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# A qualitative analysis of children of incarcerated parents in the United States

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A Qualitative Analysis: U.S. Children of Incarcerated Parents

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Summary: The rapid rise in the incarceration rate, the large number of people convicted for drug-related offenses in the United States, and the increase in longer sentences has meant that more than one-half of prisoners are parents. While there is research on the impact of parental incarceration on children, most of this research examines the period of the parent's incarceration and does not address how children experience parental incarceration across the life course. A qualitative analysis based on empirical evidence and informed by a developmental framework, this study examines the written narratives of 35 adults who reflect on how their parent's incarceration affected them. The study focuses on three findings. First, the impact of parental incarceration is not the same for all children and varies according to the historical period when the parent is in prison or jail. Second, the gender of the incarcerated parent as well as the economic impact of incarceration on the family are important variables. Third, the reentry period is more complicated than is often acknowledged.

**Context:**

*Children of incarcerated parents*

The rapid rise in the incarceration rate, the large number of people convicted for drug-related offenses in the United States over the past forty-plus years, and the increase in longer sentences has meant that more than one-half of State and Federal prisoners are parents (Maurer, Nellis, and Shirmir, 2009). The first national survey on parental incarceration found more than 700,000 parents of children were imprisoned (Mumola, 2000). Today 2.7 million children in the U.S. have an incarcerated parent, and approximately 10 million children have experienced parental incarceration (National Resource Center, 2014). Because people of color are disproportionately incarcerated, more children of color are affected; 1 in 9 African American children have an incarcerated parent, 1 in 28 Hispanic children, and 1 in 57 white children (National Resource Center, 2014)<sup>1</sup>.

Early research on children of the incarcerated in the U.S. focused on the relationship between a parent's criminality and a child's delinquent behavior (Baker, Mack, Moffitt, Mednick, 1989; Bohman, Cloninger, Sigvardson, and von, Knoring, 1982; Glueck and Glueck, 1950; Loeber and Dishion, 1983; McCord, 1979; Reiss and Roth, 1993; Robins, 1979; Wilson and Hernstein, 1985). Although researchers reported a causal relationship, they never established a mechanism for intergenerational criminality (Johnston 2006).

From 1980 to 1990, the number of women in U.S. prisons more than tripled (Sabol, Couture, Harrison, 2007). Researchers shifted their focus from child delinquency to families (Adalist-Estrin, 2006; Arditti, Lambert and Jost, 2003; Baunauch, P. J. 1985; Bloom and Steinhart, 1993; Boswell, 2002; Costa, 2003; Gabel and Johnston, 1995; Mazza, 2002; Mumola,

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<sup>1</sup> The National Resource Center uses these terms; this author uses terms such as African American, Latino/a, European American and Native American.

2000; Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, and Kennon, 1999; Parke and Clarke-Steward, 2001; Patton, 1999; Seymour and Hairston, 1998; Simmons, 2000; Travis, McBride and Solomon, 2003; Young and Smith, 2000).

Subsequent researchers reported that parental incarceration impacted a child's development and well-being (Boss, 2004; Hairston, 2007; Lee, Fang, Luo, 2013); led to unstable living situations (National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, 2014); made children more likely to live in poverty (Reed and Reed, 1997); was associated with feelings of loss, stigma, poor school performance and a greater potential for addiction (La Vigne, Davies, Brazzell, 2008); had lasting and detrimental effects on children (Arditti, 2012, Murray and Farrington, 2008a, Pohlmann and Eddy, 2010); and could hinder cognitive and behavioral development (Geller and Cooper, 2012). Some researchers found children of incarcerated parents had more criminal justice involvement than adolescents and adults who did not have an incarcerated parent (Siegel, 2011).

This focus on families helped define the problem and establish services for children (Johnston 2006). However, most of the research was not longitudinal or based on empirical evidence. Furthermore, since the research focused primarily on the period when the parent was incarcerated, it failed to account for the life course impact on children. In our study, my colleague and I foregrounded a child-oriented, developmental perspective, acknowledging that children's significant experiences have effects beyond the time when they occur<sup>2</sup>. In order to determine how children are impacted by a parent's incarceration throughout their lives, we examined adults' written reflections.

