

Black Male Experiences and Perceptions of Felony Disenfranchisement

Kashley Brown^{1*}, Melody Threadcraft², Whitney Threadcraft-Walker³

¹PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at Grambling State University, 403 Main St, Grambling, LA 71245, USA

²PhD is an Assistant Professor in Criminal Justice Assistant Director of Camus Initiative Grant at Jarvis Christian College

³Ph.D. Conducts and Synthesizes Research on Criminal Justice Policies

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*Corresponding author: Kashley Brown

Abstract

Interest in felony disenfranchisement is growing rapidly because of the rising rates of felony offenses and disenfranchisement. In fact, an estimated 6 million Americans are denied the right to vote as a result of their felony convictions. Felony disenfranchisement is an obstacle to participation in democratic life- a reality exacerbated by the current racial disparities in the criminal justice system which result in 1 out of every 13 Blacks being unable to vote (Sentencing Project, 2015). As there is little we know about the differences between Black and felony experiences with disenfranchisement, this study focused on everyday disenfranchisement experiences that research suggests Black males face. The focus was on perceived discriminations resulting from entitlement programs (i.e. employment, housing, educational and other forms of government assistance). It was predicted the persons with felonies would have a different perception of disenfranchisement or discrimination, but results indicated both groups perceived similar experiences with discrimination, confirming findings in the extant literature.

Keywords: Felony, ex-offender, felon, black felon, disenfranchisement, discrimination, experiences, perception.

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INTRODUCTION

Dissatisfaction among recently released offenders has grown rapidly due to the impact of rising rates of felony offenses generated disenfranchisement. For example, an estimated 5.85 million Americans are denied the right to vote as a result of their felony convictions as well as felony disenfranchisement, which has become an obstacle to participation in democratic life. This reality is exacerbated by the current racial disparities in the criminal justice system which result in 1 out of every 13 Blacks being unable to vote [1]. As there is little we know about the differences between Black and felony experiences with disenfranchisement, this work focused on everyday disenfranchisement experiences that other research suggests Black males face. Punishing persons with felony records affects minorities harder; in fact, racial or ethnic minorities are disenfranchised at a rate much higher than Whites. Uggen, Manza, and Thompson [2] found that Hispanics are also disenfranchised at a rate higher than Whites, but lower than Blacks. Further, Hendricks [3] found that Latinos were three times more likely to lose their rights to vote from felony disenfranchisement than the population at large. Nevertheless, this rate remains even higher for Blacks, who represent 38% of the nation's 4.7 million disenfranchised felons and former felons.

This was the first time the effect on Latinos had been studied according to Hendricks [3].

Previous research notes how disenfranchisement affects Black felons and certain social variables, but none have explored the perceptions of felons in regards to their experiences with disenfranchisement [4]. As such, this work examined felon and non-felon perceptions and experiences particularly toward disenfranchisement or related discriminations. Further, we extend data that supports the argument that felons' personal experiences beyond release from the attachments of the criminal justice system had a negative impact on their perceptions of disenfranchisement laws and their lives overall. Finally, this research displays the viability of disenfranchisement experiences as similar to discriminations that non-felon Blacks face daily in American society.

BACKGROUND

Re-entering felons encounter societal stops as come back to the community. Less than positive satisfaction was found in re-entry research that not only recognizes the roadblocks such as voting issues that formerly incarcerated persons experience, but that they

can also be excluded from educational assistance in receiving federal Pell Grants or housing assistance, and food stamps (if convicted of drug related offenses) [5]. Re-entry to mainstream society is a difficult process that is not commonly understood. Most prisoners are eventually paroled, which is intended to assist felons with their transition back into society and also make space for the more recently (or newly convicted who will replace the formerly incarcerated in American prisons [6]. With limited resources, felons must find a place to live, a way to sustain themselves, and be assimilated back into society. Many felons have difficulty adjusting to life outside of prison and completing their parole successfully [7].

Further, disenfranchisement results from labeling process of felons and stripping them of numerous constitutional protections. As such, this research examined the perception of the formerly incarcerated regarding their experiences with disenfranchisement as well as Black males who faced discrimination barring a criminal record. Understanding these experiences can assist in the overall development of evidence-based approaches to prisoner re-entry, establishing an academic understanding of the discrimination Black males face, and how they have a higher chance of being racially profiled or denied opportunities that should be a given right. This article contextualized felony disenfranchisement and discrimination within the theoretical framework of “petit apartheid” followed by analysis of the history of disenfranchisement, disenfranchisement policies, and prior research into the concept of disenfranchisement.

