

Constructing Remote Contexts: An Examination of African American Christian Perceptions of
Jails, Prisons, and Inmates
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Crime and punishment are issues that concern every American. Last year, America's prison population experienced its largest increase in 4 years (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics), and the increase is expected to continue. Currently, the nation's prison and jail population totals nearly 2 million (Espejo, 2001). Public sentiment toward crime appears to be on the side of criminal justice professionals, who advocate mandatory, long-prison sentences for even minor infractions. The response of government officials to the crime problem is a commitment to build larger correctional facilities, so-called supermax prisons, to house the rising inmate population that is a direct result of new get-tough policies. The prevailing mindset appears to echo a catchphrase made popular by a 70s TV detective program: "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time." Furthermore, much of the American public may have developed a deep-rooted fear of inmates, jails, and prisons.

Due in large part to media portrayal, the most prevalent perception of the quintessential criminal may be that of a social deviate prone to violence and possessing a recidivist criminal nature. However, there is evidence to suggest that those who believe in such stereotypes may be, for the most part, misinformed. The issue of recidivism serves as a poignant example. According to a 2003 Virginia Department of Corrections report less than one-third of all inmates released in 1998 returned to prison, and nearly one-third of those were for simple technical violations of parole (VDOC Recidivism Report).

Lack of direct involvement in prison and jail ministry may suggest that Christians too have been swayed by the glut of misinformation regarding inmates and the nation's penal system. Although many Christians accept the notion that preaching the gospel to those who are incarcerated is part of the great commission to all believers, relatively few Christians are actively

involved in prison ministry, this despite the fact that Christian prison ministry has been responsible for salvaging countless lives. Although there may be many reasons why most Christians shun prison ministry, one major factor may be the beliefs and attitudes many Christians have about criminals and correctional facilities; therefore, any attempt to increase prison ministry volunteerism must start by ascertaining what those attitudes and beliefs are and their primary sources. Thus, the purpose of this study is to empirically determine the stereotypes African American Christians have of inmates, jails, and prisons. Two other objectives are to determine the major sociocultural contributors to the formation of those stereotypes and to determine if frequent direct contact with the incarcerated has any influence on reversing those stereotypes.

Social Construction of Reality

Constructivists have long maintained that human perception of reality and actual reality are two different things. They assert that the “world of human perception is not real in an absolute sense . . . but is ‘made up’ and shaped by cultural and linguistic constructs” (Patton 2002, p. 96). In other words, each individual socially constructs reality on the basis of the knowledge he or she possesses. This knowledge comes from three prominent sources: personal experience and interpersonal interaction; organizations, agencies, and institutions; and popular culture.

In terms of credibility the most significant contributors to a person’s knowledge base are personal experience and conversations with other people. However, there are areas of reality in which a person has no direct knowledge or experiences. Neither does he or she have interpersonal contact with other individuals who have such knowledge or experiences. These areas have been referred to as “remote contexts” (Freeman, 2000). For most people, criminals,

jails, and prisons are remote contexts. As with the construction of reality in general, individuals obtain the necessary information to form “their reality” of what criminals, jails, and prisons are like either through personal experience or conversations with others, through organizations and agencies that disseminate information about correctional issues, or through popular culture (Freeman, p. 4-5).

Generally speaking, relatively few people have direct contact or first-hand experiences with criminals or correctional facilities, neither have they have had personal relationships with those who have. For the most part, only people involved in law enforcement and corrections read the trade journals and other publications put out by the various criminal justice agencies; therefore, it seems plausible to conclude that the bulk of the information used to construct most people’s perceptions of law and order comes from popular culture -- principally, media.

Emphasizing a major tenet of media dependency theorist, Freeman (2000) notes that “because any given individual can experience only a limited number of world events, we are all dependent on the mass media for the social construction of reality” (p. 10). Weaver and Wakshlag (1986) describe media influence on belief formation this way:

It appears that social perceptions are formed and reinforced on the basis of highest order experience available (i.e., direct, interpersonal, or mediated). When direct experience is lacking or highly ambiguous, however, the individual is most susceptible to the suggestion of indirectly obtained information, conveyed either interpersonally or through the mass media (p. 143).