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<sup>2</sup> Study published as Johnston, D. & Sullivan, M. (Eds.) (2016). *Parental Incarceration: Personal Accounts and Developmental Impact*. New York, NY: Routledge.

A qualitative analysis based on empirical evidence, our study investigated the effect of parental incarceration throughout a child's life course. Although the study made other discoveries, this article will discuss three findings. First, the impact of parental incarceration is not the same for all children and varies according to the historical period when the parent is in prison or jail. Second, the gender of the incarcerated parent as well as the economic impact of incarceration on the family are important variables. Third, the reentry period is more complicated than is often acknowledged.

**Methodology:**

The study uses empirical evidence collected by qualitative methods; recognizes that significant events influence children beyond the period when the events occur; and examines children in their communities and throughout their life course.

A developmental framework finds that children's development is shaped by their experiences and that developmental outcomes are the effects of the developmental supports and insults they receive (Sroufe L.A., Egeland B., Carlson E.A., Collins, W.A. 2005). The Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation from Birth to Adulthood began in 1976 in the United States to analyze the complexity of child-development. The report understood children's behavior as that which changed in relation to their experiences. Children did not progress one way or another based solely on whether or not their basic needs were met; rather, children progressed according to how well (or not) their social and emotional needs were met and what experiences they encountered. The Minnesota Study also found that children were impacted by family and community opportunities and challenges (Sroufe L.A., Egeland B., Carlson E.A., Collins, W.A. 2005). A developmental framework is important when we examine children of incarcerated parents, because it recognizes that children change because of the opportunities they are given

and that what a child experiences during one part of his life may affect him at another point in his life.

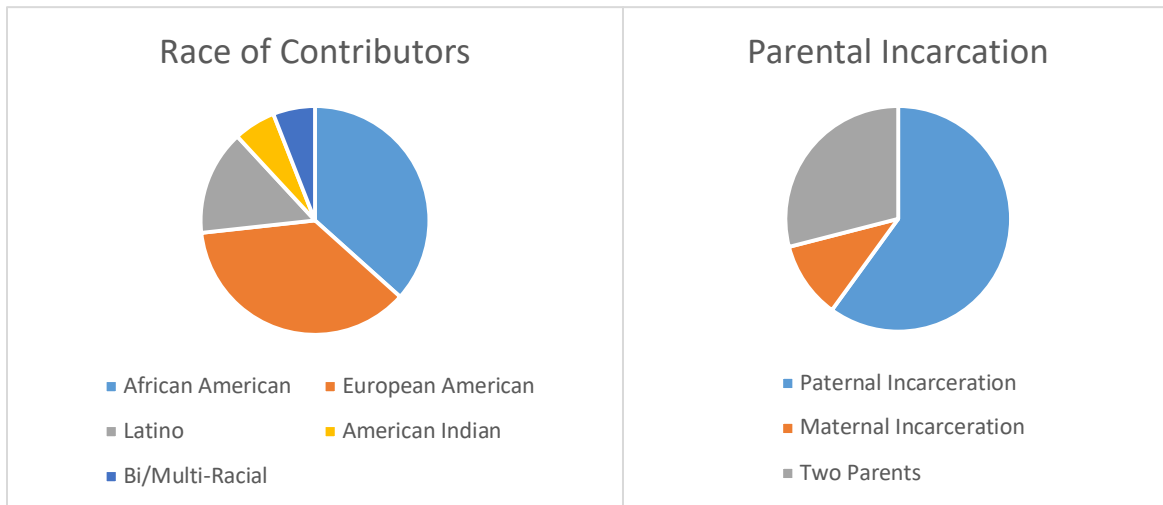
For our narrative analysis, my colleague and I solicited writing through organizations that work with families, posted calls for writing on social media, and mailed calls for writing to prisons and jails. Our starting instruction was open: we said we were editing a book of life stories or reflections by adults who had a parent in jail and/or prison when they were growing up, and we asked people to share their stories with us. When they confirmed their interest, we requested that contributors identify their address, gender, race, age and occupation. We inquired whether they experienced any criminal justice involvement and the status of the incarcerated parent. Contributors had the option to use anonymous names in their reflections, and they sent their writing to us via electronic or regular mail. Those who wrote from prison sometimes wrote to us with pen and paper. In sum, we asked contributors to write about their lives as children of incarcerated parents.

