

Incarceration of family members negatively impacts mental health outcomes for African American women

More than half of all African American women in the United States report having at least one family member who is incarcerated, causing higher levels of depressive symptoms and psychological distress than previously understood.

The findings come from a [new paper in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*](#), whose lead author, [Evelyn J. Patterson](#), associate professor of sociology and a Vanderbilt Chancellor's Faculty Fellow, said the study sheds new light on the challenges facing African American women.

"Most studies that look at the impact of incarceration are examining people who are parents or the children of someone who is incarcerated. That means, if you're not a parent or a child of an incarcerated person, you're excluded," she said. Given that having a sibling incarcerated is the most common form of familial incarceration, prior work misses a large piece of the familial incarceration story. Further, African American women as a whole are rarely the central focus when people examine the toll of familial incarceration, especially those without children.

The study sought to measure the mental health impact on African American women of having a family member incarcerated. Further, the research examined whether social roles such as employment, marriage or parenthood added to, or eased, the psychological burden of having an immediate family member in jail or prison.

"In all models, familial incarceration was associated with worse psychological adjustment," the authors wrote. "Our findings showed that familial incarceration was associated with elevated psychological distress and depressive symptomology, extending a long line of studies documenting the consequences of familial incarceration." Examining role combinations, women who were employed, but had no other social roles showed lower levels of psychological distress and depressive symptoms than women who occupied other roles such as marriage/partnership or motherhood.

In addition to Patterson, the co-authors included Ryan D. Talbert from the University of Connecticut and Tony N. Brown from Rice University. The study drew from a nationally representative survey of 1,961 never-incarcerated African American women.

Patterson said the study fits into a broader research context examining how marginalized populations, particularly African American families, face worse outcomes on measures of health and psychological well-being because of the societal burdens they face.

"From slavery, to lynching, to incarceration, generations of African American families have endured having their family members taken away. African Americans have had to learn how to compartmentalize this trauma and have survived, in part, due to their resilience," Patterson said. "But this resilience is a double-edged sword as these experiences worsen health outcomes."