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# Developmental Outcomes among Children within the Context of Maternal Incarceration: Findings from a Study of Family Inequality

Zina T. McGee 

Department of Sociology, Hampton University, Hampton, VA 23668, USA; zina.mcgee@hamptonu.edu

**Abstract:** This research addresses behavior difficulties and maladaptive coping among African American children and adolescents, and the manner in which these outcomes differ among those with incarcerated mothers. The study also provides an in-depth analysis of the experiences of mothers during and after their incarceration. Earlier investigations suggested that mothers' victimization and offending, including drug use, are related to children's emotional and behavioral outcomes. Hence, this research extends an ongoing project by investigating the nature of this relationship using aggregate data on adolescent health outcomes. Generally, most research addresses parental incarceration, typically followed by negative responses of male youth. Less research has evaluated the outcomes of parents' incarceration on African American children and adolescents specifically. This is particularly true among those with incarcerated mothers. Additionally, examinations have highlighted the role of fathers' incarceration on negative family functioning, yet we know less about the impact of mothers' imprisonment and re-entry on children's behavior. Many of these mothers are single and live in poverty, and their economic situations lead to higher risks of recidivism, deleteriously affecting their children. Moreover, several of them are raising children while experiencing traumatic mental health concerns amid drug usage with minimal support or treatment. For the current project, special attention is also placed on the mothers' experiences with contact with children, prior history of substance abuse, mental illness, treatment for drug and alcohol problems, and coping with separation from children in an attempt to reveal the subsequent, harmful impact on children's behavioral adjustment.

**Keywords:** juvenile delinquency; maternal incarceration; behavioral outcomes; violence



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## 1. Introduction

Women comprise the fastest-growing segment of the incarcerated population in America's federal state and local prisons. There remains a gender gap in the prison population with regard to many women who are marginalized on the basis of race, class, age, and sexuality, as many of them bear the burden of punitive policies and sentencing; this problem has become even more exacerbated as the number of mothers in prison has greatly increased in recent years. Specifically, almost seventy percent of women in prison are mothers with children under eighteen years of age, with almost one third with children under the age of five [1,2]. Recent studies have also estimated that one out of every twelve women are pregnant during their incarceration and more than one million children in America have incarcerated mothers or mothers on parole [1,2]. Children with incarcerated mothers are in the highest category of at-risk youth in the nation [3]. Moreover, many youths face dire circumstances with the incarceration of their mothers, and studies show that those from the ages of twelve to seventeen are demonstrated to have the highest levels of victimization for violence- and theft-related criminality. Generally, children with mothers in prison experience poverty and trauma prior to, and during, their mother's incarceration [3]. Research additionally shows that between sixty and seventy percent of the mothers in prison stated prior experiences of physical or sexual abuse, and most of them were living with their children at the time of apprehension.

Recent research has furthermore suggested that the arrest and incarceration of a mother poses greater challenges for youth, who may experience mental health complications and behavioral problems from the crisis events relating to separation from the mother. Additionally, the removal of the mother from the home due to incarceration poses unique situations for children and adolescents across age and developmental levels. One study, as an example, demonstrated that mothers who were recently released from prison without adequate resources were more likely to report complications with living arrangements, finances, and their children's behavior, much of which was due to accumulative disadvantage and stigmatization [4]. Other research has displayed that there is a correlation between mothers' expected incarceration and children's adverse consequences [5], a finding that is likewise consistent with more recent studies [6]. Research has also associated pointers of economic sufferings relating to mothers' release from prison and children's destructive behavior. Here, children's external signs (i.e., behavioral problems) were more narrowly related with issues connecting prolonged separations from, and partial contact with, their mothers throughout confinement than were internal indicators (i.e., resentment of mothers for leaving).

