

How family matters for HIV risk-taking among African American men with a history of incarceration

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“Will I be able to do all the things I thought about in my cell?”

Objectives

This qualitative study examined the influence of the family on HIV risk among heterosexually-identified African American men recently released from prison.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 men within two weeks of release from prisons in Northern and Central California. The men were asked about their life, activities and behaviors in prison, including those related to sex and drugs, as well as their perceptions, needs, and obstacles they faced after release. Recruitment and data collection took place in the East Bay. Interview transcripts were coded and summarized to capture themes emerging from the data.

Results

Sample participants were parolees between 20 and 62 years old. Their offenses included drug-related charges, rape, theft, murder, outstanding warrants and parole violations. Their sentences varied between 6 months and 5 years; their average length of stay was 13 months; and they all had been in prison at least twice. While the men's backgrounds were different, many had in common chaotic lives, and a personal and/or family history of crime, drug-related activities, and violence.

The participants' specific HIV risk is not apparent from our data since they reported limited use of drugs in prison, including injection with needles, and only one of them reported sex with men, even though most related stories about someone else engaging in those activities. For the purpose of our study, however, participants reported that, in prison, the support and connection with their families helped them not to participate in the underground economy, avoid conflict, violence, and illegal activities (such as sex or drugs) which could increase their HIV risk, bring added time, and add strain to the relationships with their families waiting for them. Emotional and financial support took the form of letters, visits, collect phone calls, and money to purchase food from the canteen rather than eating the prison-supplied food. For some participants, time in prison was a chance to reflect on changing, making amends and/or proving to themselves and their families that they could be clean and sober. The support from their families helped them to cope, influenced their lives, and reinforced their motivation to get out and stay out of prison.

“...my gang was my family, my kids, my wife. So as far as participating in a gang I thought it wasn't to my benefit.... it was like how can I explain to my wife and my kids that...I got six months but 'honey, it's going to be about 6 years now because I had to do something for some-body to show my loyalty.”

“I found myself, fortunately, because I have a family, I have people's letters coming all the time. I wrote my wife like crazy. Tell her how much I love her. I wrote my mom, too, but my mom is from the old school...So she didn't really trip off my letters. She's like, “Yeh, right. You said that last time. Now you are back [inside].”

After release, men's focus was to stay out of prison, and the connection with their families and their emotional and financial support provided a strong motivation for doing so. Men expressed their determination not to go back; and the perception that their families, particularly their children, depended on them, needed their love, and

were affected by their being in prison. Women sex partners or relatives often provided a home or temporary financial support. Frequently, families tried to help the men to stay out of trouble and watched over them to avoid situations or associations that could send them back to prison.

“...lot of people fail to realize when they're incarcerated, that your family is incarcerated as well. If you truly have someone that loves you, and you truly have children that love you, they're incarcerated too...it's hard on them too”.

“I'm happy to know that people care about me enough to want to see me stay out of trouble and do the right thing.... if I've got somebody there with me who's going to keep me on that straight path, then I'll be all right. She's doing a good job. She keeps me in the house.... She won't let me go out or nothin', you know. I can't argue with her.”

Participants stated that services for people released from prison are limited. Men worried about their ability and material and emotional resources for coping with family obligations, finding employment (in the absence of job skills and restricted opportunities as a result of being an ex-convict) to financially support their families, staying clean and sober, or staying away from illegal activities for making money. Many participants stated that they and their wives or girlfriends did not discuss the specifics of their life inside nor talked about topics such as sex, drug use, violence, or HIV risk in prison.

“as a man you should be able to take care of your wife and kids and it is scary because you wants to make a change and stay out of prison, but it is hard because for the last few years you been used to making fast money knowing that if you do the same thing you are going to get the same results.”

“I asked, ‘how can you help me and my family?’ They said, ‘Well, your wife needs to do this and you should do that and then you guys come together on your own’.... I don't like that, you know. Parole is for the individual, not for the family...”

Conclusions

Families' emotional and financial support can have a protective effect against HIV risk behaviors by helping men to avoid activities, including drug use and sex with men, which could jeopardize their release from prison or their parole status. After release, however, men also face significant challenges in relating to their families and the outside world, and face structural obstacles to securing financial resources and jobs. Those challenges and obstacles, including the financial pressure to support their families, can lead men to engage in the same illegal activities that contribute to high rates of reincarceration and to a revolving door between prison and life outside.

Existing services for people released from prison are limited services for families receiving incarcerated members are almost non-existent. Effective HIV prevention services for prisoners and their families should focus on the context of their lives and explore the role of their family as a motivation to avoid risk and stay out of prison. Specific issues that may be addressed are lack of employment opportunities, health, drug use and dealing and other illegal behaviors, and how men released from prison might cope with having had sex with men in prison, especially when that behavior is inconsistent with their self-perceptions or with the norms of their families and communities.

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