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# Urban School Districts & Mass Incarceration of Young Black Males

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## **Abstract**

*The lack of quality education provided to minorities in urban school districts has had devastating outcomes for young black boys. The school to prison pipeline is a recognized problem in this nation that has allowed our prison population to disproportionately represent African-American males. My research examines the relationship between academic experience and life outcomes in relation to correctional control of young black males in Northern California. Through quantitative measures I examine the opinion of survey participants on their primary and secondary educational experience. Along with interviews to provide personal testimonies about the life outcomes in relation to their educational experience. Non parametrical test revealed that students of color are suspended more often and although data was not strong enough to reject that staff-student relationships were equal among minority and majority students, descriptive statistics did reveal on average the experience with staff was more negative. The findings of this study highlight the nationally recognized issues in urban education of underachievement, zero-tolerance policies and an overall negative experience all of which attribute to the mass incarceration of young black males.*

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, Correspondence Theory, Exclusion, Black Males, Punitive Discipline Policies, Prison Industrial Complex

## **Introduction**

The objective of this research is to identify the factors within urban schools that contribute to the mass incarceration of young black men. Today there are more African-Americans under correctional control in prison, jail probation or parole than were enslaved in 1850 which equates to more than half of working-age african-american men are either under correctional control or branded felons. If the lack of quality education in communities of color is the reason why so many young black men are behind bars in the “Land of the Free and Home of the Brave” then it is time for America to rethink what we stand for allowing institutions to impede on the freedoms of its citizens. If anybody deserves a chance to thrive it is the children that live amongst us and for a change they deserve for their potential to be invested in instead of when it is too late and it is already too costly. My value commitments to equality, individual freedoms and community are what lead me to be a proponent of the functions of the government. The market alone cannot function to bring justice within our society. As it has clearly demonstrated with the privatization of prisons aiding the mass incarceration of young black men. When left to its own evils I believe the market impedes on individual freedoms, equality and order for the sake of the prosperity of a few individuals. The privatization of prisons was made possible by the Reagan administration (1980) when he implemented the war on drugs which singlehandedly put people of color especially young black males in the position to be over-penalized with mandatory minimums for nonviolent offenses, monetary incentives for police to profile citizens of color. The war on drugs was a crack down on freedom within the United States. It sent dad’s away to prison for a long time and allowed the police to become terrorists on its own soil, and allowed for students of color to be

excluded in education through punitive discipline policies. Black male adolescent exclusion in the form of negative academic experiences and punitive discipline policies within the education system affect mass incarceration of young black men.

## **Theory**

Herbert Gintis, originally a math major who grew disillusioned with the subject when he became involved in the student movements of the 1960's which peaked his interest in economics and marxism. He then switched his doctoral degree studies from math to economics, at the end of his studies he met life-long professional partner Samuel Bowles (Gintis). Samuel Bowles received his doctoral degree from Harvard University where he had focused his thesis on the allocation of resources in Education (Bowles). Although they were both economic majors, both Gintis and Bowles were very interested in social justice issues primarily those focused around education. In Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* they lay out the theoretical groundwork for the Correspondence theory which explains the phenomenon of exclusionary education that black boys are socialized to in this country.

The public school is a social institution which integrates our youth in the economic system. Schools serve a particular function of reproducing the social relations within production (Knopp). In other words, schools prepare our youth to be good workers. The social relations in education help accustom students to the discipline of the workplace and the relationships that will be formed in the work place. The relationships between administrators to teachers and teachers to students mirror the hierarchical divisions in labor (Bowles, 1976). Those students whom are economically disenfranchised and attend schools in primarily working class or urban areas will assuredly be prepared

to take labor positions at the bottom of the hierarchy of labor. According to *Urban Pedagogies and the Ceiling of Adolescents of Color* by G. Duncan, white control over public education of students of color has always had economic implications and those boys with limited educational opportunities and low achievement are at a greater risk for imprisonment later in life where they will be exploited for cheap unskilled labor by the capitalists.

American schools lead our students on an illusory journey believing that people are awarded on the basis of merit. This misconception leaves out the economic status of the parents playing a role in the success or merit of a child. Children of wealthier backgrounds have an easier time at reaching the same status as their parents meanwhile students in urban school districts are prepared to stay at the bottom of the labor pool due to the economic standing of their parents (Bowles, 1976). Awarding students on the basis of merit is not a fair practice because merit for students of color especially young black boys does not exist because they are being prepared for the exploitation of their labor. This illusory journey serves a purpose in urban school districts because it is no mistake that students of color are concentrated in schools that are repressive, have little internal order and forceful authority structures with little possibility for advancement. These characteristics mimic the inferior job situations that education is preparing them for.

