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SOCIAL ISOLATION & ALIENATION IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

THE EFFECTS OF POST TRAUMATIC SLAVE SYNDROME & YOUTH INCARCERATION
ON COMMUNITY BONDS & FAMILY RELATIONS

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**Social Isolation and Alienation in the Black Community:
The Effects of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome and Youth
Incarceration on Community Bonds and Family Relations**

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About the Contributors

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Whitney Major—formally known as Whitney Whitehead—is the eldest of seven and a mother of three. She recently received her B.A. in Sociology, at Simmons College of Kentucky. She is a scholar and a cosmetologist. She currently works at Simmons assisting faculty and staff with digital learning. As a Community Researcher at the Root Cause Research Center, she is working on a project that addresses an issue within the Racial Wealth Gap.

Mitzi Wilson (she/her/hers)

Missy is very passionate about juvenile justice, ending incarceration, and housing justice. Missy studied at JCTC and was trained in community organizing by Black Lives Matter Louisville. She supports her community through advocacy work and mutual aid. Through the BLML mutual aid program she's able to nourish others who may not have access to a home-cooked meal. As a Community Researcher at the Root Cause Research Center, she is working on a project that addresses an issue within the Racial Wealth Gap.

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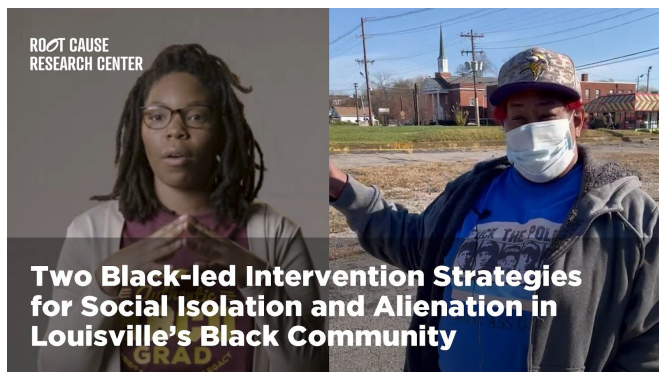
Shelton is a RCRC Associate, project facilitator, professional consultant, and mentor. He is a counselor in mental and behavioral health, a strategic planner, consultant, and community organizer. A 2016 **Just Leadership USA** fellow and a 2018 BMe Genius award recipient, Shelton holds Masters in Mental Health Counseling and studies Documentary Studies at Duke University. In addition, Shelton hosts scholarship workshops for underserved individuals and has raised over \$100k for emerging scholars. In addition to leading multiple bail fund initiatives (nationally and locally), Shelton worked with Parent Advocacy and Participatory Defense in Louisville, KY, assisting parents in the reunification process with their children and using organizing tools to fight the criminal justice system. As a formerly incarcerated individual who was a ward of the state in foster care for over 15 years, Shelton works daily to dismantle dehumanizing systems of oppression.

Jessica Bellamy (any/all/yall)

Jessica is a RCRC Co-Founder, Co-Principal Investigator, community research curriculum co-designer, project facilitator, and research supervising staff member. They are also an international speaker, Adobe Creative Residency alumna, and award-winning infographic designer., Jessica Bellamy. As a former Neurodevelopmental Science research analyst at the University of Louisville and community organizer, in 2015, Jessica created a social enterprise that combined grassroots organizing, research, and information graphics. She named that business GRIDS: The Grassroots Information Design Studio. She has since been featured in Arianna Huffington's [Thrive Global](#), [Forbes](#), [Communication Arts Magazine](#), [The Great Discontent](#), [Create Magazine](#), [Creative Mornings](#), [Slack](#), [The Dieline](#), [Revision Path](#), and on Adobe's Project 1324 (viewable through Facebook).

