

**The Effects of Parental Incarceration on their Children's Mental Health**

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## **Abstract**

Prior research indicates individuals who are incarcerated may face adverse or negative effects during the period of their incarceration, however, the existing research often overlooks the specific impacts of the children of those incarcerated individuals. Little is known regarding the exact effects that a child may face due to having an incarcerated parent or guardian. This study aims to explore the potential psychological effects on a child who has grown up with an incarcerated parent or guardian during childhood. This research contributes to the literature by identifying and examining the lingering effects experienced by individuals who have had an incarcerated parent or guardian during childhood. These effects were examined through conducting interviews with a small sample of eight adults who have grown up with an incarcerated parent or guardian. To highlight some of the key concepts that emerged from these interviews were mostly related to the psychological impact of having a parent be incarcerated. Many participants reported their parent was incarcerated at a young age, posing significant mental health issues, such as anxiety, fear, paranoia, and worry. The findings of this study allowed for a deeper understanding of the effects of parental incarceration on their children's mental health, and in doing so, provided solutions to help combat the negative effects of parental incarceration on their children's mental health.

# **The Effects of Parental Incarceration on their Children's Mental Health**

## **Introduction**

As of 2022, the number of individuals who are incarcerated in the United States at the state and federal correctional level is 1,230,100 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2023), and that number has grown tremendously since the late 1900s. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) has collected data on the prison population dating all the way back to 1926. The trends in their data collection have shown a drastic increase in the prison population throughout the years. In 2021, the BJS reported that the prison population was at 1,204,300 which is only a 1% decrease from the study reported in 2020, which was only 1,221,200 incarcerated individuals. In the study done by the BJS in 2000, the prison population was reported to be at 1,381,892 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001). That number is much higher than the prison population reported in 1986, when the population reached its first record of 546,659 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1987). As the numbers show, the prison population has fluctuated; however, we have a society that is obsessed with incarcerating individuals, and the numbers are a prime example of that.

The mass incarceration movement began in the 1980s to try and combat the rising issue of crime, specifically drug related. The policies by President Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s, more formerly known as “the War on Drugs” started a movement that changed the trajectory of the Criminal Justice System, from healing individuals to punishing them (Mauer & King, 2007). As a result, the arrests and incarceration rates skyrocketed leading to a vast majority of issues that swept our nation and affected not only the incarcerated person, but the persons associated, as well. National issues such as overcrowding of prisons and jails, the disproportionate representation of certain groups, i.e., people of color, harsh prison environments due to

underfunding and understaffing became prominent (Mauer & King, 2007). At the personal level, issues arose within neighborhoods, communities, and most importantly, families.

The impact of being incarcerated is like a ripple effect, especially with the children of the adults who are incarcerated. In a report published by the Sentencing Project (Ghandnoosh et al., 2021), approximately 5.2 million children have grown up with an incarcerated parent or guardian, with 47% of incarcerated parents in state prisons and 57% of the incarcerated parents in federal prisons. It is also important to note that the vast majority of incarcerated parents are fathers compared to mothers, with 626,800 reported fathers who are or were incarcerated compared to only 57,700 mothers. This paper emphasizes the fact that the effects of parental incarceration on children are not explored enough. When a parent(s) is incarcerated, it could have drastic effects on the child. It could affect the development of the child, and more importantly, it could impact the mental well-being of the child. Even though there is a limited amount of research regarding the specific effects on children when their parent(s) is incarcerated, the challenges they may face from not having a parent be present in the household are addressed in other existing literatures when a child does not have a proper relationship with their parent(s). Challenges such as the mental and psychological impact on the child, the academic difficulties, the behavioral and developmental issues, and the possibility of the child getting involved within the criminal justice system as well.

There are multiple different layers that fall within this topic. Understanding the complexity of this issue could ultimately help society shift their perspective on how they look at incarcerated individuals. Understanding this issue can also prevent the child from following in their parent's footsteps and/or preventing the trauma that could play a negative role in their future, while also, promoting healthy relationships between a parent and their child. The system

is not fully equipped in allowing the incarcerated individual to support important relationships such as a parent and their child (Martin, 2017). Due to the “war on drugs” and the “get tough on crime” movements, we are focused on punishing, not rehabilitating (Hinton & Cook, 2021). Therefore, the relationship is set aside, often ending up in a strain between the incarcerated parent and their child. Just as the citizens like to forget about the prisoner, they like to forget about the consequences and the people that are tied to the individual who is incarcerated. Getting into the effects, specifically the mental and psychological damage that could happen, is the first step. The first step will hopefully be followed up by coming up with solutions on how to ensure that there are proper policies in place to protect the children, offer them the support services they may need, and allow the incarcerated individual and the child to work through the problems and still be able to have a good relationship. Which ultimately could end up in recidivism rates and the prison population dropping. The existing body of literature provides explanations and studies surrounding the effects of the people who are or have been incarcerated, however, there is not nearly enough research out there to address the effects that it has on the community, such as the children of the parents who are incarcerated. This study explores the psychological impact of having an incarcerated parent on their children.