The difference in social relationships within schools reflect the social backgrounds of the student body and their likely future economic positions (Bowles, 1976). The negative experience amongst boys of color is not arbitrary but serves a purpose to enforce the stratification system set in place by the division of labor. If students are

placed in schools that are repressive and do not harbor critical thinking but rather conformity than it follows that those students who come from urban backgrounds will stay at the bottom.

Education's main purpose is to reproduce the social division of labor in this country and with the intersectionality of race, class, and gender if you look at one then you must look at the other. Schools have a duty not to teach content but rather to shape the form of the student in how they fit economically into the grand scheme of things and as it stands black males fit into the prison industrial complex. Which it is estimated that 1 in 3 black males will go to prison in their lifetime (Knafo).

Further analysis of this phenomena and why it persists according to correspondence theory brings in Derrick Bell's *Critical Race Theory*. Derrick Bell was a legal scholar and professor at Harvard University and is credited as the creator of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Critical Race Theory interprets racism as being ingrained into the fabric of America and does not need a sole body to thrive because it is apart of the foundation of America. The foundation was built on white privilege and whiteness being dominant which further marginalizes the "others" less dominant within society (Delgado et al, 2012). Racism being the fabric of America explains why we have black students in urban school districts who are being prepared to be unskilled laborers. Further it explains the error in students believing that people are rewarded for the work that they do, that does not exist for black boys in urban school districts because it is implied in the function of the institution to prepare these boys for their lowly place in the division of labor.

Integrating Correspondence Theory with Critical Race Theory helps to analyze the exclusion of black boys in education and explain how this phenomenon fits the narrative of the capitalists who own the means of production. This integrative framework puts into perspective the normalization of exclusion in education and why it so greatly affects students of color especially young black boys.

## **Literature Review**

### **History**

The history of exclusion within the education system dates back to the groundbreaking case of *Brown Vs. Board of Education* (1954) which desegregated schools and gave children of color what seemed like a fighting chance at being able to contribute to society and mobilize themselves. Before the desegregation of schools African-Americans had to educate themselves as best they could with minimal resources. This exclusion did not impede the progress of African-American students as they made due with the resources they had despite the issues that were specific to black schools; subpar facilities, lack of bussing for students, disproportionate teacher-student ratios, overcrowding and poor teaching practices. However, this had no effect on the empowerment through education. These characteristics that were deemed inferior made African-Americans adept to persevering (Walker 2000). Prior to 1954, African-Americans knew that the only way to educate themselves would be through their own agency. They took what they had and made the best of it using vacant houses, churches, and lodges for schools because the whites felt that the blacks did not contribute enough taxes to receive proper funding for their schools (which would have eradicated issues that were specific to black schools). African Americans did not let this deter them from what they felt education was; true freedom. Black teachers and students saw merit in their community schools



opposed to white scholars who saw inferiority. (Walker; 2000, Patterson;,2001). Historically exclusion has been established by the state and is important in understanding the Anti-black sentiments it has created within education policy and funding for our contemporary society. Exclusion is not new to the black community and without the historical communal safeguards in place it is having a devastating effect on African-American communities.

The Reagan administration served as a turning point for urban education. Ronald Reagan's legacy is one known of decreased government and decreased spending. Reagan's administration embraced what is known as block grants; that would aide in reducing inflation and federal spending on education. Reagan's proposals to cut back significantly impacted the amount of aid available to the neediest students in urban schools. Between 1980 and 1988, spending for disadvantaged, neglected and delinquent students was up 35% but when adjusted for inflation, there was actually a 12% decline in spending over this time. These spending reductions fell most heavily on poor and minority students in urban school districts (Verstegen; 1990). These reductions would have serious implications on black students in urban school districts in the subsequent years.

Contemporarily exclusion has taken a more covert approach with dire consequences for young men of color. Black students are suffering in poorly funded schools and being over-represented in exclusionary discipline policies which later funnel them into prison at alarming rates. Landmark class action lawsuits like Serrano Vs. Priest which made it unconstitutional to fund schools through local property taxes because then the success of a student became dependent upon the wealth of their parents and

neighbors ( G.F; 1972). This lawsuit victorious, provided no remedy for the current tax funding system in California and can largely be attributed to the faults in our urban schools. Schools in urban districts suffer from lower achievement rates, poorly qualified teachers and severe budget discrepancies which fuel the inequalities. Nearly two-thirds of minority students attend predominately urban schools with one-third of black students being in intensely segregated school populations (90% or more enrollment) (Darling-Hammond; 2000 ,Leob et al; 2007) The California school finance and governance system is highly flawed, no schools serving a low percentage of students in poverty (Meaning; serving primarily rich students) are low performing while a high number of poverty schools are low performing. Funding programs limit districts and schools ability to respond to accountability and student needs, leaving students in high poverty consistently low performing and inadequately resourced to serve their specific needs (Stubblebine et al; 1981, Leob et al; 2007, Darling-Hammond; 2000). Poorly funded schools lack the courses, materials, equipment and qualified teachers that would give poorer black students the access to education that will help them thrive in our society and be self-sufficient (Darling-Hammond; 2000, Leob et al; 2007, Stubblebine et al; 1981). Those in poorly funded schools are more likely to drop-out due to the lack of resources like books, other materials and highly qualified teachers. Students in highly funded districts do not see the same problems with qualified teachers, adequate materials and smaller class sizes due to adequate funding in richer school districts (Darling-Hammond; 2000).