Abstract

This qualitative participatory research study will explore social isolation caused by the lack of resources and opportunities that impact Black, Brown, and poor communities. We will look at the root causes and effects of systemic oppression on these communities with a particular focus on the impact of Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome and mass incarceration. In an effort to envision restorative solutions, this work features two Black-led intervention strategies that aim to rebuild connections within our community and create an adaptive shared system of support and resources.

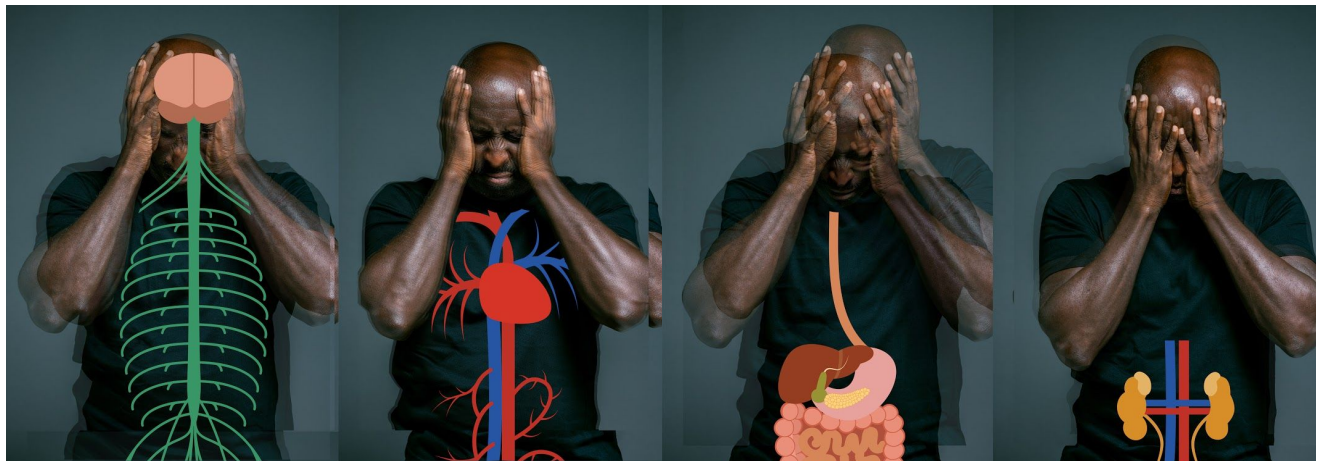


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Understanding Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome & Mass Incarceration as Traumas

As researchers with intergenerational family trauma, we understand how mass incarceration and the entrenched trauma carried across generations can affect the family over time. Incarceration and the compounding impacts of racism (i.e., slavery, Jim Crow, racial profiling, redlining, stereotype threats¹, police brutality, etc.), are traumatic experiences that Black populations are barely surviving. This trauma can lead to high-risk behaviors such as dropping out of school, substance misuse, and criminal activity, in addition to the disintegration of mental, physical, and social health. Stress responses to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, death of a parent or sibling, parent separation or divorce, witnessing violence or substance misuse in the home, or the imprisonment of a loved one can have immediate and long-term physical and mental impacts. Adults who have experienced ACEs often suffer from lung conditions, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and other chronic health problems throughout the course of their life.²



Two leading factors of such poor health conditions are sustained emotional trauma and chronic stress. Though they are both dangerous to our health, they are very different conditions. Stress is a negative reaction to an event or series of events that we perceive as threatening.³ According to an article written by Alissa Greenberg with Kentucky Educational Television program, *NOVA*:

A stressful situation involves more than just abstract emotion; your body also prepares for conflict. Your blood pressure increases, along with your heart rate. Blood is diverted to your extremities to allow for easier movement. And your system is flooded with

¹ [Stereotype Threat Widens Achievement Gap](#)

² [Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\) to improve U.S. health](#)

³ [Trauma vs. Stress](#)

hormones like adrenaline and norepinephrine, which give you access to lots of energy quickly—key for either fighting or fleeing. The catch is that these systems have evolved to be used for a few minutes at a time, then returned to baseline once the threat has passed. The problems arrive when stress becomes chronic. (Greenberg, 2020)

