Inequalities of Race, Class, and Place and Their Impact on Postincarceration Higher Education

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Abstract
Postsecondary correctional education (PSCE) is witnessing a revitalization, offering the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated an important source of human and social capital. Yet, opportunities for higher education among this population are patterned by larger structural exclusions based on race, class, and place. In this article, we investigate the impact of race and class inequalities among students in a program for formerly incarcerated individuals at a large state university. Specifically, we draw from 34 in-depth interviews with past and present program participants to examine how pre- and postcarceral financial, familial, community, and social network contexts shape postsecondary experiences after incarceration. Research participants came from community contexts with vastly different resources, with consequences for social identities, educational preparedness, and embeddedness in crime preincarceration. These circumstances differentially prepared students for university studies postrelease. In addition, during the postcarceral period, study participants had disparate access to familial supports, were unequally burdened by financial difficulties and familial responsibilities, and differentially exposed to risks for reoffending. These patterns were closely tied to race, social class, and neighborhood characteristics. Our work highlights the import of attention to such disparities for PSCE, to facilitate its equitable access among incarcerated and formerly incarcerated populations.

Keywords
postsecondary correctional education, social inequality, reintegration

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In the wake of the federal Second Chance Act of 2007, and in response to decades of harms resulting from mass incarceration in the United States (see Clear & Frost, 2013; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013; Western, 2007), postsecondary education for current and former prisoners has witnessed a revitalization (Anders & Noblit, 2011; Anderson, 2013; Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013; Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011; Mercer, 2009; Vera Institute, n.d.; Wheeldon, 2011). This represents a significant turn of events, after “changing attitudes and policies toward crime led to the elimination of Pell Grant eligibility for prisoners through a provision in the Violent Crime Control Act of 1994” (Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011, p. 6)—resulting in declines in both educational investments within prisons and the proportion of inmates able to participate in college programming in carceral settings (Coley & Barton, 2006; Ubah, 2004).

Postsecondary correctional education (PSCE), and especially the conferment of a college degree, offers the formerly incarcerated an important source of both human and social capital (Anders & Noblit, 2011; Coley & Barton, 2006). This is particularly salient, given a contemporary labor market characterized by “limited opportunities for long-term employment, human capital accumulation, career advancement, and benefits” for those individuals who are less educated and bear the stigma of a criminal record (Bushway, Stoll, & Weiman, 2007b, p. 4; Pager, 2003). Moreover, there is fairly consistent evidence that higher educational attainment decreases recidivism (Chappell, 2004; Davis et al., 2013). While most research on the benefits of carceral postsecondary education has focused on college courses and/or degree offerings within prisons (Anders & Noblit, 2011; Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011; Mercer, 2009; Meyer, 2011), recent efforts to rebuild correctional higher education emphasize a “continuum that begins in prison and continues in the community after release” (Vera Institute, n.d., p. 1).

Yet, opportunities for higher education are available to but a small proportion of prisoners and former prisoners, and—given dramatic educational disparities by race among the incarcerated population (Pettit, 2012)—such opportunities are patterned by larger structural exclusions based on race, class, and place. As a consequence, carceral postsecondary education disproportionately provides advantages to those individuals whose postincarceration prospects are already likely to be better than most (see Fader, 2013; King, 2012), presenting a significant obstacle for overcoming the inequalities intensified by mass incarceration. Moreover, while the inclusion of a postrelease component is believed to increase the impact of postsecondary educational access (Davis et al., 2013, p. 36), thus far, very limited research has focused on the experiences of former prisoners in higher education venues within the community.

What unique challenges might exist for formerly incarcerated students in these settings? And, more importantly, how are these differentially distributed and experienced as a result of race and class inequalities among such students? These are the questions we investigate here. We draw from in-depth interviews with a diverse group of students in a postincarceration higher education program at a large state university to examine how pre- and postcarceral financial, familial, community, and social network contexts shape postsecondary educational experiences after incarceration. Our work offers insights into the complex ways by which disparities of race,
class, and place affect these students’ preparedness, opportunities for engagement, cultural adjust-ment, and struggles in the program and within the university setting more broadly. Attention to these challenges, we argue, is critical for facilitating more equitable access to the benefits of community-based postsecondary education for formerly incarcerated students.

The Value of Postsecondary Education for Postincarceration Success

Why might universities offer significant promise as anchoring institutions that can meaningfully improve the lives of former prisoners? Scholars concerned with reentry, desistance, and reintegration often point to two other social institutions as especially significant for postincarceration success: labor market participation (Apel & Sweeten, 2010; Bushway et al., 2007b; Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011) and marriage (Bersani & Doherty, 2013; Giordano, Cherkovich, & Rudolf, 2002; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998). Each is believed to contribute to desistance and community reintegration by promoting multiple processes of change: facilitating identity transformation; building attachments to prosocial community members and institutions; changing routine activities and facilitating a “knifing off” with prior criminal “people, places, and things”; and restricting opportunities for involvement in crime (see Bersani & Doherty, 2013, pp. 401–406 for a concise overview).

Yet, when considered in the context of the deep racial and class disparities in contemporary America, both labor market participation and marriage hold much more limited promise and greater challenges for socially and economically disadvantaged former prisoners, particularly urban minority men: “A key result of race-based social isolation is that racially segregated areas are marked by high levels of joblessness... and marital disruptions” (Mears, Wang, Hay, & Bales, 2008, p. 307; see also Ford & Schroeder, 2011, p. 35). Indeed, as King (2012, p. 331) surmises, the emphasis on marriage and work are “heavily rooted in middle-class experiences, and do not incorporate a recognition of the structural reality that many would-be desisters face in their everyday lives.” Moreover, the marriage effect is gendered, showing stronger positive impact on male than female desistance (King, Massoglia, & MacMillan, 2007).

Consider, first, the contemporary labor market faced by those released from prison. Formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly those without educational credentials, are typically “confined to the ‘spot’ secondary [labor] market,” where they “tend to churn in and out of a series of dead-end jobs” (Bushway et al., 2007b, p. 4; see also Visher et al., 2011). Indeed, research consistently shows that “incarceration has a long-run, detrimental impact on one’s employment prospects by reducing the probability of employment, increasing the length of unemployment, eroding wages and earnings, and exacerbating turnover” (Apel & Sweeten, 2010, p. 451). Such problems are exacerbated when former prisoners return to disadvantaged communities. These offer markedly poor job prospects (Bushway et al., 2007b) and may facilitate both labor market detachment (Apel & Sweeten, 2010) and a turn to illicit income generation to meet pressing economic needs (Fader, 2013; Uggen & Thompson, 2003).
Likewise, while recent evidence suggests that the “marriage effect” holds for urban African American men (Doherty & Ensminger, 2013), it shows less promise for promoting desistance among women, given their greater likelihood of marrying “‘down’ when it comes to exposure to violence and crime” (Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 46). Moreover, “the character and anchoring potential of marriage has . . . undergone substantial transformation” in recent decades, as a result of delayed timing as well as growing rates of both cohabitation and divorce (Ford & Schroeder, 2011, p. 50). In poor and disadvantaged communities, and among African Americans in particular, rates of marriage are both lower and declining more appreciably than in other contexts (Edin & Kefalas, 2005), resulting, as well, in instability and fragility in fathers’ relationships with their children (Edin, Tach, & Mincy, 2009).

Moreover, marriage rates for prisoners are strikingly lower than those in the general population: Fewer than one in six prisoners report being married, and well over half report having never been married (Visher & Travis, 2003). “Thus, for a substantial group of released men, reintegration into a family role of husband or parent that involves day-to-day responsibilities” is not a reality, regardless of its potential significance for postcarceral transformation (Visher & Travis, 2003, p. 97). In addition, recent ethnographic research suggests that former inmates in disadvantaged communities who are committed to intimate and parental relationships may experience acute economic strains in their attempts to be “good providers,” and thus may turn to crime, even sporadically, to address family needs. In such circumstances, “the ‘positive’ turning point” that many scholars attribute to marriage may “in practice lead to negative outcomes under certain circumstances” (Carlsson, 2013, p. 684; see also Fader, 2013).

Access to institutions of higher education, and the opportunity to earn a college degree, may offer a more promising long-term avenue for overcoming not just the barriers that result from incarceration, but also the broader structural inequalities that disadvantaged and racial minority former prisoners face in America. As Ford and Schroeder (2011, pp. 35–37) summarize:

It has now become necessary to earn a college degree to be employable in many career fields and college education is a key determinant of earning potential. . . . A college education confers status and credentials that provide graduates with an advantaged social position, access to more fulfilling and better-paying jobs, larger and stronger social networks, and greater social and political influence.

