

Teenagers of the Incarcerated: Collateral Damage?

A Study on Adult-Youth and Youth Peer Relations, Stigmatization, and Perspectives on the
Criminal Justice System

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I feel like I got kinda like a turtle. I got a little harder on the outside. I didn't let people in. I didn't trust anybody. My trust just completely disappeared 'cause my mom was gone. I trust nobody at all—my family, friends. The only person I could reach out to was my mom and it was just that I won't trust her because she left me. And I felt like she abandoned me. I just felt like she left me and I know it wasn't by choice, you know, she didn't want to, but I still felt left.

—Sarah

It was part of my life for so long that it almost became normal, where it wasn't like, "Oh, my parents are incarcerated. My dad and my brothers are incarcerated." It was like so normal. It was like we'd have family reunions in visiting rooms. Because it was like all the men in my family were locked up at one time.

—Ashley

I don't think that like who I am or like the type of person I am should be identified because my mom is in prison. 'Cause I feel like, if anything, I might be a little bit stronger than a lot of people because of it or I might be like a little more like independent or aware of certain stuff because of the situations that I've been in.

—Amanda

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Abstract

With the rise in mass incarceration in the United States, there has been a corresponding rise in the number of children with incarcerated parents. However, relatively little is known about their experiences as the youth of incarcerated individuals. This study therefore explores the effects of parental incarceration on adolescents, specifically whether and how teenagers of incarcerated individuals perceive stigmatization in relation to their parent's incarceration and whether and how parental incarceration changed their relationships with peers and adult-authority figures. It also examines youth perspectives on the criminal justice system to determine how, if at all, parental incarceration plays a role in shaping their opinions. By conducting three in-depth interviews and analyzing two short documentaries featuring the narratives of six youth, I find that there are six key themes that provide the basis for a spectrum of youth experiences. At one end of the spectrum, there are youth whose lives are fundamentally altered and shaped by their parent's incarceration; at the other end of the spectrum, there are youth who simply view the incarceration of their parent and other family members as "normal." This study thus provides a different, and heretofore lacking, perspective on the effects of parental incarceration by exploring the issue from the youth perspective.

Introduction

Mass incarceration has significantly impacted American society—socially, politically and economically. More specifically, however, it affects the daily lives of not only the inmates behind prison walls, but also the families of those incarcerated individuals. With the rise in mass incarceration, there has been a corresponding rise in the population of children with incarcerated parents. The drug laws of the 1980s resulted in the incarceration of many young minority men, but the “proportional impact has fallen even more heavily on minority women” (Clear, 55). The number of both men and women entering prison has therefore increased in the past several decades, resulting in a substantial impact on the number of children with incarcerated parents. There are “more than 1 million children under age 18 whose parents are behind bars” and by 2000, there were over 1.5 million minors who have ever had a parent in prison (Clear, 61-62). Thus, this vulnerable and growing population warrants further research, especially from new and different perspectives.

There is a general consensus on the behavioral and economic effects of parental incarceration, but the literature on stigmatization and on the overall effects of parental incarceration from the youth perspective is lacking (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest; Fritsch and Burkhead; Johnson and Waldfogel). The two primary research questions to be answered by this paper are therefore:

- 1) How does the incarceration of parents and guardians affect the everyday lives and emotional experiences of teenagers from these families?
 - a. How do these teenagers experience changes in their relationships with peers and adult-authority figures?

2) How are their perceptions of and experiences with the criminal justice system affected by having an incarcerated parent or guardian?

This study will examine the effects of parental incarceration on the teenagers of incarcerated individuals, with special attention to whether and how these youth perceive stigmatization. By interviewing teenagers with incarcerated parents, this study will ascertain whether or not they perceive disparate treatment before and/or after the parent was incarcerated. If disparate treatment exists, it will analyze how these teenagers perceive this unequal treatment.

Additionally, this study will explore youth perspectives on the criminal justice system. By asking these teenagers about their experiences with visiting their incarcerated parent, there will hopefully be a better understanding of how, if at all, their experience with parental incarceration influences their views. These two primary research questions will therefore provide a fresh, and essential, perspective on the larger subject of the effects of parental incarceration.

Literature Review

The Family and Children

A number of studies on the effects of parental incarceration on families and children have been completed, and there appears to be a consensus on several of the negative effects, including reported behavioral changes, psychological and emotional stress, and increased risk of delinquency. While this research contributes to the existing knowledge on the effects of parental incarceration, the studies draw conclusions about youth based on data collected exclusively from adults, thereby ignoring the perspectives of those who arguably matter most—the youth themselves. Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest conducted surveys and interviews of family members with children visiting incarcerated parents at a jail, and they concluded that incarceration has both social and economic consequences for the family. They found, based on the responses of the adult family member, that children's behavior changed since the incarceration, including "difficulties in school...depression and irritability...and behavioral regression" (201). Additionally, while most of the respondents were already financially vulnerable before the other parent was incarcerated, their financial situation deteriorated after incarceration due to the "loss of income provided by the incarcerated family member, the enhanced likelihood of mothers leaving paid work outside of the home, the unavailability or loss of child support, and new expenses associated with incarceration" (Arditti et al., 200).

Additionally, Fritsch and Burkhead used survey answers from inmates about their children to conclude that the "sex of the absent parent was...correlated with the type of behavior exhibited [by the children], absence of the father with acting-out and absence of the mother with acting-in behavior" (87). While this research contributes to the existing

literature on the effects of parental incarceration by identifying specific changes in the children's behavior after parental incarceration, the study has several limitations. First, the findings are based on questionnaire answers from inmates about their children rather than direct observations of the children. Second, the responses to the questionnaire may not be valid because the inmates' answers about problems with their children could be under- or overestimated. This is especially problematic because the parents' responses cannot be confirmed by data from direct observations or data from individuals who have direct contact with the children in question. Finally, there is a possibility that the behavioral changes were simply aggravated and not actually caused by parental absence due to incarceration.

Similarly, Johnson and Waldfogel analyzed survey data on inmates spanning an eleven-year period and conclude that the dramatic increase in rates of incarcerated parents, especially mothers, is correlated with an increase in the number of children of incarcerated parents in the foster care system and under the care of grandparent caregivers. The study also found that there was very little contact between inmates and their children because "the frequency of all forms of correspondence between parents in state prison and their children declined from 1991 to 1997," which may contribute to the negative effects of parental incarceration (Johnson and Waldfogel, 471). Although the study has several limitations, including possible overestimation of the number of children with incarcerated parents, it nonetheless adds to the existing literature by confirming that the children of incarcerated parents may be an especially vulnerable population.

Although the Arditti et al. study used interviews and surveys of adults who have direct contact with the minor(s) to gather data about the effects of parental incarceration,

the other aforementioned studies in this section relied completely on data collected from the incarcerated parent. According to the Johnson and Waldfogel study, the correspondence between parents in prison and their children is relatively infrequent; this finding therefore highlights one of the main problems with relying on data from incarcerated parents. Studies that draw conclusions about the effects of parental incarceration based on data collected from incarcerated parents may not reveal the realities of the situation due to a lack of information and lack of contact with the child. Furthermore, none of these studies used data collected from direct observations or interviews of the children of incarcerated individuals.

