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Experiences of Adult Children with Previously Incarcerated Parents: A Qualitative Study

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Departmental Honors Thesis
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Abstract

There are at least 1.5 million adult children of incarcerated parents in the United States based on research conducted in 2000. While research has been conducted on this population while they were under the age of 18, little research has focused on their reflection of their childhood experiences nor on their transition into adulthood. Existing literature provides insight on their experiences as it pertained to peer and caregiver feedback, child and development into adulthood, parent-child relationships, and intervention recommendations. An exploratory qualitative study is conducted with adult children of incarcerated parents (n=5) in order to gain insight into their experiences and their interpretation of them from an older perspective. The findings focused on the themes of relationships, environment, and development as supported by Ecological Systems Theory. Discussed are the limitations, implications for practice, and suggestions for further studies.

Introduction

An *Adult Child*, as referenced in this research is defined as an individual who is over the age of 17, but was under the age of 18 when they experienced a specific phenomenon. As implied by the United States' Bureau of Justice Statistics, there are at least 1,498,800 adult children of incarcerated parents in the nation (Mumola, 2000). The report by Mumola (2000) accounted for parents who were incarcerated in the nations' state and federal prisons with children under the age of 18 years old. However, it did not account for the parents who may have been incarcerated in the local jails, territorial prisons, immigration and naturalization facilities, military facilities, and Indian Country jails which in total made up 660,201 individuals in 2001 (Harrison & Beck, 2002). This statistic also does not account for individuals who may have been the primary caregiver of non-biological children prior to incarceration. Nevertheless, the children who were accounted for in the study are now at least 18 years of age. This population of children formed, in 2000, approximately 2% of the nation's child population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Between 2000 and 2016, incarceration rates within local jails and prisons collectively increased by 227,400 which is an 11.6% increase; this heightens the chance of increasing parental incarceration rates and subsequent increases in amount of children affected by it (Cowhig & Kaeble, 2018). While existing research has studied the experiences of children with incarcerated parents, few have studied the experiences of adult children of incarcerated parents. Therefore, the literature review will largely reference articles about children of incarcerated parents (CIPs) and be complemented with articles about adult children of incarcerated parents (adult CIPs).

Literature Review

Existing literature describes the experiences of CIPs and adult CIPs through four major themes: peer and caregiver feedback, impact of parental incarceration on childhood and development in adulthood, relationship quality between parent and child, and recommendations for intervention.

Peer and Caregiver Feedback

Stigma. Existing literature frequently suggest that CIPs experience stigma in connection (Sack et al., 1976; Philips & Gates, 2010). Stigmatization is described as a process that consists of the following elements:

(1) distinguishing and labeling differences, (2) associating labeled differences with negative attributes, (3) differentiating between “us” and “them” based on labeled differences, and (4) the devaluation and discriminatory treatment of labeled individuals, all of which (5) occur within the context of and serve to perpetuate differences in social, cultural, political, and economic power (Link & Phelan, 2001).

The process of stigmatization is found to be perpetuated by varying sources that include: the incarcerated parent, the caregiver, peers, teachers, and society (Sack et al., 1976). For instance, a psychologist conducted interviews with incarcerated parents who had extended contact with their child in the year prior to their incarceration (n=31) and their children (n=73). Stigma was specifically perpetuated through primary caregivers instructing their children to not talk to their peers about their incarcerated parents and providing the children with either vague or deceptive explanations regarding their parents arrest (Sack et al., 1976). This would lead the children to adopt “their own evasions and deceptions to cope with any reactions they have received from peers in the case their parental incarcerated became known (Sack et al., 1976; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). These behaviors lead to isolation tendencies of the CIP even in cases where they

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found that there may be other CIPs in their school environment; few CIPs were able to feel bonded as close friends or siblings (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). In paying closer attention to the environment within school settings it was found teachers could also be perpetuating the stigma when teachers' (n=30) expectations of a child who experienced maternal loss due to incarceration was compared to a child who experienced maternal loss due to other reasons (Dallaire et al., 2010). Teachers rated the female students as being more competent than the males, but lowered their expectations for female students when they knew the mother was incarcerated (Dallaire et al., 2010). On a larger scale, it was found that society does not offer a honorable narrative for CIPs to contextualize their experience and maintain a self-esteem in the same way it offers narratives, acknowledgement, and resources for other forms of parental loss such as death, deployment, divorce, etc (Sack et al., 1976).

The feedback CIPs receive from their primary caregivers is largely impacted by three factors: parental involvement prior to incarceration, the nature of the interpersonal relationship between the caregiver and prisoner, and the family support system that is provided for the caregiver (Turanovic et al., 2012). In households where the parent played a vital role prior to incarceration, the caregiver described more negative transitions particularly pertaining to financial hardship, new childcare responsibilities, and managing the emotional response of the CIP (Turanovic et al., 2012). In households where the parent was disruptive, abusive, or not engaged prior to incarceration, the caregivers tended to report more positive transitions since they already assumed either some or all of the role of caregiver prior to the parent's incarceration (Turanovic et al., 2012). Caregivers who had a strong relationship with the parent prior to incarceration also reported grief while those with poor relationships reported relief (Turanovic et al., 2012). Further, caregivers who had more familial support reported positive experiences while those

without familial support reported negative experiences (Turanovic et al., 2012). These trends are supported by Song et al. (2018) who further linked the caregivers' experience to outcomes of the CIPs. It was found that the internalizing and externalizing behaviors were dependent on the psychological health of the caregiver where in their particular study, over 50% of the caregivers were dealing with borderline to severe depression (Song et al., 2018). Turanovic et al. (2012) believes the quality of the caregiver's experience and subsequently the CIPs experience should be viewed through the lens of systems where access to resources and social support institutions should be explored.

