that despite being a free community, trust is something that must be earned in society and can be easily taken away if you do not fit the norm. The process of reentry, which entails leaving prison and transitioning into said free community, becomes a struggle when under social scrutiny. The decreased mental health they experience from confinement along with the lack of social practices causes negative perceptions within society. These barriers contribute to the increasing rates of recidivism, referred to as the risk of a person reoffending due to behaviors against the law. When the United States holds the record for most people incarcerated per capita, you begin to wonder how the country is able to stay in that top spot. Additionally, they are also in one of the top spots for highest recidivism rates in the world with 76.6% of people rearrested after five years (Benecchi, 2021). Not only does this demonstrate the ineffective nature of punitive prisons but also how the various obstacles significantly impact people post incarceration. With the high amounts of people rearrested, reconvicted, and reincarcerated becoming victims in this cycle of abuse within the criminal justice system, how do we start taking preventative action against this?

Holding the label of a criminal comes with preconceived notions about the way they look and act due to the crimes they were punished for. They are viewed as social outcasts that could be a potential danger to the world. The stigma surrounding incarcerated individuals in society is reflected through the discrimination they experience inside prison and social rejection during reentry which perpetuates harmful stereotypes and increases recidivism rates. The struggles they face searching for employment and housing traps them in the cycle of reincarceration due to lack of education and resources with no social support.

Stigma Mechanisms

Stigma is known as the, “social phenomenon in which labeling, separation and discrimination occur together in a power situation...” (Feingold, 2021). The stigmatization surrounding individuals is the central cause of many health and social inequalities they face post incarceration. The amount of discrimination experienced is impacted with intersections of race, gender, and crime which continues to perpetuate stereotypes surrounding marginalized

groups. The separation people experience from stigma causes difficulties with reconnecting back into their communities which can also affect our society with a shift in social power. We can look at stigma in a broader framework when examining the four stigma mechanisms that happen at different levels: structural, social, and individual.

The first stigma mechanism is known as enacted stigma which refers to an individual's experience with discrimination from the outside (Feingold, 2021). Many people post incarceration face enacted stigma through job, housing, and social discrimination. People formerly incarcerated found job insecurity to become one of their main stressors outside of incarceration due to their record (Porter, 2018). While they tend to be overqualified for jobs, a simple background check negates any experiences they had before incarceration. Having a record becomes their most defining factor during the hiring process due to the distrust and question of morality. When jobs are found, there tends to be limited opportunities in the market for them- leading to instability in finances and no room for growth. This type of stigma can also affect mental and physical health. With chronic stress becoming a significant factor during and post-incarceration, this impacts a person mentally. Prolonged problems to your mental health can develop into physical illnesses over time. Individuals have been neglected when reaching out for help due to the perception of their character while in prison and during reentry. This can lead to feelings of helplessness and social withdrawal due to the lack of a support system. This is most commonly the first stigma mechanism they face which eventually leads into the other three.

Perceived stigma refers to one's belief about society's perceptions on a certain group. In this case, individuals can come to the conclusion that the public tends to not trust incarcerated individuals based on discrimination in the workplace. When assessed, perceived stigma predicted employment rates and hours worked for Black participants but not White participants (Feingold, 2021). While enacted stigma shows the direct example, perceived stigma is the conclusion that comes after the experience of discrimination. Race and type of crime can affect how participants experienced perceived stigma as white participants and violent felony convicts felt a higher level than others.. They begin to feel much more conscious about how they are viewed due to interactions with the public, causing them to become more critical of their identity. At this stage, it becomes difficult for people to reintegrate back into

society due to the harmful conclusions the public has about their character. The emphasis on perceived stigma felt by white participants can be attributed to different attitudes in their community regarding incarceration. People of color have faced overcriminalization for many years yet these ideas are not as common in white communities, causing them to feel an emphasis on the discrimination they experience. They do not strongly identify with their experiences of incarceration due to the lack of connection and knowledge, which furthers the stigma they perceive to be felt a lot stronger. Police brutality is extremely prevalent in Black communities which has normalized the scrutiny they face in both the criminal justice system and society. In contrast, a majority of White communities feel so far removed from fear of incarceration that the feeling of being criminalized is almost foreign to them. It is important to note that this does not measure the amount of discrimination they face but rather their own level of perceived stigma based on past experiences.