Research has connected the harmful effects of mothers' incarceration on children's adjustment, as many mothers are faced with problems associated with re-entry. Numerous women released from prison continue to have problems with living arrangements, economic stability, and their children's behavior. The family disruption that is often caused by the mother's anticipated incarceration leads to greater negative outcomes among children. As noted previously, many of these negative outcomes can be displayed in behavioral problems which are associated with lengthy separations and less contact with mothers, as well as anger at mothers for leaving. The marked increase in children with mothers in prison sheds light on the pervasive problems of economic, residential, and developmental risk that can lead to problems in minority youth. Minority children and adolescents in particular face the dire circumstances of poor mental health, educational disparity, and frequent contact with the juvenile justice system, as the conditions of confinement exacerbate the experiences of mothers. The fact that many of them are the sole providers of their children creates even greater problems for these children as the crisis event of separation from the mother is rarely recognized. Therefore, misbehavior in school, violence in communities, and overall juvenile delinquency is rarely met with responses that are age-appropriate in terms of mental health and behavioral services. Research continues to show that there are correlations between child behavior and mothers' incarceration, particularly given length of stay, limited contact, and economic decline. African American children are more likely than white children and adolescents to have an incarcerated mother and many of the specific parenting and family needs of this group are left unaided. This becomes an even greater challenge as we continue to examine the indicators of juvenile delinquency within the context of mothers' incarceration. Differences also exist with regard to age level and gender-specific outcomes. Many theoretical perspectives have been used to address the circumstances of children whose mothers have been in prison. One of these frameworks focuses on the consequences of anomie or strain which produces certain modes of adaptation which serve, for many disadvantaged children, as coping strategies as they deal with the pressures that have been placed on them. The status and frustration that many children experience as a result of their mother's incarceration, much of which is also brought on by stigma, can often compel youth to act out in home, in school, and in the community, as well as internalize their symptoms. Therefore, this perspective focuses very heavily on the issue of status frustration experienced by many youths in response to their mother's incarceration, thus creating a greater need to study research that connects children's encounters with behavioral problems and internalizing symptoms within the context of mothers' incarceration.

As a theoretical framework, the strain perspective also addresses in detail the economic disparities that result from maternal imprisonment. Hence, mothers' incarceration is directly connected to children's behavioral outcomes, and this perspective relies greatly

on the functioning of familial groups that involve the mother as the sole provider. As noted, when fathers are incarcerated, mothers are the sole providers, and if mothers are incarcerated, many children will lose their sole provider, thus exacerbating the situation when there is a lack of financial ability to raise children. Moreover, inadequate income, limited access to government assistance, and financial strain often create negative outcomes for children who are processed at the societal level. Therefore, they are not appropriately regulated due to the mothers' incarceration, and their means to achieve success remain limited. As a result, these children have less access to legitimate means and will cope and deal with the pressures that involve negative behavior. Additional theoretical perspectives such as the control theory focus on the fact that children raised in homes in the absence of a mother due to maternal incarceration will often have low levels of control, which often contributes to the causality of criminal delinquency. Effective parenting promotes conformity, and in the absence of the mother, a detrimental effect remains on the experiences of children who are not bonded to the parent. Problems with visiting mothers while in prison are also apparent, as many facilities are too far away from homes for children to visit, and the visits alone create stressors and strains for many of the youth. Hence, attachment to the conventional parent and involvement in conventional activities are often hindered among many youths, who in contrast will experience their mother's imprisonment through delinquent behavior and less family bonding. Because the number of children with mothers in prison continues to grow, academics have noted more financial, housing, and developmental risk aspects that often lead to amplified behavior difficulties among this population of youth. Mass-incarceration-deprived mental health, educational inequalities, fewer substantial resources, and recurrent interaction with the juvenile justice system disproportionately create greater problems for minority children and adolescents [7–10]. Additionally, these situations are further aggravated when a parent, particularly a mother who was the sole provider of her children, is incarcerated, and several of these same complications continue when she is released as new issues concerning re-entry mount.

Previous research has placed greater focus on the consequences that parental incarceration has on children in general, yet less is known about the cumulative effects when also addressing overall exposure to community violence. The current investigation, however, draws specific attention to how maternal incarceration and community violence exposure play a role in the delinquent behavior of youth. Understanding this connection will optimistically lead to more efforts to decrease delinquency and implement prevention and counseling programs for youth, families, and the community, while recognizing the structural, unequal consequences of parent–child separation with increased maternal incarceration. The purpose of this study, then, is to discover the relationship between maternal incarceration, exposure to community violence, and the impact they together have on juvenile delinquency involvement. Specifically, this study will seek to answer the following research question:

What is the relationship between children's adjustment outcomes and mothers' experiences with incarceration?

Additional matters vital to the current study are the involvement of mothers in jail and prison, mainly with regard to coping with separation from children. Here, our intent is to discover the relationship between familial history of incarceration, drug addiction, sexual abuse, mental illness, and treatment among a sample of female inmates and the subsequent experiences of their children upon re-entry. Special attention is paid to the degree of contact with children, prior history of substance abuse, mental illness, treatment for drug and alcohol problems, coping with separation from children, and children's behavioral outcomes.

## 2. Literature Review

An assessment of the literature proposes that delinquency tends to rise during initial adolescence, peak during mid-adolescence, and wane during late adolescence and early adulthood [11–14]. While disproportionate amounts of African American youth are in-

volved in drug-related behaviors, African American women are also unequally engaged in low-level drug-related offenses, leading to arrest and removal from the home.

