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HOW DO INCARCERATED PARENTS EXPLAIN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM TO THEIR CHILDREN?: NARRATIVES OF STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

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Abstract

In the age of mass incarceration, over five million children have experienced parental incarceration. Children with incarcerated parents are more likely to experience criminal justice system contact, educational difficulties, behavioral problems, and health concerns, among other challenges. Using in-depth interview data from a pilot intervention study on enhanced contact between incarcerated parents and their children (ages 3-12), I examine how incarcerated parents understand and teach their children about their incarceration. I find that the majority of parents understand their incarceration and criminal justice involvement to be related to structural inequalities, such as poverty, addiction, and difficulties in school as youths. However, parents presented different narratives to their children about their incarceration. I find that most participating incarcerated parents explain their incarceration as due to behavioral actions in order to promote pro-social behavior amongst their children, often by encouraging them to follow the rules or warning them about the consequences of getting in trouble. Parents do not share the structural factors leading to their incarceration with their children, even if they acknowledge elsewhere in the interview that societal inequalities were major factors in their criminal justice system involvement. Yet despite downplaying the structural inequalities and even sometimes reassuring their children on the fairness of the justice system, several parents report that their children voice fear of the criminal justice system and law enforcement. Even when they are unsuccessful, incarcerated parents attempt to shelter and protect their children from the criminal justice system, and thus they invest in their identities as parents, which has important implications for reentry outcomes.

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HOW DO INCARCERATED PARENTS EXPLAIN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM TO
THEIR CHILDREN?:
NARRATIVES OF STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY

by

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Abstract

In the age of mass incarceration, over five million children have experienced parental incarceration. Children with incarcerated parents are more likely to experience criminal justice system contact, educational difficulties, behavioral problems, and health concerns, among other challenges. Using in-depth interview data from a pilot intervention study on enhanced contact between incarcerated parents and their children (ages 3-12), I examine how incarcerated parents understand and teach their children about their incarceration. I find that the majority of parents understand their incarceration and criminal justice involvement to be related to structural inequalities, such as poverty, addiction, and difficulties in school as youths. However, parents presented different narratives to their children about their incarceration. I find that most participating incarcerated parents explain their incarceration as due to behavioral actions in order to promote pro-social behavior amongst their children, often by encouraging them to follow the rules or warning them about the consequences of getting in trouble. Parents do not share the structural factors leading to their incarceration with their children, even if they acknowledge elsewhere in the interview that societal inequalities were major factors in their criminal justice system involvement. Yet despite downplaying the structural inequalities and even sometimes reassuring their children on the fairness of the justice system, several parents report that their children voice fear of the criminal justice system and law enforcement. Even when they are unsuccessful, incarcerated parents attempt to shelter and protect their children from the criminal justice system, and thus they invest in their identities as parents, which has important implications for reentry outcomes.

Keywords: Parental incarceration, children with incarcerated parents, legal socialization, parent-children relationships

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Dedication: This thesis is dedicated to my family and friends; thank you for your love, kindness, and support. This thesis is also dedicated to families impacted by incarceration; thank you for your strength, resilience, and thoughtfulness.

Introduction

Over the last forty years, the American incarcerated population increased by 500% (The Sentencing Project 2019). While the uptick in the prison population is frequently discussed, an even sharper spike of people is admitted to local jails. The jail population is often overlooked due to the shorter length of stay average. This is because jails seem to have a smaller number of people because incarceration data is often viewed as an annual snapshot. While there are over 600,000 prison admissions annually, there are 10.6 million jail admissions every year (Sawyer and Wagner 2019). Of the incarcerated population, an estimated 1.1 million are fathers and at least 120,000 are mothers of children under 18 years old (National Resource Center on Children & Families of the Incarcerated 2014), and over five million children experience the incarceration of a co-resident parent (Murphey and Cooper 2015). As the number of people in jails and prison have increased during the era of mass incarceration, children's likelihood of experiencing parental incarceration has grown astronomically. The reach of the correctional facilities extends into the life of the children and their residential caregivers as they navigate the unique challenges of the parents' incarceration.

In this study, I examine how incarcerated parents understand and teach their young children (ages 3-12) about their incarceration. Using in-depth interview data from a pilot intervention study on enhanced contact between incarcerated parents and their children, I find that the majority of parents understand their incarceration and criminal justice involvement to be related to structural inequalities, such as poverty, addiction, and difficulties in school as youths. However, parents presented different narratives to their children about their incarceration. In this paper, I focus on the explanations that acknowledge

that the parent is involved in the criminal justice system; I do not examine the minority of explanations that are untruthful (such as that the parent is on vacation, seeing friends, or at work). I find that most participating incarcerated parents explain their incarceration as due to behavioral actions in order to promote pro-social behavior amongst their children, often by encouraging them to follow the rules or warning them about the consequences of getting in trouble. Parents do not share the structural factors leading to their incarceration with their children, even if they acknowledge elsewhere in the interview that societal inequalities were major factors in their criminal justice system involvement. Yet these representations of individual responsibility can conflict with some children's lived experiences of the criminal justice system. Children who witnessed their parents' arrests in particular have conflicting information regarding the criminal justice system, and several children in this study who witnessed their parents' arrests challenged their parents' explanations. This study fills an important gap in existing literature by focusing on young children who are exposed to the system through their parents.

Literature

Incarcerated Parenting, Parental Identity, and Reentry

The number of incarcerated parents has increased rapidly in the age of mass incarceration. One in five (18.4%) American adults has had or currently has a parent incarcerated (Wildeman et al. 2018), and over five million children currently experience incarceration of a parent who they lived with (Murphey and Cooper 2015). Parental incarceration poses major challenges for family members in the community, including loss of income and responsibility for legal fees in addition to the emotional distress and loss of

social support from that parent (Wildeman et al. 2018). The dramatic racial inequalities in the American criminal justice system are compounded in that they affect both the incarcerated parents and the family members in the community. 63% of Black American adults have experienced the incarceration of an immediate family member, compared to 42% of White American adults. Furthermore, Black adults report their family members spending more time in correctional facilities than White adults, with 31% of Black adults stating that the longest incarceration of an immediate family member lasted over one year compared to only 10% of White adults (Wildeman et al. 2018). These racial disparities can be transmitted intergenerationally to children's educational outcomes (Haskins 2014).