“Concentrated Disadvantage” in Communities

The family members of the incarcerated are not the only individuals who experience the effects of incarceration; entire neighborhoods and communities, especially those with high rates of incarceration, are also affected. According to Todd Clear, whose book discusses the effects of mass incarceration on disadvantaged communities, social disorganization theory helps to explain the relationship between incarceration and neighborhood life. Several factors, including poverty, ethnic heterogeneity and high mobility, taken together produces social disorganization, a condition whereby crime increases because of the lack of social control (Clear, 73). Furthermore, he suggests that the conditions in these communities “established a basis for norms to develop that enabled criminal values to be transferred to children from one generation to another,” thereby increasing the prevalence of crime in these disadvantaged communities. In other words, “crime is not only a consequence of social disorganization but also one of the causes of it” (Clear, 85). Although sociologists have long accepted social disorganization theory,

alternative theories also exist. Foremost among these is the theory espoused by Martin Sanchez-Jankowski, who challenges the prevailing theory by arguing that the social conditions that most researchers view as signs of social disorganization are actually “used by the residents of these neighborhoods to build a functional social structure” (Sanchez-Jankowski, 9).

While incarceration affects communities, the communities themselves also play significant roles in the prevalence of crime and incarceration. Generally, people try to live in the best places they can afford and move away from undesirable locations; the people who live in undesirable areas are therefore often “stuck there, not liking where they live but unable to change the fact,” resulting in neighborhoods concentrated with poor people who have few opportunities (Clear, 70). These communities with “concentrated disadvantage” are often characterized as “urban communities of color” with concentrated poverty and high levels of crime (Clear, 71). Additionally, since these communities with high levels of incarceration already lack resources and social supports, every existing resource is essential; however, “incarceration causes those resources to deteriorate for members of the social network of the person going to prison” (Clear, 86). Thus, the children in these communities, many of whom know at least one person who is incarcerated, face bleak prospects.

Clear’s discussion of the relationship between incarceration and communities therefore suggests that the high rates of incarceration in communities with concentrated disadvantages further weakens the neighborhood and may actually increase rather than decrease crime. These findings illustrate the importance and role of the community in explaining why certain neighborhoods are disproportionately affected by high rates of

incarceration. Furthermore, Clear provides a different approach to analyzing the effects of incarceration on minors by using a broader lens than often used through examining entire neighborhoods. This literature therefore provides the context for which to understand the experiences and environments that some of the subjects of my research come from.

Incarceration and Child Risk

Many studies have researched the various factors that put individuals at risk of incarceration, and several studies have focused specifically on the risks posed to children of incarcerated individuals. Dallaire, for example, examines the likelihood of child incarceration and other negative outcomes based on parental incarceration. Based on data gathered from surveys of incarcerated parents, she concludes that maternal incarceration amplifies the other risks of incarceration to a greater extent than paternal incarceration (Dallaire, 443). She argues that this is largely due to attachment theory, which suggests that the disruption of the mother-child relationship increases risks to children. Furthermore, the study found that “children and families with a parent imprisoned experience sociodemographic and contextual risk factors...as well as incarceration-related risk factors” and that both of these sets of risk factors “contribute to the accumulation of risk in the lives of their children and families and the likelihood of intergenerational patterns of incarceration” (Dallaire, 443).

Similarly, Wildeman and Western reviewed existing research on the effects of incarceration to draw conclusions about the cumulative risk of imprisonment. In light of the imprisonment boom, the study concludes that mass incarceration disproportionately affects fragile families because of the increase in the imprisonment of unmarried African-American men with little schooling, who are likely to have children (Wildeman and

Western, 161). Additionally, they found that “racial and class disparities in imprisonment have produced extremely high lifetime risks of imprisonment for minority men with little schooling, and small but rapidly growing risks of imprisonment for similar women,” so parental incarceration has become increasingly common for children in fragile families (Wildeman and Western, 160). Moreover, they argued that both parental criminality and incarceration influence children’s criminality because “a number of studies show an association between parental incarceration and the criminality of children,” which suggests that parental incarceration is another risk factor for children (Wildeman and Western, 168).

Adult-Youth Relations and Youth Peer Relations

Several studies have explored the relationships between youth and adult-authority figures, such as teachers and local law enforcement. Aaron Kupchik’s study, for example, examined the role of police officers as school resource officers in schools and found that “[w]hen [police officers] enforce school rules, there is a lot of room for small problems to escalate into larger ones, especially if students become upset at the rule enforcement” (Kupchik, 95). Furthermore, the officers’ presence in schools affect the overall school climate because:

[h]aving an can escalate disciplinary situations; increase the likelihood that students are arrested at school; redefine situations as criminal justice problems rather than social, psychological, or academic problems; introduce a criminal justice orientation to how administrators prevent and respond to problems; and socialize students to expect a police presence in their lives (Kupchik, 115).

With the increased presence of law enforcement personnel in public schools in recent years, the relations between adult-authority figures and youth in schools is an important field of study; although Kupchik's research addresses the relationship between school resource officers and delinquent youth, he does not explore the relationship between these officers and youth with incarcerated parents.

Similarly, Victor Rios' study on the hyper-criminalization of Black and Latino youth examines the relationship between youth who have entered the juvenile justice system and the adults in their communities. Rios found that "[a]fter their first offense, most of the youth in the study were labeled and treated as criminals not only by police, courts, and probation but also by teachers, community centers, and even parents" (45). Many of the youth in the study "normalize being treated as criminal by most adult members in their community" and "see it as an every day way of life that they have to cope with and learn to navigate" (Rios, 48). Both Rios and Kupchik therefore explore the relationship between adult-authority figures and delinquent youth, but they do not address teenagers with incarcerated parents, which is a dearth that my research aims to fill.

Moreover, a study by Fine et al. addresses the relationship between adults and urban youth in general. They found that "[t]hese urban youth narrated an ambivalence about police presence in their neighborhoods and a disappointment that police, guards, social workers, and educators view youth as suspect and untrustworthy, reporting considerable alienation in New York City" (Fine et al., 148). Also, the data they collected indicated that "youth across race, ethnic, and gender lines report adverse interactions with and low trust in adults in positions of public authority" (Fine et al., 154). This research is important in that it addresses the relationship between adult-authority figures and urban

youth in general, whereas the work by Rios and Kupchik address delinquent youth.

However, the same problem remains; the literature on the relationship between youth with incarcerated parents and adult-authority figures is lacking.

Likewise, the literature on the relationship between urban youth and youth with incarcerated parents is deficient. According to Rios's study, the delinquent youth did not indicate any problems with friends and peers, beyond those that existed previously (Rios, 47). This suggests that friends and peers can be accepting of delinquent youth when adults are not. However, this research on peer relations does not address the relationships between youth and teens with incarcerated parents, which is another void that my research aims to fill.

Prisonization and Adult Partners

Megan Comfort's ethnographical research on the women who visit their incarcerated partners at San Quentin state prison details how their visits to the prison turn the women into "quasi-inmates." Through numerous interviews with the women who visit San Quentin, she also concludes that the women are themselves changed by their interactions with the prison. Comfort suggests that these women undergo secondary prisonization because of their interactions with:

the correctional system due to their connections to those behind bars, with the result that carceral contact profoundly transforms women's intimate and social lives through its regulation of their conduct, physical appearances, agendas, sexual relations and fantasies, and speech both at and away from the correctional facility (14).

More specifically, she finds that “the inmates’ associates and kin are subjected to weakened versions of the elaborate regulations, concentrated surveillance, and corporeal confinement governing the lives of ensnared felons,” thereby resulting in secondary prisonization (Comfort, 29).

Furthermore, Comfort identifies three different categories of women who visit their partners in prison. The women in the first category (“families with a problem”) are “financially secure, predominantly well educated, [and] with few or no dependent children” (Comfort, 183). Although their partner’s incarceration is the central problem in their lives, they are less likely to become severely institutionalized and less prone to secondary prisonization because of their preexisting social networks and experiences. The women in the second category (“problem families”), on the other hand, “contend with racism, intergenerational criminality, and their partners’ recidivism” and these “hardships are compounded by poverty, inadequate family and social services, harassment at the hands of criminal justice authorities, and controlling or abusive mates” (Comfort, 183-184). These women are the most susceptible to secondary prisonization and some are “often ‘groomed’ from early ages for this process through their contact with imprisoned kin and associates” (Comfort, 184). The women in the final category have experienced such instability and disorganization before the imprisonment that the removal of their partner actually alleviates the situation. These women therefore depend on penal intervention to restore order to their lives, indicating the highest level of secondary prisonization because they “engage the criminal justice system as a protective intervention in their relationships, finding a semblance of stability, control, and safety in its long shadow” (Comfort, 184).