DISENFRANCHISEMENT

Disenfranchisement derived from the 17th century, better known as the period following the “medieval period,” where it was used as a form of punishment that restricted those convicted of heinous crimes from civil rights and claims to property. This practice continued during the 18th century where the social contract was a way of law and, though said contract was unwritten, it was generally understood that if members of society broke certain laws the consequences of said offense could include the stripping of rights [8].

Disenfranchisement is typically defined as losing the right to vote, but others have begun to characterize it as the act of society restricting one from civil liberties, government entitlements, and employment benefits [9]. When disenfranchisement appeared in America during the 17th century it was usually punishment for something as minimal as drunkenness [10]. The historical context of disenfranchisement can be applied to this study considering that it does focus on felons losing rights or being discriminated against due to being convicted of an offense.

This “black mark” carries with it potentially mandatory restrictions on jobs, housing, education, and public assistance. As detailed in a National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers study, the federal government and every state imposes some sort of “collateral consequence” to arrests or convictions. Some survey data suggests more than half of released ex-offenders remain unemployed up to a year after their return to society from police custody. In some jurisdictions, ex-offenders can never hold certain jobs. According to research, there could be as many as 800 occupations nationwide that automatically disqualify people with felony convictions for life [11]. With a varied context of disenfranchisement this work examined previous work detailing its effect on minorities in the general population.

Prior Research

Prior research examined the impact of disenfranchisement laws as well as post-release experiences and discovered that there has been minimal research found and employed regarding discrimination that Black males face relevant to their race.

More than 50 articles, book chapters, and other publications were reviewed. While meta-analysis has become the dominant approach to integrative literature examinations, a more traditional, narrative review was performed. Primarily, the disenfranchised re-entry field is greatly fragmented and the studies focus on different aspects of re-entry transition or post-release experiences and use different definitions of variables. Further, two views were considered, Black males perception of the relationship of age, education, offense, income and employment, politics, subculture, disenfranchisement relative to their felon and non-felon status, and how Black male felons and non-felons perceive post-release experiences or discrimination.

Post-release Experiences

Felony disenfranchisement is one of a variety of legal sanctions that restricts liberty and opportunity for re-entering ex-offenders. The increased application of these punishments in recent years seems to be a reflection of a more punitive approach to criminal sanctioning and has raised important questions about the proper scope, size, and duration of punishment [12]. There also remains a criminological and policy discussion on how these factors affect the re-entry process and impact successful reintegration [12]. To evaluate how these punishments affect ex-offenders requires a better understanding of the felons’ post-release experiences after they have “paid their debt to society” and reintegration.

Travis [13] has termed these types of penalizations “invisible punishments.” He defines them as “the punishment that is accomplished through the diminution of the rights and privileges of citizenship and legal residency in the United States” [13]. These

punishments include requirements that felons become ineligible for voting, welfare, housing, student loans, and are legally barred from a number of occupations [13, 14].

Scholars Uggen and Manza [9], Uggen and Manza [15], and Mauer [16] argue the importance of the right to vote and the use of disenfranchisement as a form of punishment is the harshest civil sanction imposed by a democratic society. Felons face difficulties returning home to what undoubtedly would seem like “a new world” by having to adjust to the changes in technology, deaths of friends, family members, or other loved ones, and people they cared about moving on with their respective lives [17]. Nevertheless, the academic voices describing the challenges of post-release experiences are not unanimous. Clark [14] reports that felons who return home from imprisonment in the United States are least likely to obtain a job or even get an interview. The likelihood is lessened if the felon is Black [18]. Additional variables differ from felon’s experience but rather other existing demographics, which indicated a need for more diversified research on affective aspects of re-entry transition and exploration of other identified phenomenon and variables.

Age (Desistance Phenomenon)

Age is the second most frequently researched post-release variable. Research indicates a strong relationship between age and re-entry adjustment; the older the ex-offender, the less the re-entry distress [19, 20]. Cox [19] shows that age is not only related to psychological distress, but also to social difficulties upon reintegration into society. More than half of the working age Black males in the United States have criminal records [21, 22]. Although age remains a constant indicator, social economic such as educational preparedness factor in the disenfranchisement synthesis.