Being incarcerated severely restricts opportunities to actively parent. Lewis and Hong (2020) find that formerly incarcerated Black fathers view their paternal identity in terms of their ability to be there, be an example, and provide for their children. However, while incarcerated, they were unable to meet any of these self-established standards, which led fathers to either lower their expectations for themselves as parents or to disassociate from their paternal identities (Lewis and Hong 2020). Although research has indicated that contact between incarcerated parents and their children is crucial for many families (Poehlmann et al. 2010), limited programs exist to offer parenting support or opportunities. Programs that do exist show promise for teaching parenting strategies and improving outcomes for families. The Parenting Inside Out program helped parents build a newly defined parental identity and form or maintain secure attachments with their children in a setting that did not naturally provide the opportunity (Eddy et al. 2013). Promoting parental identity supports the development of pro-social behaviors that align with parental values (Dyer 2005). These values are more likely to be law-abiding when the parental identity is at the forefront, which

has important implications for reentry (Dyer 2005). Although correctional facilities do not support incarcerated individuals' identities as parents, studies have also shown that incarcerated people who maintain their parental and family-oriented identity experience improved outcomes on reentry (Visher et al. 2013). Western (2018) finds that family support is crucial to an incarcerated person's successful reentry, as the family unit provides monetary and personal resources. Reentering parents also state their children as motivation to desist from future criminal activity (McKay et al. 2019; Western 2018). Muentner et al. (2019) also find that reentering parents who lived with their children for a longer period of time in the year prior to their incarceration are less likely to experience housing instability than those who lived with their children for a shorter period of time. Despite these positive reentry outcomes related to family-centered identities, jails and prisons make it difficult for incarcerated people to maintain these relationships. In a mixed methods study of dyadic and family relationships with men incarcerated in several prisons across the United States, McKay et al. (2019) emphasize the communication challenges between incarcerated parents and the child's residential caregivers. Poehlmann et al. (2008) find that incarcerated mothers give great consideration to who will provide the highest quality and stability of care to their child. Additionally, when the relationship between the incarcerated mothers and residential caregivers is more positive, the mothers have more consistent and frequent contact with their children (Poehlmann et al. 2008). The residential caregiver becomes an informal gatekeeper for the incarcerated parent's contact with their child, which creates additional relationship difficulties within the family. Thus, maintaining relationships with children is crucial for incarcerated parents' reentry success.

Children with Incarcerated Parents: Outcomes, Experiences, and Challenges

Children with incarcerated parents face heightened challenges and risks. They are more likely to struggle with behavioral problems, difficulties in school, and health concerns (Haskins 2015; Poehlmann et al. 2010). Studies have found that children experiencing paternal incarceration have increased likelihood of mental and physical health risks (Haskins 2015; Miller and Barnes 2015; Wakefield and Wildeman 2011; Wakefield and Wildeman 2013; Wildeman 2010). Children with incarcerated parents also demonstrate a negative bias compared to their peers without incarcerated parents when trying to identify emotions (Hindt et al. 2016). Parental incarceration places a strain on the relationship between the child and residential caregiver. Children who witness their incarcerated parent's crime and/or arrest are more likely to have an insecure attachment style with their residential caregiver (Poehlmann-Tynan et al. 2017). Children have more secure attachments with caregivers who provide stimulating and responsive home environments, and who provide appropriate support during potentially stressful visits with the incarcerated parents (Poehlmann-Tynan et al. 2017).

Children with incarcerated parents are also more likely to experience an increase in antisocial behaviors and a decline in cognitive skills (Haskins 2015, 2016; Shlafer et al. 2012). These disparities are particularly pronounced in education. Children with incarcerated parents are more likely to experience difficulties in school, including an increased likelihood of being placed in special education classes (Haskins 2014) and experiencing grade retention (Turney and Haskins 2014). Racial disparities in incarceration are estimated to account for 2-15% of school achievement gaps among children with incarcerated fathers (Haskins 2016). Paralleling trends of mass incarceration, children of color are significantly more likely to experience parental incarceration than white children (National Resource Center on Children

& Families of the Incarcerated 2014). Thus, children with incarcerated fathers are also more likely to experience homelessness, which disproportionately affects Black children due to the disproportionate incarceration rate of Black men in the era of mass incarceration (Wildeman 2014). Children with incarcerated parents who experience homelessness also experience elevated internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Muentner et al. 2019).

The impacts of parental incarceration reach beyond early and middle childhood. In a longitudinal study in which children are followed for fifteen years, Shlafer et al. (2012) find that maternal incarceration is associated with criminal justice involvement and poor health outcomes in adolescence. Gjelsvik et al. (2014) find that respondents who experience the incarceration of a household member as a child report a lower quality of life as an adult, with mental health and physical health outcomes varying across racial categories. Children with incarcerated parents experience increased risk of justice involvement as they grow older (Miller and Barnes 2015).

Additionally, even though the children and their residential caregivers are not incarcerated, they experience the reach of incarceration into their own lives. This experience is called secondary prisonization, in which they are subjected to rules and restrictions imposed by correctional facilities whenever they wish to communicate with their parents (Comfort 2003, 2008). To maintain any sort of relationship with their parent in jail, children must comply with dress codes, visiting hours, and other limitations. Regulations determine what visitors, including children, are allowed to bring to show their incarcerated loved one (including toys, blankets, stuffed animals, and other items that may have provide comfort to the children), what they are allowed to wear, how long they are allowed to see their loved one, their behavior when they can talk to their loved one, whether or not they can physically

touch their loved one, and a plethora of other limits (Comfort 2008). Children have particular difficulty abiding by some of these strict regulations, and it is not uncommon for children to be removed from the visiting space if they do not comply (i.e. if they are running around, too loud, misbehaving, and other normal behavior for children). Their correspondence is not confidential and is constantly monitored. Even innocuous forms of communication, such as sending a birthday card or bringing a favorite toy to show their parent, may be prohibited.

Thus, even though the children live in the community and are as young as three, they experience several of the same “pains of imprisonment” as do their parents (Comfort 2003:103). This demonstrates the reach of the criminal justice system into the private, family realm. Elliot and Reid (2019) discuss the growing phenomenon of “family criminalization,” in which entire families experience criminal justice contact because of one member’s justice involvement. While Elliot and Reid focus on how Black mothers come into contact with the justice system because of their adolescent children, this can also be applied to other family structures, especially when one considers the prevalence of child protective services in justice-involved families.

Teaching and Learning about the Criminal Justice System

Parents, both those who are incarcerated and those who live with their children in the community, often are faced with leading difficult conversations with their children about the criminal justice system. This conversation has become so fundamental for Black families that it is often simply referred to as “the talk” (Jones 2018; Malone Gonzalez 2020; Whitaker and Snell 2016). “The talk” focuses on teaching Black adolescents how to cautiously navigate interactions with law enforcement to protect themselves from police brutality. “The talk” is

less frequent and crucial to White families, due to racial disparities in incarceration and police brutality. Youth of color, specifically Black boys, are disproportionately likely to be criminalized from a young age, and these interactions with law enforcement lead to long-term disruption within communities (Jones 2018). Studies about “the talk” typically focus on older children and adolescents, not younger children.

“The talk” affects the entire family, not just the youth learning for the first time about these injustices. In Elliot and Reid’s (2019) study of low-income Black mothers and their children, the authors find that the families experience stress from the high level of surveillance they are exposed to. If one child experienced institutional discipline (from a school, law enforcement, or other authority figure), the mothers in this study expressed fear about their other children being scrutinized and the potential to experience questions of maternal fitness for custody (Elliot and Reid 2019).

Incarcerated parents have additional pressure to explain the criminal justice system to their children, even if their children are young and would not typically receive “the talk” yet. Poehlmann-Tynan et al. (2020) find that providing developmentally appropriate “simple truth” explanations to children with incarcerated parents leads to significantly more positive visits between children and their incarcerated parents. Caregivers also reported an improvement in their additional conversations with their children after reviewing the educational materials that encouraged them to explain the “simple truth.” (Poehlmann-Tynan et al. 2020).

