

Racial Realities

[00:00:00] **Jason Hibbs:** Content warning. This episode of the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast contains language that may not be appropriate for children. Discretion is advised.

On this episode of the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast.

[00:00:18] **Avis Files:** The narrative has always been driven that, you got absent dad or dad beat dad. All these names that we've given black men, but we've never really given them the title father.

[00:00:29] **Jason Hibbs:** We explore the racial realities causing headwinds along the journey to redemption.

Welcome back to the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast produced by WGTE Public Media and made possible by support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce over incarceration. by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails.

I'm your host, Jason Hibbs. And you may remember Avis Files, the director of family and supportive services for Pathway Inc.

[00:01:04] **Avis Files:** Absolutely, we know that any child, their best bet is to be with both of their parents. Unless their parents are extremely abusive and that just can't happen, but we know that the best thing that's going to happen for a kid is that they have both parents involved.

And so teaching co parenting because 80, 80 percent of African Americans, black people don't even get married. So we can't talk to them about in the marriage space. We have to come from the co parenting space and then what happens with co parenting and how do you teach people how to co parent is very key.

[00:01:36] **Jason Hibbs:** Through community programming for years, she's been an advocate for young men, fathers and future fathers, hoping that her work helps reduce crime and violence in the community.

[00:01:47] **Avis Files:** It's been proven that there's one thing for sure, that if the father's involved, all the social ills go away. Period. It's been proven time and time again, except for It's very hard for people to get to hear that.

And it's very hard for people to hear it around Black fathers because of the way that the narrative was driven. The narrative has always been driven that, you got Absinthe Dad or Dad Beat Dad, all these names that we've given Black men, but we've never really given them the title father.

[00:02:18] **Jason Hibbs:** Files says it's not just racist rhetoric around young men of color who've struggled with fatherhood, But years of institutional racism that's setting society back.

[00:02:29] **Avis Files:** Racism is a common thing. Like we don't want to talk about it. We always saying there's something else. But at the end of the day, racism plays a huge part to this. I've been in this community 30 plus years in this field. And as I've catapulted to work in this field for 10 years and become a fatherhood practitioner, the more I see racism in Toledo.

It's deep. It's deeper than what people want to say to admit. It's no, that's not happening. And then for people who know what's happening, they want to shut my door like you in my office, shut a double door and say, Avis, we know what's happening, let's not be I feel boisterous about it.

There's other ways. And I'm like, how, what other way is it? But to say that racism plays a role.

[00:03:13] **Jason Hibbs:** As passionate as she is, Files says she understands people's hesitation to talk openly about racism because she, too, fears retaliation from people she needs to work with.

[00:03:27] **Avis Files:** I've done this work for 10 years, so I'm very careful about who I'm saying things to, right?

Because I would have to stand alone on that. But I also have children. I also have my husband. I also have a reputation in the community. We've done some good work. If I blackballed it, I can't continue to do the work. So I have to be careful of whether or not I want to stand in that space by myself.

That's not a good place to stand. And I'm a black woman, living in a racist town. Not easy.

[00:03:56] **Jason Hibbs:** She says things are somewhat better now, but for years in Toledo, black defendants were jailed more than white defendants. The MacArthur Grant funds jail alternative diversion programs, allowing defendants who can't afford them to participate for free.

However, Files says it will take time for the black community to trust the criminal justice system, which remains difficult to navigate, hard to understand, and often makes headlines across the country. When an unarmed black person is shot by the cops.

[00:04:29] **Avis Files:** Nobody talks about the trauma of racism. Nobody talks about how I get up every day.

I have two sons, I have a son. I have two grandsons and I have a husband. And every day before I get out of my bed to pee, because you know you have to pee in the morning, I say, God, please, don't let anybody hurt my grandchildren. Don't kill my son. Don't let anybody kill my son. Don't let anybody kill my husband.

Let them live today. Today. Because that's all I got. That's all I have. I do that every day. That's a different kind of lens. That's a different kind of lens to wake up with. And then I come here. And men are calling. And men are calling. Men are on Facebook. Men are calling. Hey, can you help me? I just talked to a guy today, disproportionately, removing his damn kids.

I fought for so many dads to get their kids. It's unbelievable. And they walk in systems when they walk in without me. I had a dad whose mom was molesting her son. He had all his paperwork. He went to the jail to say I need to file something to get my son. She's kidnapped the son. And they wouldn't file it.