### **Discipline Policies**

The problems of underachievement that are specific to urban schools are not just an issue of personal responsible but an issue that has larger societal consequences

that affect everyone in and outside the communities of the youth. Students who are overly subjected to punitive discipline policies are more likely to suffer from lack of achievement, truancy and being a drop-out (Fenning et al; 2007, Gregory; 2011, Mendez et al; 2002, Arcia; 2007). When certain groups are not reaching the same levels of success as their counterparts it has a great affect on society by creating conflict. That conflict results in higher class disparities, crime and poverty rates which are all issues that are exclusive to poor minority populations. This phenomena of over-disciplining black boys has been documented since the 1970's and still remains when accounting for factors such as socioeconomic status (Gregory et al; 2011). Black students are 2 to 3 times more likely to be suspended as white students (Gregory;2011, Mendez et al; 2002, Arcia; 2007). This is due to students being perceived as more dangerous or troublemakers so school staff feel they must discipline the child but end up over disciplining which fuels their entry into prison. Black boys are more likely to be suspended for re-offenses such as tardies, horsing around with friends or showing aggression. These offenses are often overlooked in white children and deemed a threat when black students commit (Krezemien et al; 2006, Gregory et al; 2011). The high suspension rates amongst black students is largely attributed to how black boys are perceived amongst school staff. The student-staff relationships play a huge roll in how a student is perceived whether it is positive or negative. Staff tend to act on the judgments they have made about groups of people and the children that come from those specific groups. For example, if a staff member believes that black males are dangerous then it follows that they treat the students who identify as a black male badly. Furthermore, the neighborhood the school is

in plays a role in shaping the staff's prejudgments on the type of students they are dealing with. If the staff works in a rough neighborhood then they will treat the students from that neighborhood as a problem that needs to be fixed. This leads to the need to over-protect roles of authority because young boys in urban schools are a threat to authoritarian rule in schools (Arcia; 2007, Krezmien et al; 2006).

## **Merit**

One might presume that maybe students of color are just underprepared for school due to cultural differences and that is why they have these specific issues in their schools and communities that hinder them from succeeding but that is not the case. As a large group, the underachievement of African Americans in school and the overrepresentation in prison populations are not because they are any less intelligent than their counterparts. It is because they do not have access to the materials; such as computers, paid tutoring sessions, and etc. that their counterparts have had access to their whole lives and are valued in discussions of merit within our education system (Spears; 1978, Hurtado; 2005). Our current understanding of merit and the way it is socially constructed, standards appear to be biased against various groups memberships. This is much like testing a fishes ability to climb a tree, of course that fish is going to fail the test if you don't include the cultural capital of black boys. Furthermore, those facilitating the test have the power to control who knows what about that fishes ability to climb a tree.

The problem of exclusion in education that disproportionately affects black boys and is economically beneficial to the prison industrial complex. Students who miss valuable instructional time are less prepared to enter into and maintain a cohesive society by contributing to the workforce (Duncan; 2000, Wakefield; 2010, Krezmien et al; 2006)

Similarly, completion of high school reduces the participation in criminal activity by 2-3% (Lochner et al; 2003). This well researched problem is directly correlated with the prison industry. One would assume that this heavily researched problem would no longer be a problem. However it continues to persist because setting students up to go to prison is profitable.

### **Prison Industrial Complex**

Over the past several decades as the prison system grows, spending time in prison is shared among those with lower levels of educational attainment (Ewert S et al; 2014). Majority of black men in prison are high school drop-outs or unemployed; this type of disenfranchisement is characteristic of prison inmates and was set up so these young men fall into correctional control ( Hirschfield; 2003, Wacquant; 2001, Duncan; 2000). The prison industrial complex is a billion dollar industry that works in government lobbying for mandatory minimums on prison sentencing , harsher sentences, all of which disproportionally affect men of color and more specifically black men (Cohen; 2015, Wacquant; 2001). Similarly, the United States has the highest prison population in the world and the profit from this industry is incentive to keep people locked up. Contracts in private prisons mandate states keep quotas on the occupancy of their prisons which guarantee that beds will be filled or tax payers pay the price despite a decrease in crime (Pelaez; 2014, Cohen; 2015, Public Interest; 2013). In addition, legislation allows for companies to receive a tax credit for every inmate they hire while paying the inmate as low as 14 cents a day. This provides incentive for the continued incarceration of black men. Inmates make million dollar profits for some of our favorite companies such as Victoria Secrets and McDonalds; making burger patties, bras and packaging for our

favorite beverages (Pelaez; 2014, Riley; 2014). According to Pelaez; 2014, the economic rationale for this has historical context.