The import of postsecondary education is also evident in light of the consistently low yield that other carceral education provides for labor market attachment and opportunities. Assessing the economic impact of adult basic education in prisons, for instance, Cho and Tyler (2010) found a net benefit, 2–3 years postincarceration, of only around US$125 a month for program completers as compared to noncompleters. More starkly, Tyler and Kling (2007, p. 249) report that while carceral general equivalency degrees (GEDs) provided small economic gains for racial minority former prisoners in the short term, “any benefits that accrue . . . from obtaining a GED appear to fade
substantially after the second year.” Indeed, Fabelo (2002, p. 110) found that Texas former inmates “in the highest education group still had an average employment rate that was 27% lower than the state minimum rate . . . and earned wages that were slightly higher than an actual minimum wage salary.” Higher education may thus offer one of the few meaningful ways for former inmates to make real inroads into “good” jobs in the primary labor market, available to those with academic credentials, and the human and social capital that come with these.

There is also strong evidence that postsecondary education is associated with lower rates of recidivism (Chappell, 2004; Davis et al., 2013). This makes sense in light of the processes of change researchers have linked to desistance. University attendance, especially in community settings, provides an important avenue for building ties to prosocial people and institutions. Moreover, when these social networks include other formerly incarcerated peers—in college programs designed for former prisoners, such as the one investigated here—it is likely they can provide “emotional guidance and support, and other important resources” for one another, as they bring a deeper understanding of one another’s histories and struggles than will student peers who have not experienced incarceration (Taylor, 2013, p. 122; see also Meyer, 2011, p. 155).

Community-based university attendance also holds the potential to facilitate positive situational aspects of postincarceration change, such as changing routine activities, knifing off former networks, and restricting opportunities for reoffending: time spent on campus is time away from risky situations, people, and places. Finally, access to higher education may facilitate what Healy (2013) refers to as identity capital, engendering a sense of agency and future directedness (see also Maruna, 2001). This so-called agency effect is best actualized when “coupled with a social context which includes enabling structural properties,” where “access to economic resources and cultural spaces . . . make self-realization a possibility” (King, 2012, pp. 323–324). More so than a job in the secondary labor market or a marriage under less than optimal circumstances, institutions of higher education may offer just such opportunities.

**Inequalities of Race, Class, and Place, Postsecondary Education, and Reintegration**

The same factors that make higher education so valuable for the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated are also those that contribute to its replication as an exclusionary opportunity, reserved only for “the most academically advanced inmates” and former inmates (Davis et al., 2013, p. 35). Individuals in prison have dramatically lower educational attainment, on average, than the general population, and markedly so for racial and ethnic minority prisoners:

The extreme disadvantage experienced prior to incarceration by prison and jail inmates can be seen in their extraordinarily low levels of educational attainment. . . . By 2008 more than half of all male inmates—white, black, or Hispanic—between the ages of twenty and thirty-four had not completed high school. Among young, male, black inmates, more than six in ten had not completed high school or a general equivalency
degree (GED). Between 1980 and 2008, as the overall educational attainment of the American population increased, the fraction of inmates with less than a high school diploma grew (Pettit, 2012, pp. 15–16).

In fact, while more than half of the adult population in the United States has some post-secondary education, this is true for just 14.4% of state prison inmates (Davis et al., 2013). As a consequence, though an estimated quarter to a third of prisons now offer college courses (Coley & Barton, 2006; Davis et al., 2013), only 6–7% of inmates participate in postsecondary educational programs (Davis et al., 2013; Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011). This discrepancy appears to result from multiple factors, including low educational attainment and lack of academic preparedness, as well as limited access to carceral college programming (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). Moreover, a significant limitation of higher educational offerings within prisons is that the majority do not “result in academic degree attainment” (Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011, p. 3). This is a primary reason the renewed push to expand PSCE includes partnerships with universities, with the goal of ensuring degree completion during or postincarceration (Vera Institute, n.d.).

In addition to disparities in access to postsecondary education, individuals’ experiences within these programs are likely shaped by racial and class inequalities. One facet affecting student success that is shared by disadvantaged students both during and after incarceration is the quality of prior education. Meyer (2011, p. 157), for example, found that having obtained a high school diploma, rather than a prison GED, was “positively associated with academic achievement, educational aspirations, progress toward a secondary degree, and personal development.” Such students were “better prepared to succeed” in carceral college classes (see also Anders & Noblit, 2011). What many have dubbed the “school to prison pipeline” disproportionately affects students of color, especially in economically disadvantaged communities (Coggshall, Osher, & Colombi, 2013; Langberg & Fedders, 2013). The early timing of incarceration, and its disruption of education, has been found especially detrimental for former inmates’ long-term prospects (Bushway et al., 2007b), and this appears to be the case even in postsecondary education programs.¹

For former inmates attending university in community settings, many of the challenges generally faced upon reentry are also relevant to consider. First is the issue of prisonization—individuals’ “adaptation to the habits and customs that prevail in correctional institutions” (Apel & Sweeten, 2010, p. 453). The ensuing adjustment to college life is likely a challenge for all former prisoners, but especially for those whose preincarceral lives did not expose them to the social and cultural capital taken for granted in university settings. In particular, minority students from disadvantaged urban communities spend their formative years in settings where street culture is “a neighborhood-level property,” and one that requires young men in particular to adopt presentations of self that are an especially ill fit with college campuses (Stewart & Simons, 2010, p. 571; see also Anderson, 1999). Former inmates from more privileged settings will likely find such cultural strains less relevant in their adjustment to the role of university student.

Two additional factors are likely of particular relevance for students who are former inmates: family resources and support, and community of residence postincarceration.
Family support has been found to be a critical dimension of successful reentry and reintegration (Visher & Travis, 2003). Former prisoners depend “on family members extensively for housing, financial support, and emotional support,” and those with strong family ties have greater postrelease success (Naser & La Vigne, 2006, p. 93). For former inmates who attend university, the need for such tangible supports is likely especially high: Success requires both economic resources and time commitments that place long-term goals ahead of immediate needs. Formerly incarcerated students with more privileged backgrounds are thus better positioned, on average, than their less advantaged peers. Moreover, students with families and children of their own, particularly those with fewer economic resources, are apt to face greater familial obligations, including financial responsibilities, that hinder opportunities for full engagement in university life (see Fader, 2013).

Finally, recent research on the social contexts associated with greater risks for recidivism is useful for highlighting the unique challenges that face students who must commute to campus from disadvantaged communities, particularly their precarceral neighborhoods. There is now strong evidence that racial inequality and reentry into disadvantaged community contexts are associated with higher rates of recidivism, especially for African American men (Hipp, Petersilia, & Turner, 2010; Kubrin & Stewart, 2006; Reisig, Bales, Hay, & Wang, 2007), while residential change postincarceration reduces recidivism (Kirk, 2012). As Kubrin and Stewart (2006, p. 172) surmise:

[W]here ex-offenders live greatly affects their ability to reintegrate into society. By providing an environment either rich or deficient in resources, place of residence tangibly affects the quality of day-to-day living and influences the range of opportunities available through the quality and extent of institutional resources...and personal networks.... When ex-offenders return to resource-poor communities they face much greater challenges.

Former inmates who commute to campus from their preincarceration-disadvantaged communities may likewise face significant obstacles that their more privileged peers do not, including the time and costs associated with transportation, fewer opportunities to establish campus-based social networks and participate in university life, greater exposure to criminogenic influences and temptations, and less ability to “‘knife off’ the past from the present” (Kirk, 2012, p. 17). These circumstances likely create significant challenges that may exacerbate race and class inequalities in student success postincarceration. We know of no research that has investigated the experiences of and challenges faced by students postincarceration in university settings. Our study is thus positioned to make an important contribution by illuminating how disparities associated with race, class, and place shape such students’ struggles and successes.

Method
Our investigation of the postsecondary educational experiences of former inmates is drawn from qualitative in-depth interviews with 34 participants in a voluntary higher
education program for formerly incarcerated students, which we call Project Achieve. It is housed at a large university in the northeastern United States, referred to here as State University. Project Achieve affords former prisoners who have demonstrated commitment to higher education the opportunity to enroll at State University upon release. Eligibility for the program is determined based upon performance in community college courses that are offered in several prisons throughout the state. Project Achieve’s director regularly visits these correctional facilities to raise awareness of the program, and correctional counselors also inform eligible inmates about the program during prerelease interviews.

At the time of the research in 2012, 51 individuals had participated or were currently participating in Project Achieve. The program’s director provided the first author with the names and contact information for each. Five were in state or federal custody and thus were not accessible for participation in the research. The first author contacted the remaining 46 by phone and/or e-mail to describe the research and schedule interviews with interested program participants. Of these, 12 chose not to participate. The remaining 34 each participated in a face-to-face in-depth interview, which was conducted by the first author, and scheduled at the time and place of their convenience. Prior to the interview, the first author outlined the study’s objectives and reviewed its confidentiality procedures. All interviewees received US$25 in appreciation for their participation.

Of the 34 research participants, 2 were alumni, 21 had been in the program for at least 1 year, 9 were in their first semester, and 2 had been admitted but planned to postpone their enrollment. The sample includes 30 men, 3 women, and 1 transgendered individual; they ranged in age from 24 to 57, with a mean age of 28. The sample was racially and ethnically diverse, and included 13 Blacks, 5 Latinos, 7 individuals who identified as biracial, 5 Whites, 3 Asians, and 1 individual of Middle Eastern descent. Most had served time at a state youth correctional facility prior to attending State University; one had spent his most recent incarceration in federal prison. Their sentences had ranged from 3 to 10 years, with an average of approximately 6 years, and included convictions for both violent and nonviolent offenses. Just over two thirds remained under correctional supervision as parolees or under intensive probation supervision at the time of the research, while nearly a third had completed a parole term or had been released without supervision.

