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Parental Pains of Imprisonment: A Critical Qualitative Examination of Reentry Into Family Life

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PARENTAL PAINS OF IMPRISONMENT: A CRITICAL QUALITATIVE

EXAMINATION OF REENTRY INTO FAMILY LIFE

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The purpose of this study is to grasp and become better informed about the experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers and fathers transitioning from correctional facilities (i.e., local jails, state & federal prisons) back into family life. Lacking in criminological literature on prisoner reentry is the intersection of parenthood and post-incarceration reintegration. Since available research often focuses on maternal and paternal reentry separately, this study encapsulates both to provide an in-depth analysis of experiences across race and gender. To gauge perspectives and experiences in-depth, this study is grounded in qualitative/triangulated methodologies. The data and findings from this study aim to assist institutional and community-based prisoner reentry programs and services in their efforts to improve the transitional process from incarceration to communities of formerly incarcerated parents. Study findings may also be applicable to the administration of justice by providing empirically sound policy implications for correctional officials and agencies that are both gender and culturally responsive.

Keywords: parenting, prisoner reentry, incarceration, family, race, gender

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At year-end 2019, the United States' prison population reached figures unseen since the end of the year 2015 (1,526,603) (Carson, 2020). A slight decrease occurred that went from 1,464,400 at year-end 2018 to 1,430,800 incarcerated individuals at year-end 2019 (Carson, 2020). The roughly two percent decrease represents the lowest rate of imprisonment since 2002, an approximate eleven percent decrease from an all-time peak of more than 1.6 million prisoners in 2009 (Carson, 2020). Among the thirty-five states that saw decreases in their prison population between 2018 and 2019, Texas showed the greatest decline of roughly 5,200 prisoners (Carson, 2020), an obvious improvement yet still surpassing every other state in incarceration by raw numbers. On the surface, consistent decreases in the United States' state and federal prison population might appear as evidence of a national divergence from punitive crime control ideologies, policies, and practices of previous decades; however, these figures must be approached with caution.

Disproportionate racial and gender disparities persist despite declines in state and federal prison populations. For example, in state prisons, the rate of incarceration for African Americans remains more than five times the imprisonment of whites (Nellis, 2021; Carson, 2020). When taking race and gender into account, disparities are pronounced among men and women of color. State and federal prison populations have steadily decreased in recent years; however, out of approximately 1.3 million sentenced prisoners as of year-end 2019, more than 700,000 were Black and Hispanic males (Carson, 2020). While men constitute the largest population of incarcerated persons,

Black and Hispanic men have a far greater likelihood of serving a prison sentence than their white counterparts (Ulmer et al., 2016; Pettit & Gutierrez, 2018). Despite their significantly smaller representation among state and federal prisoners, racial and gender disparities exist among women as well. At year-end 2019, the rate of imprisonment for African American women was roughly 83 per 100, 000, more than 1.7 times the rate of their white counterparts whose figures were approximately 48 per 100,000 (The Sentencing Project, 2020). Similarly, Hispanic women are imprisoned at a rate 1.3 times that of white women (The Sentencing Project, 2020). In recent decades, the imprisonment rate of women has exceeded their male counterparts, posing gender-specific concerns and research inquiry into this population (see Bloom et al., 2004; Moe & Ferraro, 2007; Scroggins & Malley, 2010; Cobbina, 2010; Robison & Miller, 2016).

The changing racial and gender dynamics of the correctional population throughout the United States presents another issue. Hidden from public view among populations of incarcerated men and women is the reality that nationally, more than half are parents (Foster & Hagan, 2009). Based on self-reported data from a nationally represented sample, nearly 685,000 state and federal prisoners were parents to minor children as of 2016 (Maruschak et al., 2021). Furthermore, nearly 47% of state prisoners and approximately 57% of federal prisoners reported having a dependent child as of 2016 (Maruschak et al., 2021). Racial and gender disparities are present as well among state and federal populations of incarcerated parents. Among state prisoners as of 2016, roughly 60% of White women, about 62% of Hispanic women, and approximately 50% of Black women were parents to dependent children (Maruschak et al., 2021). At the

federal level, the percentages of mothers with minor children were higher except for White women, who saw an 11% decrease (Maruschak et al., 2021).

For their male counterparts, percentages were seemingly smaller among state prisoners. In fact, the highest racial group at this level with minor children was on par with the percentage of Black women, pointing to the staggering problem of maternal incarceration. Like their female counterparts with dependent children on the federal level, Black and Hispanic fathers saw an increase while White fathers showed an estimated 6% decrease (Maruschak et al., 2021). Clearly, parents of color are disproportionately represented among state and federal inmates. Due to the transience of the population and lack of uniformity in information gathering, the number of parents in jails with minor children is more difficult to count; however, recent studies suggest that incarcerated parents are also largely represented within these correctional facilities (Charles et al., 2019; Correa et al., 2021; Tripp, 2009; Sufrin, 2018). Consequently, more than five million children in the United States are estimated to have experienced parental incarceration with children of color disproportionately impacted (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016). In fact, approximately one in nine African American children have an incarcerated parent (Nellis, 2016; Pew Charitable Trust, 2010) and are seven times more likely than White children to have a parent in prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Consequently, the racialized and gendered nature of mass incarceration has reached beyond directly impacted individuals themselves; its tentacles have created and affected a generation of "children of the prison boom" (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014).

As described, parental incarceration is a pressing issue across both genders and delegates this group of incarcerated individuals as a special needs population (Mitchell et

al., 2018). The correctional population in the United States consists of several different groups of special needs offenders, or individuals in confinement or under community supervision that possess any form of disability, mental impairment, juvenile, or veteran status, among others (Dodson, 2018). The presence of these vulnerable populations warrants individualized attention, specialized programming, and tailored services to meet their unique needs and challenges. Despite their widespread representation within correctional populations, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated parents are less likely to receive institutional and community-based programming and assistance that addresses their special needs (Mitchell et al., 2018). For programming and interventions that do exist, they are usually reserved for pregnant women and mothers with newborn babies (i.e., mothers' infant bonding programs) (Dodson et al., 2019). Unfortunately, preferential treatment given to expecting and new mothers is incompatible with empirical data that shows nearly 50% of minor children with an incarcerated parent are age ten or older (Maruschak et al., 2021). For incarcerated and released fathers, limited programming exists minus a few exceptions (e.g., Inside Out Dad) that provide support in the areas of relationship building with children, co-parenting, and reentry planning, for example. This may be in part due to hegemonic ideals of parenting in American society that deem criminals have essentially forfeited their right to parenthood, thereby, drawing minimal sympathy and support from the state and public.

The extant literature on parental incarceration mostly examines the gamut of negative effects on the children themselves. Overwhelmingly quantitative in nature, several studies reveal educational disadvantages (Turney & Haskins, 2014; Testa & Jackson, 2021); health-related effects (Wildeman et al. 2018; Turney, 2014; Jackson &

Vaughn, 2017), and risky behaviors including sex (Le et al., 2019), drug use (Khan et al., 2018), and delinquency (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010) as correlated with the removal of a parent by the criminal legal system. Rightfully so, children of incarcerated parents are deserving of special attention because they are the silent and invisible victims of mass incarceration (Muhammad, 2011; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014). Studies reveal that children affected by the incarceration of a mother, for example, have a greater likelihood of familial disruption and entry into the foster care system (Poehlmann et al., 2008; Turney & Wildeman, 2018). On the other hand, the abrupt removal of a financially contributing father can create economic hardships, thereby creating a feminization of poverty phenomenon in already disenfranchised and socially isolated communities (Clear, 2007; McKay et al., 2019; Arditti, 2012; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014). Consequently, the disintegration of families in communities subjected to hyper-incarceration can resemble a "death by a thousand cuts" (Clear, 2007).

While children affected by parental incarceration are an extremely vulnerable population, the perceptions, challenges, and lived experiences of the parents themselves could provide insight to help guide correctional administrators, community supervision officers, social service providers, and policymakers toward empirically grounded solutions to address this population. Concerted and intentional efforts to understand the incarceration and reentry experiences that justice-involved parents face could aid in reducing recidivism, strengthening familial bonds, and supporting vulnerable children. Furthermore, recognizing justice-involved parents across gender as a special needs population worthy of assistance will provide rehabilitative interventions for a substantial segment of the nation's correctional population.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

The focus of the current study is to examine adult formerly incarcerated men and women's experiences and perceptions of their maternal and paternal identities, incarceration as a parent, and reentry back into family life. While research shows mixed results about the effects of parental incarceration on children specifically, these studies are largely quantitative, based on large and outdated datasets (i.e., Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study), and lacking an in-depth qualitative context. In addition, an understanding of maternal and paternal incarceration foregrounded in personal narratives from the parents themselves could add to the body of knowledge, as well as provide a critical framework to aid in guiding local, state, and national efforts in addressing the collateral consequences of mass incarceration on families. According to the United States Department of Justice, approximately 608,000 individuals were released from state and federal prisons as of year-end 2019 (Carson, 2020) which is on par with previous years; therefore, a constant flow of formerly incarcerated adult men and women are returning to American communities, many of whom are parents. The fact that approximately 95% of incarcerated individuals will eventually return to the community (Hughes & Wilson, 2004) magnifies the importance of ensuring they are best prepared to matriculate through society.

Despite research documenting the racial and gender disparities of parental incarceration, few in criminology-related disciplines (e.g., criminal justice, administration of justice, sociology) have examined the perceptions and experiences of formerly incarcerated mothers and fathers through critical theoretical frameworks such as critical race theory and/or intersectionality, for example (see Garcia-Hallett, 2019; Williams et

al., 2019; Williams et al., 2021). Actually, findings in criminological studies on parental incarceration rarely problematize the administration of justice and its effects on parenting ideologies, parent-child contact during incarceration, and reunification experiences after incarceration. Moreover, intersecting identities of race and gender are rarely examined across both genders simultaneously in qualitative criminological scholarship on parental incarceration. Therefore, the following research questions guide the following study:

1. What are formerly incarcerated mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their identities as parents?

2. What are formerly incarcerated mothers' and fathers' experiences during incarceration?

3. What are formerly incarcerated mothers' and fathers' experiences during the reentry process?

<u>Significance of the Study</u>

The significance of this study is three-fold. First, a study of this kind will provide correctional administrators, community supervision officers (i.e., probation and parole agencies), social services, and policymakers with a more complex and in-depth way to view system-involved parents and their special needs and challenges. Much of the current research to-date attempts to measure the strength and extent of correlation between parental incarceration and a variety of outcomes (i.e., education, health, and behavior) on children; however, these studies are based on quantitative methodologies that prefer large sample sizes. While such studies have greater generalizability than smaller sample sizes, they often lack nuance of the interplay of social problems and can have the unintended effect of portraying the population under study through a deficit lens. Research that relies

on large datasets minimizes the human element of the issue(s) under study, while surveys and close-ended questions limit the respondents' capacity to answer questions critically.

Secondly, the racialized and gendered nature of mass incarceration, especially the increasing rate of women and mothers among state and federal prisoners in recent decades warrants in-depth examination into this phenomenon. Furthermore, the persistent racial disparities among incarcerated men who are returning to their families and communities in larger numbers deserve the chance to share their experiences. Much of the extant literature lacks data that is grounded in lived experiences and intersectional in nature. This study does not attempt nor claim objectivity; instead, it is intentional about examining perceptions and lived experiences from the perspective of the participant. While generalizability is not a goal of this study, it is expected that participants' experiences will be similar to other formerly incarcerated parents throughout the continental United States. As a former correctional officer, with familial connections and social networks with currently incarcerated and formerly incarcerated parents, my position provides much-needed context for this study.

Third, to the researcher's knowledge, there are few studies to date within criminology that employ intersectionality and critical race theoretical frameworks in the area of parental incarceration. The current study seeks to answer Garcia-Hallet's (2016) call for more scholarly and practical attention to the maternal experiences of women returning from incarceration in their own words, while not imposing social constructions of motherhood. Similarly, this study aims to address a gap in the extant literature on prisoner reentry regarding the strains that fathers face upon return from incarceration. As Williams et al. (2019) state, "missing in reentry research is a thorough analysis regarding

strains that fathers face upon returning home after incarceration" (p. 446). However, this study will add to previous scholarly literature by providing a strictly qualitative analysis using critical theoretical frameworks minimally used in criminological research examining both gender categories (i.e., men and women) within this population (i.e., formerly incarcerated parents).

Assumptions of the Study

The author assumes that the intersections of race, gender, and parent status make navigating reentry more difficult for participants. When examining both genders across races, the author expects that system-involved parents of color will experience unique challenges dissimilar to their White counterparts. Across gender, it is assumed that formerly incarcerated mothers are more negatively impacted by incarceration and the reentry processes. Since women have become the fastest-growing segment of the United States' prison population in recent decades (The Sentencing Project, 2018), system-involved women are more likely to be the primary caregivers of their minor children prior to arrest (Arditti, 2012; Garcia-Hallett, 2016; Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014), it is assumed that female participants in this study will express that their gender and maternal status posed more challenges to incarceration and reentry experiences.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is the absence of perspectives from the participants' children. Children are the invisible victims of mass incarceration (Muhammad, 2011), and therefore, might be considered "innocent bystanders of their parent's decisions" (Garcia-Hallet, 2017, p.1). However, few studies, if any, provide a critical, qualitative analysis that explores the impact of maternal and paternal incarceration on the parents

themselves. Furthermore, some studies posit that formerly incarcerated mothers and fathers of color endure unique strains and barriers that complicate their navigation of reentry (Garcia-Hallett, 2019; Williams et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2021; Welch et al., 2019; Dill et al., 2016; Gurusami, 2019; Mitchell & Davis, 2019). The author of this study will contribute a thorough analysis of the similarities and differences in perceptions and lived experiences across race and gender.

<u>Organization of the Study</u>

The study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the correctional population demographics in the United States, problem statement and research questions, and study significance. Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical framework and analytical literature review. Chapter 3 consists of the study design and procedures. Chapter 4 includes study results. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of major themes from the results, policy implications, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

To explore the nuance of the lives of marginalized men and women returning from incarceration, intersectionality and critical race theory will be the theoretical frameworks used to situate participants' experiences within the broader scope of structural oppression. This study relies solely on participants' narratives due to its preference by critical race theorists. Critical race theory rejects the claim of objective truth, at least in the social sciences, and believes objectivity is socially constructed to privilege the dominant group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Garica (2016) argues that criminological research should qualitatively analyze the impact of incarceration on returning mothers by using their narratives. While a growing body of research examines challenges former women offenders face (Richie, 2001; Cobbina, 2010; Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Barrick et al., 2014), intersectional identities have yet to be adequately explored among this population. Furthermore, some research shows that mothers returning from incarceration must negotiate the challenges of motherhood and reentry under supervision by formal state agencies (e.g., parole, and child protective services) (Gurusami, 2018; Opsal 2009, 2011, 2015). Qualitative research allows the researcher to accumulate data that otherwise might be overlooked in less-interactive data collection methods (Creswell, 2016).

While prisoner reentry has become an increasingly prevalent topic of concern in criminology and criminal justice, few studies focus on the implications of post-incarceration reintegration for family life and relationships (Crandall-Williams & McEvoy, 2017). Further, the lack of holistic and comprehensive reentry planning may

potentially contribute to higher risks of recidivism, especially when the service needs of reentering parents are not addressed (Muentner & Charles, 2020; Eddy et al., 2010). Parental status among system-involved populations is especially important since over half of incarcerated men and women have dependent children (Maruschak et al., 2021). Despite women being the fastest-growing segment of the prison population, men remain mostly represented in the United States' jail and prison population. Like other prisoners, incarcerated fathers with children are eventually released and plan to resume their parenting roles (Arditti, 2012). However, the challenges fathers encounter during reentry remain an understudied area (Dill et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2019). Therefore, to capture an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of fathers navigating reentry, qualitative modalities of data collection with this population would serve as the most appropriate methodology to accomplish study goals.

Specifically, I plan to study how men's identities as fathers impact their reintegration into society after a period of incarceration. To examine this, semi-structured interview questions will focus broadly on conceptions of fatherhood, fatherhood experiences during incarceration, and reintegration experiences, especially relationships with children and caregivers. In addition, inquiry into traditional aspects of prisoner reentry (e.g., employment, housing, family support, etc.) will be explored to examine how formerly incarcerated men navigate both fatherhood and community reintegration, simultaneously. It is my aim to uncover information that could assist other formerly incarcerated fathers seeking to reunite with their children and successfully transition back into society.

Theoretical Framework

The current study relies upon two theoretical perspectives in which to frame and ground the analysis: intersectionality and critical race theory (CRT). Both theoretical frameworks underscore the importance of considering how intersecting social locations shape individuals lived experiences across various settings. While scholars argue that intersectionality is a necessary component of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), both theoretical frameworks are separate, stand-alone, empirically grounded perspectives that have been applied in criminological research even if not explicitly referenced (see Potter, 2008; Miller, 2008; Jones, 2010). To date, however, limited studies incorporate both to guide and contextualize qualitative-oriented data for the topic under focus. Therefore, this chapter begins with coverage of intersectionality and CRT and their appropriateness for the current study, followed by an analytical review of scholarly literature through which the following chapters are inspired by, build upon, and provide suggestions for future research.

Intersectionality as a concept was popularized and credited to Black feminist legal scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw; however, the etiology of many core tenets precedes her seminal work (Potter, 2013, 2015). Some scholars contend that intersectionality, while not always formally labeled as such, can be traced back to Black feminists and women of color organizing as early as the nineteenth century (Potter, 2015; Davis, 1983; Collins, 2000). The idea of interlocking oppressions is not relatively new; previous literature explores the multiplicative identities of Black women and their societal impact. For instance, Beal ([1970] 1995) uses the term *double jeopardy* to describe the disadvantaged status of Black women due to their race and gender status. The term denotes the multiple

sites of oppression Black women and other women of color navigate often at once. King (1988) expounds on this idea of interlocking oppressions by coining and emphasizing the concept of *multiple jeopardy* regarding Black women. She articulates that Black women, especially in the United States, undergo several forms of oppression and subjugation that negatively impact their lives simultaneously (see also Collins, 2000; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Indeed, the basic premise of intersectionality is that one's lived experiences are shaped not by a single, or multiple identities, but in fact, through the interwoven or intersecting nature of various spheres of oppression such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. For example, a Black woman navigating the labor market can be placed at a further disadvantage due to her race and gender, therefore, resulting in experiences of racial and gender discrimination simultaneously.

Intersectionality underscores the importance of viewing identities and their positions within the grander social hierarchy (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). A critique of the recent popularity of intersectionality in academia is that its common usage contributes to widespread misunderstanding of the term. Potter (2015) posits that intersectionality can exist as both a *perspective* and *theory* (p. 76). The commonality between intersectionality as a perspective and theory is the assertion that individuals have multiple intersecting identities that are connected to and influenced by the existing social structure (Potter, 2015). Since interrogating and understanding the role of identities is central to the practice of intersectionality (Potter, 2013, 2015), it is imperative to foreground the current study in this theoretical framework.