## **Literature Review**

The current body of research that exists on the effects of parental incarceration on children is vastly limited, however, there are a few research articles and studies that have been published to examine some of the possible effects of the children with the goal to implement more systems and intervention techniques that provide the necessary support for the children. Miller (2006) begins to address the possible impacts that the children of incarcerated parents may face. Losing a parent in the house, which normally leads to a change in family dynamic is difficult to adjust

with, especially for a child who may not have full emotional regulation yet. Losing a parent could also lead to losing a main source of income in the house, which is a major stressor for families, and that on top of the sole act of losing a parent is incredibly traumatic. The existing research shows that children are experiencing negative effects after having a parent be taken away, however, the systems in place do not know how to care for these children, making the situation worse. This article discusses the efforts that have been made or that should be made in order to alleviate some of the pain and trauma these children may face. Professionals will sit down and unpack all of the trauma and the resentment that the child may be facing, and together, they can work to grow up as “mentally, developmentally, and physically” healthy. The programs in place are committed to teaching those strategies to properly delve deeper and solve these issues the child may be facing.

Eric Martin (2017) introduces new perspectives on the effects of parental incarceration on children. The main focus of research dedicated to corrections in the criminal justice field is mainly placed on the incarcerated individual(s). The child, along with other family members, is vastly underrepresented, and better known as “hidden victims” of the mass incarceration movement. In fact, children of incarcerated parents are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system, as well. Additionally, children with incarcerated parents are more likely to have academic and behavioral challenges. The education system and the criminal justice system are intertwined. There is a known cycle between the two, where if you do poorly in the education system, along with other external factors, you are more likely to be in the criminal justice system (Heitzeg, 2009). The term school to prison pipeline refers to the fact that for some children, teens, and adolescents, public schools around our nation serve as a gateway into the criminal justice system, due to the consequences of how detrimental labels placed on a child could be.

Labels that make the student perceive themselves as a “bad person” and can never come back from it, and if one does not have hope to change, they just give in to the side that is familiar to them. Acknowledging the cycle that if a child with an incarcerated parent is struggling at home and at school, along with the feelings of anger and resentment towards their situation, allows one to understand how it is more likely to follow in what is familiar, their parents’ footsteps (Elias, 2013).

The existing research examines the academic impact on children and adolescents who have incarcerated parents or guardians. Research by Nichols and associates (2012) focused on the child’s possible negative academic outcomes if they had a parent who was incarcerated. In this article, the studies gathered reported that children who had an incarcerated parent tend to experience challenges with their socioeconomic status and lower cognitive skills. They also report that children were more likely to skip school and be high-school dropouts. This research study extended the lens to the extended family members and begged the question on whether the child’s extended family members are/were incarcerated, would that have any impact on the child? Their hypothesis was supported by the strong correlation of negative school outcomes with having extended family members be incarcerated. This research study adds an interesting point of view by incorporating facts of extended family members and the effects that could arise as a result. If more research existed around this topic, assessing the chaos within the child’s life by studying the effects of having incarcerated family members would be extremely beneficial.

Prior research does not delve deeper into the differences of effects on the child if they were to have an incarcerated father or mother. In a research study conducted by Sobba and associates (2017), the researchers conducted a study to assess the influence on a child when the child’s mother is the one who is incarcerated and if it had any impact on the child’s behavior. The

authors analyzed data from The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing dataset to track children's behaviors before and after their mother was incarcerated. The behaviors that were looked at were the tendency to destroy property and fighting. The authors found that if a child had a mother who was incarcerated, the child was more likely to show fighting behaviors, but did not affect their tendency to destroy property.

Toro and associates (2023) provide new research on addressing the effects of a child when their father is the one who is incarcerated. How do the effects differ when it is the father who is incarcerated? Does it affect the child differently than when it is their mother who is incarcerated? The data was collected from a sample of 4,327 families through a period of ten years in a longitudinal study. The results showed that children who had their father incarcerated at the age of five were more susceptible to behavioral issues at the age of 15 and showed signs of depression by the age of 9. When a child at a young adolescent age has a father who is incarcerated, research shows that it is just as disruptive to their growth and development as having a mother or a maternal figure be incarcerated. According to these two research studies, the negative impacts of having an incarcerated mother or father do not necessarily differ between the two. Children face the same consequences with either their mother or father being gone.

Raeder (2012) focuses on the possibilities of children who have incarcerated parents becoming incarcerated themselves. Are children with incarcerated parents more likely to be juvenile offenders/adult offenders? The author also examines the intersection of the foster care system and the education system as well, and how children with incarcerated parents are overrepresented in those systems. This also points out the stigma and isolation that may surround a child who has an incarcerated parent and discusses interventions and programs that aim to separate the child from their parent's actions, but also working to better their lives.