Interviews were conducted in quiet locations on the university campus and were audiorecorded and transcribed. Most lasted approximately an hour. They covered a range of topics related to educational experiences pre-, during, and postincarceration, exploring, in particular, whether and how family relations, peer influences, and neighborhood contexts influenced participation in crime and educational engagement. Of particular relevance for the current investigation, interviewees were asked to (1) talk about their experiences in elementary, middle, and high school, including their school environments, quality of education, their educational engagement, and, when relevant, the contexts of school dropout; (2) describe their neighborhood/neighborhoods growing up, along with life contexts (e.g., neighborhood, familial, peer, educational) associated with their entrée and involvement in delinquency or crime; and (3) discuss their
motivations for participating in Project Achieve, and those factors that facilitated and hindered their success in the program and at State University more generally. They were also encouraged to describe general challenges to reentry and reintegration, those specific to students in the program, and the strategies they used to overcome these.

For the current analysis, the first author merged all narrative data on pre- and postincarceration educational experiences, neighborhood descriptions, and accounts of the impact of race/ethnicity, peers and place on crime and education into a single data file. We then used inductive analysis techniques (see Charmaz, 2006; Miller, 2011) to identify key themes related to race and community context that were identified by research participants as relevant—in both positive and negative ways—to their prior involvement in crime, educational attachment, and experiences within Project Achieve. We first coded the data independently and then worked together to refine our analysis of the thematic patterns reported here. We used constant comparative methods, comparing accounts both within and across interviews for evidence of patterns, commonalities, and divergences (see Silverman, 2006). We then used basic tabulations to ensure the strength of the themes we discovered, to identify any deviant cases requiring further scrutiny, and to link themes and patterns back to research participants’ race/ethnicity, precarceral educational attainment, and their childhood and current neighborhood contexts.

Our analysis of interview accounts provides insights into the social processes and challenges associated with postsecondary education among formerly incarcerated students. The sample only captures the experiences of around two thirds of the participants in a single postincarceration university program, but research participants were diverse in their racial/ethnic background and precarceral educational attainment, as well as the community contexts in which they grew up and were residing at the time of our investigation. Such variations are particularly useful for qualitative research, as they allow for specification of similarities and variations in social processes and meanings across groups and settings (Miller, 2005).

Our sample of 34 participants is nonrepresentative, and its size and composition made for particularly small comparative subgroups. Thus, we do not claim that our findings are generalizable. Nonetheless, the strength of the patterns we uncovered through inductive analysis—and the richness of research participants’ accounts of their educational experiences and challenges—provides strong evidence of important social processes, in students’ backgrounds and foregrounds, by which disparities of race, class, and place impact their postsecondary educational experiences. As such, they offer important insights relevant for policy and practice, particularly in the wake of renewed attention to the benefits of higher education for successful desistance and reintegration postincarceration, and the desire for its equitable contribution for changing lives.

Findings

The opportunity to participate in postsecondary education, in carceral settings and upon release, is a privilege reserved for a small group of prisoners and former
prisoners. As Zach, a 26-year-old Black interviewee, noted, “we are the exception. The people who make it into this program [are] definitely an exception.” Nearly all of the program participants we interviewed entered State University upon successful completion of college courses while incarcerated; yet, on average, just 6–7% of inmates participate in postsecondary educational programs nationwide (Davis et al., 2013; Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011). Indeed, for every one Project Achieve student admitted to the program since its inception, there were more than 2,800 former prisoners released from the state’s correctional facilities.

Already there are “fierce selection issues that determine who participants” in a program like Project Achieve (Tyler & Kling, 2007, p. 227). Table 1 shows the patterns between precarceral educational attainment and community context, and precarceral educational attainment and race among our research participants. Achieve participants were disproportionately educationally privileged, compared to the state’s prison population as a whole: Over two thirds of the students we spoke with entered prison with a high school diploma and/or some postsecondary education (35% and 32%, respectively), while three (9%) received their GED prior to incarceration. Just eight participants (24%) obtained their GED in a carceral setting prior to enrolling in college courses. By comparison, data for 2010 from the state’s Department of Corrections reveal that fewer than 4% of prisoners in the state had some postsecondary education, 17% had a high school diploma, 14% had a GED, and 1% had a postsecondary degree.5

These patterns, however, are differentiated within our sample by disparities associated with race, class, and place. In all, 12 research participants (35%) grew up in communities characterized by economic disadvantage, another 6 (18%) reported moving from disadvantaged to more advantaged communities prior to high school or lived in an urban African American working-class community in close proximity to urban disadvantage, and 16 (47%) grew up in middle-class or affluent suburban

Table 1. Prior Educational Attainment, Community Context, and Race/Ethnicity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community context</th>
<th>Some college</th>
<th>HS diploma</th>
<th>Precarceral GED</th>
<th>Carceral GED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged community (N = 12)</td>
<td>2 (17%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged to suburban and near</td>
<td>2 (33%)</td>
<td>3 (50%)</td>
<td>1 (17%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disadvantaged (N = 6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban community (N = 16)</td>
<td>7 (44%)</td>
<td>5 (31%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black (N = 13)</td>
<td>3 (23%)</td>
<td>5 (38%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>4 (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (N = 5)</td>
<td>1 (20%)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1 (20%)</td>
<td>3 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biracial/ethnic (N = 7)</td>
<td>2 (29%)</td>
<td>3 (43%)</td>
<td>1 (14%)</td>
<td>1 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian and Middle Eastern (N = 4)</td>
<td>2 (50%)</td>
<td>2 (50%)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (N = 5)</td>
<td>3 (60%)</td>
<td>2 (40%)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. HS = higher secondary; GED = general equivalency degree.

N = 34.
communities throughout their childhoods. Fully half of those who spent their childhoods in disadvantaged communities received their GEDs while incarcerated, versus less than 1 in 10 research participants who spent all or part of their childhoods in more privileged communities (see Table 1). Moreover, growing up in a disadvantaged community was itself racially patterned: All of those research participants who grew up during all or part of their childhoods in disadvantaged communities were racial minority, including 10 of the 13 Blacks, 3 of the 5 Latinos, and 3 of the 7 biracial participants, each of whom had an African American parent. In contrast, none of the White, Asian, or Middle Eastern research participants spent time in their childhoods in disadvantaged communities.

Not surprisingly, then, precarceral educational attainment was patterned by race as well: 39% of Black and Latino research participants obtained carceral GEDs, while just 22% had some precarceral postsecondary education. In contrast, half or more of White, Asian, and Middle Eastern participants had taken college classes prior to incarceration, and the remainder had graduated from high school (see Table 1). In what follows, we examine in more detail how these inequalities associated with race, class, and place impacted our study participants’ experiences within Project Achieve. We begin by discussing their educational histories in community contexts prior to incarceration, to better understand how disparities in these settings set the stage for postsecondary educational preparation and challenges. We then turn to the heart of our analysis: investigating how disparities of race, class, and place impacted student success within the program. We focus on two complex dimensions, both of which emerged inductively in our analysis: cultural adjustment and assimilation, including the negotiation of loyalties to home community and friends; and the impact of family, financial, and residential circumstances on university engagement.

Precarceral Experiences: Educational Attachment, Peers, Crime, and Community Context

A common theme among research participants, irrespective of race and class differences, was that their attachments to education began to dwindle between middle and high school, a time when many described becoming more attuned to their own identities and how to align them with peer expectations and norms. Yet, the nature and type of peer influences they experienced in adolescence varied according to the racial and socioeconomic contexts in which these interactions took place, with implications for their identities, educational outcomes, and embeddedness in delinquency and crime. The most striking distinctions, which emerged inductively in our analysis, came from themes that coalesced among what emerged as four meaningful groupings of research participants: (1) those who grew up in disadvantaged communities, all of whom were Black, Latino, or biracial; (2) White and Asian research participants, all of whom grew up in the suburbs; (3) non-Asian racial minorities who grew up in suburban communities; and finally (4) those who described moving in early to mid-adolescence from disadvantaged to suburban communities, again, all of whom were Black, Latino, or biracial.
Students From Disadvantaged Communities

The 12 research participants who grew up in socially disadvantaged communities characterized their neighborhoods as having an active street life and extensive crime, which they and their peers found themselves drawn to in adolescence. Of his social context growing up, Farley, an African American, said: “My elementary and junior high school were predominantly Black. My junior high school, even the teachers were predominantly Black. I grew up [in a] pretty bad neighborhood. . . . You know, drugs, crime, the usual. Usual things associated with that type of environment.” Yvette, who was also African American, said her neighborhood consisted of “selling drugs, murders, robbing, dope head, coke fiend, carjacking, car thieves. It’s the projects, so you see it all.” Likewise, Sam, an African American young man, noted that in his neighborhood, “coming up in poverty . . . unfortunately a lot of people’s parents be on drugs. Mines wasn’t, I was fortunate of that. . . . [But] that’s what they grow up around, seeing they parents on it, not caring. Definitely don’t have no money.”