Childhood and Development into Adulthood

Existing literature seeking to understand the current and long-term effects of parental incarceration on CIPs largely point towards negative outcomes. These outcomes include: poverty, depression, behavioral issues, developmental delays, delinquency, amongst others. However, there are some pieces of literature that fight back against the narrative of predominantly negative outcomes as a direct result of parental incarceration.

Health Outcomes. Stress Proliferation Theory is defined as “the phenomenon of how an initial stressor can produce further stressors” (Ward, 2014). Applied to CIPs, Turney (2014) suggests CIPs are subject to negative physical and mental health outcomes because of the intergenerational stressors passed from their incarcerated parent and primary caregiver. The applied study empirically found that CIPs experience: learning disabilities, ADD/ADHD, behavioral or conduct problems, developmental delays, and speech or language problems at a higher rate than their counterparts (Turney, 2014). The most detrimental of these experiences are behavioral/ conduct problems and developmental delays (Turney, 2014). Even more noteworthy may be the fact that the mental health state of members within the household has a greater effect

on the CIP's behavioral and conduct outcomes than their parent's incarceration (Turney, 2014). Hence, it is unclear as to whether overarching health outcomes of CIPs are determined by their genetics or their environment (Turney, 2014).

Mental. Particularly, when CIPs reach the young adult stage, it is found there is a difference in effect between maternal and paternal incarceration (Foster & Hagan, 2013). Depressive symptoms are more prevalent with maternal incarceration among CIPs while substance abuse symptoms are more prevalent with paternal incarceration (Foster & Hagan, 2013). It was also found that CIPs who experience maternal incarceration are more prone to subjective weathering which is a term used to describe the accelerated rate of adult responsibility and declined health status (Foster, 2012). Further, Gaston (2016) found that depressive symptoms were prevalent in CIPs whose parent was incarcerated during adolescence (including before birth and one year of age) which leaned into the numerous arguments of long-term effects of parental incarceration.

Economic and Social. CIPs are more exposed to financial hardship and public assistance especially when their caregiver lacks proper familial supports (Siennick, 2014; Turanovic et al., 2012). In their transition into adulthood, they are often still vulnerable because of an inaccessibility to parental supports such as financial reserves or housing accommodations (Siennick, 2014). This same demographic is more susceptible to participate in criminal activity, illegal drug use, lower earnings, and less formal education amongst other things (Mears & Siennick, 2015).

In considering the various effects of parental incarceration on CIPs, it is important to note there are numerous risk factors associated with parental incarceration that can lead to negative outcomes rather than solely as a causal effect of parental incarceration. These risk factors include:

poverty; entry into child welfare system; parental criminality and witnessing parent's arrest; low educational attainment by a parent; suddenly being cared for by a one parent; and parental substance use and mental health concerns, as well as their own pre-existing mental health and behavioural concerns (Knudsen, 2016).

Parent-Child Relationship

The quality of relationship between the incarcerated parent and child has not widely been explored. However, there are some strong inferences that the relationship may be most affected by the parent's prior involvement before incarceration, the frequency of child visits, and the quality of child visits (Song et al., 2018). Children whose parent was healthily involved prior to incarceration experienced tougher transitions than children whose parent was disruptive or abusive (Song et al., 2018). The tougher transitions could indicate a level of grief based upon the disruption in a positive relationship, while the relief experienced by some CIPs could indicate the disruption of a poor relationship. Further, children who experienced frequent and positive visitation with their incarcerated parent were more likely to feel more positive about their relationship with their parent and have high expectations for their parent's release (Song et al., 2018).

Intervention Recommendations

There are numerous intervention recommendations that cater to the perceived needs of CIPs. In terms of social support, it was found that CIPs' resilience factors were boosted when they had access to activities that include: sports, camps, religious activities, and community programs (Luther, 2015). Access to these activities along with the adults who encouraged them provided the CIPs with optimism about their future in spite of their parent's incarceration (Luther, 2015). Further, the mentorship and supervision strongly encouraged for the at-risk CIPs to participate in

prosocial behavior overwhelmingly changed the trajectory of their lives, as self-reported by the CIPs (Luther, 2015). To thicken the quality of social support, there are also calls for policy change within in jail and prisons in order to decrease the disruption of the parent-child relationship (Song et. al, 2018). Clinically, utilizing trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy is a strongly suggested intervention for CIPs since it is proven be highly effective with individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Cohen et al, 2018; Morgan-Mullane, 2017). The therapy's model is brief, cognitive- behavioral, resilience-building, components-based, and phase-based (Cohen et al., 2018). This therapy's focus is on reducing symptoms and associated negative thinking within 12-18 sessions (Cohen et al., 2018). However, this therapy can prove difficult for community-based agencies due to limited resources and the potential challenge of providing therapy to CIPs who struggle to connect with their therapist for trauma-related reasons (Morgan- Mullane, 2017).