While Comfort's research contributes a considerable amount of knowledge to the existing literature on the effects of incarceration on families, the effect of secondary prisonization merits further research. The interview participants consisted only of women who maintained a direct connection to their incarcerated partners, while those who "voluntarily or involuntarily lose touch once their man goes behind bars" are excluded (Comfort, 19). Although my research aims to explore teenagers' perceptions of the criminal justice system in general, I also examine the topic of secondary prisonization for the second research question, as the three categories that Comfort identifies may also apply to the teenagers of incarcerated individuals.

Stigma

The various definitions of stigma and stigmatization all share one element in common: the devaluation of persons (Stafford and Scott, 79). The most relevant definition of a "stigmatized person" to a discussion about the relationship between criminality and stigma, however, is one who has "attributes that do not accord with the prevailing standards of the normal and good. They are often denigrated and avoided—openly in the case of known criminals and other transgressors" (Stafford and Scott, 79). One of the primary reasons for stigmas is social control; these "[r]eactions may occur for various reasons (e.g., fear, vengeance), but an important consequence is often the restriction or termination of social relations" (Stafford and Scott, 87). Furthermore, "[p]eople who ordinarily would not be disvalued, if considered alone, can by association acquire some of the disvalued characteristics of a stigmatized person" (Stafford and Scott, 87). However, this explanation for stigma does not fully explain why or how the family members of incarcerated individuals also experience stigmatization when they have not transgressed.

Rios' book, through a discussion of the youth control complex, also explores the stigma attached to being a juvenile delinquent. The youth control complex, Rios explains, is "the combined effect of the web of institutions, schools, families, businesses, residents, media, community centers, and the criminal justice system, that collectively punish, stigmatize, monitor, and criminalize young people in an attempt to control them" (40). As a result of this complex and the associated labeling hype, the boys in Rios' study:

believed that some agents of social control, the family, school administrators, and police, interacted with them as if at any given moment they would engage in crime or violence. As the boys came of age, they experienced being treated as criminal risks in need of constant, ubiquitous surveillance and control across social contexts (73).

Thus, these boys were forced to live with the stigma of being juvenile delinquents after being labeled as such. Additionally, Rios found that stigma was extended to the boys' parents as well. The "[s]chool personnel, police, and probation officers provided the boys' parents with 'courtesy stigmas,'" which are stigmas that develop as a result of being related to a person with a stigma (Rios, 82). Those in the youth control complex therefore considered the parents, like their children, deviants, as evidenced by the "conversations that school personnel, police, and probation officers had with one another about troubled youths" (Rios, 82). These conversations would almost always follow "the same trajectory: 'These parents need to learn how to discipline these kids'; 'It's their parents' fault for letting them do whatever they want'; 'It's no surprise that they're this way—look at their parents' (Rios, 82-83).

While Rios' findings are important, his study primarily focuses on the experiences and stigmatization of youth who have been labeled juvenile delinquents. The need for further research on the experiences and stigmatization of youth who may not necessarily be juvenile delinquents but are simply the children of incarcerated individuals still remains. Rios' finding about the courtesy stigmas attached to the parents of juvenile delinquents is thus especially important because it suggests that the teenagers of incarcerated persons may encounter similar courtesy stigmas based on their relationship.

Clear and his colleagues, after interviewing of over 100 individuals in two predominantly African-American neighborhoods with the highest incarceration rates among other communities in the county, summarized the participants' conclusions about the problem of stigma and incarceration. These views generally challenge popular beliefs about stigma; for example, "[w]hile community residents stress that they think people from outside the neighborhood are primarily responsible for stigmatizing people, it also affects the way they think about their neighbors who have criminal convictions" (Clear, 125-126). The participants also acknowledge that stigma "also gets transferred to family members of incarcerated individuals" and even "attached to the community-at-large" when communities have high incarceration rates (Clear, 126). While the respondents "insisted they had not personally experienced the stigma attached to their own family members," they described what they had witnessed with others in the community; when a family member is incarcerated, "neighbors reconsider what they think of those who are left behind" and "[s]iblings often bear the brunt because there is an idea that if your sibling could be a criminal, then you could, too" (Clear, 128).

These findings are especially important and contribute to the existing knowledge on stigmatization as a result of incarceration; however, the respondents claimed to have never experienced this type of stigma because of their family members. Further research is therefore necessary to determine whether and how family members of incarcerated individuals perceive stigmatization. Also lacking is research on whether and how children of incarcerated individuals perceive stigmatization, which is what I aim to explore with my research project.

Based on my review of the existing literature, the youth perspective is non-existent in the current literature on the effects of parental incarceration. Studies on the effects of incarceration on families and children rely exclusively on data collected from adults or the incarcerated parent. Similarly, studies about child risk of incarceration draw conclusions based on data from the incarcerated parent or from existing research that does not include data from youth. Moreover, the existing works on adult-youth and youth peer relations, secondary prisonization, and stigma fail to address or include the perspectives of youth with incarcerated parents. This research project therefore aims to fill this void in the literature by examining the effects of parental incarceration from the youth perspective and with input from the youth themselves.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study are all individuals between the ages of 15 to 23 with at least one parent who has been or is currently incarcerated. Two of the three participants were given and signed a consent form, which explained that (1) the study was about the

effects of parental incarceration, (2) if they agreed to participate, they could decline to answer any questions they did not wish to answer or to stop the interview at anytime, (3) the interview would involve questions about their experiences at home and at school, and (4) their names and other personally identifiable information would not be used. The third participant was not given a consent form because the interview was conducted over the telephone. Nonetheless, all components of the consent form were explained and agreed to before beginning the phone interview.

Participants were given the opportunity to create a pseudonym to conceal their identity. Because all three participants declined to create a pseudonym, they were informed that one would be created for them.

Sampling

All participants were contacted through San Francisco/Bay Area organizations that work with or provide services to either the children of incarcerated individuals or incarcerated individuals with children.

Interviews

Two types of interviews were conducted in this study, both using the same interview protocol. The first two interviews were conducted in person, at the location of the participant's choosing. The third interview was conducted over the phone because the participant currently resides outside of the San Francisco/Bay Area. The interviews were audio recorded. Participants were given the option not to have their interviews audio recorded, but all three participants consented. Each interview was transcribed within 48 hours after being conducted.

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended interview questions developed for the purpose of this study to answer the two main research questions:

- 1) How does the incarceration of parents and guardians affect the everyday lives and emotional experiences of teenagers from these families?
 - a. How do these teenagers experience changes in their relationships with peers and adult-authority figures?
- 2) How are their perceptions of and experiences with the criminal justice system affected by having an incarcerated parent or guardian?

In order to answer the first question, interviews of teenagers with incarcerated parent(s) is most appropriate because it allows the respondents to provide narratives of their life stories before and after parental incarceration. This technique therefore has the greatest potential to expose common themes about stigmatization and other effects of parental incarceration. Similarly, interviewing is the best method for the second question because it allows the respondents to describe any experiences or interactions with the criminal justice system, positive or negative.