As this information suggests, parents and caregivers are very influential in how their children perceive the justice system. A study of mothers and sons’ perceptions of the criminal justice system following the sons’ first arrest finds that negative maternal attitudes

indirectly predict recidivism by their sons (Cavanagh and Cauffman 2015). Pennington (2017) finds that parents who attend juvenile delinquency court refer to the legal process negatively to their children, which likely creates further cynicism towards the justice system among the youths. Abrego (2019) finds that among families in which some members are documented U.S. citizens and others remain undocumented, all members feel legally precarious and internalize fear of the criminal justice system. Kolivoski et al. (2016) find that juvenile offenders in the child welfare system are more likely to distrust the justice system if they hold negative views of their child welfare caseworker.

Information that children learn about the criminal justice system shapes their understanding in a process known as legal socialization. Although legal socialization for younger children has not been studied in great depth (largely due to methodological challenges in studying children), the legal socialization process of youth is well-documented. During this process, youth develop their own personal stance on the fairness, legitimacy, and compliance towards the law. This process is tied heavily to procedural justice, or perceptions of whether the legal system appears to be fair and just (Fagan and Tyler 2005). Structural factors, particularly systemic racism, impact the way in which youth of color perceive the justice system. In a survey of 18,000 students, Black and Latinx youth experience a greater level of distrust in the justice system than their White peers, although school composition does impact the level of distrust (Hagan et al. 2005). Additionally, racial minority youth are significantly more likely to hold negative perceptions of police interrogation tactics, and these youth were more likely to have given a self-reported false confession (Arndorfer et al. 2015). Furthermore, Fine et al. (2017) find that first-time male youth offenders experience different legal socialization trajectories depending on their race/ethnicity. White respondents

held consistent views of the justice system, whereas Black respondents' perceptions become more negative. Latino respondents only become more negative if they reoffend.

Young children's understanding of the criminal justice system has been the subject of less research. Dunlea and Heiphetz (2020) provide important insight into what factors young children (ages 6 to 8 years old) identify as relevant to individuals' incarceration. These children focus on incarcerated people's internal and behavioral characteristics, viewing jail as a place for "bad people" or people who did "bad things" (Dunlea and Heiphetz 2020). Through this understanding, children reject or ignore structural factors that may play an important role in incarceration. Dunlea and Heiphetz (2020) also find children with incarcerated parents have the same understanding of incarceration, and do not differ significantly or meaningfully from other children in the study. This paper adds to this body of literature by examining how incarcerated parents explain their criminal justice involvement and current whereabouts to their young children.

Data & Methods

The data in this project come from a larger intervention study on enhancing contact between children and their incarcerated parents. The study is based out of a jail in a Midwestern city, and the intervention combines remote, in-home video visiting and guided visit coaching to promote improved and increased contact between parents and children (for more information on the intervention design, theoretical framework, and practical implementation challenges, see Charles et al. [forthcoming]; Kerr et al. [in press]). Research demonstrates that in-home video visiting can provide accessible and developmentally appropriate communication between children and their incarcerated parents when contact

visits are limited, and thus facilitating these visits increases child-friendly contact between incarcerated parents and their children (Skora and Poehlmann-Tynan 2020).

Recruitment began at the jail, in which incarcerated parents received recruitment materials in the jail housing units and could sign up electronically to have an eligibility screening interview. Eligibility requires incarcerated parents to: (1) have at least one child between the ages of 3- and 12-years-old, (2) who lives within approximately one hour of the jail, (3) with whom the parent is legally permitted to have contact, and (4) against whom the parent cannot have been convicted of child abuse.¹ 94 incarcerated parents met all eligibility requirements and were invited to participate in the study. Researchers then contacted their children's caregivers to invite them to participate in the study. Many families ultimately did not participate in the intervention, often due to the children's caregiver declining to participate, the research team's inability to contact the children's caregiver, or the incarcerated parent's release from jail or transfer to prison. Ultimately, 36 children from 29 families (to date) have participated in the intervention. Demographics on these participants is recorded in Table 1 below.

The research team conducted a wide range of assessments with the parents, children, and caregivers, including in-depth, semi-structured interviews, self-report standardized measures, video and audio recordings, a hair sample of the children, technology usage data, and an ecological momentary assessment. Researchers met with participants from two to six times during their participation in the intervention, often for a total of approximately three

¹ Caregivers and children who live more than an hour from the jail could participate if they were able to meet research team members within an hour of the jail at a neutral location. Additionally, parents are eligible if they face *pending* child abuse charges, as long as they were not convicted during the study and they were legally permitted to have contact.

hours per participant (and approximately eight hours per family, if all participants complete all parts of the study). Data on the parents are collected during interviews in the jail, and data on the children and children's caregivers are typically collected in their homes, unless participants preferred to meet in another location of their choosing. To protect the confidentiality of participants, researchers obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institute of Health in addition to Institutional Review Board approval at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. All names utilized in findings are pseudonyms. Participating children received a tablet that they kept after the end of the study, caregivers received \$20 for each meeting (up to \$100 total) and WiFi for up to three months if they did not have it, and the families could have free remote video visits (while video visits typically cost \$13.50 per 45-minute visit, and remote video visits are not currently available in this jail). I was one of the primary researchers collecting data on this project on a team of five interdisciplinary professors, three graduate research assistants, and over twenty undergraduates. I was present and actively involved in nearly half of all in-person interviews in both the jail and in the home, and I worked with both children and adult participants. This fieldwork gives me a unique perspective in connecting the entire family unit in the community and the correctional facility.

In this paper, I examine data collected from the audio-recorded, in-depth interviews with the incarcerated parents (n=22).² I analyze parents' responses to two series of questions about their incarceration. First, I focus on parents' narratives of their incarceration and what

² 22 incarcerated parents gave audio-recorded responses to these questions. There are four reasons for missing data: 1) there was a change in data collection protocol early in the study to begin audio-recording these interview questions, rather than only collecting written responses; 2) some incarcerated parents were released earlier than expected and did not complete the full interview; 3) occasionally the audio recording corrupted when being uploaded to the drive; and 4) the COVID-19 pandemic led to an interruption in data collection.

factors they believe led to their justice involvement, framed as what the interviewee would tell a friend about how they ended up in jail. Second, I analyze the responses to questions regarding what parents told their children about their incarceration and what they believe the child understood. These audio-recorded pieces are only snippets of the entire interview, but I limited the analysis to these questions because they speak to the topic and scope of the paper. I utilize inductive techniques to analyze transcriptions. I began by identifying recurring themes throughout the interviews, and then reread transcripts and developed additional conceptual frames and coding systems, as is consistent with the principles of inductive grounded theory. I coded all transcripts in NVivo 12. Quotes have been edited slightly for clarity, and all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Results

Incarcerated parents emphasize different themes and experiences when recounting explanations of their criminal justice involvement to their children compared to what they would say to a friend or peer. In this section, I highlight the narratives of six incarcerated parents. In the following sections, I examine how parents reframe their incarceration and provide alternate—yet not incompatible—narratives to their children. Their narratives pivot away from discussing structural inequalities and the injustices of the legal system and focus on framing incarceration in a developmentally appropriate way for their young children. Although parents openly acknowledge the complex factors related to their incarceration, they work to cautiously limit their children’s criminal justice exposure to what the parents can frame as teaching tools, maintenance of social norms and values, and explanations of what children witnessed.