The third mechanism is anticipated stigma, defined as the expectations people gain to face rejection from their identity. Harmful coping mechanisms are adopted at this stage from their fears about society and their attempt to process this aspect of their identity. To mitigate attitudes that could be potentially harmful to their mental health, many people tend to utilize avoidance based strategies which furthers social withdrawal from others. This can take the form of pushing peers away and refusing to reach out for help. Feingold (2021) mentions the struggles on an individual level, “The sensitivity to and anticipation of identity-based discrimination may give rise to social withdrawal and decreased help-seeking behaviors (e.g., reduced health care utilization), among other consequences” (p. 550). It becomes imperative for ex-offenders to garner social support during this stage or they face the risk of recidivism due to a decrease in both physical and mental health from social confinement. Stigma relies on attitudes by society, meaning we can shift this narrative around incarceration individuals if they have support from the people around them. This can be as simple as spending time with family and friends in a positive manner to show that they are more than just their criminal record. On a higher level, people struggling both mentally and physically post-incarceration should take the liberty to access health care if applicable which can further social support.

The last mechanism is internalized stigma which is a person's belief about their own character from societal perceptions and attitudes. During this

stage, people with convictions may start to question their own morality and trustworthiness based on their past experiences with incarceration. This leads to further social withdrawal and changes in the language when you talk about themselves or other people who were formerly incarcerated. The time a person spends incarcerated could also be a potential predictor of stigma due to in-group and out-group dynamics. While internalized stigma is caused by negative perceptions, these perceptions can change when observing the groups they identify in. People who identify in a specific group tend to think more positively about other members inside their groups rather than out groups. In this case, the longer someone spends incarcerated is correlated with their readiness to identify with other inmates and their prejudice (Feingold, 2021). Internalizing these harmful thoughts about your own character can target your mental health in many damaging ways. You begin to lose control of your own situation which can eventually lead to learned helplessness. This happens when an individual experiences such a strenuous lack of control that they eventually lose the hope and motivation to change their situation. This can either look like a person who stops trying to strive for employment and housing or if someone regresses back to substance abuse and criminal behavior. While the consequences are crucial, internalization can happen from something as simple as a degrading name or label.

Labeling Theory

The labels and language people use when discussing this subject is important to understand their perceptions and attitudes. Once the label of a criminal becomes part of your identity, the stigma you experience has become internalized. This leads into the labeling theory involved in criminal justice and deviancy groups. The labeling theory predicts the future of people who are formerly incarcerated based on the social scrutiny they face. Their punishments can lead into deviant self concept, social rejection, and deviant groups (Restivo & Lanier, 2015). This theory rose to popularity with criminologists during the 1960s when the civil rights movement was at its peak.

During a time where society felt a period of unrest, many people wondered how the consequences of criminal behavior would affect people within their community. Sociologist Howard Becker emerged with his book, *Outsiders*, which greatly popularized the term labeling theory. His writing argues how deviancy is a social construction based on the reactions of the

public (Triplett et al., 2015). Rather than putting the blame of the criminal act on the individual, this puts the blame on societal standards. These labels play a significant part in the way ex-offenders are stigmatized and why these attitudes become internalized.

Labeling theory works in conjunction with the process of increased recidivism rates since the likelihood of incarceration is correlated with experiences of stigmatization. In a study reporting stress related experiences before and after incarceration, many people struggled with finding employment. While race plays a significant role and can contribute to the labeling theory, the type of crime someone is convicted for can affect the way they are perceived. Porter (2018) illustrates this through one man formerly convicted of sexual battery:

It was very hard because they labeled me a sex offender and I did not really know what that meant . . . the ramifications of it. That has definitely affected my health mentally, physically, and everything else because I've had to continually fight just to survive...