I went with him. I said, we need to file an Amber Alert. Amber Alert. on this baby. We went there six times before I asked for a female. I said, can you give me some kind of female officer or somebody who can get what I'm talking about? And I'm standing there going I guess I'm gonna go to jail today because I'm damn over it.

Why should he have to? Now his papers are not in a neat folder now. They in a little plastic bag. They all but they, but he got them. I gotta do that. And then the lady said to me, all you guys have to do is just call the police and when the police show up, What? Lady, do you see us? You think we just gonna call the police and the police gonna show up and go in there and get the baby from a woman and give it to him?

And you think we gonna have favor? Did you look at him? He got on shades. He's doing his thing, he got a durag and some shades. He got a durag and some shades. He's clearly gonna go to jail. We got him arrested. And are you that insensitive that you don't even see this happening? I could go on and on.

I got a million stories. A million of them. This is 10 years worth of history. We just got to do better. That's just my cry. We just got to do better.

[00:07:07] **Jason Hibbs:** When interviewing people of color for this podcast series, a handful of themes emerged. And as a traditional journalist, I do not want to put words into someone else's mouth, especially as a white guy talking about issues facing black people. However, as the podcast host, it's my responsibility to try to Organize all of this incoming information in ways that can be easily understood.

So here's my attempt to do just that in most, if not all of the interviews with people of color, the activists, the nonprofit community leaders, people who've been impacted or had family members impacted by gun violence. The main points from them are usually as follows. We're worried about the children.

The absence of the fathers are a concern. We know that in most cases, if the father is involved, the better off the children will be. But as these groups try to break destructive cycles, get dads more involved, strengthen families and communities, they face the following challenges. Negative stereotypes of black men, personal trauma amplified by police shootings of unarmed black people, and an overall distrust of the system.

Even as leaders of all races try to, as we've said repeatedly on this podcast, reduce racial disparities in the jail population, it's hard for some people of color to trust that leaders will not abandon that plan when the political calculation changes. Or if they're actually doing what they say they're doing, or is it just lip service?

And then, of course, you also have addiction, not unique to the black community, which is often connected to untreated mental health issues. And again, this is not my personal list, not Jason's list, but a summary of what I kept hearing in the field. Interviewing sources who are people of color. And you may remember from an earlier episode, an interview with a man granted clemency, mentor and community activist Willie Knighton Jr.

[00:09:04] **Willie Knighton, Jr.:** I've lived with depression, being sentenced to life as an innocent man. I live with substance use disorder. I stopped doing

cocaine in prison. I turned 18 in juvenile. I turned 18 at Cuyahoga Hill Boy's School.

[00:09:20] **Jason Hibbs:** I've lived it. He was on the streets, lost loved ones to gun violence, and spent years in prison for a murder he did not commit until he was granted clemency in 2009 by then Governor Ted Strickland.

Some people I interviewed still aren't sure if they can trust local leaders, but Nottin does. He says he sits on the boards. He works personally with Prosecutor Bates, judges, law enforcement, and the rest. I'm in the trenches and I love it. Yeah, I love it. Yeah, I love it. It's not going to stop. He says while changes in drug laws and sentencing have helped reduce disparities in the prison system, he worries about what he's still seeing in county

[00:10:02] **Willie Knighten, Jr.:** jails.

There is still uneven balance inside, disparity inside of these county jails with races, minorities make up the majority of people incarcerated. Although you look around Lucas County. There's only a small percentage of us. It's sad. It's wrong. And how do we balance that?

So that's what MacArthur have come in and take a look at that systemic racism. We have to nip it in the bud. We have to. Also, there's a lot of men who are incarcerated who are not actually criminals, untreated mental health, undiagnosed mental health, untreated substance use disorder.

You have addicts and you have people whose minds that are not right, which he says keeps the revolving door of jail spinning. What still needs to be done is more employers that are not scared to say that they are a second chance higher because it's still somewhat of a struggle. Housing is the biggest by far.

[00:11:02] **Jason Hibbs:** He's a consultant for Goodwill Industries of Northwest Ohio. He helps recently released people get their forklift certification and other things to prepare them to go into the workforce. And they also partner with local employers willing to give people a chance. Willie Knighten Jr. knows these challenges because he sees them every day with his own eyes.

own eyes.