Theoretical perspective: Ecological Systems Theory

The existing literature predominantly utilizes Ecological Systems Theory in order to contextualize the complex nature of parental incarceration. The theory looks at four systematic levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, ad macrosystem (Arditti, 2005). Within each system, there are both constructs of interest and protective factors that collectively provide a more comprehensive view of the CIPs experience (Arditti, 2005). For instance, within the microsystem, constructs are of interest are “parent-child relationships, disenfranchised grief, and ambiguous loss” while the protective factors are “social support, individual and family resilience, and ecologically sensitive casework” (Arditti, 2005). Parental incarceration has not been proven to directly cause particular outcomes for CIPs, but to increase their risks of numerous environmental factors that can negatively affect them. For instance, Murphy et al. (2014) found

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in a questionnaire with 75 participants that emotionally supportive experiences in the midst of their ACEs was more of a predictor for their Adult Attachment Interviews (AAI) and Unresolved/ Cannot Classify (U/CC) mental state interviews (Murphy et al., 2014). It was found that with lower emotional support systems, both the AAI and the U/CC discordant state of mind was higher (Murphy et al., 2014). Hence, special attention is needed for environments where CIPs live. Utilizing this theoretical perspective has been supported by Arditti (2005) when specifically looking at parental incarceration and by Anderson and Mohr (2003) in understanding children who experience emotional disturbances in their families.

Purpose of study

This qualitative research study was designed to capture the experiences of adult children who had at least one incarcerated parent between the ages of 0 and 17 years old. The term, *Adult children*, is a phrase commonly utilized to describe individuals who are at least 18 years old or older, but are reflecting on their childhood experiences. The primary research questions driving this research are the following:

1. What types of changes in peer and caregiver relationships do adult children of incarcerated parents (CIPs) remember experiencing when their parents were initially incarcerated?
2. How do adult CIPs describe the impact of having an incarcerated parent on their childhood and development into adulthood?
3. How do adult CIPs describe their current relationships with their parents?
4. What suggestions or needs do adult CIPs report for helping other children or youth experiencing the same thing?

Methods

Institutional Review Board Process. This study underwent review by the Institutional Review Board and was approved in December 2018. Each participants was provided with a informed consent form that included their voluntary participation in the study along with the study's objective. Participant questions were answered prior to obtaining a signature on the document; afterward, the principal researcher proceeded with the interview. The provided incentive was a \$5 Walmart gift card. The potential risk for involvement in the study were emotional distress. In the case of emotional distress, the interview would have been stopped, the participant would have received either resources for the University counseling center if they were a student or for the Lighthouse Counseling and Transformation Center if they were not a student. The individual would be responsible for paying their counseling expenses, but they still received the \$5 Walmart gift card. The research data was kept confidential by keeping the interview recordings on a safe-guarded audio recorder until they were transcribed and then keeping the transcriptions on a password-protected laptop. All identifiers were removed from the transcriptions. Once transcribed, the audio recordings were deleted.

Sample. The sample was comprised of 5 individuals who were at least 18 years of age and self-reported experiencing parental incarceration when they were under the age of eighteen. It is notable that one of the participants shared that her experience with parental incarceration began when she was seventeen years old though her parent was not actually incarcerated until she turned eighteen. While this participant's experience does not directly fit the initial criteria for this qualitative study, her information is still included due to gaps in research regarding young adult children of incarcerated parents. All of the participants were college-educated and recruited from a medium-sized, metropolitan area in the Southeast United States.

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Recruitment. The participants were recruited in two ways: digital flyers that were posted on social media and sent out through a college email list; and, through word of mouth. Once the participants were notified of the research opportunity, they contacted the principal researcher to schedule their interview in a location that was most convenient to them.

Data Collection. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews that occurred in a confidential and convenient location for the participant. The principal researcher formulated a list of nine interview questions and 11 sub-questions to guide the interview process. The open-ended sample questions utilized were inspired by existing literature. In cases where there was a lack of clarity regarding a response to one of the questions or the participant introduced a unique perspective in their response, follow up questions were asked. The interviews lasted for between 19-43 minutes, a length determined by the participant's level of comfort and completion of the questions. The questions included in the semi-structured interview were as follows:

1. How old were you when your parent(s) was incarcerated?
2. How would you describe your school experience while your parent was incarcerated?
 - a. What happened at school after your parents went to jail?
 - b. Did teachers and friends know? What do you remember about their response?
3. How would you describe your home experience while your parent was incarcerated?
4. What was your relationship like with your parent while they were incarcerated?
 - a. How did you communicate with your parent while they were in jail?
 - b. What were visits like?
 - c. How long were your parents incarcerated?
5. What is your relationship like with your parent now?
6. Do you believe your parents incarceration had any effect on your development? If so,

how?

a. How did your parents' incarceration affect the choices you made for yourself growing up?

b. Do you believe this has had an impact on the way you live your life today (as an adult?)

7. What was your support system like while your parent was incarcerated?

a. Who helped you when your parent went to jail?

b. What activities did you do or places did you go while your parent was in jail?

How did those things affect how you felt at the time?

8. If any, what types of transitions did you experience when your parent was incarcerated?

a. What changed in your life when your parents went to jail?

b. What changed in your life when they were released?

