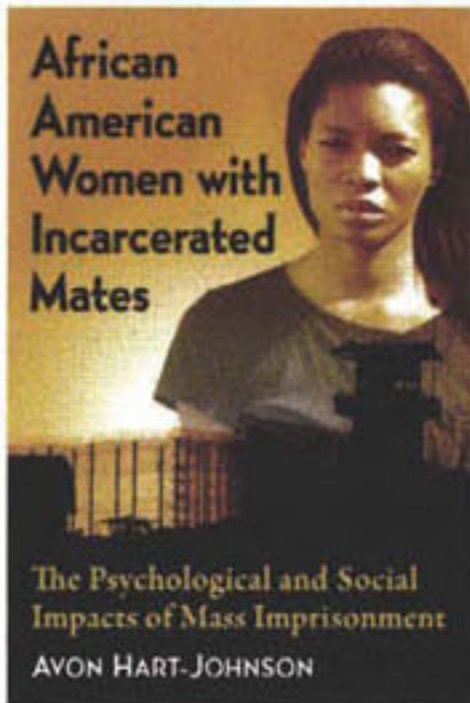




BOOKSHELF



“African American Women with Incarcerated Mates: The Psychological and Social Impacts of Mass Imprisonment”

Written by Avon Hart-Johnson,
McFarland, 2017, 212 pp.



REVIEWED BY Alice Haskins, chief correction officer of the Ontario County Jail in Canandaigua, New York.

This book is based on doctoral research conducted by the author in Washington, D.C. in 2014. Written for an audience of helping professionals and human services practitioners, this work provides a profile of African-American women affected by their mates' incarceration, suggests interventions and identifies coping strategies.

I recommend that the reader start with chapter 10. Here, Avon Hart-Johnson identifies the need for cultural awareness. The African-American woman has typically been portrayed in two conflicting lights — as a strong “superwoman” or needy,

unable to cope independently. The reality of poverty, lack of health literacy and access to care, the legacy of having been treated as inferior and the inability to move from drug-infested neighborhoods has increased the likelihood of partnering with justice-involved men, particularly men who target women with low self-esteem. Loyalty above self, blame, shame and guilt are expected. Having this cultural framework allows the reader to more clearly understand the women whose stories are key to the research.

Each chapter introduces one or more women and an exhibited trait. One example is the fixer; this person wants to be in control, to find ways to mend the broken partner. There is a synopsis of the relationship with the offender as well as the current expectations of the involved female. Hart-Johnson then provides a discussion of the situation, followed by questions that a counselor might ask to facilitate change for the women.

The book describes ways in which a woman reacts to her partner's incarceration, serving time with him or feeling guilty about aspects of her life that do not mimic incarceration. This typically leads to social isolation and a distancing from supportive services including family. In addition, the stigma of incarceration may extend past the offender to the partner, eliciting feelings of guilt and shame.

This is further complicated by financial harm in cases where the partner was a contributing member

of the household. In addition, travel for visitation, phone calls and contributions to commissary accounts can put a strain on the already tight budget. The woman with children has the additional burden of raising the children without a partner, along with the added concern that the children may engage in criminal activity and all while trying to provide emotional support to the children. These losses are endured without the typical sympathy extended during traumatic life changes.

Hart-Johnson's work is important because it goes beyond a description of the problem. From her research, Hart-Johnson developed the SIG-C Theory, which addresses symbolic imprisonment, grief and coping. Key to handling the incarceration of a partner are awareness, assessment, reframe and matched response (AARM). This intervention model expects the client to be an equal of the facilitator.

The coping element of the SIG-C model includes self-directed identification of goals and strategies to achieve them. Seeing self as important, with the right to enjoy personal freedom is central to achieving one's potential; expecting support from those who are expected to give it is not unreasonable.

Throughout the book, the author clearly describes the behavior and characteristics of the male partners as charismatic, narcissistic, demanding, interested in a relationship only while incarcerated and demeaning. While

it is not the purpose of the book to address the male partners, it seems reasonable to expect that the men should be in a corollary counseling program; if not, they will find other women to prey upon.

In addition to identifying coping skills for her clients, Hart-Johnson points out weaknesses in the criminal justice system. For example, there are no prisons in Washington, D.C. Inmates are housed within the federal prison system and may be placed in any place in the nation that has a federal prison. This complicates

visitation and raises the level of concern about the well-being of the family member.

I strongly recommend "African American Women with Incarcerated Mates: The Psychological and Social Impacts of Mass Imprisonment." It is a significant tool for counselors and practitioners working with clients whose mates and/or children are incarcerated, and to extended families who can support those clients. Correction officers and other staff in jails and prisons will gain a clearer understanding of the structure

and dynamics the incarcerated population — those physically and those vicariously serving time. Legislators and advocates who have a real interest in criminal justice reform will benefit from the information regarding black family structure and the long-term impact of mass incarceration. Like the women, we cannot be "fixers" — we must be equal participants in the discussion. Asking some of the questions Hart-Johnson poses for clients, would be a good starting point. ♦

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