To illustrate the importance of utilizing intersectionality theory for this study, we must highlight its intent and purpose as formally conceptualized through the scholarship

of Black feminist legal scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw. In a legal context, Crenshaw (1989) coined intersectionality to problematize viewing the interlocking oppressions of race and sex as mutually exclusive, especially as it relates to the complexity of Black women's lived experiences. Crenshaw highlights several U.S. court cases where judges refuted that legal claims could be based on race and sex discrimination simultaneously, thereby, arguing that Black women could not show evidence of discrimination based on their combined race and gender status. Relatedly, Crenshaw (1991) expounds on intersectionality as an analytical framework to show the various ways that race and gender intersect to shape experiences of violence against women of color. As she argues, race, gender, sexuality, and class, among other social categories compound and impact the social realities of individuals, especially among minoritized groups.

The extant literature that applies an intersectional framework has largely focused on the multiplicative identities and experiences of women of color (e.g., Richie, 1996, 2012; McCorkel, 2013; Parker & Hefner, 2013), however, its tenets and propositions are not gender specific (Potter, 2015). Identities are a central component of intersectionality and can be explored across the gender spectrum. Since the current study provides a comparative analysis of post-incarceration experiences of parents across gender, intersectionality is an appropriate theoretical framework to be applied toward both populations under focus. While intersectionality theory recognizes the significance and social meaning of race, a deeper racial analysis rooted in history and culture is essential to contextualize the data for the current study. To accomplish this, critical race theory will be used in conjunction with an intersectionality theoretical framework to provide a

thorough analysis of the transition process from incarceration to the community for formerly incarcerated parents across races and gender.

Recognized as a conflict theory in criminology, critical race theory (CRT) interrogates race, racism, and power relations (Gabbidon, 2015). As a theory that emerged from critical legal studies and radical feminism in the 1970s, CRT was developed to acknowledge the implications of race and racism for U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), but is applicable globally as well due to the borderless terrain and tentacles of racial hierarchy and white supremacy (Christian, 2019). The goals of CRT are twofold: determining how the law is used for the maintenance of white supremacy, while on the other hand, providing a counter to law and criminal legal system practices implemented to oppress racialized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Several tenets are included within CRT which include the following: (1) racism is commonplace in the United States, (2) whites benefit in various ways from racism and therefore have little incentive to ameliorate it, a concept referred to as "interest convergence," (3) the social construction of race and racial classifications, and (4) the belief that people of color have a unique voice in this society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gabbidon, 2015). In the discipline of criminology, scholars have made similar arguments as the final tenet of CRT, positing that African Americans have divergent histories and lived experiences as a racialized group that may account for their involvement in crime (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011). The current study, however, does not attempt to explain the reasons for participants' involvement in crime; instead, the author utilizes critical theoretical frameworks coupled with qualitative inquiry to capture the divergent reentry experiences of parents across race and gender. The researcher assumes that the lived experiences of

formerly incarcerated parents are connected to oppressive underpinnings of the criminal legal system that undermine family life for minoritized groups.

Few studies on prisoner reentry in the fields of criminology, criminal justice, and administration of justice formally incorporate CRT in their analyses. Ortiz and Jackey (2019) underscore the intentionality of the prisoner reentry industry (PRI) in ensuring the failure of returning citizens in their transition from incarceration to the community. Racial logics of the past are intertwined with contemporary carceral logics that appear insidious but are especially damaging for racialized groups. The authors conclude that the PRI, an expansive apparatus of criminal justice agencies, non-profits, and reentry service providers (Thompkins, 2010), traps its clients with obligations and endless debt that almost denies any opportunity for reintegration (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019). Furthermore, Ortiz and Jackey (2019) demand a serious call to action for reentry scholars to "enter the trenches and reveal the human suffering caused by the PRI (p. 499)."

Due to the current study's specific focus on formerly incarcerated parents, it is both inspired by and builds upon previous empirical research that utilizes CRT in its theoretical framework and analyses of returning citizens of color. In their qualitative study of Black women's matriculation through the reentry process, Williams et al. (2021) found that the maternal distress (Arditti & Few, 2008) and trauma that system-involved Black mothers endure has a connection to the surveillance, encroachment, and violence various state systems have historically and contemporarily perpetrate against their bodies and children. Their study recognizes the racialized nuance of Black women's experiences and aims to amplify the voices of marginalized subjects of the carceral state. While CRT and intersectionality may not be explicitly acknowledged in their studies, additional

criminological studies on aspects of reentry explore the unique experiences of people of color, including parents, through critical analysis in alignment with both theoretical frameworks (e.g., Garcia-Hallett, 2019; Williams et al., 2019; Gurusami, 2019).

This study seeks to explore how parental identities are shaped or transformed by incarceration, and the experiences and consequences of this role during the reentry process across race and gender. Both theoretical frameworks allow the researcher to underscore the importance of identities and their relation to lived experiences of two marginalized populations: the formerly incarcerated and racialized groups. To date, limited criminological research has formally incorporated CRT and intersectionality together to provide an understanding of formerly incarcerated parents' navigation of reentry and family life, qualitatively. Therefore, the current study adds to the body of knowledge in a significant way.

In the following chapters, intersectionality and CRT will serve as analytic tools through which to contextualize participants' narratives. Every participant in the study possesses multiple interwoven identities that shape their navigation of the criminal legal system and reentry. Intersectionality will be used as a theoretical framework to help explain how race, gender, and ex-offender status simultaneously shape pathways to family life for formerly incarcerated parents. Through narratives, the author will examine the divergent pathways to reentry for individuals marginalized by their social locations. Most participants in the study are from racially minoritized groups (i.e., Black and Hispanic) and had some contact with legal institutions. In alignment with CRT, this framework provides a unique ability to contextualize participants' experiences matriculating the carceral terrains of race (Williams, 2019) and the impact of

incarceration on underserved families. The application of intersectionality and CRT together strengthens the current study's purpose of providing findings, analyses, and policy implications to assist in the development and implementation of gender and culturally responsive reentry programming. Since many men and women returning from incarceration are parents (Arditti, 2012; Wildeman & Wakefield, 2014; McKay et al., 2019), there is a critical need to address and understand their lived experiences to help prevent the decimation of fragile families and intergenerational cycle of incarceration.

The current study takes the stance that respondents' experiences are perhaps intentional when considering the criminal legal system's fixation on minoritized groups, especially Black bodies (Williams & Battle, 2017). Across time and space, the United States created peculiar institutions (e.g., slavery, convict leasing, Jim Crow, ghettos, prison) that served to force and maintain Blacks in a racial caste system (Alexander, 2010; Wacquant, 2001). Due to the criminal legal system's culpability in promoting White supremacy through the subordination of people of color, it should be viewed as an "instrument for preserving the status quo" (Bell, 1995, p. 302). Therefore, the criminal legal apparatus and its connection to White supremacy cannot be separated nor ignored in any study that examines race, gender, and criminal justice.

<u>Divergent Motherhood</u>

In the United States, historical and contemporary conceptions and experiences of motherhood are not universal (Roberts, 1993a; Hill Collins, 2000; Bermudez et al., 2014). For minoritized women, the status of a mother is shaped by interlocking oppressions such as race, gender, socioeconomic class, and their relation to the existing social structure (Roberts, 1993a). Hegemonic ideals of motherhood in the United States

are grounded in the assumption that women must provide insurmountable care, financial resources, and emotional support to their offspring to ensure their well-being (Roberts, 1993a; Hill Collins, 1994; Hays, 1998). However, research shows that the "intensive mothering" standards ascribed to parenting women may not actualize similarly across different race and class backgrounds. Scholars posit that intensive mothering ideals privilege the parenting experiences and maternal labor of white, heterosexual, middle to upper-class women (Hays, 1998; Hill Collins, 1994; Arendell, 2000).

Mothers without the privilege and institutional protections to meet the parenting standards of mainstream society, deploy maternal ideologies and practices that diverge from prevailing hegemonic standards that fit their social realities (Hays, 1998; Baker & Carson, 1996; Verduzco-Baker, 2017; Bermudez et al., 2014). To illustrate the divergent maternal labor that economically disadvantaged women engage in, Verduzco-Baker (2017) conducted semi-structured interviews with more than 30 African American and white women to underscore the parenting logic and practices they practice. While not explicitly stated, her findings are consistent with an intersectionality framework. The maternal practices that low-income women deploy are grounded in the intensive mother ideology; however, their race, gender, and class status dictate child-rearing ideologies and goals. Therefore, study participants were attentive to their children's needs and stressed the importance of education to attain upward mobility, for example, but engaged in protective parenting to shield their offspring from the perils of the streets. Bermudez et al. (2014) found similar motherhood experiences among women of Mexican origin. Through a qualitative, intersectional, feminist-standpoint framework, the researchers underscore the identity salience of these women as good mothers who rely on their extended families

and Hispanic culture to provide an enriching upbringing for their children amidst marginalization and oppression.

Interestingly, the intensive mothering ideology that women are pressured to embody in Western culture can have damaging effects with health implications. As Rizzo et al. (2013) found, aspects of intensive mothering can have detrimental effects on maternal health. In this study, the authors operationalized the endorsement of intensive parenting beliefs by utilizing the Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire (IPAQ). Through an online survey of 181 mothers, study findings revealed that it is not parenting itself, but rather the way parenting is done that leads to negative maternal mental health outcomes. Strong adherence to essentialist beliefs that women are the most capable parents, as well as feelings that parenting is challenging contributed to stress, depression, and decreases in life satisfaction for study participants. The reported findings interrogate the intensive mothering ideology and its impact on women's health and well-being; however, additional research analyzes the parenting strategies of women through intersectionality and critical race theory frameworks.

Roberts (1993a) argues that experiences of motherhood differ based on race; therefore, Black and other minoritized women have maternal fears, concerns, and challenges that white women may not share. Moreover, race, gender, and class may interface to shape maternal parenting strategies among women. Some studies highlight the protective parenting or carework that mothers from minoritized backgrounds engage in to shield their children from harm and violence. Children of color, especially Black youth in the United States, must navigate a society where their race, gender, and age make them more susceptible to suspicion and victimization. Research conducted by Goff

et al. (2014) examined whether Black boys and their peers were granted the same protections of childhood as their peers. Through mixed laboratory and field methods, the researchers found that in comparison to same-age white peers, Black boys are viewed as less innocent, older, and aggressive like animals (i.e., apes), resulting in greater contact and victimization by police. Studies show similar adultification processes for Black girls, especially in the context of schools and the juvenile justice system (see Epstein et al., 2017; Wun, 2016a; Wun, 2016b; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020). As a result, parents of youth of color have the additional burden of protecting their children from real and perceived harms of interpersonal and state violence.

      <u>Protective Carework</u>. The practice of protective carework among marginalized mothers and their children is done out of necessity and survival tactics. Scholars have conceptualized *protective carework* as assessing potential threats to children's wellbeing, closely monitoring their behaviors and surroundings including social networks, and determining the level of autonomy they deserve (Elliott & Aseltine, 2013; Nelson, 2010). While all parents show concern for their children, research shows that the type of protective carework strategies employed is shaped by their social locations, including race, class, and gender (Collins, 1994, 2000; Elliott & Aseltine, 2013; Gurusami, 2019). In their qualitative study of 40 Latina, White, and Black mothers, Elliott and Aseltine (2013) explore how protective carework strategies are influenced by intersecting social locations, specifically race, class, gender, and age. Through interviews with a diverse group of mothers with teenagers (ages 13-19) living in various types of community contexts, the researchers found that children's safety was salient issues for participants. The protective carework strategies the mothers in this study used as a buffer from

external threats within their respective neighborhoods were largely shaped by larger systems of inequality. The interpretation of such threats differed based on class, race, and gender. For instance, working and middle-class Black and Latina mothers expressed concern for the criminalization of their boys in contrast to White mothers, while for girls, mothers worried most about sexual vulnerability.

The parenting strategies of women considered by hegemonic standards to be unfit for motherhood (i.e., unwed mothers, teenage mothers, justice-system involved, and substance-abusing women, etc.) already face multiple forms of oppression; therefore, their maternal labor is largely influenced by the existing social structure they must navigate (Hays, 1998; Gurusami, 2019; Baker & Carson, 1999; Jensen & Dudeck-Biondo, 2005). For example, single, low-income mothers employ parenting strategies to buffer the effects of raising children with limited or absent financial and social support. As Elliott et al. (2018) found in their qualitative study of more than 30 Black, low-income, single mothers, these women often enlist help from older sons, known as "brothermothering," as well as other male authority figures to help raise and protect younger children from neighborhood victimization, criminalization, and/or sexual vulnerability. This is one of many forms of protective carework utilized by women of color charged with parenting their children in economically disadvantaged, underserved communities. Moreover, marginalized communities of color are disproportionately subjected to surveillance and punishment by law enforcement and social services (i.e., child welfare) (Gurusami, 2019) whereby protective carework may be necessary for parents and their children alike. Elliott and Reid (2019) illustrated this phenomenon in their study of 46 low-income Black mothers of adolescents in urban neighborhoods. They

posit that the effects of mass incarceration have far-reaching consequences that extend to families in disadvantaged communities. Mothers in this study employed protective strategies like cautionary tales, sheltering, and enacting compliance that aimed to keep children out of the reach of perceived racist institutions (i.e., criminal legal system) while sometimes relying on carceral logic to instill fear. Other studies show similar parenting strategies used that rely on the juvenile court to instill compliance and conformity among their children (see Richardson et al., 2014; Rios, 2011).

    <u>Fear of Victimization.</u> Most if not all parents have fears and concerns regarding their children; however, mothers of youth of color have the burden of raising children in a racist society unlike their White counterparts (Roberts, 1993a). One mainstream institution that permeates the lives of Black and Hispanic families and communities disproportionately is the criminal legal system (Alexander, 2010; Western & Wildeman, 2009; Ulmer et al., 2016; Cox, 2012; Becerra et al., 2017; Isom Scott, 2020). Due to the reality of under and over-policing in these communities, protection by law enforcement is not always guaranteed; therefore, parents devise various strategies to ensure the protection of their children from crime, violence, and other perils of the streets (Bermudez et al., 2014; Elliott & Reid, 2019). Among Black children, one such parenting strategy involves giving "the talk", a socialization practice meant to prepare them for encounters with the police (Gonzalez, 2019, 2020). Studies show that similar conversations are had in White and Hispanic households; however, distrust of police is generally higher among African Americans (Cintron et al., 2019).

    The parenting strategies employed by mothers of color can vary depending on the gender of their children. For instance, in her intersectional analysis of the police talk

among 30 Black mothers across a diverse social class background, Gonzalez (2019)

found that the preoccupation of concern over their boys' racial and gender vulnerability to

police violence often marginalizes the experiences of girls. While research substantiates

that Black women and girls too are victims of state violence perpetrated by police

(Willingham, 2018; Ritchie, 2017; Gonzalez, 2020; Washington Post, 2021), their

experiences are often marginalized. Among girls of color, parents' concerns are usually

centered around their sexual vulnerability (Testa et al., 2011; Gonzalez, 2020). For boys,

controlling images of them as "thugs" shapes the protective parenting strategies

employed. Media depictions of Black males as suspicious, hyper-aggressive, and

deserving of punishment, even in cases where they are unarmed victims, contribute to the

racist misnomer of the "criminal black man" (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016; Russell, 1998).

To counter these narratives and their influence on boys of color by school officials, law

enforcement, and the public, parents devise racial and gendered strategies to help their

sons navigate racism and criminalization across multiple settings (Dow, 2016; Elliott &

Aseltine, 2012; Elliott et al., 2018; Richardson, 2013).

<u>Criminalized Women of Color</u>

Women from marginalized backgrounds must also navigate controlling images of

themselves and structural impediments that complicate their experiences as mothers

(Windsor et al., 2011; Elliott & Reid, 2019). The disadvantaged positions of women of

color in the racial and gender hierarchy are institutionalized across space and create

additional challenges not experienced to the same extent by their white counterparts. One

such institution that has increasingly and disproportionately impacted the lives of women

is the criminal legal system (Arditti, 2012; Garcia, 2016; Allen et al., 2010). As the

fastest-growing segment of the United States' correctional population, an overwhelming portion of incarcerated women are mothers (Kajstura, 2019). For incarcerated women, the correctional setting can pose challenges for their gender-specific needs, including inadequate medical care and separation from their children, among others (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Evans, 2007; Haney, 2013). Along with feminine care and hygiene, women in correctional settings can be pregnant at the time of incarceration or have dependent children on the outside that were under their care and custody prior to arrest (Sufrin, 2017; Arditti, 2012). As the rate of incarceration for women increases, jails and prisons are having to address the unique needs and challenges of this population (Mitchell et al., 2018). Many interconnected identities that criminalized mothers possess shape their experiences during confinement, including but not limited to race, gender, and parent status. Studies show that for incarcerated women with children, being a mother is central to their identity and confinement experiences (Celinska & Siegel, 2010; Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Aiello & McQueeney, 2016). However, maternal incarceration experiences vary for women navigating multiple interlocking oppressions.

   __Maternal Outcasts__. Consistent with the intensive mothering ideology, mothers impacted by the criminal legal system make immense sacrifices to provide for their children, however, their criminal record reduces them to maternal outcasts (Allen et al., 2010; Garcia, 2016; Aiello & McQueeney, 2016). Individuals labeled as felons experience a "spoiled identity" (Goffman, 1963) in which their criminal record becomes a badge of dishonor that results in perpetual stigma. For incarcerated women, the stigma associated with having a criminal record is intensified, especially among mothers (Gunn et al., 2016). Incarcerated mothers are among the most marginalized women in society

(Aiello & McQueeney, 2016), and their "master status" (Becker, 1963) as criminal places them in the category of unfit or bad mothers. An assortment of studies shows that women involved in the criminal legal system, including those with substance abuse problems, are considered unfit mothers due to their failure to fulfill hegemonic standards of motherhood (Baker & Carson, 1999; Couvrette et al., 2016; Gunn et al., 2016; Granja et al., 2015). Similarly, these mothers are rendered "throwaway moms" and the stigma they experience because of negative contact with state agencies (i.e., criminal legal system, child welfare, etc.) can lead to feelings of guilt, remorse, and shame towards themselves and their children (Allen et al., 2010). The societal and institutional pressures to conform to the "good mother" or intensive mothering ideology can have an unintended effect of placing mothers at risk of guilt and shame (Sutherland, 2010).