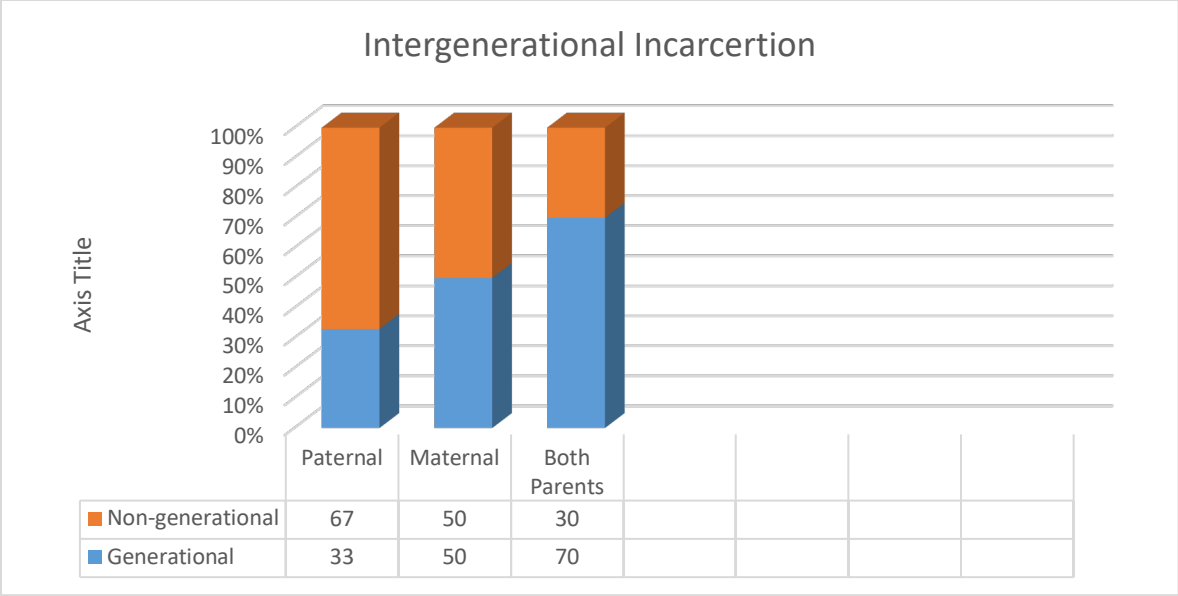
Respondents ranged in age from 18-59. Sixty percent were female and 40 % were male. African American and European Americans each made up 37% of this group; 15% were Latino/a; 6% were American Indian; and 6 % were bi or multi-racial. Sixty-six % were raised in very low-income families. These 35 contributors had 45 incarcerated parents; 60% had a father incarcerated, and 11% had a mother incarcerated. Twenty-nine % had two parents incarcerated. Less than 50% of our contributors reported consistently receiving primary caregiving from their incarcerated parents, and about two-thirds lived at least some of the time with their other birth parent when one parent was incarcerated. The contributors' occupations included retail salesperson, server, teacher, student, nursing assistant, real estate salesperson, television producer, university professor and lawyer. Contributors hailed from every region of the country

but were more plentiful from states with the highest rates of incarceration: California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington. Twelve % were unemployed at the time of their writing, 9% were in residential treatment, and 6% were homeless. Half of the contributors had some criminal justice involvement (79% male; 19% female), and 30% of contributors were incarcerated when they wrote their stories. Intergenerational incarceration occurred in 33% of those who had experienced only paternal incarceration; 50% of those who had experienced only maternal incarceration; and 70% of those who had experienced the incarceration of both parents (Table 1).