Media and Social Construction

As media dependency theorists assert, the importance of media as knowledge sources used in reality construction increases when the importance of other sources of knowledge

decrease. Merskin's (1999) summation of media dependency accurately describes the American social/cultural landscape and articulates how media have come to play such a dominant role in the formation of beliefs:

As social systems become more urbanized and industrialized people tend to rely more and more upon the mass media. . . Dependence upon media is particularly high during times of rapid social change and conflict, where traditional roles and norms are in a state of flux. Media play an important role in reducing ambiguity (p. 77).

Bailey and Hale (1998) state, "Because popular culture contains a common, shared set of world knowledge that is pervasively distributed through the mass media, popular culture has emerged as a main engine in social construction of reality process" They further note that "the media establishes powerful frames for perceiving the world . . ." (p. xvii). Indeed, some critics have called the media " 'mythmakers' because they offer distorted views of crime, justice, and law enforcement" (Bailey & Hale, p. 4).

A plethora of research encompassing a broad spectrum of media study adds weight to the notion of media as mythmakers. Study after study has demonstrated that media presentation is a dominant source of information, crystallizing the underlying assumptions of most people's perceptions of minority and other outgroups as well as shaping their views on prominent social issues. For example, studies have consistently shown that media repeatedly portray African Americans unfavorably and that this negative portrayal significantly impacts the development and reinforcement of viewer perception of their characteristics and behaviors (Allen and Waks, 1990; Entman, 1994; Rada, 2002; Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Mastro 2003). In fact, most studies reveal "ethnic minorities are still negatively stereotyped as criminals, dangerous characters, or clowns" (Worthy, 1996, p.509).

What these and other studies demonstrate is that media have the ability to powerfully influence perceptions and shape opinions by framing issues for the public. Journalists frame stories by selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of an issue while ignoring other facets, thereby advancing a particular point of view. Studies show that framing affects the way individuals evaluate issues (Rogers, Dearing, Rao, Campo, Meyer, Betts, and Casey, 1995). One tool used to frame social issues is the use of exemplars. Exemplars are short quotations or soundbites from individuals connected to a social problem or issue and are frequently used by journalists to add credibility and authenticity to their stories. Gibson and Zillmann (1993) demonstrated the fact that exemplars can sway recipients' perception of an issue in the direction of personal testimony. They note that evidence overwhelmingly supports the contention that direct quotations, whether in print or broadcast copy, "is a powerful journalistic tool that can be used to influence news media consumers' perceptions of reality and judgments of issues" (p. 799). Brosius' (1999) studies have shown that the influence of exemplars on viewers' judgments of a social phenomenon far exceeds that of accompanying base-rate information, although the base-rate information may be more valid. Furthermore, Brosius discovered that exemplars can strongly impact both a recipient's perception of public opinion on issues as well as the recipient's own opinion on issues (p. 222).

Media Coverage has also been linked to stereotypes of criminality as well. Steadman and Coccozza (1977-78) found that media attention to rare, bizarre cases involving the criminally insane has caused the public to fear the criminally insane and has created a false perception that these individuals are all either murders, attempted murderers, or mass murderers.

Television and movies: Major contributors to reality construction

Two media that have been found to play a pivotal role in shaping public perception of social problems are movies and television. Movies are primary vehicles for cultivating negative stereotypes of jails, prisons, and inmates. As Cheatwood (1998) astutely argues, “prison films tell us a great deal about the nature of our society, our prisons, and our theorization about prisons at any point in time” (p. 227). His 1998 study of prison movies stands as a testimony to the popularity of this genre among movie moguls. Cheatwood’s examination of Hollywood movies made between 1929-1995 discovered 101 dramatic films with themes dealing with adult male civilian prisons. Also, he estimates that at least 20 to 25 prison films have been produced since 1981. The overwhelming majority of these films presents the movie going public with images of a violent environment run by a sadistic prison administration that leaves inmates little choice but to result to unethical, violent means of survival. Freeman (2000) argues that movie producers present the public with a corrections template filled with powerful negative imagery designed to hold viewer attention and in the process instills in viewers a false perception of the corrections industry. He notes:

The Hollywood creation and dissemination of the corrections template is the most powerful source of nonpersonal information about the remote context of corrections. For many members of the general public, their first exposure to the corrections template will be the prison movie, and this exposure usually will take place at a very early age because of the pervasive presence of television, VCRs, and videotapes in the American household.