(p.11)

As mentioned previously, criminalization becomes a significant factor in deciding the outcome of a person's employment. It is hard to be confined to a box of labels without any opportunity to better yourself even if you are striving for improvement. These layers of stigma continue to build onto each other with intersecting identities causing bigger obstacles for people. While being classified as a criminal causes a specific characterization on its own, the status of a sex offender creates a heavy perception that is even harder to escape due to moral outrage among the majority of society and ex-convicts alike. This shows how perceived stigma can contribute to internalized stigma with the use of labels and type of crime.

Words adjacent to criminal, such as felon and prisoner, are known to derive from an unconscious bias and lack of understanding with negative connotations surrounding these phrases. Self-awareness regarding this issue needs more acknowledged by the public due to the normalization of judgement towards incarcerated individuals. The language used is often dehumanizing in many ways, defining their whole character from their experience in prison. The

best example of the labeling theory is examining media representation of committed crimes.

News coverage and social media tend to have a more dichotomous view of crime where it is viewed as inherently bad and a reflection of a person's morality. Portrayals of crime become much more skewed when comparing differences on racial bias in the media. We can examine the trends based on the words to describe white and black defendants. Personal and life oriented words are used more when describing White defendants such as father, son, and man. In contrast, Black defendants are heavily criminalized with labels such as arrested, accused, and murder used in stories (Report Documents Racial Bias, 2021). These articles instill implicit bias which is known as the subconscious feelings a person develops due to prior experiences. This can not only affect decision making but has furthered societal perceptions regarding racial disparities. Shifting away from degrading language into more objective or uplifting words can hold a heavy influence in how these marginalized groups are recognized. By using the phrase, 'person who is incarcerated' rather than 'felon' we can change the dehumanizing feelings towards incarceration.

Empowerment is a significant factor in helping people release this stigma which has been internalized from conversations around the criminal justice system (Tran et al., 2018). This is not to say that reporting crimes needs to be centered around positivity, but rather that we need to start using language that is unbiased towards certain groups. The sympathetic language used for White defendants only exacerbate the dehumanization of Black defendants and criminalizes them further.

Prison Lifestyle

Life in prison has proven to be a grueling experience due to the punitive measures taken by prison systems. While the morality of convicts has been put into question by society, we must question the morality of these prison and jail systems to understand the wrongful tactics taken against convicted people. A major reason for why stigma against incarcerated individuals exists is due to the environment during incarceration which greatly affects their mental health and provides no aid into reintegration of society. The main three stressors of incarceration were due to interactions with correctional officers and medical staff along with fear of other inmates. It is noted that in this study done by

Porter (2018), investigating experiences related to stress during incarceration, formerly incarcerated people focused more on social struggles in prison as their primary stressor rather than physical factors. Over 70% of participants in the study found their altercations with the prison staff to be stressful, with a majority of them feeling dehumanized, specifically by correctional officers due to the punitive measures taken. These measures could range from verbal and physical abuse to having certain privileges taken away, such as visitation rights. The intensity of these interactions ignited a fight or flight response for many people in the criminal justice system where they never had the time to relax in their environment. Prison culture is something that can be adopted during incarceration which creates a social hierarchy that people must learn and follow. They must conform to a certain inmate code; all contingent on a person's sentencing, social circle, and interaction with staff. Similar to social hierarchies outside of prison, even gender and the people you surround yourself with can affect where you stand within institutions. The actual outline of this code is not clearly stated as it varies depending on the location and how the institution decides their rules. However, many follow the basic guidelines of not revealing information about another inmate and be respectful to staff but do not 'suck up' to them with a major emphasis on loyalty in your group (Irwin & Cressey, 1962). This means the stigma around inmates starts before they even begin the process of reentry. Connecting back to the in group/out group phenomenon described during internalized stigma, people tend to stick with groups they closely identify with based on criminal ideologies which creates this prison subculture. The social standing you hold outside of prison does not translate inside, however there are parallels. Such as with many societal standards, these rules are unwritten and simply learned as you navigate throughout the community. There is still a hierarchy as the person with the most power, based on their connections and sentencing time, tends to have the most authority.