“I used that to let him know not to steal”: Incarceration as a Teaching Tool

Many incarcerated parents frame their criminal justice involvement as a teaching tool, focusing on the importance of *their child* following the rules and aiming for pro-social successes. The parent uses their incarceration both as motivation for their child to follow the rules and social norms *and* for the parents themselves to share pro-social aspirations. These explanations focus on the child’s *future* goals, rather than the parent’s *past* mistakes. These narratives all face towards the future, and they place the emphasis on the child’s potential rather than the parent’s misdeeds.

Charlie is a 28-year old White father with two sons, ages 7 and 5. He was incarcerated for disorderly conduct and a probation violation related to his substance use. Charlie presents dramatically different narratives between what he told his 7-year-old son and what he would tell a friend. When asked how he would explain his criminal justice involvement to a friend, Charlie explains,

“...the first few times I was put in because the first few times were kind of happen chance, like I was locked up wrong place wrong time. But the first time I did over a month of time was because I was addicted to a drug, but I didn’t let anybody know about that. And when you come into the system they don’t cater to your individual, they ask you questions, but it’s just a question—they don’t look for, they don’t care about the answer. They get so many people through here that I feel like they don’t care about you individually and I don’t know if they are able to care about you individually. If I was given a drug treatment program, as much as I probably woulda hated it at the time, I wouldn’t’ve had to do this year.”

Charlie explains that he was first incarcerated because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, but he was then subjected to the dehumanizing process that fails to provide him support for his addiction. He acknowledges that, in a treatment-oriented system, he likely would not have been reincarcerated for his current year-long sentence. Charlie adds, “if they [criminal justice decision-makers] looked at my charges and understood me as a drug addict,

and said ‘here, we’re gonna give you this program whether you like it or not,’ that would definitely have prevented me from coming back.” The criminal justice system is, in Charlie’s words,

“I mean it’s a revolving door that can’t be stopped. People come in, they get put on probation, they get out, the minor—the smallest infraction will have them back in here, and after two three more times of those, they get revoked [from parole] and go to prison. And it’s just a really bad cycle due to an imperfect system that’ll never get fixed.”

His experience represents that of many others: a young man struggling with addiction, who is denied mental health treatment and services and is instead churned through the criminal justice system. He characterizes the system as a “revolving door,” a phrase used by many academics to describe this same phenomenon (see, for example, Haimowitz 2004; Warner and Kramer 2009). Yet to his 7-year-old son, Charlie tries to portray his incarceration as a teaching experience:

“I explained to him that this is like a prolonged punishment. So for him, he knows what a time-out is. So I said this is an adult time-out, where I’m put on time-out for an extended period of time.”

Charlie uses developmentally appropriate language to teach his son so that the 7-year-old can understand within the context of his own experiences. Charlie continues,

“He also knows that I’m in here for stealing, I used that to let him know not to steal because he’s already been on a couple of times in his age, stolen out of a purse from his grandma and food from a fridge which seems petty but I don’t want that to grow. So I let him know why I’m in here and how terrible this is and why he shouldn’t want to come here, and I use that to teach him not to do the things that I did.”

To his young son, he frames his incarceration as the result of his decision to steal. He explicitly mentions the deterrent role that he hopes this explanation plays for his son as the child decides whether or not to steal as he grows older. This father also directly expresses that he wants to teach a lesson out of his experience, thus constructing a purely moralistic

tale to his son rather than the complex battle against structural barriers that he expressed to researchers. Thus, even though Charlie portrays his incarceration as a dehumanizing revolving door to researchers, he emphasizes different aspects in an effort to teach his children to be responsible. These narratives are not incompatible, but rather demonstrates Charlie's shift between his identity as an incarcerated person living with untreated addiction and his identity as a father teaching his son.

Like Charlie, Mason also focuses on using his incarceration to teach his son. Mason is a 32-year-old Black father who smiles instantly at the mention of his six-year-old son. Mason became involved in the criminal justice system young, and he was only 17-years-old when he was first incarcerated. He reflects that being able to continue school while he was in jail was the only positive, but as he says, "other than that, it wasn't a fun rodeo." He recalls how difficult 23-hour lockdowns were on his mental health at that age, which led him to request counseling at the jail. His request was rejected, and he concludes "really nobody cares about you." Mason was released after four years at age 21, but he was quickly reincarcerated and became caught in the revolving door cycle with frequent jail or prison stays after brief reentry periods, leading to his incarceration nearly 15 years later. He became emotional when he thought about his separation from his son. However, rather than expressing the difficulties of his jail stay to his son, he focused on his role as a parent teaching his child. For Mason, his incarceration became another tool to educate his young son.

Mason recounts his son's disappointment when he first said that he was incarcerated again: "[My son] was like 'what?! You in there again—in the visiting place [referring to prison visitation] again—man?' and then [my son] dropped the phone!" Mason's son's mother picked up the phone and handed it back to the six-year-old, and Mason explained,

“yeah man, I’m back in that place again. I did something that I wasn’t supposed to be doing, and it put me back to that place.” He immediately explains the cause and effect relationship of doing “something that he wasn’t supposed to be doing” and going “back to that place.” Mason does not focus on the negatives or the stigma of the jail, but merely focuses on the activity and outcome in terms that his son can understand.

Mason then reflects on how upset his son was that his father wouldn’t be picking him up from school anymore, and Mason shifted to explain how he continued to teach his son from jail. The shift in subject matter, without a change in interview topic, indicates that Mason sees these subjects as intrinsically interrelated. Mason explains that before he was incarcerated, he would pick his son up from school and check in on his son’s progress, particularly when his son had academic or behavioral difficulties. Now, conversations about school occurred over the phone.

“Every time I get on the phone, I ask him, ‘Did you have a good day at school?’ He tells me, ‘Yeah,’ and then [his mother says] ‘Nah, tell him what else.’ [Mason laughs.] And [my son] tells her, ‘Hurry up, get off the phone.’ And I’m like, ‘Come on, man, you gotta be cool, like you know, you gotta listen to the teachers, like you know what I’m saying? It’s a reflection on your future, ‘cause you don’t want to be, you know, keep doing that.’ ‘Cause I keep it real, I’m like, ‘You don’t want to continue doing that, because when you start getting older, like that stuff can get you in big trouble.’ You know what I’m saying?’”

Even though he is limited to phone calls, Mason still makes an active effort to focus on his son’s education progress, as he did while he was living in the community. He explains how important it is to listen to the teachers, follow rules, and stay out of trouble. Mason focuses on his son’s future, removing his incarceration from the core of the conversation and directing his son towards commitment to school.