Table 1

Contributor Information		
Total number	35	
Age	18-59 years old	
Gender	Female 60%	Male 40%
Percentage Raised in Very-low Income Households	66	





**Findings:**

The 35 contributors provided evidence about their childhood, adolescent and adult relationships, how they were raised, the care and guidance they received, and how they experienced their parents’ criminal justice involvement. For the purpose of this article, their writing revealed the following: parental incarceration is not a monolithic experience for children and varies across generations of prisoners; the gender of the incarcerated parent and the economic status of the family are important variables; children’s experiences of the reentry period also vary.

*Parental incarceration is not a monolithic experience for children or across generations of prisoners*

The experiences of children whose parents are in prison varies across generations of prisoners and in line with available resources. These are some of the reasons not all children experience parental incarceration the same way. History shows that how a nation understands

and punishes crime changes over time. Racial disparities, sentence lengths, and availability of services also change.

A family's access to resources such as housing, food, healthcare and education helps determine a child's outcomes. Economic 'booms or busts', housing access, healthcare options, and state and federal support for education fluctuate across decades and often by year. These differences will lead to children's diverse experiences of parental incarceration and are often unaccounted for when researchers discuss children.

Parents of the oldest contributors to our study were incarcerated prior to the 1970s, when the majority of prisoners were white (Langan 1991) and when people were often imprisoned for theft. The parents of the next generation of our contributors received sentences in the 1970s, during the so-called "War on Drugs" and increased sentencing guidelines. Most of these parents were convicted of drug offenses, and the percentage of prisoners of color increased. The youngest contributors to our study had parents incarcerated during the expansion of the "War on Drugs" in the 1980s and 1990s.

So what do these different historical periods mean for children? As more people of color were incarcerated the communities they came from changed. Their neighborhoods offered fewer resources and greater levels of poverty. Parents convicted of drug-related offenses had higher rates of addictions when resources for drug and alcohol abuse were not readily available, and deinstitutionalization in the 1970s led to fewer services for people with mental illness. More children had parents who were mentally ill and /or abused substances, and these children were concentrated in communities unable to help them. With changes in sentencing laws in the 1990s people received longer sentences (Mauer, M., Nellis, A., Shirmir, S. 2009). Their children spent

longer periods without them, and their communities had larger portions of their inhabitants unavailable for larger swaths of time.

“Betty” (not her real name) is an African American female born in 1959. In our study, she reports that she never knew her father, and that he was in prison for theft. Betty writes, “[My mother] said he was a good man who stole money because we were poor.” Betty’s account is consistent with reports that find that prior to the 1970s more people were incarcerated for crimes related to property or theft (Morsy and Rothstein, 2016).

Betty was one of six children raised by a single mother in the south in the 1960s. She never knew her father and reports that she never missed him. Betty writes that although “Black people had could not get good jobs” during the 1960s her mother worked in domestic service. Betty recounts a relatively satisfying childhood. Toward the end of her narrative, Betty states that her own children are in state care, and that she has abused drugs and been homeless. She reports being sober at the time of her writing, and wonders if her father’s incarceration had any effect on her. “I don’t know if my father’s incarceration affected me. I never saw him, not once,” she states toward the end of her reflection.

A young African American woman whose father is incarcerated more than two decades later than “Betty’s,” Moe-Moe is the child of parents who were addicted to drugs. An analysis of her writing suggests her parents’ drug addiction had the largest impact on Moe-Moe’s outcomes. Moe-Moe writes the following: “My life was hell the second I was conceived. My mother went into premature labor because she was smoking crack.” Abandoned by her mother, Moe-Moe is raised by her father until his drug use escalates. Moe-Moe’s reflections of this period indicate that the choices her drug addicted father made affected her care. Later, her father’s incarceration

would send her into foster care, but by the age of nine Moe-Moe had already been exposed to significant hardships.