Regarding the linkage between maternal incarceration and children's developmental outcomes, one study found that 66 percent of crimes committed by women were drug-related, with the rest of the crimes being non-violent. Furthermore, seventy percent of the women had previously been victims of physical and sexual abuse [5]. These findings are consistent with more recent readings addressing the effect of imprisonment on mother-child relationships and financial, emotional, and physical well-being [6]. Additionally, none of the women were provided with family reunification programs while in prison according to [5], highlighting the dearth of treatment programs for women in prison, particularly those addressing probable complications with re-entry. When mothers are released from prison, they return home to their children with the challenge of re-establishing emotional bond or attachment, as children are presented with greater risk of emotional and behavioral problems [6].

Research studies have continued to address the necessity for greater, improved services at the civic, state, and national points for the urban children of incarcerated mothers. Their efforts are not only to reduce substantial destitution and guarantee the permanence of resources, but to extend existing strategies concerning the removal of the mother from the home as a crisis event that instantaneously impacts children [7]. Moreover, the gap in income inequality that affects families broken by maternal incarceration points toward the experiences of children facing the consequences of maternal incarceration without appropriate aftercare [15–18].

Research has found that children usually experience life stressors prior to, and after, their mother's incarceration. They may experience what is called "enduring trauma", which is a combination of poverty, abuse, neglect, molestation, living arrangement changes, separation from parents, and community violence. They may also be exposed to substance abuse, since many mothers' primary reason for imprisonment relates to drug possession and usage. The enduring trauma which results from a combination of pre-incarceration and post-incarceration factors can have an enormous impact on juvenile delinquency involvement [18]. Reaction behaviors may include fear, low self-esteem, withdrawal, separation anxiety, eating and sleeping disorders, physical aggression, gang activity, sexual activity, lying, and other delinquent behaviors [19,20]. Studies also show that enduring trauma can also lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and traumatic events experienced before the age of 11 are more likely to result in PTSD than those after the age of 12 [2].

Incarceration not only adversely impacts mothers, but children and caregivers as well. When fathers are imprisoned, children usually stay with their mothers; however, when mothers are incarcerated, these children are most likely to be placed with their grandparents, other relatives/guardians, or foster care [21]. Hence, the relationship between child and caregiver is important in helping the child achieve positive outcomes from their previous experiences [5]. Moreover, some caregivers have to rearrange their lives in order to help children adjust to the changes, leading to major stress for the caregivers [21]. Studies have shown that non-parental attachment relationships formed after maternal incarceration can be characterized by intense ambivalence, disorganization, violence, or detachment. Moreover, negative views of relationships foster emotional and behavioral reactions that may lead to delinquent behavior [18,21]. With increased parental attachment, delinquent behavior is less likely to occur. Alternately, when there is decreased parental attachment, there are higher rates of delinquent behavior expected [20,22].

In relation to family structure and processes, studies continue to show a linkage between maternal imprisonment and children's behavior and expressive adjustment outcomes. Research has shown more specifically that mothers' incarceration relates to children's criminal justice involvement, such as a greater probability of arrests, a higher quantity of arrests, and apprehensions at an earlier age [22]. Alongside maternal incarceration, exposure to violence has a strong effect on juvenile delinquency [23,24]. Exposure to community violence includes being a direct victim or witness of violence and can range

from hearing gunshots to prostitution, to murder. Research suggests the average age of youth exposed to violence is 12, and older youth are more likely to be exposed to violence than younger children. Victimization from exposure to violence has been found to be the greatest predictor of internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors. Males have been found to externalize problem behaviors while females are more likely to internalize problem behaviors such as depression.

Researchers have found that the different family structures of youth and socio-economic status integrate much of the time when it comes to delinquent behaviors of youth, and that low socio-economic status heavily contributes to delinquency [14,20]. Others have found that youth living in deprived neighborhoods are more expected to witness violence than youth living in middle- or upper-class neighborhoods, and youth living in neighborhoods where services geared towards youth are provided are less likely to witness violence [25]. The movement of people of different races and ethnicities into inner cities where unemployment and animosity between different groups may be high can contribute to increases in crime. However, what is often lost in the discourse is that those families are marginalized by wider society, which reinforces barriers and dislocations and can further criminalize many mothers through greater arrests and separation from children [26]. Scholars have persuasively argued that mothering in the context of criminalization is often shaped by poverty, structural racism, inadequate housing, and lack of childcare, and other economic barriers [26]. Mothers, in turn, are criminalized women who are further stigmatized as inadequate with children who are destined for problematic life trajectories. Their focus reminds us that social and material realities shape outcomes for children, since many of these families are destitute prior to the mother's incarceration and that such a handicap is likely to shape one's entrance into the criminal justice system. While confinement exacerbates disadvantages, they posit that the legislative and financial dynamics shape the lives of children and youth in even greater ways [26].

