EXPLORING THE SILENCE AMONG CHILDREN OF PRISONERS: 
A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

EXPLORING THE SILENCE AMONG CHILDREN OF PRISONERS:
A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

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The current incarceration rate is at an historic high, with more than 1 in every 100 adults serving time in Federal and State prisons (Pew Center on the States, 2010). With more than half of all incarcerated adults in the United States being parents, many children are directly affected by parental incarceration. Research on children of incarcerated parents provides limited information resulting in few services responding to their needs (Bernstein, 2005; Eddy and Poehlmann, 2010; Henriques, 1982; Johnston, 1995; McGowan and Blumenthal, 1978; Muhammad, 2008, 2009; Pew Center on the States, 2008; 2010; Phillips, 2010). Although the U.S. government’s criminal justice data collection agency, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, has provided national estimates of children affected by parental incarceration, the actual complex nature of the problem remains unclear. To respond to these lack of data, researchers have investigated children of the incarcerated by talking to their parents, caregivers and family members.

Although 1 in every 28 children has an incarcerated parent (Pew Center on the States, 2010), few studies have directly focused on children. This absence has resulted in a limited understanding of their circumstances. Therefore, this qualitative dissertation explored the experiences and perceptions of young urban children of the incarcerated through semi-structured interviews. These data were collected from a sample of 57 child
participants, aged 7-18 years, who resided in New Jersey and who were recruited from a local community organization.

The findings indicate that children’s experiences are often different than what others describe them to be. Respondents described both negative and positive effects of parental imprisonment. Among the negative consequences was enforced and voluntary silence regarding their parents, the use of drugs and alcohol to cope with parental incarceration, and uncertainty in changing homes and schools. Among the positive experiences were comfort in their foster care placements and with their grandparents, new opportunities in new schools, and improved communication with their incarcerated parent. These findings have implications for programs and policy related to the well-being of children and their families affected by parental incarceration.
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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my first born,
Jaelah-Millah
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CHAPTER 1

PRISONERS’ CHILDREN’S PERSPECTIVES

SILENCE AND PARENTAL INCARCERATION

Many incarcerated parents and caregivers feel that children keep information about parental incarceration and their feelings about their experiences concealed from everyone (Hagen & Myers, 2003). In some instances, their caregivers and parents warn them against speaking about their family members’ incarceration (Chaney, Linkenhoker, Horne, 1977; Gabel, 1992; Johnston, 1995; Sack et al., 1976). Some caregivers feel that keeping children silent about their parent’s incarceration and acting as though it never happened will help them to forget that their parents are incarcerated. Some refer to this suppression of information as the “conspiracy of silence” (Kampfer, 1995) or “forced silence” (Johnston, 1995b). However, this forced silence produces fear of disclosure in children, limiting personal and professional support (Kampfner, 1995).

Children of prisoners are also silenced by deception when their caretakers try to protect them by avoiding the truth about the whereabouts of their parent (Gabel, 1992). Sometimes children are told that their parents are away at school, working far away, in the military, or in the hospital (Adalist-Estrin, 2005). This is not done necessarily to hurt these children, but to alleviate some of the stress that the caregivers feel they may encounter by knowing that their parents are incarcerated. The incarcerated parent may also request that the caregiver not tell the child/children about his/her situation. Caregivers also deceive children because they do not know how to explain the situation to the child or feel that the child is too young to know the truth (Johnston, 1995b). For
example, these children will not attend visiting sessions at the correctional institution, they will not be aware of where their parents are, and they will not have an opinion on their unknown situation.

Goffman (1974) defines stigma in terms of ‘deeply discrediting’ characteristics that prevent one from being socially accepted and this stigma motivates those stigmatized to hide the mark whenever possible (pg. 1). This framework can be applied to children marked by their parent’s incarceration. The social stigma attached to incarceration encourages families to conceal their situation and view it as being problematic. Families who have incarcerated family members are often stigmatized (Braman, 2002; Clear, 2003; Richie, 2002). For example, sometimes members within families disassociate themselves from their incarcerated relative. Researchers have discovered that people are less likely to disclose a problem that has a stigma attached (Hagen & Myers, 2003). Children may remain silent and hide their situation to avoid obtaining a “courtesy stigma” (Goffman, 1974) also known as “stigma by association” (Neuberg, Smith, Hoffman, and Russell, 1994). That is, they may wish to refrain from being stigmatized themselves because of the association with a criminal offender parent.

Children of incarcerated parents are frequently harmed by this kind of social stigma. Hairston (1998) discussed the fear among children experiencing paternal incarceration of not being allowed to play with other children in the community because of their father’s incarceration. In addition, Mazza (2002) provided a narrative about a young girl who was prohibited by her parents from playing with her best friend after she disclosed that her father was in prison. Similarly, Boswell (2002) identified a young boy who was bullied and called malicious names by other students in school because of his
father’s imprisonment. Children of the incarcerated, such as those mentioned above, are subjected to ostracism and even discrimination because of their parents’ incarceration (Braman, 2004; Fishman, 1990).

The current state of knowledge on children of incarcerated parents is missing the voices of children. Research collected through studies of incarcerated parents and caregivers speak on behalf of the children, discussing the negative experiences they face as a result of having a mother and/or father in prison (Braman, 2004; Fishman, 1990; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; McGowan & Blumenthal, 1978). Family members give voice to the children by providing information on the process and hardships of maintaining the ties that bond incarcerated parents to their children (Christian, 2005; Christian, Mellow & Thomas, 2006; Nurse, 2002). In addition, advocacy and community organizations voice the need for programs and policies to help children during this experience (San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, 2005; Juvocy, 2003; Seymour & Hairston, 2001). Although these voices that have been heard through individuals who speak on behalf of children have allowed insight into the issues that these children face, they fail to provide the voices and opinions of the children themselves.
INTRODUCTION OF THE PROBLEM

Absence of research on children's circumstances during parental incarceration from their perspective constitutes an overall sense of silence. This silence creates methodological problems for researchers’. The methodological problem includes researchers’ limited ability to interview children. On the surface this may seem to be easily remedied by merely interviewing children, but it is not that simple. In fact, children of the incarcerated are not an easy population to track, obtain access to and/or interview. The methodological difficulties may be a result of this population’s status as unidentified, under-researched, unsupported and unmonitored (Murray, 2007; Pew Center on the States, 2010). As early as 1978, McGowan and Blumenthal (1978) stated, “we can only estimate the actual number of children of prisoners because they have been overlooked statistically, as well as, in every other way” (p. 5). Today in 2010, this statement still holds true (Bernstein, 2005; Johnston, 2006; Murray & Farrington, 2006; Murray & Farrington, 2008). Most information on prisoners’ children is derived from surveys of their parents. Very few studies have directly examined the children themselves (Johnston, 2005; Travis, 2005). Most of the research on prisoners’ children focuses on their problems and have not attempted to create a rounded picture of their lives. In response, this study explored children’s circumstances during their parent's incarceration.

The focus of this study was to explore children’s experiences during parental incarceration as a means of describing child circumstances. The research data was used to answer two main research questions:
(1). *What do children experience during parental incarceration?*

(2). *What are the circumstances under which children deal with parental incarceration?*

Prisoners’ children’s perspectives are important because they provide insight into their experiences and circumstances that we know very little about. Their perspectives, coupled with the perspectives of their parent and caregiver have the potential of depicting a well-rounded picture of their lives (Johnston, 1995).

To date, professionals depend on prior research about children of incarcerated parents to construct programs and policies for them. Limited information has been gained from prior studies about child demographics, experiences and living situations and negative and positive perceptions. The paucity of programs and policies that reflect children’s circumstances and experiences may be due largely to the lack of information.

In the sections to follow, the literature review is divided into three main topic areas, including background data about incarceration in the United States, incarcerated parents and their children, and children of the incarcerated. This final section including data on children of the incarcerated is divided into three categories including: descriptive information, experiences/living situations and perceptions/negative and positive.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

INCARCERATION IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States has experienced significant prison growth in the last few decades (Bonczar, 2003; Frost, Greene & Pranis, 2006). To date, 1 in every 100 adults is behind bars in the U.S. (Pew Center on the States, 2010). Overall, 1,446,269 individuals were residing in federal or state adult correctional facilities throughout the nation in 2005 (Harrison & Beck, 2006). In the most recent Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin on prisoners, Sabol, Couture and Harrison (2007) describe the state prison population growth rate (2.8 %) in 2006 as being faster than the rate (1.5 %) from yearend 2001 through 2005. This growth is not expected to decline in the near future: for example, it is predicted that in 2010, “1 in every 29 adults is expected to have served time in prison” (Bonczar, 2003, p.7).

As the number of offenders sentenced to prison increases, so do the numbers of communities, families and children affected by the unintended consequences of incarceration (Bernstein, 2005; Braman, 2004; Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006; Clear, 2007, 1996; Fishman, 1990; Gabel; 1992; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Mackintosh, Myers & Kennon, 2006; McGowan & Blumenthal, 1978; Meek, 2007; Nurse, 2002; Travis, Cincotta, & Solomon, 2003; Travis & Waul, 2003; Western, 2006). Incarceration is intended to punish, incapacitate, deter, and/or rehabilitate the offender, but it is not intended to punish the communities, families and/or children of offenders. Not all communities are impacted equally by incarceration. In fact, there are certain core
communities, that are struggling with high rates of poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, single-parent households, teenage pregnancy, and adult and juvenile crime and are further burdened by large numbers of incarcerated and returning offenders (Rose & Clear, 1998; Travis, Cincotta, & Solomon, 2003).

**DATA ON INCARCERATED PARENTS**

The majority of both state (52%) and federal (63%) prisoners in the United States are parents (Maruschak, Glaze, & Mumola, 2010). The first national survey on parental incarceration was conducted in 1997 by the U.S. Department of Justice and considered the “most valuable” government investigation on maternal and paternal imprisonment (Johnston, 2006, p. 706). This federal and state investigation characterized most parents as being African-American (49%); never married (48%); having minor children under 18 (55%); violent offenders (44%) or drug traffickers (13%); using drugs in the month before their offense (60%); having prior histories of conviction and incarceration (77%); and never having a personal visit with their children during their incarceration (57%) (Mumola, 2000). Many inmate parents have experienced various traumatic events, such as childhood and adult physical and sexual abuse; multiple health problems; marital difficulties; single parenthood; neglect and separations from their own parents; parental substance and/or alcohol abuse; unemployment; and violence in their homes and communities (Gabel & Johnston, 1995; Gabel & Shindledecker, 1993; Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002; Murray, 2007; Reed & Reed, 1997; Western, 2004).

The majority of incarcerated parents are fathers (Mumola, 2000). The absolute number of incarcerated mothers is much lower than fathers largely due to the differences
in population size between incarcerated women and men generally. However, women represent the fastest growing segment of the U.S. prison population (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Frost, Greene, & Pranis, 2006; Harrison & Beck, 2006; Sabol, Couture, & Harrison, 2007; Snell, 1994). The median age of parents in state correctional facilities is 32 years (Mumola, 2000). Male inmates have been reported to be older than female inmates in state correctional facilities. Female prisoners are usually under the age of 25 years, while male prisoners are between 20 and 35 years (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). Incarcerated mothers are less likely to have been married or divorced than incarcerated fathers (Johnston, 1995). The majority of drug-using mothers reported crack-cocaine as their drug of choice, while fathers reported marijuana or hash. Indeed, when compared to inmate fathers, mothers had more drug-using histories, reported drug use in the month prior to their offense, were more likely to be under the influence of drugs during the commission of their crime, and reported committing the crime to obtain drugs or money for drugs, than inmate fathers (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002; Mumola, 2000).

Incarcerated mothers reported more physical and sexual abuse histories than fathers (Bloom, 1995). Fathers were more likely to be convicted of violent offenses, while the majority of mothers were convicted of drug offenses. The average maximum sentence length for mothers was seven years; five years shorter than the average sentence length (12 years) for fathers (Hairston, 1995; Mumola, 2000).

Furthermore, inmate fathers are more likely to be rearrested and re-incarcerated than inmate mothers. Mothers were more likely than fathers to report living with their children in a single-parent household (consisting of parent and children only) one-month prior to incarceration. Therefore, the most common living arrangement for children
whose mothers are incarcerated is with a grandparent (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; McGowan & Blumenthal, 1978). During paternal incarceration, the majority of children were placed with their natural mother or stepmother (Bernstein, 2005; Johnston, 1995; Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). Mothers were less likely than fathers to be satisfied with their children’s placement during their incarceration (Johnston, 1995). A greater percentage of mothers reported weekly correspondence with children through mail and calls, compared to fathers. Even though both parents reported at least weekly contact with children, the majority of parents had never received a personal visit from their children. This may be attributed to the fact that most parents are incarcerated in facilities 101-500 miles from their last place of residence (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002; Mumola, 2000).

During separation from children due to incarceration, parents worry about their children, but mothers and fathers voice different concerns. For example, fathers identified concerns about discipline and lack of guidance or supervision to keep their children from getting into trouble. They also report concern about being replaced, losing their children’s respect, and being forgotten (Dyer, 2005; Hairston, 2001; Johnston, 1995; Roy, 2005; Roy & Dyson, 2005). Mothers, on the contrary, report concerns that focus on their children’s future. For example, mothers voice concern about reunification with their children upon reentry, day-to-day nutrition and adequate care, and safety from sexual and physical abuse at the hands of their care provider (Bloom, 1995; Enos, 2001; Johnston, 1995; McCarthy, 1980; Poehlmann, 2005).
DATA ON CHILDREN OF THE INCARCERATED

Descriptive Information

There is almost no information about children of the incarcerated unrelated to their parents incarceration (Johnston, 1995; Murray, 2007). Information describing these children has been limited to characteristics connecting them to their parents. For example, children’s experiences have been discussed in terms of maternal (Hagen & Myers, 2003; Henriques, 1982; Stanton, 1980) or paternal (Gabel, 1992; Murray, 2007) incarceration. Researchers have used demographic information about parents (e.g., level of education, income, history of substance abuse, length of sentence, lived with child prior to incarceration) to begin to tell the story about the lives of those children they left behind during imprisonment. This information does not, however, provide complete descriptive information about their children. It only begins to tell their story (Bernstein, 2005; Travis, 2005).

Experiences

The majority of data on children of the incarcerated is about their negative experiences (Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Johnston, 1995; Mumola, 2000; Norman, 1995; Phillips et al. 2006). These many consequences of parental incarceration fall into three types of effects: (1) changes in physical environment, (2) psychological and health consequences, and (3) behavioral responses. Understanding the effects of parental incarceration on a child is very complex because outcomes are entangled in a variety factors, including child’s age, gender, parent’s custodial sentence and crime, previous
experience with parent-child separations, mode of emotional response, witnessing parental crime and/or arrest, frequency and quality of parent-child contact, child’s relationship with current caregiver, availability of family support, community and school support, and the degree of stigma that family, school and peers associate with incarceration (Gaudin & Sutphen, 1993; McGowan & Blumenthal, 1978; Seymour, 1998). In other words, the totality of a child’s life circumstances and experiences play a role in how they may be affected by parental imprisonment.

Furthermore, according to Phillips et al. (2006) the degree to which a child is impacted may also be determined by the following variables, including, but not limited to, parent/caregiver involvement in criminal justice system, parent/caregiver risk characteristics (characterized by parental substance abuse, mental health problems and/or status as high school drop out); and exposure to family risks.

Parental incarceration has an immediate effect of physical distance between children and their parents. Subsequently, the unavoidable result for the children is a “sentence” of enforced separation (Boswell, 2002; Ramsden, 1998). On average, children of parents incarcerated in state prisons are physically separated for approximately three years, while those parents in federal prisons are expected to spend about four years away from their children. During these years of separation from their parents, children experience many things that the research has just begun to address. Obtaining information on children’s experiences of parental incarceration from parents who do not have direct contact with their children may be incorrect or misleading (Johnston, 1995).
Forced separation from a parent can also result in positive effects in the child’s life; especially when a parent is found to be abusive to the children. Separation of a parent from a child in the case of identified maltreatment can be a protective factor for the child against further abuse and/or neglect. Norman (1995) found the majority of abused and/or neglected children of prisoners are brought to the attention of child welfare services because they have no place for their child to reside during their incarceration. Mumola (2000) found that more imprisoned mothers have children in foster care (10%), compared to fathers (2%). Prisoners, who commit crimes against their own children or other children, provide an obvious example of the possible, positive effects of parental incarceration. However, few studies discuss the positive effects of parental imprisonment on children. While some studies have focused on positive aspects of imprisonment for incarcerated parents, specifically time away from crime to think and plan for a positive change upon return home (see, for example, Nurse, 2002), similar studies have yet to be conducted.

Johnston (1995) identified three factors that affect the normal development of children with incarcerated parents: (1) parent-child separation, (2) enduring traumatic stress, and (3) inadequate quality of care. These factors affect children in very specific ways. Often children internalize (i.e., their reactions). Children may experience problems with their sleep patterns including wetting the bed and nightmares, as well as have problems with lack of concentration, feelings of sadness, and mood swings (Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Johnston, 1995). Children are often traumatized by separation. They internalize their feelings and worry of abandonment or fear of never seeing their parent again (Beatty, 1997). This is especially true among young children experiencing parental
imprisonment. These feelings and beliefs often lead to a lack of trust and attachment issues. Wright and Seymour (2000) state, “reactions include such things as inability to form later attachments, woebegone searching, numbing, self-blame, depression, regression, and antisocial behaviors” (p.18). The children also worry that the remaining parent or caregiver will also disappear or that the parent or caregiver cannot protect them or prevent other bad things from happening (Beatty, 1997). A recent study conducted by Murray and Farrington (2008) found that males’ experience of parental imprisonment predicts internalizing antisocial problems throughout their life course.

Children who had witnessed parental crime, arrest and incarceration tend to hold negative attitudes toward law enforcement and the criminal justice system (Johnston, 1995). This is serious because it can lead to disobedience of authority, which can place these children at risk of being on the wrong side of the law. This and other intergenerational trends pose serious threats to children’s futures. Greene, Haney, and Hurtado (2000) found in their study on the lives of incarcerated mothers and their children that the pain and violence which the mothers were exposed are being “replicated in the lives of their children” (p.16). They also suggest that children’s exposure to risk factors such as familial instability, physical abuse, violence and drugs makes it more likely they will follow adaptive patterns similar to their mothers’ ones, increasing the chances that they too will end up in jail (Greene, Haney, & Hurtado, 2000). The effects of parental incarceration on children are interwoven in a net of family, community and individual factors that have yet to be disentangled. In fact, Phillip et al. (2006) and Murray and Farrington (2005) discuss the difficulties in attributing effects to parental incarceration rather than to other risks present in the parent’s life, the child’s family
and/or community. What the children experience during the parent’s incarceration can have just as much, if not more, of an effect on the children.