Education

Education is a variable that has had minimum research conducted on it as a result of felon disenfranchisement or the specific reason why a person commits an offense. Yet, there are approximately 70% of offenders and ex-offenders that are high school dropouts [23]. According to at least one study, about half are “functionally illiterate” [24]. Research [25] indicates that pre-release and post-release employment programs are primarily comprised of inmates or ex-offenders who are male, minorities, and high school drop outs with minimum work experience. Variables such as under education and minimal work training continues as a factor deeming felons unemployable while adding to their frustration in job hunting.

Offense

Criminogenic behavior can be considered a factor. In fact, it variables such drug offending does not differ substantially by race. Surveys by federal agencies

show that Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics have used illicit drugs at roughly similar rates - recently and historically [26].

Despite making up just 13% of the population, Blacks reportedly commit nearly half of homicides in the United States. Department of Justice statistics show that between 1980 and 2008, Blacks committed 52% of homicides compared to 45% of homicides committed by Whites. In 2013, Black criminals carried out 38% of murders, compared to 31.1% for Whites (despite the fact there are five times more White people in the United States). From 2011 to 2013, 38.5% of people arrested for murder, manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault were Black. This rate is nearly three times higher than the 13% overall Black population rate in America. Black males aged 15-34, who account for roughly 3 percent of the American population, are responsible for the vast majority of these crimes and the figures are even more staggering. Black people reportedly commit an equal or greater number of violent crimes than Whites despite a wide margin of population figures [27]. Studies identified that official statistical numbers list blacks with higher offending incidence contribute to unsatisfactory dynamics associated with perspective of being disenfranchised.

Income and Employment

Although there are a moderate number of scholars who have researched the effect income has on an ex-offender, there has been minimal recent research regarding how low socioeconomic status has a high correlation to blue collar or street crimes [28, 29]. Prior to incarceration, the employment rates of those involved in criminal activities were obviously low due to multiple factors (i.e. lack of education, work experience, broken households, trades, or skills) of young Black men who lived in poor inner city neighborhoods [30]. Furthermore, time spent incarcerated impeded any gains additional private sector experience and undoubtedly helped erode existing job skills, positive work habits, or connections to employers they might have had beforehand [30].

Blacks and Latinos constituted half of the jail population in 2013. In 2002, 44% of people of color in jail lacked a high school diploma. In the months prior to their arrest, 29% were unemployed and 59% reported earning less than \$1, 000 monthly [31]. Black ex-offenders are almost half as likely to gain employment in comparison to White ex-offenders. Even Black non-offenders have a lower chance of obtaining employment over White applicants with felonies [32]. Research tends to support that both groups, black males and male felons of color experience the similar levels of unemployment.

Felon’s Perspectives

This section provides a detailed explanation of the conflict between individual’s perceptions of

disenfranchisement and the reality of their transition due to disenfranchisement. There was an abundance of literature on sex-offenders' and juvenile offenders' perspectives respectively as well as the perspectives of law enforcement, however there was little research in regards to the topic of the perspectives of those convicted of felonious offenses. Hence, the topic of felons' perspective of social and legal disenfranchisement needs further scholarship.

Voting

As of 2002, varying forms of felon disenfranchisement laws exist in 47 states. Currently more than one million ex-offenders are disenfranchised. It is estimated that 13% of all Black men of eligible voting age are legally restricted from voting. And worse, an offender who receives probation for a single nonviolent offense in some American states may lose their voting rights for life [33]. Today, there are more Black men disenfranchised than in 1970 during the ratifications of the 15th Amendment [21]; The 15th Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibited the federal and state governments from denying a citizen the right to vote based on that citizen's race, color, or previous condition of servitude. Without the right to vote, the literature shows that many felons remain voiceless in the political arena, thus limiting their local, state and federal voting impact and say.

Employment

Legal standards for employment of people with criminal records are predominately created by state laws. While there is no federal law expressly governing employment, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has ruled that employment policies excluding people based upon arrests or convictions unrelated to the job sought may violate Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (because of their disproportionate impact on minorities who are arrested and convicted at a significantly higher rate than racial counterparts).