Indeed, the affordability of VCRs, DVD players and recorders coupled with the burgeoning of the movie rental industry and the increasing consolidation of the motion picture and

cable/broadcasting television industries deliver a much broader audience than was possible two decades ago.

Much research points to the fact that television is “the central medium disseminating stories of crime and criminals” (Bailey Hale, 1998, p. 111). For decades, cultivation theorists have asserted that heavy viewers of television internalize the dominant ideologies, beliefs, and attitudes embedded in the reality constructed by media producers. In effect, a mainstreaming effect occurs in which, despite demographics and the influence of other social contributors, the views of heavy viewers become homogeneous (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Shanahan & Jones, 1999). For instance, Potter (1986) discovered that high consumers of television programming grossly overestimate chances of being victims of violence. Brusselle & Crandall (2002) found that heavy news viewing is linked to the belief that low economic success among African Americans is not due to lack of job opportunities but is due to lack of motivation (p. 279). Sotirovic discovered that viewer perception of welfare recipients is greatly influenced by media in the absence of personal contact with recipients (2001). Similarly, Oliver and Armstrong discovered a significantly strong correlation between exposure to the negative portrayals of African Americans in reality-based television police shows and perception of crime among African Americans (1998). A host of other studies bolster the contention that media in general and television specifically influences public perception on a broad range of issues -- everything from heightening fear of crime and violence to elevating concern over various health risks (Doob and Macdonald, 1979; Dominick and Fletcher, 1985; Weaver and Wakshlag, 1986; Gerber, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1980).

As the research suggest, television provides viewers with a representation of reality that becomes a critical foundation for making social judgments about marginalized groups in the

absence of firsthand information about those groups; thus, television serves as a form of vicarious contact with these groups (Fujioka 54). However, as many studies have shown, much of “television’s reality” is mired in negative representation that can be damaging. As a result of the negative stereotypes disseminated by entertainment media and the selective framing and sensationalizing of crime and punishment by news media, many Christians may be fearful of taking their gospel into a jail or prison because they perceive them as threatening environments characterized by racial segregation and brutality.

As has already been shown, an abundance of research can be found in the literature dealing with the relationship between media consumption and social perception using a vast array of approaches. However, almost none of the research in this area has focused on public perception of correctional facilities and those that are housed there. Only two major studies aimed at gauging public opinion of corrections are cited in the literature: the 1979 Graber Criminal Justice System study and a 1997 study commissioned by the Florida Department of corrections (Freeman, 2000). However, the first focused on the public’s perception of police, court, and correctional system performance. Similarly, the second study focused on the public’s evaluation of the Florida Correctional system performance.

This study attempts to go beyond examining how the public views the performance of correctional systems and attempts to ascertain what people believe about correctional facilities and inmates in general. However, because the ultimate goal is to get more African Americans involved in prison ministry, the central focus of this study is on the beliefs held by African American Christians. In addition, because most of the research on public perception of corrections is mainly anecdotal this study seeks to examine this issue from an empirical standpoint; thus, the first research question is exploratory in nature:

RQ1: Do African American Christians hold negative perceptions of inmates and correctional facilities?

As noted earlier, information forming the basis of beliefs about remote contexts comes from three sociocultural sources: direct contact, interpersonal communication, and mediated communication. However, there is some indication that when it comes to African Americans and perceptions of corrections the principle source may be television. According to Nielsen Media Research (2004) African Americans comprise the largest segment of minority television viewers in the U.S. Liss (2003) notes that African Americans spend more money on cable TV each month than any other form of entertainment. He also notes that they watch at least 20 more hours of TV each week than any other ethnic group. Indeed, a study conducted by Initiative North America, a leading media buyer, revealed that African Americans watch a staggering 74.4 hours of television each week (Liss). From these facts and other studies it becomes apparent that African Americans watch a lot of TV; thus, it is likely they have been exposed to television images and messages about jails and prisons in some form. This leads to a second research question:

RQ2: Do African American Christians see television as the most dominant sociocultural contributor to their beliefs about jails, prisons, and inmates?