## **Methods**

The independent variable associated with my study (Race) required me to open up my selection of participants. By using only the population that is unique to higher education and the CSUMB community would have skewed my data as I would have had a pool of participants who were majority caucasian. This required me to do convenience and snowball sampling, I sent out a link to my survey through Facebook and other social media platforms. A total of 53 survey respondents data were collected. I adapted an existing survey from *The Relationship of School Structure and Support to Suspension Rates for Black and White High School Students* (Gregory et al. 2011). In Gregory's survey he ask about the past 6 month experience for high school students, I adapted my survey to ask about the general primary and secondary education experience of male survey participants. An eleven question survey with multiple choice and a 4-point likert scale to eliminate the "neutral" or "undecided" option was utilized. I then used IBM SPSS 20 to statistically analyze my data using Manova test which a parametric test that determined the outcomes for these different groups; in this case the academic experience outcome of the groups. This test has revealed the difference in academic experiences between the racial groups. Also, I used Pearsons Chi-Square which is a test of association that is used to discover if there is any significant association between race and suspension rates within my given sample size. This test is important because suspension rates correlate with achievement and drop-out rates which further connect to

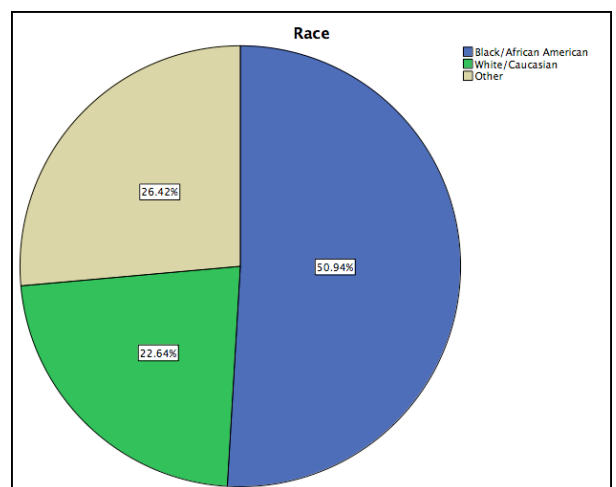
the heightened possibility of being under correctional control later in life. All statistical methods used a significance level of  $<0.05$ .

The qualitative data methods originated in the need to substantiate the quantitative data with personal narratives to explain how the subjects felt about the phenomena and how it contributes to subjects success or failures in life. I recruited 4 subjects through my professional contacts that I made in my tenure at Solano County Office of Education and California State University, Monterey Bay. The subjects were black males over the age of 18 recruited to give meaningful personal narratives about their academic experiences and how it has contributed to their current place in life. I created a semi-structured interview with 13 open-ended questions allowing the subjects to express their thoughts as freely as they wished. My unit of measure includes words spoken, tone of voice, body language and any other ways the subjects communicated their responses. I employed Nvivo qualitative data analysis software running a word frequency test to find the most frequent words used amongst participants and themes within their collective responses and then connect them to my integrative theoretical framework in the discussion section. Also, I used matrix coding query to investigate what each subject had to say about their academic experience analyzing the nodes attached to their responses and the table created with those nodes and attributes. I used Matrix coding because it allows for comparison amongst subjects.

### **Logic of Sampling**

#### **Quantitative**

The survey I administered online through Google Forms had a total of 53 respondents. My sample size of 53 respondents was 100% male with varying racial backgrounds. My research question being revolving around the experiences of males; in particular African-American males forced me to close my sample size to female participants. I left female participants out of my analysis because of the need to analyze and compare the experiences of males and how those experiences correlate with the literature's projection of black males being under correctional control. There were 18 Black/African-American respondents, 10 White/Caucasian, 8 Hispanic/Latino, 1 Native American, 5 Asian/Pacific Islander, 9 Black Mixed and 2 White Mixed respondents. For the purposes of analysis the 9 Black Mixed respondents were combined with the Black/African-American respondents. The perception of Black mixed race peoples in American society still has negative connotations attached to the identity just as Blackness still has negative connotations. Also, the need for society to categorize people which results in seeing people either "black or white" made me more inclined to combine the two. The 2 White mixed race respondents I combined with the White/Caucasian respondents for the same reasons stated earlier, that our need to categorize people has resulted in mixed race peoples being improperly labeled and treated as such label ascribed to them against their will. Then I combined the Hispanic, Native American and Asian/Pacific Islander to make a new category of "Other". This combining of variables made my





new data set 27 Black/African-American respondents, 12 White/Caucasian and 14 Other which makes for a sample size of 53 Males.