Later in the article, clinical professor of social work at the University of Southern California, Tyan Parker Dominguez explains, “Your body then remains in this hypervigilant mode, where you’re constantly anxious, constantly worried. If you have your foot on the gas pedal of your car, and you’re just constantly revving your engine with no let up, that’s going to wear down the engine of your car much faster.”⁴

Trauma, on the other hand, is not a reaction. It *is* the event or series of events. When a person experiences a sudden, possibly life-threatening event that changes the way that they perceive the world, that event can then be identified as trauma. Many people who have experienced trauma also go on to experience intrusive memories or thoughts that force them to relive the event of their trauma over and over in their imagination and even their dreams. Though some may relive their trauma consciously, many still feel powerless to control these reincarnations of severe and painful emotions.⁵

Black Americans experience Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), a term coined by internationally renowned researcher Joy DeGruy, PhD.⁶ The term is a nod to Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), which is the severe stress reaction to an extreme and frightening traumatic event,⁷ but it also alludes to much more. Dr. DeGruy clarifies that the term, “describes the multigenerational trauma and injustices experienced by African-Americans — from the dawn of slavery to the recent deaths of Black citizens at the hands of police.” Much like survivors of PTSD, Black Americans who experience PTSS often: 1) avoid certain places, people, or activities and events that may remind the individual of the trauma or experience, 2) have difficulty concentrating, oftentimes feeling jumpy or easily angered, 3) may appear emotionally numb, also called “vacant esteem”, which includes feelings of hopelessness, depression and a general self-destructive outlook. Racial socialization and internalized racism⁸ are also unique aspects of PTSS.⁹ Racial socialization is the way in which Black parents teach their children how to navigate and survive a society that systemically marginalizes, disenfranchises, and criminalizes people who look like them. Racial socialization happens both intentionally and by happenstance. Parents may give their children “The Talk,”¹⁰ and expose them to Black literature, while the parents themselves may unconsciously demonstrate survival responses to learned or inherited past racial trauma. Though some parents have concerns about their children internalizing a victim-mentality or suffering from hypersensitivity as a result of racial socialization, research shows that youth who rarely receive messages about race have poorer psychological health. Moreover—regardless of age and gender— Black youth who receive

⁴ [How the stress of racism can harm your health—and what that has to do with Covid-19](#)

⁵ [Trauma vs. Stress](#)

⁶ [Understanding Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome](#)

⁷ [Trauma vs. Stress](#)

⁸ [What Is Internalized Racism?](#)

⁹ [Understanding Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome](#)

¹⁰ [‘The Talk’ Is A Rite Of Passage In Black Families. Even When The Parent Is A Police Officer](#)

messages of pride in one's Blackness generally do better overall than their peers who receive zero messages about race.¹¹ Additionally, communities that suffer from high amounts of trauma also tend to have complex issues involving social health.

The Connection Between Social Isolation & Poverty

According to a 2016 Pew Research Center study, most Black adults surveyed (81%) said that they felt at least “somewhat” connected to a broader Black community; these answers include the 36% who said they felt “very connected” to a broader Black community. Since the 2020 Uprising for Racial Justice that number may have changed, but Pew’s study highlighted a very interesting fact: Black adults with an annual family income of \$30,000 or more were somehow more likely to connect with the broader Black community than those making less. Pew’s study also said the relationship existed where education was concerned. It suggested that Black adults with at least a bachelor’s degree were more likely to feel connected than those with less education. The study went on to say that Black adults who felt a strong connection to the broader Black community were more likely to engage with organizations that were dedicated to improving the lives of Black people.¹²