The contact hypothesis and stereotype reduction

Many have argued that lack of contact with members of stigmatized groups leads to ignorance that fuels negative stereotypes about those groups. Proponents of the contact hypothesis, first postulated by Allport (1954), have argued that intergroup contact leads to more positive attitudes among groups. In other words, the more members of one group interact with members of another group, the more they will learn about the other group and thus develop more

positive beliefs about and feelings toward members of that group. Allport popularized contact theory with his book *The Nature of Prejudice*. While maintaining the importance of intergroup contact, Allport recognized that each situation is unique and that contact alone is not enough to reduce prejudice. In speaking of interracial contact he wrote, “Whether or not the law of peaceful progress will hold seems to depend on the nature of contact that is established.” He continues, “Obviously, the effect of contact will depend upon the kind of association that occurs, and upon the kinds of persons who are involved” (p. 262). According to Allport, prejudice can only be reduced if members of both groups see themselves as being of equal status and are in pursuit of common goals. He further theorized that the contact needs to be sanctioned by some institution and should lead “to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups (p.281). Although this theory appears logical, it has not garnered much statistical support. At best, the findings produce ambiguity as to whether or not personal contact makes any difference in changing negative attitudes toward marginalized and other stigmatized groups. While Desforges et al. (1991) reported that structured, cooperative interaction between university students and former mental patients resulted in the students adopting more positive behavioral attitudes toward the former mental patients, other studies cast doubt on whether or not direct contact is effective in ameliorating negative attitudes and beliefs. For instance, Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, and Sherif (1961) discovered that prejudice between two group of boys at a summer camp was positively influenced only after the two groups were forced to cooperatively work together. Cook (1978) discovered that while favorable contact situations resulted in more positive evaluations of individual out-group members, it did little to reduce negative beliefs about the out-groups themselves. Lastly, Segelman and Welch (1993) in their studies concluded that contact between Caucasians and African Americans “does not

always affect racial attitudes, and even when it does, the effect is not always meaningful” (p. 792).

It appears that prison ministry meets the conditions put forth by Allport for successful stereotype reduction. First, successful ministry necessitates shared respect between ministry volunteers and inmates. Inmates demand that they be respected and that the volunteers look upon them as peers. Condescension on the part of volunteers dooms the ministry. Secondly, both groups share the common goals of promoting better understanding of the Gospel among inmates, thereby enabling them to successfully negotiate relationships and to live productive lives. Thirdly, prison ministry affords both groups the opportunity to get to know one another, which Allport contended is essential to meaningful contact. Lastly, these meetings are strongly encouraged by both by churches, parachurch organizations, and correctional administrations.

The fact that many of those who participated in this study are either actively involved in or formally involved in prison ministry presented an opportunity to test the contact hypothesis to see if direct contact has any affect on prejudice toward those incarcerated. Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H1: The perceptions of those who have frequent, direct contact and personal experiences with inmates and the correctional system on a regular bases will be less negative (more positive) than the perceptions those who do not?

Methodology

A self-study approach was used to examine beliefs held by African American Christians about corrections and those incarcerated. A total of 50 members of an African American evangelical Christian church participated by anonymously completing a four-part survey consisting of 96 items designed to measure four variables: 1) perception of jails and prisons, 2) 0

perception of inmates, 3) perception of sociocultural influences on stereotype formation, 4) direct contact with inmates.

Of those who completed the survey, 28% were male and 36% were female. 48% were between the ages of 40 and 64 while those 25 to 39 made up 34% and those 18 to 24 made up 16%. Only 4% of the respondents were 65 or older. 62% reported annual incomes of \$20,000 to \$50,000 while 26% reported earning under \$20,000. Only 12% reported income above \$50,000. As for formal education, 56% reported having a high school diploma, 34% an undergraduate degree and 8% as having engaged in some post-graduate study.