Under the federal guidelines, employers may not exclude people solely based on arrests that did not lead to conviction unless there is a "business justification". Further, federal guidelines require employers to give applicants a chance to explain their arrest records before they are disqualified from employment. Clark [14] conducted a study on employers' perspectives of hiring felons and many employers admitted they will not willingly hire a person with a conviction. One study suggested that ex-offenders have a variety of characteristics that greatly limit their employability and earnings capacities that include, but are not limited to, the following: limited education and cognitive skills, limited work experience, previous substance abuse, and physical or mental health problems [30].

Housing

According to research, secure housing may be more critical to ex-offenders than stable employment, but many recently released ex-offenders still end up living with relatives [34]. Visser and Courtney [35] reported that ex-offenders depend on their families for basic support with their re-entry into society as it relates to housing, employment, and finances. In one Urban Institute research on ex-offenders released in Chicago, three-quarters of them planned to live with family, a relative, or significant other, while a higher percentage (approximately 88%) were living with family, relatives, or significant other months after their releases from prison [34]. While ex-offenders unquestionably require assistance upon release, it is often the basic needs for survival, such as permanent suitable housing, which is the biggest need and obstacle to successful re-entry [36].

Housing preferences for ex-offenders who do not have any family or friends to rely on are very limited; unfortunately, this essential need is significant in an ex-offender's successful re-entry. Bahr, Armstrong, Gibbs, Harris, and Fisher [37] reported upon re-entering the community, housing presented a substantial challenge for returning prisoners. Bahr and associates [37] researched the challenges of re-entry that involved 51 participants and their housing situations. They found that not only did 60% of the ex-offenders secure housing with close family and relatives, but those who did were also less likely to return to lives of crime than ex-offenders living in different housing situations. The existing research fortifies that housing is a primary need when unsatisfied can add to the newly released felony ex-offender's negative reentry.

Government Assistance

One of the most troubling and least discussed provisions of the new federal welfare law is the lifetime ban on benefits to anyone convicted of a drug-related felony. Section 115 of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (Welfare Act) denies both welfare benefits and federally-funded food stamps to any individual convicted of a felony involving the possession, use, or distribution of a controlled substance. Section 115 fails to address the causes of drug abuse and drug-related crime in our society, and, as a result, is likely to worsen recidivism rates among drug offenders.

Since 1996, federal law has banned anyone with a drug-related felony conviction from receiving benefits from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). But, analysis of law allows states to waive or modify the bans, most states have deny felons at this level as well. Essentially, due their previous convictions certain felons remain

unable to receive governmental assistance and includes educational assistance in some circumstances.

Financial Aid

Financial Aid is a right for affordable rates and/or assistance in obtaining a degree or trade, yet ex-offenders convicted of certain offenses in the United States are denied it. The Higher Education Act of 1998 makes students convicted of drug-related offenses ineligible for any grant, loan, or work assistance. States cannot discard or alter this restriction. No other class of offense results in the automatic denial of federal financial aid eligibility. The suspension begins on the date of the conviction. The restriction applies even if the person is not receiving assistance at the time of the conviction. A person with a conviction record must wait until the end of the ineligibility period before being eligible to apply for student assistance. The length of the suspension depends on the type first-time convictions of possession [17].

For the possession of a controlled substance, ineligibility lasts one year. A second offense for drug possession results in two years of ineligibility while a third offense leads to indefinite ineligibility. First-time convictions for sale of a controlled substance lead to two years of ineligibility. The period of ineligibility is indefinite for subsequent offenses involving drug sale. A student may resume eligibility before the end of the suspension period if he or she satisfactorily completes a drug rehabilitation program that complies with criteria set out by the Secretary of Education, which includes two unannounced drug tests if the conviction is reversed, set aside, or otherwise struck down [17].

The review of literature looked at several dynamics that contribute to disenfranchisement in felons and found that many of the factors that figure high with felons also impact non-felons of color as well. Essentially, it found that many life experiences were shared with both groups from limited educational, work, residency and other life course factors.

The Current Study

This study examined the perceptions of felon disenfranchisement by utilizing multiple choice questionnaires (Disenfranchisement of Black Males; Discrimination of Black Males). The questions were centered on perceptions regarding personal experiences of felons who had been released from prison and currently reside in Harris County, Texas, as well as non-felons and their experiences with varying forms of discrimination. The felons struggled with gaining or keeping employment, finding adequate independent housing, going to college or trade schools, and/or obtaining any type of government assistance. The non-felons experienced similar barriers and expressed closely related perceptions regarding their societal treatment.