The emotional and mental health issues that occur when a child has an incarcerated parent or guardian is addressed by Thorne and associates (2023). This article is a secondary research study comprised of nine forms of literature that met the criteria that the authors set. The authors are aware that having a parent incarcerated is a high risk for children, labeling it as an “Adverse childhood experience (ACE).” The separation along with the dysfunction of the household now that one parent is away, is very troubling for the child. Children are vulnerable and more susceptible to unhealthy effects if they experience a negative change, such as their parents being incarcerated. This study aims to address the potential impact on the child’s mental and emotional health. The authors found that out of the nine articles, they identified five different categories that either had an impact on the child’s mental health or that was a negative effect of children. The first category was the parent/child relationship and the barriers to maintain that relationship. The contact and communication are significantly cut short between a parent and their child when that parent is incarcerated. The time spent for the child visiting their parents is cut down, and they are not always able to go and visit their parents, instilling a lot of issues for that child who does not have the same opportunity to see their parent(s). The second category is the structure of the household. For a child to go through any kind of change could pose certain issues for their developmental and mental health. When the living arrangements are changed, and their parent(s) who are supposed to be living at home with their child is not there anymore, it enables the child to go through things that they are not supposed to go through at a young age. The third category was the child’s emotional intelligence, how well they can regulate their emotions after not having their parent(s) in their home anymore. The fourth category is stigma and isolation. If a child goes to school, and the other kids are aware of their home experiences, that could lead to the child being put in an unwanted situation where other kids are mean to

them, bully them, leave them out of activities, etc. The fifth and last category is the structural disadvantages, such as a person's race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, education level, and other factors caused by parental incarceration? This new and constantly growing topic is multifaceted and complex. There are many different layers to this issue that need to be separately unpacked to give the platform to the underrepresented, in this case, the children ("hidden voices") who have incarcerated parents.

Children, adolescents, and young adults are a special population as they are constantly going through changes that make them more susceptible to experiencing mental health issues, with depression and anxiety being the top two mental health issues that they usually face (Heard-Garris et al., 2019). Due to their susceptibility and vulnerability, the trauma experienced for not having a "normal" connection with an individual's parents is sure to leave an impact on that individual. It makes them see the world differently, it makes them more aware of the system since they are involved with it as well, and it makes them deal with more trauma, which could lead to a wide range of behavioral and mental health issues (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). Behavioral issues such as fighting behaviors, a greater display of anger and frustration, unruliness, disobedience, and other unruly behaviors. In an article written by Heard-Garris and associates (2019), the researchers assess if a child is more likely to engage in delinquency if their parents are incarcerated or not. The researchers also analyze their mental health status, aiming to explore the association of parental incarceration on the child's mental health. The study was conducted by using data provided by the US National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health to examine the likelihood of a child committing criminal acts and whether or not they have had an incarcerated parent or guardian. The results found that out of the 13,083 participants the researchers interviewed, there were 141 participants who reported having both an

incarcerated parent and involvement within the juvenile system. It should be noted that the number is a very small sample compared to the wide range of participants in this study, however, the researchers did find that when a child had both an incarcerated parent and involvement within the juvenile justice system, those children reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder compared to children who never had an incarcerated parent or was incarcerated themselves. For a child to completely lose their innocence at such a young age by being exposed to the crimes and unfortunate situations that make them exposed to the criminal justice system is a difficult thing for a child to endure. Therefore, allowing the future to be known of this special population with data and facts should exist more in order to promote more meaningful change in these children's lives, while allowing them to grow up as healthy, mentally, emotionally, and physically stable adults in order to push them to be the best they can be.

The purpose of this research is exploratory, with the researcher aiming to examine the certain impacts of parental incarceration on the lives of their children.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

This research involved interviews with 8 adults (individuals over the age of 18) who have had incarcerated parents growing up. A total of 8 undergraduate students, including 7 female and 1 male, at Radford University were asked to participate in the researcher's study to examine the impacts of parental incarceration. The population of interest was college students, specifically, undergraduate students due to the nature of the study. The study's purpose was to examine the impacts of parental incarceration on their children's mental health. Participants were recruited through the personal knowledge of those individuals having grown up with an incarcerated parent or guardian. In-person interviews with the participants, and this was the best design due to the researchers' desire to obtain the most open and honest answers. The interviews were approximately an hour and consisted of 14 questions regarding their lived experiences, the trauma they may have faced, and if they show/showed more symptoms associated with mental health issues due to the supposed turmoil that the incarceration had on the family and child.