Mason continues by explaining how important it is that his son consistently understands and follows the rules: “You gotta continue to understand certain rules and stuff like that instead of just letting up, that’s just one day. You gotta think about the other days.” Although Mason is discussing his son and lessons that his son needs to learn, he also seems to reflect on his own position as a father who must plan for the long-term—“the other days”—to maintain and foster his relationships with his son. This demonstrates the connection between Mason’s relationship with his son and his reentry goals. Mason’s engagement in teaching his son stresses the lessons that he hopes will enable him to remain in the community out of jail or prison. Not only does Mason identify as a father, but his paternal identity helps to situate him as an individual focused on planning ahead and staying out of trouble.

“When you do bad things, you go to jail”: Maintenance of Social Norms and Stigma

A number of incarcerated parents provide explanations to their children that focused on the parent’s wrongdoing. Compared to the above “teaching tools” section, these narratives center on the incarcerated parent’s problematic and/or stigmatized behavior, rather than the child’s opportunity to learn and be a productive member of society. Whereas the fathers discussed in the prior section focuses on motivational explanations and aspirations for their children, the parents in this section focus on jail as a place of consequences to punish wrongdoing. They represent jail with the stigma widely seen throughout society, regardless of whether this is fair to their own personal experiences.

Tim is 32-year-old Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander father to a seven-year-old son. As a teenager, Tim’s mother was incarcerated in prison, which Tim sees as a major factor in

his criminal justice involvement: “If I was in a different environment or the fact that my mother didn’t go through the things she went through, I probably would have never even touched prison in my eyes.” While it is clearly impossible to determine whether this would have been the case for Tim, his statement demonstrates the impact of parental incarceration on future opportunities and outcomes. By age 15, Tim began paying rent to keep his mother’s apartment for himself and his siblings during her incarceration:

“The landlord never knew [my mother] was gone. But it’s like I used to just like say, ‘Oh, my mom’s at work, she won’t be able to bring you the rent.’ But I am bringing him the rent money, and the money order form, and paying the rent ‘till [I] actually was able to be able to sign the lease. I had my aunt play like [she was my mother], they practically look alike.”

Tim ultimately dropped out of school when he turned 18 so he could support his younger sister while she was in high school. He recounts the decision to leave school as “you know what, forget high school, I can’t keep struggling.” Tim shows great commitment to his family, and he looked for ways to support his family so they did not have to “keep struggling.” However, he explained that without his mother, “you resort to gangs, or you look outside to certain things, like this is what they doing, but I’m stuck right here, and [I] don’t have the proper certain things to go to school, or clothes, and you tend to say eff it, imma go over here.” He explains that he grew up around people who used and sold drugs. His first incarceration was related to selling drugs, although he explained that he was not the one selling the drugs and referred to his conviction as “conspiracy, in so many words.”

Tim was young during his first incarceration: “I was 18, like basically a child in a house full of men basically. I was surrounded by a lot of people, most of them weren’t going home, they were serving life sentences.” As is not surprising based upon his commitment to his family, one of the hardest parts of Tim’s incarceration was being separated from his

family, which he referred to as “painful, like mental wise.” He was incarcerated in a federal facility over 500 miles from his family, and he was incarcerated for five years without any visits with his family.

Since his release from federal prison, Tim has struggled to remain in the community.

Although he worked to follow his dreams, the trauma of his incarceration follows him:

“When I was released, I practically did everything that I was dreaming about doing. As far as traveling, I’ve been a few different places, I opened up a [small business], but certain things still kind of haunt me. Like things that I wouldn’t want my son or anyone else to view—like I done seen people get killed in prison, and it’s kind of like, at times I don’t—I knew I’m not going back to it, but I wouldn’t even like give somebody that’s going through the ultimate that then did broke the law, I wouldn’t even send them there. So it’s like traumatizing in so many words.”

Tim speaks candidly of his trauma about the inhumane treatment he witnessed and experienced while of incarceration. Yet although Tim represents jail and prison as this traumatizing places to himself and his peers, he shares a different explanation with his son, focusing on the role of jails in discouraging unacceptable behavior. Tim explains,

“[My son’s] mom told him that I was in jail, but when he came to see me, I told him that I was on a time-out. I did some things I shouldn’t be doing basically, and I’m on a time-out—that’s what you call it when you don’t do right in school, or when you don’t do what your mom tells you, or just like being an obedient child—you get placed on a time-out or on the outside of the class.”

Tim’s explanation focuses heavily on the actions and behaviors associated with criminal activity. He frames his incarceration as punishment for actions that he “shouldn’t be doing,” providing child-friendly language (“time-out”) to draw parallels to his son’s experience while maintaining the focus on incarceration. This explanation differs widely from what he shared previously; Tim does not even acknowledge the societal factors relevant to his justice involvement. Instead, he reinforces negative conceptions of incarcerated individuals, and

thus teaches his son the social stigma surrounding incarceration. Tim recounts his son's reaction to this explanation of jail:

“He [was] practically like ‘yeah, I’m not coming to the time-out room.’ Or ‘I’m cool, I don’t want to be on time-out.’ So then he asked me, ‘can I use a phone in here?’ And I’m like, ‘no you can’t use a phone, you can’t use nothing.’ He [said] ‘yeah, I don’t want to be on a time-out.’”

Tim concludes his recollection with his son's rejection of the jail as a place of punishment that he wants to avoid. Tim discourages his son from relating to the space through developmentally appropriate comparisons to his son's experience as a technologically inclined young child. In doing so, Tim also reinforces his son's understanding of the jail, its place in society, and who is incarcerated, which likely undermines their father-son relationship.

Peter recounts a similar story. Peter is a 32-year-old Black father to a five-year-old son and a seven-year-old daughter. Peter grew up in and out of foster care while his mother struggled with addiction. He recounts moving to a new city and living in a stratified area with wide class disparities:

“You know, so I’m dealing with hood people, and then I’m dealing with people that got some sense in their head that like to make better decisions, and they value education, and they value, you know, things and stuff like that. We’re in—just important people like family and stuff was important. I never really was taught that, so I kinda swayed towards the other people ‘cause I wasn’t really used to that type of feeling, you know, so seeking out those people was just the wrong thing. I started stealing out of cars and shit with people.”

Peter focuses on the cultural difference due to economic disparities and stability. This led Peter to move towards stealing because that was behavior he was more familiar and comfortable with, based on his upbringing. He expands on why he was drawn to this crowd:

“I mean, it’s easy to fall back into the same routine, and into that world, because it’s just easy. These are people I grew up around. These are the people I know. They’re

misunderstood. We're misunderstood, so—but that doesn't mean that I can just do whatever I want, you know. That's kinda how that went, and unfortunately that's where – you know, instead of just using my people skills and talking about things when I was faced with certain situations, I still suck out the wrong people.”

Routine and familiarity draw him back into this world, even though Peter acknowledges that associating with others in this community was detrimental to him. He focuses on how misunderstood this community is, but he clarifies that he does not view that as an excuse for him to break the law. Peter expressed difficulty and fear in navigating different options and life choices, which ultimately resulted in increased criminal behavior.