The first section of the survey consisted of 31 semantic differentiation scales constructed according to the guidelines outlined by Isaac and Michael (1995). The first 14 scales were designed to measure perceptions of jail and prisons, and the second 17 scales measured perceptions of inmates. Each scale contained seven points anchored by polar adjective pairs adapted from Osgood's factor list. Participants were asked to rate what they believed to be characteristics of jails, prisons, and inmates by circling a number somewhere between the polar adjectives on each item, indicating the magnitude of their association with one or the other adjective. Adjectives with negative connotations were placed at the highest end of each scale. Some of the trait adjective pairs used to measure perceptions of correctional facilities were: good-bad, non-violent-violent, safe-unsafe, positive-negative, and bright-drab. Some of those used for inmates were harmless-dangerous, non-violent-violent, friendly-unfriendly, kind-cruel.

To facilitate analysis of the data and to increase the credibility and validity of the study, several items were selected from each semantic scale to create two new composite variable scales with high reliability coefficients. Using factor analysis, 8 items were selected from the first 14 semantic pairs and transformed into a composite variable. This new variate scale had a

Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .872. The second variate scale was composed of 15 items and had a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .930.

To further enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, perception of correctional facilities and inmates were also measured using 1-5 Likert-type statements. In order to assess the respondents' opinions about the statements, they were asked to select one of 5 options, which ranged from 1 denoting strongly disagree to 5 denoting strongly agree. Several statements used to measure perceptions of jails and prisons are as follows:

- Overall, I think a prison is a violent place.
- A lot of crime occurs among inmates in prison.
- Prison misconduct is a big problem.
- I feel confident that the prison staff would be able to protect me.

Statements used to gauge perception of inmates were similar:

- The average inmate disrespects authority.
- The average inmate is violent or dangerous in some way.
- The average prisoner continues a life of crime after being released.
- The average inmate is aggressive.

As with the semantic items, attempts were made to create composite variables using highly correlated statements. An attempt to create a scale measuring perception of correctional facilities generated a low Alpha. However, a 12-item Likert scale with a alpha of .706 was created to measure perception of inmates.

The survey instrument also contained 14 Likert statements designed to measure media consumption and influence. The purpose of these statements was to discover the participants'

sources of news as well as to measure their perception of the influence of various contributors to their perceptions of correctional facilities and inmates. Repeating the process used earlier, a fourth 7-item Likert media influence scale was developed. This scale had a alpha of .803.

Participants were presented with such statements as:

- I consider myself a regular TV viewer.
- I consider myself a regular newspaper reader.
- The majority of my news comes from television.
- The majority of my news comes from newspapers.
- I can remember seeing at least two movies about prisons.
- I can recall at least two prison scenes that I have seen in a movie.
- I believe that prison movies or scenes I have seen have influenced my perception of prisons and jails in some way.
- I believe the TV news stories and documentaries about prisons and jails have influenced my perception of prisons and jails in some way.

In addition to the above measurement, participants were required to rate the degree of perceived influence exerted by various sociocultural contributors by responding to such statements as, “Most of what I know about prisons and jails comes from this source,” and “ I believe my views on crime, criminals, correctional facilities have been influenced most by this.” The participants were asked to place the number of what they believed to be the most influential source on a line at the beginning of each statement. The options given, indicated by arbitrarily assigned numbers, were TV, radio, books/magazines/pamphlets, newspaper, Internet, talking to others, and personal experience. Because most movies are eventually shown on television and

become available for in-house viewing through video rental, this category was considered to a part of television viewing.

Several procedures were performed using SPSS software to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics were conducted on all items including frequencies and measures of central tendencies. In addition, a correlation matrix was created to determine linear relationships between variables, and a T-test was conducted to compare several of the scale and item means from two groups in the sample.