In sum, the aforementioned studies that have addressed the linkage between maternal incarceration and subsequent childhood behavior have also pointed toward the need for greater research to address the chronological impact of oppression within the juvenile justice system and the ensuing factors that considerably influence early-onset juvenile delinquency. In this regard, the devaluing of talent and potential among marginalized youth within the educational system remains, as many are relegated to characterizations of criminality, as seen through inordinate levels of dismissal and interruption for minor infractions [2]. Hence, the likelihood of positive mother/child reunification declines with prior maternal incarceration, and as women are arrested, sentenced, and confined several times, the degrees at which they will be continually detached from their children are swiftly rising, further suggesting the need to discover additional options for intervention and treatment. Likewise, greater attention must be placed on the strong connection between family upbringing, traumatic victimization, and violent behavior, and how these influences add to regulation consequences among African American youth [2]. As mothers face re-entry, developing community assets, creating better policies regarding custodial judgement, shorter sentences, and consistent judicial attitudes, can lessen the possible threats for juvenile delinquency in response to maternal incarceration. Disparate incarceration rates among minority mothers exist within urban areas and do not affect society as a totality. As a consequence, they are not beheld with urgency when attempts for structural change and the dismantling of current policies are introduced.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Major Question*

What is the relationship between children's adjustment outcomes and mothers' experiences with incarceration?

### 3.2. Sampling

Surveys were completed by 1500 lower-income African American youth from 12 to 18 years of age in the State of Virginia. From a variety of schools, churches, and community organizations that service youth in urban areas, we selected our participants from a quota-sampling procedure. From census tract data, youth were recruited to fit the demographic characteristics developed from the census data. Participants from neighborhoods were also recruited from the census to be representative of the groups of interest. Additional data were collected from a sample of 200 youth detainees who had mothers in prison for non-violent offenses related to drug possession and use. Within this context, the following three specific aims guided portions of the research. The first part of the study addresses relevant constructs of coping and adjustment outcome, including at-risk sexual behavior, as contributors to measures of physical and psychological health. Second, using the race homogenous sample, the mediating or moderating function of coping and adjustment outcome, including at-risk sexual behavior, on the relationship between exposure-to-violence level and psychological and physical health is addressed. Third, the project examines the moderating influence of dispositional factors such as age, gender, and family structure on the relationships between managing stress or coping, adjustment results, including at-risk sexual conduct, and physical and mental health in African American youth across an array of exposure-to-violence levels with the experience of having a mother in prison for non-violent offenses.

Surveys were also conducted with 200 women incarcerated in jails in Virginia, Maryland, District of Columbia, and New York. Twenty interviews were also conducted with some of the women presently kept in jails and a few who had been released.

We enrolled women into the study by inviting volunteers within the female housing section and obtaining knowledge on other women who would be helpful in addressing their experiences after confinement. We specifically selected women with children, and this review reports on a convenience sample since random sampling was not accessible due to significant transitions and court appointments. We are unable to provide the participation ratio because of the transition within the units and the privacy of respondents. We acquired informed consent, and research aides managed the interviews and distributed the surveys to the women in a secluded setting within the jails. They also interviewed women released from prison in community centers that offered aftercare services to ex-offenders.

There was no payment provided for data collected within the jails, but women in the community centers who were former jail inmates collected USD 20 for each interview. We managed continuation surveys on 200 of the previous participants. Survey items examined familial background properties (i.e., living condition while growing up, family past involving incarceration, and parental abuse of drugs and alcohol), the inmate's own circumstances including mistreatment prior to incarceration, history of drug and/or alcohol abuse, physical ailment, forms of treatment including drug/alcohol treatment, mental health therapy, medical care, group counseling, parenting classes, and reunification analysis.

The racial composition of the sample of female inmates surveyed was 45% Caucasian and 55% African American, with 33% of the women having some high school education, 38% having completed high school, and 33% with some college education or more. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 54, and women between the ages of 35 and 44 comprised the largest age range of all at 42%. Additionally, of the women who participated, 30% had one child, 23% had two children, 10% had three children, 32% of the women had four children, and 5% had five children or more. Regarding economic status and marital status, 24% of the women were married and 36% were divorced. Only 5% were separated, with the remaining 35% never being married. Most of the women were employed full time prior to their incarceration at 34%, while 23% were employed part time, 15% were unemployed, and 28% were unemployed and not looking for work.