9. What are your suggestions for helping other children who are currently growing up with an incarcerated parent(s)?

Data Analysis. As presented by Saldaña (2013), a first cycle of structural coding was initially performed to categorize the data. The categories were: school experience, home experience, relationship with parent prior to incarceration, relationship with parent during incarceration, relationship with parent prior to incarceration, development, support systems, transitions, and suggestions. Afterwards, a second cycle of axial coding was then performed to synthesize the codes into ones that best fit the data. The codes that were used were: relationships, environment, and development.

Table 1:

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Structural Codes

Category	Description	Example
School Experience	These are the experiences that the participant had while they were in school during the time their parent or parents were incarcerated.	"...I went to a public school in a very wealthy county, predominantly white. It's the kids that aren't given the stereotype of going through any type of family struggle-particularly your parent being incarcerated..."
Home Experience	These are the experiences within their household that the participant had while their parent was incarcerated.	"...my mom was worried they had bugged the house, the car. We didn't talk about it. Even in the house, we didn't talk about it.... just in case they were listening."
Relationship with Parent Prior to Incarceration	This describes the relationship that the child had with their parent prior to parental incarceration.	"He would look to help before he looked to say 'why were you doing that?'"
Relationship with Parent during Incarceration	This describes the relationship that that the participant had with their parent during incarceration.	"I didn't talk to him at all when he was incarcerated."
Relationship with Parent at the time of the interview	This describes the attitudes and actions that characterize the relationship the participant now has with their parent.	"To this day, he's never told me 'ah, this is why I went to prison'. We never talk about it, and I don't bring it up now because he doesn't bring it up."
Development	This describes the participant's perspective on how their parent's incarceration has affected	"I'm a fighter. It makes me a fighter. It makes me want more out of life."

	their choices.	
Support System	This describes the participant's perspective of who was in their support system and how it contributed to their experience.	"... no one knows what advice to give you. Peers are just trying to be there to support you and be there to listen."
Transitions	This describes the changes that the participant reports from their parent entering jail/prison and their parent exiting jail/prison.	"It was abrupt for me because me and my pops relationship when he first went to jail is when he had just like got into my life, so I had just met him, so then he went to jail."
Suggestions	This describes suggestions that the participants made for helping other children who have an incarcerated parent.	"I do want to start a home for people whose spouse is incarcerated and they have kids because all of the financial responsibility can come up or emotional distress or you need counseling or you need communal parenting basically while you're at work."

Table 2:

Axial Codes

Code	Description	Example
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Relationships	This describes the range of relationships that the adult child experienced, their interpretation of them, and/or their final thoughts regarding them.	“I think I was defining support as people I actively talked to about the situation at home, but actually they [coworkers] were a huge part of that community of support by just being there and loving.”
Environment	This describes the range of environments that the adult child experienced, their interpretation of them, and/or their final thoughts regarding them.	“I was in the system- me and my brother. We were in foster homes; we went to homeless shelters; I lived in a halfway house when I graduated high school.”
Development	This describes the range of biopsychosocial developments that the adult child experienced, their interpretation of them, and/or their final thoughts regarding them.	“It made me very cautious. I’m not a risk-taker. I don’t speed. I just try to stay out the way. It made me a very, very practical person. I only do stuff if I need to do it. I don’t associate with too many people because I don’t want to be around them. I don’t want to be involved with the crap that comes along with it...”

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. This method was useful in capturing the primary themes from the Adult CIPs’ interviews. There was a review of key terms that are associated with the experiences. This method was also utilized in the work of Turanovic, Rodriguez, and Pratt (2012) when they were exploring the collateral consequences of incarceration using qualitative interviews.

Results

The adult children of previously incarcerated parent reported a wide range of experiences that could most clearly be demonstrated through their relationships, environments, developments, and the interconnection between them all.

Relationships

Primary Caregiver. While some adult CIPs described having a single caregiver throughout their experience, others reported having as many as five. The adult CIPs reported complex relationships with their primary caregivers. The absorption of the primary caregiver's emotions were reported:

Well, my mom didn't really care. So, that transformed to me. It transformed to me not caring. That literally is the really why to this day, I could be like—I mean I love my pops, but do I care for him? Not really.

She used to cry about it all the time, and that energy transferred on to me. Especially because that's your parent: the fact that she was worried made me worried. Even if I wasn't that worried about it.. You look to your parent for stability and to see how your family is doing financially or if you're stable. So, she didn't feel like we were.. I had no reason to feel like we were stable

In these two examples, the emotions of the primary caregiver directly influenced how the adult CIP viewed their incarcerated parent and how they felt about their stability. Further, it was reported that due to an awareness of their primary caregiver's emotions, the adult CIP shielded her own:

She [mentor] would ask me about it every single week, and that was very helpful because my mom was not ready to talk about it. I feel like I was more so my mom's support system because she would cry at night. I would hold her. I didn't cry about it at home. Not until I got to college did it really hit me because I didn't get a chance to deal with it before I came to college.

While some of the adult CIPs describe their caregivers as providing care and advocating on their behalf, others described adverse situations. One participant described how their aunt “had been beating [them] with a board,” to the point where they had marks on their faces and backs; they

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had to be removed by social services. When one adult CIP entered the workforce as a teenager, his primary caregiver would take all of his money. Another adult CIP described not having a strong relationship with her primary caregiver, but still respecting her for working to provide for her and her siblings.

Incarcerated Parent. The relationship between the adult CIP and the incarcerated parent was analyzed in three stages where notable experiences were found. Prior to incarceration, the adult CIPs describe physical and/ or emotional distance with their parent. There were lacks of communication and inconsistencies in the fulfillment of the CIPs expected level of support. Some of the adult CIPs describe various forms of abuse: verbal, emotional, mental, physical, and sexual.