In addition to internalized problems, children may externalize their pain in reaction to parental incarceration and exhibit aggressive behaviors that lead to a host of other problems (Reed & Reed, 1997). These children may act out inappropriately, become disruptive in the classroom, and perform poorly in their schoolwork (Gabel, 1992). In such instances, the behaviors of the child can develop into prolonged and serious problems. Some children become uncontrollable, especially in the case of grandsons in the care of their grandmothers (Hanlon, Carswell & Rose, 2007). It is hard for older caregivers to provide the level of needed supervision to keep behaviorally challenged young men under control, and a child’s behavioral problems can affect his/her caregiver’s level of stress (Mackintosh, Myer & Kennon, 2006; Young & Smith, 2000).

Behavioral problems are seen among male and female children. However most of the research focuses on male behavioral issues (Gabel, 1992) and there is a lack of research literature on behavioral problems among girls (Murray, Janson & Farrington, 2007). Nevertheless, research on teenage girls sheds light on some gendered factors, specifically their risky sexual behaviors. For example, a large percentage of teenage girls in Jose-Kampfner’s (1995) study became mothers shortly following their mothers’ imprisonment.

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW AND GAPS

A great deal is known about incarcerated parents but very little about their children. The majority of information known about children of the incarcerated has been
obtained from their parents about experiences directly related to parental incarceration. According to incarcerated parents the lives of their children are plagued by a host of negative experiences. These experiences can be grouped into three categories related to changes in physical environment, psychological and health consequences, and behavioral responses. The current picture painted about these children is dim and limited.

The limited information about children of the incarcerated has left researchers with barely any insight into the children’s life circumstances and perceptions. Who are these children? How do they spend their time? What do they enjoy doing in their spare time? This information may help to paint a well-rounded picture of the lives of these children. To date, there is only one side of the story that continues to be told. The state of current research leads one to assume that these children spend the majority of their time experiencing negative situations that revolve around their parent being in prison. For example, children are traumatized by separation from their incarcerated parents and experience difficulties with sleeping, concentrating, making new friends and trusting (Bernstein, 2005; Hagan & Myers, 2003). This has been clearly stated and repeated in the findings of many studies done on this population of children. Talking to parents and caregivers has allowed many of the negative experiences of the children to surface without providing much about the children’s positive experiences. Do children of the incarcerated have positive experiences during their parent’s imprisonment?

Another gap in the literature is the details related to these negative situations. For example, children of imprisoned parents are stigmatized, blamed and ridiculed (Johnston, 1995). What is barely discussed is the context in which such situations occur. Again, parents have provided a lot of information about their children’s experiences with
parental incarceration without contextual backing. Context is important when discussing children. Children are the world they live in. What they experience day-to-day shapes who they are and who they will become. It is not enough to know their experiences without the details provided by contextual information and their perceptions of such experiences. Children are very different from adults. They have their own perceptions and feelings. With that in mind, this study explored the perceptions and experiences of children of incarcerated parents.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

PILOT STUDY

A pilot study was conducted prior to the current study because it laid the foundation for the study at hand. During this preliminary study, the researcher designed and tested a semi-structured survey instrument that was later used to gather information for the current dissertation, adding to prior studies’ methodologies of interviewing incarcerated parents and/or caregivers to gather information about the children of prisoners. The pilot study also proved to be an invaluable tool for devising a methodology for gaining access to children of the incarcerated. A successful methodology was vital to exploring the current study because children of incarcerated parents are a “hidden population” (Muhammad, 2007). At this time, there is no federal or state agency responsible for keeping track of this population, making it difficult to find, track or access them. Finally, the pilot study also provided the researcher with “hands on” experience of what to expect during the current study.

DESIGN OF DISSERTATION STUDY

Rationale for Research Methods

This study relied on qualitative research methods to collect interview and observational data. According to Creswell (1998), research questions that ask about the “how” or the “what” of an experience call for qualitative methods:
In a qualitative study, the research question often starts with a *how* or *what* so that initial forays into the topic describe what is going on. This is in contrast to quantitative questions that ask *why* and look for a comparison of groups (e.g., Is Group 1 better at something than Group 2?) or a relationship between variables, with the intent of establishing an association, relationship, or cause and effect (e.g., Did Variable X explain what happened in Variable Y?) (p. 17).

Furthermore, qualitative research methods are often used when the researcher wants to gain personal perspectives from the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). These viewpoints would be difficult to gather by employing only quantitative methods, because the participants would not have the opportunity to explain their perspectives. Marshall and Rossman (1999) state, “increasingly, there are calls for including children’s perspectives as relevant and insightful in learning more about aspects of their worlds” (p. 115).

*Data Collection*

The interviews elicited personal narratives of children’s perspectives and experiences. This was accomplished through a set of semi-structured questions with open-ended responses and probes. The interview protocol was structured under the lessons learned during the pilot study and Patton’s (1990) and Spradley’s (1979) successful guidelines where questions are asked for information on *action, behavior, or ways of doing*, rather than *why* something is done. All questions were constructed to allow the child to be the sole narrator of behaviors, experiences, opinions, values, feelings, knowledge, and explanations.

Interview sessions were tape-recorded so that the research could capture the respondent’s answers in a conversational manner (Spradley, 1979). The researcher used
this strategy to allow the interview to be similar to a conversation. The current study attempted to gain insight into child experiences and perceptions of parental incarceration by allowing them to openly discuss their situational truths.

**Organization Selection**

In 2003, President Bush in his State of the Union address announced a three-year initiative for mentoring children of prisoners programs. In 2004, the initiative announced a pool of renewal funds totaling $45.6 million. In 2005, the researcher obtained a list of all funded agencies and organizations in New Jersey, which were then contacted for their voluntary participation in the current dissertation study. This study focused on five organizations located throughout New Jersey. Organizations in New Jersey were chosen because of the researchers’ accessibility to these locations. For the duration of the dissertation study, the researcher resided in Newark (8/2004 - present) and Vineland, New Jersey (7/2006-8/2006). The five participating organizations provided the following:

a). Access to information and data files collected on the children in their programs, and

b). Contact information for parents, guardians, and/or caregivers for their consent to seek child assent for face-to-face interviews, which lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Study organizations consisted of five New Jersey nonprofits that provided services to children of prisoners. The Youth Consultation Service, Inc. (Newark) provided mentoring services to children of the incarcerated living in Essex County. The Girl Scouts of Rolling Hills Council (North Branch) provided children monthly
transportation to and from the prison for visits and peer group weekend activities. The Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Salem and Cumberland County (Vineland, Bridgeton, Salem) provided children services under Amachi: Mentoring Children of Prisoners Program. Redeem- Her, an organization in New Jersey not provided federal funding under the grant, also volunteered to participate in the study. Redeem- Her provided services to incarcerated mothers reentering back into their families and communities. Newark Now (Newark) similar to Redeem –Her also lacked funding from the above grant but volunteered to participate. They provided services to families of the incarcerated living in low-income housing projects. Both Redeem-Her and Newark Now are community organizations that were not solely geared toward providing services for children of prisoners.

The criteria for organization selection was threefold: (1) organizations had to offer services/programs to children of prisoners, (2) must have been located in New Jersey, and (3) must have maintained filed/stored information on children served by their organization. These general criteria were set because this dissertation study focuses specifically on children. Since this study employs an exploratory ethnographic design, knowledge of the location of the children was key, and organizations that serve them and collect information on their whereabouts were vital. Being given residential information (home address, city, state, zip-code, home phone number, caregiver-child relationship), parental information (parent incarcerated, name of correctional facility) and descriptive information (age, gender, race, grade, ect.) allowed the researcher access and entrance into the lives of the research subjects.
Starting with organizations servicing the target population was used as a way to gain entry into the community. Community organizations provided the researcher an “open door” to the children and families they served, as well as an understanding of the city in which their organization was located.

Setting

After organizations agreed to participate, the researcher worked closely with each organization to examine data elements that they collected about the children in their programs. For the duration of the study, the researcher spent many hours at the organization sites. Although every organization collected information about the children, each organization stored the data differently. For example, The YCS-Mentoring Children of Prisoners Program, and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Salem, Newark Now, and Cumberland County-Mentoring Children of Prisoners Program kept paper files on all children and mentors. For these two organizations the researcher analyzed every file for all the children in both programs. On the other hand, The Girls Scouts Beyond Bars Program stored their information in an excel database that was updated every year. This information was made available electronically to the researcher.

Because of the use of this internet accessible database, the researcher was not required to spend time searching through files/folders of information. Although this made things easier for the researcher, it did not provide as much detail or insight into the children’s lives as going through the individual files. Furthermore, Redeem-Her kept
limited information about the children, because their organizational mission revolved
around serving formerly incarcerated parents. All participating organizations allowed the
researcher to collect descriptive, residential and parental information.

**Sample Selection**

The researcher constructed a master list of all the children who were being served
through the five organizations. The list was then used to randomly select 20 children
from each site, which resulted in a total of 100 selected children. Of the selected subjects
a total of 57 children were interviewed for the study. The 43 children not interviewed
were under the age requirement, had interview scheduling difficulties, were no longer
residing at residence on file, and/or had no home telephone. Table 3.3, depicted below,
shows how many children participated from each organization.

**Table 3.3. Breakdown of Children by Community Organization**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizations</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth Consultation Services</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>(21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Brothers Big Sisters</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>(16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl Scouts Beyond Bars</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>(11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redeem-Her</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newark Now- Family Success Centers</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Children</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>(57)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interview Approach and Consent Procedures**¹

The researcher interviewed 57 children of prisoners (See Table 3.4). Children
were between the ages of seven and eighteen years. The caregivers/guardians of these

¹ IRB Title and Number: Caregivers of Prisoners’ Children, # 06-014 Rpx
children were contacted to obtain consent for potential study participation. Child assent was also obtained to interview and tape-record during the session. Both children and caregivers/guardians were made aware that the child interview was recorded. This allowed researcher-subject conversation, probing and engagement instead of note taking. Both guardian consent and child assent was obtained for all child participants. By virtue of age, minor children were told that they do not have to participate because their parent agreed to let them. The researcher incorporated additional safeguards into the research plan. The assent form for children was child friendly.

Subjects were informed they could skip as many questions as they pleased or refuse to participate, and they would still receive a stipend (a McDonald’s gift card) for participating. The interview protocol was read aloud by the researcher and the children were asked to speak out their answers. As a result, the interview session mirrored a typical conversation.

None of the 57 children refused to participate in the study or terminated their participation prior to completion of the survey. Interviews were conducted at the child’s current home. Children were asked where they felt most comfortable having a conversation. This method allowed children to choose any place in the home he/she felt most comfortable. Prior to the interview, the caregiver/guardian or others present were kindly asked to leave the room. This assured interviewer confidentiality of shared information.

According to Rutgers University IRB and New Jersey state law requirements, subject confidentiality must only be broken in the event that the researcher had

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2 See attached Appendix C.
3 See attached Appendix D.
reasonable cause to believe that a child had been subjected to child abuse. In dealing with cases of suspected abuse the researcher was required to report the abuse to the authorities. Furthermore, the researcher was required to report any information about conduct dangerous to the child, or any unreported or planned criminal conduct revealed during the interview. This was not the case for any of the children in the sample.

*The Sample*

General demographic information of children is presented below in Table 3.4. This sample includes a total of 57 minor children. The majority of the sample was female (61.4%). Age of children is represented as the current age at the time of interview. The age variable was broken into two developmental stages including pre adolescence and adolescent years. The average age of children was approximately 11 years (sd= 3.02). Ages ranged between 7 thru 18 years. Twenty-six percent of children were teenagers. Most were Black (77%), followed by Caucasians (14%) and Hispanics (9%).

Table 3.4. Demographics of Children (N=57)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>(35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>77.2</td>
<td>(44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>(8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Home Life

All 57 children were residing in New Jersey at the time of the interview, and all lived in one of eight counties. More than half lived within Essex County (56%), followed by Cumberland County (23%). Five percent were living in Monmouth County and four percent lived in Ocean, Union Mercer, and Salem counties. The remaining (2%) lived in Atlantic County. Within Essex, children resided in Newark, East Orange, Orange and Irvington. In Cumberland, kids lived in Millville, Bridgeton and Vineland. The majority of these children resided with grandparents (42%), closely followed by biological mothers (40%). Approximately, 9 percent were in the custody of foster caregivers. A few children lived with maternal aunts (5%) and biological fathers (4%). Three quarters had siblings (75%), and (15%) had been separated from their sibling(s) as a result of their parent’s imprisonment. More than half of the children changed residences (68%) as a result of their parent’s incarceration. Although a majority of the children (60%) were not involved with the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS). However, this means that 23 children (40%) were involved with DYFS.

4 Mean age for the sample = 10.7 and range is 7 –18 years.
Table 4.4. Characteristics of Home Life (N=57)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current New Jersey County of Residence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essex</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>(32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumberland</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>(13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monmouth</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>(3 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>(2 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>(2 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercer</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>(2 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salem</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>(2 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlantic</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>(1 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current Caregiver</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological Mother</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>(23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Grandmother</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>(15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paternal Grandmother</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>(9 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>(5 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Aunt</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>(3 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological Father</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>(2 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Siblings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>(43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>(14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Change in Residence as Result of Parents Incarceration</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>(39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>(18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Involvement with Division of Youth and Family Services</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>(23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>(34)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*School Life*

Thirty-nine percent of children had to change schools because of parental imprisonment. A quarter (26%) of the kids were enrolled in special education classes at their respective schools. Two-thirds (67%) of the sample told peers about their parent’s imprisonment.
Table 4.5. Characteristics of School Life (N=57)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change in School as Result of Parents Incarceration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>(22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>(35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>(15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>(42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosed Parents Incarceration to Peers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>(38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>(19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Parental Incarceration**

The number of children experiencing maternal incarceration (47%) was slightly higher than those children experiencing paternal incarceration (44%). 9 percent of children had experiences resulting from both parents being incarcerated. In terms of an ongoing relationship with incarcerated parents, 63 percent of children maintained contact. The majority of the sample (67%) was made aware of their parent’s incarceration; leaving 33 percent unaware of their parent’s whereabouts. Nearly all of the children (84%) desired lifelong relations with their incarcerated parent; another 14 percent did not and the remaining child claimed to be unsure.

Table 4.6. Characteristics of Parental Interaction (N=57)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incarcerated Parent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>(27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>(25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Parents</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Desires Lifelong Relations with Parent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>84.3</td>
<td>(48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>(8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contact with Incarcerated Parent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>(36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>(21)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Knowledge of Parents Incarceration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>%</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>(38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>(19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Present During Parental Arrest

Forty-three percent of the children in the sample witnessed the arrest of their parent; the majority (56%) did not.

Table 4.7. Child Present During Arrest of Parent (N=57)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Witnessed Parents Arrest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>(25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>(32)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Child Problems

Approximately two-thirds of participants reported behavioral and emotional problems, while only 19 percent reported experiencing psychological problems. Children considered having psychological problems answered ‘yes’ to the dichotomous question asked during their interview. Psychological problems revolved around emotional trauma. Child responses included in this category included not being able to sleep at night, being easily startled, and having persistent negative emotions. In other words, children with psychological problems identified not being able to get images and feeling out of their
heads. Of all child problems explored (psychological, emotional, and behavioral), the sample majority reported both emotional (66.7%) and behavioral problems (66.7%).

**Table 4.8. Characteristics of Child Problems (N=57)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>(11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>(46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>(38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>(19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>(38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>(19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Risky Behaviors*

This section only includes adolescent children (aged 13-18). Fifteen respondents (26 percent) of the sample children were teenagers at the time of interview. In terms of risky behaviors, all of the children (100%) self reported having sex, drinking alcohol and/or using drugs. The majority of children disclosed their risky behaviors pertaining to alcohol use, followed by drug use and sexual intercourse.

All fifteen teenaged subjected reported alcohol use during their parent’s incarceration. Eleven teenagers reported drug use and six children reported having unprotected sexual intercourse. Forty percent of the sample reported involvement with one risky behavior; 33 percent of children had experiences with two risky behaviors; and 13 percent were involved in all three risky behaviors.
Table 4.9. Characteristics of Child Risky Behaviors among Teenagers (N=15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Intercourse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug Use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>(11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol Use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>(15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the data were collected through community organizations offering services to children of prisoners. It is possible that those children who do not receive services are inherently different from children who do receive services. A second limitation is the use of minor children as research subjects. Children are seen as vulnerable and persuadable. Therefore information collected from these subjects may not be viewed as credible by virtue of age. Children are known to say things that they have heard others say, what they feel is the right thing to say or even make things up. This has been identified as the true score theory. This theory assumes that any information obtained from interviews, especially with children, will contain some error and some truth. Therefore, interviewing children is “a sharp double-edged sword…the same features that bless it with its sensitivity and special access to subjective data curse it with the threat of excessive measurement error” (Parker, 1984, p.19). The challenge in interviewing children is how the researcher manages the relationship so that it makes it easy to collect information, while simultaneously not spoiling the gain of subjective data. This required a conscious balancing act on part of the researcher. In
addition, the relationship between researcher (adult) and interviewee (child) may limit the study’s ability to avoid coercing children to participate. The power-imbalance of age can be seen as coercive in nature. This limitation was addressed by the study methodology. Because this study did not seek to find causal relationships and is exploratory in nature, anything collected or not collected can inform study findings. In other words, children are seen as being the experts. Therefore, the relationship between researcher and child was that of teacher and learner. The child subjects were viewed as teaching the researcher about unknown things. The researcher was the learner.

A third limitation of the study is its adoption of a cross-sectional design. This design did not allow for changes over time to be captured. Because of financial constraints the researcher conducted a cross-sectional study. This dissertation explored something that we know little about and provided child descriptions.

A fourth limitation of this dissertation pertains specifically to the findings discussed in the chapters on neighborhoods and perceptions. The current study does not and cannot disentangle the identified neighborhood effects on children experiencing parental incarceration from children who do not have an incarcerated parent(s). Furthermore, in analyzing children’s perceptions, those who are aware of their parent’s imprisonment are not differentiated from those who are not aware of their parent’s incarceration.
Strengths of the Research

In spite of the fact that the proposed research has limitations, the researcher incorporated credibility and transferability into the study design. This did not rid the study of its limitations, but provided counterbalancing strengths.

**Credibility**: Credibility refers to the extent to which research reflects evidentiary support for the conclusions. The research study is credible through the use of triangulation, member checking, and prolonged field time (Creswell, 2003). The research design weaves in multiple streams of evidence collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Triangulation improved the quality of the data and accuracy of empirical findings. No wonder, Fetterman (1998) notes, “it is the heart of ethnographic validity—comparing information sources to test the quality of the information (and the person sharing it), to understand more completely the part an actor plays in the social drama, and ultimately to put the whole situation into perspective” (p. 93). In addition, member checking strengthened the research by allowing children from one organization to clarify the objectiveness of the research collected from another organization. Where discrepancies existed, the researcher was made aware of areas in need of further analysis. Prolonged field time was another study strength. Data collection began in 2005, allowing the researcher three years of field time. While in the field, the researcher managed to build trust and rapport among subjects and service organizations.