Many women in the criminal legal system experienced multiple avenues of oppression before arrest and incarceration. Contrary to their male counterparts, a significant risk factor for women's involvement in crime is physical and sexual abuse victimization throughout the life course (Daly, 1992; Holtfreter & Morash, 2003; Bloom et al., 2003; Arditti & Few, 2006; Salisbury & Voorhis, 2009). In addition, women who encounter the criminal legal system overwhelmingly experienced a triple threat of disadvantages (Arditti & Few, 2006) in their lives including drug dependency, mental health impairments, and intimate partner violence. For mothers with incarceration histories, these issues are exacerbated due to the undue pressures and expectations these women must navigate while parenting. Despite their sacrifices and efforts to be good mothers, the spoiled identity and associated stigma criminalized mothers face for having a criminal record is unforgiving (Gunn et al., 2016; Aiello & McQueeney, 2016).

Maternal Incarceration. Incarceration can be especially egregious for women with dependent children for several reasons. First, mothers are more likely than fathers to be the primary caretaker of their children before incarceration (Phillips & O'Brien, 2012). Among state prisoners in 2016, approximately 58% of incarcerated women compared to roughly 46% of men were parents to minor children (Maruschak et al., 2021). Therefore, the loss of a mother to incarceration has a greater likelihood of family disruption for the children left behind (Turney & Wildeman, 2014, 2018). In anticipation of separation from their children, many mothers employ specific coping strategies to mitigate the emotional pain and continue this process during the time of incarceration (Celinska & Siegel, 2010). During incarceration, some mothers try to show their maternal worth by maintaining contact with their children through letters, phone calls, and/or visitation (Stringer, 2020). This adaptive strategy allows these women to embrace the good mother ideology while lessening the burden of separation (Celinska & Siegel, 2010; Easterling et al., 2018). However, the ability to maintain a mother-child bond during imprisonment can be contingent upon the relationship with the caregiver (Arditti, 2012; Stringer, 2020). Children of incarcerated mothers are more likely to remain in the custody of the maternal grandmother, nonmaternal caregivers, or end up in the child welfare system (Poehlmann et al., 2008) For poor, Black mothers, their children disproportionately land in foster care and other out-of-home placements (Enos, 1998; Roberts, 2012; Honore-Collins, 2005).

Incarcerated mothers can also internalize blame for their actions and perceived maternal neglect which can have negative effects. For example, mothers can become detached from, or disassociate themselves from their maternal identity (Arditti, 2012; Easterling et al., 2018). During the involuntary separation from their children and family

life, some incarcerated mothers undergo a prisonization process whereby they identify

closely with prison life while distancing themselves from familial and social networks on

the outside (Golden, 2005; Barnes & Stringer, 2014; Easterling et al., 2018). On the

contrary, some mothers make a conscious effort to refrain from contact with their

children out of belief that the period of incarceration will be easier and go by swiftly

(Easterling et al., 2018). Since fewer women are incarcerated relative to their male

counterparts, prisons, where they are housed, are often located at a greater distance from

home. Furthermore, this population is overwhelmingly poor, and comes from

economically disadvantaged families and communities; therefore, distance and financial

hardship create additional barriers to the maintenance of positive bonds (Poehlmann et

al., 2008; Arditti, 2012).

      Intersectionality and System-Involved Mothers. Incarceration experiences for

women can be more difficult due to their gendered needs and importance in families left

behind. However, the impact and extent of the criminal legal system is not experienced

equally among women. At year-end of 2019, the imprisonment rate for Black and

Hispanic women was approximately 1.7 and 1.3 times the rate for white women,

respectively (Carson, 2020). Despite steady decreases in imprisonment nationally

(Carson, 2020), the impact of mass incarceration on Black women is pronounced relative

to other racial groups (Cox, 2012). Any critical analysis of the effects of mass

imprisonment on women is incomplete without incorporating intersectionality,

specifically, the myriad ways that overlapping and interlocking oppressions affect groups

differently (Christian & Thomas, 2009). For Black women, poverty, limited social

support, and punitive drug enforcement have been among the driving forces leading to

their unparalleled rates of incarceration in the United States (Willingham, 2011; Cox, 2012; Ruiz & Copak, 2014). The relative invisibility and marginalization of Black women across the socio-political and race and gender spectrum render this group powerless and therefore vulnerable to stringent restrictions associated with the War on Drugs including welfare, housing, and other government assistance (Jordan-Zachery, 2008; Ruiz & Copak, 2014).

The spillover effects of mass incarceration in African American communities have impacted Black women negatively in various ways (Tonry, 2010; Western & Wildeman, 2009; Clear, 2007). Due to their disproportionate proximity to incarcerated relatives, some research suggests that this may increase the likelihood of developing major health abnormalities that are risk factors for cardiovascular disease including hypertension, diabetes, and obesity (Lee & Wildeman, 2013). Similarly, studies have also found that pronounced familial incarceration in these communities is associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms and psychological distress for Black women (Patterson et al., 2020). When accounting for race, gender, and ecological factors, even residing in neighborhoods with high rates of mass incarceration was found to correlate with preterm birth risk for Black women (Sealy-Jefferson et al., 2020). The multiple marginalization of Black women also factors into their incarceration experiences, especially among those who hold the status of mother.

Mass incarceration and its deleterious impact on African American families and communities can be readily seen in the increasing visibility of incarcerated mothers. The likelihood of experiencing parental incarceration in the United States is associated with race (Ruiz & Copak, 2014; Foster & Hagan, 2009). Black children encounter the greatest

risk of familial instability after the incarceration of a mother, a startling reality when accounting for the fact that they are greater than seven times likely than their white peers to have a parent in prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). The disproportionate incarceration of African American women with children also places a heavy toll on maternal and non-maternal relatives who become caregivers of their children (Ruiz & Copak, 2014). Due to economic disadvantage and limited social support, mass incarceration in communities of color, especially African American, are like "death by a thousand cuts" (Clear, 2007).

A critical intersectional analysis regarding the impact of incarceration on families and communities is incomplete without incorporating non-minoritized groups (i.e., White/Caucasian) as well. While criminological research has devoted extensive empirical attention to the criminal legal system and communities of color (see Clear, 2007; Scott, 2020; Wodahl & Freng, 2017; Solis et al., 2009), whites also interface with the carceral state albeit differently. In the context of maternal incarceration, research has overwhelmingly focused on the experiences of mothers in general, or poor and disenfranchised Black mothers with scarce attention devoted to their White counterparts (Easterling & Feldmeyer, 2017). Socioeconomic class and geography are among a few factors that may impact the probability that an individual is arrested, and their subsequent experiences matriculating through the criminal legal system (Clear, 2007; Rucks-Ahidiana et al., 2020). For White mothers, they often enter prison from different community and environmental contexts than their Black and Hispanic counterparts (Easterling & Feldmeyer, 2017). Unlike incarcerated Black and Hispanic mothers who are more likely to have experienced various types of concentrated disadvantages common in urban communities (Peterson & Krivo, 2005; Wilson, 2009), White mothers come

from smaller rural and suburban towns that shape their maternal incarceration experiences differently (Easterling & Feldmeyer, 2017; Beichner & Rabe-Hemp, 2014).

Maternal Reentry. The transition from incarceration to the community is also a gendered phenomenon that presents unique experiences for women (Richie, 2001; Cobbina, 2010). Upon reentry, formerly incarcerated women face similar collateral consequences as their male counterparts, however, they also face additional challenges, concerns, and forms of oppression unlike men (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; O'Brien, 2001; Evans, 2007; Arditti & Few, 2008; Scroggins & Malley, 2010). Like their gendered pathways into criminality and incarceration, women also return to the community with unaddressed trauma, mental health abnormalities, and substance abuse problems (Cobbina, 2010; Evans, 2007). In addition, many returning women are also mothers who were primary caregivers of their children before imprisonment and plan to resume their parenting roles (Arditti, 2012; Opsal, 2009; Brown & Bloom, 2009). Unlike their male counterparts, formerly incarcerated women must navigate stigma associated with having a criminal record, in combination with sexism, patriarchy, and racism (Gunn et al., 2016; Garcia-Hallett, 2019). Women who bear the label felon have not only violated the criminal law but the norms and expectations of femininity (Beckerman, 1991; Arditti, 2012, Easterling et al., 2018).

Reentry for mothers can present more complexities to the transition process, especially when considering that women are more likely to be incarcerated for drug and property offenses (Katsjura, 2019), therefore, generally serve lesser time in jail or prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). As a result, women who had minor children at the time of their arrest will usually be released sooner than their male counterparts (Arditti, 2012),

allowing for the opportunity to reunite and resume their parenting role if desired. Some studies have shown that the mother-child relationship post-release is contingent upon several factors, including (1) nature of relationship before and during incarceration (Enos, 2001; Easterling et al., 2018); (2) frequency of contact during imprisonment (Arditti & Few, 2006; Siegel, 2011); and (3) relationship with the child's caregiver (Poehlmann, 2008). Incarcerated mothers are more likely to be the primary or sole caretaker of their dependent children before arrest (Arditti, 2012; Mancini et al., 2016); therefore, separation from the family is potentially more damaging to the relationship. Maintaining a positive bond with their children during incarceration is best accomplished through frequent contact. However, the correctional environment provides few opportunities for physical and emotional bonding, especially for mothers (Kennedy et al., 2020). Additionally, distance, financial insecurity, and transportation barriers experienced by the caregiver are among the reasons why incarcerated mothers are less likely than fathers to receive in-prison visits (Enos, 2001; Arditti, 2012; Christian, 2005; Poehlmann et al., 2008).

Caregiver relationships with the mother can dictate the frequency of visitation (Poelhmann, 2008; Arditti, 2012). Feelings of anger and disapproval may result because of the mother's incarceration, therefore, affecting the willingness of the caregiver to make efforts to bring the child(ren) for visitation. Furthermore, the physical space and security features of the carceral environment can induce "secondary prisonization," a form of punitive socialization that bring incarcerated individuals' loved ones under the surveillance and control of the prison (Comfort, 2008). To protect children of incarcerated parents from exposure to the carceral environment, caregivers may choose to

keep them away from any physical contact with such institutions. Some research posits that race/ethnicity alongside other contextual factors like community disadvantage, spatial location, and sentence length are among predictors of prison visitation (e.g., Cochran et al., 2017; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005; Rubenstein et al., 2019). For incarcerated mothers anticipating resuming their maternal responsibilities post-release, in-prison visitation matters (Smith et al., 2021). Therefore, incarceration experiences can be influential on reentry, especially among parenting women seeking family reunification.

<u>Divergent Fatherhood</u>

Like motherhood in Western culture, the social construction of fatherhood is rooted in hegemonic ideals and standards that privilege White, middle to upper-middle class, and heterosexual men. These expectations include being the primary financial provider or "breadwinner" and protector of the family. Regarding the former, structural impediments like poverty, discrimination in the labor market, and mass incarceration contribute to the economic precarity experienced by fathers among the lower strata of the racial and gender hierarchy. For low-income fathers, teenage fathers, and fathers with histories of incarceration, among others, social, economic, and legal barriers present obstacles to fulfilling traditional conceptions of masculinity and their role in the family. Like their maternal counterparts, fathers at the margins of society deploy their own ideologies and parenting strategies that are influenced by their social positions (e.g., race and class). Fathers of color from economically disenfranchised communities, in combination with involvement in the criminal legal system, are among the most marginalized.

Masculinity and Marginalized Fathers. Conceptions of fatherhood may be influenced in part by the type of masculinity men subscribe to. Hegemonic masculinity establishes that men should be the financial provider, authority figures, and protectors of the nuclear family. These standards privilege custodial, two-parent married, heterosexual couples with children as the norm. In the United States, the nuclear family structure has historically been associated with White, middle-class values. The standards of hegemonic masculinity are reinforced in male gender socialization practices through which boys and men learn definitions of "being a man", a process that encourages dominance over women. As an important component of manhood, paternal identities and expectations are strongly connected to hegemonic masculinity. However, men that are disadvantaged by their race, ethnicity, and class positions may pursue alternative methods to performing their manhood (Roy & Dyson, 2010). Structural factors such as poverty, bleak employment opportunities, low-educational attainment, and neighborhood disorder may limit the capabilities of satisfying hegemonic masculine expectations (e.g., being a good financial provider) for marginalized men (Roy & Dyson, 2010; Roy, 2004, 2006).

Low-income men of color embrace paternal identities and practices that are shaped in part by their immediate social environment. In neighborhoods characterized by rampant violence, drug selling and abuse, and few legitimate employment opportunities, adhering to street masculinities (Roy & Dyson, 2010) for survival and autonomy over one's life may take precedent over responsible fathering. For fathers navigating these spatial areas and conditions, their ability to provide and care for their family is extremely limited. The demands of patriarchal family structure and hegemonic masculinity may be so deeply internalized that low-income marginalized fathers turn to antisocial behaviors

like an intimate partner and interpersonal violence, or participation in the illicit economy (e.g., drug trade) in search of dominance and respect (Bourgois, 2003; Jones, 2018; Grundetjern et al., 2019). Men living on the margins may pursue alternative masculinities that allow them to compensate for the limitations of their spatial context.

Consistent with critical race theory's rejection of essentialism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), paternal ideologies and practices by marginalized fathers are not monolithic (Roy & Dyson, 2010). Many express conventional views about fatherhood contrary to dominant discourses about low-income fathers of color as deadbeats and absent (Randles, 2018; Battle, 2018). To underscore the divergent fathering experiences of fathers marginalized by race and class positions, several qualitative studies provide needed context to their reality. Threlfall et al. (2013) found that impoverished African American fathers adhere to the traditional roles of nurturer, protector, and teacher; however, burdens such as poverty and child support constrain their freedom to accomplish these goals. Moreover, regardless of resident or custody arrangement, low-income fathers in this study imparted knowledge to their children regarding neighborhood survival as a protective mechanism from street life. Like their maternal counterparts, shielding offspring from the dangers (e.g., gang activity, violence, drugs, etc.) of their immediate environment is a teaching strategy and fear not shared by White, middle-class parents (Letiecq & Koblinsky, 2004; Verduzco-Baker, 2017).

Marginalized fathers parenting practices may also be shaped in part by knowledge of their paternal role. Single-parent households are a common reality in American households yet pronounced in communities of color. For many marginalized fathers, the absence of a father in their own lives means that their parenting knowledge must come

from other sources. Robinson (2021) highlights the important role of trusted relatives and processes of trial and error for African American fathers navigating their paternal identity in the absence of a father figure. Participants in this study expressed a sincere commitment to being there and actualizing conventional expectations of fathers despite having confusion and limited knowledge about best practices. In economically disenfranchised communities where biological father involvement may be scarce, "social fathers", or non-biological fathers, may also serve an instrumental role in the lives of youth. For instance, Richardson (2009) qualitatively unpacks the underexplored role of supportive men in extended family networks and fictive kinship ties within the African American community. He argues that the traditional focus on biological fathers and their involvement in Black communities ignores the role that equally other male figures (e.g., uncles) have played in promoting positive human development among urban African American youth. Similarly, McDougal and George (2016) posit that social fathers carry on the informal African American tradition of paternal caregiving.

Street-Involved Fathers. The disappearance of legitimate work in the inner-city has dealt a significant blow to the life chances and human agency of minoritized groups, especially Black men (Wilson, 1997, 2009). Considering limited opportunities to provide for the family in material ways as hegemonic masculinity demands, men in ghettoized communities embrace alternative or multiple masculinities (Connell, 1995) that allows them to pursue manhood in a variety of ways. Men who pursue street masculinities (Roy & Dyson, 2010) are not always synonymous with involvement in crime as essentialist ideals of manhood in the street might suggest (see de la Tierra, 2016). However, restricted opportunities to provide for their children can draw marginalized fathers into

the illicit economy as an alternative means of support (Randles, 2018; Roy & Dyson, 2010; Grundetjern et al., 2019). To these fathers, well-intentioned parenting (i.e., providing materially) may be obscured by violation of the law.

<u>Criminalized Men of Color</u>

Men of color, especially those who are low-income and street-involved, encounter the criminal legal system disproportionately for several reasons. Two competing explanations for the arrest and incarceration of minority men are differential involvement and selective enforcement (Alexander, 2010; Tonry, 2011; Unnever et al., 2017; Mitchell & Caudy, 2017). On the one hand, violent crimes like homicide are committed at higher rates among men of color (Beck, 2021; Feld & Bauldry, 2018), however, their arrest and incarceration rates for non-violent offenses like drug possession are higher despite similar behavior by their white counterparts (Alexander, 2010). Several criminological studies substantiate that urban communities of color are policed more heavily, thereby resulting in a greater likelihood of arrest and subsequent imprisonment for minoritized groups (e.g., Clear, 2007). In large part due to the War on Drugs, Black and Hispanic men from urban areas raised state and federal prison populations tremendously over several decades. A large segment of the correctional population consists of fathers, with men of color representing more than half of the incarcerated male population at the state and federal levels at year-end of 2016 (Maruschak et al., 2021). The experiences and challenges encountered by incarcerated fathers differ in many aspects from incarcerated mothers (Arditti, 2012). Similarly, however, divergent experiences exist that are shaped by the intersections of race, class, and gender.

Divergent Pathways. The profile of incarcerated fathers differs from fathers in the general population (Arditti, 2012). They overwhelmingly consist of men of color who come from urban communities, have low educational attainment, possess limited legitimate and stable work experience, and have histories of drug and alcohol use (Ewert et al., 2014). Incarcerated men also tend to be younger and have previous contact with the criminal legal system (Nurse, 2002). Like women, men are disproportionately convicted and incarcerated for non-violent offenses, however, more violent offenders are represented among this population. On average, men serve longer prison sentences than women (Rodriguez et al., 2006; Nowacki, 2019); consequently, incarcerated fathers can expect to be separated from their children for a longer period. For Black and Hispanic men, separation from their families due to incarceration can create a ripple effect toward preexisting structural inequities (Arditti, 2012).

Prior to formal contact with the criminal legal system, men of color from disadvantaged backgrounds navigate various carceral terrains (Williams, 2019). Before reaching adulthood, many boys of color encounter punitive social control mechanisms through interactions with teachers, law enforcement, and probation officers to name a few (Rios, 2011). As a result, pathways to the adult criminal legal system begin much earlier for young minority males, often during adolescence. Life in ghettoized communities can make street life more appealing to marginalized young men in the absence of legitimate employment opportunities (Richardson & St. Vil, 2015). Their allegiance to the street code, an informal set of governing rules for inner-city marginalized youth, praises aggression and violence for respect by peers but also serves as a protective mechanism (Anderson, 1999; Stewart & Simons, 2010). For some marginalized young men of color,

street involvement can also serve as an expression of masculinity amid inhumane socioeconomic conditions (Payne, 2006).