“I didn't really know how to truly live, you know, the right way. Or maybe I was scared of success, or didn't know how to handle success if I was to be successful, so I kinda developed this kinda like phobia of, you know—just like damn man, if I do make it something is gonna happen. You know, something where I'm probably gonna fuck it up or something, so that negative thinking just kept me in that – in that bubble, you know, and eventually it turned into bigger – more bigger crimes: stealing bigger stuff, going into people's houses, stealing people's cars. You know, and just upping the ante, so.”

This narrative is tragic, expressing the barriers between Peter and his potential success. He had limited opportunities due to structural inequalities, and he was unable to embrace the chances he did have due to an internalized fear of success, an admission that is reminiscent of previous research on Black poverty and criminal justice involvement (Liebow 1967). Peter ultimately takes responsibility for his choices, emphasizing his autonomy despite the difficult circumstances:

Peter: I mean I can't keep putting it on other people. Of course, somebody could've stepped in, but if you don't really want to change, then what's the point? There's people who tried to step in, but I wasn't ready.

Interviewer: So ultimately, it was up to you?

Peter: It was up to me. I'm still hanging out with the same dummies, same goofies, and that's what I'm gonna get.

Peter fully accepts responsibility for his criminal justice involvement, even though he previously acknowledged a range of factors contributing to his unlawful activity. He focuses on other options he could have taken in a narrative of regret.

Peter's explanation to his children is simple and he emphasizes the bad behavior he (and other incarcerated individuals) engaged in that led to his incarceration. He explained to his children,

“When you do bad things, you go to jail. You know, unfortunately, when you don't abide by certain laws and rules that are in place then you — there's consequences, jail or prison.”

Like Tim, Peter focuses on the active behaviors that lead to incarceration and punishment.

Interestingly, although Peter assumes personal responsibility in explanation to peers, he uses the second person pronouns (“you”) when expressing his justice involvement and incarceration. In doing so, he distances himself slightly from the explanation while also making it more intimate to his family, since it is an experience that they could share or put themselves into. Peter also depicts the experience through negative language and thus enforces the stigma around incarceration and criminal justice involvement. Peter's children undoubtedly understand jail as a negative, socially undesirable place:

“They definitely know that [jail is a consequence]...because they hate jail. You know even when you joke with them and they're like: [*Peter imitates child's voice*] ‘no, I don't wanna go to jail.’ So, I mean, they know about it.”

Similarly to Tim's narrative to his son, Peter ends this narrative with his children's rejection of the jail and maintenance of the social stigma around incarceration. In doing so, his children do not see the inequity of Peter's circumstances nor the challenges he overcame. Instead, Peter presents it simply: “when you do bad things, you go to jail.” This developmentally appropriate explanation provides a clear and comprehensive narrative for

his children. However, in doing so, Peter's children learn the stigma of jail and incarceration and are further separated from him.

“She’s seen the police take me away”: Explaining policing to children who witnessed their parents’ arrest

Unfortunately, some incarcerated parents do not have the same opportunity to control the narrative and decide what to teach their children about the criminal justice system. Children who witness their parent's arrest experience significantly higher stress levels and behavioral difficulties than children who do not witness their parent's arrest (Muentner et al., under review). It also changes the conversation about between incarcerated parents and their children about their whereabouts and criminal justice system involvement.

James is a 28-year-old Black father, whose eyes light up when he talks about his 6-year-old daughter. He was incarcerated for parole revocation when he went to his girlfriend's house to pick up his daughter, because he explains that, unbeknownst to him, a family member of his girlfriend was under investigation for narcotics and her home was under surveillance by law enforcement. As James puts it,

“I am incarcerated and [my parole was] revoked for a crime that another person committed, but because I was near a person that was committing the crime, and I was on extended supervision, then I should have known—I don't know how I would have, but I should have known.”

James states that his incarceration was due to circumstances beyond his knowledge or control, and he later adds that the low standard of proof required for a parole revocation contributed to his incarceration. Despite James' statement that he was arrested for an offense another person committed, he explains that he does not blame the other person, even with the outcome.

“I also don’t feel like it was another individual’s fault that I was here, you know. Although he was committing a crime and it was under investigation, he didn’t place me in that situation, he didn’t lead me there, you know, so I was literally picking up my child. So I can’t place the blame on him, and I struggled with that when I first got incarcerated, I struggled with it. I feel like, ‘how am I in this situation’ but I mean I can’t really place blame.”

In this statement, James implicitly acknowledges that the other person is also likely caught in the system “over and over again.” By acknowledging that there is no one person to blame, James holds the system in its entirety as the cause of his incarceration. As James says,

“I feel this is a situation that was out of my hands. I guess the way that the law was administrated, the judge put it out of his hands. This is just pretty much the way that the system works. You know, they actually said it at my hearing—like I was just pretty much at the wrong place at the wrong time, so here I am, on a case number from 2011 doing 36 months away from my family, meeting you here today, and I mean literally a situation that honestly was out of my control.”

Yet James does not share this narrative with his daughter. Like many other incarcerated parents, James grapples with how to present this information to his daughter:

“You know, I don’t know how to explain. I don’t, I don’t, I don’t. It’s like trying to explain your child, they’re hungry, and you are explaining why they can’t eat and how you’re not going to be able to feed them. But who knows how to explain that to their child? You’re going to try to figure out a way to feed your child.”

James demonstrates the thoughtfulness and consideration that he put into deciding what to explain to his daughter. While not surprising that James, and other incarcerated parents, put such time and thought into what he teaches his daughter, James expresses the difficulty of finding words for incarceration as a parallel to the difficulty of explaining structural inequalities such as poverty and food insecurity. For James, a father revoked for being in the vicinity of an offense that he did not commit, these experiences are *not* particularly different, as all are beyond his control. Furthermore, James was going to pick his daughter up to shop for her upcoming birthday when an officer physically grabbed and “scuffled” with James to

arrest him. James' daughter saw his arrest from the porch of her home, where she stood "screaming and crying and telling them to stop." James explains, "she knows that [James' incarceration] stemmed from that day, because ever since that day she hasn't had her father home." Despite James' consideration of what to share with his daughter, having seen his arrest changes her understanding:

"She doesn't understand *why* daddy is where I am. She understands where I am, she knows where I am, I explain to her that, um, I don't want her to look at – she told me that she thinks that police are mean people – I said, 'Why would you say that baby? Um, that's who you call when you're in trouble.' But she said, 'Because they beat me [James refers to himself] up.' And, it's difficult to try to explain something to a child that saw something with their own two eyes and then later on down the road continue to remember. It's not like I brought it to her attention."

Ultimately, James' daughter remembers her father's arrest and how the police treated him, and she responds to law enforcement with fear beyond what James told her. James cannot provide an explanation for what his daughter witnessed, and his attempt to reassure her to call the police when she is in trouble does not suffice. Furthermore, James explains that, given the circumstances of his arrest, revocation, and incarceration, it is harder to determine what to share with his daughter:

"So, you know, when I'm faced with a tough question, it's difficult to explain it to her. Especially under the circumstances. But, I mean, if I could honestly say 'Daddy made a mistake, and I made a bad decision.' Then, you know, I would say that. But I'm not going to be deceitful to her. It's a situation I don't really know how to explain."