The first set of questions focuses on the background information about their parent's incarceration, such as when their parent was incarcerated and how they found out about it. The second set of questions elicits narratives about their life before, during and after their parent was incarcerated. The third set of questions measures any changes to their relationship with peers and/or adult-authority figures and their perceptions of stigmatization. The final set of questions elicits narratives about their experiences with visiting their parent in prison, if at all, to measure their perceptions of the criminal justice system and secondary prisonization. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were

given the opportunity to make any final remarks or to touch on anything related to their experience with having a parent in prison that was not covered in the interview.

Documentaries

Two short documentaries featuring the narratives of six individuals with incarcerated parents were viewed, transcribed, and analyzed. The ages of the documentary participants were not disclosed, but they all spoke about their childhood or adolescent experiences while their parent was incarcerated. The first documentary was more structured, with the four participants answering specific questions regarding their parent's incarceration, while the second documentary was more open-ended, with the two participants telling their life story.

Analytical Strategy

After all of the interviews and documentaries were transcribed, the data was analyzed based on the different sets of questions in the interview protocol. First, the background information for each of the participants was compared with one another to determine whether there were any main commonalities or differences. The other three groups of questions—narratives of their lives before, during, and after parental incarceration, stigmatization and relationships with peers and/or adult-authority figures, and narratives about visitation—were analyzed in the same way. With the documentary participants, there was an additional step between transcription and analysis; each set of data was organized into different sections to correspond with the four sets of questions in the interview protocol. The data from the narratives of the documentary participants were then analyzed in the same process as the data from the in person and phone interviews.

By analyzing the data for commonalities and differences within the four sets of questions, any similarities shared by, or patterns found in, at least three of the participants' experiences were coded as themes. These themes were then assigned additional data and supporting evidence from the remaining narratives. Any major differences, namely evidence contrary to the themes, were also identified and assigned to the themes in order to demonstrate the range of experiences within the themes.

Findings and Analysis

The key findings of this study have been organized into six themes, each of which will be explained in its own sub-section. The implications of these themes will be discussed more thoroughly in the Analysis sub-section.

The Revolving Door

Five of the nine youth in the study had parents who were incarcerated at least twice. This suggests that for the youth of incarcerated individuals, their experiences with parental incarceration may be recurring.

Amanda, who recently turned twenty, explained that her mother is currently incarcerated in Carson City, Nevada for check fraud. However, her mother has been incarcerated before; she explains, "*My mom has been in and out of jail my whole life for as long as I can remember. My dad has always been in and out of jail.*" Similarly, fifteen-year-old Isaac explains that his father went to prison when he was younger for drug offenses and robbery, and "*he got out not too long ago, but he went back in like October. Last October.*" Sarah also had multiple experiences with parental incarceration:

When my mom went the first time, when I was seven, she was gone for eight months, so I didn't really know very much. At fourteen going on fifteen when my

mom went away again, I kinda understood, but I didn't know why. I knew my mom was in jail, I knew she wasn't gonna be gone forever because when she first went, they gave her thirteen years to life. She originally was not supposed to come home, but she did appeal after appeal and she kept getting it knocked lower and lower and lower 'til finally three to five years. She got out and got three and a half, four.

As a twenty-three year old with two young children of her own, Sarah's narratives are somewhat unique in that she is reflecting upon the experiences that she had many years ago. She highlights the differences in her level of cognizance and her ability to comprehend the situation between the first and second incarceration, therefore suggesting that the multiple experiences of incarceration may become slightly less confusing with repetition.

While the situation may be less confusing with repetition, experiencing parental incarceration multiple times does not necessarily make the experience any easier. For example, Carla's father is currently incarcerated in Texas. She explains:

He was incarcerated for the third time when I was 17, going into my senior year in high school, and I expected him like the previous times to get out after several years. It wasn't until my junior year in college, at UCLA, when I went to visit him that he told me and my brother that his sentence was actually for life and that he wouldn't be getting out after a few years this time. I was devastated.

Carla's case therefore indicates that the recurring experience may produce false expectations, such as the belief that her father would "get out after several years" like he had previously. Moreover, the second and third experiences can be equally, if not more

devastating than the first, because the sentences are often longer for repeated offenses. With Carla's father, his third offense resulted in a life sentence. With Amanda's mother, her third offense for check fraud means a longer sentence and she explains, "*they're not giving an exact date or anything right now.*"

The prison's revolving doors also means that these youth often have no idea whether or when their parent will be incarcerated again. Katherine, for example, finally had the opportunity to meet up with her father to let him know "*how much stress he's caused [her and her] family.*" The documentary captured the conversation [speaking to her dad]:

I feel like whatever you were doing to get you locked up like so many times is like really irresponsible like knowing you have five kids who don't have their father around and everything. It seemed like you just kept taking the same path like with dealing drugs or whatever it was that kept getting you locked up. So it didn't seem like you were being like thoughtful...[but] I'm not mad at you.

Just two days after this film was shot, however, her father was arrested again. Thus, this common theme among the youth in the study suggests that youth affected by parental incarceration are at risk of experiencing it—and its associated consequences—multiple times.

Moving in with _____

Three of the youth either mentioned or discussed in great detail the constant changes to their living situation as a major difference in their life after their parent was incarcerated. While one of the participants may have already had a chaotic life, parental incarceration was the trigger for other two. Although three youth may not seem significant enough for this theme to be a finding, the small number could be explained by the fact that

this was not a question or topic posed by either of the documentaries. When questioned about changes in their lives after their parent's incarceration, all three of the participants interviewed identified these constant changes to their living situation.

Amanda's life before her mother's incarceration was nothing short of "hectic." When asked to describe her life before her mother went to prison, she recounted:

When I was younger, goodness, my life was hectic. I mean I had all the responsibilities where I mean, my mom, she's addicted to drugs, probably all drugs you can possibly think of. She has an alcohol problem, so we had a lot of verbal and physical altercations because of that. I missed a lot of school trying to take care of her because she has cirrhosis of the liver, which doesn't help when you're an alcoholic and all of the above. So my life before she went to prison was already really hectic.

To make matters worse, she and her mother never had a stable household; they were always in and out of shelters. So, when her mother was incarcerated, Amanda's already hectic and unstable living situation was further aggravated:

The first night, I slept in a park. And then, I eventually lived with...[a girl who] had the house that was behind our apartments, and me and her ended up getting really close. And I ended up moving in with her, and then my mom came back and took me. Then we moved to West Oakland and then my mom went back to jail, and then I kinda ran away from them because I didn't trust them. And I went back with the girl and then I was staying with, moved in with, her cousin, 'cause that was kinda like my god mom. And then I got in trouble for

stealing so they sent me to live with my family, and then my aunt and uncle shipped me off to Washington to go stay with my sister.

When her mother returned from prison, the constant changes in her living situation did not end:

[My sister] shipped me back out here and I lived with my mom. We were in and out of shelters all over again. And then we moved to Richmond. I was with friends, and then Job Corps became my housing for about a year and a half or so, and now I live with my pastor and I'm in the process of getting my own place.

Amanda's case may thus represent one type of experience in a range of experiences because her situation suggests that parental incarceration may exacerbate existing instability.

Isaac's case represents another type of experience. Unlike Amanda and Sarah, he did not give lengthy descriptions of his life before and after his father's incarceration. However, when asked about his moving history, he explained, *"I moved after [he went to prison]. I moved a couple of times. I moved with my auntie, then I moved with my cousin, and then I moved to where I am now."* Isaac's response, while short, further supports the finding that the youth may experience frequent changes to their living situation after their parents are incarcerated.