It's not because he did something that was worth going to prison, is "why I don't like you"; it's the fact that he was, in general, an incredibly emotionally, verbally, and sometimes sexually abusive person.

During incarceration, almost all of the adult CIPs reported avoidant behavior that took the form of ignoring phone calls, letters, or art projects from the incarcerated parent. One of the participants reported visiting his father initially out of curiosity and then growing resistant with age.

there was a period of time where I wasn't going to the jail cell no more, like, "I'm grown up now." And once you start growing up, you feel like you don't have to do nothing. Like your mama tell you you don't have to do it—"Psh, grandma, na, I ain't gone go." I ain't going. I never really had that relationship with my father to where it was like "I love you, man." I used to just go cause my sisters wanted to go and I'd be with my grandma—she's make sure I eat and give me money. I'd just be with my grandma. And we would just go see my pops.

Other adult CIPs mentioned transportation problems and prior relationship tensions (between primary caregiver and parent and/or between child and parent) as a part of their barriers to visiting the parent during incarceration. Further, one of the adult CIPs recalls her parent not

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making any effort to contact her while he was incarcerated but felt it was a normal continuation of their previously non-communicative relationship and not a hostile occurrence. Post incarceration, the adult CIPs reported varying transitions in their relationship with their parent. These transitions included how they perceived their parent. Three of the adult CIPs mentioned their change in perception was either because of a negative change in their parent's self-image, exacerbation of toxic behaviors, and/or an inability to fulfill expectations.

I already didn't depend on him emotionally, but I depend on him overall even less now that he's out. Because I don't know- he a felon, I guess- I don't know his classification, but he feels like he can't get a job and pay for our basic necessities so I just leave him to his own devices and don't talk to him very much...

Two of the adult CIPs mentioned the adult CIPs reliance on them for material and financial stability and thus, a conflicted relationship. All of the adult CIPs had either ceased, minimized, or shifted their communication with their previously incarcerated parent as a method of self-preservation.

Peers. The adult CIPs reported varying experiences with their peers. Three of the adult CIPs mentioned that they had peers who were supportive of them throughout their experience with parental incarceration. Support from peers emerged in both direct and indirect methods. While some adult CIPs disclosed their parent's incarceration to their peers, others did not. Individuals who disclosed their parent's incarceration to their peers mentioned feeling supported by their peer's empathy and presence though they may not have known what to say; the adult CIP did not expect them to know how to respond.

My friends were very kind and very supportive- just basically of me as a person. They were very loving and encouraging, but I don't actually remember if I told them about my dad because our friendship was very surface level.... When you're 15/16 years old, no one knows what advice to give you. Peers are just trying to be there to support you and be there to listen. That's amazing and that's all that they can do, and I really appreciated

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that but at the same time what advice are they going to give me? Nobody knows how to handle that situation.

Adult CIPs who did not disclose to their friends still described feeling supported by their peers through them being supportive of the adult CIP “as a person”: having a positive relationships where peers paid close attention and were willing to spend time with the adult CIP were seen as significant supports. In discussing peers, one adult CIP brought up the topic of stigma within her wealthy private school; there were not any conversations occurring regarding parental incarceration, so she felt alone. Other nuances regarding adult CIPs’ relationship with peers included two of the participants who stated parental incarceration was prevalent in their communities, so it was not something they felt alone in even when they did not speak with other individuals. Some of the adult CIPs reported adverse experiences with peers such as being made fun of for circumstances connected to their parent’s incarceration or having surface-level friendships that prevented them from making connections.

Another type of peer relationship that emerged in the data was the adult CIPs relationship with their siblings. All of the adult CIPs mentioned their siblings as a form of direct and indirect support. Even in circumstances where the adult CIP did not explicitly talk about their emotions with their siblings, they found solace in knowing they were not completely alone.

I’m very fortunate in that I have 3 younger siblings who I adore and love. Even though we didn’t talk about my dad while he was in prison- at least I don’t recall it- it was just comforting to have them there because we had been through everything together.

My sister was having sex with grown men just to feed us because my mom was just on the crack.

I struggled a lot with deciding do I sacrifice that I don’t want to go over there and it’s not safe environment to be with my siblings and offer some type of faux sense of I feel like I can protect them when I know that I can’t or is it healthier, actually, because when it

comes to my father, I was very willing to stand up for myself and the kids. I don't know what sense of bravery came over me.

Teachers. Most of the adult CIPs described their relationship with teachers as being distant. The factors discussed included large class sizes and personal preferences for privacy; they did not feel that their teachers needed to know anything and felt that it was important for them to not bring their home business into school. There was one report of a teacher who left a profound impact on one of the adult CIPs:

I had a teacher named [teacher's name]. She would always come pick me up. She taught me how to drive. I got my license the day of graduation because my teacher took me. She was a big mentor. She would tell me, "[participant's name], three things in life and you're going to go far:"- her picture's on my desk- "pray, aim high, stay focused." Those were her guidelines. She's still living to this day. I still talk to her. She's very, very impactful.

Another adult CIP recalls facing stigma in the classroom:

the business course that leads into that club was taught by a man that worked with my father and was there when he got arrested. It was just this obscure relationship that we had. He would kind of ignore me in class; he was not proud that I was in his class because he didn't like my father either.