To create trusting relationships in the field, I was conscious of establishing rapport within the field through informal conversations and frequent attendance at events. While in the field, I stayed in hotels with the children, joined them for bus rides to the
prison to visit their parents, and attended weekend craft events. Furthermore, as
Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) suggests, my honesty and frankness about myself
helped me build a high level of trust with my participants. A personal investment in the
field is important to obtaining high-quality data (Coffey, 1994). In one instance, I
expressed the reason to a child’s question about why I was interested in talking to
children who have parents in prison.

My parent (mother) recently passed away and I was so torn apart. At the
time I was in school and studying issues about crime and incarceration. I
had to write a paper and decided to focus on how it might feel to a child to
have a parent lost to prison. I was wondering if someone who lost a parent
to prison would have similar or different feelings than someone who lost a
parent to death like me. I know how I felt when it happened and I know
how I still hurt. This sparked my interest in talking to you and other kids.
She mentioned how she was sorry that my mom passed away and didn’t
really know what to say. I told her that’s fine.

Three additional fieldnotes indicate the type of relationships I established:

I never told anyone the stuff I’m telling you. I just feel comfortable
talking to you. I like talking to you ‘cause it makes me think about all the
stuff I never get to talk about. I always thought I would be embarrassed to
talk about my mom and her being in prison, especially to a stranger. It
like the opposite, ‘cause I’m not embarrassed at all.

A few of the girls and I chatted about our favorite music videos. I told
them about the videos I like on BET, especially Little Wayne. They all
started screaming when I mentioned his name, because, they have big
crushes on him. We all started singing the lyrics to Lollipop.

Blacky and I shared our favorite dishes to cook. She gave me her
grandmother’s secret recipe for mac and cheese. She told me that if I
make it everyone would be sweating my cooking skills. I gave her my
secret for making fluffy chocolate cupcakes. I told her if she made them
she would be running back to me for more recipes. We both laughed and
said we would try the recipes out and talk about it next week.
The time spent with children during organizational activities provided a high level of rapport and trust with subjects. Children opened up to me and shared their intimate experiences both related and unrelated to the study questions.

Transferability: In qualitative research, generalizability is referred to as transferability, and is defined as obtaining similar findings in another context. The research design included data collection from five organizations in five different geographical contexts. To enhance the transferability of my study I discuss my findings as embedded in context. In other words, I identify the similarities and differences of my findings from a contextual perspective. This is strength in and of itself.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data Management, Sorting and Coding

All tape-recorded interviews and observations were transcribed verbatim into Word documents and saved as computer files. Notes were taken throughout this first phase of data analysis. The first phase of data analysis provided the researcher with a list of themes, unique key words used in the data, and guidance for next steps. During the second step of data analysis, all saved computer files were imported into SPSS Text Analysis for easier management of the data and further coding and analysis. In addition, field notes were analyzed to triangulate data to provide for a rounded picture of child experiences of parental imprisonment. Data collected from organizations were imported into SPSS to identify descriptive information that was used to supplement the interview and observation data.
While qualitative research utilizes statistical tools for data analysis, qualitative analysis is not strictly limited by technical rules. As Patton (2001) suggests, “there are no absolute rules except to do the very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study” (p. 433). The analytical process for qualitative research is quite judgmental in nature and depends more on the researcher’s intellect and creativity. Thus, researchers are viewed as the instrument of qualitative studies. Although qualitative inquires do not necessarily follow stringent rules, some techniques for qualitative analysis have been developed. According to Maxwell (2005), these procedures entail reading and thinking about data, writing fieldnotes, developing coding categories and applying them to data, and analyzing narrative and contextual relationships. Both inductive and deductive reasoning is involved in data analysis, but these are employed differently and different stages of the research analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). These analytical strategies have been used as the primary guidelines for the current study.

The data analysis began right after the first interview was completed. I listened to the recorded interviews right after I came back from the field, made brief transcripts and coding, and wrote memos containing observational and methodological notes. These preliminary analyses are important because they facilitated further analysis. I added interview probe questions constantly as themes emerged from my data.

During the initial data analysis process, making inductions by deriving concepts, proposition and dimensions from data is the primary task. This initial data analysis essentially involves a combination of two distinct processes, including data categorizing and data connecting. It is also referred to as the two stages of data analysis: examining
and comparing material across categories (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). By using data categorizing and connecting, the study is able to interpret the meanings of these findings in context.

The current study employed qualitative research methods that Patton (1990) states, “provide depth and detail which emerge through direct quotation and careful description, and allow one to understand the work as seen by respondents” (p. 24). Data were coded into themes that were generated from the data. Using inductive reasoning, common themes and an overarching framework were derived. The constant comparative method, in which the data are continually compared with previously collected data, allowed for the construction of categories that captured both common elements and relevant characteristics (Strauss, 1987). Similarities and differences in the experiences of the participants that rose within those themes were also investigated.
CHAPTER 4
THEIR FAMILIES AND NEIGHBORHOODS

Inside Their Homes

Many studies have discussed caregiver relationships that children experience during a parent’s incarceration barely providing any detailed information about their experiences while residing with these caregivers (Poehlmann, 2010). It has been clearly documented that the majority of children experiencing parental imprisonment reside with maternal grandmothers, biological mothers, aunts and in few cases foster mothers. (Bernstein, 2005; Bloom, 1995; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Enos, 2001; Hairston, 1995; Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002; Johnston, 1995; Maruschak, Glaze & Mumola, 2010; McGowan & Blumenthal, 1978; Mumola, 2000; Poehlmann, 2005). This study delved deeper into the familial living context of children during their parent’s incarceration, by exploring what children experience inside their homes. This chapter describes child experiences within their families and communities during parental incarceration.

It’s Complicated

When asked to describe what it was like living in their current residences the children spoke about dynamic situations, and they tended to explain them as being complicated. These complications ranged from living arrangements, to sleeping quarters, to feelings of being unwanted in their current homes. For example, Muka, a 15-year-old teenager described her situation as being complicated. She states:
“To describe my situation in one word I would say complicated. It’s up and down. When I act out in school, my grandma tell me she ‘gon kick me out to the street. At the same time, she tell me she love me. How you love me and could live with me being on the streets. It’s so complicated, man. I don’t know what to feel or who to trust. This is a evil house. Since I came here my life been crazy. It been up and down, up and down, up and down. I don’t know how long I could live like this, man.”

Muka, similar to other children held uneasy feelings about the home she lived in at the time of the interview. Dealing with parental imprisonment was not seen as being an easy process. According to Tatee (10 years old), “living here is not easy. It’s like I’m here because I don’t have no where to go but I don’t feel welcome. When I get 18, I’m out of here and can’t nobody stop me.” Both Muka and Tatee describe experiences that are difficult to deal with, especially for a child. Parental incarceration often happens abruptly without parents making any care arrangement for their children (Johnston, 1995). This results in children being placed in long-term situations without any prior agreements with those caregivers. This creates complication in the lives of both caregivers and children. Living in such situations is not easy on children and leads to discomfort.

Other children described their living experiences by disclosing concerns about their sleeping quarters. For example, Bebe, a 13-year old female, who was residing at her paternal grandmother’s house during the incarceration of both of her parent’s states her frustration:

“I sleep in the living room. I don’t have my own space. I feel like a guest. It’s complicated because this my family and I know they got love for me. I got love for them. It’s like no room here for more people. I’m a extra. I’m not supposed to be here. I just ended up here ‘cause my mom fucked up and my dad is a fuck up.”
Another example, Mark, a 16-year-old male, residing with his maternal aunt during his mother’s second incarceration said:

“So I have like three rooms and not one is mine. When my sister is at school, I sleep in her room. When she comes home for breaks, I sleep in the living room or with nana when she up for it. She says I sleep wild, so sometime she want me out her bed. I’m too old for this.”

Mamah, a 12-year-old female, residing with her father during her mother’s incarceration:

“I sleep in a room with my two sisters and younger brother. We only have one small bed in that room so we have to take turns sleeping on the floor. I rather be here on the floor than in the street on the ground. Feel me. It’s not easy, but I know it could be worse.”

Danny, a 7-year old female, residing with her maternal aunt during the incarceration of both of her parents:

“I don’t have a room. I just go where my auntie tell me to sleep. I sleep and lay everywhere.”

Similar in nature to the responses of Bebe, Mark, Mamah, and Danny, Quea an 11-year-old female living with her mother’s grandmother while her mother was incarcerated talked about her sleeping quarters when describing her feelings toward living at her grandmother’s house.

“This is some straight bull. I went from having my own room to having no room at all. It’s sad because no one cares. It’s like if you have a roof over ya head then nothing else matter. It’s hard ‘cause I’m glad I have a place to lay, but I’m not comfortable at all.”

Children were uncomfortable living in homes without a their own rooms.

Children desired their own space, rather than having to live and sleep in the common areas of their caregiver’s homes. Having the livingroom, floor, caregiver or siblings room as a bedroom left children without a space to claim as their own. Having a bed is a
basic right of every child (Division of Youth and Family Services, 2010). The degree to which children are impacted by parental incarceration are determined by such structural family risks. Specifically, living in large families of four or more members, a reduced standard of living, and/or inability to meet basic needs of children (Phillips et al., 2006). In other words, when children are moved from having their own rooms to sleeping in a common area on the floor, this reduction in their living standard can be traumatic for them. In order to prevent long and short-term adjustment problems, children require consistent, high quality substitute care (Henriques, 1982). Children who by necessity are moved into homes that are occupied by many people are forced to sleep wherever possible, even if it is uncomfortable for them. Although children were not satisfied with their living situations, specifically their sleeping quarters, they expressed gratitude for having a place to go.

Tweety, an 11-year-old female, primarily living with her maternal grandmother during her mother’s incarcerations sheds light into her living situation by discussing how she moved about according to the day of week and season:

“I have a week house, that’s when I stay with my granny to be near school. Then I got a weekend home when I go and stay with my older sis to hang with my friends who live over that way. Then when school is out for the summer, I stay down south with my dad. If I had it my way, I would be in one spot. I’m always somewhere. I can’t get comfy. It’s complicated now that I think about it.”

It is presumed that parents prior to incarceration will make adequate living arrangements for their children. Yet, children express unstable situations, characterized by numerous moves into multiple households.
When describing his home experiences, Complex, a 17-year-old male living with his biological mother during his father’s incarceration, shed light on the complications of his mother’s behavior during his father’s absence and his role in the home during that time. Complex states his frustration and anger by stating:

“I don’t like living here at all. My mom has all these men coming and going. I can’t even tell you some of the names. It’s a lot of them. I’m the man of the house and it’s hard when you young and your mom don’t listen. It’s complicated, ’cause I want to tell dad but what can he do. I have to do man things and I wanna just be a boy.”

Similar in nature to Complex, Maurica, an 11-year old female living with her maternal grandparents during her mother’s incarceration also described wanting to be a kid within her residence rather than acting as adult. Maurica stated:

“I thought I could deal with my mom being in prison. I thought it would be easy. It is far from easy. It’s complicated because I love my family, but they are doing me wrong. I have to take care of myself. I make sure I eat. I have to cook and do everything. It’s never no one here to take care of me. I am a kid, but I do all adult stuff. I just want to go back to being a kid like when my mom was here.”

Overall, children were uncomfortable living in households without a private sleeping space. A child discussed going from having her own room to sleep on the floor. This was an example of a step down from her living situation prior to her parent’s incarceration. Such lifestyle reductions can be uncomfortable for children and places them at risk.
He Not My Daddy

Children residing with their biological mothers spoke about their dislike about new male figures residing with them after the incarceration of their fathers. Children were very adamant about verbalizing that these new men were not their fathers and they were not very happy about their presence in the home, regardless of the contributions they were making to the household. Minnie, a twelve-year-old male, spoke of his dislike with his mother’s male companion:

“Sometimes I think like why is he even here. We don’t need his help. He pays this and that and it’s like my mom just fall for it. When my dad comes home he not gon’ be having it. He don’t sleep here all the time, but when he do, I hate it. He walks around here like he own this place. I’m the man of this house, not him. I hope he never think I would listen to anything he say. I don’t like him and never will. He trying take my daddy place while he gone. It may be okay with my mom, but not with me. He not my daddy. He not my blood. I don’t trust him at all.”

The increased demands upon a single mother’s limited time, energies, emotional and economic resources during parental imprisonment, make the help from a male companion greatly needed. Although, mothers could benefit, both emotionally and financially, from such relationships, their children dislike having these new male figures around. Specifically residing in their homes. Children are accepting of the monetary support received from these men, as toys, gifts, and/or spending money, but at the same time they do not trust or respect them. For example, Minnie explains his relationship with his mother’s companion:

“He brought me the wii and I was happy. He got me like three games to play with it. I had been asking my mom for the game for a long time and she ‘ain’t never get it for me. All my friends been had it, so when I got it, I was too happy. Another time he brought me a new pair of kicks, some air force one’s. I needed that. He good for buying me stuff here and there. My mom tell him what I want
and he get it, I guess. I take it ‘cause my moms ‘ain’t buying it for me and I ‘ain’t got no job.”

Furthermore, Greg, an eleven-year-old male, described how he perceived his situation with a new man in his home:

“He’s a stranger. I don’t know him. He don’t know me. He came out of nowhere. One day, my dad was gone. The next day, he was here. First he started coming by a lot to see my mom then he was sleeping over. Now he just live here. I don’t even talk to him. I barely look at him. He try to be nice to me, but I ‘ain’t beat. I don’t need no stranger man coming in my house trying to be the man and take care of me and my mom. I can take care of my mom. I don’t get why my mom doing this. When daddy come home he gone live with us. I know this just for now.”

For this young male, changes in his home structure seemed to take place immediately. Once his father was incarcerated he was replaced with a new male figure, which lead to this child being isolated within his own home. Although his mother’s companion did not seem to be trying to make for an uncomfortable situation, Greg, similar to other males his age was not very accepting of his invitations for friendship. New male figures in the homes of these young males were seen as a threat to their territory/home. In such situations, role-reversal occurs where male children hold down their fathers place in the house during his incarceration by not accepting, not respecting, and failing to trust their mother new companions.

Kiya, an eleven-year old female provided more insight into her relationship with her mother as a result of her disapproval of the man in her mother’s life, who is not her father:
“Me and my moms was cool before she started shacking up with this man; letting him stay in our house, use our shower that I have to use. I don’t know him and don’t trust him. He always looking at me. I don’t know why he stay looking at me when he ‘posed to be here for my moms. He a mess. When I don’t listen to my mom, he try to talk to me about doing this and that. I be like, ‘you not my daddy. You can’t tell me what to do’. My mom don’t like when I talk to him like that, but it’s the truth. He not my daddy. My daddy in prison. I hate when she do this. This not the first time. If it don’t work with him. It’s on to the next. This make me mad at her. I barely talk to her ‘cause of this. She make herself look dumb. I know she lonely, but like my dad said you have to be strong ‘cause these guys out here to get over of weak females.”

Female children also distrust the new men their mothers bring into their homes following the incarceration of these children’s fathers. Different from young male children, this young female talks to her mother’s companion, but in a disrespectful way. Young girls seem to feel unsafe with these unknown, new adult males in their homes. Especially when it becomes a routine for their parent. This change in the family structure has led to miscommunication between the child and caregiver. Experiencing strong and stable ties with a caregiver can be the key protective factor that keeps a child emotionally healthy and resilient through the stress-ridden period of parental incarceration (Mackintosh, Myers & Kennon, 2006).

While Kiya projects dislike about her mother’s decision to keep a man figure in the household while her child’s father is incarcerated, Mar, a ten-year-old male, is happy that his mom was able to move on with her life when his dad left her and went to prison. Although he also made the researcher verbally aware that this new male figure is not his father and could never take his place. Mar mentions:

“If I was my mother, I would move on, too. Who would sit and wait alone while they man in prison. I’m glad she moved on with her life. I want her to be happy.
He makes her smile. What she does is her business. He never gone be my dad, so I don’t really care. I don’t have to listen to him, so I don’t really care. Deep down I don’t want her with no one but dad, but hey, what can I do. She grown.”

Older children are expected to have a better understanding of the situations they experience during parental incarceration (Poehlmann, 2010). This is not the case with Mar, who clearly understands his mother’s need for a companion during his father’s incarceration. He is actually happy for his mother’s decision to go on with her life. Ultimately, he cares more about his mother’s well-being than her new boyfriend. Although, Mar would like to see his parents together, he puts his feeling to the side because he feels helpless in his situation. Other younger children held similar feelings and provided limited information, but had the following to share about their personal experiences:

“He not my daddy. I don’t like him but my mommy do. She like him more than she like my dad. I don’t know how. Sometime I look at her funny, ‘cause I don’t get it. First my dad, now a new fake dad. I don’t know how.”(Tamia, 9-year-old female)

“He is not my dad. I don’t care about him.” (Godoe, 7-year-old male)

“He like a dad, but he not my dad.” (Nay-Nay, 7-year-old female)

As young as seven, children are able to speak for themselves about their perception of parental incarceration. Although seven year olds did not provide long narratives in discussing their feelings, nine year olds provided more insight, in which, they began questioning these new changes in their homes, their parent’s reasoning behind their decision to be involved with a new man, and how they just do not understand. For example, Nay-Nay further elaborates:
“I can’t tell you why my mom need this new man. You can ask her. I don’t want to ask. I ask my dad when I visit and my mom in the bathroom. He laugh and say I’m like him. He say she just going through something. I be happy when she done going through it.”

During paternal incarceration, a lack of communication between the biological mothers of their children can lead to children reaching out to individuals outside of their home to answer questions about issues that are going on inside their homes. Nay-Nay sneaks and asks her incarcerated father during a visit to the prison, why her mothers needs a new man. Although Nay-Nay’s question is answered, she received a simple answer to such a complex question. Her father does not include his incarceration at all when responding to his daughter; rather he gives an answer that puts the blame on the mother. This answer is one sided, and fails to provide her mother’s reasoning for her own actions. Children have questions about what their experiences. Nay-Nay is not typical of the majority of children who never have contact with their parents during incarceration (Mumola, 2000).

Children spoke about new male figures in their homes when asked about who they live with and their relationships with their caregivers. These new males in the home are helpful to the mothers yet burdensome to their children. Even when they try to gain the children’s attention, trust and respect. The children were not shy about discussing their unhappiness about what their mothers were doing to keep from being lonely. In fact, some children were so upset that it led to them not communicating with their mothers and their companions. Prior studies have identified that children are warned against discussing their parent’s incarceration outside of their homes. Thus, it is assumed that children are able to discuss their parent’s incarceration in the privacy of their homes it is important they feel comfortable with discussing their feelings inside the family with
someone they trust. The current study found that children are not talking about their concerns inside their own homes either.

Children were able to hold numerous conflicting feelings simultaneously about new men in their lives as a result of their mother’s decisions. On one hand, they held feelings of disgust, mistrust, misunderstanding and hatred toward their mother’s and the new male figures in their homes. On the other hand, they welcomed and accepted material gifts from these same male figures that they did not want in their homes. Children seem to have unanswered questions about these new men in their homes, confusion about their mother’s decision to allow new men in, and frustration about having to live with the combination of the two.

Adding to the children’s confusion and frustration is their inability to remove themselves from their situation. Children described their experiences inside their homes as being trapped.