### 3.3. Measurement

For this research, we specifically used survey items from the women that addressed their experiences with incarceration, problems with re-entry, and children's general responses, which allowed us to combine a series of questions in which they were reporting problems on scales with separation from children, limited contact with children, trouble finding appropriate housing, and trouble finding a job. We analyzed the items to create a scale yielding a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.89 for problems from incarceration. We also created a child problem scale which allowed us to look at two individual items: anger at the mother for leaving and behavioral problems at school. This yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.95, whereby the combined score suggests that there are both internalizing and externalizing outcomes of mothers' incarceration.

Items also addressed the methods that female inmates used to cope with their incarceration, markedly in occasions where extended separation from children was involved. To further comprehend the experiences of women in jail and the way in which they coped with being absent from their children, we used a sequence of open-ended questions for interviews addressing how the female inmates handled being away from home, the effect that incarceration had on their lives, the degree to which they received support in jail to assist with rehabilitation, the influences on their ability to cope while in jail, their goals in life prior to incarceration, and the undercurrents of dealing with criminal justice staff. The inquiries were later modified as a follow-up interview on released offenders to discover how they amended life after incarceration. For this study, women receiving drug abuse treatment and mental health treatment were compared with women who did not.

Authorization was obtained from the Institutional Review Board, study #57033. Guided student research assistants assembled the consent and assent forms, and 20–30 youths at a time were examined in small group arrangements during assemblies. Survey completion lasted around 90 min, and participants received USD 10 for data collection both as an incentive and to reduce obstacles to participation. We encountered no problems with denials to participate. However, it should be noted that the stratified model is not generalizable, given the precise technique of recruitment and suitability requirements. Descriptive data reveal that the sample was 89% African American, and fewer respondents were Caucasian, Latino, Asian, Native American, and Other. The greatest number of students were 15 years old, and the modal grade was ninth. The majority (57%) of the students were male, while most of the respondents lived with their mother only (49%), followed by both parents (34%).

## 4. Analysis and Findings

### 4.1. Quantitative Findings

The results examining problems with incarceration among mothers and children's developmental outcomes show that 71% of the women at the time of their arrest had at least one child under the age of 18. Among those most likely to be separated from their children for a period of one year or more, the results showed that the percentage within that category was 39%. As they were detained, 68% of the women reported having regular contact with their children, with a substantial proportion reporting the reason being trouble with distance to visit the prison (39%). Moreover, 39% of them reported having one day or less to make arrangements upon arrest. Additionally, 61% of the mothers reported being the sole providers of their children at the time of their arrest. The questionnaire items also addressed other problems that the women experienced, and results indicated that upon re-entry to society, 39% of them reported having trouble finding a place to live, while 67% of them reported having difficulty finding an affordable, safe, and stable residence for more than three months. The women also reported difficulty with maintaining their households upon re-entry, with 68% of them indicating that they had trouble finding employment, and 61% of the women also reported that they were concerned with problems dealing with abusive partners. The results also showed that when women were asked questions about the responses of their children to their incarceration, 68% of them reported having children

who were angry for leaving, and 32% of them reported children who had exhibited behavior problems in school. Table 1 provides an illustration of the aforementioned statistics.

**Table 1.** Frequency distribution of problems after re-entry and children's adjustment among released mothers.

Problems among Released Mothers	Percent (%Yes)
Children under the Age of 18	71%
Length of Separation from Child: More than One Year	39%
No Contact with Child during Incarceration	68%
Most Common Reason Children Did Not Visit: Too Far Away	39%
Amount of Time to Arrange for Children to Live in Another Place After Arrest: One Day	39%
Were Respondents Living with Spouse or Partner that Supported Them: No	61%
Reported Problems with Finding a Place to Live	39%
Reported Problems with Finding Employment	68%
Reported Problems with Finding a Safe Place to Live	67%
Reported Problems with an Abusive Relationship	61%
Reported Children Being Angry at Mother for Leaving	68%
Reported Children Having Behavioral Problems at School	32%

Correlational analyses in Table 2 show that among youth who exhibited anger, a strong positive association existed with regard to being separated from the mother over an extended period of time ( $r = 0.58^{**}$ ). A similar association was found with regard to having limited contact with the mother and anger ( $r = 0.64^*$ ), while measures relating to the amount of time for living arrangements, problems with finding a place to live, employment, and the mother being unemployed for at least three months were also statistically significant but had weaker coefficients ( $r = 0.30^{**}$ ,  $r = 0.33^{**}$ ,  $r = 0.23^{**}$ , and  $r = 0.12^{**}$ , respectively). In each instance, however, children were more likely to exhibit anger at their mother for leaving in situations where there were greater problems with the mother's adjustment upon re-entry. Stronger associations were found when examining behavioral problems at school. Here, there were strong positive associations between behavioral problems and separation from the mother for an extended period of time ( $r = 0.68^{**}$ ) and behavioral problems and limited contact with the mother while incarcerated ( $r = 0.78^{**}$ ). Moderate associations also existed in this regard as they related to measures of the amount of time given for finding living arrangements ( $r = 0.47^{**}$ ), trouble with finding a place to live ( $r = 0.46^*$ ), trouble with finding employment ( $r = 0.43^{**}$ ), and being unemployed for at least six months ( $r = 0.34$ ). Again, children exhibited greater problems with behavior in situations where mothers were reporting difficulty with adjustment upon re-entry, as the indicators of these measures were assessed.