In adolescence, many research participants in such neighborhoods described being drawn to illicit activities, to gain respect from neighborhood peers and attain economic prosperity. Cameron, a Latino research participant, described this as a gradual process:

I started smoking cigarettes. You know shying away [from school] a little starting 15, 16 years old, getting into the streets. You know, you come home at a later time now, school isn’t as important anymore. I started cutting classes, you know, that’s when high school starts, you know. I started going to people’s houses and you know . . . and that’s how I got engaged with a group of people, and then smoking. The weed comes in and it’s like the dominos of stuff [to offending].

He reflected back on what he now saw as the environmental and peer influences that shaped his choices: “At that time, when you’re a kid, if you grew up in a certain environment, you’re not thinking [about legal consequences] . . . you’re thinking, you know, kingpin status. . . . If you’re with negativity, you’re gonna be involved with negativity.” Randy likewise explained:

On my street in particular, it wasn’t a lot of drug dealing. But you could walk a block up the street and you right in the middle of it. Liquor stores and, you know, Laundromat, corner stores . . . that’s where everybody go to, you know, to sell drugs, to chill . . . just gonna chill out there, you know. There was definitely violence, but I can’t say it was always violence, it was really just a neighborhood feel to me.

In adolescence, Randy became “a part of the criminal life” in his community. “I guess you could say it became natural,” he explained, because “you was around it. . . . If they wanted money, if they wasn’t selling drugs, they would say, ‘let’s rob this,’ or ‘let’s do this to get money,’ and it was always some criminal activity, and you know, I was around, I was a part of it.” As Cameron’s and Randy’s discussions highlight, the common thread in the accounts of interviewees who grew up in
disadvantaged communities was the connection they identified between their criminal involvement and the underlying cultural and economic fabric of the neighborhoods in which they were immersed. Criminal outcomes in this context seemed “natural,” as Randy put it. Moreover, incarceration was an expected, if not anticipated, feature of daily life, as all were exposed to its common occurrence in their communities.

White and Asian Students From Suburban Communities

This is a stark contrast to the accounts of research participants who grew up in middle-class and affluent suburbs. They reported that crime was uncommon in their neighborhoods; where it did exist, it was among a small group of individuals, who they made a conscious effort to associate with in adolescence. The eight White and Asian research participants, in particular, tended not to attribute their crimes to systematic, patterned behaviors, but rather characterized them as isolated incidents fueled by alcohol, drug consumption, or the lure of fast money. Ivan, for example, was a young White man who had been drinking heavily when he attacked a friend out of anger—a crime he was subsequently incarcerated for. He believed his crime, race, and socioeconomic background set him apart from the majority of individuals who are incarcerated:

I wasn’t from a rich family, I wasn’t from a poor family. I was middle class, I guess. I grew up in the suburbs you know. So I think in that sense...I was a little more unique.

From what I understand from the guys I usually met [while incarcerated], they were closer to inner cities, urban areas, hustlers, drug dealers, you know, these guys were more of the guys that I would run across.

From that vantage point, Ivan never considered himself to be a “criminal or someone who committed crime.” Rather, he looked at himself “more as someone who messed up one time and is paying for it,” an outlook that he admitted “might not be completely accurate.” Despite “getting involved in drugs and alcohol and stuff like that,” he had gone to community college, though had dropped out by the time of his arrest.

Mike, likewise, was a young White man from a “quiet environment” whose plans to attend college were interrupted by his incarceration. An exceptional student until middle school, when he “started to get into partying, girls, and cared about sports more, and less about school,” Mike was just shy of high school graduation when he was arrested for a violent offense. Nonetheless, he was still able to graduate. He had “no explanation” for his crime; like Ivan, he viewed his activities as youthful indiscretions, and in doing so, disassociated himself from the criminal label. He explained:

I mean it’s natural to not think about committing crime and doing things like that, especially the neighborhood that I grew up in, and the family that I grew up in. Like they would never have a need to do that. Like, anything I needed, I could have asked my family, but as I got older I wanted to rush to be independent, all I thought about was being 18 and moving out and being on my own. So when I was young I wanted a car, I wanted my
own money, cell phone, bills, clothes and stuff like that. So the lifestyle that I wanted, I needed more money for it and I didn’t want to ask anybody for it.

Mike said he had been unaware of the consequences of his crime, as neither his family nor his peers were ever involved in similar activities. Wayne, an Asian American student, likewise had not considered incarceration a possibility:

There was a part of me that felt like, “well what is gonna happen to me,” right? I wouldn’t see any people, like I didn’t hear any people growing up like, you know, who went away to prison. It wasn’t something that was very common. So there was that idea, like, “oh that’s not going to happen to me.” Like if you got in trouble, most people would get probation or something like that or pretrial intervention.

Indeed, even those White and Asian suburban research participants who engaged in more frequent crime identified their association with a small group of delinquent peers as the source of their behaviors, characterized their activities as due to adolescent immaturity, and tended not to have thought of incarceration as something they needed to worry about.

**Racial Minority Students in Suburban Settings**

The eight research participants we interviewed who were Black, Latino, biracial, or Middle Eastern, and spent their childhoods and adolescence in suburban communities, likewise described serious crime as relatively rare in their communities, characterizing it primarily as involving delinquency, drugs, and partying. However, most racial minority suburban youth also recounted their experiences of racial exclusion and stereotyping growing up, and the impact of these on their educational experiences. Isaiah, a Latino young man who grew up in an affluent White community, described what it was like being poor and minority in this setting, and vacillated in his interpretation of whether it was race or class responsible for his treatment:

It’s a rich area, and I wasn’t rich, so it was like really hard. Plus it’s an all White school, and they were really prejudiced. So I only had like two Black friends. The other Black kids that were poor, like me, had the opportunity to go to a nice school. But we didn’t have too much fun. We didn’t have the money to do all the nice stuff. . . . It probably was a rich or poor thing, and we was just the odd man out. But when another Black kid came in and he had money, it was like, he was good. I don’t know, maybe it was a money thing. I looked at it as racism my whole life.

Isaiah saw his incarceration as an inevitability, similar to those in disadvantaged settings: “I knew I was gonna get incarcerated as a kid. . . . In my mind, as a child, like I figured in order to fulfill . . . to be that person, sooner or later I was gonna get locked up.”10 Tarik, who was Middle Eastern, also grew up in an affluent White community, and likewise saw the roots of his delinquency as emanating from his experiences of racial bias:
There was really no Arabs or anything like that [in my community]. And then, my first year of high school was 2001... the year when the towers got knocked down. So it was September in a new school and stuff like that and, you know, I kind of felt a little bit like I ended up getting into a few fights and stuff like that, and then from there I guess I started getting into more trouble.

Moreover, it is striking that the only suburban research participants in our study who did not graduate from high school were racial and ethnic minorities. For example, Peter, a White suburban participant, rebelled in school and was suspended multiple times for fighting, but was never expelled. Likewise, Mike’s high school graduation was not disrupted by his arrest for a violent offense. In contrast, Albert, Marcos, and Oliver all reported having been expelled from high school. Oliver, a White and Middle Eastern young man, described delinquency that sounded no more severe than that of Peter or Mike, noting that he and his friends would “you know, like smoke weed, drink on the weekends... fight, we look for problems with other kids, or you know, just cause mischief and stuff like that.” He surmised, “I think they expelled me too quick out of school... I feel like they just chewed me out, they really didn’t care.”

Looking back, Ashanti, a Black young woman, also identified problems with tracking minority students in her suburban community:

Now I feel like that town or the school like really pushed the Black and Hispanic students to go to the voc techs instead of pushing them to go to like college. It’s like, “go to voc tech, when you graduate you’ll have a job.” So that was one of the things that I noticed. And then the guys that did stay, obviously they played basketball. If you didn’t go to voc tech, then you played a sport.

Albert, a Latino young man who grew up in a predominantly White small town and was expelled from school, also alluded to racial bias in his treatment by his community’s law enforcement, noting that “everybody” in his clique of friends:

Was getting into trouble, but nobody was like, when we would do things, for some reason like I was always getting caught. I was always the one, like sometimes I wouldn’t even do it. Because of just being back-to-back-to-back, having run-ins with the law, like I would just get picked up, so that definitely started the downward spiral.

Thus, despite growing up in economically privileged settings, research participants who were non-Asian racial and ethnic minorities described a number of experiences with racial and class biases that impacted their identities, educational attainment, and exposure to criminal justice interventions.

**Students Who Transitioned From Disadvantaged to Suburban Communities**

Five minority research participants described moving in early to mid-adolescence from urban to suburban communities, which their families believed would afford a better quality of life, better education, and fewer of the lures afforded by street culture.
That their families were able to make such a move (or had relatives who would take their children) signaled that such research participants were more economically privileged than many of those in the communities they moved away from. And in some ways, their experiences paralleled those of non-Asian racial minorities who grew up in suburban communities. But there were distinctions as well, most notably trouble adjusting to the different organization and pace of social life in the suburbs, a desire for the familiarity and excitement of home, and peer expectations of their behaviors tied to their roots in disadvantaged communities.