Prison life causes a remarkable amount of stress onto a person which impacts both their physical and mental health. Physiologically, our brains go through allostasis, during which small stressors permit a baseline of wellbeing to protect your mental and physical health. This helps to maintain homeostasis which is the interaction between chemical and physical systems in your body to have an equal balance. Allostasis is vital for our bodies to function properly under small stressors in our daily lives to prevent the development of physical illnesses. When you experience chronic stress over a prolonged period of time, returning to this baseline proves to be more difficult (Frodl & O'Keane, 2013).

The stark differences from a prison environment back to society prevents allostasis from being carried out efficiently. Not only does this take a toll on your mental health but can also put your physical health at risk with increased chances of heart disease, diabetes, and much more. One of the many obstacles people deal with post-incarceration includes finding the proper medical help. With financial instability becoming a factor along with discrimination from healthcare and counseling services, this only adds as a risk of recidivism.

The extensive time away from their community along with their offending and incarceration experiences have shaped their character greatly; reintegration to society becomes a strenuous process at this point. The disruption to their baseline of stress can lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms to stimulate their fight or flight reactions that provide comfortability during prison.

This prison lifestyle is their way of adapting to life after incarceration in order to navigate society. Their ways of adapting could include habits they developed in prison, choosing likeminded social groups, and practicing substance abuse. Accounting for the stressors people experience in prison, these can greatly impact the way a person thinks and functions in their daily life. From eating food to making their bed they have had to make many adjustments in prison that carry over post-incarceration. This provides more support in a stark transition to unfamiliar environments despite the absence of these stressors after prison. Not only does this prison lifestyle risk recidivism, but it contributes to the surrounding stigma due to stereotypes regarding drug use and violent behavior which have the potential to be carried out.

This risk of recidivism can be prevented through criminal desistance which is defined as the absence of criminal activity, leading to a decline in reoffending. It is important to note that criminal desistance is not an event that happens such as recidivism but rather the absence of an action which is prevalent over time. The most common reason for this event is due to aging, rates of criminal offenses decrease as age increases (Laub & Sampson, 2001). New lifestyle changes along with social support can promote healthy habits, decreasing the likelihood of reoffending. There are lifestyle choices made to further improvement, including the search for employment and housing. Many people find the most hope in change directly after release, with promises of a bright future and long term goals. LeBel and Maruna (2012) mention these goals to provide a connection between formerly incarcerated people and the general public:

For example, Helfgott (1997) found in her study in Seattle, Washington that former prisoners' most common long-term goals were to own a home, to establish a career, to be self employed and to own a business, to obtain an educational degree, to be able to help their children financially through college, and to have a 'normal life' (16). (3) While the stigmatization of formerly incarcerated people creates a barrier between them and society, their expectations outside of prisons demonstrates a common link to close their polarizing perceptions. The obstacles faced trying to achieve their goals are unique to their own experiences, with their starting line being a lot farther than the average person due to their identity being connected to crime.

Stigma Reduction

In order to enact stigma reduction and assist formerly incarcerated people who are struggling with re-integration, we must focus on providing education during and post incarceration to aid with reentry and among the general public to normalize incarceration. When observing the stigma mechanisms, these have been put in place because the experiences people have gone through are not common among society. Their morality has been put into question because they committed an act that led to a punishment- something that is taboo to the average person. If we had more conversations around incarceration, the stigma surrounding them and the use of the harmful labels would be reduced. We can also reduce recidivism rates by offering resources post-incarceration for people that need guidance. "...community- and school based diversion and intervention programs could successfully divert first time offenders from further encounters with the justice system" (Restivo & Lanier, 2015). This can be especially helpful for adolescents and marginalized communities because they are the most likely to suffer from increased recidivism rates and discrimination.

The act of stigma reduction puts an emphasis on empowerment of oneself, hope for the future, and meaning in life by recovering physically and mentally from incarceration. The obstacles people struggle with consisting of employment, housing, and substance abuse must be first addressed on their road to recovery. Barranger et al. (2020) expands on this idea with an approach on recovery and mental health- emphasizing the autonomy they can gain from employment and the positive effects. Depending on their job, it can allow for

more stable social support among their peers aiding in their journey on substance abuse and financial stability, which can contribute to their housing crisis. The act of assisting people during reentry must start before they even leave correctional systems. The stressors illustrated previously take a significant toll on their mental health, extracted from the punitive measures taken by prison and jail systems. By focusing on more rehabilitative practices such as behavioral interventions, education, and substance abuse treatment this can make the transition one step easier for incarcerated individuals before they are even released.