Sarah's case represents yet another type of experience, and it is also somewhat unique. Sarah's situation is similar to that of Amanda's in that she too experienced homelessness for a period of time in her childhood. However, while Amanda had numerous responsibilities in the household, such as taking care of her mother, Sarah explains, *"I was*

like a spoiled brat. I didn't have to do much at all [laughs]. I washed dishes here and there, you know, my biggest chore was to keep my room clean and feed the fish." After her mother was incarcerated for the second time, however, her situation changed drastically; she was by no means spoiled anymore. Sarah explains:

I had to stay with some of my family members and they didn't want me there because of my bad habit with my anger. And they were like, "You're just like your mother. We don't want you here." They kept me anyway for a while, and then I ended up having to go back. So I went from my stepdad's to my cousin's house and then from my cousin's house, I went to my stepdad's sister's house because she was the only one who would take me. So I went to stay with some of his family. And then, it didn't work out with me and her...so I had to go back to my stepdad.

After she broke her leg, she moved back in with her cousins, who made her do a variety of chores. Recounting her time living with her cousins:

They made me wash dishes... So I had to be like either in the wheelchair with books stacked up high so could reach the sink and wash the dishes, or I had to have the walker in front of me and be leaning on it, trying to wash dishes. They had me sweep and vacuum with one leg and just a whole bunch of things I shouldn't have to do with a cast from my toes to my hip.

Eventually, Sarah was forced to move out of her cousin's house and was placed in a group home. She describes her time at the group home and the events leading up to her life on the run:

I started getting into the street life and using drugs, sellin' drugs and just doin' a bunch of stuff I hadn't been doin'. But now it was a way to survive because in the group home, they weren't giving me the things I wanted. They had locks on the cabinets and refrigerators and if you wanted to eat, you know, you had to go ask the staff to eat. And I'm like, that's just crazy so when my friend was like, "Yo, hey, let's run away. My boyfriend has a brother and we can hang out and stay there." I was like, "Alright, okay."

Thus, after her mother's incarceration, Sarah went from being a self-proclaimed "spoiled brat" to a runaway, who used and sold drugs and who did not have permanent place to live.

This commonality in the participants' narratives therefore suggests that parental incarceration may fundamentally and negatively change these youths' everyday lives and emotional experiences.

A Secret No More

A common theme among the interview participants and those featured in the documentaries was their eventual disclosure of a fact that they initially kept secret; five of the youth admitted to hiding or not telling others about their parent's incarceration, but ultimately opening up to people about it. However, one of the participants, Isaac, never tried to keep his father's incarceration a secret—"I told my friends, I told my cousin, I told my family, I told my teachers." He may therefore be an anomaly, which will be discussed in greater detail in the Analysis sub-section. The other three youth made no mention of either hiding or disclosing their parent's incarceration; however, this could be explained by the fact that it was not a question or topic addressed by the documentaries. Furthermore, it may be assumed that these three youths are open to discussing their experiences based on

the fact that they agreed to have their narratives featured in documentaries that are easily accessible on the Internet.

Amanda is representative of many of the other youths because she initially did not tell others about her mother's incarceration. She explains:

If they didn't already know about it, I didn't bring it up. Like, I chose to not talk about it, I guess...I tried not to tell other people my situation, just 'cause I was really kind of ashamed of the situation. One because it messed up my living situation, and in middle school, like, your image is so much. And so, I tried not to tell people.

Similarly, Mark explains, "You could say that I was ashamed, but I kept that all to myself. I made sure nobody ever knew my business." Carla echoes both Amanda and Mark, "I think there were times when I chose not to share the fact that my dad is incarcerated." Sarah also admits, "at first I wasn't saying much." Trisha's experience is perhaps more unique in that she has a clearly activist reason for opening up; she explains, "When I was younger, I always hid the fact that my dad was in jail. Nowadays, I want to just let people know that prisoners are a part of society."

Amanda recently started to talk openly about her mother's incarceration, largely due to her participation in a youth organization that aims to spread awareness about the effects of parental incarceration. Although she is more willing to speak about it, she is still hesitant in many respects: "I'll talk about it openly, but if it doesn't get asked or like brought up, I just kinda brush it underneath the table."

While Mark and Carla did not explicitly state when they began to talk about their parents' incarceration, their mere participation in a documentary about the effects of

parental incarceration suggests that they are willing to share something they once kept secret. They therefore share Trisha and Amanda's activist reason for openly speaking about their experiences. Sarah, on the other hand, later talked openly about her mother's incarceration because she "*thought it was kinda cool,*" especially since she grew up in Oakland where "*everybody else's mommas and daddies are goin' to jail.*" However, she too had an activist reason for talking about her mother's incarceration because she was also a member of Amanda's youth organization.

This common theme suggests that many youth are reluctant to reveal to others and openly discuss their parent's incarceration, often because they feel ashamed. However, they are willing to disclose their secret once they have the correct motive to do so, such as spreading awareness about the effects of parental incarceration.

Emotions... "kinda like a turtle"

Four of the youth mentioned having anger or trust issues after their parent's incarceration; some also recounted stories of lashing out with violence. However, Isaac is again unique, and this finding will be further discussed in the Analysis sub-section; he reports, "*I've become more open to people...I'm not like other people, it doesn't really get to me as much.*"

After Amanda's mother was incarcerated, anger issues intensified and trust issues emerged: "*I've always had anger issues but it really brought them out the first time she went to jail. And, I got kicked out of school all the time.*" She further explains, "*it changed me because her not being around has kind of caused me to have a wall up with everybody. I have horrible abandonment issues, and horrible trust issues.*" Amanda also began to lash out with

violence on multiple occasions, and she “got into [her] first fight right after [her] mom went to jail.” She recounts:

When I was in high school, I got kicked out of summer school for fightin’ because someone had said something about my mom and that’s like a red flag for me almost. But she wasn’t in jail at the time, but it had everything to do with my mom...I still had bad anger issues because our relationship was crap.

Amanda therefore had anger and trust issues develop after her mother was incarcerated.

Unlike Amanda, Sarah only developed trust issues as a result of her mother’s incarceration. She explains:

I feel like I got kinda like a turtle. I got a little harder on the outside. I didn’t let people in. I didn’t trust anybody. My trust just completely disappeared ‘cause my mom was gone. I trust nobody at all—my family, friends. The only person I could reach out to was my mom and it was just that I won’t trust her because she left me. And I felt like she abandoned me. I just felt like she left me and I know it wasn’t by choice, you know, she didn’t want to, but I still felt left...And I became spiteful, and that’s one thing that I’m not liking about myself.

Sarah’s trust issues thus echo those Amanda developed, which suggests that parental incarceration may affect the emotional experiences of these youth and in turn, affect their relationships with others because of their inability to trust.

Mark and Jerry did not mention trust issues, but they both began to lash out with violence after their mothers went to prison. Mark explains:

I can honestly say that I changed a lot. There was no little innocent kid anymore. I got abusive, put it that way. So when I used to play around with my

niece, she used to hit me. I used to hit her back hard, and I didn't know. I'd just hit her back and then she'd go crying to her moms.

Jerry's situation is slightly more nuanced, because of his experience with bullying. After his mother was incarcerated, he explains, *"I got suspended almost every single year, for the same fighting reason. I just kept getting picked on by the kids in my class until I just exploded and hit somebody. Last year I got involved with gangs and everything."* These latter two cases indicate that parental incarceration may cause youth to lash out with violence because of the emotional changes associated with a parent's absence.

A Better Person

One of the most significant themes encountered during this study was the youths' belief that they were in fact better people because of their experiences and that they strive to be better people because they have a parent in prison. While this was not a theme found in the first documentary, it was most likely due to the fact that it would not have been in any of the responses to the questions posed to the youth.

Four of the youth made it explicitly clear that they were different from their incarcerated parent. So, when asked, "Do you feel like you're not as good a person because you had a parent who went to prison?," the three interviewed participants responded similarly. Amanda answered:

I don't think that like who I am or like the type of person I am should be identified because my mom is in prison. 'Cause I feel like, if anything, I might be a little bit stronger than a lot of people because of it or I might be like a little more like independent or aware of certain stuff because of the situations that I've been in. So even though it has its disadvantages, I definitely feel it has given

me some advantages. I don't think it makes me like any less of a person or anything like that.