We interpret these findings as evidence of the undeniable link between social isolation and poverty. Black neighborhoods have historically suffered segregation, redlining, exploitive relationships between white landlords and low-income Black renters, the irreversible economic devastation of Urban Renewal¹³, racist lending practices, hiring discrimination, wealth, jobs and resource extraction since emancipation. On top of that suffering, poor people have been historically treated as if they are less entitled to dignity and basic respect. Our society stigmatizes poverty as an individual's personal failure, and as a result poor people are often forced to battle feelings of personal shame. It is only natural that those individuals might seek isolation. According to the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, “Poverty is a real threat to confidence and participation,” which can allow the few opportunities in low-income neighborhoods to either be consciously passed up due to self-doubt or unnoticed altogether.¹⁴

The second most significant factor to consider when discussing social isolation in the Black Community is mass incarceration.

¹¹ [Racial socialization Ways parents can teach their children about race.](#)

¹² [Most black adults say race is central to their identity and feel connected to a broader black community](#)

¹³ [The Racist Roots Of “Urban Renewal” And How It Made Cities Less Equal](#)

¹⁴ [The Vicious Circle of Poverty and Social Isolation](#)

The Connection Between Mass Incarceration, Poverty, & Adverse Childhood Experiences

According to the Center for American Progress, a nonpartisan public policy research and advocacy organization, “The criminal justice system is perhaps the clearest example of structural racism in the United States.”¹⁵ The criminal justice system perpetuates white supremacy and capitalism through racist calls made to police, policing, prosecutorial decisions, pretrial release processes, sentencing, cash bail, unpaid and low-wage penal labor, correctional discipline, poor carceral living conditions, reentry, the systematic mass imprisonment of nonviolent people for nonviolent crimes, and so on. Racist institutional practices, policies, and norms, as well as the strategic discriminatory lack of Black political leadership to maintain these systems. Though it is common knowledge that Black people are five times more likely to be incarcerated in their lifetime than their white counterparts, it is lesser known that Black people are also twice as likely to have a family member imprisoned during their childhood. As stated earlier, the imprisonment of a parent or family member is a documented example of an ACE, which increases behavioral risks and damages mental, physical, and social health. But what is furthest from public knowledge and consideration is that with incarceration rates being

...more than 500 percent higher than they were forty years ago, black Millennials and post-Millennials are at greater risk of contact with the system than any previous generation. In fact, a new CAP analysis finds that 1 in 4 black Millennials had an incarcerated loved one before they even turned 18. For those born in the early 1990s, the rate is almost 1 in 3 (Maxwell and Solomon, 2018).

The material effects of imprisoning a family member include loss of income, loss of property, and significant residential instability. This can force remaining family members into economic crises and even homelessness.¹⁶ Though we may be able to speculate the financial losses associated with imprisoning our fathers, mothers, brothers, uncles, and other relatives, it is much more difficult to quantify the emotional distress, alienation, social isolation, and long-term damage to overall health that also significantly impacts all parties involved.

Imagining Solutions for Black Communities in Louisville, KY

Louisville needs Black-led restorative solutions that are grounded in historical and cultural practices to establish the adaptable ecosystem of support that our community so desperately needs. These solutions would garner greater buy-in from Black community members, which research suggests would increase program recruitment and retention due to the shared culture

¹⁵ [Mass Incarceration, Stress, and Black Infant Mortality](#)

¹⁶ [Mass Incarceration, Stress, and Black Infant Mortality](#)

and experiences of leadership and clients, in addition to deepening the quality of relationships formed within interpersonal programs.¹⁷ Holistic and racial & trauma-informed practices that work hard to change problematic narratives, build communal spaces (virtual and in-person), center self and community compassion, and provide personal guidance would increase resilience and stability within the community. We need Black-led solutions that thoughtfully and directly address the individual and collective opportunity gaps that we experience due to internal and external factors. In response to these needs, we propose two intervention strategies that we believe could be invaluable alternative solutions for Black youth and their families.