**Feeling Locked Up**

Approximately 10% of the sample spoke about feeling locked up in their homes because of strict rules and regulations set by their caregivers, not having any friends, and/or not being allowed out because of unsafe community life.

Drey, an 8-year old male, living with his maternal grandmother during the incarceration of both of his parents describes the many rules that he must abide by while residing in her house.

“I can’t do nothing. No hanging out with friends, not even on weekends. No company over, not even when my mom is home. No talking on the phone or
having a cell phone. No going anywhere that’s not helping my mom out, like Shop Rite or Wal-Mart. I have no life. No friends. No one to talk to, and no one to listen to me. I have to do all the listening. It’s like I’m the one locked up. Sometimes I think like this is how it feels to be locked up.”

Drey further states:

“If I’m not home right after school, my grandma will have a heart attack. If I am not in school, I’m locked up in this old house with nothing to do but stare at the cracked walls and ceilings. I am bored out my mind.”

Similar to Drey and a few other children in the sample, Nye, a 9-year old female living with her father during her mother’s sentence looks to the prospect of moving out so that she can live. Nya says:

“My father says I can’t do nothing, ‘cause I will just end up like my mom. His rules keep me locked in the house all day and night. If it’s meant for me to be like her, then it will happen no matter what. I want to live, but that won’t happen ‘til I move out of here.”

Sahde, a 12-year old female living with her foster mother during her mother’s incarceration shed light on her home experiences and feelings of being trapped in the house.

“Living in a foster home is like being locked up. Everybody here is seen as bad no matter how good you are. You are expected to be bad, so you are treated like a bad person. I can’t do nothing. One time I lied about having to go to a graduation just to get out. I have to be bad to be free.”

Children experienced caregiver rules and regulations as similar to incarceration. This is, the rules made children feel as though they were locked up. These narratives provide a snapshot into a sort of dual-incarceration effect, where a parent serves time in a correctional facility having to abide by the strict rules and regulations set by that particular institution and at the same time their children are serving time in their caregivers’ homes, having to abide by similar restrictions on behaviors.
Other children made conscious decisions about remaining in the confines of their homes because they had no friends in the new neighborhoods in which they resided due to the moves that resulted from parental incarceration. The following quotes identify the children’s descriptions of such instances:

“I don’t go outside. I lock myself in the house, because I have no friends here. I had a lot of friends before I had to move because my father got locked up” (Brit, 9-year old, living with biological mother during father’s incarceration).

“It is so corny over here. I stay inside the house most of the time. I don’t want to play with any of the kids over here. They think they better than you when they have two parents watching them” (Mar, 10-years old, living with biological mother during father’s incarceration).

“I ain’t made no friends since my dad got locked up and I had to move with my mother. I just stay in the house. When my mother is out I lock the door and stay in till she gets back” (Kiya, 11-year old female, residing with her biological mother during her father’s incarceration).

In agreement with the majority of children, Kadesa, an 8-year old female residing with her biological mother during her father’s incarceration, spoke about her decision to stay inside her home to avoid the unsafe neighborhood:

“It’s nothing good to do out there. I stay in the house and try not to go out, because I don’t want to get shot or robbed. I seen people get jumped and robbed right at my school. You safer inside than outside. I always keep the doors and windows locked up”.

INSIDE THEIR COMMUNITIES

Hood Life

The majority of children in this study were living in urban communities at the time of interviews. When asked to describe their neighborhoods, children complained of the dangers surrounding them. Many children shared similar views of not liking or
feeling unsafe in their neighborhoods. Blacky, a teenage female is a typical example of a child sharing such feelings. Blacky said:

“I don’t like living here. It ain’t a good neighborhood for me and my grandmother. There is lots of killing that goes on in my hood. I hear gun-shots all the time. When I walk to school in the morning, I see drunks and addicts hanging outside the liquor store. I keep to myself in the streets. I only feel safe inside the house.”

Sandy, another teenager with similar views spoke about being shot on her way to the neighborhood corner store:

“The hood is the hood. I can’t even tell you what really happened, because it happened so fast. I was doing this girl hair at my house and I was on my way to the store to buy something that I needed for her hair. I was walking down the block and this dude ran past me so fast I didn’t think nothing of it. Then another dude yells, ‘he got a gun!’ I remember thinking to myself, these people crazy out here. You hear people say it so much and be joking that I just laughed it off and kept on to the store. Then I hear gun shots, so I started to run. Your typical hood episode, so I thought. Next thing you know I’m on the ground and people over me talking about I got shot. I passed out after that. I was in the hospital for a while and kids from the school that I don’t even know came to visit. It was cool. They never got the bullet out. It’s still in me. You could feel it. You wanna feel it?”

A younger male child, Q, describes his neighborhood as being the home of “drug dealers, stolen cars, drinking on the corner, and lots of noise at night.” Q hated where he was living and spoke very strongly about not wanting to live in the city forever. Q described his daily walk home from school:

“You have to be on the look out when you walking in these streets. They are something serious. If you fly like me and stay wit the hot sneakers and crispy white tees, then you better be strapped. Sike, nah, but for real, yo. These guys in the streets are hungry and if you got on something they want, they will try and take it for sure. I was walking home from school one day, and me and my boys was hollering at this chick. We wasn’t paying no attention to these crips on the corner hating ‘cause we get more chicks and doe than them. So they tried to holla at the same chick when they saw we was tryna holla. You see what I mean, haters. They had nothing better to do than pick with us and they were older, too. They sit
on that corner all day and night and they just looking for something to do. They stay bored and they dumb. They have no education whatsoever. That’s the main problem, dumb gang bangers. They make the neighborhood go down. They try to look cool so they could get people to join they gang. Most of the time they approach kids walking home from school. They have guns, too. They may even kill you if you don’t wanna join. They feel good about it when then hurt people. They don’t care if they take a life. My neighborhood is nuts.”

Michael, another male subject, close in age to Q, says that his mother forbids him from walking home from school alone. Michael said:

“I am not able to walk home from school alone, ‘cause it is not safe for me. My mom told me that bad things happen to kids who walk home alone. My big brother comes to get me from school. He walks me to school in the daytime, too. At night, sometimes I hear stolen cars going up and down the block. I hear gunshots, too, a lot. It is scary. But I stay in the house for safeness.”

Michael is very aware of the violence that occurs in his neighborhood. He keeps himself safe by staying in the house. Risa, a nine-year old female also remains on her property to stay safe in her dangerous community. Risa states,

“I can never go to the store with just me. I always wait long for someone to take me. The store is just two corners down. I can’t do anything but play in the backyard. I want to go to the park, but the bad guys hang out there, so I can’t go. In the old house, it was better. The park was safe. Only little kids play there. It was fun. I like the backyard. It is safe and boring sometimes.”

Nagee doesn’t like that he is not allowed to play outside. He mentioned wanting to play with the other eight-year-old boys in his community. Nagee was very frustrated when he mentioned,

“I can’t do anything. I have to stay inside, because it is not safe outside. I hate it. Other kids down the street play outside, but their mom is not home like mine. I wanna play outside with the other kids.”
Zahir, a seven-year-old female talks about how her home looks as a result of her grandmother’s attempt to deter unwanted people from coming in. She states,

“We have bars on the windows, so we can keep the badness out. My mom said to keep all the windows close, so no one can climb in. People steal out there for they could buy drugs.”

Nahna, a fifteen-year-old female, speaks about her fear of things that happen in the daylight in the neighborhood she lives in.

“I used to feel fine in this area. Well, I’m kind of getting scared because they talking about this man walking around. He be snatching little girls up and he killed a girl a couple of houses down from me. I don’t be too beat to go down there though. It happened during the day. He was jumping in people’s cars in the daylight. Like, crazy.”

Nahna, 15-year old female, residing in East Orange, similar to the majority of children in the sample, felt unsafe in her neighborhood. The feelings and perceptions held by children about the neighborhoods they lived in were defined by Muka as being a “hot ghetto mess.” Muka described her city this way “because of violence everywhere all the time, cops not doing their job, crack heads and drug dealers, guns, stolen cars, gangs, kids acting like grown ups, bums and all type ghetto stuff. It’s a mess all over. A hot ghetto mess.”

Both younger and older children were aware of the negative circumstances of their neighborhood experiences. Many children mentioned personal experiences related to the negativity within their communities. How children experience parental incarceration cannot really be understood by looking solely at the children and attempting to change him/her. Rather both the individual and the environment must be considered.
It is important to recognize that these children are experiencing parental incarceration while living in crime ridden neighborhoods. This is important because these children have been defined as being destined, similar to their parents, to spend time in prison at some point in their lives. Crime is easily accessible to these children, because of the impoverished neighborhoods they live in. At a very young age, children are introduced to the realities of crime, drugs and violence. In fact, these children are growing up, seeing crime and clearly understanding what it is like to live within it.

Young & Smith (2000), explain the interactions between neighborhoods and individuals as dynamic interactions. They state:

A problematic situation cannot really be understood and alleviated by looking at just the individual and attempting to change him/her, or by just looking at the environment and attempting to change it. Rather, both the individual and the environment are seen as having strengths and deficits (p.131).

With that in mind, the following are strengths of growing up in a crime-ridden environment, such as those described by the children: (1) these neighborhood provide these children with a vivid depiction of the life that they want nothing to do with; (2) All of the children describe their neighborhoods in a negative manner, which shows that they do not aspire to become bums, drunks, gang members or drug dealers; and (3) Children expressed the desire to want more for themselves and their caregivers. On the other hand, the deficits outweigh the strengths. The deficits described by children, include: (1) not feeling safe anywhere outside of their homes; (2) having to be locked inside of their homes because of the violence outside; (3) not being able to practice independence, by walking to the store or school alone; (4) witnessing crime as a part of life; (5) being
approached and bothered by gangs; and (6) the lack of social capital in their
neighborhoods.

With so few strengths of living in such environments, children of the incarcerated
have begun to paint dim futures for themselves. Living with crime on a daily basis has
led children to loose hope, and feel as though they have no other options outside of crime.

**No Way Out**

Children felt unsafe with the violence that was characteristic of their
neighborhoods. This made children feel they had no way out. When thinking about
incarceration, one is aware of the fact that the prison doors swing both ways. In other
words, those parents who are incarcerated and enter the prison will one day pass through
those same doors upon release back to the community. Sample subjects spoke about
feeling locked up, having to abide by strict rules and regulations, living in unsafe
neighborhoods, not feeling appreciated or wanted, and having no way to escape it all.

A sense of enclosure seemed prevalent among this sample of children. They
wanted out of their situations, and, they described it as a never-ending process. This was
interesting because 84% of the sample expressed desires of having life-long relations
with their incarcerated parent and wanting to be reunited upon their release. In this sense,
they didn’t “have a way out.” These feelings are disturbing, because the children have
done nothing to be in their situations. In other words, they did not commit the crime, so
why are they left to bear the life-long burdens of their parent’s actions? Reiterated by the
children themselves, they question their experiences and personal circumstances.
Jaya asks, “Why me? What have I done to deserve this, I ask myself sometimes?” (14-year old female). Other children pose similar questions and make statements that project the same hopeless message. Naah, a 12-year old female says:

“I don’t know how I got into this and I don’t know how to get out.”

Complex, a teenage male subject, perceives his situation in a similar light. “I feel trapped in this situation and there is no way out” (17- years old). Bubba, another teenage male subject says “it’s like a maze. Once you in, it’s no door out.” (18- years old).

Another teenage male subject spoke about having no way out. Jammie (15-years old) says:

“It’s scary. I think a lot about my life and how I will probably end up incarcerated, too, just because my dad was incarcerated and his dad was incarcerated. It’s like a cycle that you can’t break. Once you in it, you can’t get out.”

Having no way out seems to take hope out of children for a brighter future. If you grow up thinking that you have no way out and that you will end up like your incarcerated parent, what are the odds of it happening?

Summary

Children’s perceptions of their living situations within their homes and communities, provided insight into their family structures, duties, and relationships. Children identified many experiences that they were grateful for, but perceived as being complicated and frustrating. Although living with kin, children held unsecure feelings of being kicked out of their living situations at anytime and felt unwelcome. They also identified complications with the structure of their living situations. For example, children tended to live in crowed households, leading to tight sleeping quarters. Children
described their desires to have their own space, which they were not afforded most of the time.

Children were frustrated within their homes, because they harbored feelings of being a guest during long-term stays with family members. Children were uncomfortable, and did not desire the responsibility placed upon them to be the adult of the house. Children were uncomfortable with having to take care of themselves. They desired to be taken care of rather than having to take on the role of adult. Children were forced to act as adult when having to fend for themselves (i.e., cooking/cleaning).

Furthermore, in contrast to the expectations of adult-like behavior, they were not allowed to come and go as they please. If fact, children complained about feeling as though they were locked up, like their parents. Children described situations in which they were not allowed to leave their homes without the company of an adult. This too was frustrating for children, although they understood that it was only to keep them safe in the dangerous and crime-ridden communities they lived.

Children lived in neighborhoods plagued by crime, drug users and sellers, and violent. The children desired a way out of it their unsafe communities, uncomfortable living situations, and status as children of the incarcerated, but identified no way of accomplishing such.

Chapter 5 provides findings related to child perceptions of the effects of parental incarceration. The themes discussed in this chapter include silence and shame, disruptions, and the police.
CHAPTER 5

CHILD PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTS OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION

SILENCE AND SHAME

Children of incarcerated parents often keep the information about their parent’s incarceration private. Many reasons have been documented for this silence, including secrecy, deception, stigmatization, shame, and fear (Chaney, Linkenhoker, Home, 1977; Gabel, 1992; Hagan & Myers, 2003; Johnston, 1995; Kampfner, 1995; Sack et al., 1976). Although research suggests that children do not disclose information regarding their parents’ incarceration, few studies have explored in detail the child’s perceptions about this silence (Murray, 2007; Poehlmann & Eddy, 2010). This chapter provides insight into child perceptions of silence as an effect of having a parent in prison. When discussing their personal experiences with silence during their parent(s) incarceration, five main themes emerged. The themes relevant to silence included deception and playing dumb, keeping one’s personal experiences inside, telling God about their feelings, being forced to disclose information about parental incarceration, and selective disclosure to a few close friends.

A substantial proportion of subjects were not aware of their parent’s incarceration. Of the 57 children interviewed nineteen (33%) were not aware that their parent was in prison. Therefore, these children were deceived by caregivers and involuntarily silenced by the lack of information provided them. The majority of children in this sample (n=38) were aware of their parent’s incarceration. Three children acted as if they did not know where their parents were. The child narratives below provide details of how and why
these three children decided to manage this information by playing dumb about the truth of their mother’s or father’s incarceration.

**Playing Dumb**

This section discusses children’s experiences of being deceived about their incarcerated parent’s whereabouts. Children were aware of their parent’s imprisonment but chose to act as though they were not aware of their parent’s status as incarcerated. The current chapter sheds light on reasons behind and the secrets told children to maintain their silence about parental incarceration.

Blacky is 13-years old and living with her maternal grandmother during her mother’s incarceration. When asked about her mother’s whereabouts she had the following to say:

*Interviewer:* Do you know where your mother is?
*Child:* “I’m not supposed to.”

*Interviewer:* What does that mean? Tell me about it.
*Child:* “Everybody acts like it’s this big secret. Like I don’t know the truth.”

*Interviewer:* What are you talking about? Who is everybody? What is the truth?
*Child:* “My grandmother thinks that I don’t know my mom is in prison. She told me that my mom had to go away for a while to get her life together. That she would be home soon. That I shouldn’t worry because she is fine and sends her love. She never says where my mom had to go to. When I ask, she find some way to change the topic. I just stopped talking about it. I just starting playing dumb. Playing along with her half-truth. My mom is in prison and who knows when she coming back. She killed someone and had to go there not to get no life together. I’m not dumb. I know where she at. I always knew.”

*Interviewer:* Who else knows that you know where your mother is?
*Child:* “Just you and me. I’ma wait til it comes out then I’ma tell them I knew all the time.”
Two other children provided less detailed information about playing dumb, yet they had similar experiences with remaining silent about their parent’s incarceration.

“My mother told me that my father is away at training school. I know he in prison. He never come home. My cousin in training school and he come home on Christmas and in the summer. My dad never come home. I know he in prison. Don’t tell my mother. She think I don’t know. I act like I don’t know. I don’t ask nothing ‘cause she just keep on lying.” (Minnie, twelve years old, male).

“I don’t get what’s so bad about prison that your family lies about it. Everyone say my dad is somewhere else. He was in rehab one time. Out of state with family another time. Travelling for work the next time. Coming home soon another time. It’s always something new. Never he in prison. He in prison, he in prison. Who really cares? I play along with all the stories they tell. I even ask questions about it. But really who cares he in prison? I don’t.” (Poo-Poo, eleven years old, male).

Although some children decided to remain silent and pretend to be unaware of their parent’s incarceration by accepting the deceiving stories they were told other children made conscious decisions not to talk about it because they felt their personal business should not to be shared or discussed with anyone.

It’s Nobody Damn Business

The majority of the sample felt that having a parent in prison was a personal issue that should not be talked about outside of family members. The excerpts below capture the feelings of many of the children. Leeah specifically spoke about her experience with parental incarceration as being “family business.” Leeah mentions,

“I don’t tell my family business in the streets. I grew up being told that you keep your personal business at home. It aint nobody damn business about what happens in your home. You tell someone your business and they can do whatever with it. They could tell people and you never know who to trust. You better off not saying nothing about it to no one.”
Mo held similar feeling although he did not categorize his experience as being family business. Mo states,

“I never told anyone because they never asked me. If they did ask, I still wouldn’t tell because it’s not their business anyway.” (Mo, 15 years old, male)

Ricky and Relly decided not to share their “business” about their parents being in prison because of fear that it might be shared with others. Ricky and Relly respectively said,

“I don’t want anyone to know. They might tell the teacher or someone else. I don’t want them knowing my business. What for?” (Ricky, eight years old, male)

“I don’t tell anyone because they will talk about it. Then when they get mad at me they would talk about it” (Relly, eight years old, male)

Marie and Godoe similar to Ricky and Relly identified a sense of fear in talking about their parents’ imprisonment because of fear of being laughed at or stigmatized. Marie and Godoe had the following to say,

“I don’t talk about my personal to people. If you tell that, people will just laugh at you. I don’t want to be laughed at.” (Marie, eight years old, female)

“I don’t tell people, ‘cause they will think my dad is a bad dad. My dad is a good dad. I don’t know what he did wrong. I wasn’t there.” (Godoe, seven years old, male)

Greg on the other hand, questions himself as to why anyone would want to share that his or her parent is in prison. Greg projected his feeling by stating,

“It is not cool to have a parent in prison. Why would anybody tell that? It’s for me to know and nobody to find out. My business is my business and nobody else.” (Greg, eleven years old, male)

Finally, Nay-Nay decided to keep her feelings and information about her father’s incarceration to herself, she maintained silence in the following way,
“I just keep it all inside. I don’t want to talk about it to no one. It feels better to keep it to yourself. If someone made a joke about it, I would be sad.” (Nay-Nay, 7 years old, female)

Children had many reasons why and how they decided to remain silent about their personal “business” of having a parent who is serving time in prison. Another way children remained silent was to share their experience with God. In this manner they were able to divulge their feelings without fear of the information being disclosed to any human being.