In providing suggestions, one of the adult CIPs wished that there was a discreet way for authorities to notify the school that one of their students was about to face parental incarceration. Her suggestion was embedded in her experience with her house being abruptly raided and having guns pointed at her; there was no follow up and she fears that children like her sister, who are reluctant to ask for help, will fall through the cracks. She feels that teachers would be able to at least refer the families to appropriate services. One of the adult CIPs mentioned that one of her teachers noticed that she began to fall behind the other children in her emotional development

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and had also developed a speech problem; the teacher referred her to counseling where she and her siblings underwent therapy.

Mentors. The types of mentors that the adult CIPs mentioned ranged from family members to community peers. Two of the adult CIPs mentioned how mentorship positively affected them during parental incarceration. One of the mentors described was a family member who had personally been incarcerated and was willing to stand in the gap for the adult CIP to make sure that they were emotionally supported while their parent was incarcerated. Another mentor was described as an assigned mentor through a community program; this mentor asked the adult CIP about her experiences every week of which the adult CIP found useful since she could not find relief at home.

I was assigned a mentor and it was like perfect timing. I applied to be in the organization or a recipient of the aid of the organization and all summer long- I didn't realize that I would do this, but I was talking to my mentor about it every single week. She would ask me about it every single week, and that was very helpful because my mom was not ready to talk about it. I feel like I was more so my mom's support system because she would cry at night. I would hold her. I didn't cry about it at home.

One of the adult CIPs felt that she would have been better supported if she could find a mentor from among her peers' parents who was willing to serve as a father figure.

Environment

Household. In the household, the adult CIPs reported transitions that largely related to their family's finances and relationships. For each adult CIP (except for one where the mother was the breadwinner), there was a decline in resources that caused stress for the family. While some adult CIPs were able to stay with one primary caregiver that they were familiar with during parental incarceration, others went through a series of caregivers who they had no prior relationship with. For instance, one of the adult CIPs reported being in foster care, living in

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homeless shelters, and living in a halfway house; there was a constant change in his environment, some of which included abusive relationships and/ or lacking resources:

I grew up in that hood environment and that underprivileged situation- wic, food stamps, all that - living without food, without water sometimes, without lights for months.

One of the participants described drastically shifting from a two-parent household to a one-parent household and having to move in with family members. She recalled how her location change strengthened some family relationships while weakening others.

Further, the household was often described as lacking a structure for clear communication between its members; in stressful situations such as when the home was raided or when the parent was incarcerated, there was not any disclosure of feelings amongst the members. One of the adult CIPs mentioned learning of her father's criminal activity from the local newspaper; she described there being a "don't talk about it aura in the house", a "unspoken tension- big elephant in the room- multiple elephants in the room."

School. The school environment was described in a variance of ways. While some school environments were described as being wealthy, others were described as being poor. In the wealthy school, a complaint from the adult CIP was that students in that school didn't fit the stereotype for facing parental incarceration, so it was not something talked about.

I kind of wondering are there any other kids feeling this or am I alone? Especially because I went to a public school in a very wealthy county, predominantly white. It's the kids that aren't given the stereotype of going through any type of family struggle- particularly your parent being incarcerated, so it was nobody there who is going to be talking about family struggles going on at home even though you know they're happening. So I did wonder a lot if I was alone in that and why no one else was speaking up if that wasn't the case.

In the poor school, an adult CIP complained about having inadequate resources: "Inner city, so the curriculum was garbage. I was very intelligent, but my test taking was horrible. I had to study

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extra hard for the ACT because we didn't have those resources in my school." The school environments were largely a facilitator for peer and teacher relationships, sports, clubs, and work study opportunities. Four of the adult CIPs reported involvement in school activities. One of the four described being involved in numerous activities, but found that they may have been more harmful for her in the long run since she was using them as a means of distraction from her home life.

I think being in the organization helped me by giving me a distraction while the process was happening. It might have been better for me to cope with the emotions of it sooner because it really did not help me- it hurt me to cope with it when I got to college. I didn't realize it was going to do that, but it hurt me to do that. But at the time when I was participating in those organizations, it gave me something to do.

Another adult CIP mentioned how important the work study opportunity was for her since her household was in financial distress; it was important for her start working toward financial independence as early as possible.

One of the adult CIPs spoke of her school environment from her current experience as an adult. She mentioned that she had more access to alcohol and began to use it as a coping mechanism for her mental health issues. She also mentioned still having difficulty with attaining resources since it was still dependent on her incarcerated parent filling out the FAFSA; she attended the school for two weeks before knowing if she could stay. The school was not clear on what to do in her case.

Community. The communities that the adult CIPs described had variance. Two adult CIPs mentioned programs that were either in their city or near their city that catered to some of their needs (mentorship and therapy). One of the programs mentioned was catered to foster children of which the adult CIP did not meet the criteria; however, because of her risk factors, she was allowed into the program. One of the adult CIPs mentioned that she believed a home for spouses

of those incarcerated and their children would be beneficial for the purpose of pooling resources and lessening financial burden. Components included communal parenting and counseling services.

I think that's how peers some into play: once it's destigmatized, they go "hey, you know, my dad really loves, you, why don't you come over for dinner," or, "hey, my mom is the bomb and she going to our soccer game. What if she makes a sign for the both of us?" It's just like little things like that where they step in. I think those are the best ways.