### **Interview Questions**

Fourteen questions were asked of those interviewed. The interview questions consist of:

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1. Describe your experience of having an incarcerated parent. Was the incarcerated parent your mother or father or another guardian? What age were you when your parents were incarcerated? What age were you when your parents were released?
2. Were you able to see your parents when they were incarcerated? Can you describe the visits?
3. What was it like growing up with one? What was the adjustment period like without them?
4. Do you think having an incarcerated parent had an impact on your psychological development? Describe the psychological impact that having an incarcerated parent had on you.

5. Does your experience of having an incarcerated parent make you feel isolated or different from others?
  6. Did you lose interest in things you cared about after your parents were incarcerated?
  7. Do you tend to worry a lot? Do you believe that you worry more because you grew up with an incarcerated parent?
  8. Do you find yourself to be more irritable with yourself and others? Do you think your level of irritability was affected by having an incarcerated parent?
  9. Have you ever experienced an “attack” of fear, anxiety, or panic?
  10. How often do you feel that you are in control of your moods/emotions/words?
  11. How have your experiences put a positive or a negative outlook on the world?
  12. What are some lessons you’ve learned after having an incarcerated parent?
  13. What do you believe that the criminal justice system needs to do in regard to addressing the needs of children with incarcerated parents?
  14. What are your thoughts about the criminal justice system overall? Do you believe that they handle the issues of parents in prison well? If so, why? If not, why?
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The data that was collected from these interviews were analyzed qualitatively. After the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed onto the computer, the researcher analyzed similar trends and patterns that correlate among the majority, if not all, of the participants. Direct quotes and information from each interview were utilized to support the overall themes that were collected. The participants all shared their experiences in great detail and how the experience of having an incarcerated parent affected them throughout their lives, and since the researcher’s goal is to examine the impacts of parental incarceration on their children’s mental health, this analysis plan was the best choice to use for the data collection.

## Results

The results obtained from this study indicate that there are lingering impacts of parental incarceration on their children's mental health. By the researcher comparing similar themes and patterns among the participants shared experiences, the researcher was able to identify a few lingering negative effects of a child growing up with an incarcerated parent or guardian. Some of the overall themes that the researcher found within the interviews are:

### **Theme #1: Experiences of having an incarcerated parent:**

- All eight of the participants reported that their parents were incarcerated at a younger age.
  - Participant A: “My mom has been incarcerated for most of my life and I think the earliest I really remember it was like 5 or 6.”
  - Participant B: “I can't really remember visiting my dad when he was incarcerated, just because I was so young, and I didn't really fully understand what was going on.”
  - Participant C: “I think it was definitely some time before my freshman year of high school, so I want to say around 11 or 12.”
  - Participant D: “I don't really know what age I was because he was arrested a lot before he was incarcerated. I think the last time I remember him getting arrested and actually being put in a car and taken away was when I was 6 or 7.”
  - Participant E: “I think I was 15 years old, so I was like a freshman or sophomore in high school.”
  - Participant F: “My father was incarcerated since I was probably not even a month old. He got out when I was about 6 or 7 years old.”
  - Participant G: “It was my stepfather, and I was about 8 years old.”

- Participant H: “I guess the first time it happened was maybe when I was 2 years old, and she was arrested on Christmas.”
- Five out of the eight participants reported having a hard time maturing emotionally.
- Participant D: “I think it did impact me growing up because it wasn’t always a stable environment with my dad getting arrested a couple of times, and I think because of that, I had a hard time regulating my emotions and I would act out like my dad because that is what I was taught to be like. I thought it was the normal, right way to act.”
  - Participant F: “I don’t think I was ever really in control of my emotions; I was told to suck it up by both my mom and dad.”
  - Participant G: “I didn’t feel like I had an outlet for my emotions, so not only did I not feel in control of emotions, but I also didn’t feel in control of myself.”
- Six out of the eight participants had a father who was incarcerated.
- Two out of the eight of the participants had a mother who was incarcerated.
- Four out of the eight participants reported having to take care of and be responsible for siblings. Participants also reported having to grow up and mature faster, be a “mom” or a “dad” at a young age.
- Participant E: “I have definitely had to grow up really fast and be a mom really fast to take care of my siblings since my dad was incarcerated and my mom had left me to take care of my younger siblings.”
  - Participant G: “It was kind of expected of me to take care of my sister. Which was fair, but it was still a lot to try and take care of myself when I was only 8 and take care of a 2-year-old.”