First, Moe-Moe's father brought another addict into the home, a woman whose brother abused Moe-Moe: "In addition to my step-mother beating me, and encouraging my dad to use drugs, her brother was also molesting me." Second, because of the father's drug addiction, Moe-Moe and her younger sibling lack safe housing and adequate nutrition. Moe-Moe is also ostracized. Her reflection is worth quoting in full here:

I remember this one day. There wasn't anything in my house to eat and this guy named Chris, a close friend of my dad's, made me some beans. I don't even like beans, but they were all we had. After I ate them, I went outside, and sat down on my porch . . . . My friend came out of her house, and I asked if she wanted to come over. She said, 'My momma won't let me because that's a crack house'.

When she is nine years old, Moe-Moe's father goes to prison for possession of heroin, and she and her brother move into separate foster care placements. Moe-Moe spends the next nine years in foster care. Moe-Moe's reflections underscore how much she loves and misses her father. She laments his drug use and that his incarceration took him away from her. Mostly, however, she wishes that he had been "drug-tested when she was born" and that children did not have to go into foster care.

"Betty" and Moe-Moe were female African Americans who had incarcerated fathers. However, in part because of the different historical periods of their parents' arrests, their circumstances and needs were different. Moe-Moe's father was incarcerated for drug-related activity and subject to the longer sentences doled out as a combination of the "War on Drugs" and tougher sentencing laws (Morsy and Rothstein, 2016). Moe-Moe had two incarcerated parents who abused drugs, and she was placed in foster care. Betty's mother was not incarcerated and was the family's primary care-giver. Although she was poor, she worked, so she had some

resources. Betty is not certain how much her father's incarceration affected her. While Moe-Moe's childhood is altered by her parents' drug use, her father's incarceration is the reason she is sent into foster care. In the final sentences of her reflection, Moe-Moe states that she wants people to know "[children] are not always treated right in other people's care." She sees her negative outcome (foster care) as directly related to her father's incarceration.

#### *Gender and economic class matter*

Researchers believe the gender of the incarcerated parent is an important factor in a child's outcomes. Incarcerated mothers are more likely to have been the primary caregiver of the child; women in jail and prison have more contact with their children than incarcerated fathers; incarcerated mothers are more likely to have experiences and conditions that can adversely affect parenting; and incarcerated fathers are more likely to separate from children for longer periods of time (Arditti, 2012; Gabel and Johnston, 1995).

Despite the above, recent research has found that at least with respect to children's behavior, negative outcomes are due more to the disadvantages children experience prior to the mother's incarceration rather than the incarceration itself (Wideman and Turney, 2014). Our contributors who had an incarcerated mother, especially if she was their primary caregiver, report worse outcomes than did those who had incarcerated fathers. While it is difficult to come to conclusions based on our sample, our contributors' narrators shed important light on the impact of the incarcerated parent's gender on their children.

Our contributors' reflections indicate that children of incarcerated mothers are more likely to become homeless or displaced and to live in unstable conditions after a parent's incarceration. Alisha, an African American woman, recalls returning from school in the sixth grade to a home ransacked by police and replete with the detritus of drugs. Her mother is gone.

Alisha states, “I knew I was going to have to leave the apartment sooner or later . . . . I slept in a park near school so that I wouldn’t be late the next morning.” She is homeless as a direct result of her mother’s incarceration. Initially, Alisha moves from one temporary living situation to another. She later moves into a friend’s house and then s to another state to reside with a sister she barely knows. When her mother leaves prison, Alisha lives in shelters and apartments with her. Ultimately, Alisha finds a stable living arrangement and graduates from a job-training program. However, Alisha’s mother is by then re-incarcerated in another state and is unable to attend her graduation. Rendered homeless as a direct result of her mother’s incarceration, Alisha experiences housing instability for years afterward.