**In God We Trust**

Telling God about their experiences allowed children to talk about those things that they did not feel comfortable sharing, were told not to, or were ashamed of. One child’s short story sheds light on the experience of maintaining silence by choosing to talk to God about his/her parent being in prison. According to Jaya, a teenage female (14 years old), telling God is not considered talking about it. When asked, “did you tell anyone about your parent being in prison,” Jaya answered ‘no’. She had the following story to tell when asked how she is dealing with her parent being in prison:

“I put all my trust in God. From day one when my mother went to prison, I was talking to God about it. I asked God to keep it a secret. I didn’t want no-one to know about it. I asked God to keep my mom safe in there, because it’s not a safe place. I talk to God and that’s how I deal with it. Each day is a new day to pray for something, talk or cry about it to God. My friends can’t help me, because they don’t know nothing about it. They don’t care about it. I do. It’s hard to hold in and not talk about it. I thought a lot about who I could tell that I can trust. Who wouldn’t get mad and use it to hurt me. Who loves me and cares about what I feel. Who I trust all the time. It is only God. God makes stuff happen, so I know he knows what I say.”
I remember when she got arrested. I saw it happen. I ran in the house and went to my room and got on my knees. I put my head down and prayed and prayed and prayed. I don’t know if it did anything. It made me feel better. In my house we act like nothing happened. We still don’t talk about it. I ask God why and pray we do. But it didn’t happen yet. I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t have God in my life. It been like five years and God keeps me feeling good. He don’t talk, but he’s inside making it better.”

Jaya is an example of child who claimed to remain silent about her parent’s incarceration when in actually she was sharing her experiences with God from the beginning of her mother’s imprisonment. Talking to God about parental incarceration seemed to make Jaya feel a lot better than holding her feelings in. In dealing with parental incarceration, children had desires of sharing their experiences and feelings with those who they perceived as being trustworthy. Similar to Jaya, Sum-Sum a ten-year old female subject shared her experiences of her mother’s incarceration with the help of a recommendation from her caregiver. Sum-Sum mentioned:

“My grandma told me the only person I can talk about my father’s prison is Jesus. She said he can keep a secret.”

Other sample children identified similar feeling by simply stating:

“I ask God all my questions I have about prison and why my parent is there.”
(Drey, eight years old, male)

“I only trust God with the stuff I’m afraid to tell anyone about. He don’t judge.”
(Kadesa, eight years old, female)

“Every night I pray the Lord keep Papi safe. I tell God everything.”
(Pablo, eleven years old, male)

“I don’t tell anyone about my dad being in prison. The only person that knows is God and I never even told him. I trust God 100%.”
(Marquis, ten years old, male)
This study has shed light on the silence among this population and how some children do not necessarily remain quiet about the situation. In fact, some children have turned to God to talk about their personal experiences with parental imprisonment. Children have faith in God in keeping their secrets about their parent’s incarceration and with answering their questions about parental incarceration. Yet, they lose faith and hope when faced with the challenges of growing up in a crime-ridden neighborhood.

**DISRUPTIONS**

Children of the incarcerated reported experiences with disruptions relating specifically to moving into new homes and/or changing schools as a result of their parent’s imprisonment. The majority of children whose lives were disrupted by parental incarceration had a change in residence (68%), followed by a change in school (39%). Furthermore, 15 percent of these children experienced dual disruptions. Dual-disruptions are when individuals experience more than one lifestyle change simultaneously. For example, a few children had a change in residence and a subsequent change in school when their parent was imprisoned.

**There’s No Place Like Home!**

Children described their experiences with being disrupted from their living situations in a negative light. Although they had positive things to say about their caregivers, they had negative things to say about the experience itself. The children seemed to be shifted from comfortable situations into uncomfortable ones. Children
talked about the differences between their old and new residences, rooms or lack of, and the actual move.

Drey compared his experience to homelessness. He was experiencing the incarceration of both his mother and father during the time of his interview. Drey had the following to say:

“First my mom went to prison and that messed everything up. I had no mom anymore and I had no place to live. My dad was in prison already, so when my mom went, I was like homeless. Until my grandma said I will be with her, ‘cause she ain’t want me to be lost in the system like other kids. I moved in with her and had no bedroom. I had to sleep in the living room for like months. I never got my old friends over ‘cause we had no place to talk without grandma being around. I used to have my own bedroom, friends over and space to just be with friends. I had a cool house. All that is gone. This house is small and it’s no room for me here. I ain’t never getting comfortable.”

Drey was living with his mother during the time his father was in prison. Once his mother was incarcerated, he had no place to live. His maternal grandmother stepped in and took the initiative to allow him to live in her home. Similar to Drey, who moved in with his grandmother and had no private bedroom to sleep in, Ricky mentioned:

“I used to have my own room and now I don’t. I like having my own room. Sleeping on the couch is no fun.”

Children further described the move from one household to another as being a very quick process. For example, Little Bit’s description was:

“The move was so fast. I really didn’t know what was going on. I had one suitcase the rest of my stuff I put it in black garbage bags. I packed when I didn’t know where I was going. It was like no one shared where I was going with me. I was the only one moving. My brother stayed at mom’s boyfriend, but I had to go. I found out when I got to her house, I would be staying in my grandmother cold dark basement. I don’t know how long I will be here, so I really won’t unpack. I’m not happy here. I never will be.”
Other children also discussed their preference for their previous living situations. Marie, Zahir and Tamia had the following to say:

“I don’t like changing my home. I want to stay at the home I was.”
(Marie, eight years old, female)

“I felt better in my old house with daddy and mommy. Living here is weird. I can’t sleep at night, ‘cause I don’t feel it here.”
(Zahir, seven years old, female)

“I like my house before my dad went away. It was my place. This is not mine. It will never be.”
(Tamia, nine years old, female)

A few children spoke about their experiences of numerous moves. Greg described such an experience below:

“I have moved more times than you can count on two hands. It’s like no one want me with them for a long time. Every few months I pack and move. First at grandma’s, then auntie, then back to grandma, than to auntie, then with dad. That was the worst. His new girlfriend hated me. She made me feel uncomfortable when my dad was gone. I think ‘cause I look like my mom and she hates her.”

Other children described a routine of numerous moves as well:

“I have lived with my family in like five shelters. All the beds at these places are so hard and uncomfortable. I just suck it up, ‘cause at least I’m with my mom and brothers.”
(Nikki, eleven years old, female)

“I lived in a lot of houses after my dad went to prison. My moms say she can’t afford for us to stay comfortable. We just have to do what we gotta do.
(Mark, sixteen years old male)

Another theme that emerged among child responses included issues related to the move itself. Some children provided basic feedback comparing their past and current living situations. For example, Kiya questioned why, before beginning to disclose her experience with moving from her old home into the new residence. Kiya mentions,
“Why me? I liked where I was before. Moving was so much work. I have always lived with my mom and me. We had a routine with how we got along with each other. I loved it. I hate this now. The move was horrible. I had to leave my whole room back there. All I took was clothes. My grandparents can’t fit my stuff in the house. So now I have to down grade. No more queen bed. I am back to a small, small twin. I don’t have room for my clothes to fit. I have lots of clothes. I wish I could go back to before all this happened. My life is different forever now.”(11 years old, female)

Similar to Kiya, Day-Day enjoyed living in her old situation. Day-Day commented,

“I hate it here. I like it where I was before the move. No one ever told me why we had to move. I think it would be better to just stay and not have moved. But no one listens to me.”(14 years old, female)

To the contrary, Michael was less concerned about particulars of his living situation than with having neighborhood companions. Thus, he too compared the amount of friends he had while living at his old residence. Michael mentioned,

“In the old place I had so many friends. Now I have none. This place is corny. I will never make friends here. This whole thing sucks.”

Children experiencing disruptions dealing with moving from one home to another had negative descriptions of their situations. When asked about their living situations, children made comparisons to how they lived prior to parental incarceration that was often depicted as a positive experience. Children of the incarcerated spoke about how ‘there is no place like home’ when dealing with residential disruptions in their lives.

They also experienced disruptions in their school situations. Those children who experienced changing schools after their parent’s imprisonment felt like the new kid. Being a new kid included positive and negative experiences. Although some children felt that this was a good thing, others felt it was yet another horrible situation. Minnie, a twelve-year-old male had the following story to tell about his experience attending a new school after his father was incarcerated and his mother forced to move out their old home.
“I had to leave my old school with my best friends, my good teachers, mostly my home room teacher. I lived so close to school I could walk. I liked that ‘cause it gets cold in the winter-time and walking far to school is too much. I knew everyone and everyone knew me. I left so quick I couldn’t say goodbye to my friends and teachers like I wanted. One week you in your comfort zone, the next week you a stranger in your school. This school is so boring. I don’t talk to a lot of them, ‘cause they all have their friends already. Here I come as the new guy with no friends. No one knows me. My homeroom teacher is mean. This makes me not want to go to school no more.”

Other children provided similar experiences of changing schools as an effect of parental incarceration. The section below describes the negative experiences of child subjects.

The New School: I Hate This Place!

The majority of children described their negative experiences of changing schools in terms of being the new kid. Contrary to child descriptions of changing residences, those who had to change schools had both positive and negative experiences. This section only provides insight into the negative experiences as perceived by the children.

Blacky, a teenage female subject, was unhappy with having to change schools in the middle of the school year when her mother was imprisoned. Blacky had the following to share:

“Who moves to a new school in the middle of the year? It just makes everything worse. I don’t know no one and no one don’t know me. It’s better to move in the beginning of the year when it’s lots of other new kids. I don’t like that I don’t know the teacher and by time I do get to know her, the year will be over and my grades will suffer. Moving in the middle of the year is just stupid in my opinion.”

Leeah’s experience of being disrupted from one school into another was negative because she felt as though she did not fit into her new school environment. Leeah said,

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The positive experiences related to being the new kid will be discussed in the section titled positive effects.
“This school is full of cliques. You have the nerd kids. You have the bad kids that hang in the halls all day. You have the sport kids. You have all these groups. I am not in none. I don’t fit in none. So I don’t fit with this school.”

Muka had a negative experience on her first day at her new school. Muka mentions,

“My first day I had a fight at school. This girl thought she was tough and try to test me. I sure showed her. I hate this place. When you new, you have to prove yourself. At my old school they all know that I’m no joke when it come to my boxing skills.”

Drey shared his negative experience with change of schools by stating,

“I don’t like it there. The teacher is always yelling about something. She has no control over the class. She is mad annoying.”

Similar to Drey, Zahir related her negative experience with her new teacher at her new school. Zahir said,

“The teacher don’t know how to teach. She lets the kids just do anything. They talk back to her and no one listen to her.”

Children’s negative experiences with being disrupted from their schools were related to the time of year they changed schools, relations with their peers at the new school, and relationship with new teachers.

**OTHER NEGATIVE EFFECTS**

Children experienced other negative effects, such as, unforgettable situations, hating the police, drug and alcohol use, and sexual experiences. This section identifies child perceptions relevant to the identified thematic areas.
Unforgettable Situations!

Jammie remembered the day his father was arrested like it was yesterday, although it was five years ago. He was ten years old when police officers,—who he refers to as the “popo,”—took his father into custody. Jammie was fifteen-years old when interviewed. During his interview session, Jammie’s voice trembled as he discussed his unforgettable situation.

“It was a sunny day and me and daddy and grandmommy were getting ready to eat breakfast. My grandmommy said that we should go to the store to get bread and milk to complete the meal. I ran to my room and put my t-shirt on and was ready to go. Me and my dad walked to the store and we was talking and laughing the whole way. The store was only three blocks away from our home, so it took a short time to get there. We got the milk and bread in no time and were on our way back home. Then popo came out of nowhere. I don’t know where they came from. I didn’t even see them coming. It happened so fast.

They drove the cop car up on the sidewalk right in front of us and jumped out the car. I was confused and I think my dad was too. They grabbed him and shoved him into the side of the car. They were smiling the entire time. My dad dropped the milk and bread and I ran to pick it up. They never looked at me or said anything to me. I watched them being rough with him the whole time. They put cuffs on him and threw him into the back of the cop car. As soon as they had jumped out of the car, they jumped back into the car and drove off. I never got to say bye. I didn’t get no chance to ask no questions or answer no questions. I never got to talk. I wanted to say something. I don’t know what I would say. But I wanted to say something to my dad, to them, to someone, you know.

I thought I was invisible for a second, ‘cause they never even looked my way. They wanted my dad and didn’t think anything about me. His son who stood there helpless watching them abuse him. I walked home and thought about it the whole way. I told my grandmommy what happened and we both cried. That was the last time I spent quality time with my dad, the worst day of my life. A day I can’t never forget even though I try many times.”

Similar to Jammie, many of the children who witnessed the arrest of their parent could remember everything that happened during the arrest. They described that day with the same emotion that they said they experienced at the time of the arrest. Johnay was seven years old when interviewed at her paternal grandmother’s home, where she had lived
since her mother and father went to prison. Johnay was different from many of the children in the sample because she witnessed the arrest of both of her parents.

“My father went in prison first. Him and my mom lived here too, before they went in prison. They stayed in the basement and I was upstairs. My room is there. They came in the house at night. I was asleep, but woke up when I heard my mom yelling and screaming loud. I was scared. I ran out my bed and saw granny in the hall and dad on the floor and mom standing there. The police was on top of dad and had his hands on his back. It look like it hurt. My dad was yelling, my mom was yelling, and I was crying. I don’t know how they got in the house. I was waked up out my sleep. It was scary. I have night dreams about it all the time. I just wake crying sometimes. Loud noise at night make me scared. So my mom told me sleep wit the TV on, so I can stop waking up all the time.

When mommy got in prison it was worse. The police knocked on the door and I opened it. They just started running in. I called for my mom, ‘cause she was home and in the basement like all the time. My granny was out. They ran all over the house and my mom was running to the back to go out the door. I was going with her, ‘cause I would be home alone. They grabbed her and she hit them. They hit her in the face and she was bleeding. Then another cop came to her and she spit on him. He hit her, too. I ran to my room…too much to watch. I heard them leave and close the door. I never came out my room. I feel asleep. My granny came in my room and woke me. I was thinking I was dreaming. I wasn’t.

I had to tell my granny what happened. It was hard to say. It was hard to see. It hard now to say again. I have night dreams and keeping the TV on don’t work no more. I’m crazy over it. My granny is, too. I don’t know why the police took my parents. I don’t know why they ain’t take them at the same time? Why they wait and come back for my mommy? They ain’t hit my dad in the face? And they came when my granny was home when he went in prison? They took my mom with just me in the house? I’m crazy over it. It’s stuck in my heart now. I think when I get an adult they go’n come for me?”

Day-Day, a fourteen-year-old who lived with her maternal grandmother while her mother was incarcerated, talked about what she saw:

“It was crazy. I was walking home from school with my girls and when I got to my block I saw mad cop cars all over the place. I was wondering what was going on. I never thought they was on the block cause something that happen in my house. When I reached my house, I saw like four cops on the porch and more in the cop cars. They had yellow tape up all around my porch, so I
couldn’t get in the front door. I went to the back door and came through the basement. I wish I never did that. In the basement, I saw blood on the floor. A lot of blood. I saw a chair. I saw a belt. The belt had blood on it. I almost threw up. I just stood there looking and then I ran right back out the back door.

When I got outside, my neighbor was out there and she called me to her. I was in shock. I wanted to know what went down. What happened in the basement? Whose blood was that? Yo, I was all jacked up at that point. I was walking into my neighbor house, when I saw the cops bringing my moms out the front of the house. We caught eye contact. We stared at each other the whole time. It was like slow motion. It was so crazy. I wanted to say something. I wanted to yell something. I wanted to do so much. I wanted to know so much. They put my mom in the back of the car and they turned the sirens on and drove down the block. Everybody was outside looking and when the car rode down the block everyone saw my mom in the back seat with her head down. I was so embarrassed. I was so sad. I was fucked up. I’m still fucked up.”

Children such as Jammie, Johnay and Day-Day, who witnessed the arrest of their parent, found it hard to forget. These children had many questions about what took place during the arrest, but had not received any answers. This seemed to leave them with unresolved emotions. The children carried their personal experiences throughout their youthful lives even disrupting sleep and a sense of safety. The children did not describe a typical arrest scenario that one may see on television or read in a newspaper article. They describe what they perceived as abuse, disrespect, life-changing, and unforgettable events. The children who witnessed the arrest felt invisible, silent and useless. They wanted to speak out, not knowing what they would or should say, but wanting to have a voice in what was happening before their eyes. All three children mentioned the interview session as being the first time they talked about what they saw since its occurrence. They all spoke of a sense of relief that they experienced from talking about what occurred and how they felt as a result.
I Hate The PoPo

The majority of children in the sample did not witness the arrest of their parent, yet 30 percent of the children held negative attitudes toward the police. Many of the children disclosed hatred, lack of respect, mistrust, and anger toward the police. For example, Nahna, a sixteen-year old female, experiencing maternal incarceration, disclosed the following information when asked about her feelings/attitude toward the police:

“I don’t like them at all. ‘Cause you have black cops that really be sitting there like really trying to pick with you just to get on your last nerve, or just to see you get mad and curse them out, just so you could get locked up. They do everything in their power to just mess with somebody. So like I don’t like them at all. I just don’t see no purpose for them on earth. To me, [the] police don’t do their job anyway. You still have crack heads on the street, you still have people who steal cars, people that break into people house, rapist. You still have everything. They don’t do nothing. I just don’t like them.

They came in my grandmother’s house. My mom told us how everything was going to happen and an hour or two later the police came asking for my mother. She gave everyone their hugs and kisses and they took her. They wasn’t rough with her, because she participated. I think that’s the reason why they wasn’t rough with her. I don’t like them at all. When they took my mother, that made me hate them more.

You should talk to my ex-boyfriend. He used to stay getting locked up, but over some dumb junk like fighting, just little stuff like that. They would take him to jail and put him in the car and everything. He is worse than me in hating the police. I really can’t stand them. A lot of people I know feel the same way or worse. It’s just sad how no one respects them. They don’t respect themselves.”

Little Bit, another teenaged female subject, held similar attitudes toward the police as Nahna. Little Bit mentioned, “I never liked the cops. They are all crooked.” Another child, Nikki, discusses her lack of respect toward police because of what was said to her after her father was arrested:
“They are dumb. When they locked my dad up that day, they told me to have a nice day. I have no respect for the police. I never did. They took my dad and didn’t tell me anything—but to have a nice day. How is that possible?”

Another child discusses her negative attitudes toward the police because from her perspective they do not do their job. Ebby, a thirteen-year old female, whose father was incarcerated, held negative attitudes toward police, because she felt they don’t do their job:

“The police don’t help. When you call them to come out and help you they take a really long time to come. They don’t care. If you were in danger, you could be dead by the time they come.”