Zach, who was Afro-Caribbean, spent 1 year in a “good suburban area” in elementary school, before returning to a predominantly Black working-class neighborhood that adjoined socially disadvantaged ones. At this elementary school, he performed very well and was even placed on the honor roll. That changed upon his return, however. In middle and high school, he became “fascinated with street life, and it wasn’t so much pressure to perform well in academics as it was to perform better in your appearance.” He was even praised by friends—including the young women he was increasingly interested in impressing—for his first school fight. Their reactions intensified his beliefs about what it meant to be a Black man, and led him to abandon his academic pursuits: “It was the idea of being cool,” he explained. “So if you’re cool, you have to fit this model of what being cool is. Being cool is usually the rebellious kind of dude, and you know, fighting and street credibility, and you know, just urban society’s definition of what it is to be a man, you know.”

After his grades began to suffer, Zach’s mother decided to move to a predominantly White suburb. He noted that his Caribbean cultural background meant that “we put a great emphasis on school. So when she saw my grades wasn’t coming in [and]...I started cutting school...she wanted to move to a more stable and small environment.” Yet, he found himself “the only Black dude” in this new environment, and felt additional pressure to live up to the stereotype of “the cool Black dude.” This, along with his dissatisfaction with suburban life, “ kinda propelled me more into the streets.” He explained:

In the suburbs, it seems like people, if it’s boring, they need something to do. So a lot of people will be like, “let’s do alcohol,” or “let’s smoke weed,” or something like that, which was their definition of cool. Opposed to being in an urban environment, their idea of cool was fighting and holding up this idea of what it is to be a man. You know, selling drugs and stuff like that. It was more selling drugs as opposed to being on the other side, abusing drugs.

Zach said that “even though I was living [in the suburbs], I would be so fascinated with like...[the] different [urban] environments [close by] that I would always find myself there.” Nonetheless, he succeeded in graduating from high school, despite his White coach regularly telling him, “you’re gonna end up incarcerated,’ you know, ‘you’re gonna end up dead.’” He was subsequently incarcerated for his involvement in a violent crime that he described committing to maintain his street credibility among his peers, all of whom were White and Latino.
Kerri, an African American, described similar challenges adjusting to environments vastly different than where she “grew up in the projects.” Though her mother had a well-paying professional job, Kerri described the disadvantaged community where they lived as:

Big in like gang activity, so like one side was the Crip side and one side was the Blood side. . . . In my building . . . there was this family, and like the whole family sold drugs, like, and it would be all types of nights, you would hear people coming in and out, in and out, like you could smell crack like in the staircases.

She described her adolescent self as enamored with the “flashy” lifestyles she saw in her neighborhood, distinctly recalling her “schoolgirl crush” on “the big drug dealer in the neighborhood” who “drove a Bentley.” At the time, Kerri adhered to what she called a “hood rich” philosophy: a belief that through her connections with criminally successful men, she could live in the projects and have access to nice cars and other material possessions.

Despite her good grades and involvement in many extracurricular activities, Kerri “always found time to get involved” in street life. As a consequence, her mother sent her to live with her father, who lived in a middle-class, racially heterogeneous suburb. As a young Black woman from the projects, she felt out of place there as well, explaining:

It’s a very mixed town . . . but not mixed in my sense of mixed, like mixed in a suburban mixed. So there are Black people, but they may not be Black people in an urban sense is what I’m trying to say. So, I don’t know, it was like, “alright this is cool, but where are the stores? I can’t walk nowhere? You gotta take me everywhere?”

And though Kerri succeeded in graduating from high school—as did all but one of the research participants who made this transition11—she felt like trouble followed her because there was nothing else to do and no place to go.

**Postcarceral Experiences: Contexts of Reintegration and the University Experience**

While our research participants all shared the experience of incarceration, their precarceral experiences of race, class, and place inequalities helped set the stage for their preparedness and experiences within State University’s Project Achieve. Specifically, comparing the experiences of Achieve students across race, community contexts, and educational experiences growing up, along with their circumstances on return, revealed important variations in their ability to engage with campus life, thrive academically, and negotiate community reintegration more generally. Two dimensions of these challenges—or their absence—were notable in our analysis: (1) cultural adjustments and the ease with which Achieve students could assimilate comfortably into campus life, including its implications for existing loyalties at home and (2)
family and financial resources and place of residence postrelease. The latter were interrelated social circumstances that afforded or hindered students’ ability to devote themselves to university studies, restrained or heightened the temptation to return to illicit income-generating activities, and impacted the ability to “knife off” from past social networks and the opportunities and risks these created.

Cultural Adjustments and the Challenges of Assimilation to Campus Life

For Project Achieve participants, regardless of race and class background, the process of assimilating into the cultural environment at State University was complicated by two realities: the age differences between themselves and other students on campus, most of whom came to college directly from high school, and the impact of prisonization. Kerri articulated these tensions well: “A lot of them are like 30, you know, so their challenge is trying to sit in a class with people that are 18 and they’re 30. You know, that alone is a challenge, plus people that spent 6, 7, 8, 10 years in prison . . . once you get to prison, you stop aging.” Many interviewees believed that their incarceration suspended or hindered their social development. This was particularly relevant, given that most were incarcerated in their late teens, and released in their mid-20s, the age when most began taking classes at State University. Tarik explained:

It’s just such a weird transition because going from those correctional facilities to a college campus is just totally different. You know the correctional facilities, everybody has this mentality, where everybody’s tough you know what I’m saying, everybody has something to prove. Nobody feels as though you could, you know let somebody talk to you in a certain kind of way or else you know. It was just a lot of real tense, tough kind of situation where the college situation is just the complete opposite.

Dexter, a White participant, likewise noted, “when you’re a male and you’re with males for four years, it’s like an aggressive environment, so, and nobody has any consideration for the other.” Though he was from a middle-income, suburban community, Dexter recalled his experiences when he first started attending State University from a halfway house in a disadvantaged part of a neighboring city:

When you’re in the halfway house you’re allowed to leave every day, but you still have to come back and sleep there. . . . So coming from there to [State University] every day . . . that’s what blew me away. [On campus] I’m like, “wow, somebody held the door for me, somebody said thank you,” you know, or someone said bless you. There’s things that people really don’t notice, common courtesy. Like you feel it here, ‘cause like people are really nice around here. I mean, once you leave the campus, then you get back to reality, and there’s poverty and, you know, drugs and everything else.

For this reason, he opined, “this environment is like, I think, it’s key to reentry . . . ‘cause not only are you learning, but you’re interacting with people on a positive level, and it’s always positive. There’s never anything negative happening around you on campus, you know.”
On the whole, the Project Achieve participants we spoke to agreed with Dexter’s assessment about the positive impact of State University for former inmates. Yet, it was primarily the racially and class-privileged participants who described the university environment in unequivocally positive terms, and this stemmed largely from their reimmersion back into a setting characterized by middle-class, suburban culture, as well as their ability, described previously, to internalize and articulate identities as nonoffenders who had made a youthful mistake. Ivan, a White suburban participant, felt welcomed by students and faculty alike, right from the beginning. He even felt comfortable revealing his incarceration to others and reported receiving encouraging reactions. He explained, “I think it’s a pretty accepting community, and... especially at a liberal college like [State University].... You know, the people that are generally at college are more open-minded, and I like that. I like being able to connect with people like that.”

Black, Latino, and biracial research participants, on the other hand, were more likely to describe having to learn how to transform their identities to align with campus culture before they could genuinely connect with students and faculty who didn’t share their past experiences. This was particularly the case among those who spent all or part of their childhoods in disadvantaged communities or described negative experiences associated with race and class bias growing up in the suburbs. Albert, for example, said one of the biggest challenges in coming to State University was “just shedding our, like, dealing with other people, like interacting with like the regular society.” He thought it was important for Project Achieve students to:

Pick up on dress codes or pick up on how you should approach people, how you should talk, how you should watch what you say. You know, cursing and slang, that goes out the door. You’re trying to be professional. This is basically an institution to try to make you a professional. ... I think you don’t want to look like Project Achieve, “oh, he’s part of Project Achieve.” Not, it’s like, you want to represent what your success is, you know what I mean. Like not because of the way you look, because of what you’re doing.

Nate and Sam, both from disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, embraced the cultural environment Albert referenced, remarking on how different it was from their experiences growing up. Sam, who was African American, explained:

I love the campus. I love it. Like my first year there, it was spring, and just to see like, they got cherry blossoms and stuff. Just to see the grass, and people sitting on the grass, and people just reading, conversation, and throwing Frisbees and riding they skateboards. This is all new to me. We don’t throw Frisbees in the ghetto. We don’t ride skateboards. We don’t sit in the grass and read books, we don’t stare at the cherry blossoms, you know, all that was like a new experience to me. Different cultures, different languages... it’s like, when I get up there, I take a deep breath, like “this is beautiful.”