Victoria, another African American child of an incarcerated mother, describes her first separation from her mother. A developmental framework would find that this separation would hinder important infant-parent attachment.

My aunt took me home from the hospital as an infant because my mother was arrested and taken to jail following my birth. She was incarcerated off and on from that point until I graduated college at 22 years of age. Most of her arrest was for charges . . . to support her crack cocaine and heroin habits . . . . While my aunts raised me, my mother would show up occasionally, but her visits were always short and ended in disaster and sometimes emotional trauma.

Victoria does not discuss her relationship with her aunts, but she does view her mother’s visits to her while she is in their care as disruptive. She notes, “She would show up occasionally but her visits were always short and ended in disaster and sometimes emotional trauma . . . .” Although she has vowed to keep her distance from her mother, just after she graduates from college, Victoria returns home because her mother is severely beaten. The mother survives but is unable to care for herself, so her daughter houses and feeds her.

Many researchers find that caretaking is a gendered experience, or that women are more likely to care for sick or aging parents (Revenson, et al., 2016). Despite how disruptive her mother has been in her life, Victoria nevertheless becomes her caregiver.

Research finds that families are economically disadvantaged by a parent's incarceration (Reed and Reed, 1997; Wildeman, 2009). Our contributors' reflections support these findings, especially if their incarcerated parents had been contributing financially to the family. However, our contributors also indicate that with respect to economic turmoil, the time-period when a parent is incarcerated matters.

Shari reports that she grew up in the 1950s as a "middle class Jewish child in Brooklyn, New York." She notes that her father sold furniture and states that when she was 15 he was arrested for embezzling money. Shari reports feeling ashamed of her father's crime, and her narrative recounts her family's precarious financial situation, a situation that was a direct result of his incarceration: "The economic hardships just kept coming. Though we narrowly avoided losing our house, we did lose our car." In Shari's reflections, her mother appears distracted and emotionally affected by her husband's incarceration, but she is able to keep her family together and provide food and shelter. Shari is not uprooted from her home and neighborhood.

Also a European American child of the 1950s and the daughter of a man who embezzled money, Pamela notes, "[After my father was incarcerated] we were immediately plunged into poverty, and my mother went to work." Pamela reports that her mother was emotionally distant and neglectful and that she and her brother suffered as a result.

Life is difficult for Shari and Pamela. Their families struggle emotionally and financially, but their fathers are incarcerated for larceny, not drug use. Thus, the men do not receive the long sentences imposed because of the "War on Drugs" and harsher sentencing guidelines. Shari and

Pamela grown up to earn degrees and have families of their own. Their reflections indicate that as children they would have benefitted from economic assistance; their caregivers would have benefitted from and parenting education and respite opportunities. Unlike Alisha, however, Shari and Pamela did not become homeless, so they would not need immediate housing.

Natalie is a bi-racial woman who has become a successful screenwriter and television producer with grown children of her own. She is at least a generation removed from Shari and Pamela. Her story is important for several reasons. Natalie's mother's incarceration affects the family financially, emotionally, and with respect to Natalie's physical health. However, because the family lives with Natalie's maternal grandmother, Natalie and her younger sister do not become homeless. Although she does not indicate her father's employment, Natalie reports her mother worked as a physician before her addiction caused legal/financial trouble for the family. She also indicates that her parents were educated and encouraged Natalie's academic success.

Natalie reports feeling "completely humiliated" by her mother's arrest, and her narrative suggests she is angry at the drug abuse, financial problems and dysfunction in her home. However, she clarifies that the financial effects of her mother's legal trouble and later incarceration are paramount. Natalie's discussion of the financial hardship her family endured and the physical and emotional effects on her are worth quoting in full here:

The financial blowback from my mom's arrest was even worse. Within a year, we had no car and no home phone. All our money was going to legal bills and my mom's on-going addiction. I developed bulimia during high school, no doubt a result of all the family stress. I had terrible cavities because I was throwing up all the time, and yet no one took me to the dentist. I remember a few nights literally banging my head against the wall in pain to try and help me sleep.