The lives and behavior of young men growing up in inner-city neighborhoods are shaped profoundly by their milieu. Early exposure to punitive social control functions of the youth control complex (Rios, 2011) can have the unintended effect of breeding hypermasculinity in the form of dominance over others, mainly women (Rios, 2009). Dominance by marginalized young men can manifest in the form of high-risk sexual activity (Richardson & Robillard, 2013) and intimate partner violence. In place of constrained opportunities to perform masculinity in positive ways (i.e., legitimate employment), these men may assert dominance using antisocial means to fulfill their conceptions of manhood. Involvement in criminal activity may be a consequence of or expression of hypermasculinity. Upon contact with the criminal legal system, the pre-incarceration experiences of marginalized men, especially fathers, may shape their pathways to incarceration.

Paternal Incarceration. On average, dependent children with parents in state and federal prisons are at least ten years of age (Maruschak et al., 2021). Since men are sentenced to prison for longer periods, it is expected that fathers of minor children will miss a considerable portion of their lives. Incarcerated fathers are less likely than their maternal counterparts to be the primary caregiver of their dependent children before being arrested, convicted, and sentenced; however, most had some level of involvement (Uggen & McElrath, 2014). Perceptions of the father-child relationship before incarceration may differ based on the individual asked, but studies generally show that most were present and maintained contact during confinement and post-release (Charles

et al., 2019). Some research suggests that imprisonment can impact paternal identity, influencing how fathers view themselves (Dyer, 2005). Management of the dual identities of inmate and father even occurs during short-term incarceration in local jails (Tripp, 2009). In the hypermasculine environment of the jail and prison environment, men may respond to their dual identities as inmate and father in multiple ways.

Some incarcerated fathers may remain in contact with their children through mail correspondence, phone calls, and/or visitation. In contrast, other fathers may limit or reject contact with their children as a strategy to suppress their pre-incarceration identity (Tripp, 2009). This way, the inmate role can be assumed fully and make the incarceration experience less emotionally painful. Consistent with Sykes's (1959) pains of imprisonment, incarcerated fathers also experience the deprivation of family, which includes the painful separation from their children (Ugelvik, 2014). Collectively, these confinement-specific masculinity challenges complicate the incarceration experiences for fathers. For marginalized men of color, fathering from behind bars can be more difficult and nuanced than their White counterparts.

The racialized and gendered nature of mass incarceration has impacted the stability of communities of color, their households, and family relationships since its inception (Browning et al., 2001; Alexander, 2010; Hattery & Smith, 2014). Not only do their disadvantaged class positions create additional stressors for families of incarcerated men of color (Hattery & Smith, 2014), but also maintaining father-child contact and relationships more tenuous (Swisher & Waller, 2008; Woldoff & Washington, 2008). With greater than 50% of state and federal prison populations comprising men of color with minor children (Maruschak et al., 2021), the toll on familial bonds is heavier,

especially when considering the structural disadvantages that precede their incarceration (Clear, 2007). The scarcity of financial and social capital among the population of marginalized men of color in prison places a burden on their family's ability to provide material support. The economic precarity experienced by the children's caregiver(s) can make it more difficult to maintain father-child bonds through visitation and phone calls due to exorbitant financial costs.

Additional barriers exist that create challenges for father-child contact during incarceration. Preexisting or relational conflict due to incarceration may discourage some maternal caregivers from allowing communication and contact between the child and their imprisoned father. Roy and Dyson (2005) found that mothers of children with system-involved fathers engage in "babymama drama" as a strategy to encourage or discourage paternal involvement. This processual negotiation of the men's role as fathers depended on their relationship with the maternal caregiver, deteriorating commitments, and stressors of poverty. The quality of the relationship between the incarcerated father and his current or former romantic partner can influence the mother's willingness to allow any communication with the child. Mothers who move on to new relationships may show an emotional divestment from their former partners, affecting the father-child connection. In addition, stressors experienced by low-income families make sustaining relationships with incarcerated fathers difficult, especially since female-headed households bear the economic burden of providing for the family. Altogether, maternal gatekeeping that discourages father involvement may result in incarcerated men feeling powerless in actualizing their paternal identity within the confines of the carceral milieu (Arditti et al., 2005).

Institutional and family barriers present challenges to father involvement during incarceration (Swanson et al., 2013). Correctional visitation policies, distance, and treatment of visitors can hinder the level of social support and bonds available to incarcerated men (Tewksbury et al., 2005). However, Swanson and colleagues (2013) challenge the assumption that institutional barriers are primarily responsible for the limitations of father involvement. Instead, internal family constraints and negotiations may have a more significant impact on father-child contact during incarceration. For instance, Arditti and colleagues (2021) found that some maternal caregivers attempt to safeguard children from experiencing harm or secondary prisonization by engaging in mediation strategies as a form of motherwork that is based on caution and oversight. These strategies involve mothers of children with incarcerated fathers engaging in protective carework through monitoring communication and limiting exposure to features of the prison environment (e.g., searches, staff mistreatment, lack of child-friendly visitation areas). While these collective experiences are not race-specific, the extant literature consistently shows that mass incarceration has a deleterious impact on disadvantaged, families of color (Clear, 2007; Pettit & Gutierrez, 2018; Foster & Hagan, 2009; Western & Wildeman, 2009).

Studies exploring the impact of incarceration on families of African American men, for example, reveal the collateral damage experienced by mothers and children left behind. Hattery and Smith (2014) found that the removal of fathers due to incarceration can lead to an intergenerational cycle of prison for African American children. The likelihood of involvement in the foster care system is also greater among these youth (Roberts, 2012), therefore, contributing to a crisis of children of color raised in the

system. Incarcerated fathers express worry and concern for their children (Arditti et al., 2005); however, some studies discuss additional fears men of color from disadvantaged communities have that are unique to their social locations. The presence of interpersonal violence in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods poses a risk to children which is a reality that Black fathers try to protect them from (Letiecq & Koblinsky, 2004). The criminogenic conditions present in structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods such as poverty, high unemployment, and accessibility to the illicit economy (Wilson, 1987; Krivo & Peterson, 1996; Brown & Weil, 2020) makes raising children in a healthy and safe environment challenging. In the incarcerated father's absence, the burden to provide safety and protection rests solely on mothers and other familial caregivers, many of whom are already living on the margins (Turanovic et al., 2012).

Since mass incarceration and its effects are pronounced among fragile families (Geller et al., 2011), and Black and Hispanic households are largely represented among this population (McLanahan et al., 2019), examining the impact on family life through an intersectional and critical race lens is necessary. The spillover effects of parental incarceration exacerbate preexisting racial inequality among the most disadvantaged families and communities (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014; Western & Wildeman, 2009; Foster & Hagan, 2009). Wakefield and Wildeman (2014) discuss how the racialized and gendered effects of mass incarceration have made social conditions for vulnerable children of color worse by increasing residential instability, inducing health-related problems, and contributing to school misbehavior and subsequent low educational attainment. Turney (2015) examines changes in relationship quality between women and their incarcerated partners over time. She finds that another significant collateral

consequence of mass incarceration is the dissolution of romantic relationships. Due to the disproportionate representation of families of color affected, these spillover effects are especially damaging to the sustenance of family life. Paternal incarceration and its divergent experiences across race, class, and gender follow men upon release as well.

Paternal Reentry. Like their female counterparts, men's transition to the community after incarceration is a gendered phenomenon (Cobbina, 2010; Andersen et al., 2020; Travis, 2005; Visher, 2013). However, there are also challenges and concerns faced that are shaped by the intersections of race and gender. First, male offenders of all races are more likely to serve longer periods of incarceration than similarly situated women (Rodriguez et al., 2006), therefore, relationship dissolution with romantic partners is common (Turney, 2015) and children may be older at the time of release (Arditti, 2012; McKay et al., 2019). Consequently, their former romantic partners may be in a new relationship and changed residential addresses. Therefore, financial, and emotional support provided earlier in the sentence may have waned over time. Research suggests that formerly incarcerated men of color must navigate divergent pathways to successful reentry that may be complicated by fatherhood status (see Williams et al., 2019; Dill et al., 2016; Skinner-Osei & Stepteau-Watson, 2018).

Men of color with criminal records face disadvantages in several domains including the labor market (Pager, 2003, Pager et al., 2009), familial and social support (Cooke, 2005; Frazier, 2014), and even mental and physical health (Dill et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2020; Houle, 2014; Munoz-Laboy et al., 2014). Transitioning from incarceration to the community adds additional stressors for returning fathers, however, the extant literature on prisoner reentry rarely captures these challenges from a qualitative

standpoint (Williams et al., 2019; Muentner & Charles, 2019; Charles et al., 2019). Few criminological studies on reentry explore the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated men through a critical, intersectional lens. In their study of Black male navigation of reentry in a Northeastern city, Williams et al. (2019) find that fatherhood is deeply connected to normative expectations of manhood. They argue that father involvement after incarceration can discourage further criminal activity and help men regain a feeling of importance and self-worth. On the other hand, however, the inability to secure employment and provide for their children may create hopelessness and a negative self-image. Dill et al. (2016) also found that formerly incarcerated Black men make attempts to rekindle a relationship with their children as a form of redemptive fathering. Participants believed that an opportunity to right past wrongs would provide them a second chance at being a good father.

Additional studies underscore the importance of achieving heteronormative expectations of manhood for returning fathers. For example, Andersen et al. (2020) posit that recidivism as an indicator of reintegration success is limited in scope. Through their interviews with formerly incarcerated men, the authors found successful reentry included being a real man by providing for the family. Welch et al. (2019) found similar results with Black men, however, barriers such as parole, distance from children, and housing insecurity made father involvement challenging. However, this does not negate the fact that formerly incarcerated Black fathers express a desire to be involved in their children's lives. An additional finding of interest is that some participants acknowledged that their conceptions of fatherhood and parenting strategies were largely shaped by past life experiences.

Barriers to Paternal-Involvement. Despite interest by many formerly incarcerated men to be involved with their children, barriers prevent or challenge their ability to do so. These barriers can be broken down into two types: financial and relational. Financial obstacles often come in the form of child support obligations (Roman & Link, 2017). Non-residential fathers with no criminal legal system involvement often must pay court-ordered financial support to a former partner; however, legal and extralegal factors embedded within the labor marketplace places system-impacted fathers at a further disadvantage (Haney, 2018). Failures to meet child support obligations can earn fathers the stereotype of being deadbeat or irresponsible (Battle, 2018) but for men with criminal records, the inability to pay can lead to an imprisonment of debt (Haney, 2018). Incarcerated fathers ordered to pay child support may not have access to do so during confinement due to institutional or personal constraints; therefore, resulting in higher child support arrears (McLeod & Gottlieb, 2018). Roman and Link (2017) found in their study that roughly 60% of former prisoners owed more than five thousand dollars in child support arrears yet faced difficulty securing gainful employment and receiving assistance to help meet financial obligations. Since men of color are overwhelmingly represented among system-involved fathers, the deleterious impact of financial barriers to their successful reentry warrants attention.

Relationships with children's caregivers represent an additional barrier to paternal involvement after release (Arditti, 2012). Changes in relationship status may affect the former romantic partner's willingness to allow returning fathers to visit and spend time with their dependent children (Turney, 2015). Maternal gatekeeping practices are not restricted to the period of imprisonment; women with children of fathers in reentry

regulate contact and involvement for many reasons. In anticipation of the father's reentry, Yocum and Nath (2011) found that mothers and children expressed an eagerness for them to return to the family, however, confidence in their ability to satisfy expectations would determine this arrangement. In this study, mothers desired a father-child relationship but deployed self-protecting or confidence-enhancing strategies depending on several factors such as whether fathers would provide emotional and social support, as well as abandon street life and former criminal activities. Interestingly, an influencing factor in mothers' and children's confidence is the father's in-prison conduct. The authors found that good behavior and substantive actions during incarceration are positive indicators of success post-release.

Institutional barriers in the labor market and community supervision requirements can pose challenges that impede father-child involvement. For individuals with criminal records, the labor market can be unforgiving. This reality undeniably holds true for Black and Hispanic job applicants (see Pager, 2003; Pager et al., 2003). An audit test conducted by Decker et al. (2015) found that for in-person applicants, Black and Hispanic individuals with criminal records were less likely to be offered a job. While minority applicants with a criminal record fared worse, effects were most significant for Blacks with prior prison records. There were no statistically significant differences between online applicants which suggests that the stigma of race in conjunction with a criminal record, impacts applicants of color differently. Barriers in the licit work economy can have the unintended effect of forcing some individuals with criminal records to pursue alternative types of work (i.e., legal and illegal) to navigate the challenges of finding employment during the reentry process (Augustine, 2019). Some vulnerable job seekers

with criminal records even turn to predatory and exploitative temporary staffing agencies where internal mobility and wage growth is nonexistent, therefore providing legitimate work opportunity for cheap and disposable labor (Elcioglu, 2010).

Community supervision requirements can, directly and indirectly, impact paternal involvement. In their qualitative study of sixteen fathers on parole, Crandell-Williams and McEvoy (2016) found that these men feel that the correctional system disallows bonds with their children through constant surveillance, oversight, and burdening expectations. For instance, restrictions on traveling can obstruct the ability to live with and visit their children. Transportation challenges can exacerbate preexisting vulnerabilities for formerly incarcerated individuals (Nordberg et al., 2021). Lack of social capital can impact access to employment, transportation, and necessary resources for successful reintegration (Walker et al., 2014), which ultimately affects parenting capacity, including paternal involvement. Ortiz and Jackey (2019) describe community supervision agencies and the prisoner reentry industry writ large as engaging in intentional structural violence against marginalized bodies through constant surveillance, mounting legal fees, and exorbitant post-release supervision conditions that make it nearly impossible to become self-sufficient and able to rebuild healthy relationships. Low-income formerly incarcerated men of color are disproportionately represented among the incarcerated and reentry population (Crandell-Williams & McEvoy, 2016; Frazier, 2014; Williams et al., 2019), declaring them a vulnerable special-needs population deserving of attainable resources and programming that is tailored to fit their needs (Mitchell et al., 2018; Muentner & Charles, 2019).

In sum, the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated parents across race and gender must be contextualized through their divergent pathways before, during, and after contact with the criminal legal system. In the current study, the author takes the position that traditional quantitative studies fail to capture the nuances of parental incarceration's impact on marginalized families. Several studies use of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, for example, have documented the extent of correlations between parental incarceration and negative effects (e.g., Turney & Wildeman, 2018; Wildeman & Turney, 2014; Turney & Haskins, 2014; Turney, 2014, 2017); however, critical qualitative analysis of how parents marginalized by race, class, and gender interface with systems of racialized social control (i.e. criminal legal system) is limited in criminology. In addition, intersectionality and critical race theory are frameworks seldom applied to research examining aspects of parental incarceration despite the extant literature showing evidence of disproportionate impact on families and communities of color.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to grasp and become better informed of the experiences and challenges that system-involved parents face upon returning to the community. Specifically, this research explores how being a parent impacts reentry experiences after a period of incarceration. Since available research often focuses on maternal and paternal incarceration as separate entities, this dissertation incorporates both to provide a qualitative analysis of experiences across race and gender. Exploring the similarities and differences in lived experiences among this population could assist institutional and community-based prisoner reentry programs in their efforts to support formerly incarcerated men and women in their transition to family life. Through professional connections and volunteer work with several non-profit organizations in two large metropolitan areas in the state of Texas, I had access to men and women who were previously incarcerated and seeking reentry assistance.

My initial interest in parenting and incarceration came about while pursuing my master's degree in criminology and criminal justice from 2017-2019. During this time, the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, a non-profit research, and advocacy organization, published a series of reports describing system-involved women in Texas as an underserved and understudied population (Linder, 2018). Since parental incarceration was a current research interest, and I had regular interaction with formerly incarcerated women in North Texas, I decided to conduct a study using qualitative/triangulated methodologies to explore the post-incarceration navigation of motherhood. After

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gathering multiple forms of data (i.e., observation and interview) over several months with female participants, I wanted to explore the same process with male participants to better understand the post-incarceration navigation of fatherhood. As a result, I modified the initial study to include male participants and expanded recruitment to include another major metropolitan area in South Texas. The research reported in this dissertation commenced in October 2018 while I was completing a master's degree at The University of Texas at Arlington and continued during my doctoral studies at Texas Southern University. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) and later deemed exempt by the Institutional Review Board at Texas Southern University (TSU) (see appendix C). In-person and online training in human subjects' research was completed at UTA and TSU, respectively, which provided valuable information about preparing protocols and conducting ethical research with human research participants. Due to the outbreak of a pandemic, formally known as COVID-19, remote data collection was utilized with male participants to maximize social distancing guidelines and protect me and the participants. In the sections that follow, I provide a thorough outline of the study design and procedures.

<u>Qualitative Methods</u>

As mostly an inductive process, qualitative methodology, unlike quantitative research, is not fixed. Therefore, research questions, research design, and data collection methods can, and often do change throughout the study (Creswell, 2016). Furthermore, in qualitative research, the researcher and instrument are interchangeable, therefore, he/she decides on the most relevant factors to explore and does so through guidance from one's interests, goals, and biases. In fact, unlike the notion of objectivity that quantitative

research strictly abides by, qualitative methodologists draw from their subjectivities, although strongly encouraged to practice self-reflexivity and acknowledge positionality (Tracy, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2017).

Prior studies point to the importance of justice-system-related research incorporating the voices of those most directly impacted (e.g., Muentner & Charles, 2019; Williams et al., 2019). Tewksbury (2009) argues that meaningful research is best achieved through qualitative methodology; in fact, he hierarchizes qualitative research as superior in criminology and criminal justice due to its ability to obtain in-depth, rich data. Qualitative methods, especially interviews, allow participants to offer more critical and nuanced responses (Wilson, 2017). Therefore, data collection methods for this dissertation center on thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of system-involved individuals whose voices are often marginalized or exploited for the purposes of research and professional gain.

<u>Participant Observation</u>

One of the methods through which data collection was accomplished in this study is through participant observation. In qualitative research, field notes are usually the information obtained during observation (Bhattacharya, 2017). The role that an observer assumes is contingent upon the type of study conducted and the researcher's positionality (Bhattacharya, 2017). Due to the professional connections established with several non-profit organizations throughout two major metropolitan areas in the state of Texas, I was granted access to make frequent visits to research sites where participant recruitment occurred. I was invited to attend men and women empowerment group sessions, new client intake meetings, and parenting classes. Even when recruitment and data collection

transitioned from face-to-face to remote, the identity and purpose of the researcher was known to organization staff and clients.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I began conducting semi-structured interviews with female participants in the fall of 2018. Recruitment and data collection with male participants commenced in spring 2019 under a modified institutional review board protocol approved by UTA. The study was later deemed exempt and approved by the institutional review board at TSU in the summer of 2021. The goal was to collect formerly incarcerated parents' experiences transitioning into family life. I followed an interview instrument for male and female participants that focused on specific thematic areas. These themes included perceptions of motherhood and fatherhood, maternal and paternal incarceration and reentry experiences, and experiences with community-based reentry services. Both interview instruments across gender were open-ended to allow respondents the opportunity to answer freely without the restrictions of close-ended, fixed answer guidelines (see appendices A & B). Where appropriate, I probed participants after questions where a more in-depth response was possible.