As a group White males are not incarcerated at the same rate of black males in our new age of mass incarceration. This fact is why I used White males as a comparison for the academic experience of Black males.

## Findings

When comparing the means of the two groups (Black Male vs. White Male) on a 4 point likert-scale, 1 representing Strongly Disagree and 4 representing Strongly Agree, on average Black men have a more negative academic experience. Black male central tendency range between 1.89 and 2.19, whereas White male responses range between 2.58 and 2.92. The 5 questions regarding academic experience and the relationships between staff and students, black males tended to have more negative staff-student relationships which results in a more negative academic experience as opposed to their white counterpart. The central tendency revealed that for Black Males it leaned more negatively opposed to more positively for White males.

The Multi-variate test was implemented to test the differences in the dependent variables and if they are significantly affected by the different levels or groups in the independent variables. Due to the de-

pendent variables not being independent of each other, meaning they all contribute to the overall academic experience of my male participants, it was logical to run a multi-variate test. Also, running multiple ANOVA test increases the risk of a type 1 error. Combining the dependent variables together the multi-variate test revealed that there

	Multi-Variate	
	Value	Sig.
Wilks Lambda	0.550	0.001

was statistically significant difference in academic experience based on race,  $F(10, 92) = 3.210, p < .005$ ; Wilks  $\Lambda = .550$ . This is significant because it reveals in the context of the research question that African-Americans are having more negative academic experience. When you explore the One-Way Anova test on the dependent variables it reveals where the statistical difference is. The variables *students being treated with respect* and *if a school*

One Way ANOVA	sig
Staff treated all students without prejudice	0.004
Staff/Adults in my primary/secondary school supported and treated all students with respect	0.489
Punishments for breaking the rules were the same no matter who you were	0.004
If a student broke a rule he or she would be punished	0.042
If a school rule was broken, students knew what kind of punishment would follow	0.005

*rule was broken the student would be punished* were not strong enough to reject however they still contr

tribute to the over all experience; this is why grouping is necessary in the Manova test. Black men reflecting on their academic experience do not agree that they were treated without prejudice and that punishments that followed breaking rules were not distributed equally and depended on who you were. Also, they did not know what punishment would follow for them breaking the rules which creates a negative academic environment which does not contribute to the development of the student and contributes to an overall negative experience. As stated in the literature negative academic experiences contribute to the incarceration of young black males because this negative experience also contributes to the student being pushed out of school and into the prison system.

My hypothesis for Out-Of-School Suspensions was an alternative hypothesis  $H_a$ :

Black male students are suspended more often than white male students, and a null hypothesis  $H_0$ : black male students are not suspended more often than white male students. I ran cross tabulations to compare the relationship between race and out of school suspensions (both categorical variables) and found that there was a significant difference between the two levels of the independent variable; Black males and White males. We can see that  $X(1)=9.641$ ,  $P = .002 < \alpha 0.05$  reveals that there is a significant relationship between suspension rate and race. This statistical difference allows for me to reject my null hypothesis and accept that the alternative hypothesis that black male students are suspended more often than white male students. It would be safe to assume that this significance really exist and is not due to chance. The total of both black and white respondents combined reveals just how wide the disparity is. The total respondents of Black males made up 48% of the total "Yes" for the question *I Have Had An Out Of School Suspension*, As for White males when asked the same question they only made up 5.1% of the total responses for "Yes". A strong relationship would be cause to assume that the chances of suspension determined by race are high. However, the relationship between Race and Suspension reveal a moderate relationship with a Cramer's V association of (.497). Assuming the chance of suspension by race would not be wrong but the risk of being wrong is greatly increased because it is only a moderate relationship.

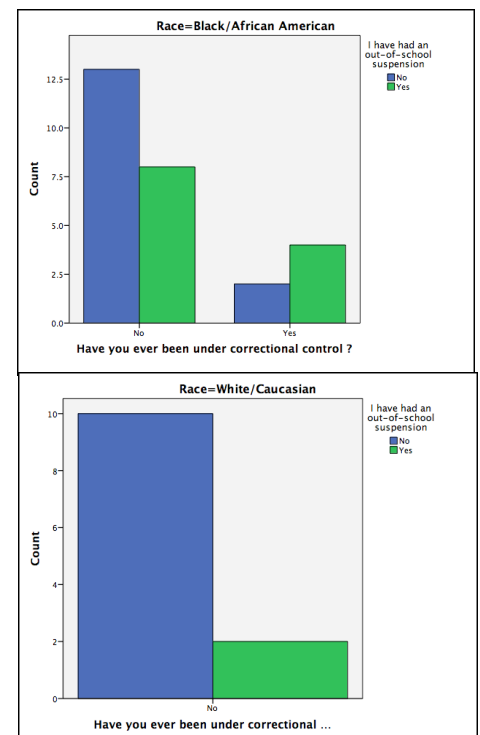
Running Cross Tabulations Chi-Square between *I have had an out of school suspension with have you ever been under correctional control* and layering the variables so they are sorted by race revealed no significant relationship between the two,