These analyses found that there is a relationship between the behavior of youth and maternal incarceration. When a mother is arrested and imprisoned, bonding between mother and child, from the social control framework, does not take place, and the child is more likely to become a delinquent. Likewise, there is a connection between the behavior of youth and their exposure to community violence. Youths living in disadvantaged neighborhoods where violence is prevalent have higher chances of becoming delinquents. When combined, youth living in low-income communities and whose mothers are in prison can be detrimental to the development and socialization processes of the young.



**Table 2.** Correlations of problems after re-entry and children's adjustment among released mothers.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Separated for Extended Time from Mother							
Limited Contact with Mother during Incarceration	0.19 *						
One Day or Less for Living Arrangements to be Made After Mother's Arrest	0.43 **	0.16 *					
Trouble Finding a Place to Live Upon Re-Entry	0.14 *	0.23 **	0.38 **				
Trouble Finding Employment Upon Re-Entry	0.09 **	0.02 *	0.36 **	0.23 **			
Unemployed for at Least Three Month or More	0.10 **	0.09 **	0.33 **	0.14 *	0.11 **		
Child Angry for Mother Leaving them Behind	0.58 **	0.64 *	0.30 **	0.33 **	0.23 **	0.12 **	
Child Exhibiting Behavior Problems at School	0.68 **	0.78 **	0.47 **	0.46 *	0.43 **	0.34 **	0.81 **

\*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

The assessment of the problems that the women in the sample faced from the results of the survey analysis further suggests that the removal of a parent for incarceration creates a significant amount of strain on children, as these women do not suffer the pains of incarceration alone. Barriers between communication with children and mothers create even more problems for youth, as seen in their antisocial behavior and anger at the mother for leaving them. Their adjustment to the mother's incarceration creates greater problems that address the characteristics of many low-income families with regard to the development of children and adolescents in harsh environments. While mothers are away, someone has to take care of the children, and many of these youths do not understand the circumstances and will respond in ways that exhibit negative behavior for them. The greatest determinants of how they cope would be regular contact with a parent during imprisonment, but in these situations, we can see that visitation becomes extremely difficult for families with limited resources. Hence, they are unable to fully cope with the separation of the mother. Studies have also suggested that regarding intervention, there are diverse problems with children who are separated from their parents. Here, we found that anger and behavior problems are specifically related to variations in the mother's problems that are reported upon re-entry. Many of these problems remain structural in nature, as these women have difficulty finding jobs, finding affordable places to live, and finding places to live that are safe for their children, as they continue to escape the horrors of abusive situations. Children then will respond differently in many ways as a result of the circumstances of their mothers. In addition to the strain placed on these youth, we are also seeing that there is less attachment and less commitment to conventional lines of action and conventional parents. Hence, the results of these correlations shed more light on the collateral consequences of maternal incarceration as children are forced to continually navigate through these negative experiences. As these findings suggest, more steps need to be taken to meet the needs of the entire family with regard to incarceration. Additionally, an independent samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the relationship between select difficulties with mothers' re-entry and children's problems with behavior. A re-entry problems scale was created from four indicators measuring the extent to which mothers reported having difficulties with specific issues after incarceration. These included problems with parenting, conflict with the children's father, having too many financial responsibilities, and experiencing substance abuse problems. Items were combined to create a re-entry problems scale, whereby a higher score denotes an increase in reported problems (Cronbach's alpha = 0.723). The results in Table 3 indicate that there was a significant difference in the scores for no behavior problems in school (mean = 6.00, sd = 1.59) and the scores for behavior problems in school (mean = 10.57, sd = 4.16). Hence, the results of the t-test value of mothers' re-entry problems score show a significant difference in delinquent and non-delinquent children in that the mean score on the re-entry problem scale is higher with reports of children's behavioral problems in school.

**Table 3.** Results of t-test value of mothers' re-entry problems score in delinquent and non-delinquent children.

	Behavioral Problems in School	Mean	Std. Deviation	t
Re-entry Problem Score	no	6.00	1.59	76.05 *
	yes	10.57	4.16	

\*  $p < 0.001$ .