Study Design

The qualitative data collected for this study draws from in-depth, semi-structured interviews. In total, the study sample consists of 25 participants. Unlike the standards of quantitative research, the qualitative methodology does not require large representative samples (Tracy, 2019). In qualitative research, fewer participants are typical to conduct an in-depth analysis of perceptions and experiences among often marginalized and hard-to-reach populations (Bhattacharya, 2017). Qualitative research is an appropriate and

ideal approach to studying the post-incarceration navigation of motherhood and fatherhood due to its capability of capturing complex phenomena from the standpoint of the epistemology of the participants themselves. Through careful observation and interviews, formerly incarcerated men and women provide their perceptions and experiences that may be limited by fixed, closed-ended questions in other data collection methods (i.e., surveys). The use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews allows explorations of the impact of incarceration on maternal and paternal identity, parent-child relations during and post-incarceration, as well as relationships with caregivers.

Sampling Strategy

Men and women recruited for this study resided in two large urban centers in Texas. The state of Texas is a unique geographical location to study prisoner reentry for several reasons. First, as the second-largest state by land area and population in the United States, Texas has an incarceration rate of approximately 891 per 100, 000 people (Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.). Despite decreases in the total state prison population, as of year-end 2019, Texas had the highest number of incarcerated men and women among all fifty states (Carson, 2020). In the same year, approximately 78, 500 individuals under state or federal correctional jurisdiction were released in Texas (Carson, 2020). It can be expected that many men and women returning to Texas communities from state and federal correctional facilities are parents; therefore, capturing their lived experiences upon reentry can help provide the in-depth context needed to better assist these system-involved populations.

Recruitment for this study followed a purposive sampling strategy, whereby individuals who were formerly incarcerated, English speaking, and had at least one child,

were intentionally asked to participate in an interview. When study recruitment began in 2018, I was solely interested in interviewing formerly incarcerated women who self-identified as mothers. I was granted access to a large non-profit reentry service provider in North Texas through previously established connections from a gatekeeper. The nonprofit organization is nonresidential and assists formerly incarcerated individuals with housing, employment, healthcare, and life skills (e.g., financial literacy, job readiness, and parenting). In qualitative research, gatekeepers serve as mediators for gaining access to research settings and participants (Andoh-Arthur, 2019).

During participant recruitment, I intentionally refrained from contacting criminal justice agencies (e.g., probation and parole) to minimize risk and protect the privacy of respondents. Since it was expected that some respondents would be under community supervision, I believed that their willingness to participate and authenticity of responses would be limited if I had any affiliation with formal criminal justice agencies. The fear and distrust of criminal justice agencies were evident in one respondent in this study (Dana) who repeatedly said, "I'm not going back to jail" when I asked her to follow me to a private space at the research site to conduct our interview. Therefore, avoiding contact with any state agency that could potentially report respondents to law enforcement helped to ensure comfortability and data transparency from study participants.

For the first part of this study, female participants were recruited mostly through posted flyers at a large nonprofit organization in North Texas. I also attended parenting classes and observed women's empowerment group meetings at the same organization that assists formerly incarcerated individuals. Program staff helped share flyers, schedule

interviews, and provide private meeting rooms to conduct interviews. This research site had two locations across the metropolitan area, and after months of recruitment, most female respondents (N=13) came from this organization. One additional respondent was recruited from another nonprofit organization that serves system-impacted mothers and their children. Through word of mouth, she learned of my study and contacted me about participating in an interview. The final participant in the sample of women for this study was recruited through snowball sampling, a process in qualitative research where respondents assist the researcher in finding other potential subjects (Tracy, 2019). Overall, I recruited 15 formerly incarcerated mothers that included African American (N=10), Hispanic (N=2), and white (N=3) women. This study's overrepresentation of African American women is consistent with their significant presence in prisons and jails within the United States (Kajstura, 2019).

Due to the COVID-19 national pandemic, the recruitment of male participants for this study was conducted remotely. Study recruitment expanded across geographical locations to include participants from another metropolitan area in South Texas. I established a professional connection with a large reentry organization that provides employment assistance, anger-management classes, substance abuse education, and cognitive behavioral therapy to formerly incarcerated men and women. Through this connection, I was given access to recruit eligible participants for this study. Shortly after this agreement was made with the Division Manager and Program Manager of the organization, the COVID-19 outbreak worsened and led to client services transitioning to remote modalities. As a result, recruitment and subsequent interviews were conducted remotely to protect myself and the respondents from becoming infected with the virus.

To recruit eligible male participants, flyers were distributed by email to program staff at reentry organizations across both metropolitan areas in North and South Texas. Program staff assisted with sharing flyers and scheduling virtual interviews. To be eligible, participants had to be male, at least 18 years of age, English speaking, and have at least one child at the time of their most recent arrest. To assist with recruitment, I was invited by staff at organizations in both locations to attend intake meetings to discuss my study with new clients. After a few of these meetings, interested clients contacted me by phone or email to request participation in the study. In addition, I attended men's empowerment group meetings at a large reentry organization in North Texas and South Texas where I was granted permission to discuss my study. Most eligible male respondents in the study sample (N=7) were recruited through one of these methods. It should be noted that several formerly incarcerated men who contacted me about participating in the study had to be declined because it was discovered that they did not fully meet eligibility requirements. Some male participants (N=3) learned of the study through the process of snowball sampling and contacted me to inquire about doing an interview. Interview procedures for male and female participants mainly differed in modality. All the women in the study sample (N=15) were interviewed face-to-face, while every man in the sample (N=10) was interviewed virtually through Google Meet due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interview Guide and Procedures

Once the mothers expressed interest in the study, we either arranged a date, time, and location to meet or conducted the interview right away. In accordance with their preferences, women were interviewed at research sites used for recruitment (N=13), or a

public location of their choice (N=2). Before the start of each interview, I initiated a casual conversation with female respondents to create a relaxing environment for the interview. In qualitative research, establishing rapport with participants beforehand is encouraged for its ability to humanize the individual and create comfort during the interview process, especially involving difficult and emotional topics (e.g., incarceration, family separation, trauma) (Bhattacharya, 2017). Next, we reviewed the consent. During this process, I gave a description of the study and its potential risks and benefits; informed the participant of the voluntary nature of participation, discussed compensation, and assured them of steps I would take to maintain their anonymity. We then proceeded to the interview. While all mothers were told they could end the interview for any reason, none withdrew. In total, 15 formerly incarcerated mothers were interviewed. Interviews lasted between 16 minutes to 1.5 hours with the majority (N=11) falling between 20 to 50-minute durations. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The semi-structured interview instrument (see appendix A) consisted of questions related to the women's perceptions of motherhood and expectations of them as mothers, and post-incarceration experiences including community supervision (i.e., probation/parole), mother-child relationships, and reentry assistance. To end each interview on a positive note, I asked every participant what advice they would give to other mothers returning home. Throughout the interview process, I probed participants on certain questions that I believed they could provide a more in-depth response. After the completion of each interview, I compensated participants with a $15 CVS gift card. CVS gift cards were ideal because participants can purchase medication, personal hygiene

products, and groceries. One of the mothers (Dana) was homeless at the time of the interview and wanted to use the gift card to buy a blanket to "cover-up at night."

For fathers recruited to participate in the study, I also established a rapport before beginning the interview. Each interview was conducted virtually utilizing the Google Meet video platform. I obtained verbal consent from all fathers in the study due to convenience. Since interviews were conducted remotely, requiring male respondents to sign and submit an informed consent form would have presented challenges. Since formerly incarcerated individuals are largely economically disadvantaged (Travis, 2005; Clear, 2009), access to a printer with scanning capabilities to return a signed consent form may be limited. Instead, a description of the study was given, potential risks and benefits explained, and assurance of participant anonymity was provided. Each respondent was also informed about the voluntary nature of their participation.

While all fathers were told they could end the interview for any reason, none withdrew. Overall, 10 formerly incarcerated fathers were interviewed. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many reentry organizations and service providers transitioned to remote client assistance due to social distancing guidelines, therefore, affecting the recruitment of participants during this time. As a result, fewer male respondents were recruited for this study; however, theoretical saturation was reached with the data collected. In total, 10 formerly incarcerated fathers were interviewed. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes to approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes. Interviews conducted with fathers were generally longer in duration although fewer in numbers than the mothers. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

A similar interview instrument (see appendix B) was used for fathers except for a few additional questions. The additional questions added to the interview protocol for the fathers often came up during interviews with mothers even though they were not explicitly listed on their instrument. Interview questions were broadly focused on perceptions of fatherhood, paternal incarceration experiences, and aspects of the reentry process including father-child relationships, and relationships with the caregiver. Like mothers, fathers were asked about community-based reentry assistance, if any, and advice they would give to other fathers returning from incarceration. When appropriate, I probed fathers after certain questions when I felt a more substantive response was possible. Upon completion of each interview, male participants were compensated with one $15 Walmart gift card. According to their preferences, respondents were emailed a Walmart E-gift card or mailed a physical card to their home address. After each gift card was distributed, I confirmed receipt. Walmart gift cards were chosen due to greater access (i.e., store locations in proximity) and affordability of personal hygiene products, food, clothing, and household essential items.

<u>Sample Characteristics</u>

The average age of formerly incarcerated mothers in the study sample was 35 years old. For fathers in the study sample, the average age was 41 years old. Although fewer in number, male participants spent more years incarcerated which may explain why their children were older upon release. Moreover, 60% of the fathers interviewed had previous arrests before their most recent. The majority of participants (N=19) were most recently incarcerated in state prison, while one (N=1) was convicted and sentenced to state jail. Several participants discussed experiencing financial hardships and

employment challenges from their release until the time of our interview. Having a felony

record and a history of incarceration exacerbated challenges to finding employment,

housing, and providing familial support for many participants. Table 1 shows a

description of all male and female participants in the study sample.

Table 1

Description of Study Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Race	Incarceration Length (Most Recent)	Time Since Release	# of Children	Type of Incarceration
Nate	M	49	Black	12 years	2 months	3 adults, 1 deceased	State Prison
Ariana	F	40	Hispanic	2 years	3 years	1 adult, 3 minors	State Prison
Ray	M	45	Black	16 years	3 months	1 minor, 4 adults	Federal Prison
Brianna	F	30	White	1 year, 3 months	1 year, 5 months	4 minors	State Prison
Ron	M	39	Black	13 years	1 year, 3 months	3 minors	State Prison
Dana	F	28	Black	180 days	11 days	6 minors	County Jail
Terrence	M	49	Black	29.5 years	3 weeks	2 adults	State Prison
Eve	F	36	Black	1 year	12 years	7 minors	County Jail
Wakeem	M	34	Black	2 years	9 years	1 minor	State Prison
Gertrude	F	45	White	2 years	1 year, 6 months	1 adult	State Prison
Jared	M	51	Black	8 years	2 years, 6 months	2 minors, 1 adult	State Prison
Kim	F	33	Black	8 years, 4 months	4 months	1 minor	State Prison
Luis	M	40	Hispanic	5 years	3 years	4 adults	State Prison

La'Tasha	F	45	Black	6 months	6 years	1 minor, 1 deceased	State Prison
Ty	M	36	Black	6 years	5 years	4 minors	State Prison
Lisa	F	39	Black	2 months	1 year, 3 weeks	2 minors	State Prison
Bryan	M	28	White	4 years	6 months	1 minor	State Prison
Shantel	F	40	Black	11 months	4 months	4 adults, 1 minor	State Jail
Tasha	F	30	Black	7 years	1 year	1 minor	State Prison
Jesus	M	43	Hispanic	12 years	1 year, 6 months	1 adult, 1 minor	Federal Prison
Tierra	F	31	Black	1 year, 3 months	2 months	1 minor	State Prison
Tracy	F	40	White	2 years	1 month	2 adults, 4 minors	State Prison
Valerie	F	31	Black	1 year, 3 months	3 weeks	1 minor	State Prison
Yolanda	F	32	Hispanic	7 years, 6 months	5 years, 6 months	2 years	State Prison
Trina	F	30	Black	3 months	2 years	7 minors	County Jail

Analytic Strategy

For both male and female participants, interviews were audio-recorded utilizing a secure iPhone voice recording program. This program allows users to record, upload, and store voice recordings with password protection. After the interviews were recorded, I assigned each respondent a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. All interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service, and afterward, I reviewed and edited the completed transcripts for accuracy. Informal conversations with respondents during my participation and observation of virtual and in-person client group meetings were documented in field notes and provided much needed context to analyze. Field notes were recorded as timely as possible, usually within 24 hours, to prevent the researcher

from experiencing recall bias concerning participants' remarks. All audio recordings and interview transcripts were analyzed and formatted in MAXQDA 2020, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). CAQDAS is both a convenient and effective tool that assists with organizing, managing, and coding qualitative data (Tracy, 2019). During analysis, the data were separated into three different data sets which included (1) perceptions of parental identity, (2) parental incarceration experiences, and (3) parental reentry experiences. These themes were categorized independently into cases concerning perceptions and experiences. Inductive analysis techniques were used to identify perceptions and experiences present within the data. The perceptions and experiences gathered were later coded into themes that were analyzed extensively. To increase the internal reliability of the analyses, the author engaged in multiple readings of the data.

Conclusion

The qualitative methodologies utilized in this study are appropriate to examine marginalized populations included in this sample. The post-incarceration navigation of motherhood and fatherhood using critical theories and mixed-qualitative methods contributes to the criminological body of knowledge on prisoner reentry in various ways. First, few studies formally apply intersectionality and CRT to underscore the divergent pathways to reentry for mothers and fathers. Second, the multiple methods of data collection (i.e., participant observation and semi-structured interviews) allow for data triangulation which increases internal reliability. Finally, the themes, analyses, and policy implications in the following chapters are foregrounded in the lived experiences of marginalized populations whose multiple identities (i.e., race, gender, parent status,

formerly incarcerated) shape their matriculation through the criminal legal system and transition into family and community life.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The systematic analysis conducted for this dissertation revealed several themes with corresponding findings for both populations of formerly incarcerated parents. In the current chapter, I include personal narratives and their connection to the extant literature that responds to the study research questions. To grasp an understanding of the post-incarceration navigation of motherhood and fatherhood, I contextualize participants' perceptions and lived experiences using intersectionality and CRT as analytic tools. The findings provided in this chapter reveal how system-involved mothers and fathers perceive their parental identities, and its influence on their incarceration and reentry experiences. Study findings will fall under three broad major themes including perceptions of parenthood, pre-release experiences, and post-incarceration experiences.

<u>Perceptions of Parenthood</u>

Divergent Parental Identities

Several qualitative studies on parental incarceration reveal that system-involved mothers and fathers cherish their role as parents and express concern for their children (Easterling et al., 2018; Mitchell & Davis, 2019; Williams et al., 2019; Dill et al., 2016). Despite their criminal record and incarceration history, respondents in this study shared similar perceptions of the differences between a good and bad parent. Across both populations, many respondents shared views that resembled hegemonic standards of femininity and masculinity in the context of parenting. Many respondents believed and adhered to the expectation that a "good" parent provides intangible (e.g., emotional

support, nurturing, time) and tangible (e.g., finances, clothing, food, etc.) resources and support to their children. In responding to a question about qualities of a good mother, Ariana states, "she [a good mother] has empathy, caring, puts her children above herself…and makes her children a priority." Brianna discusses the importance of prioritizing intangible support, especially when ability to provide tangible resources is limited:

> I would say qualities of a good mother would be somebody that's there, somebody that listens. Somebody that is supportive, non-judgmental, that spends time with their kids. Even if you can't afford to provide for them all the time, just being there means more to them than giving them things. Spending time with them means everything to them.
> An interesting observation among system-involved mothers in the sample is the

maternal labor they provided with limited financial and social support. Several women reported that the onus was on them to give emotional support and ensure all their children's needs were met no matter the financial, emotional, or mental toll. The factors that inspired their tireless and selfless maternal labor was often rooted in past experiences. The death of her mother at an early age motivated Trina to be the best mother she knew how. Trina's perceptions of what constitutes a good mother is teaching them to make good choices. She states:

> Like show them how to make good choices in life because I was one of the ones that, my mother died when I was two, so I didn't grow up with a mother. So, by me having five kids, I want to be there. I stopped all the things I used to do, and I'm changing since I got older and everything, I been through in life it showed me my kids need me more than the streets than anything else. So, I want to be here for my kids cause growing up without a mother, that mess with me, it still messes with me right to this day because I don't have nobody that I can go talk to.

A few mothers recognized the personal shortcomings they experienced in life and viewed part of their purpose as mothers was to help ensure the upward social mobility of their children. Low-income mothers like Yolanda felt that being a good mother was

exemplified through providing her children's wants and needs with no assistance. She shares the following about expectations of her as a mother:

> I get up early in the morning, do what I got to do for their education. Like Ismael [son] going to that [gifted] school, they don't have anything over here like that. So, I feel like I sacrifice every morning to make sure that he has the best education for himself. And sometimes I got to do things like far as working, I work two jobs sometimes. I worked two jobs for about a year and a half to make sure that they had what they wanted. I mean those are expectations that I have to do because nobody else is going to do it for me.

This quote illustrates the reality of the feminization of poverty in the United States and added burdens that women marginalized by race and class must carry to acquire and maintain a quality standard of living for themselves and their children. For most women in the study sample, meeting hegemonic standards and expectations of motherhood proved more difficult and often unattainable due their intersecting categories of oppression (i.e., race, class, ex-offender status). Like Yolanda, they make immense sacrifices and engage in maternal labor that is a product of their social realities.

For system-involved fathers, their perceptions of being a good parent mirrors expressions of hegemonic masculinity. Terrence, for example, shares that the role of a good father is "to be their protector, caretaker, [provide] any financial need, be there, even if you can't take care of them, you're going to be there for your kids." Due to shared experiences of economic precarity among many respondents, providing tangible support like money (including allowances and other voluntary donations) did not rank high in the hierarchy of children's needs due to a lack of privilege. Instead, several respondents believed that listening, communication, building trust, and spending time with their children would lead to the best relationships. Luis, corroborates this in his view of what it means to be a father:

A best friend. A best friend. If you're not a best friend, you're nothing. A best friend with boundaries. If you can't have the trust with these kids to come up to you and talk about whatever, then there's no need to be a father because if they're scared of you, or et cetera, or something like that, it makes no sense. I think that especially now that I am a father, even though they're grown already, I have to be their best friend, man, because they're teenagers, and they still need to feel like, You know what? I can talk to pops about anything, about anything in the world, I don't care what it is. I can talk to pops about whatever.