West Louisville needs a supportive housing program for teenagers and young adults who have been affected by the juvenile penal system. Specifically, many young Black boys have unaddressed trauma and need a safe space to work through and heal from their childhood adverse experiences. The first intervention strategy is a non-profit supportive housing organization named the Mitzi Safe Housing Program (MSHP). This organization would coordinate services for Black boys who are at risk for incarceration and are in need of a supportive and stable home environment. MSHP would be a safe home for youth, ages 12-17, in efforts to prevent them from going into the juvenile justice system. MSHP creates an opportunity for young Black boys to learn about the impact of their trauma on their mental health, emotional health, and the impact of these experiences on their whole family.

Participants in the MSHP program will be able to enroll into either a three or six-month program track, which includes housing, meals, individual counseling, group therapy, family therapy, and other support services. Once they complete the program, they will then gain access to transition support services, which aims to place the youth back into their home environment safely. To effectively deliver the level of care that these young people need, we would only be able to enroll and house five Black boys at a time.

To get started on a pilot program, we'd need a house to operate out of, in addition to financial support to sustain two live-in staff members, therapists, and other support staff. We would need funding for a van, furniture, and stipends for the youth. The stipends would allow staff to teach them financial responsibility and prioritization, while nurturing their sense of autonomy. Young Black boys need to learn about self-reliance outside of survival tactics. They can grow to be more confident problem-solvers and creative thinkers when given the right opportunity and support.

MSHP is a unique program because it focuses on decriminalizing young people and focusing on their humanity and ability to transform from trauma. This program also aspires to teach young people how to build better relationships with themselves as well as others in their community. These aspirations will positively affect their school attendance rate, help them improve their grades, increase their ability to talk about their emotions, and will help them transition into living independently once they are over 18 years of age. All of these tools will help them break down elements of social isolation and create healthier connections with others. These are lifelong skills that are essential to our development and livelihoods.

¹⁷ [Does Race Matter? Understanding the role of social connectedness in student retention in hospitality programs](#)

The second solution is *S.T.E.P. to Success Holistic Center*, a therapeutic safe place where women and families that experience trauma or struggle to be all they can be, can grow and thrive. *S.T.E.P.* stands for *Sisters That Elevate Purposes*. The idea behind *S.T.E.P.* was crafted and nurtured by a group of Black women over the course of several years. We believe that women are both the center and backbone of the family. If she's together then the family will be together. If she's moving forward, the family will move forward with her. We wanted to form an organization that aimed to help and heal Black families by supporting and uplifting their central members.

S.T.E.P. families are provided with care, education, resources and support to positively transform their lives. The image below is an image of what the CDC says are preventive factors to help a child reach full potential through providing the needs of the children and families.



Figure 1. Adverse Childhood Experiences Resources

S.T.E.P. to Success Holistic Center is not just for women. The program works with fathers and mothers alike because we understand that for children, that foundation of family can only be as stable as the relationship between the parents, even if the parents are no longer together. We

want to have as many supportive services possible because we understand that systematic oppression has broken down our families. When a person or family enters our program, we start off with loving them. We celebrate the good things and recognize the hard work that has been put in leading up to this moment. Grounding and validating families before doing a needs assessment is essential to building their resilience and confidence moving forward. Through the intake process, we work to assess what that family's immediate and long-term needs are. They may need family mentoring services, self-care cosmetology services, childcare, our entrepreneurship program, life coaching, access to food, healing sessions, legal assistance, a family cooking class, parenting classes, or other resources from our Compassionate Basket. It's important to note that S.T.E.P. is not a one-stop-shop for all of the above services. Though we will provide some services directly, we will also use our wide network to connect people to local experts and organizations who can fill in the gaps.

Our healing sessions will allow families to re-center their mindsets, build self-compassion, acknowledge their trauma, and begin to develop the spiritual flexibility necessary for the changes that are to come. Our family mentoring services will pair families together so that they can build trust and lasting ties through their shared experiences and interests. Befriending another Black family that has been through the mentoring program can create access to new opportunities and resources for families that are new to S.T.E.P.