Development

Physical. While physical development was not largely mentioned by the adult CIPs, there were notable aspects. One of the adult CIPs reported the development of a speech impediment while another adult CIP still carried a knot on his head from where his previously incarcerated parent smashed it into a car window over 15 years ago.

Mental. Cognitive and affective process changes were reported during this study. Some of the changes included: increased awareness of the world and its systems, increased self-awareness, efforts toward high achievement to prove personal potential, efforts toward financial independence, increased preference for privacy, fear of failure, and an effort to be different from incarcerated parent. Some of the adult CIPs reported battles with anxiety and depression that followed them into their adulthood. One of the adult CIPs was released from her college honors program because she was unable to maintain her mental health, felt shame, and did not tell her advisors what was happening; she felt there was "no excuse" for her grades slipping.

I was actually kind of avoiding them; I didn't want to talk to them about it. I didn't want them to know about it. It was hard enough for me to see my grades slipping; to see myself not going to class; to feel depressed. I never really experienced that full on, so for me, I didn't think it was acceptable enough of a reason for my grades to slip. I didn't think it was an excuse; there was no excuse in my mind. So I felt like going to them about it was trying to make up an excuse for it, so I never told them.

Social. The social developments that the adult CIPs faced were described as stemming from the parent's absence more than their incarceration. For instance, one adult CIP described that he felt that he missed out on life lessons since he did not have a father figure in his life; he believed that he had to learn things the hard way. Therefore, he prides himself in being “ a go getter instead of somebody that's going to sit around and wait.” He frequently mentioned other aspects of his independence from the help of others and his reluctance to ask for help from anyone. Another adult CIP described facing two traumatic rapes while her parent was incarcerated; she felt that if she had a better relationship with her father and if he was present, she would have healed from the experiences faster. She describes losing hope in all males and having visceral reactions to individuals of the same gender and sex identity as her father. She mentioned not being able to show other humans the genuine kindness that she wanted because of her experience with her father. Speaking to long-term social developments, one of the adult CIPs reported his development of a strong relationship with God as means of interpreting his previous experiences and motivating him toward the future; he finds rest in his faith.

I had spent my life running from them. I wasn't ashamed. It's just I felt I wasn't apart of them because I'm so different from them. I think differently, and I respond differently. I carry myself differently. That's how I know it's God intertwined in the fibers.

I have to believe in God that he's going to continue to move me.

The more a person goes through in life is the bigger the calling is through God. He was eager for achievement and found that he was buying expensive items to prove that he made it. His current relationship with his children is driven from his determination to right the wrongs of his father. He still reports tension in family relationships and an avoidance of his family (abusive primary caregivers and parent).

Economic. Two of the adult CIPs reported continuing battles with financial insecurity. They both determined at a young age that they could not depend on their parents (especially their incarcerated parent) to assist them with anything financially. Therefore, one of the adult CIPs entered into the workforce full-time in preparation for college and adopted strict saving habits. At the time of the interview, she reported that while her family is still struggling financially, she feels more prepared for any role shifts because almost everything that belongs to her is in her name; she has more control now than when she was younger. She reported having to provide her parent with basic necessities while he was in a halfway house near her university while prior to incarceration he was providing all of her needs. A similar experience was reported by another adult CIP who in his adulthood has to bear to financial burden of caring for his elderly family members (including his previously incarcerated parent) because of his economic success; he refers to it as his “curse”. He was the only individual in his family to graduate from high school and college; he is currently in graduate school.

Interconnection of Relationships and Environment.

While the adult CIPs reported varying experiences, they all touched on the interconnection between their relationships, environment, and development. For instance, when the adult CIP was in an environment where their primary caregiver was stressed and resentful toward the incarcerated parent, the adult CIP absorbed those emotions and allowed it to influence their relationship with the incarcerated parent. However, when the adult CIP changed their environment where the primary caregiver (such as a grandparent) had a positive relationship with the incarcerated parent, they were more likely to visit and build upon the relationship with their incarceration parent. In home environments where there was a lack of communication, the CIPs

tended to grow further away from their incarcerated parent during and after incarceration. It was the collaboration of relationships and the environment that affected the adult CIP's development.

Discussion

Existing Literature

There were numerous congruencies between the existing literature and the data. Regarding the relationships that the CIP experienced, it was confirmed in the data that the CIPs experienced stigma, gaps in communication surrounding their parent's incarceration, internalizing tendencies around their peers, caregivers, and teachers, and declines in the parent-child relationship when there was little to no communication during incarceration (Sack et al., 1976; Philips & Gates, 2010; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Dallaire et al., 2010; Turanovic et al., 2012; Song et al., 2018). Likewise, the one participant who visited his incarcerated parent was the only participant who had higher expectations for their relationship post-incarcerated as compared to the others who had chosen to cease, minimize, or shift their communication with their parent (Song et al., 2018). Further, in cases where the parent was abusive prior to incarceration, there was a positive shift in the household functioning.

Environmentally, it was confirmed in the data that parental incarceration had a triggering effect for other risk factors that affected the CIP more directly than the incarceration itself (Ward, 2014; Turney, 2014). Numerous times, it was shared that the parent's absence was more of a concern than their incarceration, of which for many of the participant's had began prior to the parent's incarceration. Of the nine risk factors, listed below, for negative outcomes that are associated with parental incarceration in existing literature, seven of them were reported by the adult CIPs:

poverty; entry into child welfare system; parental criminality and witnessing parent's arrest; low educational attainment by a parent; suddenly being cared for by a one parent; and parental substance use and mental health concerns, as well as their own pre-existing mental health and behavioural concerns (Knudsen, 2016).