Conclusion

The stigma that incarcerated individuals face is reflected by their experiences both inside and out of prison, leading into a cycle of recidivism due to social rejection and lack of resources. The four stigma mechanisms illustrate the barriers they can face from jobs, housing, and social circles which perpetuate negative stereotypes, further magnified by racial disparities. The last mechanism, internalization, leads into the labeling theory to promote conversation around incarceration. This theory leads into predictions about the future of people in the criminal justice system based on surrounding societal perceptions. By observing life in prison we can understand the potential obstacles transitioning into reintegration. Taking preventative measures against Recidivism includes criminal desistance and stigma reduction. There is an emphasis on providing education for both the general public along with formerly incarcerated individuals in order to promote stigma reduction and provide resources to gain success with searching for employment and housing. Recovery for formerly incarcerated people is not a linear journey but with the steps in the right direction, we can negate the stigma surrounding them with successful reentry. The hope society holds for them and for themselves can be uplifted if they find outlets outside of correctional systems to help them with their physical and mental health. The golden rule that we learned so young can finally be carried over into adulthood to tear down degrading social constructs and allow people to be free from a confined box.

References

- Barrenger, S. L., Maurer, K., Moore, K. L., Hong, I., McLeigh, J. D., & Spaulding, W. (2020). Mental Health Recovery: Peer Specialists With Mental Health and Incarceration Experiences. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 90(4), 479–488. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000450>
- Benecchi, L. (August 2021). *Recidivism Imprisons American Progress*. Harvard Political Review. <https://harvardpolitics.com/recidivism-american-progress/>
- Feingold, Z. R., & Lamb, M. E. (2021). The Stigma of Incarceration Experience: A Systematic Review. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 27(4), 550–569. <https://doi.org/10.1037/law0000319>
- Frodl, T., & O'Keane, V. (2013). How does the brain deal with cumulative stress? A review with focus on developmental stress, HPA axis function and hippocampal structure in humans. *Neurobiology of disease*, 52, 24–37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nbd.2012.03.012>
- Irwin, J., & Cressey, D. R. (1962). Thieves, Convicts and the Inmate Culture. *Social Problems*, 10(2), 142–155. <https://doi.org/10.2307/799047>
- Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2001). Understanding Desistance from Crime. *Crime and Justice*, 28, 1–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1147672>
- Moore, K. E., Stuewig, J. B., & Tangney, J. P. (2016). THE EFFECT OF STIGMA ON CRIMINAL OFFENDERS' FUNCTIONING: A LONGITUDINAL MEDIATIONAL MODEL. *Deviant behavior*, 37(2), 196–218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2014.1004035>
- Moses, M. (2014). How likely are ex-offenders to get a job offer? American Correctional Association. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/249043.pdf>
- Porter, L. C. (2019). Being “on Point”: Exploring the Stress-related Experiences of Incarceration. *Society and Mental Health*, 9(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2156869318771439>

- Report Documents Racial Bias in Coverage of Crime by Media. (2021).
<https://ejournal.org/news/report-documents-racial-bias-in-coverage-of-crime-by-media/>
- Restivo, E., & Lanier, M. M. (2015). Measuring the Contextual Effects and Mitigating Factors of Labeling Theory. *Justice Quarterly*, 32(1), 116–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2012.756115>
- Tran, N.T., Baggio, S., Dawson, A. *et al.* Words matter: a call for humanizing and respectful language to describe people who experience incarceration. *BMC Int Health Hum Rights* 18, 41 (2018).
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-018-0180-4>
- Triplett, R., Upton, L., & Piquero, A. R. (2015). Labeling Theory. In *The Handbook of Criminological Theory*(pp. 271–289). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118512449.ch14>