[00:11:23] **Chris Scott:** I had a gentleman come in. He wanted to get a forklift certification, right? He did not delay or waste any time. He came in, said, I want

to get my forklift. He didn't play about it. He was serious about it. And next thing I know, he came back and showed me a certification.

[00:11:37] **Jason Hibbs:** Another person who sees what's happening and what the needs really are in real time.

[00:11:44] **Chris Scott:** When you see people return home with that level of hunger, although it may be difficult to place them in the beginning because of the barriers down that they have with the felonies on their background, there's a tenacity that's there to keep going, to make sure that I get to where I'm trying to go because I'm thinking different about the world.

So yeah, I see that a

[00:12:02] **Jason Hibbs:** lot. Scott is a community activist who grew up in the inner city of Cleveland and is trying to make a change here in Toledo.

[00:12:10] **Chris Scott:** Primarily at Pathway, we work with the adults that are primarily focused 18 or older. And then during the summer months, we may run a summer youth program working with our 14 through 18 year olds.

Primarily my role there is the employment coordinator. And ultimately what my role is to ensure that the team has what it needs so we can successfully support the clients that come in. So we see clients who come in for who may not had any job experience at all.

So they may need resume help. They may need support with just interviewing practice or how to even approach it, approach a job, from the basics, right? And then you have folks that are returning home from being locked up, five years, 10 years. I think the most I've seen was 30 years.

And you think about it, that person has a very unique. Experience right 30 years. They've been in a different type of world per se right and so Reacclimating them to how things are done on the outside, but then also making sure that they have the tools, right? Oftentimes, you're dealing with barriers such as I don't have that.

They don't have their IDs They don't have their social security cards birth certificates. They don't have housing stable housing So primarily what we do is we try to provide some of those supports to remove those barriers, those foundational barriers, getting a job is important, right? But if you don't have

anywhere to lay your head, or if you don't have the basics to get a job there's other things that need to be taken care of.

So primarily making sure that the clients that we serve is making sure that they have those basic needs met first, before we go ahead and try to help them find employment or a different career or certification opportunities to elevate.

[00:13:45] **Jason Hibbs:** He says finding employers willing to give his formerly incarcerated clients a chance isn't always easy, and it's been that way throughout history, which often helps to perpetuate the cycle.

[00:13:57] **Chris Scott:** Thinking about fathers and the job opportunities that are fathers in particular, that black and brown fathers and the job opportunities that were afforded to them are the lack thereof as I was growing up and you notice and you start to see Those opportunities that others may have may not necessarily readily exist in that neighborhood.

Maybe it may be too far away, or maybe the fathers don't have the credentials to get to it. And so it helps you to understand why someone may take a different route. Meaning, if I don't have the skill set to get this job that will bring me a certain level of income. To support my family, what other opportunities may be available to me to do whether good or bad.

And so you start to notice the different routes that people take in the in the underground, I would say whether that's selling drugs or committing levels of crime to feed their families. And once you get down to the root, you understand that the focus is really to sustain their families.

And so really, how can we start. Introducing opportunities to folks to, to fathers and give them those spaces to where they can legally afford to be able to support their family. So looking at the economic effects of it crime and poverty are hand in hand, right? They go together, where there's crime, you're going to have poverty.

It doesn't matter really the color, black or white people are trying to sustain. And that's our innate animal instinct. I believe, when the resources aren't there, you're going to find a way. The best way or the quickest way to get those needs met.

[00:15:25] **Jason Hibbs:** Scott says a key to bringing families together is to help fathers be good dads.

[00:15:30] **Chris Scott:** One in particular is getting families back together, right? Bringing fathers back into the household. It's very difficult for a young man to get caught up in the street life if he has a father that, that is working and supportive of his household and helping sustain the household. So in a way, working to try to eliminate this.

Single parent household, right? Bringing those two parents together. Along with that the education piece is important, right? Making sure that the resources to elevate as the economy changes, right? There has to be a educational change as well to sustain, right? So bringing along those different opportunities, whether it's certification for short term Being able to get a certification within a year to be able to sustain your family or opportunities to go back to school to receive some level of a degree, whether it's associates, bachelors, whatever that may be.

And even also teaching the skills, right? When I was growing up a few of my mentors around me taught me how to do stuff with my hands, right? Whether that's painting cars or fixing cars or painting houses. So what that did is it provided another opportunity to be able to support, right?