Vague and/or deceptive explanations about the parent's incarceration were confirmed along with the lack of societal acknowledgement and resources for the drastic shifts that the family underwent (Sack et al., 1976). It was consistent with literature that community programs, sports, clubs, and other hobbies increased resilience factors (Luther, 2015). However, it was a surprise finding that while providing immediate resilience, it may provide long-term harm in preventing the CIP from dealing with their emotional distress earlier on. It was consistently with existing literature that parental incarceration increased financial stress within the household and that there was an increased level of responsibility for the CIP (weathering); however, it was a surprise finding that some of the CIPs had access to work study opportunities that curbed their financial insecurity (Turanovic et al., 2012; Foster, 2012).

Developmentally, speech delays, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse were confirmed by the participants (Foster & Hagan, 2013). It was suggested that depression would be more associated with maternal incarceration while substance abuse would be more associated with substance abuse; Therefore, it was a surprise finding that one of the participants who experienced paternal incarcerated experienced both depression and substance abuse heavily and later on down the road post-incarceration.

Limitations

Sample. The sample size for this study was small (n=5) and therefore, the findings are not generalizable. Further, each individual who participated in the study had either completed or was

in the process of completing their college education. This hints at an element of privilege that these individuals were able to access that others in this community may not have. The research may have been more representative if the educational status of the participants was more varied. While word of mouth spread to the appropriate individuals who qualified for the study by trusted community members, there was difficulty in having them commit to participation. It may be useful if the principal researcher utilize a methodology that allows them to gradually build trust with the community before interviewing them.

Data Collection and Analysis. During the data collection process, there was difficulty in balancing the affirmation of the participant's emotions with taking a non-biased approach; the participants looked to the principal researcher for validation. Some of the follow up questions asked were leading questions which could have potentially influenced the answers received by the participants. Also, more questions could have been asked in regard to the participant's environment to give a more vivid picture. The analysis could have been more credible by there being a second researcher conducting a thematic analysis for comparison and refining purposes. There were significant time limitations that prevented collaboration with a second researcher.

Implications.

Practice. In direct practice, it may be advantageous for the social work professional to assess the home environment more thoroughly and consistently to ensure that in the midst of potential internalizing behaviors, the CIP is in an optimal and safe environment. Upon notification from the arresting agency, it would be advantageous for a Licensed Clinical Social Worker to follow up with the child to help them address any residual trauma and walk them (along their family) through Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. The social work professional may conduct home visits in order to help facilitate healthy family communication surrounding the

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arrest and family plan to ensure a healthy and stable environment for the CIP; this may also help with reducing the stress for the primary caregiver of whom would be better equipped to provide support to the CIP. In cases where the home environment is unstable, it could be beneficial for the social work professional to safety plan with the CIP and their siblings. For increased outcomes with parent- child relationship post-incarceration, it may be advantageous if the social work professional is able co-facilitate visitation with the child (with the approval) of the caregiver since the frequency and quality of parent visitation was an indicator of post-incarcerations relationships between the two. Within the school setting, a social work professional could facilitate a support group for parental loss that CIPs along with other individuals who experienced other forms of parental loss could come together in a confidential space where along the way, the social work professional would directly confront any aspects of stigma that arose. The social work professional could also advocate for access to work study opportunities, counseling, and mentorship for the CIP in order to increase their resilience factors in a way that reduces their financial insecurity, helps them deal with their emotional distress immediately, and have a positive role model that they can rely on outside of their home environment.

In macro practice, it is suggested that current community programs be made more comprehensive to serve individuals with all ACEs rather than creating programs that target this population as a distinct group (Phillips & Gates, 2011). The supportive reasoning is that serving this population as a distinct group perpetuating the stigma that comes from labeling and asserting that children who experience parental loss byway of parental incarceration are different from children who experience parental loss through other means (Phillips & Gates, 2011). Similarly, as requested by one of the participant's, the formation of a home for spouses of incarcerated

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parents may be beneficial for the purpose of communal parenting, pooling resources, emotional support, and counseling services; in light of avoiding the perception of stigma, the suggestion could be adapted to serve spouses of child with parental loss. Policy that requires for the arresting agency to notify the Department of Children's Services may also be advantageous, so that CIPs are followed up with in regard to any trauma they may have experienced in their parental loss and are connected to appropriate resources.

Research. In research, it would be better if the principal researcher worked in conjunction with a key community member who already established relationships with the participants. This would provide communal credibility to the researcher and potentially increase the number of willing participants for research. Further, research of this magnitude could be best carried out with at least three researchers to interview a larger sample size, transcribe the interviews, and analyze the data in an efficient and effective manner.

Further Studies.

Further studies that would enlighten practice with individuals of this community would be the following: the effect of work study opportunities for those who experience parental loss and service access delivery in Tennessee for children who have experienced parental loss. Tennessee is specified as a further research area since it holds two percent of the nation's population that is under the age of 18 years old (Child Population by Age Group, 2017). Yet, this same state has the sixth-leading percentage (11.7%) of children whose parent or guardian has served time in jail, a form of incarceration (Survey Results, 2017).

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