James indicates that he *wants* to be able to provide an explanation related to his behavior as an individual, but such an explanation would not be true. Yet James implies that he does not want to share the true inequities of the criminal justice system with his daughter. James attempts to shield his daughter from his earlier explanation that "this is just pretty much the

way that the system works,” but her witness of his arrest leads her to conclude that these structural inequalities do in fact exist.

Greg, a 30-year-old Black father, shares a similar story about two of his daughters, ages 4 and 7. Greg became involved in the justice system when he was young; he recalls, “when I was twelve and thirteen, I was kicking it with people that was seventeen, eighteen and people always thought that I was older.” His first arrests were primarily for relatively minor drug-related offenses, but he acknowledges that “I gradually escalated to doing worse things.” Greg traced much of his lengthy criminal justice history back to his socialization and involvement as a child, but he openly acknowledged that his offenses got more severe over time. He considered much of his personal history to be a test, one that he still struggles to fully understand as he thoughtfully reflects:

“It just makes me think back to everything that I’ve ever done, like, do I regret it? I really can’t say that I do, even though I feel like I do, but I also feel like everything happens for a reason. Like this is probably a test, you know what I mean? And people might look at it like ‘Damn, how many tests you going to go through?’ But I’ve been in prison a few times.”

Greg’s reflection of his history of incarceration as amounting to a test demonstrates his challenge to balance his own decision-making and autonomy within the larger context of the world’s “test” for him, as a young man with a criminal record since childhood. He reflects to determine where he has autonomy to decide his path moving forward and where the “tests” determine his next steps for him.

Like many other parents in this study, Greg works to protect his two young daughters. As he explains,

“I feel like my kids should not know everything, but I want them to know what’s going [on], you know what I mean? I don’t want them to grow up too fast, but I

definitely want them to be educated about a lot of things that people hide from their kids, you know what I mean?”

Like James, Greg struggles to balance sharing the truth about the criminal justice system with his daughters and preserving their innocence as young children. He also puts a lot of thought into how to discuss this information, but sadly, like James, Greg’s children witnessed enough to arrive at their own assessments of the criminal justice system. Speaking about his four-year-old daughter, Greg says,

“She’s seen the police take me away before. Last September. And um...she was just repeating that at school, you know what I mean? She was three then, so she just was sort of repeating it, repeating it, repeating it and like, ‘The police took my daddy. And he going to jail.’ You know what I mean? So she *really* don’t like the police. But I told her—I explained it to her that—you know, I don’t know if she remembers the conversation cuz she’s so young—but I definitely made it known to her that the police is not—they not the bad guys, you know what I’m saying? But, she definitely witnessed that.”

What Greg’s daughter has seen of the police independently in her personal life outweighs the reassurance her father attempts to provide. Her firsthand experience of legal precarity matters more than Greg’s explanation in terms of her legal socialization process. Because of her status as the child of an incarcerated parent, she cannot detach her understanding of the police from her understanding of her family. This demonstrates the cruel reality of the ways the criminal justice system impacts children, even when they are not justice-involved themselves.

Notably, both James and Greg are Black fathers of young daughters, and both of the fathers have been incarcerated more than once in their daughters’ lives. Both of the daughters directly witnessed their fathers being arrested by the police and retained those memory in their understanding of their fathers’ incarcerations. Other children may have less adverse responses to the carceral system. The children who are most aware of their legal precarity

because they witnessed their parents being taken from them have more reason to fear the criminal justice system.

Discussion

Incarcerated parents use different narrative strategies to explain their whereabouts to their children. Some parents use their experience of incarceration as a teaching tool to discourage their children from certain behaviors. Others focused on the morality aspect of those behaviors and the resulting punishment, and, in doing so, those parents reinforce the stigma and social undesirability of incarceration and criminal justice system involvement to their children. A handful of parents also recounted trying to teach their children about criminal justice in alignment with social norms, but their children, who had witnessed their parent's arrest, rejected these explanations of the criminal justice system and expressed fear of law enforcement. Six parents in this study did not provide truthful information about their incarceration to at least one of their children, either preferring to say that they are gone on vacation, at work, or with friend, but this paper does not explore these misleading explanations in depth.

A number of parents focused on framing their incarceration as a teaching tool for their children. These parents focus on their children's futures, prioritizing the importance of following the rules in settings that children are more familiar with, such as schools. Incarcerated parents reframe their circumstances to help educate their children and encourage them to pursue their future thoughtfully and obediently. In doing so, parents demonstrate an intrinsic interest in being involved in their child's learning and development. This further allows them to occupy a parental role from within a correctional facility, which can help to

strengthen their parental identity. These parents, whether intentionally or intuitively, provide a developmentally appropriate and child-friendly explanation of incarceration to their children and help them to develop resilience. Explanations that provide the “simple truth” can improve the quality of interactions between incarcerated parents and their children (Poehlmann-Tynan et al. 2020). These relationships are important for reentry outcomes, both as a motivational factor for parents and for family support upon release from jail (McKay et al. 2017).

Other parents focus on incarceration as a morality tool. In doing so, they provide a more negative representation of their whereabouts to their children and focus the conversation on the incarcerated parents rather than the children. In doing so, parents continue to stigmatize incarceration as a place for people who “do bad things.” While this simplifies the conversation to terms that their children can understand, it frames the conversation on the parents’ wrongdoing, regardless of the circumstances and context, rather than opportunities for the child to grow and learn. This can lead to the child retreating or disconnecting from the incarcerated parent, as exemplified by both the children’s responses to the jailed parents in the narratives above.

Some parents tried to offer their children explanations and reassurance about the criminal justice system, but their children witnessed too much injustice by law enforcement to believe that the police are “who you call when you’re in trouble,” to use James’ words. As several participants shared in interviews, incarcerated parents hope to preserve their children’s innocence and shield them from the injustices of the world. Since the children in this study are all under 12-years-old, parents feel pressure to balance the truth and age-appropriate content. Thus, many parents actively try to imbue their children with trust in the

system, encouraging them to follow the rules and trust in the police. However, children who witness their parent's arrest experience much higher stress and trauma (Muentner et al., under review). Thus, children who witness their parent's arrest experience greater stress and likely push back upon incarcerated parents' developmentally appropriate, more innocent explanations of the criminal justice system. Many parents prefer to wait until their children are older before explaining the inequities driving the criminal justice system, particularly regarding racial disparities.

This finding is distinct and compatible with findings about how parents teach older children and young adults about the criminal justice system. A number of studies examine "the talk" that Black parents have with their adolescent children about policing (see, for example, Malone Gonzalez 2020; Elliot and Reid 2019; Whitaker and Snell 2016). In these conversations, Black parents teach their children practical strategies to stay safe during police stops or other encounters. Parents have these conversations to enable their children to navigate the world around them safely and with a fair amount of independence. However, since children in this study are much younger (with an average age of six-years-old), parents do not need to focus on their children's independent navigation of the world yet. Thus, the conversation about criminal justice involvement analyzed in this paper will likely shift to "the talk" about staying safe amidst a world of police violence as children grow older and gain more independence. However, at this early stage in life, it is not surprising that parents seek to shelter their children as participants share in this study.