Interestingly, several male respondents' perceptions of fatherhood were connected in some way to their own paternal experiences and upbringing. Father absenteeism was a common occurrence among system-involved fathers in this study; however, the responses to this phenomenon varied. For Wakeem, being a father "means the world…because I never had a father. That's my purpose." Due to his father's absence, he strived "to be the best dad I can be when that time come." To men like Terrence, improper teachings of fatherhood could have lasting effects. He states:

> It's more than a nurturing thing, because it's a responsibility that, if taught to you wrong, you tend to pass it on, and it goes down through the generations. So, for me, you can only teach what it is that you've been taught. So, the way my father raised me, most times, it was through absenteeism. But I learned enough from him to where I appreciate his life. He died in 2013. So, when my kids came along, I had no clue. I was actually free when both of them was born. But I had no clue about fatherhood, about how to take a small child, especially a son, and turn him into someone productive.

The milieu that Terrence grew up in exposed him to definitions and expressions of hypermasculine behavior (e.g., sexual promiscuity) and patriarchal relationships with women. When asked how he views himself as a father, he offers the following reflection:

> Well, I think the image of myself as a father was created, in my mind, before I left because I never could see myself ... Pre-incarceration I was 19 years old, but I'd been in and out of jail since I was 15, 16 years old. So, by the time my sons were born, it's ... What's the guy's name? Ron Johnson [author], when he talked about the four rites of passage, the four levels of the rites of passage, and the third being that you should be sexually active. Sexually active and being seen as a man is two different things. But when you're from the community that I'm from, you could be

judged on exactly how many women you have, not necessarily whether you hold their hand, or open the door for them, or be intimate with them.

For men marginalized by race and class status, exclusion from traditional heteropatriarchy (e.g., being the breadwinner of the family) may lead them to devise their own conceptions of manhood constructed within the context of structural inequality and racism. In structurally disadvantaged communities akin to where Terrence was raised, boys and men of color navigate divergent terrains to manhood. Therefore, having multiple sexual partners and exercising dominance over women is part of the process of becoming a man. If pregnancy comes because of this arrangement, an absence or lack of emotional ties to one's child(ren) is connected to adherence of divergent masculinity, a process through which achieving manhood is risky, dangerous, and unpredictable (Williams et al., 2019, 2020). As Terrence elaborates further about his perceptions of manhood and pre-incarceration paternal identity, divergent masculinity can be clearly seen:

> We don't know nothing about intimacy where I'm from. We know about fat asses and big titties [sic], that's what we know about. So, when your kids, as far as being judged from that point of view, I didn't have an overall positive view of myself as a dad because the kids were like a result of me going through the rites of passage, which the last rite is to go to prison and come back. And now you're seen as a full man in the community where I'm from. So, like I say, I didn't have a positive view of myself then because not only was I not in the home, I was more absent. With my youngest son I was there. My oldest son, I really wasn't. They have different moms. So, I really wasn't from that point of view. But I never looked at myself pre-incarceration, or most, the first part of my incarceration, first 10, 15 years, because like I say, the kids were just an offshoot or an add-on to me being sexually active.

Single-parent households were common among male respondents, but father absenteeism was involuntary for some. Ty was raised in a structurally disadvantaged community characterized by drugs, high unemployment, and violence. His divergent

pathway to becoming a man and ultimately a young father started at a very early age.

When asked whether his father was involved during his childhood, Ty responded:

> He passed away when I was just about one from mistaken identity, it was basically due to gun violence. From there it was just like, as I grew up it was just mom and then myself. It was just mom and the streets. I just looked at it like, it was me and my mom, so I had to be a boy, and then grow into a man's shoes.

The greater likelihood of violent victimization in ghettoized communities contributes to the premature death of its inhabitants, especially Black males (Richardson et al., 2016; Papachristos & Wildeman, 2012; Abt, 2019). Through the loss of fathers by voluntary or involuntary absenteeism (e.g., health-related death, violence, or incarceration) during childhood and adolescence, many young males of color in structurally disadvantaged communities are denied the right to childhood and feel pressure to be the man of the house before the legal age of adulthood.

Spoiled Identity and Criminalized Parents. In his seminal work on stigma, Goffman (1963) conceptualizes the term "spoiled identity" as a disreputable characteristic that leads one to experience negative, exclusionary, and discriminatory treatment based on its possession. All 15 participants in this study held one or more identities that result in stigma. Most of the sample (88%) were people of color and therefore part of a racially stigmatized group. However, several participants internalized their spoiled identities as "ex-offenders" which influenced how they viewed themselves as parents. An example of this is seen by Dana when asked to describe qualities of a bad mother:

> I would have to say that's probably what I've been these past couple of years, not being there, with my addiction, struggling with addiction. They're used to me being there, you know, when they were little and now, they're getting old and I'm not around.

Despite her personal battle with drug addiction, Dana perceives her sporadic absences from her children's lives as evidence of being a bad mother. However, problems like substance abuse may be symptomatic of structural inequities like racial, class, and gender oppression that women of color are largely subjected to (Gunn et al., 2018; Jordan-Zachery, 2008). For women with children, involvement in drug use and criminalized behavior does not denote a lack of care and concern; however, divergence from hegemonic notions of femininity can contribute to feelings of maternal failure and inadequacy. The internalization of maternal failure is also seen with Ariana, who gives the following description of a bad mother:

> Bad mother would be one that beats her children. One that leaves her children and one that abandons her children. One that doesn't put her children first. And I can say that with all authority because I have been a bad mother before.

Her previous bouts with addiction also resulted in periodic absences from her children's lives; however, several mothers in the sample exclaimed that even through their struggles, their children were cared for by them or a trusted family member. They believed that although their enactment of motherhood differed from traditional conceptions and expectations, it was not confirmation that they did not cherish their role as a parent. Trina's perception of a bad mother substantiates this point:

> A bad mother is if you don't want your kids. Like I wouldn't say giving your kids for adoption is bad because you don't want them going through whatever the situation you are going through. So, I don't feel like that's being a bad parent. Being a bad parent is leaving your kids outside. It's just like neglecting them. Leaving them outside with nothing, no food, no nothing. That's neglect and everything else. That's a bad mother.

A few mothers lost their children to the foster care system or granted custody to a close family member. In none of the cases were these custodial arrangements the result of child abuse although one mother, Trina, experienced the temporary removal of her kids

by child protective services [CPS] due to a burn incident at the house of a fictive kin.

Here, she discusses her relationship with her probation officer.

> Like with probation, I'm doing everything. She ain't violated me yet and I keep telling her about the situation with CPS. She keeps telling me just keep doing what you are doing. I'll have them back actually with me in January because I'm going to classes, passing drug tests, going to court for them, showing them people [CPS] that I want my children but the burn situation, he wasn't even with me, but I still had to suffer for what happened when he was with somebody else. It's because I'm his mother. It wasn't a day my kids weren't with me, so when he went over with my other aunt, she's not my biological aunt, she was just somebody I know and um, he wanted to go over her house and the day I had to go report [to probation] I got a call saying he got third degree burn and I rushed to the hospital on the bus. I beat them [EMS] to Park View [county hospital] and they put the people in my life [CPS]. And of course, I was dirty smoking and using cocaine. Like when my kids got over there with the people [CPS], I didn't want to live no more.

Prior research reveals that drug addicted mothers are labeled unfit parents and therefore deemed "throwaway moms" for violating traditional gender norms (Allen et al., 2010). However, in Trina's situation, her child's burn incident was not the result of carelessness or maternal failure. In fact, she was meeting with her probation officer at the time when it happened. Her completion of community supervision conditions was a requirement to stay out of jail; however, being under state surveillance (i.e., probation) did not protect her son from harm. Black women have historically been subjected to racist and sexist tropes about their assumed maternal illegitimacy (Davis, 1981; Roberts, 1993a; Hill Collins, 2000). Beginning with the period of chattel slavery in the United States, a historicity of controlling images has been applied to Black women that portray them as gendered outcasts, which serve as ideological justifications for their experiences of race, class, and gender oppression (Simms, 2001; Hill Collins, 2009).

In Trina's situation, the fight to regain custody of her children from CPS custody is reminiscent of enslaved Black mothers' experiences resisting the long-term separation

of their children to the exploitative, economic system of slavery. The effects of interfacing with historically oppressive systems and institutions (HOSI) especially for poor, disenfranchised people of color, can have health implications like substance abuse, depression, and suicidal thoughts (Patterson et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2021; Munoz-Laboy et al., 2013). Trina's fight to prove her legitimacy as a mother to CPS and probation despite not being responsible for her son's injury and consistently meeting community supervision requirements reveals how HOSI's can be demanding yet unforgiving to marginalized and vulnerable populations. In addition, contact with HOSI's is expected and normalized for these populations.

For example, Dana, a formerly incarcerated Black mother struggling with addiction resisted the label of troublemaker, yet she wanted to focus on herself by staying sober and out of contact with law enforcement. She stated: "when you're in active addiction, that's part of it just jails, institutions, and death." A common theme of struggles with addiction and mental health were present among female respondents in the current study. Participants like La'Tasha felt that her substance abuse and mental health conditions had severe consequences on her life. Several years prior, she got drunk after taking medication and fell asleep while her seven-month-old son was left alone in the car. After a tragic loss, she experienced the following:

> And so, there's a lot, there was a lot of anger, and then I lost my 12-year marriage, the house is gone, my job is gone and had to put my business on Sabbatical… I've had death of several things, a marriage, a child, a relationship, I mean severed everything.

Some male participants viewed themselves as bad fathers for their involvement in criminalized behavior (e.g., selling illicit drugs) and carried an internal badge of dishonor

for their perceived paternal failure. In describing his perceptions of a bad father, Nate shares:

> Bad father is pretty much what I did. I used my children and my family as an excuse to sell drugs for a better life. But truth is, I was being selfish because I was thinking about me…I was taken away from my children because of my actions.

However, Nate also shared that he felt responsible for the life outcomes of his children. The shame of abandoning his wife and children made him feel as though every negative circumstance was his fault.

> That's why I say, we use our family as an excuse, or at least I used my family as an excuse for me to go out there and sell drugs. And, but the truth is that it was only an excuse that I used my family. I feel like I'm a bad father because I wasn't there for my children. I wasn't there to help them get through school as a result only two of my kids graduated, my oldest and my youngest. One of my sons died [interpersonal violence]. He's dead now. And I believe all of that is a result of my actions.

Nate's perceptions of being a good father was to be the head provider; however, in his opinion, selling drugs was due to a lack of education. He and his family always struggled financially and lived within resource-depleted communities. Therefore, his decision to sell drugs was a personal choice but one of few opportunities accessible to disenfranchised men of color like himself who subscribed to hegemonic expectations of masculinity. He shared:

> And, but I understand that prior to my incarceration I was ignorant I didn't know, I had a lack of knowledge. And it wasn't until I got incarcerated this third time that I discovered my lack of knowledge. And I believe had I gotten an education, had I got my education I'm almost sure that I would not have gone to prison.

Overall, participants expressed perceptions of parenthood that were unique to their upbringing, social environment, and combination of human, social, and financial capital. Some male and female respondents learned to parent through the absence of positive parental figures in their own lives. For others, their blueprint to parenting was

connected to structural inequality; and therefore, the definitions of femininity and masculinity they followed took a divergent path that was often risky, dangerous, and potentially harmful to the family unit. Study participants like Trina and Dana expressed how the state (i.e., criminal legal and child welfare system) sought to punish them through re-incarceration or termination of parental rights despite their proven commitment to following community supervision requirements. As women of color, having their maternal legitimacy challenged by the state has historical antecedents. Interestingly, several respondents viewed themselves as bad parents in retrospect. The separation and absence from their children due to addiction, battles with mental health, and incarceration made many participants perceive their previous efforts at parenting as a failure.

All fifteen participants experienced one or more periods of incarceration in jail, state, or federal prison to varying lengths. While their pathways to incarceration varied, each shared unique perspectives about the experiences of being a parent behind bars. In addition, many participants discussed the transformation of their pre-carceral parental identities and the influence of the criminal legal system on this fluid process. Among the qualitative data collected, observations of gender and racial differences appeared that both corroborate previous research and contribute to the extant literature on parental incarceration.

Parental Pains of Imprisonment

The prison environment is a unique space that possesses its own culture, mores, and values (Sykes, 1958). In men's prisons, specifically, there exists a hypermasculine milieu that governs attitudes, behavior, and decision-making among its inhabitants. The

ubiquity of violent and predatory behavior (e.g., physical, and sexual assaults, sexual and economic exploitation, etc.) against individuals perceived to be less masculine or weak can have far-reaching implications for how incarcerated men navigate prison life (Williams et al., 2021; Curtis, 2014). In addition, the incarceration experience presents deprivations of rights, privileges, and access enjoyed in society. Sykes (1958) coins five main deprivations that are common experiences within prison life: liberty, access to goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security. However, as Ugelvik (2014) argues, "Sykes' list of pains of imprisonment is not exhaustive (p. 153)." For imprisoned fathers, the separation from their families and children is also painful, yet internal and external factors mitigate or aggravate the physical and mental anguish felt among this population. Variations in paternal incarceration experiences were observed among fathers of color.

The pains of imprisonment coined by Sykes (1958) are also experienced among incarcerated women. Women must also survive the deprivations of confinement all while matriculating through an institution not designed historically with them in mind (Owen et al., 2017). Incarceration for women presents a different set of gender-specific challenges that are complicated by interlocking oppressions and their interaction with HOSI's. The racist, classist, and sexist underpinnings of the criminal legal, and child welfare systems, bring forth additional barriers, challenges, and oppressive conditions for women, especially mothers (Roberts, 1993a,1993b, 2002; Garcia-Hallett, 2019). System-involved mothers and fathers in the current study shared feelings, perceptions, and challenges during their incarceration and transition to the community that appears connected on the surface; however, upon closer examination, some differences across race and gender are

evident. In the previous theme, participants' views about their parenting were explored, and factors that influenced their maternal and paternal identities. The current theme and sub-themes examine lived experiences navigating incarceration as a parent. Through the utilization of participants' narratives, I specifically underscore the gendered pains of imprisonment among incarcerated parents through the lens of intersectionality and critical race theory.

Feelings of Helplessness. Long-term separation from their children contributed to feelings of helplessness for some parents. While incarcerated, their children were left in precarious living arrangements that placed them in unstable and sometimes unsafe environments. During his sixteen-year federal prison sentence, Ray learned that one of his daughters was a victim of child sexual abuse by a family member. Now as an adult, she still deals with the unaddressed trauma from multiple sexual assaults experienced during her father's incarceration. Although these incidents occurred several years prior, Ray recalls his feelings then and now.

> Well, my oldest child, she was molested and raped by her stepdad, and her mother went on to marry the man. They're together right now. So, that really messed with me a whole lot. And my oldest child is broken behind it right now. That really broke me down in prison, not able to be there for her when that happened to her. It was always on my mind that if I was free, maybe what happened to her would've never happened. So, that messes with me a whole lot.

Ray expressed that he was "very broken inside" after being informed by his daughter what she went through as a child. Unfortunately, the impenetrable walls of prison disallow any form of physical and intimate connection between incarcerated individuals and their loved ones, beyond closely surveilled visitation rooms. The physical barriers and separation from their children may cause some incarcerated parents to reflect on their

pre-incarceration parental identities and roles. Ray provided the following response

regarding the hardest part of being a father in prison:

> Being away from the kids and not able to have that relationship that you would
> have if you were free. That's the hardest part. I mean, we can always write letters,
> send pictures, and say "we love you," but not to be able to be there with them.
> Sometimes we don't realize that until we get incarcerated, and you be like, "Man,
> why did I mess my life up like that to where I can't really properly be there for
> my kids?"

Jared corroborates the challenges of physical separation between incarcerated parents,

especially fathers, and their children.

> Children need to have access to their parents, period; to their fathers, because in
> prison, letters can only do so much, and visits are limited because they're simply
> so far out. They can't come visit because they are so far out.

In addition, it is common for incarcerated parents to experience relationship dissolution

with romantic partners due to barriers to physical and emotional connection as well as

financial contributions (Turney, 2015). The change in the relationship and family

arrangements can affect both the incarcerated parents and children. Jared's self-worth as

a father took a blow due to separation from his children through incarceration, and the

children's mother taking on a new romantic relationship.

> Yeah. The man that's supposed to me their father, he's in prison, and their mother
> done moved on. So, there's another man in the house that's not their father. That
> takes a toll on the kids. It takes a toll on me. Make me feel less than a father
> because I'm supposed to be there.

The feeling of helplessness also came about in response to perceived negative

effects of incarceration on their children. Some men believed that incarceration impacted

the lives of their children in various ways including mental health. Jared felt that his time

in prison affected the relationship he had with his children.

> It affected my relationship because I wasn't present, and it caused them to spiral
> down into a-- like my son when I went to prison, he was still in high school I

think in 10th grade. He just shut off from other people, he didn't have that person he could talk to because he could tell me things that he can't tell his mother. It caused him to have anti-social emotions. My middle girl, she was just taking each day as it goes and just going through life aimlessly. My baby girl like I told you she was having crying spells, depression, because when I came home, the teacher was telling me she's used to cry at school because they knew I was in prison. "Well, how did you know I was in prison?" Because my daughter used to act out in school, and they asked her, and she told them.

The above quote illustrates the emotional toll that children of incarcerated parents endure. Furthermore, Jared's concern over knowledge of his time in prison reflects the "eerie silence" that exists in communities where mass incarceration is pronounced (Alexander, 2010). Mass incarceration has ripple effects, and children of color, especially African American, bear the brunt of the collateral damage (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014).

While incarcerated, some parents felt that breaking free from the shackles of the criminal legal system was a daunting task. For women of color, being involved in the system is part of an exploitative scheme that is difficult to escape, especially for mothers. Ariana expressed the helplessness she felt while under community corrections:

They're [probation] looking for their money and they're looking to send you back because once they have you in the system, they make money off you. So, it's a fight. It's a fight. Especially for a woman who has kids. It's a fight to stay out here.

Linda also believed that involvement in the criminal legal system served the purpose of ensuring perpetual punishment for its captives.

The system, the way probation is set up, the money. The money. That's a big sign. They don't care nothing about, can you provide for your household and be self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency, it has nothing to do with probation, yet they wear the mask and send you to these classes and say, "Oh, this is so that you can become more self-sufficient," but the system is set up to make all your time go to them, especially if you're uncooperative like me. So, no, they don't respect the institution of family at all, not at all.

Consistent with critical-oriented literature on punishment and social control, the carceral system dehumanizes incarcerated individuals and strips them of autonomy and agency

(Sykes, 1958; Irwin, 2004). Ariana corroborates this reality when she says, "just like inside they're not worried about you as a person, you're a number." As mothers who experienced time behind bars and under supervision of probation, feelings of helplessness were recurring due to separation from their children, struggle to satisfy expectations of the criminal legal apparatus, and maintaining contact and involvement with their children. The latter proved difficult for many participants largely due to relationships with caregivers.