Nate, who was biracial, had recently participated in a campus educational program for undergraduate students underrepresented in graduate education, and said it was “beyond great, it was amazing.” What he appreciated most was that:
It gave me tools—not only as a student, but as a person. Like I learned dining etiquette, [my
advisor] bought me a suit, like a real suit . . . like a real tie, a real dress shirt made of good
material. You feel different when you wear stuff like that. I know clothes are not supposed
to make a man, but it’s just different. It makes you feel like you count, like you matter.

In addition, Nate especially appreciated the cultural diversity his participation in this
program exposed him to. “I wouldn’t never thought that we were anything alike,” he
explained, “I’m the only ex-con in the whole group, I’m from the ’hood, I done carried
guns, sold drugs.” Instead, he discovered: “They like hip-hop music, we like the
same foods. You know what I mean? Culturally there’s a lot of differences, but . . . we
could talk and have witty conversations and still be considered friends.” Marcos, on
the other hand, having grown up in a racially heterogeneous suburb, was also biracial
and said, “I’m as diverse as can be.” Unlike Sam and Nate, for whom cultural diver-
sity was new, Marcos was surprised to find State University “diverse but . . . also seg-
regated in a sense.” He explained, “here it’s just, I feel like a lot of kids do stick to
themselves still. It’s like a lot of Chinese stick together, a lot of Indians stick together,
a lot of Black people stick together.”

Many less privileged minority research participants expressed discomfort with
what they experienced as their outsider status at the university. Randy, from an urban
disadvantaged community, found the drastic difference between the university envi-
ronment and where he was raised disconcerting. He felt out of place and unsure of his
actions when on campus:

I’m different. I’m totally different, even if I hadn’t been to prison I would be different
because of the environment that I grew up in, you know what I’m sayin’. Not to say
everybody here grew up in a nice environment, or the suburbs, or an upscale neighbor-
hood, but you could see a big difference, you know between me, you know when I catch
the bus and I’m traveling or walking around campus, you know I could feel it. I could
actually feel the difference. Like nobody’s, even though they don’t know that I’ve been
to prison, they know something.

Yvette, who was transgender, found the White lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
[LGBT] student population on campus less than welcoming. “They’re very snotty,”
she explained. “They’ve been given everything so they don’t struggle, so they don’t
understand. . . I had nothing in common with them, so I kinda like stayed to myself.”
Kerri, too, described struggles to engage on campus, where she said “I’m very
reserved, so I’m having a hard time like making friends.” Though she thought that
“it’s cool to see different people of different cultures get along,” which she felt “helps
me break that whole narrow minded way of thinking and branch out more,” nonethe-
less, she said, “I don’t really talk to anybody.”

Ulysses found it especially difficult to adapt to the interactional styles he saw
prevalent on campus, which did not fit the reality of the disadvantaged urban
neighborhood where he grew up and lived again postrelease. He was not used to
speaking to strangers, he explained, “because you do that, you jump into somebody
conversation up here [in my neighborhood], they might jump on you, ‘oh, get out of my F-in’ business, why you all in my face?’’ He elaborated: “Where I’m from . . . nobody say, ‘good morning, how you doin’? You know, if I’m sitting there laying on the ground, nobody’s gonna help me where I’m from. . . . So I’m used to you know, not talking to people.” He recognized, however, that:

In college, that’s the worst way to be. ‘Cause it’s all about networking. It’s all about who you know. . . . And I be like, that’s my only inner demons right now. Like I try to force myself to be social, ‘cause for years I’m just used to being so antisocial, like not talking to nobody, and it just be hard. You know just turning that switch on and off, I gotta talk, I gotta meet people, this and that. Everybody’s here to help me versus out here everybody’s just trying to use you for everything you got.

For some minority research participants, then—and disproportionally those from disadvantaged communities—a strong sense of outsider status, and difficulties switching interactional and cultural styles across settings, hindered their ability to engage fully in campus life.

In addition, Project Achieve students from disadvantaged communities often felt torn between multiple loyalties and were not always convinced that the “knifing off” required for university success was the right thing to do, both because of their allegiance to old friends and challenges in their adjustment to campus life. Geoff, an Afro-Caribbean man, explained:

It’s still a form of attachment, even if you pull us out of it. We have families over there, and you have so much going on. Like, alright, damn, such and such is homeless now, she needs help. Such and such just got hurt real bad from these guys down the street. It’s just so much, it’s like, even though [I’m here], like life is not that simple, you feel me?

Kerri’s isolation on campus meant that “you tend to feel alone.” She described going back to her old neighborhood “all the time,” but as a consequence, “it’s always that temptation” to “do the stuff that I used to be involved in.”

Ashanti, too, said “most of my friends are still doing the same thing that they were doing before I left, so there wasn’t really no need for me to hang out with them.” But, she noted, “I definitely feel like some type of loneliness, because it’s like, who do we run to, to share that same experience?” She also worried that her friends would think she’d changed because she was now attending university:

It’s such a tough decision, like you know, your friends are telling you, “come,” like, “you’ve been gone for so long, let’s party, let’s hang out.” And then your other side is telling you like, “ahh, I have class,” and you don’t want to seem like you’re stuck up or, because you know, you go to State.

Cameron described the same ambivalent pulls. Of the friends from his old neighborhood, he said “we still want to hang out.” Yet, he felt his horizons had expanded,
while his friends “don’t move, they’re stuck in this one place. . . . They want to stay in the house and drink, and then the problem arises sometimes with confrontation and drinking. You know, you want to act tough. I mean, we’re going back to the beginning, you know. So I try to shy away from that.”

The adjustment to campus life was fraught with more challenges for racial minority students, particularly those from disadvantaged communities. Fitting in and breaking with the past were easier for Project Achieve participants whose cultural backgrounds were more aligned with most others on campus, and for whom going home meant returning to a community where crime was rare and social networks were disproportionately prosocial and privileged, making the draw to the past, and loyalty to those at risk, less resonant features of their postcarceral lives. This was especially so, given many such students’ ability to identify themselves as nonoffenders whose youthful indiscretions were the mistake of an earlier self.

**The Impact of Family Support, Financial Resources, and Residency**

In addition to the cultural features of university life, Project Achieve students entered the program with vastly different social supports and financial resources. These, again, were patterned by race and class, and had important implications for research participants’ ability to dedicate themselves to their studies, take advantage of the social and intellectual opportunities on campus, and avoid a return to illicit means for making ends meet. Regardless of race and class, Achieve students shared the experience of housing discrimination due to their criminal record, particularly when they sought to live near campus. Marcos, who was biracial with a middle-class upbringing, noted that most Achieve students “probably want to live here, want to live away from where they used to be at. . . . If my parents didn’t help me out, I wouldn’t be able to live here.” Indeed, students from middle-class families in suburban communities, who were also disproportionately racially privileged, described receiving extensive family support for their studies at State University. Peter, a White student, described himself as “lucky” because:

> I have a really supportive family that really helps me out. My mother, brother, and sister are my core. . . . I had one week to take care of everything I needed to take care of before school started—as far as shopping, getting a car together, getting other bills taken care of that I had. So they helped me out a lot, whatever help I needed, or financially, they help me out.

Wayne, too, described his transition back to the community as “pretty simple. In the sense that I came home and my brother had lined up a job for me.” Jeevan, an Asian American man, explained that his family strongly encouraged his enrollment at State University and had remained very supportive of this endeavor ever since. He said his family’s outlook on the value of education was strongly influenced by his cultural background: “Education was also a top priority, you know . . . I come from an Indian household and education is just expected of you.” Jeevan realized that he was
privileged compared to others in the program, noting, “definitely...I’m fortunate enough to have family support, so when times got really rough and I didn’t have a job, my family was there to help. And I know many students don’t have that, many inmates, former inmates.”

Mike was less understanding of the challenges faced by less privileged research participants. Asked to identify what challenges he faced postincarceration, he responded, “nothing really, just normal day-to-day things that people go through I guess.” He lived at home with his family in a middle-class suburb and said that his parents were not “looking to charge rent and stuff like that.” Despite this, he did not appear to recognize how well these advantages positioned him for postincarceration success, as compared to his peers: “Even someone who goes home to an unstable environment, if they’re in the program, it does so much for you that there’s no excuse for anybody to reoffend.”

The experiences of students without such privileges put his comments in stark relief. Not only were their families less able to provide financial support, but they themselves were often required to help support their families of origin, children, or both. Given racial and class disparities in health and health care in the United States (see Barr, 2008), it is perhaps not surprising that several Black and Latino research participants had either lost parents early due to health problems or had sick or disabled parents they helped take care of. Such experiences placed additional burdens on these students. Everton explained:

Everybody’s got something on their plate, you know, we’re all coming from the same place, from different levels and different levels of support...My only concern with this whole thing is, you know, getting myself to a position where I’m financially stable...I’m concerned about myself just because of my home situation and my financial situation. I mean, I do have the financial aid and everything...but it’s only gonna carry you so much.