METHOD

In order to determine the influence of the independent variables on the dependent variable and describe the participants of the study, Survey Monkey – digital polling software - was utilized. Descriptive statistics were employed to illustrate the characteristics of the sample: age, offense, income, and education. The methodology focused on in this quantitative study includes (a) the researcher's philosophy, (b) research design, (c) sampling design and setting, (d) measures, (e) data collection, (f) data analyses, (g) limitations of methodology, (h) internal validity, (i) external validity, and (j) ethical issues.

This study posed the following two primary research questions drawn from previous research. Historically, Blacks in America have been denied the right to vote through tedious grandfather clauses, poll taxes, or even hasty literacy exams. This was the standard during the Civil Rights era. Prior to that, Blacks were not even considered human and were often classified as everything from “barbaric” and “atavistic” to being the White man's property [38]. Thusly, there have always been barriers that deprived Blacks from voting as well as being able to find their own housing, getting assistance from the government, and the ability to go to school. According to Alexander [21], by this merit the criminal justice system is the new enslavement. From over-policing in Black communities to wrongful traffic stops and arrests, Black men lead the nation in disproportionate numbers in the prison population. Alexander [21] also calls this problematic concern the “New Jim Crow.”

In 1974, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a state's right to ban felons from voting. *Richardson v. Ramirez*, 418 U.S. 24 [39], held that convicted felons could be barred from voting without violating the Fourteenth Amendment. In addition to the aforementioned, a number of felon disenfranchisement laws have changed over time [40]. Dhami [41] stated that in some cases these changes have been restrictive. For instance, Massachusetts recently passed legislation that removed the right to vote from incarcerated felons who previously had the right. Kansas now bans felons on probation. Conversely, Connecticut allows felons on probation to vote, Nebraska has replaced the lifetime ban on felons with a 2-year post-sentence ban, and New Mexico restores voting rights to felons after the completion of their sentences [41].

There have been a few studies that argued the disproportionate overrepresentation of minorities as disenfranchised citizens is a logical, though unfortunate consequence of a non-colorblind criminal justice system and is, to an extent, justified by the fact that racial minorities disproportionately commit felonies (hence their disproportionate disenfranchisement)

[42, 21]. But, this view fails to take into account the other odds stacked against minorities in the criminal justice system like racial profiling [43].

Voting restriction is the only “officially” used form of disenfranchisement against felons, but there have been many other reported forms of unofficial discrimination against them ranging from lack of employment opportunities, inability to garner government assistance, and obtaining a lease to rent a dwelling place in one's own name. The lack of opportunities could be one of many reasons studies have proven the majority of ex-offenders released from prison reoffend.

Research Question 1

How do Black male felons and non-felons differ on age, education, income, employment, and living situations?

Research Question 2

How do Black male felons perceive post-release experiences?

Participants

The probability sample population consisted of 118 adult male felons in Harris County, Texas, between the ages of 18 and 60, who self-identified as Black, were released from prison between January 2005 and July 2015, and who speak and comprehend the English language. Concurrently, the surveyor created a separate instrument for the 98 non-felon respondents. These respondents self-identified as Black males between the ages of 18 and 60.

Participants were recruited via social media sites (Facebook and Twitter) where volunteers were

sent a link to Survey Monkey, an online survey development tool. The participants recruited on social media were provided a disclaimer explaining the nature of the research and survey, contact information of the researcher, and consent forms. The surveys were approved by Texas Southern University's IRB board. The flyer explained the purpose of the research and the requirements to participate in the study. All participants met the criteria noted via Facebook and Twitter to participate in the research. Respondents were informed their participation was voluntary and compensation would not be given for it.

Dependent and Independent Measures

This study considered perceptions and experiences of felons and non-felons as the dependent variables. Further, variables identified in this study were felon and non-felons' expression of discrimination and disenfranchisement. Moreover, the dependent variable highlighted the outcome measures of success as it specifically related to income, education, employment, age, and subculture. Conclusively, the data analysis portion details the statistical approaches employed to address the research questions and hypotheses.

Additionally, both perceptions and experiences of felon disenfranchisement were captured by utilizing multiple choice questionnaires (Disenfranchisement of Black Males; Discrimination of Black Males). The questions were centered on perceptions regarding personal experiences of felons who had been released from prison and currently reside in Harris County, Texas, as well as non-felons and their experiences with varying forms of discrimination.