Barriers to Contact and Involvement. Men who desire to maintain a relationship with their children while incarcerated sometimes encounter resistance from the mother. A shared experience among many participants was maternal gatekeeping, a practice of parenting women restricting opportunities for contact and involvement between their children and the father. As Roy and Dyson (2005) argue, maternal gatekeeping in the form of "babymama drama" occurs because of romantic partnerships impacted by incarceration, declining commitment, and stressors associated with low-income family life. Several incarcerated Black fathers were victims of maternal gatekeeping despite their willingness and desire to have contact with their children behind bars. Consequently, instances of maternal blame were observed as well in different contexts among male participants.

During his most recent federal incarceration sentence, Ray did not have the opportunity to see his children despite having interest. Upon further questioning, it was discovered that Ray was transferred to several federal prisons across the United States during his sixteen-year sentence. Unlike being incarcerated in state prison, federal prisoners violated federal law and are housed in Federal Bureau of Prison (BOP) operated

facilities anywhere in the United States and its territories. Therefore, a counterargument can be presented that visitation for federal prisoners is more difficult for families, especially low-income. Ray expressed his desire yet inability to have face-to-face interaction with his children.

> That's what I missed out on. I saw other guys while I was in prison that was able to interact with their kids on a regular basis while they were in prison because they either had a significant other or someone in their family, or someone was bringing their kids up on the visiting days that we were able to visit. They were able to interact in their kids' lives on a regular basis. Unfortunately, I didn't have that opportunity.

Black federal prisoners account for a substantial proportion of the BOP inmate population. As of December 2021, approximately 38.2% of federal prisoners are Black, with roughly 97% being male (Bureau of Prisons, 2021). Therefore, visitation or the lack thereof can be particularly beneficial or damaging for Black male federal prisoners. Upon further questioning, Ray provided his reasoning for the absence of visitation with his children.

> Well, most of it was because of being too far away and broken relationships with the mother. Because when I left society, my kids were nine years old. My oldest was nine. And the broken relationship with her and her moving on with her life, she wasn't going to bring my child up to the prison. So, all I was able to do was call on the phone or write letters.
> Maternal gatekeeping was also experienced by Jared, another Black father who

encountered restrictions to contact with his children while incarcerated in the state prison system. Due to financial hardship, his ex-wife left and moved the children to California, and later to Arizona where she and his daughters remain. In discussing his relationship with the children's caregivers, Jared stated the following:

> My ex-wife relationship was okay, but like I say, she wasn't the type to keep the kids writing where I could be able to contact them and all that, because she was bouncing around here and there and like I say, she didn't have no structure because of the way she was raised. She didn't have a structure either.

Maternal blame also appeared among fathers in the study. In Jared's case, his ex-wife's upbringing was largely responsible for her instability, in his opinion. On the other hand, fathers like Ray blamed their children's mother for losing them to the [foster care] system. The children's mother was battling drug addiction; and therefore, lost custody of their two kids. Despite the totality of their situation (e.g., paternal incarceration, financial hardship, etc.), Ray applied blame to his ex-wife.

> My last two kids were taken into foster care upon my incarceration because the mother, she got on drugs. She lost our two kids, and they happened to go into the system. My 18-year-old, she just turned the age to where she can get out of foster care, and she went on with her mother, who now is clean and doing good for herself. My son has to stay because he isn't that age yet. Once he gets that age, he's going to come on back, also.

Ron, a Black father who served thirteen years in state prison, felt that his former partners spread misinformation about him to his children. When a parent is incarcerated and a tumultuous relationship exists between them and the child's caregiver, the caregiver usually holds power in deciding whether to allow contact and controls the narrative about the absent parent. As a result, some incarcerated parents try to prove themselves to their families through various ways like pursuing an education or maintaining exemplary in-prison conduct, or sobriety. For Ron, his accomplishments in prison countered some negative perceptions spewed by his ex-wife, but not all.

> Especially with my daughter, it's one of those, "Okay. My daddy made a mistake. He learned from it, because I was able to see the things that he was able to accomplish while he was in prison." My son on the other hand, he's expressed it to my mother, he hasn't really expressed it to me like, "All I knew was a bunch of lies about my daddy." So, like I say, it was different for both of my children based on how their mothers portrayed it and how their mothers allowed things to happen.

Maternal blame was heightened in situations when there was harm or neglect toward the incarcerated father's child(ren). For example, Ray expressed his feelings

toward his former partner regarding the sexual abuse his oldest daughter experienced as a child while in her custody.

> And it broke me down when she told me. I questioned her mom about it, and I never got any answers from her of why she allowed this to happen and still go on to be with the man, get married to him, have three more little kids by him. It wasn't just him. It was some guys on his side of the family, also, that mistreated my daughter in that type of way. It's a horrible thing.

The emotional breakdown Ray experienced is also connected to feelings of hopelessness and internalized guilt for not being present and serving as his daughter's protector. In his absence, the precarious home environment his children were left in is a common reality among children of incarcerated parents, especially in poor, low-income families. Some collateral consequences of mass incarceration include a gender imbalance, loss of potential marriage prospects, and financial providers in communities where concentrated disadvantage (e.g., poverty, high unemployment, high arrest, and incarceration rates, etc.) exist (Clear, 2007; Pettit, 2012). Consequently, former partners and female caregivers of the children left behind may enter potentially toxic relationships to buffer the hardships of limited to no social support. The over-and-under policing in underserved, majority-minority communities may directly play a role in the decimation and instability of families while indirectly contributing to toxic relationships and criminogenic living conditions and behaviors.

Generally, female participants received greater support from family and their children's caregivers while incarcerated. However, some issues did arise for a few women that challenged their ability to have consistent contact with their children. Barriers to contact and involvement for some mothers in the study were mostly attributed to extended family caregivers like the maternal grandmother. Women with histories of

addiction or street involvement experienced the most issues with trying to prove their

worthiness to maintain contact and regain custody of their children after release. Ariana,

for instance, encountered a dilemma with her own mother who had custody of her two

youngest children. During Ariana's eight-year state prison sentence, the maternal

grandmother vowed to relinquish custody over to the state if she did not "straighten up"

and pledge to do right when she came home. While her mother's warning served as

motivation for Ariana, she felt that stripping a woman of her children has devastating

consequences.

> It took me reaching that point to where my, the guardian of my children said, look, this is all I'm doing, no more. I'm giving you one more chance. You come home, you mess it up, I'm done. They're not yours. And it took me just sitting down for a long period of time and realizing they're really gone. These are my babies. They're my world. You can't do that. You know? And fortunately, I still had the time to fix it. I still had a guardian that was able to work with me. But you take a woman's children away, you take her life to where she doesn't want to try anymore.

Like experiences from a few male participants, some women faced perceptions the

caregiver held about them as mothers. As a result, this affected bonds with their children.

> I ran into a situation to where the caregiver that they do currently stay with, I feel is not that positive, you know, about me as a mother. So, I think that actually takes part and um, and my bond with them, with my babies.

Unlike system-involved fathers, criminalized women violate hegemonic gender norms

and expectations; therefore, the stigma they endure can be more deleterious than men

(Gunn et al., 2018). Mothers of color with involvement in the criminal legal system are

disadvantaged further and may face greater challenges (Garcia, 2016). A few mothers of

color in the study also had previous romantic partners that were incarcerated during the

same time as them. Often, these were the fathers of some or all their children which

meant that other extended family, fictive kin, or the state had to take custody of their

kids. This reality speaks volumes to the disproportionate impact of parental incarceration in communities of color.

Fears and Concern About Their Children. Another stressor or pains of imprisonment that parents in the study faced was fear and concern for their children. For many participants, their living conditions were unstable prior to incarceration. However, their removal from the family exacerbated familial and residential instability, which ultimately affected the children. Children of incarcerated fathers are most likely to reside with the mother, while children of incarcerated mothers have a higher likelihood of staying with extended family (Arditti, 2012). Black children, however, also have a high likelihood of ending up in the foster care system where they are overrepresented and often age out (Roberts, 2002). In fact, as of 2018, Black children were approximately 14% of the total child population in the United States, while nearly 23% of youth in foster care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). A few fathers shared concern about their children's wellbeing while in the custody of foster care. When asked about his foremost thoughts and concern regarding his children, Ray stated the following:

> Thinking about their care and their safety. Especially my kids that was in foster care. It wasn't a day that I didn't think about them, their care, their safety, how they're doing. Are the foster parents treating them right? That stayed on my mind constantly.

As a product of the foster care system himself, Wakeem knew the horrors he experienced as a youth. He was a victim of child abuse and ran away from home several times as a youth which led to his first contact with the juvenile justice system. Eventually, he landed in youth prison at the age of fifteen and graduated to the adult court system only a few years later. The trauma to prison pipeline actualized for Wakeem

because of his youth involvement in the foster care system and he feared his own son

falling victim to the system.

> I just didn't want him to go through the [foster care] system. I don't want her
> messing up, you know, and my kid be taken. That's what I was worried about if
> my kid is going to be okay. You know what I'm saying, or them being mistreated.
> I was in the system. I vowed to myself that if I had kids, they would never go
> through what I went through. And it hurt me. I'm in a situation where it can
> happen, you know what I'm saying? I said that my kids weren't going to go
> through this. I was worried about that.

Several respondents hoped that their children would never follow in their

footsteps and end up on a path toward incarceration. Tasha expressed concern "for them

to not follow my footsteps." In retrospect, formerly incarcerated parents in the study

acknowledged their mishaps and hoped their offspring could avoid the same mistakes and

challenges they faced. Tierra shared, "I just wish that she doesn't turn out the way that I

did." Also, participants discussed regrets that may have impacted their children and hope

for forgiveness. Linda's main fear and concern is highlighted below:

> My biggest concern for my children is not finding forgiveness for me and their
> father for the things that we exposed them to at young ages, violence, drugs,
> incarcerations… Just my biggest worry is that my kids don't find forgiveness and
> healing about all that.

Other respondents like Shantel expressed similar concerns about safeguarding their

children from contact with the criminal legal system and the collateral consequences of

being branded a felon.

> That they won't follow my footsteps. You know, I just want to be a voice now,
> because I don't want to see them, none of them go through what I'm going through
> and what I've been through and still going through.

While many respondents wished their children will avoid incarceration, some had

kids who already had a foot in the system. Therefore, the foremost fear and concern was

that their children did not fall in too deep. Tracy's experience with one of her son's illustrates this reality well.

> Oh, they don't never go to prison. I would say my main concern ... I only have ... you know my middle one that's on probation is, that he straightens up ... You know what I'm saying? Before it's too late, because now he already has a record. And he doesn't learn the hard way like I did.

The pains of imprisonment that system-involved parents experienced are not restricted to incarceration only. Upon reentering the community, respondents encountered additional experiences, challenges, and concerns.

Post-Incarceration Experiences of System-Involved Parents

The gendered pains of imprisonment that many parents experience during incarceration follow them upon release. Previous research establishes that pre-incarceration relationships largely determine incarcerated parents' experiences with their children during their imprisonment (Arditti, 2012; Saunders, 2017; Tasca, 2018; Kennedy et al., 2020). Moreover, incarceration experiences of system-involved parents may also influence their navigation of reentry into society, especially family life. Below, participants' narratives highlight some of the lived experiences that formerly incarcerated parents face in the immediate aftermath of release and over time.

Short-lived Honeymoon. After exiting confinement, many returning citizens experience a gamut of emotions. The foreseeable opportunity of freedom brings about excitement, anxiety, and fear to name a few. For individuals with familial and other social supports awaiting their return, expectations of a welcoming reunion or "honeymoon" phase is common (Naser & La Vigne, 2006). During the days and coming weeks after release, a harmonious phase occurs where family members, friends, and extended community express overwhelming joy and support for the individual returning

home. Formerly incarcerated parents may experience variations of the honeymoon phase if they maintained contact with their children while away. However, as several participants shared, this period after release is short-lived.

Several respondents encountered issues with their children not long after returning home. An assortment of problems arose mostly in the form of mistrust. Interestingly, participants with previous incarceration histories, long-term sentences, or battles with addiction faced mistrust from their children most commonly. Ariana, a Hispanic mother with a history of drug addiction, encountered mistrust from her youngest son and daughter who both engaged in harmful behavioral practices like self-harm and emotional detachment. Shortly after returning home and reuniting with her two dependent children, Ariana found work; however, her daughter engaged in self-harm out of fear she would not return.

> When I had to go to work was the worst time because she, I guess she thought I walk out that door I'm not coming back or something. She would throw a fit like there was no tomorrow. She would scratch herself I mean, big time. There were some nights I would have to be like, okay, you know, I'll have to go in a little bit later or something just to calm her down.

As of result of harmful behavior among both of her dependent children, Ariana sought counseling to help address the root causes of their pain and mistrust. She expressed that her son was the most difficult to deal with.

> This past year I started them in counseling because I feel like there's things that they can't talk to me about that they, you know, can talk to somebody else. And Ismael is the hard one he's like, oh, well you can take me but I'm not going to talk. You know, he tries to put this big old hard front on like nothing bothers him, but their father killed himself when they were like six years old, and I was incarcerated when it happened. And so, he, you know, just kind of acts out and he says things that bother me in a way.

La'Tasha experienced mistrust by her two young boys since their little brother's death happened because of her drinking. Her third child died by La'Tasha unknowingly leaving him in the car for several hours after blacking out from binge drinking. After returning home to her remaining children, she struggled with regaining trust and rebuilding the emotional wound from the tragic loss of their brother.

> I remember my son saying, Momma, can I smell your breath? And, I didn't say "I'm your momma, what you mean can you smell my breathe?!" Although I didn't drink, I had to understand it wasn't about him. He wants to know if he could trust me again. Can I trust that in that Sonic cup is not just slushy with vodka, can I trust you with it? And so, I had to understand that I have to reestablish that trust with them.

Similarly, Ariana had to earn trust back from her children, especially since she had previous arrests and a history of addiction.

> Um, they were very closed off. Um, they were very non-trusting. Nothing I said was valid at first, I could tell them I'm going to the store. Oh, are you really? Yeah. You know, um, there was a huge adjustment period and it's because they were older. The baby I had no problem with of course, you know, he didn't know any different. But the two oldest that live with me and especially my, the one that's in college, that doesn't live with me he's, you know, it took him a while to know are you really in for this? Are you really going to do this? Are you really going to stay clean? You know, why were you out late last night? Where were you? What were you doing? You know, it's just, it took longer this time cause they're older.

Some participants believed that the task of maintaining positive relationships with their children was easier while incarcerated. According to Ariana, "I mean it was easy in there and then when I got home, that's kind of when it changed up and it got harder." Also, due to their incarceration, some respondents felt their parental legitimacy and authority were gone or significantly diminished; as a result, they treaded carefully with their children out of guilt for being absent. Kim, a Black mother, stated: "I kind of have to set the boundaries but we are getting it together. I should've just come home, you

know, setting boundaries instead of trying to be cool and all that." Even non-minority

parents expressed similar concerns. For instance, Tracy, a White mother with six biracial

children stated the following:

> I know sometimes I don't like to get on my kids, especially being away for so long. In and out of their life, in jail. I don't like to be hard on them because I feel like I haven't been around enough to discipline and stuff like that.

Similarly, Eve, a Black mother, believed that her authority as a formerly incarcerated

parent was strained; therefore, the internalized guilt she felt made her be passive towards

her children:

> Since I haven't been around my kids, I feel like I have to bend over for them you know what I'm saying? Like whatever they want, you know, because I'm steady apologizing for not being around. You know what I'm saying? That's my way of apologizing to them, you know, kind of like spoiling them and I, it's not good and it's not right. But I just feel like it's my job to do that because I took time away from them, you know what I'm saying? And I know I hurt them also in the process, so I'm kind of like, what, what do you want, whatever you want, you know? I know it's not right to be like that, but that's how I am.
>
> While incarcerated, participants like Terrence had ideas about the post-release

honeymoon phase but did not expect to face a different reality upon return.

> Well, when I was on the inside, I always had this utopian view of what life would be like for me and my sons once I got out because my sons always had this idea that, "Man, when my dad get home, my dad get home" this, that, and the other thing. Well, it's almost three weeks later, and I've only seen them once. I saw them the day I got out. So, for me, and I talked to my brother-in-law about it the other day because I'm not really in tune with the feeling, but it's a feeling like everything I thought, is not, you know what I'm saying? It wasn't happy.

For system-involved parents who served longer prison sentences and returned to adult

children, the tremendous loss of time contributed to a less than ideal honeymoon phase.

The adult children of these participants grew up in their parent's absence and started their

own lives and families. Therefore, the return of their formerly incarcerated parent had little emotional impact. Terrence stated:

> But then I talked to my youngest son last night. He was like, "Daddy, you know we glad that you home." He said, "But we got lives. We have lives, too. We got jobs, we got kids we've got to take care of. And sometimes time just get away from people." So, I've been trying to extend an olive branch, so to speak, to let them know, "Man, it wouldn't make me a difference if you didn't even stop, just come by and wave, and, you know what I'm saying, continue to go do what you're doing." So, it's been affecting me a little strangely because they're grown men. They have responsibilities of their own. But I think that the idea, the thought that I had in my head about how the reunion would be, it hasn't been like that. So, what they call it? Self-fulfilling prophecy or something like that?

Some formerly incarcerated parents returned to adult children who bore the invisible scars from unaddressed trauma experienced during their absence. Ray, for example, expected to physically embrace his oldest daughter in a reciprocal fashion. However, the childhood sexual abuse she endured during her father's sixteen-year federal prison sentence still affected her. In asking about any issues encountered with his children immediately after release, Ray shared the following:

> I mean, my oldest child, she's broken. I found out that she had got married, and she's in a same-sex relationship. She doesn't like to be hugged by men. She's so broken behind what she endured, what happened to her in the past, that she was even uncomfortable with me giving her a hug after all these years of me being in prison. That really hurt me. That messed with me a lot. I reached out to hug her, and she was very uncomfortable with me hugging her. I was just hugging her from father to daughter since being out of her life all this time. But, on her side, she's still dealing with what she went through when she was younger, and she was uncomfortable with me hugging her.

The absence of, or short-lived honeymoon phase for respondents in the current study was met with post-release challenges soon after. Some participants began facing hardships immediately upon release, while others started experiencing challenges and barriers later. The extant literature on mass incarceration and prisoner reentry

corroborates that system-involved individuals face numerous collateral consequences after being labeled a felon (Alexander, 2010; Travis, 2005; Middlemass, 2017; Petersilia, 2003; Williams et al., 2019). However, formerly incarcerated men and women with dependent children share additional challenges and dire circumstances due to their role and status as parents.