Your family if in between jobs you, the bills are still coming regardless of whether or not you have a job, but you have another way. Of making an income to support your family. So bringing those skills back into it, bringing fathers back into the household and also elevating that education to help them move the needle.

So I do a lot of speaking with the youth, right? And I remember I was doing a session out in Chicago and then one also in Cleveland, two totally different spaces spectrums, right? And I remember a young person said to me, and I want you to catch this message. Both of them said the similar thing, but the message was quite the same.

Chris when I'm in jail, I'm safer. He explained, he said, in here, I know that I'll eat. And here I don't have to worry about people trying to kill me. You might get into some fights, in here, I know when it gets cold, I got somewhere warm to sleep.

When the weather gets cold, this is what they told me two totally different sessions, right? When it gets cold, I find ways to commit to commit crime so I can have me a warm place to stay. It was almost if they were saying that being free was prison and prison was freedom. And so thinking about that, ultimately what they were saying is that their basic needs on the outside was not being met. The system was providing them a set of resources that provided stability, right?

And being on the outside didn't have that stability. So what, when I'm thinking about what they're saying to me is understanding why they go back, right?

There's a stability here. That's not out here. That's not afforded to me out here. So we start going ahead and figuring out how can we stabilize them on the outside that maybe just, maybe we may not see them going so much on the inside.

[00:18:16] **Jason Hibbs:** As an advocate, Scott emphasizes the importance of reuniting households, particularly for young parents, citing studies that show better outcomes for kids in two parent households.

He emphasizes the need to instill the value of education in participating in school and urges parents to be mindful of their kids exposure to influences, including the parents, who should model positive behaviors like reading books.

So we've been talking about racial realities this episode, and there's a big one that Willie Knighton, Jr. mentioned, hanging over everyone involved in the safety and justice challenge, not just in Lucas County, but beyond. And it's the fact that the racial disparities in the local jail incarceration rates, still exist to this day, even though the overall jail population was decreased.

Here's the Executive Director of the Toledo Lucas County Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, Holly Matthews, from the Origins episode of the Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast.

[00:19:23] **Holly Matthews:** We are definitely falling into the trend of a jurisdiction that can reduce jail population. Increasing disparities in the jail.

And unfortunately, no one has found the solution to that issue yet. We're still working to address it. This is a very challenging trend, and it is a national trend that we're seeing across the network, and many communities are struggling with this same challenge.

[00:19:56] **Jason Hibbs:** Nida Abbasi is a program officer on the criminal justice team at the MacArthur Foundation.

[00:20:01] **Nida Abbasi:** That's something that we've been seeing across a lot of our sites. I think it's interesting. I think it speaks to how communities are policed, which areas are policed how people are entering the system, and what types of crime people are getting arrested for and prosecuted for. There's all these different factors that can impact Why that's happening.

And I think it's also important to acknowledge that the criminal justice system is inherently a racist system, in my opinion. And that's not going to go away with a few years of funding. I think the intention behind adding that into the SJC was like gathering information on what's causing those disparities exactly in these particular sites.

And also is there anything that is going to like Clearly reduce disparities. Can we pull out one or two things? And even that has been challenging as you mentioned, like they're getting more disparate in Lucas County. It's happening in other places, too. So we're hoping. We work with four sites specifically around racial equity that are just like in overdrive, concentrating on this issue.

And they were just renewed, or they're up for funding, a renewal. So we're hoping that we'll be able to pull out some of those practices by the time this project is really coming to a close. But yeah, I think maybe it's one of those things that it's going to get worse before it gets better, but we're hoping.

Yeah, we can find out ways to make it better soon.

[00:21:52] **Jason Hibbs:** Former law enforcement officer turned activist Shawn Mahone senior says he has the solution to help reverse the trend.

[00:22:00] **Shawn Mahone Sr.:** It is a cycle and it's a cycle because there are a lot of single mothers that are raising especially young african american boys. It's hard for those parents to really give those young men what they need because parents are stuck working, two to three jobs and you have parents that, have a lack of education or parents that that don't have fathers those mothers who fathers are absent fathers.

They're not there to give the young men or young ladies what they need. So we find it to be in a cycle, but there is a way that we can somewhat break the cycle, but it's going to take a collaborative effort for that to happen. It comes from the top down. So there has to be something in place in our city government, which allows there to be with our local police departments.