Sam had children to support, without additional familial support. He described how these circumstances affected him, as compared to other Project Achieve participants:

Everybody in the program faces challenges, [but] some is able to focus more than others. Some have family members that’s able to handle them financially or whatever, with the extra money if they need it, and some of them could just focus on schoolwork because they mom or dad will just pay for the housing.

In fact, Sam “started [school] off with a bang.” In a halfway house, he also had “no responsibility. No kids, no rent, no bills, nothing. You go to school, you come...back to the facility. There’s really nothing to do but study.” Once released, however, he returned to the disadvantaged urban community where he grew up and admitted that it was hard to balance all of his financial responsibilities, with no outside support, nor the lucrative source of income his previous drug sales had been:
I came home doing everything by myself—job, school, paying rent, paying this, doing that. Like it was just a whole new experience for me, ‘cause I’m used to making 7, $800 a day [selling drugs] to coming home and working and only making about $500 every 2 weeks. It’s a different ball game, it’s something new to me. . . . Trying to juggle responsibilities with school was something new for me.

As a consequence, he went from being a Bþ student to failing two classes.

Nate’s grades also declined after he left the halfway house and moved into an apartment with his girlfriend and children. His first semester, “I got a 4.0, I made the Dean’s List.” But, he explained, “I believe the only reason why I was capable of doing that was because I was in the halfway house and I didn’t have all the responsibilities I have now. You know what I mean, I had nothing but go to school, come back, study and do work.” In contrast:

Now I have children, I got bills to pay. . . . It’s gotten so crazy since I’ve come home. I had no idea it was gonna be that hard. I knew it would be hard but I couldn’t have foreseen the stuff I came home to. Bed bug infestations, spent all money like refund checks and all that I had. . . . Right now I’m getting by on the skin of my teeth. I got 5 dollars in my pocket to buy [my kids] something to eat, you know what I’m saying. I’m like praying for the refund check to come sometime soon. It’s hard, it’s real hard you know. . . . The apartment was dirty, the building, the landlord was a drunk. It was right over top of a bar. Everybody else in there was trifling, there was puke in the hallway half the time. . . . There are people fighting, calling the cops. This is what I came home to, so. At night there’s roaches everywhere. Now I’m fighting that stuff. I still gotta go to school in the morning. . . . It’s hard being stuck between a rock and a hard place and you trying to make it you know what I mean.

Compared to Mike’s “normal day-to-day” transition, living rent free in a “good environment,” it is easy to see why Nate described having contemplated a return to illicit income-generation strategies. Living in a neighborhood where drugs, violence, and robberies were common, and struggling to support his family on a very fixed income, “I was tempted a lot, I’m not gonna lie. Very tempted. I thought maybe if I just robbed these drunk people on the corner, we could make ends meet, maybe if I went back to selling drugs again. I said so many times, I have to drop out of school, I’m not gonna make it.” He remained determined, however, and still continued to do well in school, despite these struggles.

Farley and Ulysses described another important facet of risk facing those, like themselves, who return to disadvantaged communities: the need to stay vigilant in the face of risks for violent victimization, including at the hands of former “enemies.” Farley remained concerned that circumstances beyond his control might precipitate his involvement in an altercation, “because situations present themselves . . . it’s hard, because a lot of people don’t understand that.” He explained:

I don’t hang out . . . but I’m still conscious that there are still people that don’t like me, and I don’t know what their intentions might be. So I have to still be cognizant of
that. . . . With that in the air, a situation may present itself and I kinda won’t really have a choice [but] to protect myself. Not necessarily with a gun, but it might be a fight. You could be arrested for a fight. . . . Even though I’m consciously trying to avoid this, it still could catch me.

Ulysses remained in his disadvantaged community because his family owned their house—a rare resource in his community, but one that kept him place bound. Were he able to live near campus, “it would probably be a breeze,” he surmised. But “it’s either that, or we just lose the house,” he explained. He also recognized that owning “a house is important. Once you got a house, it’s easy to do other things. It’s easy to finance . . . the collateral, like once you got a house that will open the door, you know, for so many other things. So we at least try to keep that, ‘cause that’s all we got, you know, as a family.” The consequence, however, was that Ulysses faced continual risks at the hands of old enemies:

I know that I’ve changed. I’m not the same person. But people who know you from before, it don’t matter. So when I walk, when I get off the bus, and I have to walk past these guys that I used to have shootouts with, they don’t care that I’m in school now. All they care to remember, you know, is what I did to them then. So, you know, it’s hard to try and be, you know, submissive and not be aggressive. ‘Cause I understand, I don’t want to get in trouble, but at the same time I have to protect myself.

Traveling from campus to home is “like a switch,” he explained. “When I’m [at State University], you know, I’m social, my guard is down and stuff like that. But as soon as I get back home, you know, my guard is back up.” In addition to worrying about old enemies, Ulysses said that because “I have a name [on the streets] . . . there’s always somebody out there that want to make a name off of you. A younger guy who . . . looked up to you when they was younger. Now they there and they know, you know, if they knock you off . . . then they get the respect.” It remained a challenge for Ulysses, Farley, and other Black and Latino research participants who returned to disadvantaged communities to completely relinquish street identities, since doing so increased their vulnerability to victimization, even death.

All of the research participants recognized the importance of social support, not just from families, but especially from one another. Shortly after Project Achieve began, its members formed a student organization to provide one another with support and encouragement. Yet they recognized that residential barriers, and the risks associated with them, were the most significant challenge for Achieve students’ success. Zach, who was a member of the organization’s board, said “I have great family support . . . so I never really had problems with housing.” He said they “want to implement staying on campus” and “were talking about trying to buy a house” for Project Achieve students, noting:

It’s great not only for us, but for future people who are coming in. . . . One of the things that they teach you in order to not fall back into the recidivism or the repeat offender is
you need to move away from what got you there in the first place, and that’s what the school does. ... We really feel that moving on campus is the best thing to do. So once you do that, you’re just in the environment of everybody who is academically inclined. You’re not hanging around people who are just sitting at home, smoking, talking about Jay Z and Kayne for like 16 hours straight. You’re talking about things that could actually change your life. You’re talking about giving back to communities. You’re talking about business moves. You have all the resources here.

At the time of our research, Project Achieve had yet to acquire the resources to accomplish this laudable goal.

Discussion

The revitalization of postsecondary education in carceral settings is a promising policy shift, particularly when it is designed to provide incarcerated students with the opportunity to further their studies and complete degrees upon release. More than attachment to the lower rungs of the labor market or even marriage, a college degree offers ex-offenders a means to build identity, human and social capital that offer tangible prospects for overcoming the structural barriers associated with incarceration, racial inequality, and socioeconomic disadvantage. Investigating the experiences of students in a postcarceral higher education program at a university in the northeast, the goal of our research has been twofold: First, to highlight disparities in access to higher education among our study sample, and second, to analyze how inequalities of race, class, and place shaped student engagement, success, and opportunities within a community-based postsecondary education program for formerly incarcerated students. Careful attention to these features of PSCE is the only way to ensure that its significant benefits do not primarily accrue advantages to those former inmates already positioned for greater postcarceral success.

Higher education, particularly that offered or continued in the community post-release, has the potential to meaningfully improve the lives of former prisoners and, as an institution, it likely holds more promise for structurally disadvantaged former inmates than other social institutions scholars point to for success. It can promote multiple processes of change, both situational and enduring (see Bersani & Doherty, 2013) to facilitate not just desistance and reintegration but also social advancement. Yet the extant literature reveals, and our research strongly suggests, that correctional higher education is currently accessible to those inmates and former inmates who are primarily “exceptions” to the rule. Currently, around 1 in 15 prisoners take college courses, and most correctional course offerings do not yield university degrees (Davis et al., 2013; Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011). Programs like Project Achieve, which lead to legitimate academic credentials and professional opportunities, signal an even greater commitment to ensuring that PSCE has meaningful outcomes.12

Indeed, while the students in this program were disproportionately educationally advantaged, from middle-class backgrounds, and from privileged racial groups, Project Achieve was available to students from diverse class, race, community, and
educational circumstances. It was this very diversity that allowed us to investigate in
detail how both background and foreground life situations affected students’ struggles
and successes in the program. Perhaps the greatest strength of our research was the
opportunity to draw complex comparisons associated with disparities of race, class,
and place: Project Achieve students were not simply urban, disadvantaged African
Americans versus middle-class suburban Whites. Instead, the study included inter-
views with Latinos, biracial, South and East Asian, and Middle Eastern participants,
and our inductive analysis of their stories captured multiple variations in community
contexts growing up, including the experiences of racial minority students in White
and racially heterogeneous suburbs, and those who moved across communities in
adolescence.