- Participant H: “My older sister had to take care of me, to help out my grandparents when my mom was gone.”
- Five out of the eight participants stated that their parents were not able to be around for important milestones in their life and that had a huge impact on them psychologically.
- Participant C: “During my high school graduation, I was just so distraught because he was not going to be there for it, and it really took a toll on me. I would just sit in my room and cry about it.”
  - Participant G: “it made feel very outcasted from others, there was a lot of events where I was alone or just with the teacher.”
- Three out of the eight participants reported maturing faster and ultimately understanding why their parent was incarcerated.
- Participant A: “but it’s like oh you kind of put yourself there and right now, I know you’re not a good person.”
  - Participant E: “The incarceration really ruined him and us, and I try to be a bigger person and understand it better to see how it affected him being in and out of jail.”
  - Participant H: “I remember growing up, some of my friends wouldn’t come over because my mom was a felon. I’m not a felon, so I didn’t understand but as I got older and matured quicker than normal, I started to understand more, it was just hard.”
- Three out of the eight participants reported being shielded from the situation.
- Participant B: “I didn’t really understand what was going because my parents were very focused on sheltering me and my brother from seeing anything.”



- Participant C: “I was kind of surprised because I didn’t know, no one told me until my oldest brother mentioned that we had to go visit him, and that was when I found out my dad was incarcerated. I didn’t know about anything; I still don’t really know why he’s incarcerated.”
  - Participant F: “My mom stopped the visits because she thought it was too much for me and didn’t want me seeing him like that.”
- Two out of the eight participants reported it being scary as a child, at such a young age, to see how a prison looks like and being patted down before entering the facility. Participants stated it felt traumatizing. Participants stated that as a kid seeing their parents behind bars is a difficult thing for a child at that age to process.
- Participant A: “Getting patted down every time you go in somewhere and as a kid is so uncomfortable and then like seeing your mom through glass and she looks all sad and depressed is a little sad.”
  - Participant E: “My dad looked awful, he just looked like he was drunk, he wasn’t, but he looked awful.”
- Three out of the eight participants reported having bad dreams and nightmares about their parents, and not being able to sleep well without them in the house.
- Participant A: “We didn’t know when my mom was coming home, and I would wake up in the middle of the night and I would just go sit outside and cry and cry.”
  - Participant E: “I remember I had this awful vivid dream where my dad had me trapped in a jail cell and would burn me with cigarettes and I couldn’t get out. I

woke up from it and I was sobbing. I don't think he would do that in real life, but the dream was so vivid, it was traumatizing.”

- Participant G: “I kept having these visions, they could have been dreams, but they felt so real. I would see a shadowy figure of him in the corner and I would not be able to sleep after that.”

➤ Two out of the eight participants relied on other male figures in the family – uncles, cousins, etc. to act as their father.

- Participant C: “I feel like I missed out on a father figure in my life, and I know I have my uncle, he helped raise me, but I just don't have that normal father-daughter relationship like others do.”
- Participant F: “I relied on my uncles and grandfather; they were the only male figures I had been around, so he felt like a stranger when my dad came back.”

➤ Three out of the eight participants saw domestic abuse occur in the home leading to parent incarceration which posed a significant amount of trauma to that person as a result.

- Participant D: “I didn't really notice any difference when my dad was gone, other than the fact that no one was really afraid to walk around anymore. When I was younger, I didn't really understand why he was gone, but now, I realize that everyone else in the house wasn't as scared anymore.”
- Participant E: “I remember them just started to yell louder and louder and my dad grabbed the door and pulled it off the top hinge. He pushed my mom to the floor and my friend was over, so she started screaming because we've never seen that before, and he kicked the front door down and ran out.”

- Participant G: “Growing up in that house was already scary because of the person my stepfather was, and this was the longest time he was incarcerated so I knew when he got out, it would be bad for us.”
- Two out of the eight participants stated that random people would go up to them to ask for drugs since it was common knowledge that their parents were selling drugs.
  - Participant E: “I had kids from school who would come up and ask me at school if I had any drugs since they bought drugs from my dad.”
  - Participant H: “It happens a lot more than you think. Someone will come up to me and tell me that my mom owes them this much money, and it sucked that people were telling me that.”

### **Theme #2: Psychological impacts:**

- Six out of the eight participants felt different and isolated from others.
  - Participant A: “When I was in school, all of the other kids would share what their parents did for them, and my mom never did things like that. The kids would bully and tease me about it.”
  - Participant H: “A lot of people around here don’t have parents like that here. It’s kind of hard to talk about it with people when they don’t really understand.”
  - Participant E: “I lived in a small town, so everyone knew everyone’s business. No one ever wanted to talk to me about it, so it was hard confiding in people about it.”
- Six out of the eight participants stated that they lost interest in things after the experience of parental incarceration.