Sarah answered similarly, *"I just feel like I'm just like everybody else. You know, and I can do anything I want to do—just because my mom went to jail doesn't make her a bad person or me a bad person, that just means she made some bad choices."* Isaac also echoes several elements of Amanda's response, *"I actually feel that it makes me a better person 'cause I have a bigger realization on what's going on around me and it gives me a better reason to do something with myself."*

Moreover, when they were asked a similar question, "Does having a parent in jail/prison make you feel like a bad person?," their answers simply reiterated their other responses. Amanda responded:

At first it did, because like, my sister would always tell me it was my fault...So at first, it messed with me, just a little bit. I felt like a really bad person. But now, I don't feel bad because I'm like, I didn't do anything to make her do these decisions. If anything, I was trying to give her reasons to choose a different direction or a different lifestyle. So I don't feel like a bad person. I feel like I'm not my mom and I'm doing the total opposite of what my mom has done with her life so I feel like my mom's decisions don't make me a bad person.

Isaac and Sarah's responses were much shorter, but essentially expressed the same thing. Isaac simply said, *"No, 'cause it just doesn't get to me,"* while Sarah explained, *"No, 'cause no matter what my mom did, it's not a reflection on me."*

Trisha, whose narrative was featured in the second documentary, echoed the three interviewees' sentiments without being asked either of the questions. She states:

I want to help my family and be a good role model for all my little sisters. Just cause my dad's in jail doesn't mean I'm not gonna be anything, doesn't mean I'm not gonna be successful. We don't have to make the same decisions our parents make. I advise that we don't.

This common theme suggests that if the youth experienced stigmatization, they did not let it affect how they viewed themselves. For example, both Amanda and Sarah had others make negative comments or assumptions about them because their mothers were incarcerated. Amanda explains:

I've had multiple [people] come to me and be like, 'Oh, you're Mary's daughter, so you must live the kind of life she lives.' I've gotten into a lot of arguments over that just because my mom lived a very negative and promiscuous life. So just having people even like approach me like that, I just automatically feel offended.

Sarah has had similar experiences with her own family members; she explains, "I had to stay with some of my family members and they didn't want me there...they were like, 'You're just like your mother. We don't want you here.'" However, despite these experiences, neither let these incidences affect their perceptions of who they were as individuals.

Visitation: "seeing Daddy"

One of the strongest themes, shared by six of the nine youth, was the fact that they were glad to see their parent when they had the chance to visit. There are also several other commonalities with respect to their visitation experiences, such as wanting to visit more often or wanting physical contact during visitation. Isaac is the only youth interviewed who did not visit his father in prison, and who also did not want to do so when

the opportunity arose. The other two youth not accounted for were those featured in the second documentary, which was more open-ended and the topic of visitation was not addressed.

While Amanda wants to visit her mother in Nevada now, she is not allowed to; she explains, *"I hate [not being able to visit] 'cause there's times where like literally if I was to just able to see my mom and like hug her, like, that would fix like everything, like, for me."* When she was younger, however, she had the opportunity to visit her mother once. She recalls:

I mean I don't know how to describe it 'cause it wasn't really like, I didn't like it, I didn't feel like I got to spend enough time with my mom even though I was being a butthead. I still wanted to see her. It just felt like an overly complicated procedure.

Amanda further explains the overly complicated procedure: *"The line was crazy! I just remember it was a crazy long line. I think we were there like three or four hours, maybe? We were there pretty long."*

Also, Mark explains his tedious trip to visit his mother, which left him not completely satisfied:

We had to wake up very early, and then the next thing I knew, I was riding on the bus. And I was like, "what's going on?"...You could not go and sit where the inmate was; they wouldn't allow you to 'cause they probably thought that you was giving them something. Like, I think about that now, but when I was little, I didn't care. I just wanted to sit on my mom's lap and hug her.

Jerry shares a common experience:

When we got there, it was usually always dark. We would have to take off our jackets and go through a metal scanner. And then we would go to this cell room, where we would just talk to her, but I couldn't touch her 'cause we were separated by a glass.

Carla similarly reflects on her experiences visiting as a child and now, as an adult:

The first time I visited him was when I was about twelve years old. At that time, it was more about seeing Daddy. The fact that he was in all white really didn't, you know, interfere. Since then, as an adult, going back to visit, the visits have not been as happy. You know, being treated like a prisoner myself—not being treated with respect, not being spoken to with respect.

Both Mark and Jerry wanted to have some physical interactions with their mothers; they wanted to be able to hug and touch their mothers, but were forbidden from doing so. Carla, on the other hand, experienced the secondary prisonization Comfort describes, since she felt like she was being treated like a prisoner herself. Ashley also had the opportunity to visit her father, but she was too young to remember much of the event. Thus, the first three experiences suggest that while the youth were happy to see their parents and have the opportunity to visit, they were also left with the desire for something more.

Sarah, unlike the others, had much more positive experiences visiting her mother in prison. She explains:

In the beginning, I visited her at least once every two weeks, sometimes once a week 'cause she was only in Dublin. And then she got transferred to South Carolina to fight the other part of the case and she was there for about ten months and I didn't get to see her at all. And when she came back to Dublin, I

got to see her...So all together over four years, I probably saw her about seven times.

Because she had encountered more restrictive forms of visitation, Sarah enjoyed her experience visiting her mother. She explains:

My mom has had husbands who's been in jail. And we've done the behind the glass visiting or the big room in the gym visiting. You gotta yell across the table and something like that. So for me to actually get to sit around the table, near her and instead of a whole bunch of people visiting, it's just a handful of people visiting with their families. It was different. Even though I knew I was coming to see my mom and I can't leave with her, it still made me happy to come—I could hold her, I could hug her, you know, talk to her for as long as I wanted.

Despite her overall positive experience, Sarah also echoes a portion of Carla's experience:

When I went to visit her the second time [she went to prison], they pat you down and get into your pockets and then they wand you down and you know, it was just really awkward for me. I'm like, my mom is in jail, not me—why are you doing this to me? Like you could bring her cigarettes and stuff, but only unopened packs and anything left over you had to take with you. So I was like, that's weird, what's the point?

Sarah thus also experienced a form of secondary prisonization, as indicated by her questioning of the treatment she received when visiting her mother.

Analysis: A Spectrum of Youth Experiences

Four of the nine youth viewed their parent's incarceration as "normal," with two of four youth explicitly using the term "normal" to describe how they felt about having a

parent in prison. This suggests that parental incarceration affects different youth to varying degrees, depending on the environment and circumstances in which they grew up.

Ashley and Katherine both viewed their fathers' incarcerations as "normal" because they grew up without their fathers around. Ashley explains:

It was part of my life for so long that it almost became normal, where it wasn't like, "Oh, my parents are incarcerated. My dad and my brothers are incarcerated." It was like so normal. It was like we'd have family reunions in visiting rooms. Because it was like all the men in my family were locked up at one time.

Likewise, Katherine explains:

There was never actually like, a realization point that my dad wasn't there and that he was in jail. It was more like that was normal, and I thought a lot of people had dads in jail. When I was around twelve, that's when like the numb feeling started to come in—"Oh, you're dad's locked up. What's for dinner?" Like, it was just so normal.

Both used the word "normal" multiple times to describe how they felt about having an incarcerated parent, thereby suggesting that some youth may see their parent's incarceration as explicitly "normal."