Results

The first research question examined the perceptions of correctional facilities and inmates held by African American Christians. This was accomplished primarily by interpreting the data generated by the three composite variable scales. The closer the mean is to the scale maximum, the more negative the perception. As expected, overall beliefs about these two remote contexts appear to be negative. On the first semantic scale measuring perception of jails and prisons that has a minimum/maximum of 8 to 56, the mean value was $M = 38.9$, $SD = 9.89$. On the 15-item semantic scale measuring perception of inmates that has a minimum/maximum of 15 to 105, the mean value was $M = 74.21$, $SD = 13.65$. The 12-item Likert scale measuring perception of inmates had a minimum/maximum range of 12 to 60 with the mean value being $M = 37.66$, $SD = 5.5$.

Although the respondents' general perception of jails, prisons, and inmates appears to be negative, it does not appear to be as negative as assumed. When the perceptions were assessed using individual semantic and Likert items, the means were consistently located closer to the neutral point of each scale than to the negative extreme. For example, on the 7 point semantic scales judging whether or not jails and prisons are violent or non-violent and safe or unsafe, the

mean values were $M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.9$ and $M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.6$ respectively. On the semantic scales measuring whether or not respondents perceived jails and prisons as easy or tough, friendly or unfriendly environments, the mean values were $M = 5.68$, $SD = 1.3$ and $M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.4$ respectively. Although the data indicate that African American Christians hold rather moderate views of correctional institutions, few would like to live near a jail or prison. Interestingly, 84% of the respondents reported that they would not approve of plans to build a prison near their neighborhood.

Examination of individual semantic items measuring perceptions of inmates rendered similar findings. For example, on the semantic scales measuring whether or not respondents perceived inmates as harmless or dangerous, non-violent or violent, the mean values were $M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.2$ and $M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.3$ respectively. Three other individual scale items measuring whether or not respondents perceived inmates as non-aggressive or aggressive, honest or dishonest, and friendly or unfriendly generated mean values of $M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.3$; $M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.4$; and $M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.4$ respectively.

Given the African American proclivity for television viewing, the second research question attempted to ascertain whether or not this medium played a dominant role in shaping black Christian perception of jails, prisons, and inmates. The findings support this contention. 70% of the survey respondents reported that television is the major source of the general news and information they receive, and 40% indicated that television is for them a major source of news and information about inmates. In addition, 62% reported they believe that most of what they know about crime and criminals comes from TV. Lastly, nearly half (48.7%) believe their views on crime, criminals, inmates, and correctional facilities have been most influenced by television.

Correlation analysis conducted on individual variables provided additional support for the theory that television plays an important role in shaping the respondents' beliefs about jails, prisons, and inmates. The findings suggest that a positive linear relationship exist between perception of television viewing and perceptions of both correctional facilities ($r = .404, p < .01$) and inmates ($r = .453, p < .01$). In other words, those that see themselves as high consumers of TV, scored higher on the perception scales. Positive linear relationships were also observed between perception of television viewing and recall of programs about prisons and jails ($r = .319, p < .05$) and the perception that television news stories have negatively impacted their views about corrections ($r = .301, p < .05$).

While television seems to exhibit the greatest impact on the formation of stereotypes about corrections, it should be noted that 28% of the respondents believe that most of what they know about correctional facilities and inmates come from talking with others, and 28% believe their knowledge of these remote contexts is based on personal experience. This is probably due to the fact that 36% of the respondents are currently involved in or have been involved in prison ministry, which provides frequent contact with the prison environment, staff, and inmates.

As noted earlier, this study provided a unique opportunity to test the contact hypothesis to see if direct personal experience with correctional facilities and those incarcerated reduces negative beliefs about those remote areas of reality. The hypothesis assumed that perception scores of those who go into the jails and prisons on a regular basis would be significantly more positive than the scores of those who have never been inside such institutions. This hypothesis was supported by the data. A significant difference was observed on each of the composite variable scales measuring perceptions of correctional facilities and inmates. Results from a t-test performed on the semantic variate scale measuring perception of correctional facilities revealed

that although the means for both groups were negative, the perception held by ministry volunteers ($M = 30.5, SD = 10$) was lower than that of non-volunteers ($M = 43.59, SD = 5.9$) ($t = -5, p < .001$). The two variate scales measuring perception of inmates reveal similar results. On the first scale, the volunteer group mean was ($M = 35.6, SD = 4.9$) and the non-volunteer group mean was ($M = 38.8, SD = 5.57$) ($t = -2.03, p < .05$). On the second scale, the volunteer group mean was ($M = 63, SD = 13.59$) and the non-volunteer group mean was ($M = 79.4, SD = 10.23$) ($t = -4.59, p < .001$).