Relly, a younger child, held anger and negative feelings toward the police because they took his father away from him. Relly said:

“The cops are dumb and stupid, ‘cause they took my father away from me. I feel angry, mad, and sad. I feel like punching them. The police did not help me at all. They hurt me.”

Mo, a fifteen-year old male, living with his paternal grandmother during his father’s incarceration, talked about his lack of respect for the police, because of their behavior in the community and in his school. Mo, said the following:

“Every day I go to school I have to go through a metal detector as the police stand on each side waiting to see what one of the bad kids are going to bring to school. I never understood why the police officers need guns in the school. Do they need guns to protect high school kids? They take away your parents and put them in prison, then they come to the schools their kids go to and find ways to lock them up, too. Why would you need a gun in a high school? They have a lot of fights at my school, but you don’t need a gun to stop the fight. I really hate the police. I see them everywhere, in the streets and in my school. Every day I see them. I never got in trouble with the police. Why do I have to see them so much? I hate the police.”

Another high school student discussed negative attitudes toward police officers in her school. Muka attends a local high school in East Orange, where she lives with her
maternal aunt. Muka’s negative attitudes toward the police began when her grandmother
told her what the police did to her mother when they were arresting her. These negative
feelings were exacerbated by the police presence in her high school. Muka described a
fight that she was having at school and the way the police intervened to break up the
fight:

“The girls at school always hating on me ‘cause I stay with some new kicks. So
this one girl kept bothering me and I wanted to fight her for the longest.
Everyone at school knows me for fighting and they love to watch me fight. So I
planned to have a fight with the girl around the corner from the school, so that the
school police won’t break it up. But she kept coming in my face, so I had to fight
her at school. We took it in the bathroom and everyone followed us into the girls
bathroom, even boys. I was on top of her punching her over and over in her face.
Then the school police came in and threw me off of her. I fell into the bathroom
stall and almost fell into the toilet. I was mad, ‘cause they had no right throwing
me. They didn’t do nothing to the other girl and she started all this. I got in the
school police face and he pushed me again. They always try and be tough with
kids.

They know they can’t fight. They just do bad stuff cause they know we scared of
the guns they have. I hate the police. The school police are the worse. They are
the punk cops that are scared to be in the streets with the street dudes. They can’t
survive in the hood streets and they know it. All they know how to do is get
rough with kids, especially girls. I hate the police, yo. For real. Oooh, I hate
them so much.”

Mo and Muka described situations in their school environment that depicted their
negativity toward the police. This was interesting because much of the research on
children’s attitudes toward the police is focused on police officers within the community.
By allowing the voices of the children to be heard, researchers are able to understand
what it is like for children within the many environments in which they are involved on a
daily basis. Children were simply asked about their attitudes toward the police; they
were not asked about the police within their schools and their attitudes toward them.
These two high school students provided evidence for their negative attitudes toward police officers not just those officers in their respective schools, but in the community at-large.

The children of the incarcerated had a lot to say about their experiences, perceptions and feelings. In dealing with attitudes toward police, some children held positive attitudes while others held negative attitudes. Data from exploratory face-to-face interviews suggest that the majority of their perceptions are not directly associated with their parent’s arrest and imprisonment and are exacerbated because of their direct experiences with police. Negative attitudes toward the police were the most common feelings reported, which in many cases may lead the child to lose respect for officers in their communities.

Although some children held negative attitudes toward the police because they witnessed the arrest of their parent or felt that the police were the cause of their parent’s imprisonment, the majority did not witness the arrest of their parent and identified that they held negative attitudes toward the police prior to their parent’s incarceration. According to Bernstein (2005), “the trauma children experience when a parent is arrested may set the tone for their subsequent relationship with the criminal justice system. A natural desire to protect oneself and defend one’s family evolves into a hatred for the police, and authority generally—a rage that can make it difficult for a child to grow up to respect the law or trust its representatives” (p. 12). This study identifies that the hatred that some children hold for police occurs prior to the arrest; therefore, it may not be directly connected to witnessing the arrest of their parent.
It was not found that children hate the police because of their desire to protect themselves or their families; rather it comes from the inability of the police to protect the children and their families. Furthermore, the majority of children mentioned that they never liked the police, that they don’t do their jobs and they mistrust them and their actions.

Among the other negative effects of having a parent in prison is the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism. The next section focuses on those children who shared experiences pertaining to their use, experimentation and abuse with using drugs and drinking alcohol.

**High and Wasted**

Adolescent youth were the only subjects questioned and probed about their experiences with using drugs, drinking alcohol and having unprotected sex\(^6\). Therefore, this section refers only to those children aged 13 through 18, and includes 15 children.

More than 50 percent of the teenage subjects self-reported drug use during the time of their parent’s imprisonment. Although minor children (ages 7 – 12 years) in the sample were not asked about their involvement with risky behaviors, it is significant to discuss the experiences of the many teenagers who were using drugs. This provides insight into teenagers’ experiences with risky behaviors during their parent’s incarceration. It is important to discuss these negative effects because research identifies these risky behaviors as having the potential to lead children down the same paths as some of their drug addicted parents.

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\(^6\) This stipulation was a requirement for study approval from the Rutgers University Internal Review Board (IRB).
Nahna, a sixteen-year-old female dealing with maternal incarceration during the time of her interview, provided a detailed story relating to her experience with drugs. 

Nahna provided the following information about her mother when asked if she had been away from her before:

“Yes. She was on the streets like. I don’t want to call her a crack head or anything, but she would use drugs. She was an addict. I don’t know what she was using. She never was in the house with us. She used to live with somebody else. My grandmother said she always depended on a man and that’s what got her in trouble in the first place. But I don’t know. She was in and out of jail once in a blue moon. You really won’t hear about my mom being locked up, but she stayed on the streets.”

Similar to her mother, Nahna also used drugs and was dependent upon her boyfriend. In fact, her boyfriend introduced her to drugs. Nahna said “I have a boyfriend. I have been with him for two years. Before him I had friends. He is my rock. I love him a lot. I guess you can say we are like best friends.” Nahna went on to talk about how she was introduced to drugs and how she depended on her current and past boyfriends to supply the drugs:

“Well, before my mom went to prison I really wasn’t into drugs like that. Then my ex and I were talking one day and I was stressed over the whole thing and he told me to just pop this pill. It was a E pill. He said it would make me feel better. I was like, ‘okay’, ‘cause I know he won’t tell me wrong. That was when it all started. After that, it was a wrap. I was popping pills when I didn’t want to think about my life, my mom and all type stuff. When we broke up ‘cause he cheated on me with this other chick in our school, I stopped. It cost too much for me. My ex would buy it all the time. So if he wasn’t buying, then I wasn’t using. With the break up, I ended up not using.

My new man is not like my ex at all. He don’t want me popping no pills. We smoke weed sometimes. He used to sell, so it was just there all the time. He has a job now, so he just buy it for us. He buy me anything I want.”

Other children also discussed their drug use during their parent’s incarceration. Although many of these kids did not provide as much detail as Nahna, they spoke about
their experiences with experimenting, using and/or abusing drugs. Children mentioned
the following drugs in their interviews: Ecstasy/pills, marijuana/weed, cocaine/cope
and/or mushrooms. Bubba, an 18-year-old male, disclosed, “I have done E, mushrooms,
coke and I smoke hella weed.” Bubba was the only teenager who disclosed that he had
done five different kinds of drugs during his mother’s incarceration. In contrast, Mo, a
15-year-old male stated, “my mom used heroin. I don’t mess with all that. A lil weed is
all I need.” Although Bubba and Mo both used drugs, Mo mentioned his choice to only
use one drug.

The drug of choice among the teenagers was marijuana. The children shared the
following experiences related to their marijuana use. Smokey, Sandy and Jammie, three
fifteen year-old-subjects claimed to smoke marijuana as a coping mechanism for dealing
with parental incarceration. Smokey (female) said, “I smoke weed. I been high a couple
of times. It helps keep me sane with all the chaos in my life.” Sandy (female)
mentioned, “smoking keeps reality out my mind. It makes me not care. I don’t want to
care about my mom being in prison. It works; you just have to stay high, which I do.”
Jammie (male) disclosed “I just started smoking ‘cause when my dad got locked up, I just
ain’t give a fuck no more.” Children discussing their experiences also identified who
they did the drugs with. For example, Jaya (14-years-old) smoked with her sibling. She
said “I smoke weed with my brother. He says it’s okay to do when you have a lot on
your mind. I have a lot on my mind, so I smoke.” Blacky (13-years-old), similar to other
sample females, smoked with her boyfriend. She mentioned “me and my man get high
every time I see him. He smokes, so I smoke.”
More than half of the teenagers interviewed reported drug and alcohol use. Of all risky behaviors experienced by children, they reported drinking alcohol more than using any drug and having sex. In fact, 100% of the teenage subjects self-reported alcohol use. Similar to reasons for using drugs, children also drank alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal with parental incarceration. Day-Day, a 14-year-old female, said, “Yeah I drink. I stress a lot and drinking makes me laugh a lot, then fall to sleep.” Similar to Day-Day who reported drinking because of stress she deals with on a day-by-day basis, many sample children used alcohol as a way of dealing with the emotions they carried as a result of having a parent in prison.

Complex, a 17-year-old, male had the following to say:

“Drinking helps me deal with having my mom in prison. It’s hard to live with that. I’m too young to go crazy over it, so I drink over it.”

Little Bit, a 14-year-old, female shared a similar experience when she stated:

“I know I shouldn’t get drunk, but, hey I have a lot to drink about. I’m stressing over a lot. Mostly having my parent in prison.”

Bebe, a 13-year-old female, disclosed an experience relating to her alcohol abuse as a coping mechanism. Bebe is different from the other teenagers who reported drinking because she stated that she drinks often. Bebe says:

“My friends laugh at me and call me a alcoholic ‘cause I stay wasted. It’s easier to deal with my life that way.”

Although Bebe is different from many sample children, her drinking habits are similar in nature to Mark, a 16-year-old male. Both children seem to have adopted a habit of drinking in direct relation to their life situation. Mark states:
“I need a drink every time I come from visiting my mom. Those visits make anyone need to drink. I drink when I come from visits, when I get a collect call from mom and on Fridays, because I visit on Saturdays.”

Jammie mentions that she drinks even though she knows her parent prohibits it. Thus, she uses her father’s incarceration as her excuse for going against this prohibition.

Jammie had the following to say:

“My mom don’t want me drinking, but I always say I do it cause daddy in prison. Then she cries and I get away it with it. I like to drink and I have an excuse to do it.”

The quotations stated above identify that children drank alcohol as a coping mechanism to dealing with their parent being in prison. The following section provides more insight into the children’s experiences by revealing how they got access to alcohol and who they typically drank with.

Children obtained access to alcohol in a variety of ways. For example, some children had access to alcohol within their homes. Both Mark and Complex took liquor from their caregiver’s stash kept in their houses. Mark said, “I take my aunt’s when she works late. She never notice ‘cause she stay drunk even when she have to work. I been drunk mad times.” Complex said, “I been drunk so many times, it’s not funny. I like beer. My mom has a lot of beer in the house all the time. She never can tell when I take it.” Having caregivers who drank alcohol made it easy for the children living with them to have access.

POSTIVE EFFECTS

Research has provided limited information about positive effects of parental incarceration on children (Hanlon et al., 2005; Miller, Gil-Kashiwabara, Briggs &
This section identifies the positive perceptions that children held of the effects of parental incarceration. Children identified the positive outcomes resulting from school disruptions, positive police interactions, and improved relationships with their incarcerated parents.

**New School, New Chicks: It’s Like A Kid In A Candy Shop!**

The majority of children described their experiences of changing schools in terms of being the new kid. The majority of children who held positive perceptions of school changes were male subjects. Older male subjects had positive experiences with being a new child in school and having a chance to start all over. Most of their stories referenced good situations dealing with the females attending their new schools. Mo, a teenage male subject, had the following to say about changing schools when his mother was sentenced to imprisonment.

“Coming to this new school was pretty sweet. The kid is a girl magnet. My old school gave me a kind of bad rep with girls. They like to call me a dog. At this new spot, I’m the new kid and mad girls are interested in the kid. I like I have a new start with this school, the chicks. I could pick whoever I want. It’s like the kid in a candy shop. Sike, nah, I’m playing. But, nah, I like being the new kid.”

Similar to Mo, Mark, another teenage male subject shared his positive experience of changing schools when his mother was incarceration. Mark mentions,

“I love this new school. The girls are all over me. The girls love a new dude in school. They all want to be the first to be my girl. I’m in heaven.”

Bubba, an eighteen-year-old male, reminisced about his experience of changing schools by referring to his first day at the new school. Bubba said,
“My first day at the new school was nice. At lunch, all these chicks were coming over to my table asking questions and welcoming me to the school. I got this one girl number on the first day. She said if I have any questions about anything, call her anytime. I think I am going to love this place.”

Although the older male children seemed happy about changing school when they had positive interactions with the females at their particular schools, a few younger males held positive experiences as well. Their experiences were related to feelings of general contentment, having nice teachers and being able to start anew. The quotes below provide such examples, respectively.

“My school now is okay. I can’t complain about it.” (Minnie, 12 years old, male)

“I’m happy to be in a new school. My old school was getting boring, ‘cause I know everyone for so long.” (Greg, 11 years old, male)

“This school now is fine. My teacher is nice to me.” (Ugene, 7 years old, male).

Male subjects of all ages had positive experiences with leaving their old schools and being placed in new schools; therefore they had positive perceptions about the change. Male children were happy with being the new kid because it provided an opportunity for change. In other words, it allowed children to have a fresh start. In comparison to females, males had fewer complaints about being uprooted from their old schools. Rather they embraced the change, especially when faced with positive interactions among their female peers.

**Being Heard**

Maintaining connections to incarcerated parents is important to many children. In this sample, more female children had positive communicative experiences with their incarcerated parent than males. Girls felt they were heard and considered by their
incarcerated parent during their parent’s imprisonment, which came from their conversations and visits with their parents while incarcerated.

More than half of the children held positive perceptions of their parent being in prison because they felt that during their incarceration they listened and were more concerned with what they had to say. Jaya disclosed her positive perception by stating, “I feel like my mom is a parent now. She does parent stuff from prison. She care about your school work, your behavior, your health and teeth and what you eat each day.” Similar to Jaya, Blacky mentioned, “parents should let kids be heard and considered. My mom went to prison and learned that.” Both children felt that going to prison was positive for their parents in that they began listening to and considering what their children had to say. Risa spoke about her father listening to her problems with her caregiver during his incarceration. Risa said, “my grandma be bugging sometimes, so when daddy calls, I tell him about his mother. He listen to me and talk to her when she take things out of control. When I’m wrong, he tell me and when she wrong, he tell her.” Risa went on to describe how things were prior to her father imprisonment.

“My dad used to be mean. I thought he didn’t care what I said. It was his way or no way. I would tell him things and I was the wrong one, never no one else. He was never on my side. I was never right. I was a kid and what I said ain’t matter.”

Children seem to enjoy being listened to and considered. They felt as though being a parent requires one to listen to and consider the feelings of their children. When they were heard, children perceived this to be positive in nature. Incarcerated parents were seen to become more sensitive to the children’s need to be heard and considered.
Another emerging theme related to positive effects focused specifically on incarcerated mothers. Children had the following to say about their mothers. Smokey said,

“I always wanted this relationship with my mom. I don’t know what happen, but prison changed the way she talk to us. She care about our feelings now. Before she would just yell and be upset all the time. She was miserable taking it out on her kids. She happy more and loving her kids more.”

Blacky, a fifteen-year-old male, compared his relationship with his mother prior to her imprisonment, stating that he yearned for the relationship that they have now. He perceives their relationship as being positive because they communicate with one another as opposed to her just yelling. The current relationship Blacky has with her mother while imprisoned made her feel loved. Day-Day, fourteen-year-old female had the following to say about her mother,

“It’s weird cause my mom never really had anything to say to me. She was too busy running in those streets. When she went down, she would write me and ask about how I was. She wanted to know how I was in school and all that. She never cared about that when she was home and on the street. It was like she didn’t even know she had kids. When she was on drugs it was all about her next high.”

Day-Day provided specific reasons why she felt that her mother never listened or was concerned with what her daughter was doing. Day-Day felt that her mother’s addiction to drugs kept her from being concerned with her schooling. While incarcerated, Day-Day’s mother showed concern about her behavior in school and her overall wellbeing; this made her feel cared about. This, in turn, was perceived as a positive effect of parental incarceration. Tweety, an eleven-year-old female, had similar feelings about her relationship with her mother as Day-Day and Blacky. Tweety mentioned,
“Me and my moms, we so close now. Prison is not that bad. It give you time to think. I talk to my mom more now than I ever did.”

Tweety felt that she communicated with her mother more during her incarceration than when she was on the streets. This is the reason behind her positive perception of her mother’s imprisonment. Naah provided details pertaining to her visits with her mother. Naah states,

“When I visit mommy, she look in my eyes when we talk. She listens to me and cares about how I am feeling and what I say. This is new for me. I like it a lot.”

During visits, Naah felt that her mother was engaged in their discussions. This made her feel like her mother cared and this resulted in her feeling positively about her mother being incarcerated.

Bubba, an eighteen-year-old male also held positive perceptions about his mother. He said,

“My mom used to be a air head. She didn’t ever really parent. Now she behind those bars and she realize she had kids. She see she somebody mother. When she call, she consider how my day was and listen to what I have to say. She still talk about what she doing in there, but she listen to me first. We have that routine every time she get to call.”

Other children provided insight about their positive perceptions in relation to their incarcerated fathers. For example, Greg, an eleven-year-old male, had the following to share about his relationship with his father both during and prior to his imprisonment. Greg mentioned,

“My dad is so different in prison. He talks calm and not yelling all the time. He less angry. At home is was always yelling and leaving. You can’t even talk to him, ‘cause he leave so fast and angry. In the visiting place, he sits calm and listen to what you say. He listen to my stories and we laugh a lot.”

Bebe mentioned that her father never showed any concern about what she was doing with guys. She said,
“My dad never asked me about my boyfriends. In prison, he ask about that the most. He listens to my problems with guys and helps me. He said he don’t want me to be no chicken head, ‘cause he know how guys are. He told me stuff about him when he was boy. Prison changed him.”

Similar to other children, Bebe felt that prison had a transformative effect on her father and how he communicated with her during his sentence. Bebe, a thirteen-year-old female, stated,

“My dad was always getting on my nerves. He would always tell me do this, do that, don’t do this, don’t do that. I was like I ain’t have no voice. When he got locked up, things changed. He listens to my side of things and he don’t yell at me. We communicate, not just talk.”

Finally, Tamia, a nine-year-old female, perceived her dad in an entirely different light when they began communicating during his time in prison. Tamia said,

“My dad never talked to me. He would pay bills and party all the time. We talk a lot now. I thought he was retarded, ‘cause he would never really talk to his kids. He smart and can help with any problems you have. I see him as a friend, ‘cause we mad cool cause all this drama.”