Similarly, both Amanda and Sarah grew up in communities that had high incidences of incarceration, so when their mothers were incarcerated, the occurrence was considered implicitly "normal" by their peers. Amanda explains:

None of my friends were like, "Oh my gosh, your mom went to jail" or anything like that. It was like, "Oh, okay." But I mean, then again, in the area that we live

in, it's kinda like, well, everybody is in jail right now. So it wasn't really a big deal. It's just for me, it's a pride issue 'cause I could be very prideful sometimes.

Moreover, Sarah eventually thought it was “cool” for her mom to go to prison because “*well, I've been in Oakland my whole life and everybody else's mommas and daddies are goin' to jail.*” While neither Amanda nor Sarah explicitly used the term “normal” to describe how they felt about having a parent in prison, they implicitly viewed their parent’s incarceration as “normal” because of the prevalence of incarceration in their neighborhoods.

The experiences of these four youth therefore suggest that parental incarceration can both dramatically change the everyday lives of youth and be completely normal at the same time. Furthermore, the six key themes drawn from the interview data and documentary analysis suggest that the individuals in the study have a wide variety of experiences that fall along a spectrum. Each of the themes provides a glimpse into how the youths’ lives were changed because of their parent’s incarceration. The themes “The Revolving Door,” “Moving in with _____,” and “Emotions... ‘kinda like a turtle’” all shed light on how their everyday lives and emotional experiences were impacted by their parent’s incarceration. On the other hand, the themes “A Secret No More” and “A Better Person” reveal how their actions—past, present, and future—are shaped by their parent’s incarceration, while the theme “Visitation: ‘seeing Daddy’” highlights their interactions with the criminal justice system as a result of visiting their incarcerated parent.

A spectrum of youth experiences was thus derived based on the six themes; at one end of the spectrum, there are those whose lives were fundamentally changed because of their parent’s incarceration, and at the other end, there are those youth whose lives were “normal” despite being affected in some ways. Amanda and Sarah anchor the

“Fundamentally Altered” end of the spectrum because their experiences support all six themes, while Ashley and Katherine anchor the “Normal” end of the spectrum because they view their experiences with parental incarceration as explicitly “normal.”

Amanda’s experiences provide the support for the six themes and are thus representative of youth whose lives are fundamentally changed by a parent’s incarceration: (1) her mother has been incarcerated multiple times; (2) her already unstable living situation was exacerbated after her mother was incarcerated; (3) she initially felt ashamed about the fact that her mother was incarcerated, and she did not open up about it until after joining an activist youth organization; (4) her mother’s incarceration brought out her anger issues, sparked trust issues, and triggered violent outbreaks; (5) she believes she is a better, stronger person because of her experiences during her mother’s incarceration, and she is trying to take a different path than her mother did; and finally (6) she describes her one experience visiting her mother as an “overly complicated procedure” but nonetheless wishes she could visit her mother now. Additionally, throughout the course of the interview, she frequently described their incredibly close relationship; she explains, *“my mom is like, when she’s clean and she’s on top of herself, like that’s like my best friend. I tell her everything, like even stuff she didn’t want to hear.”* So, her mother’s incarceration made her feel, *“Lonely and kind of like empty. Like I always feel like there’s something missing because I could literally go to my mom with anything... I just don’t have that there and that’s probably the hardest thing that I deal with. It’s just, I feel like there’s nobody there.”* This, in addition to the experiences she described that support the six themes, demonstrates that her life has been fundamentally altered by her mother’s repeated incarceration.

Similarly, Sarah's experiences provide the support for all six themes and she, too, is representative of the youth whose lives are fundamentally changed by a parent's incarceration: (1) her mother has been incarcerated multiple times; (2) her stable living situation became incredibly unstable; (3) she initially did not talk about her mother's incarceration, but later talked openly about it because of the prevalence of incarceration in her neighborhood; (4) her mother's incarceration triggered trust issues; (5) she believes she is not hindered by her mother's incarceration because her mother's actions do not reflect upon who she is as an individual; and (6) she had relatively positive experiences visiting her mother, but she also questions her treatment by correctional officers when visiting. Moreover, her overall description of life before and during her mother's incarceration suggests that her life was fundamentally altered. Before her mother was incarcerated, Sarah described herself as "spoiled brat" who was sheltered; she explains, *"Oakland's so bad, but I wouldn't know anything about the bad part of Oakland before my mom went to jail because my mom kept me sheltered. I couldn't go to the park by our house. If I wanted to play, I'd go out to the driveway with my neighbors and that's it."* After her mother was incarcerated, however, the self-described sheltered, spoiled brat moved into a group home where she started *"getting into the street life and using drugs, sellin' drugs and just doin' a bunch of stuff [she] hadn't been doin'."* Reflecting on her life more generally, Sarah speculates:

I feel like my life would've been, I feel like I would definitely have my diploma right now if I had my mom. I probably would've been at college. Well, I wouldn't have my kids right now if my mom was around. I mean, I had my kids after my

mom came home, but my life would've been on a different path so I wouldn't have kids.

Sarah thus believes that her life would have been completely different had her mother not gone to prison; in addition to her experiences that support the six themes, this suggests that her life has been fundamentally altered by her mother's incarceration. Sarah and Amanda therefore anchor the "Fundamentally Altered" end of the spectrum of youth experiences.

At the other end of this spectrum, there are those youth, Ashley and Katherine, who view their experiences as explicitly "normal" even though their lives have been impacted in at least one way by their parent's incarceration. Ashley views her father's incarceration as explicitly "normal" despite the immediate effect it had on her everyday life; she explains, after her father was incarcerated, *"My mom had to do everything, that's what changed. I would say, financially, things changed a lot. I no longer had anything I wanted."* Likewise, Katherine described her father's incarceration as "normal" even though she also acknowledges that it caused her and her family a great deal of stress. This therefore suggests that youth at this end of the spectrum may view their parent's incarceration as "normal" even when it has affected their everyday lives and emotional experiences because of the prevalence of incarceration in their neighborhoods and/or because they had become used to their parent's absence.

The other individuals in the study, except Isaac, fall somewhere along the spectrum between these two anchors. Mark, Jerry, Carla, and Trisha each described experiences that supported two or three of the themes, thereby demonstrating how their lives had changed after their parent's incarceration. Mark explained how he was initially ashamed by his

mother's incarceration so he kept the fact hidden, and he also recounted how he began to lash out with violence after his mother was incarcerated. Jerry similarly explained how he began to get into fights at school and even joined a gang after his mother was incarcerated. Carla admitted to keeping her father's incarceration a secret and described experiencing secondary prisonization while visiting her father, who has been through the prison's revolving door three times. Trisha also initially kept her father's incarceration a secret, but she now speaks openly about it because she understands that her father's incarceration doesn't "*mean [she's] not gonna be anything, doesn't mean [she's] not gonna be successful.*" Parental incarceration has thus affected these four individuals to varying degrees, though their narratives and experiences indicate that they neither believe that their lives were fundamentally altered nor "normal," so they fall somewhere in between the two extremes of the spectrum.

Finally, Isaac, who is arguably the youngest individual in the study at only fifteen-years-old, is an outlier in the data. Isaac's interview was very short, but also very revealing. Unlike the other eight individuals, Isaac did not appear to have a very close relationship with his father—before, during, or after his multiple incarcerations. Besides the age factor, this fact is perhaps the best explanation for why he was the outlier in several of the themes. For example, he indicated that he never tried to keep his father's incarceration a secret, he became more open after his father's incarceration, and he did not want to visit his father, even when he had the opportunity to. These departures from three of the themes could be explained by his lack of a relationship with his father: if his father was not around much to begin with, his father's incarceration would not have as much of an affect on him, and he would not find the need to hide his father's incarceration. Despite his departure from the

themes, Isaac’s narratives nonetheless suggest that his everyday life and emotional experiences were affected by his father’s incarceration; after his father was incarcerated, he moved in with several different family members and he became more open to people. Furthermore, he believes his father’s incarceration has made him a better person because it gives him a reason to do something different with his life. Thus, because Isaac’s experiences both counter the prevailing themes and illustrate how his life has been changed by his father’s incarceration, Isaac differs from the rest of the eight participants and is an outlier in the data.