The most striking differences in our research participants’ experiences—growing
up and in the program—were undoubtedly the distinctions that emerged between the
most racially and economically privileged (Whites and Asians in suburban commu-
nities) and the least racially and economically privileged (Blacks, Latinos, and biracial
individuals who grew up and remained, postrelease, in disadvantaged urban com-
munities). The most privileged research participants rarely anticipated incarceration
as an outcome, despite their involvement in serious crime, and this was largely
because they saw little evidence of such outcomes in their communities. Most
remarked that even when their peers were arrested, at most, they received probation or
other community interventions. As a consequence, they were Achieve students who
could most readily avoid internalizing a criminal identity, and most readily shed the
stigma associated with it.

This group was the most educationally privileged going into carceral postsecondary
education, described most easily transitioning into the familiar middle-class suburban
culture of State University, and consistently reported benefiting from financial, social,
and emotional support from their families. Blacks, Latinos, and biracial research partic-
ipants from disadvantaged communities, alternatively, faced the greatest challenges—
both prior to incarceration and postrelease. The least educationally advantaged going
into PSCE, they also faced the greatest challenges adapting to the culture of State
University, sometimes had deep ambivalence about what it meant for abandoning home,
and were most often unable to do so. As a result of the accrual of multiple disadvantages
associated with urban racial isolation and poverty, they not only had fewer family
resources to draw from for full engagement at State University, but often had to balance
school with providing such resources, themselves, to kith and kin. And those who
returned to their precarceral communities faced serious risks for the retaliatory violence
that is part and parcel of the “code of the streets” (see Anderson, 1999).

On the whole, the racial minority students in our sample who spent all or part of
their childhoods in suburban settings had more resources than their peers in dis-
advantaged communities, both prior to incarceration and postrelease. They were thus
better positioned to take advantage of the opportunities available through Project
Achieve and State University. Yet they, too, often bore the scars of racial bias and
discrimination, and some were also ambivalent about what assimilation into the
university culture meant for their identities and community ties.
While our sample size was small, and we are unable to speak to its representativeness among formerly incarcerated university students, our findings suggest that disparities associated with race, class, and place create a complex tapestry of opportunities and challenges for students in postcarceral higher education. Future research should continue to investigate the impact of such disparities, to better understand how such inequalities affect students’ participation and success in PSCE, in order to better ensure that its transformative potential is available to as wide a swath of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students as possible. In addition, future studies should further investigate the impact of gender and sexuality in students’ PSCE experiences. Just three women and one transgender student were included in our sample, and this was a reflection of the population of Project Achieve students from which we drew. Their numbers were too small to draw conclusions about how their experiences might have differed from those of their male peers, but it is notable that they appeared to be among the most isolated students in Project Achieve, a circumstance likely exacerbated by their underrepresentation in the program. This remains an important question for future research.

Despite these sampling limitations, we do suggest that there are takeaways from our investigation. First, we would argue for the expansion of PSCE, both in prisons and through university partnerships like Project Achieve. The students we spoke with all emphasized the importance of higher education in changing their opportunities and lives. Though limited, extant research also supports these claims (Chappell, 2004; Davis et al., 2013; Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011). In addition, the investment in rigorous correctional GED programs, which can set incarcerated students on track not simply for a high school equivalency, but for college preparation as well, may be key to expanding the population of inmates in prisons across the country who can access and thrive in carceral college classes as well as in universities postrelease.

Finally, our research suggests that significant additional investments are necessary to ensure the academic success of formerly incarcerated students from disadvantaged communities—to provide them with the time, resources, and supports necessary to engage in campus life, thrive academically, and negotiate community reintegration more generally. We agree with Zach that the availability of affordable (or even no cost) on- or near-campus housing could make a significant difference for facilitating student success. In addition, the expansion of programs like Project Achieve into a broader array of college campuses—particularly those in urban settings—would likely afford greater opportunities for students from these communities to benefit from higher education.

We conclude by noting two additional disparities in PSCE our study is unable to address, but that warrant research and policy attention. First, the 2008 Reauthorization of Higher Education Opportunity Act, while “increas[ing] policy flexibility for states and enabl[ing] more people to be eligible for funding,” also “required that states no longer provide funds for PSCE to individuals convicted of specified sexual offenses or murder” (Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011, p. 8). These restrictions introduced new facets of unequal access to higher education in carceral settings. In addition, there is evidence that colleges and universities are increasingly implementing criminal background
checks during the admissions process (Center for Community Alternatives, 2011; Linton, 2011); the risk of such procedures is the replication of harms associated with such background checks in the labor market (see Bushway, Briggs, Taxman, Thanner, & Van Brakle, 2007a), with serious consequences for the availability of post-incarceration higher educational attainment.

Clear (2007, p. 78) notes that the development of social ties and social capital are among “the most pressing tasks” for those released from prison, as they assist former prisoners to “marshal the new resources needed for a better life.” The growing support for carceral higher education has the potential to provide such resources for real change in the lives of individuals who face structural exclusions as a result of incarceration, but also racial and class inequalities. Designing programs to ensure their inclusion and success should be of paramount concern to those at the forefront of the movement to bring postsecondary education to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated populations.

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Notes

1. On a more promising note, Ford and Schroeder’s (2011) recent analysis suggests that “college attendance and investment in higher education” offers a protective effect against offending which “is stronger for individuals who were more delinquent during adolescence” (p. 31). This is particularly notable, given that “delinquent students are characterized by a series of disproportionate educational deficiencies as compared to their nondelinquent student counterparts” (Wang, Blomberg, & Li, 2005, p. 291).

2. Specifically, potential students were expected to have a high school diploma or general equivalency degree (GED), have completed at least 12 hours of transferable coursework with close to a 3.0 grade point average (GPA), and to have had no serious disciplinary problems while incarcerated. On occasion, individuals were permitted to join Project Achieve postincarceration without participating in carceral postsecondary education, once they successfully completed several community college courses upon release. This was the case for three participants in our study, each of whom had been ineligible or unaware of carceral educational opportunities while institutionalized, but had attended college prior to incarceration.

3. Eight individuals did not acknowledge the first author’s messages; three failed to show up for scheduled interviews, and one cancelled and was unreceptive to the first author’s attempt to reschedule.

4. We use Black as an umbrella term except when specifically referencing individual research participants’ self-identification as African American, Afro-Caribbean, or African. Four
research participants were first- or second-generation immigrants from Africa or the Caribbean, with several drawing distinctions between Black immigrant communities and African Americans.

5. Data are not available to determine what proportion of these prisoners obtained their general equivalency degrees (GEDs) or participated in postsecondary education while incarcerated as opposed to in community settings.

6. Neighborhood characteristics, including disadvantage, were determined for our purposes here by utilizing census data, in conjunction with research participants’ descriptions of their communities. Urban-disadvantaged communities were identified by examining population size, median family income, families in poverty, and racial composition. Urban near disadvantage includes minority working-class sections of several large cities in close proximity to disadvantaged neighborhoods (see Patillo, 1998; Peterson & Krivo, 2010). Semiurban disadvantaged communities included two towns with populations of less than 50,000 but characterized by racial segregation, family poverty rates over twice the national average, and median family incomes less than US$38,000 in 2000. Nonurban disadvantaged was a small community (<20,000) that was more than 85% Black and Latino, with a median family income less than US$28,000 and a rate of family poverty more than 29% in 2000. Suburban areas were classified as racially heterogeneous when no one racial group was more than 60% of the population in 2000, predominately White when Whites were 88% or more of the population, and affluent when the median family income was greater than US$90,000 while fewer than 2% of families were in poverty. We used 2000 census data for our classifications, rather than 2010 census data, to better approximate research participants’ communities of origin while growing up. In three cases, the community name was not provided; we classify these research participants’ communities based on community descriptions provided in the interview.

7. Of the remaining biracial/ethnic research participants, one was White and Latino, one White and Middle Eastern, one White and African American, and one African American and Latino. Among Black participants, two of the three who did not spend part of their childhoods in urban disadvantage lived in working-class neighborhoods adjacent to urban disadvantage. The third was from an African immigrant family and lived in the suburbs.

8. This latter grouping was unanticipated; the distinct patterns of their discussions emerged in our analysis process. Likewise, the grouping of Asian with White participants, and suburban Middle Eastern and biracial with suburban Black and Latino participants, emerged through inductive analysis, as their descriptions of life experiences associated with education and entrance into offending were quite similar in each case.

9. Yvette’s experience was different, however. Upon the discovery that she was transgender, she was thrown out of her home. A homeless teenager, her crime involvement emerged from “thinking of survival. Where’s my next meal coming from? Where am I gonna lay at next? How am I gonna wash up? Where am I gonna wash my clothes at? You know, you a child basically trying to become an adult. No one’s gonna let you live with them for free. Not even family, not even friends.”

10. Only one racial minority suburban youth, who was Latino and White, explicitly articulated the idea—shared by his White and Asian suburban counterparts—that he had never
considered the possibility of facing incarceration for his offending, which began with drug experimentation, but continued to drug sales and robbery.

11. Kenneth left school to earn his general equivalency degree (GED) in the community, prior to his incarceration.

12. On this point, it is worth noting that several Project Achieve students have gone on to win prestigious national awards and some have or have plans to advance to graduate school. Moreover, these successes have not been achieved only by participants from economically privileged settings, but those from urban-disadvantaged communities as well.

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