Being heard and considered by their parents was important to children of the incarcerated. Children viewed incarceration as having a positive effect on their parent’s communication and listening skills. Prior to incarceration, parents were described by their children as being inattentive, mute, angry, upset, and/or uncaring toward their children. During incarceration, parents were described as transformed into caring, attentive, loving and listening parents. Children perceived this transformation as a positive effect of incarceration. Although children did not provide detailed information about how this transformation came about, it seems that in some cases, it was directly related to getting clean and sober. Children shed light on the positive relationships between parents and their children prior to and during incarceration.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

Shifting Identities: Beyond Criminally Defined

Much of the information known about children of the incarcerated is related to their parents. According to Johnston (2005), “after more than five decades of study, there is almost no information about the experiences of these children that are unrelated to incarceration” (p. 703). During an interview with Jaya, a fourteen-year-old female, battling with maternal incarceration, I was made aware of her desire to be recognized as an individual rather than as a child of a criminal offender. Therefore, this section is included in the dissertation because it sheds light on the importance of allowing this group to be seen as the dynamic children they are. Although they are similar because of their experience with parental incarceration they are also different in their own special ways. These children come from a variety of backgrounds and reflect a range of ages.

They enjoy many creative extracurricular activities and favorite things. In this sense they are similar to those children who have not experienced the imprisonment of a parent.

Jaya made it clear that she wanted to feel human. She didn’t want to be considered as a child of the incarcerated. Jaya mentioned:

“I don’t want to be known for having a parent in prison. I want to be known for who I am. I am a person like you, right? I am a kid, right? I have a name, right? I don’t want people to feel sorry for me. I’m not sorry. I didn’t do nothing, right? Why we not regular like other kids? We human, right?”…

The above narrative given by Jaya made it a priority for me to humanize all the child subjects in this sample by identify information about them that few studies have provided, such as extra-curricular activities they enjoy during their spare time. In other words, this chapter sheds light on how children spent their time enjoying some of their favorite things, not related to their parent’s imprisonment. This information is of importance for implementing programs to address their needs and desires.

Analyzing the home and family circumstances of children living with incarcerated parents identified many experiences that they perceived as being complicating and frustrating. Children discussed the structure within their households and duties, which plagued their situations with complications. Although living with family, children felt insecure about their residence, particularly about being kicked out of their living situations at anytime if they did not follow the rules of their caregivers. They also identified complications with the structure of their living situations. For example, children tended to live in crowded households, leading to tight sleeping quarters. Children described their desires to have their own space, which they were not afforded most of the time.

Children were also frustrated within their homes because they harbored feelings of being a guest although they lived with their biological family members, they were uncomfortable, and did not desire the responsibility placed upon them to be the adult of the house. Children were uncomfortable with having to take care of themselves. They desired to be taken care of rather than having to fend for themselves. At the same time, they were not allowed to come and go as they please. If fact, children complained about feeling as though they were locked up, like their parents. Children described situations
identifying their inability to leave their homes without the company of an adult. This too was frustrating to the children, although they understood that it was only to keep them safe in the communities in which they lived.

The children also discussed the neighborhoods in which they lived and what they saw on a day-to-day basis. They described their neighborhoods in terms of the high incidence of crime, the many drug users and sellers, and the violence they witnessed. The children desired a way out of it all, but identified no way of accomplishing such. Children of the incarcerated described their neighborhoods as being improvised, dangerous, and predictable. Their descriptions are similar to the descriptions of neighborhoods plagued by poverty. These children were found to have similar experiences of other children living in poverty, although children of the incarcerated held different perceptions than other children living in poverty without having a parent in prison. In other words, children of the incarcerated and children living in poverty seem to describe similar environmental experiences, although they perceive their situations as being terminal rather than permanent. These differences of perceptions warrant further research.

Finally, child-caregiver relationships were described by children as positive with their grandparents and foster mothers. Children were not as satisfied with the relations they had with their mothers, specifically because of the new male figures they often introduced into their households. When discussing their relationships with their siblings they described love-hate relationships. In other words, they could not stand to live with them and would hate to live without them.
In exploring the silence and shame among children of prisoners it was found that children’s reasons for maintaining silence are not limited to stigmatization, fear, shame, and/or deception and secrecy. Although children often maintained silence about having a parent in prison, they had different reactions to such reasoning. For example, children who lived with caregivers who kept their parent’s incarceration a secret by deceiving the child reacted by playing dumb. Playing dumb is when a child is aware that their parent has been imprisoned yet they act in accordance with what they have been told, and act as if they are not aware of the truth.

In dealing with their many fears regarding their parent’s incarceration, children told about the comfort they felt in sharing the truth of their situation with God, who they felt they could trust with anything. Trust rather than fear seemed to be a major deciding factor among children when attempting to disclose information about their parent’s incarceration. Children appear to be afraid that if they told friends, even close ones, that the information would be used against them in the future. Although some children voluntarily disclosed information, others were forced to disclose. For example, children provided instances when their parent’s crime was posted on the front page of the daily newspaper for the entire community to see and discuss. This made it almost impossible for these children to keep this personal information to themselves. Other children were forced to disclose because they felt that they had no choice when it came to questioning from authority figures, such as, teachers and/or therapists.

Children’s silence about their parent’s incarceration was both voluntary and involuntary depending on the circumstances. Research studies have focused almost exclusively on involuntary silence. In other words, the lips of these children are sealed
by secrecy, deception, stigmatization, shame and fear. In particular, many incarcerated parents and caregivers feel that children keep information about parental incarceration and their feelings about their experiences concealed from everyone (Hagen & Myers, 2003). Exploring child perceptions of the effects of parental incarceration revealed that children do not conceal their feeling from everyone. Study findings revealed disclosure to be involuntary or voluntary. Voluntary disclosure included those children who told their close friends, God, therapists and/or teachers because they felt that they could trust them with the information.

Involuntary disclosure occurred against their will. This occurred when children talked about their parent’s incarceration as a result of being ridiculed because their parent’s crime made the front page of the newspaper, or the entire community was made aware because the crime took place on the block and the parent was put into a cop car and driven off with the sirens on.

In some instances, their caregivers and parents warn them against speaking about their family members’ incarceration (Gabel, 1992; Johnston, 1995) and are often told not to reveal any information about their parent’s incarceration (Chaney, Linkenhoker, Horne, 1977; Sack et al., 1976). Some caregivers feel that keeping the child silent about their parent’s incarceration and acting as though it never happened will help them to forget. Kampfner (1995) refers to this suppression of information as the “conspiracy of silence” (p.92) or “forced silence” (Johnston, 1995b). Although some caregivers remained silent about the parent’s incarceration, children were still aware of it, and it caused animosity between the child and caregiver because they knew that they were being lied to. Sometimes children are told that their parents are away at school, working
far away, in the military, or in the hospital (Adalist-Estrin, 2005). This is not done necessarily to hurt these children, but to alleviate some of the stress that the caregivers feel they may encounter by knowing that their parents are incarcerated.

Although this conspiracy of silence is not intended to hurt the children, it does. Instead of protecting the children, it has its own negative consequence. For example, children held feelings of disgust and shame toward their caregivers for not being honest with them. Children tended to act as though they were unaware, when in fact they were. This left children with no means for talking about and having their questions answered about parental incarceration. Children held many questions and concerns about their experiences, and the forced silence between their caregiver and themselves made it difficult for them to address these concerns. Children want to know the truth. They desire to talk about it and have their questions answered. They want to be included in what is going on, not left on the outskirts of a situation that directly involved them.

Research on the topic of disruptions among children of the incarcerated is not new. In fact, many researchers have identified among the effects experienced by this population of child disruptions in home and school environments. Although we are aware of these disruptions, research has failed to provide how these experiences have affected the children. In other words, we know that they had to make changes in their current residence and school, but we have no contextual information related to these disruptions.

The children in this study provided details into the context of their experiences. Children who experienced a move from one household to another generally experienced the move as negative. They discussed having to move and not knowing, or not being
made aware of where they were going, the move being very quick, and the new home being uncomfortable. For example, some children went from having their own rooms to having to reside in a common area of their caregiver’s home; some children’s sleeping/private space was in the basement, the living room or any other space available to them at the time of their move. In some instances, children moved about numerous times prior to finding a permanent residence.

Children experienced disruptions in school, both positive and negative. Older male subjects seemed to be comfortable and happy about changing schools because of their positive interactions with the females in the school they were newly attending. They were content and excited about being the new children at a school and therefore a new love interest to many female attendees. Young male subjects revealed positive experiences with their new schools in relation to their teachers, new friends, and being in a new school situation. Although these younger male subjects held positive perceptions about changing schools they were not related to the female students attending the school.

Female children provided less positive experiences than male subjects. The girls in the sample were not happy about the sudden changes that they experienced with changing schools. They felt uncomfortable about changing schools in the middle of the year, which was not easy to get accustomed too. Some female subjects were uncomfortable with going to new schools because of the cliques that had formed in those schools prior to their arrival. This made it difficult for them to fit in and subsequently felt uncomfortable.

A few children experienced dual disruptions in which they changed residences and schools after their parent’s incarceration. Although this sample of children did not
provide specific experiences related to such combined experiences, they shed light on the experiences of each singular disruption.

Research on children of the incarcerated has identified many negative effects resulting from having a parent in prison. These effects include changes in physical environment, psychological and health consequences, and behavioral responses. Little of what we know about these negative effects is obtained from the children. Children discussed their personal experiences with unforgettable situations, hating the police, and their risky behaviors with using drugs, drinking alcohol and having sex.

The unforgettable situations that children discussed were related directly to their experiences of witnessing the arrest of their parent. In many cases, the experiences were traumatic and left children with nightmares. Children were left with many unanswered questions and concerns about what they say. They felt that the situation happened so fast that it left them not knowing what to do or say in the heat of the moment. Although studies have found that children who witness the arrest of a parent tend to hold negative attitudes toward the police, this study suggests that children hold ill feelings toward the police in their neighborhoods prior to these unforgettable situations of parental arrest.

Children mentioned that they hated the police not because they were abusive and disrespectful to their parents during arrest, but because they seemed to not be capable of doing their job. The children felt that their neighborhoods remained violent and full of criminals and that police failed to apprehend them or make their communities safer. Children were under the impression that it is the duty of police to keep communities crime free and nonviolent. This shows that children are not clear about the role and responsibilities of police officers.
Although children did not like the police, they were involved in behaviors that had the potential to put them in direct contact with them. For example, teenage children self-reported drug and alcohol use. Teenagers turned to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism for dealing with parental incarceration. Children used drugs and drank alcohol within their homes, with friends and/or alone. All of the teenage children in the sample reported alcohol use and/or abuse, while more than half of the teenagers reported using drugs such as ecstasy, marijuana, mushrooms, and/or cocaine. The primary illicit drug of choice was marijuana. Children did not share their drug and alcohol use with their incarcerated parents and/or caregivers. This information was kept secret between themselves and their friends; mostly their significant others (i.e., boyfriend or girlfriend).

Research collected through studies of incarcerated parents and caregivers speak on behalf of the children, discussing the negative experiences they face as a result of having a mother and/or father in prison (Braman, 2004; Fishman, 1990; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; McGowan & Blumenthal, 1978). These studies fail to provide a well-rounded picture of child experiences, because they fail to investigate and acknowledge the positive effects of incarceration. One is left to assume that there are only negative effects of parental imprisonment. In fact, children provide different points of view that are, in fact, positive in nature. For example, teenage male subjects had positive experiences with changing schools as a result of moving due to parental incarceration. Male subjects identified their positive interactions with females in their new schools. Younger male children found good in changing schools because they were happy in their new schools; they were satisfied with their new teachers and peers.
Furthermore, young male children held positive attitudes toward the police. The majority of young males had strong desires of becoming police officers as adults. Research has identified that children of the incarcerated tend to have negative interactions with the police and therefore harbor negative attitudes toward them. This study moves research in the opposite direction. In other words, study findings point to the positive attitudes that children held toward police officers. The young children who wished to have careers as officers had desires of keeping their communities and family members safe.

Research collected from family members describe children’s needs by providing information on the process and hardships of maintaining the ties that bond incarcerated parents to their children (Christian, 2005; Christian, Mellow & Thomas, 2006; Nurse, 2002). Lacking from this research are the child perceptions of the importance of maintaining these bonds through the hardships. Sample subjects shed light on the positive aspects they experienced by maintaining the ties that bonded them to their parents. For example, children felt positive about communicating with their parent’s when they listened to them and considered their feelings. Children described relationships with their parent’s during incarceration as being better than before they were in prison. This positive change was attributed to having time to think and being able to focus solely on the child’s needs, desires and wants rather then what was going on in the streets.

Positive experiences related to parental incarceration identify what researcher and practitioners are doing right in regard to children of the incarceration. This allows insight into what needs to continue to be done. The only positive effects identified in the
research to date deals with parental incarceration of parents who are have been harmful to their children. The positive effects as described by children show that children experience and perceive the effects from both sides of the coin.

Much can be learned from the children of incarcerated parents. Findings identify that child perceptions advance what has been provided through research of their parents and caregivers. Children provided insight into experiences that have not been identified in past research. For example, the positive effects of parental incarceration, their interests and desires not related to their parent’s incarceration and their perceptions of the effects of parental incarceration. Including child perceptions provides a rounded picture of the realities of their lives. Information gained from exploring their experiences and perceptions adds to the current state of knowledge.

Research has identified that children are affected in numerous ways by having a parent in prison, specifically emotional, physical and behavioral consequences. Research has failed to include experiences outside of these groupings. The children identify effects that expand the typical groups of effects discussed in the research. For decades, research has painted a very dim picture of the lives of children who have a parent in prison; a life that revolves around their parent’s incarceration. Children bring light to this dim picture that has lead research in this area for so long. The children allow for understanding both sides of the coin of having a parent in prison. The children seem to be more realistic in the way they perceive the effects of incarceration; while parents and caregivers portray the lives of these children only in negative ways.

Based upon empirical research and informant interviews regarding the relationship of children of incarcerated parents and crime, the research suggests that these
children are more likely to spend time in prison during their lifetime than children without incarcerated parents. While this information is important, qualitative studies, such as the current one, shed light on children’s delinquent behaviors barely described in prior studies on children of the incarcerated. For example, older male subjects were found to hold negative attitudes toward the police, often due to their direct interactions with the police. Furthermore, the teenage children reported using drugs and alcohol that may lead them directly or indirectly into the juvenile or adult justice system.

The insights provided by the children can support the development of practical programs and policies that address their personal and specific needs.
CHAPTER 7
PRACTICAL PROGRAMS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study fills a gap in the literature by providing new empirical data that are useful for practice or policy, because findings identify information about the experiences of these children unrelated to their parent’s incarceration, the content of their lives before and during their parent’s incarceration, and information about their communities. This chapter will provide practical programs and policy implications needed to address the concerns/needs of this population:

Implementation of Child-Centric Programs for Children of the Incarcerated

Although current programs exist for children of incarcerated parents, they have a “prison-centric” focus rather than a child-centric focus. To date, such programs provide transportation to the prison for parent-child visitation and allow children a mentor for a year for having a parent in prison. There are no programs allowing children to deal with having a parent in prison. For example, this study found that children have many questions about their experiences. Programs should allow children the opportunity to ask questions, receive answers, and talk about the hardships they face in dealing with parental incarceration. Programs should provide safe and confidential environments for children’s voices to be heard. An example, of a program model that could benefit children in breaking their silence about parental incarceration is support groups for children.
Services for Incarcerated Parents, Children of Prisoners, and Their Caregivers

Incarcerated parents, children and caregivers have different experiences when dealing with incarceration. While they all are going through their personal experiences at the same time, they are not brought together to address these experiences and their effects as a family unit. It is as though they are disconnected by incarceration. Incarceration should instead be the reason that they are brought together to address their needs. This study found that children often do not share their experiences and feelings with their caregivers and incarcerated parents. Many children spoke about their experiences for the first time during their interviews. These experiences were discussed but not addressed. Services should provide families with a safe place to discuss their experiences and be guided to the proper channels for continued services.

Implementation of Educational Programs for Children of the Incarcerated

It is often left to caregivers of children of the incarcerated to disclose and explain to the children what going to prison is and why their parent is incarcerated. Research identifies that this information is often withheld from the children for many reasons ranging from protection to simply not knowing how to break such news to a child. It would benefit both families and children to have access to programs that aid caregivers and incarcerated parents in discussing with children concerns about prison, specifically why individuals go to prison, what happens on a day-to-day basis in prison, and allow children to ask questions and gain answers. The current study found that children held assumptions about their situations and often time had many unanswered questions about their parent’s.
Education programs may also provide children with insight into the changes that they will experience and allow them to understand when and why these changes will occur. Among the negative effects of parental imprisonment were uncertainty in changing homes and schools. Children should be provided insight and say in the process that they are forced into.

**Services to Address Child Risky Behaviors**

This study found that children used drugs and alcohol during their parent’s imprisonment. Services should be implements to help children with possible addictions. Incarcerated individuals are provided services during their sentence to address their substance abuse; similar programs should be available to children. It is important that children are provided services to address their drug and/or alcohol use to possibly aid in breaking the intergenerational presence of familial incarceration.

**Build Relations Between Police and Children of Incarcerated**

This study identified that children held negative attitudes toward the police. Some children held hatred toward police because they blamed them for taking their parent to prison, others harbored negative feelings toward police because they witnessed the arrest of their parents, and others never respected the police. It may benefit both police and children of the incarcerated to build relations that allow children to voice their feelings and be made aware of the role of police; discussing what police are required and not required to do. This may help keep children on the good side of the law, and possibility keep them out of the juvenile or adult justice system.
Collection of Information on Children of Prisoners

Unfortunately, no federal, state, city, or county agency has the responsibility for collecting information on children of prisoners. To respond to this problem, researchers and practitioners have relied on incarcerated parents, caregivers, family members, advocacy agencies, and community organizations to provide insight into how children are affected by parental incarceration. This makes it difficult to gain access to populations of children of prisoners as a means to providing them services.
CHAPTER 8
FUTURE RESEARCH

As the population of incarcerated people continues to rise, so does the population of their children. Although research has been conducted on this population for many years, little is known about these children. Prior research has identified that we have gone down the wrong road when it comes to research on children of prisoners. The recommended future research directions below will allow for researchers and practitioners to move in the right direction.

*Interviewing Children*

Children can provide unknown insight about their personal experiences. Children should be incorporated in research about them. Future studies should interview children as a means to gaining insight into their personal experiences. This study supports the fact that children as young as age seven are capable and willing to share their experiences of parental incarceration.

Collect information not related to parental incarceration. Future studies must gather information about the children unrelated to their parent’s incarceration. This has the potential of provided a well-rounded picture of the lives of these children.

Experiences prior, during and after parental imprisonment. Information about child experiences and lives prior to their parent’s incarceration, during their parent’s sentence
and upon the release of their parent’s from prison is needed to fully understand the
dynamic process of parental imprisonment and how it affects their children.

**Gather information about child risky behaviors.** Empirical studies should gain insight
into child involvement with risky behaviors. Few studies have provided information
about child risky behaviors that have resulted from parental incarceration.