- Participant A: “I used to be into art and hiking and stuff, and that was right before my mom was incarcerated. After that, I don’t think I did anything related to those things. I stopped doing things that made me happy.”
  - Participant D: “I liked singing and going outside, and for a long time after, I hated going outside, I was scared of it. I wanted to stay close to my family and became very introverted.”
  - Participant F: “I lost interest in basketball because it was something that we had bonded over, so the enjoyment wasn’t there anymore.”
- Six out of the eight participants stated that they worried a lot more, they were more stressed, anxious, paranoid, and fearful.
- Participant A: “I would get all panicky thinking about my mom because I would think about her and how to help, but as a kid, you can’t do anything in that situation. There was a lot of things I was stressed and worried about, and a kid shouldn’t be thinking about those things.”
  - Participant G: “I would worry a lot more about my safety after he was incarcerated.”
  - Participant H: “I do worry a lot especially when I’m by myself, you just never know what is going to happen next with my mom.”
- Four out of the eight participants stated that they would have emotional outbursts when they feel angry, and they tend to say things that they don’t mean.
- Participant C: “My mom and I would get into more fights, it just seemed like the sight of seeing me just irritated her. Before my dad was incarcerated, we never

fought, but I don't know I just grew more irritable with her, and I can't control it."

- Participant D: "It was very easy to irritate me and make me unhappy. I hated being put out of my comfort zone after everything that happened, and I think that came from my dad. Seeing his abuse and emotional outbursts taught me that it was normal."
  - Participant G: "My stepdad blamed me for a lot of the problems we had at home, so I would get irrationally angry at myself when I messed things up."
- Seven out of the eight participants claimed they had more anxiety and panic attacks.
- Participant E: "fear and anxiety, paranoia has definitely controlled my life for a long time especially being on my own. I was determined to keep going, but I had a lot of fear and worry about leaving my siblings. I just didn't know how to take care of them anymore."
  - Participant F: "My dad's actions, his incarceration, and his alcoholism made me feel very panicky and that is the main part of why our relationship is so strained."
  - Participant H: "I remember when I was younger, I would be so scared at night, I have had a lot of panic attacks."
- Six out of the eight participants claimed that they were exposed to a lot more real-world situations and experiences that allowed them to learn more and relate to other people in similar situations.
- Participant B: "You learn more about things and you're exposed to other people in similar situations."

- Participant E: “I am able to help others who go or have gone through similar situations. I mean, every situation is different, but I can try to help.”
  - Participant G: “I know I’m not the only one who goes through stuff like this, but we are strong, we got through it, and now we are hopefully able to talk about it to try and bring joy and validation not only to ourselves, but to others.”
- Two out of the eight participants mentioned functions at school that involved bringing a parent with them and they felt sad and left out that they were not able to bring their parent.
- Participant A: “At school, they always have these parent’s breakfast, and I never had a mom, or a parental figure go with me. I would just be sitting there.”
  - Participant G: “There were parent events at school, and I did not always have a parent present. My mom came sometimes, but she was essentially a single mother working two jobs, so she couldn’t come often.”
- Five out of the eight participants stated that they felt jealous of other people’s “healthy, normal” families.
- Participant A: “When I was with my partner over break, I saw how they were with their parents and I just thought about how healthy they were and how I’ve never had that, and I cried about it a lot over break.”
  - Participant C: “Still to this day, when I see people with their parents and them being able to be supported by their parents, it makes me a little sad that I don’t have that.”

- Participant G: “People talked about their families lives and it felt like they were more normal than what I thought was normal. It made me feel very jealous like I wish I had that life or had their parents.”
- Four out of the eight participants reported that they grew to be shy after their parents were incarcerated, feeling less interested in talking to others.
- Participant D: “Once my dad started getting arrested and cops were showing up, I became more introverted.”
  - Participant E: “Even though everyone knew my business, it didn’t mean they checked in on me. No one wanted to talk to me about it, and I had no one, not even school counselors. I internalized everything and kept going.”
  - Participant H: “I am a very shy person, I didn’t always feel like that though but as I’ve gotten older, I talk less to people, and I don’t really have any friends.”

**Theme #3: Lessons learned and outlooks on life:**

- Four out of the eight participants reported being more cynical and negative about the world.
- Participant A: “I think my experiences put a pretty negative outlook on the world, I just hate that parents are made to put their children above their struggles and not get the help they need to fix that.”
  - Participant D: “I feel like my childhood made me a bit more cynical, in the aspect of I don’t think that the world is a wonderful, amazing place.”
  - Participant F: “Trying to correct the criminal justice system is hard because it’s hard to correct something that has already existed for hundreds of years.”

- Four out of the eight participants reported that they were more kind to others, and they learned to not assume or judge things about others before knowing who they are or what they've gone through.
  - Participant D: "I've learned that you don't always know what people are going through just by looking at them and I also feel like it's so important to just be a kind, courteous person."
  - Participant E: "You can't judge a book by its cover, you can't assume what people are going through, you can't assume anything. People need to not talk about you when you don't know the full story."
  - Participant F: "It made me more guarded but also less judgmental about other people and what they may be going through because you just never know."
  