Natalie's family may well have benefited from social services such as addiction treatment and family counseling. Natalie needed someone to address her medical/dental needs, and her family was clearly in financial distress.

Born in the 1970s to inexperienced teenagers who separate early, Cliff's reflection provides additional information on how a parent's gender and a family's economic circumstances can affect a child's outcome. Because Cliff is both the adult child of an incarcerated parent and an incarcerated adult, his reflections also provide insight into intergenerational incarceration.

His mother and her abusive and drug-involved partners raise Cliff. The man Cliff considers a father-figure is frequently incarcerated and drug addicted. Cliff notes that the family "sometimes had no money for food or school supplies," and that his life was "incredibly unstable . . . a lot of moving around, house to house and school to school." Cliff states, "By the time I was 15, I had completely quit school, become a full-time [Methamphetamine] user, and frequently carried a gun." Cliff is arrested several times, and he sent us his reflection from prison. Cliff's family is poor, and while his stepfather's incarceration does not help, they are not poor *because* of this incarceration. While the research on the relationship between economic hardship and parental incarceration is borne out by Cliff's reflections, he and his family encounter other problems that seem at least or even more detrimental to Cliff than the economic difficulties that ensued when the stepfather was incarcerated. Cliff's family would have benefitted from more robust social service and community supports throughout his childhood as well as addiction counseling. Had his mother received parenting assistance, Cliff's life may have been safer. Finally, an understanding of intergenerational incarceration that is informed by a developmental framework could help us better understand Cliff's outcomes.

Table 1 provides data on our contributors. Among this data is an acknowledgement that some of our contributors are or have been incarcerated. While our study does not locate specific mechanisms for intergenerational incarceration, it does find that those contributors with two

parents in prison or jail are more likely to experience incarceration as well. A helpful model for understanding intergenerational incarceration is one informed by a developmental framework. Gable and Johnston (1995) argue that children exposed to trauma, which can include parent-child separation, produce an emotional response that when not addressed can lead to maladaptive behavior. This behavior becomes a pattern of behavior that may lead to crime. A developmental perspective on intergenerational incarceration would suggest that for some children their exposure to parental incarceration and/or other traumatic experiences could lead them to adopt behaviors and patterns that become criminal activity or criminal justice involvement. This seems plausible in Cliff's case.

*Families' reentry stories are variable*

Because research usually takes an "adult-oriented" perspective, or because it focuses on the period when the parent is incarcerated rather than on the child's life course, it often implicitly suggests that children will fare better when their parents are released. While this may be true for some children and families, others do not find solace or reunification during the re-entry process. Research has begun to tease out why this is so.

As has been documented formerly incarcerated people face a myriad of hurdles when they are released from prison or jail (Travis, Solomon, and Waul 2001; Travis and Visser 2005). A recent report finds that at least one of these hurdles has a direct impact on children. In "Formerly-Incarcerated Parents and Their Children" (2017) Bruce Western and Natalie Smith find that "housing imposes a hard material constraint on the levels of contact between children and parents after incarceration." Using data from the Boston Reentry Study, Western and Smith find that parents who are unstably housed after release from prison or jail have far less contact with their children than do those people who have secure housing. If a formerly incarcerated

parent has stable housing, then he will be more likely to remain in contact with his child. As Western and Smith (2017) state “stable private housing appears to be a special type of resource for promoting parent-child connections.” Alisha’s reflections earlier in this article support these findings.

In part because researchers take an adult-oriented perspective, and in part because family support is associated with better reentry outcomes (Hairston 2002a; Visser and Travis 2004), policy makers and others have tried to engage families in the reentry process (diZerega and Shapiro 2007). Often, however, these efforts are unsuccessful. *Families and Reentry: Unpacking How Social Support Matters*, an Urban Institute report authored by Jocelyn Fontaine, Douglas Gilchrist Scott, Megan Denver, and Shelli B. Rossman (2012), analyzes one program’s attempts to involve families in the reentry process. The authors conclude that families have a very difficult and variable experience of reentry. For one thing, a family’s level of commitment and emotional connection ebbs and flows during a parent’s incarceration, surges when the parent leaves prison, and then dips down again. The report finds the same trajectory with respect to communication between the formerly incarcerated person and his family.