**Interview children of different races and socioeconomic status.** Many studies have been
conducted on predominately one race. Future studies can advise the field by collected
information about those races that have not been included in the research on this topic.
For example, Hispanics, Native American and Asian children of the incarcerated. It may
also fill gaps in the research by understanding the similarities and difference among those
families who are not considered to be low-income, and experiencing parental
incarceration.

**Positive effects of parental incarceration.** It is important to research both sides of the
coin. Researchers should gather information about the positive effects of incarceration
not only for children, but their caregivers and incarcerated parents. This has the potential
for providing a well-rounded picture of the process of parental incarceration.
Methodological choices should include the use of multiple methods

Large sample size. Many studies have provided information about children of prisoners through small samples of children.

Secondary data analysis. It might be helpful to use information that has already been collected about this population of children. This information may be derived from child welfare agencies, prisoner records, jail intake forms, or parole records. The use of secondary data will allow for a random sample to be drawn.

Ethnographic component. Even though geographical location of this population is not known, one can speculate about places where this population of children can be found. For example, children of incarcerated parents might be found visiting the prison. A researcher can conduct participant-observations at prisons on visiting days. This will allow for a researcher to see how many children are present, and how often they come to the prison. Of course, you cannot assume that the children at the prison are children of prisoners, unless you ask them.

Longitudinal Designs. Direct examination of children of incarcerated parents is needed in order to obtain the child’s perspective of the situation. Studies on children should always include the children.
**Comparative Studies on Children of the Incarcerated**

Collect information from all individuals involved in the process. Many studies have collected information from incarcerated parents and caregivers to gain information about child experiences of parental incarceration. Comparing the findings from such studies with child perceptions may provide insight into the similarities and differences of experiences among parents, caregivers and children.

Construct comparative studies with similar populations of children.

**Children Living in Poverty:** This study identified that children of incarcerated parents describe their neighborhoods as being similar to those neighborhoods of children living in poverty. Therefore, future research should explore the differences and/or similarities between children of the incarcerated living in improvised neighborhoods and children living in similar neighborhoods who do not have a parent in prison. Researchers should create studies that specifically answer the following questions: (1) are children of the incarcerated different from children living in poverty? (2) how are children different from other children who live in poverty? (3) What is it about parental incarceration that makes their children different or similar to other children living in poverty and dealing with single parenthood, deceased parent, or have a parent away in the military?

**Children Unaware of Parents Incarceration:** Future studies focusing on the differences and/or similarities between children who are aware of their parent’s incarceration and those who are not are needed to help in understanding the experiences of these two
groups. Prior studies have identified that children are not told about their parent’s incarceration as a means to protecting them from situations in which they are stigmatized. In the future, studies should explore how children are affected by not knowing the truth about their parent’s incarceration.

**Community Collaboration**

Work with organizations in community that work with children of the incarcerated. Community organizations with local knowledge on children of incarcerated parents can be help researchers to design their study, define key concepts and provide them access to this hidden population. Working within the community will have its advantages and disadvantages.

The current study was used to provide insight into the experiences and perceptions of children of the incarcerated. It confirms the benefit of understanding how children perceive their situations as a means to helping them. Future research is warranted on this population to move in the direction toward providing programs, services, and policy for children on prisoners.
REFERENCES


New Jersey Department of Corrections. Offender search (http://www.state.nj.us/corrections).


APPENDIX A: CHILD SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Subject ID: ____________  
Recorder Index: ________

Part 1: About You

1. Do you have a nickname? What is it? _______________________________

2. Do you play video games?

3. Which one’s? How often?

4. Do you watch television? How often?

5. Who is your favorite rapper?

6. How old are you? __________________


8. Do you like living here?

   Tell me about it… What is it like?

Describe the neighborhood that you live in:

Probe for me detail: Do you know why you are living here? How did you get here?

Who brought you here? Did anyone ask you if this is where you wanted to live?

9. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

   Can you tell me about them? Tell me both good and bad things.
10. Do your brothers and sisters live with you?

11. Do they live here with you? If not, do you wish they did? Do you see them often? Do you miss them?

12. Who else do you live with?

13. Have you always lived here?

**Part 2: Separation from Mother/Father**

14. Do you know where your mother/father is?

15. How long has your mother/father been away from you?

16. What happened when your mother/father left you?

17. How did you feel?

18. Do you know who took your mother/father away? What do you feel about the people who took your mother/father away from you? (ex. Police)

19. How do you feel about the police?

20. Has your mother/father been away from you before? Can you tell me about this?

21. Do you go to the same school as you did before your mother/father went away? If not, ask about changing school.
22. Have you told your friends where your mother/father is? Can you tell me about this?

23. What do they say about it?

24. Do you think you behave differently now that your mother/father is away from you?

25. Have you experienced the death of any of your family members?

26. Does having a parent incarcerated feel the same way?

**Part 3: Seeing your Mother/Father**

27. How often do you see your mother/father?

28. How do you feel when you see your mother/father?

29. Do you like seeing her here?

30. What do you dislike most about your mother/father being here? Tell me about this/why?

31. What do you miss most about your mother/father not being with you? Why?

32. When you see your mother/father what do you talk about? And what do you do?

33. What are you looking forward to most when your mother/father comes back home?
Part 4: Focused Questions used to Probe for more details

Area 1: How are you doing in school? With grades? Other kids? Teachers?

Do you take Gym Class at school? What was your grade? What kinds of activities do you do in gym class?

Do you exercise on your own? How often?

Area 2: What is it like not to have your mother/father here with you? Is it hard for you? How? What will it be like when she/he comes home again? Will you be happy or sad?

Questions Related to Children of Prisoners Bill of Rights

A. Where you kept safe during your parent’s arrest? How?

B. Did anyone talk to you about what was happening to your parent during the arrest? Who?

C. Are you well taken care of? Explain?

D. Have you been judged because you have a parent in prison/jail? By whom?
   What do they say? How does that make you feel?

E. Did anyone ever tell you that is was your fault that your parent is in prison/jail?
   Who said this/What is their relationship to you? What do they say? How did this make you feel?
F. Have you been called bad names because you have a parent in prison/jail? Who called you these names? What names do they call you? How does this make you feel?

G. Do you want a lifelong relationship with your parent in prison/jail? Why? Is there anyone who is keeping from making this possible for you? How?

Interview Notes:

Researcher Thoughts:

Researcher Perception of Interview:

Length of Session:
Location of Interview:
Child’s Facial Expressions:
Child’s Tone:
Does child make eye contact:
Is child engaged in conversation:
Does child seem excited about talking about issues:
Did child cry during interview:
If so, when did child become emotional (specific questions of reference):

Other:
APPENDIX B: ADOLESCENT TO ADULT SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Subject ID: ___________
Recorder Index: _________

Part 1: About You

1. Do you have a nickname? What is it? ________________________________

2. Do you play video games?

3. Which one’s? How often?

4. Do you watch television? How often?

5. Who is your favorite rapper?

6. How old are you? __________________


8. Do you like living here? Yes No

Tell me about it… What is it like?

Describe the neighborhood that you live in:

Probe for me detail: Do you know why you are living here? How did you get here?

Who brought you here? Did anyone ask you if this is where you wanted to live?

9. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Can you tell me about them? Tell me both good and bad things.
10. Do your brothers and sisters live with you? Let’s talk about this?

11. Do they live here with you? If not, do you wish they did? Do you see them often? Do you miss them?

12. Who else do you live with?

13. Have you always lived here?

14. Have you ever had unprotected sexual intercourse?
   Is your caregiver aware of this?
   Is your incarcerated parent aware of this?
   How was your incarcerated parent made aware of this?

15. Do you have any children? Yes No How many? __________

16. What are their genders? Were do they reside?

17. How old were you when you had your first child?

18. Have you ever had an alcoholic beverage? What kind? (Beer, wine, ect..) Tell me about it?

19. How often have you had any type of alcoholic beverage?

20. Have you ever smoked marijuana? With Whom?
**Part 2: Separation from Mother/Father**

21. Do you know where your mother/father is?

22. How long has your mother/father been away from you?

23. What happened when your mother/father left you?

24. How did you feel?

25. Do you know who took your mother/father away? What do you feel about the people who took your mother/father away from you? (ex. Police)

26. How do you feel about the police?

27. Has your mother/father been away from you before? Can you tell me about this?

28. Do you go to the same school as you did before your mother/father went away? If not, ask about changing school.

29. Have you told your friends where your mother/father is? Can you tell me about this?

30. What do they say about it?

31. Do you think you behave differently now that your mother/father is away from you?

32. Have you experienced the death of any of your family members?

33. Does having a parent incarcerated feel the same way?
Part 3: Seeing your Mother/Father

34. How often do you see your mother/father?

35. How do you feel when you see your mother/father?

36. Do you like seeing her here?

37. What do you dislike most about your mother/father being here? Why?

38. What do you miss most about your mother/father not being with you? Why?

39. When you see your mother/father what do you talk about? And what do you do?

40. What don’t you talk to your mother/father about? Why?

41. What are you looking forward to most when your mother/father comes back home?

Part 4: Focused Questions used to Probe for more details

Area 1: How are you doing in school? With grades? Other kids? Teachers?

Do you take Gym Class at school? What was your grade? What kinds of activities do you do in gym class?

Do you exercise on your own? How often?
**Area 2:** What is it like not to have your mother/father here with you? Is it hard for you? How? What will it be like when she/he comes home again? Will you be happy or sad?

I am going to read you some statements about your feeling about being a child that has/had a parent incarcerated. The following statements come from The Bill of Rights that state that every child of an incarcerated parent is to have the following rights:

(Please tell me if you strongly agree, agree, are neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Children’s Bill of Rights Project (Nell Bernstein, 2005)</th>
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<th>N</th>
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<td>To be kept safe and informed at the time of my parents arrest</td>
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<td>To be heard when decisions are made about me</td>
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<td>To be considered when decisions are made about my parent/parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>To be well cared for in my parent’s absence</td>
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<td>To speak with, see, and touch my parent</td>
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<td>To support as I face my parent’s incarceration</td>
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<td>To not be judged, blamed or labeled because my parent is incarcerated</td>
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<tr>
<td>To have a lifelong relationship with my parent</td>
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<td>Is there anything that you feel needs to be added to this list of rights</td>
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**Explain:**

*Now that I know if you agree, disagree, or are neutral with the above statements- I am going to ask you about some specifics.*
H. Where you kept safe during your parent’s arrest? How?

I. Where you informed about what was happening to your parent during the arrest? By whom?

J. Are you well taken care of? Explain?

K. What kind of support have you received as a result of your parent’s incarceration? (Programs, funding, etc.)

L. Have you been judged because you have a parent in prison/jail? By whom? What do they say? How does that make you feel?

M. Have you been blamed because you have a parent in prison/jail? By whom? What do they say? How does this make you feel?

N. Have you been labeled because you have a parent in prison/jail? By whom? What are you labeled as? How does this make you feel?

O. Do you want a lifelong relationship with your parent in prison/jail? Why? Is there anyone who is keeping from making this possible for you? How?
Interview Notes:

Researcher Thoughts:

Researcher Perception of Interview:

Length of Session:

Location of Interview:

Child’s Facial Expressions:

Child’s Tone:

Does child make eye contact:

Is child engaged in conversation:

Does child seem excited about talking about issues:

Did child cry during interview:

If so, when did child become emotional (specific questions of reference):

Other:
APPENDIX C: CAREGIVER CONSENT FORM

Prisoners’ Children

STUDY DESCRIPTION

You are being asked to participate in a Rutgers University research project about caregiver’s experiences of caring for prisoners’ children. Approximately 75 caregivers, 75 prisoner and 100 children will be included in this study. With your permission the interview will be recorded. I want to listen while you speak rather than record notes. If you prefer that I not use the tape just say so. If I do make a tape, the tape will remain my confidential property and destroyed upon completion of the research. You will be asked questions about your role as caregiver and your prior and current relationship with prisoner and prisoners’ child. The interview will take approximately two hours. You may be contacted for permission to conduct a follow up interview. Your participation in the study will be completed after one or two interviews.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may end your participation in this interview at any point that you wish to. If there are specific questions you do not want to answer you do not have to. Your participation in this study will not harm or benefit your standing with __________________________ (organization name) in any way.

INFORMATION IS CONFIDENTIAL

All of your responses will be kept completely confidential. The researcher conducting the interview is ethically bound to maintain your privacy and personal rights at all times. Your responses will not be revealed to ____________ (organization name), staff or any other
individuals. Your responses will never be described in any papers or reports using your name or
on an individual basis.

You should be aware the New Jersey law stipulates that any person having reasonable cause to
believe that a child has been subjected to child abuse or acts of child abuse shall report the abuse
to the authorities. *This child abuse reporting requirement noted above applies to the
researcher, so that they will have to report any information, which gives them reasonable cause
to suspect child abuse.*

The researcher is also required to report any information about conduct dangerous to the
caregiver or other, or any unreported or planned criminal conduct.

**NO KNOWN HARM OR RISK INVOLVED**

There is no known harm to you as a result of your participation in this study. If talking about
incarceration is upsetting you, the researcher will provide you with a list of service agencies in
the area that can answer questions and offer support to you. The indirect benefit to you is that
you will contribute to our understanding of the lives of prisoner’s, prisoners’ children and their
caregivers.

**COMPENSATION**

Your time is greatly appreciated and the information you give is very important. You will be
compensated $20 for your participation in this study. If you decide to terminate your
participation in the study before the interview has been completed you will not be penalized in
any way, and you will still be compensated $20 for your participation.

Subject’s Initials________
Please contact the researcher, Bahiyyah Muhammad, regarding any questions, comments, or suggestions.

Rutgers University, Newark  
School of Criminal Justice  
Center for Law and Justice  
123 Washington Street  
Newark, NJ 07102-3094

Phone (973) 353- 3452; Fax (973) 353-5896; E-mail: bahiyyah@pegasus.rutgers.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject, you may contact the sponsored programs administrator at:

Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
3 Rutgers Plaza  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559  
Tel: (732) 932-1050 ext.2104  
E-mail: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

Subjects Initials____
CONSENT STATEMENT

I have read and understood the information above. The researcher has answered all the questions I had to my satisfaction. She gave me a copy of the form. I consent to take part in the Prisoners’ Children study.

Name, please print ___________________________  Participant’s Signature ___________________________  Date

Researcher’s Signature ___________________________  Date

AUDIO TAPING CONSENT STATEMENT

I have read and understood the information above regarding the audio taping of interviews. The researcher has answered all the questions I had to my satisfaction. I consent to have the interview with the researcher taped.

Name, please print ___________________________  Participant’s Signature ___________________________  Date

Researcher’s Signature ___________________________  Date

CONSENT STATEMENT TO INTERVIEW CHILD/CHILDREN

Since I have formal or informal legal custody and guardianship, I consent for the following child/children to be visited and interviewed for the purpose of this study.

Child #1 ___________________________  ___________________________  Caretaker Signature
Child #2 ___________________________
Child #3 ___________________________
Child #4 ___________________________
APPENDIX D: CHILD ASSENT FORM

Prisoners’ Children

STUDY DESCRIPTION
You are being asked to participate in a Rutgers University research project about prisoners’ children. In the study the research will collect data from prisoners, their children and their children’s caregivers. I would like to ask you some questions about how you have been doing since your parent has been away. If you want me to ask you questions then I will, if you don’t then I will stop. This is a tape-recorder. Do you know what a tape recorder is? If you are comfortable with letting me tape-record you, I would like to do that, because I want to listen to you while you are talking. If you prefer that I not use the tape just say so. If I do make a tape, the tape will be mine and I promise not to let anyone listen to it. When I am done speaking to the other children then I will destroy the tape.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY
Voluntary is a big word, huh! Well it means that you do not have to do anything that you don’t want to do. This means that you do not have to answer any of my questions if you don’t want to. You will not get in trouble if you don’t want to answer any of my questions. And I will not be upset or angry at you. I will be happy as long as you are happy. So if any question makes you feel unhappy, please do not answer it because I don’t like to see children unhappy. Do you have any questions yet, or should I just keep going?

INFORMATION IS CONFIDENTIAL
Everything that you tell me is our secret. I promise not to tell anyone, not even your mom, dad or caregiver. Everything you tell me will be our little secret. I do want you to know that everything that you tell me will help me to write a book, it’s called a dissertation. I promise I will not use your name in this book. Do you have any questions for me yet, okay so I will keep going?
Now I want you to pay close attention now okay! In New Jersey, the state you live in, there is a law. Do you know what a law is? Well it is something that everyone must follow, that means me and you and everyone that lives in this state. If I feel that you have been hurt or hit by anyone I will have to tell. That is the only thing that I cannot keep a secret. I will have to tell someone so that they can get help to you. Okay. So that means if I think that you have been abused in anyway I will have to tell. I will also have to tell if your caregiver has been hurt. I want to make sure that you and your caregiver are safe. That’s cool right! Any questions now?

NO KNOWN HARM OR RISK INVOLVED

I want you to know that you will not be hurt in anyway for talking to me. If you feel funny about any questions that I ask you tell me right away. I have some people that your caregiver can call so that you will be able to talk with them about your problem. Okay! Do you promise to tell me if you don’t want to answer a question? Great! High five! I want you to be proud because you are helping out other kids like you by talking to me. You are helping in letting people know what it feels like to be a child that is separated from a parent. I am going to give you a treat for talking to me. Even if you don’t want to answer my questions you still get a treat. The treat is a book that will tell you about how other kids feel when they are separated from a parent. You are not the only one. Other kids feel the same things that you do. Do you like to read? That is perfect. You will love this book. I read it and I like it.

Okay I need you to write your name on this paper and then I will begin to ask my questions. Do you have questions now? Ask me as many questions as you want. I like to talk, and I really enjoy answering questions.
ASSENT STATEMENT

I agree to participate in the interview procedure as described above:

________________________________   _______________________
Researcher’s Signature    Date

________________________________
Name of research participant

(Name of parent if under the age of 18)   Date

AUDIO TAPING CONSENT STATEMENT

I know what a recorder is it is okay for Bahiyyah to record our talk.

________________________________
Name of research participant    Date

________________________________
Name of parent if under age 18    Date
Curriculum Vitae

Bahiyyah Miallah Muhammad

EDUCATION
May 2011
Ph.D. in Criminal Justice
Rutgers University, Newark, NJ
May 2004
M.A. in Corrections Administration
The New School, New York, NY
May 1995
B.S. in Administration of Justice
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE
12/06 – 05/09
Senior Research Associate
Girl Scouts of Rolling Hills Council, Girl Scouting Behind Bars
10/04 – 10/06
Research Associate
Youth Consultation Services, Mentoring Children of Prisoners
05/05 – 05/06
Research Assistant
Project funded by W.E.B. DuBois Fellowship, National Institute of Justice-Principal Investigator: Dr. Johnna Christian
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
Faculty, The New School-Eugene Lang College, Urban Studies Department
Adjunct, West Chester University, Criminal Justice Department
Lecturer, Rutgers University, School of Criminal Justice

PUBLICATIONS