- Four out of the eight participants reported that they were more guarded and less trusting. Few participants mentioned how they are unable to depend on other people for emotional support or advice.
  - Participant C: "The negative side, it just made me guarded a lot. I didn't want to get into a relationship or anything like that."
  - Participant E: "I feel like people are trash, and you can't trust people. I do have trust issues, it's hard for me to trust people."
  - Participant H: "You can't really trust anybody. You don't know the whole truth and if they are telling you the whole truth."
  
- One participant mentioned how they were guided to the system to help better it.



- Participant F: “I feel like my experiences made me want to be in the criminal justice system, like it placed me where I need to be and push for the change within it.”

**Theme #4: Thoughts about the system overall, how to address the needs of the children of incarcerated parents, and how to fix the issues regarding parent-child relationships in the system:**

- Two participants mentioned wanting to have more programs in place to provide support for the children and families that are affected.
  - Participant A: “I feel like there should be more assisted living programs for children with incarcerated parents because not everybody has a stable or a loving family to go too. If your prime parent is incarcerated, they should help support you.”
  - Participant D: “I think it would be nice if there was more of a support system for single parents whose significant other suddenly becomes incarcerated whether it be monetary, like providing extra financial support to ensure that there is not much of a change in their ability to provide food, clothing, housing, or childcare or healthcare. I think as long as all the basic needs are still being met, it will be a lot better.”
- Three participants mentioned wanting to have more mental health services offered. More therapy and counseling for the children and families involved.
  - Participant C: “Therapy for everyone that is involved in the immediate family because I feel like that would help a lot.”

- Participant D: “I do think that it will also be beneficial if they started offering more mental health services for young children.”
  - Participant H: “I think that they could use some sort of counseling. I never got counseling, and I think kids who go through that with their parents struggle a lot and they don’t talk about it. I think the biggest issue with that is because they don’t have counseling like they should, and they feel like they can’t talk to anybody about it.”
- Two participants mentioned wanting more visitation time with their parents.
- Participant B: “Basically allow giving them the resources to remain in contact with their parents and not all the time, but a reasonable amount of time, because it is the parent’s fault, but not the kid’s fault.”
  - Participant G: “Depending on the situation, kids should still be able to see their parent even if it may be sad or hurtful. It will help with the development and growth regardless of how young or how old they are because it’s still important.”
- One participant mentioned having an alternative way to punish people with drug-related charges.
- Participant A: “Instead of sending drug addicts to jail, they should be sent to rehab, or something like that because they are not necessarily bad people, they just need a little bit of help.”
- One participant mentioned alternative punishments in relation to reducing the incarceration rates.

- Participant B: “My dad started out as a juvenile and then went all the way up until he finally got out and stopped but when he was young, he was in and out so if the system had put a stop to it in the beginning, it wouldn’t have continued when he was an adult. More like rehabilitation and things to digress any kind of incarceration is beneficial.”
- One participant mentioned taking into consideration that people do have families when making sentencing decisions:
  - Participant F: “When someone does the crime, I guess they do the crime, but take into fact that people do have families. Or find a way to make it easier for the kids, to make that transition easier.”
- Participants reported that prisons should have a separate visitation room that is more kid-friendly so that kids are less exposed to the harsh reality of prisons.
  - Participant F: “Have a little playpen or a kid’s room to have kids see their parents who are incarcerated just to help avoid the mindset of knowing the environment their parent is in.”
  - Participant G: “I wish there was a system where the area is more kid-friendly, with toys and nice coloring on the walls and not just metal walls that look like you’re in a dangerous place.”
- Participants reported that in situations where the kids go into the foster care system, there should be a policy stating that the system is not allowed to separate siblings.
  - Participant A: “I think that there should be a policy in the foster care system where you can’t just adopt one sibling.”

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The impact of parental incarceration is a complex problem, one in which few solutions have been presented to help the children affected by this seemingly never-ending cycle of incarceration, even though research has established that having an incarcerated parent influences children's outcome. The findings of this study offered useful knowledge and valuable insights into the minds of children with incarcerated parents and provided interesting data regarding the negative effects of parental incarceration on their children's mental health. The existing body of literature suggests some of the unknown effects on the children of incarcerated parents, and the study conducted will add concrete examples that provide support in identifying the exact effects of parental incarceration on their children's mental health. Several key themes emerged from this study allowing people to understand how children feel after going through a traumatizing experience and how they see the world as a result of it.

The first key concept that emerged was in relation to the individual's experiences of having an incarcerated parent. All eight participants shared one thing in common with each other regarding when their parents were incarcerated. All participants were at a young age when their parents were incarcerated. According to a Bureau of Justice Statistics report (2021), approximately 1.5 million people who were under the age of 17 had a parent who was incarcerated. In state prisons, approximately 1,252,100 state prisoners have children who are under the age of 18. In federal prisons, approximately 221,600 federal prisoners have children who are under the age of 18. One participant stated their father was incarcerated when they were a month old, one participant mentioned that they were five or six years old when their mother was incarcerated, and one participant reported that their father has been incarcerated since they were 11 years old. At a young age, children do not really understand and process things the way

adults do. When their parents are taken away and they have to adjust to a new living environment without one parent, that causes a lot of turmoil in that child's life (Phillips & Gates, 2011).