$X(1)=2.917$ ,  $P = .08 > \alpha 0.05$ . Although no significant statistical relationship was revealed within the two dependent variables crossed with the independent variable of race there is still a weak relationship. Cramer's V association revealed a weak relationship of (.28), Therefore assuming that suspension and race guarantee the chance of being under correctional control is not sound and is wrong. However, it is important to note within the sample size, no White males answered yes to being under correctional control which is not true for Black males. The black males who responded, 6 of them chose yes to being under correctional control which makes a percentage total of 11.3% of the total sample size and the highest of the other 4 racial groups. So while there may not be a significant statistical difference there is still a difference.

The last statistical test administered in this study is a Chi-square test through Cross-Tabulations. The dependent variable *Being under correctional control* and the independent variable was *Race*. The test revealed that within this population there is a somewhat statistical significance between

being under correctional control and that outcome being determined by ones race,

$X(1)=3.152$ ,  $P=.076 > \alpha 0.05$ . The p value being greater than the alpha forces us to reject the assumption that within this sample size race being under correctional control is more likely to occur if one is a black male. The numbers reveal that black males within this sample size have been under correctional control somewhat by chance. Further investigation of association between the two nominal variables reveals that the level of



association (Cramer V) is moderately strong (.29) and assuming the outcome of the dependent variable (correctional control) one can be somewhat confident that the assumption they are making is not by chance.

### **Qualitative**

I implemented selective sampling when gathering interview participants because of my focus on the black experience in primary and secondary academia. The 4 interview participants were all black males over the age of 18 with various academic backgrounds. One of the participants attended a magnet high school program that specialized in humanities; having segments of the semester dedicated to topics that are typically taught at the college level such as race and gender theories. The remaining participants attended urban schools in various counties in Northern California. The 13 question semi-structured interview that was administered amongst the 4 participants showed themes that permeated throughout the interview process.

The first three questions asked were regarding family status; the type of family they grew up in, family socio-economic status and what types of things did their parents put value on. I asked these questions to get a feel for the participant's background because how much money your family had, if you had two parents or one and the types of things they put value on affect your life. Family makeup was split down the middle with two respondents growing up in a two parent household and the other two growing up in a single family home. The two who came from single family home admitted that their mother worked many jobs and they were financially unstable, however they did not go without their needs being met but they went without their wants being met. Having

needs met but not having wants met was also true for one other respondent and the last respondent's family having greater financial freedom.

When I asked the question "What type of things did your parent(s) put value on when you were growing up" to each participant a theme emerged immediately. The theme that permeated throughout this question were parental values were seemingly the same; they all stressed the importance of education, thinking for yourself, being self-sufficient and compassion for others. I asked this question because it a common misconception that the culture of African-Americans is to not value school but other means of becoming self-sufficient. Although, I only asked four black males what their parents values were but it was an immediate theme that emerged.

When I asked "Were you involved in any extracurricular activities?" 2 of the 4 participants were involved in activities outside of school. The magnet high school student and now CSUMB student had participated. The other suffered an injury which forced him to quit his activities just after the start of high school; which in his words "was hella weak" meaning an unfortunate or less favorable situation. If I were to lump the respondent who sustained an injury and had to quit his activities with those who did not participate a theme emerges. The participants who did not participate in extra-curricular activities also answered "Yes" to *Have you ever been to jail*. Perhaps there is a correlation to going to jail and not participating in extra-curricular activities. I would infer that the time after school that is not being occupied by positive forces allows for the student to get into trouble. The respondents who had not participated in extra-curricular activities did not due to financial woes and a lack of interest coming from respondent 1D.