The spectrum of youth experiences described above is therefore summarized by the following figure:

The Spectrum of Youth Experiences



In addition to the themes and the finding that there is a spectrum of youth experiences, there are also anticipated findings based on the existing literature that were both confirmed and left unaddressed. The literature on adult-youth relations suggested that there would be more interaction between school adult-authority figures and youth than found in the narratives collected. None of the three participants interviewed

mentioned negative interactions with school security; in fact, Sarah had a positive relationship with a school security officer. Clear's findings about "concentrated disadvantage" in communities, however, were echoed in the narratives of several youth, who described the prevalence of crime and incarceration in their own neighborhoods. Similarly, Comfort's theory about secondary prisonization was also observed in the experiences of several youth who visited their parents in prison. One of the youth, Carla, describes being treated like a prisoner herself, which confirms the presence of secondary prisonization. However, there was not enough data to neither support nor deny the applicability of Comfort's different categories of women to the youth.

Discussion

Limitations

While this study provides a new, and much needed, approach to researching the effects of parental incarceration, there are significant limitations. First, the study is based upon only three interviews, with the other six youths' perspectives and experiences gathered from documentary footage. Because the majority of the individuals in this study could not be interviewed, it was not possible to fully ascertain how their experiences contribute to the common themes.

Second, the three interviewed individuals are or were members of a youth activist organization that seeks to spread awareness about the effects of parental incarceration. This suggests that their experiences are not representative of many youth with incarcerated parents, most of whom are not involved in activism. Similarly, the individuals featured in the documentaries are also self-selecting and not representative of all youth affected by parental incarceration. These individuals agreed to be interviewed and filmed

discussing their experiences with parental incarceration, knowing that their stories would be widely available on the Internet; they are therefore also most likely involved in activism.

Third, the participants are most likely between the ages of 15 and 23 (the ages of those in the documentaries are unknown). In order to get a better understanding of the youth experience with parental incarceration, it would be helpful to have a broader age range, with more older participants who can reflect back on their experiences. Additional participants from a variety of ages would also help to rule out the age factor as an explanation for why Isaac was an anomaly for several of the themes.

Finally, while the themes and conclusions in this study were drawn from the youths' narratives and statements, it is possible that their statements do not accurately reflect how they feel. Their statements may instead indicate more about how they wish to view their lives and experiences rather than how they actually feel about them.

Future Research

Future research is necessary to fully comprehend the implications of parental incarceration on youth and to better understand these youths' experiences. This research must include many more participants than those in this study, and it should also include participants from a broader age range. Moreover, the participants in future research should be gathered from a wider variety of sources, rather than from solely local organizations that are more activist in nature, in order to ensure that the participants are representative of most youth with incarcerated parents.

With the very small number of respondents in this study, future research should begin where this study ends—with the six themes and the spectrum of experiences. By utilizing larger and more diverse samples with the aforementioned characteristics, future

projects would be able to verify whether these themes are common in the experiences of teenagers with incarcerated parents. Additional efforts would be especially helpful in determining whether the strong themes, such as trying to be a better person than their parent, are in fact strong, and whether the weak themes, such as the constant changes to their living situations, are in fact weak or even present in other youths' experiences. Furthermore, although the distribution of youth along the spectrum of experiences may potentially be very different, future studies would be able to verify the existence of the spectrum identified in this study by including the experiences of many more youth from a diversity of ages and backgrounds.

Conclusion

The incarceration of parents affects the everyday lives and emotional experiences of teenagers from these families in a variety of ways, thereby creating a spectrum of youth experiences. At one end of the spectrum, there are youth whose lives are fundamentally altered and shaped by their parent's incarceration. At the other end of the spectrum, there are youth who simply view the incarceration of their parent as a "normal" occurrence and are not as affected by their parent's incarceration. Moreover, the youths' overall perceptions of and experiences with the criminal justice system are similarly mixed. Some of the youth experienced secondary prisonization when visiting their parent, but some thoroughly enjoyed their experiences with visitation. The overall consensus with regard to the criminal justice system, however, is that it needs to take into consideration the children of inmates with regard to its visitation policies. This study has provided a different, and heretofore lacking, perspective on the effects of parental incarceration by exploring the issue from the youth perspective. However, there is much more work that needs to be

done; further research is imperative if we are to fully understand the implications of parental incarceration on youth in America.

Appendix: Interview Protocol

Background Information

I'm interested in learning about your experience as a teenager with a parent in prison, but before we begin, could you tell me about yourself?

(Probe for siblings, moving history, responsibility in the household, and work/extracurricular activities)

Parental Incarceration

I understand that your mom/dad was/is in prison. When was he/she put in prison?

How did you find out about it?

(Minimal probe about who revealed it and when it was revealed)

If the fact was kept hidden for some time, ask the following questions:

How did it make you feel to have this fact kept hidden from you?

Why do you think they didn't tell you until they did?

How long was/is your mom/dad in prison for?

What was/is he/she in for?

Life before and during parental incarceration

Could you tell me what your life was like before your mom/dad went to prison?

(Minimal probe for work/extracurricular activities, responsibilities in the household, and parental involvement/responsibilities)

What is the one thing you remember most about the time before your mom/dad went to prison?

How has your life changed since your mom/dad went to prison?

(Probe for work/extracurricular activities, responsibilities in the household, and living situation)

What do you think is the biggest change in your life since your mom/dad went to prison?

How does that make you feel?

Stigmatization/Relations with Peers and Adult-Authority Figures

Did you tell other people when your mom/dad went to prison?

(Minimal probe for friends, teachers/coaches, neighbors/community members, and local law enforcement)

How did they react when you told them?

If answered “no,” then ask the following questions:

Why did you decide not to tell other people about it?

Did they find out anyway?

If they did, how did they react? Did they reveal that they knew?

How did that make you feel?

How have your interactions with other people changed since your mom/dad went to prison?

(Minimal probe for friends, classmates, teachers/coaches, neighbors/community members, and local law enforcement)

Do you think they treat you differently because your mom/dad is in prison?

If answered “yes,” then ask the following questions:

How have they treated you differently?

How does that make you feel?

Why do you think they treat(ed) you differently?

IF answered “no,” then ask the following questions:

Did you tell them or do they know that your mom/dad is in prison?

Why do you think they haven’t treated you differently?

How does that make you feel?

Do you feel that you’re not as good a person as others because you have/had a parent in prison? Why?

Does having a parent in prison make you feel like you’re a bad person? Why?

Do you know anyone else who has a parent or family member in prison?

If answered “yes,” then ask the following questions:

Do you talk to them about having a parent/family member in prison?

How have your interactions with them changed since your mom/dad went to prison?

If answered “no,” then ask the following questions:

Do you think it would be helpful if you had someone else going through the same thing to talk to?

Why?

Criminal Justice System- Secondary Prisonization

Have you ever visited your mom/dad when he/she was in prison? How often did/do you visit?

When did you first visit?

Can you tell me about that experience?

(Minimal probe about the trip to the prison, security at the prison, treatment by the correctional officers, changes in behavior to comply with prison requirements, and leaving the prison/parent)

If visited frequently, then ask:

What is it like after visiting after so many times?

What do you remember most about visiting your mom/dad?

Overall, how would you describe your experience(s) with visiting your mom/dad in prison?

Conclusion

I'd just like to thank you for your time and participation in this interview. We talked about a lot of different things today, but I may have missed something that you think is important. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experience with having a parent in prison?

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