Another theme that emerged in describing each participants' experiences was the differences in gender. As discussed in the literature review above, Ghandnoosh and associates (2021), the data found in this article supports this concept by providing similar results that pertain to how many fathers are incarcerated vs. how many mothers are incarcerated.

Approximately 626,800 incarcerated individuals are fathers, and approximately 57,700 incarcerated individuals are mothers. There was no overlap or connections made between the researcher's participants to provide sufficient evidence to suggest any differences in how individuals feel when their mom is incarcerated vs. when their dad is incarcerated. However, many participants mentioned how the impact of their parents going away at such a young age gave them little to no support in learning how to handle their emotions.

When participants were asked questions regarding the impact of their parent being incarcerated, there was one theme that shone through. Participants discussed their difficulties in maturing emotionally due to observing their parents' behavior at the time, and a few participants were forced to internalize their emotions and consequently, started feeling angry and irritable. Another interesting theme found showed that the participants were forced to grow up earlier and as children, they were forced to grow up and take care of their younger siblings, almost be a stand-in parent to them instead of a sibling. The responsibility placed on children at such a young age, is difficult to deal with because it is especially hard to focus on things that kids should not be focusing on. Putting this much responsibility on a child that cannot even process their own emotions correctly has shown within this study that it is traumatizing when an innocent childhood is taken away and the life of an adult is pushed onto them.

Through analyzing all the interviews, a second concept that resonates among the majority, if not, all participants relate to the psychological impact of having an incarcerated parent. Many participants reported having high stress, high anxiety, high paranoia, intense moments of fear and worry. In fact, one participant mentions how they wanted to find a way to help their mom but as they stated, what could a child at that age do? Children feel so helpless because no one will listen to them, and the system tends to show time and time again, that they are not considerate of people having families (Fitzpatrick & Williams, 2016). Events involving bringing parents to school should be changed and opened up to allowing the children to bring any adult or guardian that the child relies on, since not all children have involved parents. Altering those events will lessen the chance of kids at school teasing their peers for not having parents come with them, and allow each and every child to feel included, regardless of their home situation.

Even though going through a situation like this is certainly traumatizing and enables the individual to have long-lasting effects from growing up with an incarcerated parent, there is still always a bright side. All the participants were asked about the lessons that they have learned and how they view the world, while most were negative, some offered beneficial information that shed light on the bravery and resiliency that these individuals offer to the world and the people around them. Many view the world in a negative aspect, feeling that people around them are not reliable and that no one can be trusted. Many participants stated that they had to internalize their emotions because no one was there for them. It is essential to recognize these patterns to avoid situations in which individuals are forced to be kept quiet with how they are feeling, because in most cases, these feelings have a way of rising to the surface no matter how far it's repressed (Kjellstrand, et al., 2019). One participant shared that their career choice was fueled by the

negative experiences that they went through with their incarcerated father and the knowledge they acquired regarding the criminal justice system. Shedding light on the voices of these individuals will help form solutions to prevent future children from continuing to experience negative effects as a result of not receiving the help they need to make the transition easier of not having a parent in the home.

As the existing body of literature grows to examine the impacts of parental incarceration on their children's mental health, so should the solutions presented to provide resources and support for children with incarcerated parents or guardians. Proposing new solutions and programs will reduce the stigma surrounding incarceration and will foster change in inmates to be better for their children and their families. Supporting individuals with incarcerated parents is incredibly important in ensuring that these children have the opportunities and resources in place to continue to succeed with as little of a psychological impact as possible. Some of the policy proposals that were thought of by the participants that could address the needs of children with incarcerated parents include programs dedicated to providing children and families with financial support, healthcare, housing, clothing, and other basic needs to reduce the trauma stemming from their parents disappearing from their home. A second policy proposal is implementing mental health services within the criminal justice system specifically working to address the needs of children with incarcerated parents, such as therapy and peer support programs, to allow the child to have an outlet and to be aware that they are not alone. A third policy proposal is establishing special visitation rooms within the prison system to allow for more kid-friendly rooms that embodies a warmer environment, to eliminate the exposure to the harsh realities of what U.S. prisons look like.

## **Conclusion**

This research topic is incredibly important and dire, as the numbers of children with incarcerated parents are continuing to grow immensely. Hopefully, this will shed light on the underrepresented and allow them a voice to be heard and shared, while also being able to expand on it and be able to reduce the mass incarceration movement and help keep more and more people out of prisons and in rehabilitation programs. Shifts the focus from punishment to rehabilitation and healing. Shifts the focus to the children to be able to raise them to perceive the world in a better, more innocent way.



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