One contributor to our study supports these findings, especially with respect to communication. She articulates her feelings well: “[Since his release] my father and I struggle with how to fit into each other’s lives . . . . Although he lives only 15 minutes away, I haven’t seen him for years . . . I suppose it’s easy enough to talk for two hours during a prison visit, but when you have to make an effort to be involved in someone’s life, that isn’t as easy.”

## **Conclusion:**

In *Invisible No More: Children of Incarcerated Parents in Latin America and the Caribbean* Saavedra et al. (2003) argue for national registries of children of prisoners. When they interview child protection practitioners and judicial experts, the authors of *Invisible No More* uncover what they call the “adult-centric” character of justice and penal systems. Adult-centric approaches fail to consider children of prisoners and their rights. Although Saavedra et al. are discussing Latin America and the Caribbean their findings are relevant in the North American context. Part of the reason researchers do not understand *exactly* how a child is impacted by parental incarceration is because they all too often employ an “adult-centric” model. A developmental framework can help researchers uncover a more child-centric approach. Attention to factors such as the historic period of a parent’s incarceration, the gender of the parent and the family’s economic class, as well as the variable experience of reentry for children can provide greater insight into children’s experience.

One way to take a more adult-centric model is to treat children of incarcerated parents as we do other “multi-risk” youths: identify them early. Children whose parents are involved with the criminal justice system – through either incarceration, parole, arrest, or other kinds of supervision -- should be identified early in order to receive the most effective services. We know children with many adverse childhood experiences are more at-risk for developmental and other problems (Horan and Widom, 2015). If we target children when their parents are initially involved in the criminal justice system, then we may be able to help them (Turney, 2017). While we cannot know for sure what would have happened if Cliff, one of our study’s contributors, had been identified early in his stepfather’s arrest history, it is possible that he could have been helped. Similarly, Alisha’s life may have turned out the same way had she had support from

social services, but certainly she would not have been immediately homeless if police had been taught, as they are in some states, to inquire about children when they arrest a person. In *The Unequal Consequences of Mass Incarceration for Children*, Turney (2017) notes that most researchers have examined the “average” intergenerational consequences of parental incarceration and ignored the various ways incarceration affects children. The study under discussion in this article suggests researchers should seek to uncover the various ways parental incarceration affects children.

Two of our study’s incarcerated male contributors wish they had been identified and assisted when their mothers were incarcerated, if not earlier. One states, “After my mom completed jail and rehab, a social worker brought us kids back to the same house and the same room where we’d found our mom [overdosed] nine months previously. It still hurts me to think that the court let our mom have custody of us again.” Another laments, “I watched my mother be continually apprehended by Milwaukee police officers . . . since I couldn’t find the unconditional love bouncing from different homes while my mother seesawed through the Milwaukee County Jail doors, I found comfort with the hooligans in the streets.” Both of these male contributors had mothers who cycled throughout jails. There was time and opportunity for those who work in corrections and/or social services to ask about children and to intervene appropriately. The stakes of such intervention are high; both of the aforementioned males became incarcerated as adults.

When we ask adults to reflect on how they experience their parents’ incarceration, we learn more about the myriad effects of parental incarceration on children and throughout their life course. If we only attend to or study children when their parents are incarcerated then we do not gain a true picture of how children’s entire lives and outcomes may be impacted. When we assume all children will suffer in the same way when a parent is incarcerated, we fail to consider

how variables such as gender, economic status, historical periods and reentry influence the obstacles and opportunities children face. A qualitative approach that takes a developmental perspective and asks adults to reflect on their experiences provides much needed information on how children may fare before, during and after a parent's incarceration.

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