#### 4.2. Qualitative Findings

As noted earlier, we also conducted in-depth interviews with twenty mothers who had been released from the correctional setting and were participating in a re-entry program that provides services for effective reintegration into society. Our intent to integrate this research with that of the survey analyses of youth rests upon the need to examine comprehensive programs and the policy consequences relating to the collateral costs of the incarceration of mothers, as their children are placed at significant risks for emotional and behavioral crises. Hence, upon their return to society, we asked the mothers the following questions:

1. How did you feel being away from home (daily routine, freedom, flexibility, health concerns), family, friends, social life, work, and religious life?
2. What impact did your incarceration have on how you feel? What do you think caused you to be in jail? Why would you say you committed the crime that brought you to jail?
3. Were there any support systems in jail to assist you with rehabilitation? If so, did you use them and what are their benefits? If no, why not?
4. What kept you motivated to cope with being incarcerated? What are some of the challenges or problems that you faced?
5. Regarding your children, where are they now? How much contact do you have with them? How did you cope with being separated from them? Do you receive any support for them? Did you have support when you left (i.e., childcare, employment, education, treatment, rehabilitation)?

A variety of themes surfaced from the participants' interview responses. Among them were concerns about their children and visitation, having limited support and treatment for mental health and substance abuse, being undereducated with few resources, and facing lengthy sentences for non-violent crimes. In addition to the concerns regarding mother-child separation, a critical component of the unique experiences of incarcerated women is the pervasive issue of children's behavioral and emotional adjustment, as the mothers noted how their incarceration was linked to their child's delinquency. During interviews with women who had been released from prison, Sajay, a 29-year-old mother of two jailed for drug distribution, noted

"Being away from home was painful. I did not call anyone because it was too uncomfortable. My goal was to serve my time and I would see my children when I got out of jail. I have been incarcerated many times. Things are bad and I live with my aunt. I have no transportation and I have no cash. I cannot get many resources since do not have an ID. Another problem that I now have is that my children no longer listen to me and are angry and get into trouble in school all the time."

Thoughts on children's behavior in response to imprisonment also resonated with Pam, a 28-year-old mother of one child confined for cocaine distribution and welfare fraud, as she reflected,

“I was miserable being away from my girl. My girl stayed with her grandmother. It took me about a year to get a job. I lost my other children to foster care and now I think my girl is involved in something bad at her school. She doesn’t talk to me, and I know that she is using drugs. I don’t want to end up back in the system, but now I worry that she will become a part of that same system.”

The connection between mothers’ cumulative victimization and children’s behaviors was also exemplified during Cylae’s interview. Here, the 32-year-old mother of one son was jailed for drug possession and described her situation:

“My biggest concern is staying out of jail. My son lives in Texas with his dad, and he won’t speak to me on the phone. I miss him and I would like to see him, but I can’t. As a little girl I blamed myself for bad things happening to me, got in trouble, used drugs as a teenager and I wish I had stayed away, I have problems the family history, they were in jail a lot, now I have a son who doesn’t understand what this has done to me and our relationship.”

Duana, a 30-year-old mother of four, indicated the treatment she missed in jail that she believed could have assisted her with her re-entry and the problems she now faces with parenting:

“I didn’t get much help in jail, there is nothing for women. . .no parenting help, no family programs, nothing. I am trying to get into some programs now for women but most of us are on the waiting list to get there where we could get better help. I abused drugs and alcohol, I was placed on anti-depressants but that is not what I need, I need help with my drug problem. I am having a hard time because my children are being put out of school a lot for acting up and I can’t seem to say anything or help them.”

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This investigation sought to demonstrate from the research findings that the children of incarcerated mothers face hardships not experienced by other urban families, and the findings show the necessity of first identifying mothers at incarceration as immediate risks for hardship and instability, followed by the identification of the child’s or adolescent’s risk for increased aggression, anxiety and/or depression. While we understand that the findings from this study cannot affect policy change across the full population of children impacted by the incarceration of their mothers, we do anticipate that these results will shed new light on the circumstances of African American children in particular who frequently bear the burden of punitive policies. Additionally, this study highlights the impact of maternal incarceration on the developmental and social outcomes that should be of great concern to communities, schools, and policy makers as the rates of problem behavior and emotional difficulties continue to increase for this population. In many instances, the initial exposure to the arrest of a mother is not fully recognized as a potentially traumatic event that can spiral into severe emotional and behavioral difficulties for the children. It is expected that our findings will inform judicial and legislative policies to mitigate the impact of the child’s exposure to the mother’s arrest and prompt the review of procedures to ensure effective protocols to protect children in these situations. Comprehensive trauma screening and assessment remain dominant, as do service training across dimensions of age and developmental level of the children impacted by maternal incarceration, who remain at the greatest risk for behavioral and emotional challenges. Finally, we anticipate that these results will point toward the need to develop interventions appropriate for the child’s and stage in life and to continue efforts to change the overall structure to provide greater economic opportunities for families to withstand financial hardship that can lead to negative behavioral and emotional outcomes among children. The goal of the current