Our self-care cosmetology services allow individuals to build and maintain a healthy relationship with themselves, which influences how they interact with others. These services include a wide range of therapies and treatments that include massage services, hair care, nail care, skin care, and more. Within the Black community, cosmetology and therapy naturally coexist because barbershops and beauty salons have historically served as safe spaces for Black people. We tend to form strong connections and build our networks in barbershops and hair salons. Grooming is also very significant to Black people because it builds our confidence and lifts us up from a scarcity mindset to an abundance mindset.

The Compassionate Basket is an employment and education program that was inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.'s Bread Box program. This program allows us to partner with companies who are interested in hiring Black and low-income employees. Once a company has been trained on how to be a Compassionate Employer, they become a part of our employment database and help S.T.E.P. members obtain a job where they will have added support in maintaining their position. The Compassionate Basket also recruits Black volunteers to help S.T.E.P. members fill out scholarship applications.

Both MSHP and S.T.E.P. are programs designed to help Black families work through their trauma. S.T.E.P. builds capacity around healing adults who are taking care of younger children, while MSHP builds capacity around healing teenagers and young adults to keep them out of the juvenile penal system. Together, these programs allow us to protect and work with the whole family.

Ultimately, we need \$2 million to fully establish a S.T.E.P. facility, including staff, and to launch each program. However, our pilot fundraising goal is \$50,000. Our business plan includes a

thriving wage, not just a living one, for all staff members and contracted workers such as massage therapists, cosmologists, etc. Providing a thriving wage affords staff and contracted workers the opportunity to save towards their own personal goals, which may be to start their own business someday, buy a house, send a child to college, or get an advanced degree or additional certifications in the future. Our budget also includes starting costs for initial supplies, equipment, and family pantry items such as diapers, nonperishable foods, etc. Some of our budget will be devoted to direct giving for academic pursuits.

We are committed to helping women and families break generational cycles of trauma and poverty through empowering them to heal from their trauma and walk in their purpose through connecting with compassionate partners.

This solution is important and relevant to Black and Brown communities because people of African descent have experienced years of oppression and discrimination that has limited their access to success. This has left communities in poverty and exposed to violence and trauma. The break down of our families from slavery and capitalism has affected connectedness and economic gain in the black community. We want S.T.E.P. to Success Holistic Center to be a place where people of all races can heal from racial trauma and help each other.

Through our services families can gain the support they need. Clients can feel safe and free to express themselves in an environment that is relatable and willing to get to root causes of what is preventing them from walking in their purposes. We will do this through our salon, classes, mentorships, coaching, wealth literacy, childcare, and compassionate partners. We aim to create positive changes within the whole family and understand that we can not do all this alone. We do not have the capacity to house all the youth that have been in trouble with the law, and in partnership with the Mitzi Safe Housing Program, we can help youth and families who need MSHP as a safe place to help them stay out of the juvenile justice system.

The positive impact that we hope to have is for people of African descent to receive healing, resources, and opportunities. We hope to see attitudes and behaviors about ourselves and one another change, and begin forming connections with one another. To bring an end to white supremacy, which has created the trauma and violence that harms the community as well as the individual. To bring about healing as a form of reparations.

In conclusion, the effects of Acute Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, are serious problems and can cause issues well into adulthood, and can lead to many health, social, and emotional issues. Within the Black community the risk is far greater and has led to Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, or PTSS, throughout many generations as a result of oppression, mass incarceration, poverty, and many other forms of trauma that the black community has sustained, mostly untreated. This has greatly impacted the connectedness that we have with each other and the world. This has caused generations of social isolation and alienation within the black community. The Black community needs support and resources to further their healing and to form shared adoptive opportunities to positively transform their lives. We have proposed two solutions that we believe can do just that. With your support, we can help put Louisville on a path of healing and freedom to grow in all areas of our lives.