And then also again with our juvenile court have to have something in place that would give parents a form of accountability. A lot of the reason why a lot of the crimes are happening, especially with our young and we're going to say from the age of 13 to 18 it's a little bit lower than that, but just for for the sake of when they can really take them into the juvenile system is going to be 13.

And then that way putting something in place some form of accountability. I call it operation accountability.

[00:23:12] **Jason Hibbs:** Mahone Sr. founded and is the executive director for the Young Men and Women for Change, a behavioral modification boot camp for boys and girls ages 5 to 17. He says the program works, but he needs more cooperation from the juvenile courts.

[00:23:29] **Shawn Mahone Sr.:** We find that disproportionately African Americans are more likely to be incarcerated. African Americans are more likely just going to commit crimes. And the data shows that. When we are being target and when we are not having a fight, you have poor families that can't afford the proper counsel.

So that puts us in a bind where we begin to be a part of a system that is hard to get out of, especially when you have been labeled and you have received something on your record that's going to prevent you to move forward, which causes individuals to fall back in the recidivism rate does not drop. It increases because of the lack of.

What's there at that time?

[00:24:08] **Jason Hibbs:** Bowling Green State University professor of criminal justice, Adam Watkins says, while the disparity is still there, Lucas County and other MacArthur counties that lowered their jail population should consider their efforts a success.

[00:24:22] **Adam Watkins:** From my perspective, and there's not agreement on this point.

Some people definitely take issue with what I'm about to say. But from my perspective, I think there's focusing on the direction of the trend is vastly more important. I not to imply that we shouldn't be focused on, the disproportionate aspect of it, but I'm definitely just from my perspective, much more interested in the direction of the trend and the direction of the trend as you just described it seems favorable.

So I, I'm hesitant to get overly focused on the ratio part of it or some of the stubbornness there. Now again, I do think it's important if we had a better understanding of why that existed or, and there's certainly plenty of speculation as to maybe why we could functionally address it.

But sometimes that may be in focusing on that or becoming overly preoccupied with that, I think you just maybe miss some of the successes that clearly are being made in this process.

[00:25:28] **Jason Hibbs:** On the ground, Avis Files is focused on her mission at Pathway and beyond.

[00:25:34] **Avis Files:** I run the Lucas County Fatherhood Coalition.

I'm the chair for the Lucas County Fatherhood Coalition, so I have about 14 agencies that I work with. It's still siloed.

[00:25:43] **Jason Hibbs:** She believes white leaders could learn a lot about how to improve racial realities for local communities of color. If they listened more, not in an official forum or a political event, but just by showing up in the communities of color.

[00:26:00] **Avis Files:** I don't think that people are hearing because we don't have an opportunity to talk. Where do we get to say our voice? Where do they sit on the other side to listen? We're often on this side and like we were at the thing. We're on this side and we're listening to them. But where does it flip?

Where they come on this side and then they listen to us. And it's a different reality.

[00:26:23] **Jason Hibbs:** Files even has a suggestion on where these commissioners could start this unofficial listening tour, and that's with the non profit agencies like hers that received grants as part of the MacArthur Community Engagement Initiative.

[00:26:38] **Avis Files:** I would challenge the commissioners to sit with all of us who have this money and just be quiet for about two good hours. Somebody ask the questions and they be quiet and listen. And then write down what they hear, and then repeat it back, to say, is this what you were saying? Because that's a real conversation, right?

When you can repeat it back and say, wait a minute, is this what you mean? And you're going, yeah. So then that brings a different insight.

[00:27:08] **Jason Hibbs:** Thank you for listening. The Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast is produced by WGTE Public Media and made possible by support from the John D. and Catherine T.

MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce over incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails. I'm your host, John.

By now, you've heard about the smaller grants awarded to Lucas County organizations doing work on the ground.

Ideally, we would have every little neighborhood have a spot that we could use to help the youth, have positive social engagement.

[00:27:49] **Jason Hibbs:** On the next Rethinking Jails and Justice podcast,

The way that we're trying to address it now is by doing more intentional and authentic community engagement.

And I think part of that starts with tapping into the community organizations, the community members that are committed to reform work and have are able to demonstrate this confidence around the disparities and more importantly around those solutions.

[00:28:16] **Jason Hibbs:** How and where that money was spent.

Everybody wants to talk about problems. We want to talk about opportunities.

Grant money can have different purposes.