Table-1: Participant Demographics

Age	(n)non-felon	%	(n) felon	%
18-24	52	43.75	8	8.16
25-40	44	37.5	67	68.39
41-60	22	18.75	23	23.4
Education				
Some HS	7	6	6	6.9
HS/GED	11	11.2	17	17.53
Some College	44	44.9	23	23.71
College/Trade	56	57.1	29	24.58
Post college	22	22.45		

Both felon and non-felon Black males were asked their ages in the ranges of 18-24, 25-40, and 41-60. The majority of the non-felon respondents were between the ages of 18-24 at a total of 52 while the majority of the felon respondents were between the ages of 25-40 at 67. Regarding highest level of education, the majority of non-felon respondents were college or trade graduates at 56 while the majority of felon respondents were also college/trade graduates at 29.

Concerning those who received their high school diploma or GED only, there were 11 non-felons

and 6 felons. The non-felon sample was comprised only of respondents who had post college education (master's degree, law school, medical school, and so on). Of that group, there were 22. It was evident the non-felon group was more educated than the felon group, but there were a great amount of felons who were educated as well.

Statistical Analyses

In order to determine the influence of the independent variables on the dependent variable and

describe the participants of the study, Survey Monkey – digital polling software – was utilized. Descriptive statistics were employed to illustrate the characteristics of the sample: age, offense, income, and education.

Volunteer participants submitted data through Twitter and Facebook. Participants individually answered the applicable (felon or non-felon) survey questionnaire messaged to them privately featuring an attached link and instructions through Survey Monkey. All surveys were anonymous and confidential.

The survey format included questions that were multiple choice, “yes or no” answer, and categorical ranges. All surveys are stored on a secured password protected file through Survey Monkey that only professional researchers of Texas Southern University could access. As only answers and percentages were needed no names or other forms of identity information were attached to the stored surveys. There were no perceived or anticipated threats to the security of the surveys stored in Survey Monkey.

The researcher collected 118 survey responses for felon participants and 98 survey responses for non-felon participants, both of which were automatically compiled and computed through Survey Monkey. The goal was to collect at least 100 participants for both groups in efforts to have a healthy representation of both perceptions and also to have enough responses if all participants did not complete the survey questionnaire. The researcher analyzed the findings by using quantitative descriptive methods.

DISCUSSION

We found that the felons struggled with gaining or keeping employment, finding adequate independent housing, going to college or trade schools, and/or obtaining any type of government assistance. The non-felons experienced similar barriers.

The results of this examination reinforce findings from previous studies about discrimination perceptions and responses to disenfranchisement laws. Additionally, if the overwhelming majority of studies point to the failure of disenfranchisement laws in reintegrating felons and preventing reoffending, it is hoped lawmakers and activists will look at different approaches to this very serious problem.

Black males that this research focused on were between the ages of 18- 60 and were grouped as felon or non-felon. Literature implies that disenfranchisement laws hinder the liberties of men of color in the United States, especially Black men. Alexander [21] also suggests that Black men, regardless of their criminal records, have a higher chance of being racially profiled and discriminated against. The findings of this study indicated that Black males’ perceptions of

disenfranchisement or discrimination are impacted by education, income, employment, subcultures, politics, and age. The majority of the felons were between the ages of 18-24 and the non-felons’ highest age demographic was 25-40. There was a fair number of college or trade school graduates with felonies (24 percent) and almost just as many (23 percent) with some education while the non-felons’ highest level at college/ trade of education was at 57 percent.

Respondents’ perception of disenfranchisement or discrimination are evident in the quantitative findings though all of the above mentioned variables. With regards to post release experiences or experiences with discrimination, these variables also played a role in Black males’ perceptions of disenfranchisement and discrimination. The quantitative data unveiled that 39 percent of felon respondents felt disenfranchised while 58 percent felt discriminated against.

It was learned that the more negative the variables are (i.e. low income), the higher the chances of the respondent having a negative perception of disenfranchisement or discrimination. It was also discovered that the more a person has a run in with the law (i.e. unlawfully detained, racially profiled, disenfranchisement), the higher the chances are that they will have a negative perception of disenfranchisement and discrimination. Although one group does not have a felony or criminal record, both groups share a negative perception collectively of disenfranchisement or discrimination due to the barriers that both groups face by the criminal justice system, as well as society.