When I asked the participants if they felt that the grades that were sent home reflected their actual intelligence, I received a “No” or some variation of that from all participants. When I asked why they felt that way, it got a bit more interesting. They all agreed that they were much more intelligent than what ever got printed on a report card home but due to them not applying themselves in school it became a reality that they accepted. Respondent 1D had an interesting perspective on the grades printed versus real life intelligence. When talking in general about grades he stated that he knew some really smart kids at his school but some of them were out working jobs and being parents to their smaller siblings so it caused those students to miss school. He further stated that schools only care about your attendance and sometimes you (students) cannot be there because they are trying to deal with real life. It got even more interesting when respondent 1A expanded on why his grades did not reflect him. He stated that the standardization of education skews the results (grades) and also skews learning so that we solely focus on grades instead of actual learning. This brings up an interesting point on the illusion of merit in urban schools. Students believe that they get what they have earned remaining completely oblivious to the forces in place that are preparing them for their respective positions in the labor force. For black males, those positions are more often times at the bottom. The question asked is important in my analysis because it reveals the illusion of merit because all the respondents admit they should have applied themselves more but for whatever reason, did not apply themselves when they were in school. I believe this lack of application in ones abilities has a lot to do with the standardization of education and this illusion of merit.

When I moved on to the next question “Do you feel that teachers and other staff liked you?” I received a “No” or some variation of no from  $\frac{3}{4}$  respondents. What was the most interesting theme for this question was that all of the respondents believed that as they got older teachers liked them a bit more but when they were younger they all agreed that they were not liked. This theme is frightening to me because of the formative years in adolescence and how important they are in being the foundation for the rest of your life. The question is a retrospective question that forces the respondent to look back at the experience in classrooms with teachers, so asking the question in present day they are not affected directly by that treatment any longer. However, there are hundreds of thousands little black boys sitting in classrooms in 2015 with teachers who they feel do not like them. Now it may be true those little boys may not have the capacity to realize that their teacher does not like them but they do have the capacity to still be affected by it, which has lasting effects. Respondent 1C did not say no to the question but he answered it in a way that I was not expecting and drawing solely from his high school experience with teachers, which is also the stage that the other respondents mentioned that they believed teachers began to like them a bit more. Respondent 1B said “Yeah, They appeared to like me. I am not sure they really did. They never talked to me negatively unless I warranted it from them.” His response is interesting because it has a tone of victim blaming when he says well if I didn’t warrant negativity from them then I did not get it. It leaves me to assume that whatever he received from his teachers, he felt he deserved like the illusion of merit.

When I asked the participants what they thought their teachers and other staff thought of them, I got varying answers. From the one participant who hadn’t been to jail



and had the magnet education he thought that his teachers were impressed by him. He thought this because he was aware of the stigma attributed to blackness, he stated “im a black male and im like you know, im like eloquent and i particpate positively in a class-room environment and try to facilitate conversation. ummm yeah. Impressed haha.”. Comparatively, the other 3 participants felt that their teachers and other school staff thought of them negatively. When I asked why they felt this way, 2 said they did not know. 1D mentioned “I dont know because it just felt like i was on they shit list.” In the context of the research question and the literature on this topic, negative relationships in the academic setting are detrimental to the success of the student.

Moving on to question did staff in your school treat all students fairly? I received an answer that so eloquently presents the challenges students face inside of classrooms. Respondent 1A answered

*“I think in every classroom environment the same systemic factors outside of the classroom influence every classroom environment. So the same type of phenomenon that you would say, you know happen to whatever specific demographic you want to look at; whether its race or gender or sexual orientation or physical ability (ableism) someone might be treated a certain way or socioeconomic status, positionality in the classroom, who sits in the front. so everyone is treated differently in the classroom. so i do not know but my awareness in that i think that i give things a pass because i think people think of those types of things a little differently”-1C*

The last sentence of his answer sums up my analysis of the other three respondents because of their lack of awareness on the social forces in place. They all responded along the same lines of staff treating all students fairly but agreed that as you got older they started to treat you differently. The lack of awareness has maybe influenced their understanding of what is fair because of the long standing systemic forces in place that have normalized what is not fair.

When I got to the question of were all students punished fairly and if the punishments were uniform or did they depend on who you were I got a uniform “NO”. Respondent 1C interrupted me with great fervor saying “HELL NAH” he then went on to say

*“Cus I could do something and cuss the teacher out. i go to the office, i get expelled, call my mom, get suspended or whatever. But then Johnny just did it and they(teachers and staff) just be like "Ayy man calm down,okay, i know you're having a bad day, i'ma just let you sit here for the rest of the period" and then they just let him go back to class.” –*  
1C

The response of 1C connects to the other 3 responses I received and the remaining 3 allude to the differential treatment in punishment they or others received due to how teachers and staff perceived them. Respondent 1A stated that your punishment and treatment was dependent on your background and if you were a repeat offender. He contributes this to the social forces in place that dictate the classroom and academic environment, he also stated that people think black kids are bad so they treat them as such and this is a result of the societal forces. If staff and teachers think or believe that black students are bad and treat them differently then it leads to a negative academic experience because of situations that are far too common such as those mentioned by respondent 1C.