Discussion

This study suggests that African American Christians have moderately negative opinions about correctional institutions and those incarcerated. The overall perception is that of correctional facilities as being somewhat dangerous and unsafe places and those incarcerated as being somewhat dishonest, violent, and unfriendly. However, these opinions appear to be far more positive than expected given the fact that the respondents' beliefs appear to be primarily shaped by negative media information and images. The findings suggest that the lack of direct contact with correctional systems and the lack of information generated by correction agencies cause most African American Christians to turn to television for knowledge to construct their reality of prison life. Indeed, most see television as the dominant medium influencing their thoughts and beliefs about corrections. News programs, documentaries, movies, and other television fare appear to fuel negative stereotypes about incarceration. The more respondents considered themselves to be TV viewers, the more they perceived jails and prisons as negative environments and inmates as possessing negative characteristics. This finding bolsters the conclusion that television viewing negatively impacts perceptions of jail, prisons, and inmates, because those that watch the most TV probably were the ones who strongly agreed with the

statement, “ I consider myself a regular TV viewer.” In addition, the more respondents considered themselves to be regular TV viewers the more they believed that their beliefs about corrections were being negatively influenced by television.

Contact theorists assert that positive personal contact between members of different groups can favorably change the beliefs and attitudes of members of those groups. This study supports that conclusion. Regular, consistent, personal intergroup contact that generates sustained positive feelings appears to be quite effective in reducing negative stereotypes of stigmatized groups. The beliefs and attitudes about correctional institutions and inmates held by participants in this study who have formed meaningful relationships with those imprisoned are substantially more positive than those who have never had any contact with a correctional system.

Although this study begins to shed light on how African American Christians view corrections, it has several major weaknesses that limit generalization of the findings. First, a sizable portion of the sample consisted of individuals involved in prison ministry, which may not be indicative of the general African American Christian community. This factor may have affected the outcomes by reducing the overall level of negative perception. Secondly, the study involved a small sample size which prevented the use of more sophisticated statistical analysis. For instance, analysis of variance (ANOVA) would allow for exploring causal relationships between metric and non-metric variables. Regression analysis could be performed to see if age, gender, education, and denominational affiliation have any effect on the perceptions studied. Since much of the data measuring variables concerning media consumption was categorical in nature, performing an ANOVA would have provided a means for testing the effects of media

consumption on perception of corrections. Multiple regression analysis would allow for drawing stronger conclusions about the link between television viewing and perception of corrections.

Despite the study's limitations, it opens the door for much more exhausted research in this area. At the least, it raises some interesting questions. For instance, how does the African American Christian perception of corrections differ from that of the general black population? Does the African American Christian perception of corrections differ from their white counterpart? How does the perceptions of corrections held by Christians differ from non-Christians?

A final possible area of exploration deals with the question "Does providing vicarious contact with inmates through some form of mediated communication such as pre-produced videos have the same effect as the personal contact examined by this study? This last question suggests a possible means for reducing negative stereotypes about inmates. Fujioka discovered that exposure to perceived positive television portrayals of African Americans by Japanese students who had little or no direct contact with African Americans resulted in more positive evaluations of black Americans (67-68).

This study points out the importance of media as an important sociocultural contributor to reality construction. Specifically, as media dependency theorist have asserted for decades, many turn to television to provide them with the information needed to form their beliefs of what jail and prison are like. Negative images of prison scenes become cemented in the minds of viewers. Many can vividly recall negative images of prison life presented years ago. Much more research is needed in this area. Public perception of corrections is a topic the academic community has largely ignored. However, its importance cannot be underestimated. Understanding how media shape perceptions of those imprisoned can lead to a better understanding of how media cultivates

attitudes and beliefs toward other marginalized groups. Even more important, it may lead to ways of stemming a prejudice born out of ignorance and misinformation, giving many a second chance at living profitable lives.

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