analysis was to examine the relationship between mothers' incarceration and youths' behavioral and emotional outcomes. The results overall have suggested that children can be significantly impacted by the criminal justice processing of their mothers, and the findings of this research are consistent with previous studies that have addressed the importance of maternal absence. This is particularly relevant in areas where economic, social, and educational barriers exist. The findings have highlighted the importance of conducting additional research on the plight of children of incarcerated mothers, as issues relating to stigmatization and labeling are present in the current explorations in that, for many mothers who are the sole providers of their children, re-entrance into society brings many new and unresolved problems indicative in some ways of traumatic experiences. These same experiences, in turn, have deleterious effects on the overall well-being of children within these families. One shortcoming of the current research is that the sample size was small, which restricts the flexibility and generalizability of the results. Hence, future analyses should include larger samples of incarcerated mothers and their children to address the impact of imprisonment. The current research offers suggestions for policy in that, as noted earlier, the removal of a child from the home is not always viewed as a crisis event. Moreover, from this research and previous studies, we can see that there is an increase in the likelihood of negative outcomes for children with incarcerated mothers when significant resources are not offered for effective family reunification. Greater support, including educational resources and financial assistance, can reduce the consequences of mothers' confinement, and since many of these women commit drug- and property-related crimes related to victimization experience, community sanctions may be more appropriate in addition to providing programs; more research should focus on mitigating the structural effects of maternal incarceration in society. Since research maintains that disadvantaged families continue to face the burden of the punitive criminal justice system, greater exploration is needed to fully understand the impact of lack of structural, economic, and educational programs upon the release of mothers into society. Greater attention must be also placed on family reintegration and reduced criminal involvement. The findings of this research also suggest that maternal incarceration is significantly related to impending unlawful conduct and confinement among children. In many ways, it can be contended that the criminal and juvenile justice systems persist in dismissing the necessity of increased programming and reduction in structural barriers for mothers and their children. Hence, there remains a strong need for enhanced intervention in the lives of these families, and greater recognition of the deleterious impact of mothers' separation from children due to confinement. Finally, a greater understanding of these problems will allow us to dismantle parts of the current punitive system to effectively provide new programs for reunification, rehabilitation, and economic well-being among this specific group of women and children.

## 6. Broader Implications of Research Project

The themes that materialized from the dialogues with the mothers of children who have been involved in delinquency support the idea that a woman's experience in prison may be affected by numerous dimensions of her life, such as prior mistreatment, domestic violence, division from her children, and additional fears exclusive to women in our culture. In spite of the limited investigations on the connection linking reduced contact with children while imprisoned and repeated criminal activities, researchers persistently state that the subject of mother-child interactions is significant in the comprehension of women's criminal behavior after imprisonment [2]. Several of the female offenders described feelings of hopelessness, humiliation, and guiltiness, yet stated they received no therapy to aid them with their psychological health condition. Many of them also pointed out that they only received substance abuse treatment in prison, and hardly any assistance had been supplied to them that dealt with group therapy, reuniting families, psychological health treatment, and counseling after being discharged. Where there is a scarce amount of rehabilitation and treatment, women will be unable to understand the normal structures of child-rearing because of the haze of addiction [5]. The results of

this investigation show the necessity for intervention plans that must be made available to women in prisons if they are to reunite with their family unit and flourish in their attempts to become resocialized within society. A review of the literature suggests that life stressors prior to and during a mother's incarceration and exposure to community violence are both factors contributing to juvenile delinquency [24]. A large number of women in prison are single parents. Many children were living in poverty prior to their mother being incarcerated and are still living in the same circumstances, living in neighborhoods where violence is prevalent [27–30]. Overall, we must increase efforts to dismantle punitive policies that separate mothers from their children as we address the relationship between maternal incarceration, community violence, and juvenile delinquency. It is hoped that the findings of this current research study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge and optimistically add new insight to the topic of mothers' confinement and children's outcomes. Another suggestion is for researchers to continue to conduct longitudinal studies that capture the life experiences of juvenile delinquents prior to their mother's incarceration, throughout the duration of incarceration, and post-incarceration. It is also suggested that these analyses be expanded for global studies on incarcerated mothers and children's outcomes. This form of longitudinal study should also include aspects of exposure to violence in the community and delinquency. Only then can we continue to discover the dimensions of violence in response to a child's surroundings, including those which address maternal incarceration, as we continue our efforts to dismantle the harsh effects of growing up in adverse situations.

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