## **Discussion**

This research sought to investigate the academic experience of black males and comparatively analyze their experiences amongst caucasian males and how the unique black male experience correlates with the mass incarceration of young black males. The

academic experience entailed staff-student relationships, treatment of students, the function of discipline policies from the perspective of the student and whether application of discipline policies from staff was considered consistent from the perspective of the student. Also, the rate or frequency out of school suspensions and expulsions occurred. I sought to investigate these variables because the academic experience contributes to the chance of being under correctional control as previously stated.

Rejection of the null hypothesis that black males are not suspended more often than their white counterparts is a great indicator to the application of discipline policies not being equitable. This inequality follows the logic of schools in urban districts being repressive as a way to prepare the child for their positions in the division of labor. If discipline policies are not being applied equitably then it normalizes the mistreatment of African-American males for themselves and others. Something that was not expected was the rejection of correctional control being determined by previous out of school suspensions statistically being insignificant. However, the level of association between the two still reveals that a moderately strong relationship is still a huge problem with African-American males being the largest prison population in the United States. Three of Four interview participants had been suspended multiple times and also had been under correctional control previously. 1 in 3 black males will go to prison in their lifetimes and 3 of four of my interview participants had proven this statistic to be true (Knafo).

When I compared the means of the likert scale data what was revealed was the academic experience being considerably negative for black males. To substantiate the data A Manova test was ran to see if there was a statistically significant difference in academic experience and there was a significant statistical difference. As previously

stated in the literature, ill-prepared teachers hinder the growth of students in urban school districts. The crux of a negative academic experience is the ill-prepared teacher who is afraid of their students and applies discipline policies disproportionately. When comparing Manova test findings with the themes of the interviews administered; the four participants in my interview all expressed sentiments that are typical of a negative academic experience. They believed that teachers were not very fond of them, they received differential treatment from school staff, and all had been suspended before; some multiple times for the same offenses. The one respondent who seemed to have a better academic experience is a CSUMB student who had a magnet high school education and also has never been under correctional control. Compared to the other three respondents who expressed having a more negative experience, had been suspended multiple times, been expelled and have been under correctional control more than once. In the context of the research question and the content of the interviews I am led to believe that a more negative academic experience in the form of poorly funded schools and punitive discipline policies are directly correlated with the mass incarceration of young black males. The most negative academic experiences of these 4 respondents are coupled with previously being under correctional control. The one respondent whose responses are representative of a less negative experience is a college student who has not been under correctional control at any point in his life. Although he is considerably younger than the other 3 respondents, as it stands he has not been under correctional control and his experience comparatively is an anomaly. A shortcoming of this research was the failure to gather a few white male interview participants to compare the responses of the black males. I suspect their answers would follow the themes of

the literature which states that white students have a far more positive academic experience and are not burdened with punitive discipline policies. This limitation does not detract from the research findings and the significance of them in accessing whether the academic experience still followed the literature themes in the present day.

Comparatively African-American Males are having a more negative academic experience incurring more suspensions which lead to the heightened possibility of being under correctional control. If the purpose of education is to prepare our students for their places in the division of labor then it is fitting that we continue to send them to prison instead of college. However, as a nation we need to reevaluate what we really stand for rather than selling our citizens a dream of prosperity that only a few will attain. We say we put priority on educating our children but as prison populations of black males and other minorities have soared in this country, I believe it is fair to say that our commitment to equal opportunity for all is a fallacy when everyone is not equal and is not being prepared for opportunity.

I would recommend for future research that the implementation of cultural sensitivity training be mandatory for all credentialed education positions and the affect of those trainings on student success and happiness. I believe this would be a step in the right direction to implement sensitivity trainings so that educators are working with students rather than against them.

## **Conclusions**

The importance of a positive academic experience is imperative to the success of any person especially a child. A child needs an environment where their potential is be-

ing nurtured instead of stunted. When a child's growth is stunted by negative experiences with school staff and the application of inconsistent discipline policies then the consequences are detrimental to the success of the child, their community and their school. This problem is one that has persisted for over 40 years and it deserves a remedy because we should not be preparing black children to occupy the same positions their ancestors have occupied since the start of this nation. As it stands that is the case in this country, that we are preparing students of color and in the context of this research, black boys to take positions of slave labor in the prison industry because that's what this country has always done with the blacks. With the persistence of this problem it is safe to say that as a country we are no better than we were 60 years ago. Like all things, our systems of oppression have evolved too and they are still applied with the historical context they were born out of. The academic experience of black males has a strong affect on the mass incarceration of young black males as those with lower levels of educational attainment are more likely to be under correctional control. The unique experience black males have is definitely coupled with correctional control which has been a consistent problem in this country that is extremely lucrative to not remedy. The privatization of prisons and the lack of concern for education has made capitalists rich and left black neighborhoods poor.

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