These findings build upon the work of Dunlea and Heiphetz (2020) regarding children and adult understanding of criminal justice system involvement and punishment. According to Dunlea and Heiphetz's work, children—with and without incarcerated

parents—are more likely to understand incarceration as the result of behavioral and internal characteristics. Children and adults rarely connect criminal punishment to societal factors, such as structural inequality (Dunlea and Heiphetz 2020). Similarly, the majority of the participating incarcerated parents in this paper also emphasized behavioral characteristics when talking to their children, even if they relied heavily on structural factors in representing their criminal justice involvement to their peers. The stark contrast between what they tell their children and their peers is evident in the above narratives. Incarcerated parents may choose to emphasize the behavioral components of criminal justice involvement because their children are already socialized and inclined to understand and accept these explanations, or perhaps because the parents themselves are socialized to provide these narratives in these contexts. This phenomenon is not previously explored and ought to be examined in greater detail in future research.

The findings presented in this paper also expand upon Lewis and Hong's (2020) study of paternal identity among formerly incarcerated Black fathers. Their study stresses the importance of the practical experience of “being there, being an example, and providing” for their children and examine the behavioral modifications made when they were not able to be physically present (Lewis and Hong 2020:17). Participating parents in this paper build upon Lewis and Hong's work based upon their current, not retrospective, experiences of incarcerated parenting. Many parents in this study use their explanations of incarceration as a means to provide an example, albeit a negative one, and to teach and inspire their children to look towards their futures.

These findings also have important implications for reentry outcomes, as this paper demonstrates the extent to which incarcerated individuals self-identify as parents and

consider their relationship with their children. As previously stated, correctional facilities do not support incarcerated individuals' roles as parents (Dyer 2005), but this finding demonstrates that, given the opportunity, incarcerated parents carefully consider their teaching role to their children. Providing incarcerated parents with increased opportunities to develop their parenting skills and act in a parental role can increase their success during reentry by providing increased family contact and support and functioning as motivation to desist (Visher et al. 2013).

There are several limitations to this study. Self-selection bias likely skews this sample to overrepresent families in which there is a positive between the incarcerated parent and their child *and* their child's caregiver. The relationships between caregivers and incarcerated parents are often complicated or strained due to a loss of instrumental and financial support from the incarcerated parent (McKay et al. 2019; Turney et al. 2012). This complexity may discourage caregivers from participating if they are not on good terms with the incarcerated parent, as researchers saw in a number of cases. Another limitation is that parents may retrospectively recall telling their child different information than they actually did in the moment; specifically, they may report to interviewers saying what they wish they had said in hindsight (Schaeffer and Presser 2003). Comparing the incarcerated parents' responses to the caregivers' helps to mitigate this potential bias, but it does not resolve the issue altogether. Additionally, children are not asked directly about where their parents are and what they understand that to mean. This is because of the emotional distress that this question has the potential to cause the children in the study, in addition to the wide range in age and developmental stage of participating children.

In addition, it should be noted that the eligibility criteria for the study required participants to be incarcerated for at least four weeks in the research site jail. Although jails are the primary site of incarceration in the United States (as compared to prisons), jails are not intended to house incarcerated people for long periods of time. Thus, the participants in our study were often awaiting further hearings or pending parole revocation proceedings, as incarcerated people are typically released from jail or transferred from jail to prison fairly quickly. Incarcerated people who are awaiting criminal justice proceedings may have unique circumstances that lead to their pretrial detention, which may bias their explanations.

Additionally, there are substantially fewer mothers than fathers in this study. This is largely due to the much larger population of incarcerated men compared to women, but it is also somewhat biased by the physical structure of the research site. The jail is comprised of two buildings, and the newer building houses most of the incarcerated male population whereas the older building houses most of the incarcerated female population. Unfortunately, due to building layout, it was extremely difficult to conduct the intervention study in the older building, and ultimately the research team had to exclude people incarcerated in this building from the study. This led to a decreased proportion of eligible women compared to eligible men. The physical structure of the jail also required interviews to take place in several different settings, depending on what spaces normal jail operations was using during an interview. Interviews occurred in jail housing units, program offices, attorney booths, hearing rooms, and over the phone through plexiglass. The interviews were occasionally interrupted by normal jail operations, such as mealtimes, scheduled visits, medication drop-off, or searches. Participants may have felt more comfortable to speak freely in some spaces

compared to others, which limits the comparability of the conversations.³ Finally, data collection was paused due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, at which time the jail halted all non-essential jail operations. This led to missing data from some participants who were in the middle of their interviews at the time of the jail closing, in addition to an unexpected halt of recruitment.

Future research should interview children in developmentally appropriate ways to discuss their understanding of the legal system directly. This project emphasizes the teaching process of incarcerated parents, and additional research should examine the learning process of children with incarcerated parents. Future research should also aim to disaggregate the impact of race, gender, and age on parental communication and children's perspectives of the criminal justice system. Additional research should also examine the impact of the incarcerated parent and residential caregiver's relationship on the child's perception of their parent's incarceration.

³ The remote video visiting intervention always occurs in the housing units for the incarcerated parents, so this limit does not affect the comparability of the actual intervention itself.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Incarcerated Parents, Caregivers, and Children

	Jailed Parents (JP)	Caregivers of Children (CG)	Children, based on JP's report
Number of Participants	22	21	30
Number of Households	22	21	22
Mean Age (s.d.)	32.77 (7.16)	33.00 (9.88)	6.50 (2.54)
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	21	1	17
Female	1	20	13
<i>Race</i>			
Black, African American	13	10	13
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, Alaska Native	3	0	0
White	5	9	7
Mixed Race or other	1	1	9
Missing	0	1	1
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
Hispanic	1	2	4
Not Hispanic	21	19	26
<i>Education</i>			
Some High School	1	2	—
High School Degree or GED	10	6	—
Technical College/Trade School	2	3	—
Some College	6	8	—
College Degree & More	3	2	—
<i>Annual Household Income</i>			
Less than \$10,000	5	3	—
\$10,000 - \$24,999	3	4	—
\$25,000 - \$34,999	4	6	—
\$35,000 - \$49,999	1	4	—
\$50,000-\$74,999	4	1	—
\$75,000 or more	3	1	—
Prefer not to answer	1	1	—
Missing	1	1	—

<i>Criminal Background</i>			
Previously Incarcerated	21	—	—
Technical Violation Only	6	—	—
Arrested as minor	17	—	—
<i>Custody Status (Can have multiple)</i>			
Pre-Trial	14	—	—
Sentenced	8	—	—
Probation/Parole Hold Pending Revocation	11	—	—
<i>Relationship between Child and Caregiver</i>			
CG is other parent	—	16	24
CG is grandparent	—	2	3
CG is other relative	—	2	2
Other	—	0	1
Different relationships with multiple children	—	1	0