Future Research Implications

Future research on perceptions of disenfranchisement and discrimination can benefit from the inclusion of ex-offenders living in other states and cities. A report compiled by the Legal Action Center in 2004 informs about roadblocks to re-entry for ex-offenders and highlights the vast differences between states in terms of employment restrictions, access to criminal records, the ability to expunge or seal records, access to public housing, and voting rights [44].

Future research on perceptions of both felon and non-felon Black males that live beyond Harris County would be vital, especially in states where the disenfranchisement laws are harsher than Texas. There was bare minimum data on discrimination that Black males face just for being a Black male in America, let alone their perceptions of the routine injustices and unlawful contacts with the criminal justice system.

Even though scholars such as Uggen, Manza, Mauer, and publications from the Sentencing Project had more than their share of literature on disenfranchisement and its impact on the Black vote,

the researcher found little scholarship that focused on the Black voter (prior to conviction) wants to vote after release from incarceration. It is felt that more research needs to be done on limitations related to the current or past extensions of government assistance.

There also needs to be literature added to the body of knowledge on Black male felons' perceptions of disenfranchisement as it relates their views on their race solely. In other words, felon or non-felon, studies should determine if Black people feel discriminated against by law enforcement only or primarily because they are Black. Further suggestion includes that the body of knowledge needs more research or studies on the type of employment a Black man is most likely to obtain after re-entry.

Discrimination and disenfranchisement is a detrimental topic for the professions of law, criminal justice, and policies. Although the present study focused on pre- and post-release experiences and the impact on Black males' perception of disenfranchisement or discrimination as well as other variables (age, income, education, subcultures, employment, etc.), it is also important to research the dynamics of family, friends, and social groups that provided pre- and post-release support. Future research would shed light on how the family, friends, and support groups felt about the ex-offender and the degree to which labeling him was impactful.

Limitations

Despite this study's advances, there are a number of limitations common in ex-offender research that must also be noted here. The first limitation was the method of obtaining data. Although Survey Monkey was efficient with computing the results, most of the felon population used in the study did not possess email addresses or access to the Internet. To compensate, the researcher used paper surveys and manually added their responses to the overall Survey Monkey data for the felon questionnaires. The second limitation was the researcher's dependence on volunteers to answer the questionnaires on their own time. The wait for their responses caused a delay that would have been shortened if the researcher was able to provide them paper surveys to fill out immediately after receipt.

There were also instrument errors that were not observed until analysis had completed. The option of "no offense" was given to the non-felon respondents when asked if they have one offense. If they incorrectly answered the question, data was skewed as a result. The non-felons were not asked if they were receiving government assistance. There was also limited secondary literature on Black male felons receiving or being denied government assistance despite available statistics suggesting the possibility that many Black males – felon or not - are not receiving government

assistance simply because they have never applied for or need it.

The researcher also found very few scholarly publications [32, 45] that addressed the perceptions of non-felon Black males who have never offended or been convicted of any crimes have toward discrimination by society from the legal system. There was an abundance of research that focused on re-entry yet, there were very few that focused on multiple variables of discrimination or disenfranchisement other than voting rights or housing.

CONCLUSION

This study was completely necessary to add to the body of knowledge in criminal justice due to its perspective it gives of black males and their daily experiences in modern day whether they are felon or non-felon. It also provides a new comparison to existing studies, partially concerning how to deal with felons in a way that fosters rehabilitation, the issues of discrimination, the general state of discrimination against Black males in the United States, and their perception of said discrimination. Moreover, there was a large percentage of non-felon Black males that felt they were not discriminated against compared to their felon counterparts that felt their lives had not changed since becoming a felon. The results also indicate current discrimination laws further tear apart any notion that "felon" is the new age label or tag for Black males since non-felons are discriminated against as well. Yet, discrimination and bias may still be an applicable perception since one could conclude that "hidden figures of racism," as specifically outlined earlier in this assessment, have become so subtle or normal that Black men have become immune to the mistreatment and no longer notice its impact or severity. Overall, this study aimed to contribute to the ongoing debate concerning disenfranchisement or discrimination by providing new data concerning Black males' perceptions and attitudes toward disenfranchisement laws.

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