Protecting their Children. In the United States, parents of color must deal with the burden of raising their children in a racist society (Roberts, 1993a). The adultification of Black children contributes to them being perceived as older, more aggressive, and threatening which can have fatal consequences (Goff et al., 2014). To mitigate these racist perceptions, parents of color have honest conversations with their children about how to interact "properly" with law enforcement, for example (Cintron et al., 2019; Gonzalez, 2019). Parents under surveillance of the state (i.e., child welfare, probation, parole, etc.) must employ strategies to shield and protect themselves and their children from harm and criminalization (Elliott & Reid, 2019; Gurusami, 2019). La'Tasha, a Black mother of two boys, shared her mitigation strategy.

> I think my biggest concern are my sons being African American men right now, really that is my biggest, and I hate to say fear, but it's valid right now and what we live in. And so even as a mom, even as an African American woman, I can get pulled over and I can bat my eyelashes and you know say, "Hi, how you doing" and smile a little bit, but as an African American man, him getting pulled over, uh, "I'm about to reach my hand in my left pocket officer and I'm going to pull out my wallet." See I teach them that now because it's real and they like Momma really? Son to be aware is to be alive because you have to right now, you're in a position as young men and you have to tell them [police] what you're going to do.

Other participants encountered challenges with criminal justice agencies and the child welfare system. While on probation for a previous arrest, Ariana followed all the steps to

satisfying community supervision conditions; however, she was still sent back to prison

for failure to pay probation fees for a year.

> All they're worried about is their money and wanting to lock you back up again. Wanting to get that next chance to lock you back up again. And I say that because I was on probation. I had two children at home; I wasn't able to pay my probation fees for a year and they sent me back to prison. I did every UA [urinalysis] I did all the rehabs. I had my own apartment; I paid my own bills. I had my own children in my custody. They were taking care of, fed, went to school. The baby was taken care of. And just because I couldn't, I, if they would've asked me that piss green for them, I would. I never failed a UA; I never did anything wrong. I couldn't pay my fees and they send me back to prison.

Ariana's rearrest while on probation illustrates the structural violence inherent in the

prisoner reentry industry and community supervision agencies (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019).

Instead of supporting system-involved individuals and ensuring their successful transition

into society, this web of agencies and organizations engage in punitive practices (e.g.,

technical violations) that put their freedom in constant jeopardy. Even under probation

and parole, individuals must decide between their own well-being and abiding by

conditions of community supervision (Ortiz & Wrigley, 2020). The liminal or conditional

freedom that participants like Ariana face ultimately harm the children who once again

are separated from their parents by the state.

Many study participants lost their children to the foster care system either before

or during incarceration. In this study, most of the participants with foster care

involvement are Black which previous research substantiates (Roberts, 2002, 2012).

Despite efforts to regain custody of their children in the foster care system, some

respondents felt the task proved more difficult because of their race and gender. Eve had

three young children that were in the foster care system. She felt that being a Black

woman with several kids in the system worked against her.

And the things that I'm going through, you know, trying to get my kids back. It's like I'm red flagged, you know what I'm saying? I feel very offended by it, but at same time, I keep on walking with my head up. That's all I can do.

Interestingly, formerly incarcerated Black mothers like Dana felt the stronghold of addiction was so powerful that it was better a few of her children remained in the custody of family. Through this living arrangement, they would be safe from intrusion by the state, while also protected from exposure to her battles with addiction and mental health. She mentioned that a good mother does not have to live with or have custody of her children. In expressing her reasoning, Dana said the following:

I feel like my children are better off living with family and that way I don't have to worry about if I were to make a mistake, the state will come back, which is what they have done in the past.

Male participants in the study faced different slightly different circumstances with their children during the adjustment period after release. Since several system-involved fathers returned to older, adult children on average, their concerns were mainly about missed opportunities to protect them in earlier years from harm or structural disadvantages (e.g., poverty, school dropout). Nate's son died from being involved in street life while he was in prison yet blamed himself for his son's death. He states, "actually my son that just recently passed was the result of my absence. I wasn't a provider. I wasn't none of this." Not only did Nate feel that he failed one of his biological children, but also children in the community he left. According to Nate, "I misled children in my own neighborhood and so they picked up and ran from where I left them." The internalization of guilt came as a result of feeling that his prior actions and pathway to prison led to premature death and destruction for his own son and youth in the community.

Several fathers had children that faced instability in living arrangements, economic status, and exposure to criminogenic conditions. One of Terrence's sons lived with several family members during his incarceration. Throughout the formative and adolescent years of his life, his son experienced many harms and disadvantages. Terrence describes his son's circumstances below:

> Because he told me one time, I think he was 14 or 15, that somebody had pulled a gun on him, one of his mom's boyfriends or husband. He pulled a gun on him. But it's a lot of stuff over the years that wasn't normal for a kid to experience. But he experienced it. And to me, he was a miracle, you know what I'm saying? Because when you talk about the deck being stacked against someone to make it, it was unreal, you know what I'm saying? From the poverty to just trying to navigate through life, and go to school, and have little relationships here and there. Everything was stacked against him.

Terrence was incarcerated in state prison for nearly thirty years and held many regrets about the inability to protect at least one of his children from experiencing a childhood denied. To make up for lost time and strained relationships, some men engaged in redemptive fathering, a process involving strategies to regain trust, rebuild bonds, or "redo fatherhood." For the latter, this materialized through a new opportunity at fathering newborn children after release from incarceration.

Redemptive fathering for Terrence actualized by him learning to be a father through his two adult sons. He believed his rights as a father were unofficially terminated and took a voluntary subjugated position to both adult children.

> It's like I'm learning on the fly, because I'm not trying to be that typical, traditional father figure. Because I gave that up. I lost that right. So, I need them to be fine with however our relationship is going to work moving forward.

Since his two adult sons have their own family and personal responsibilities, Terrence makes sure not to encroach on their time and space. Instead, he shows willingness to let them guide the relationship going forward. Wakeem saw his newborn child as a second

chance at being a good father. After being out of prison for a few years, he had another child with his new partner. Due to his own childhood experiences in foster care, youth, and adult prison, Wakeem desperately wanted his son to break the mold. He states: "My concern is for him to be better than me. To be better than his father and successful, accomplished. Accomplish goals that I couldn't accomplish, and most important, break the family generational curse." To Wakeem, safeguarding his newborn son from HOSI's is part of the path toward redemption.

Conclusion

The current chapter attempts to grasp some of the pre-incarceration identities, incarceration, and reentry experiences of parents navigating the criminal legal system. The results highlighted throughout the chapter underscore the importance of examining parental incarceration qualitatively and through an intersectional lens. Since most respondents (N=22) identified as people of color and interfaced with a historically oppressive state institution or HOSI (i.e., criminal legal system), CRT is an appropriate analytical tool to be used in contextualizing their narratives. Moreover, respondents' membership in multiple intersecting categories of disadvantage (e.g., racial minorities, economically disadvantaged, formerly incarcerated, etc.) warrants empirical inquiry through the lens of intersectionality. In contrast to previous research, the current study utilizes qualitative data to explore the nuanced lived experiences of system-involved parents navigating the carceral state. In the following chapter, a thorough analysis of the study results will be provided along with policy implications and directions for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings covered in the previous chapter underscore the importance of having a holistic picture of system-involved parents. While quantitative research on parental incarceration has previously examined the effects on children in a variety of outcomes, qualitative methodological approaches utilized in the current study fill a void. The findings in this study underscore the intersectional realities faced by formerly incarcerated parents returning to their families and communities. Rather than focus extensively on the negative outcomes associated with parental incarceration, the data presented in the current study deepens our understanding of the collateral consequences of incarceration from the perspectives of system-involved parents (and by extension, their families) themselves. A theoretical and empirical exploration of reentry into family life for formerly incarcerated parents has not been adequately undertaken in the disciplines of criminology and criminal justice using critical theories, focused exclusively on men and women combined, using qualitative methods only. In addition, narratives from study respondents challenge monolithic and strictly criminal justice solutions. Instead, culturally competent, institutional, and community-based programming can potentially remedy issues faced by respondents. The sections that follow provide an analysis of major themes that emerged in the findings and their connection to intersectionality and CRT, policy implications grounded in participants' narratives, and directions for future research.

Divergent Parenting and Critical Race Theory

In his seminal work *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, Derrick Bell (1992) made a provocative but cogent argument that racism is deeply ingrained and indestructible in American society so long as the dominant White majority feels unaffected by the existing status quo. Furthermore, he critiqued colorblind strategies to combat racism and its effects. The permanence of racism in American society and its institutions are recognized in CRT, and the criminal legal apparatus (e.g., police, courts, corrections) is not detached from this reality. Each respondent had contact with the criminal legal apparatus from arrest through imprisonment in a county, state, or federal correctional facility. While most participants were racial minorities, there were nuances among their pre-incarceration perceptions of parenting, incarceration experiences, and reentry challenges faced. The following sections provide a summation of divergent parenting, or the non-traditional strategies of parenting based on one's social environment (see Elliott et al., 2018, 2019; Verduzco-Baker, 2017).

Many respondents' pathways to parenthood differed from White, middle-class values and expectations, yet their concerns about parenting were similar. The community disadvantage (e.g., poverty, high crime, and unemployment, etc.) embedded in neighborhoods where several participants were raised or lived with their children shaped parenting philosophies and practices. Before arrest and incarceration, some female respondents shared that they performed maternal labor with scarce financial and social support (e.g., respondents Yolanda and Trina). A combination of poverty, addiction, mental health abnormalities, and low educational attainment constrained their ability to provide tangible resources (e.g., finances) (e.g., Dana—addiction) to their children.

Instead, intangible resources (e.g., emotional support, spending time together, giving advice, etc.) allowed mothers to compensate for their shortcomings as seen with La'Tasha and Ariana among others. For some participants, past hardships and life experiences motivated them to make immense sacrifices to ensure their children had the opportunity to overcome the limitations of their immediate environment. Ariana, for example, works two jobs sometimes to afford sending her son [Ismael] to "that gifted school."

On the other hand, several male respondents' perceptions of fatherhood mirrored expectations of hegemonic masculinity (e.g., protector, breadwinner, etc.). Before incarceration, however, some men developed what Williams et al. (2019) coin as divergent masculinities. Mostly visible among fathers of color, the pathway and enactment of fatherhood were through a process of risky and dangerous behavior. For instance, involvement in street life by selling illicit drugs, and engagement in sexually promiscuous behavior, were in part due to transmitted definitions of masculinity, as well as educational failure, the allure of easy money, and other associated pressures growing up in ghettoized communities (e.g., respondents Terrence and Nate). The manifestation of divergent masculinity was evident in the pre-incarceration perceptions of fatherhood for several men of color in this study (see respondents Terrence and Nate). Black males navigating urban, low-income communities may face greater exposure to drugs, violence, and joblessness; therefore, illegitimate forms of work (e.g., selling drugs) may allow one to earn respect and financial capital consistent with Richardson's, 2015 work. For low-income fathers in structurally disadvantaged communities, involvement in the underground economy is an easy and accessible way to provide for their family despite

violating the criminal law (Grundetjern et al., 2019). Interestingly, some participants'

conceptions of masculinity indirectly contributed to their pathway to incarceration. For

example, Terrence spoke at length about growing up in the ghetto and being misinformed

about fatherhood; the rites of passage he speaks of involve being sexually active and

going to prison.

Underserved Families and Historically Oppressive Systems and Institutions

While many respondents took personal accountability for landing in jail or prison

(e.g., Nate) and worked to improve their lives, in some cases, their efforts were not

respected by HOSI's (e.g., child protective services, criminal justice agencies, etc.) (e.g.,

Ariana, Linda, and Trina) and led to further system involvement (e.g., Ariana was

rearrested for not paying probation fee). Consequently, some system-involved parents

lost custody of their children or were reincarcerated despite showing commitment to the

state. However, their commitment to the state was not reciprocated and resulted in further

separation of already underserved families. Roberts (2002) in-depth exploration into the

child welfare system in the United States uncovered racist and classist underpinnings;

specifically, poor, marginalized Black women are the primary targets of having their

children removed by the state. Moreover, an overlap of the criminal legal, and child

welfare systems in the lives of poor women of color exacerbates existing social inequality

and places their freedom to be a mother in constant jeopardy (Roberts, 2012). Several

Black system-involved mothers in the study deployed parenting strategies to avoid Elliott

and Reid's (2019) concept of family criminalization or the combined vulnerability of

Black mothers and their children to state surveillance and punishment. The preoccupation

with HOSIs in underserved families and communities deepens distrust and increases marginalization.

Findings of HOSIs in the lives of underserved families must be situated within the legacies of slavery and mechanisms of racialized social control today. During slavery, the breakup and separation of mothers, fathers, and children decimated the institution of family among the Black population (Blassingame, 1979). In the present day, the criminal legal and child welfare systems have served similar functions through heightened surveillance, intervention, and criminal enforcement in poor and disenfranchised communities that are overwhelmingly majority-minority. Consequently, arrests, child protective services intervention, and foster care involvement are greater in communities of color and employ punitive social control functions against already underserved families. Several respondents' (e.g., see Ariana and Trina) experiences with HOSI's corroborate this reality.

<u>Recommendations for Research and Policy</u>

When asked what more could be done to help system-involved parents upon returning home, I was able to elicit many different yet connected responses from my participants. In conducting qualitative research with marginalized populations, it is important to respect and value their input and perspectives regarding solutions. It was an intentional strategy to hear from respondents about how we might best assist system-involved parents during their transition back into the "free world." Several participants expressed the importance of being housed at correctional facilities in close proximity to their children. It would allow incarcerated parents and their children to have close contact that could be critical to maintaining a positive relationship. For instance, Ray was serving

a federal sentence and often transferred out of state, while some respondents serving state prison time (e.g., Tasha and Tracy) rarely or never received an in-person visit due to distance. Family-centered counseling was also recommended by many respondents. A safe space for the returning parent to repair broken relationships and heal with their children (and spouse/caregiver) was discussed. Ray, for example, wished for family-based counseling with his ex-wife and oldest daughter to address her [daughter] trauma from sexual abuse during childhood. The need for better housing options reemerged especially for mothers who feared halfway houses in unsafe areas and wanted safe, transitional housing where they can live with their dependent children. Vanessa, for instance, stated, "I feel like the halfway houses need to be moved to better areas because a lot of them…if you go check them a dope house is like not far from it."

The recommendations featured above reflect concerns and perspectives from system-involved parents who speak from personal experience. While these recommendations are not exhaustive or generalizable to the entire population of system-involved parents, they mirror concerns and proposed solutions in previous research on parental incarceration and prisoner reentry (e.g., Middlemass, 2017; Arditti & Few, 2006; Barrick et al., 2014; Yocum & Nath, 2011; Arditti et al., 2005). Additionally, the current study underscores the importance of examining parental incarceration and reentry through an intersectional lens.

Previous literature substantiates that the mark of a criminal record disadvantages people of color more than Whites (Pager, 2003; Pager et al., 2009; Alexander, 2010). In the context of prisoner reentry, formerly incarcerated men and women of color face unique challenges and barriers that are largely shaped by racial stigma, and the

confluence of racism, classism, and sexism in American society and its institutions (Ortiz & Jackey, 2019; Williams et al., 2019; Garcia-Hallet, 2019; Frazier, 2014). Therefore, policy implications derived from the current study point to the need for culturally competent reentry programming. Ortiz and Jackey (2019) argue against a "one size fits all approach" to prisoner reentry programming since the process as experienced, is not uniform. Since all respondents in this study are parents, such reentry programming would recognize the intersectional identities of returning citizens, including their role as parents.

Participants also expressed concerns about protecting their children from system-involvement and helping them overcome past traumas and mental health issues. Many felt helpless in reconnecting with their children after release. In addition, some dealt with mistrust from their children and blame for past wrongdoing. Restorative justice circles involving system-involved parents and their children could aid in repairing harm and mistrust. Roberts (2019) imagines a restorative justice framework for Black mothers involved in the prison and foster care systems and calls on scholars and advocates to move beyond reformist ideas and embrace a radical form of healing through dialogue that is not controlled by the state. I extend this radical reimagination by suggesting restorative justice that is community-based, culturally competent, and specifically tailored for system-involved parents of color. Caution must be exercised here in the use of 'community." Community usually denotes a/the desire to foster close humane links within a troubled and fragmented population. It is clear, then, from my findings of the respondents, that to produce a fixed meaning for such a fluid discursive and practical construction is a project of dubious value. In recognition that monolithic approaches to

reentry assistance underserves minoritized groups, programming should reflect their varied realities and lived experiences.

Future research should follow the current study's qualitative methodological approach to explore perceptions and lived experiences of system-involved parents that quantitative research does not capture. Qualitative methods can take a deep dive into the personal and build social empathy that can translate into actionable outcomes which in turn, influence policy (e.g., post-George Floyd and criminal justice reform). The overrepresentation of Black men and women in the sample reflects prior studies on reentry (e.g., Frazier, 2014; Gurusami, 2019; Williams et al., 2019); however, future research should consider other qualitative methodologies such as grounded theory, case study, or life-history interviews to interrogate the social implications of race or "racecraft" (Fields & Fields, 2014) that may further contextualize the racialized and gendered experiences of Black system-involved parents specifically. Finally, qualitative research on parenting and prisoner reentry that is inclusive of system-involved parents, children, spouses, and caregivers could provide more in-depth information that can better inform policies designed to assist individuals during the post-incarceration reintegration period.

While there has been extensive policy discussion on prisoner reentry (Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005; Clear, 2007; Middlemass, 2017), a dearth of national, state, and local policies focuses on system-involved parents. In addition, gender-inclusive policy that addresses incarcerated and returning mothers and fathers are limited. On the federal level, the *Pathway to Parenting Act of 2018*, or H.R. 5575, was a bill introduced in the United States House of Representatives in 2018 (Pathway to Parenting Act, 2018). The bill

establishes the following: (1) directs the BOP to place prisoners as close to their children as possible while providing free videoconferencing and trauma-informed care; (2) for prisoners who are primary caretaker parents, the BOP must provide parenting classes, allow visitation from family, and create a pilot program allowing overnight visits from family; and (3) allows pregnant or primary caretaker parents to participate in a residential substance abuse treatment program even if a substance abuse problem is not disclosed. Currently, the bill has not yet passed; however, I argue a need for a few recommendations.

First, the Pathway to Parenting Act should be localized. As a federal bill, if passed, it would be restricted to the federal level. However, criminal justice is primarily a state and local function (Marion & Oliver, 2011); therefore, the bill would impact a larger population of incarcerated parents if expanded. Second, such a policy should be equally applied to incarcerated men and women with dependent children. Narratives from male respondents speak to the concerns and interests incarcerated fathers have in maintaining positive relationships with their children despite mothers being the primary caretaker parent more often. Most importantly, study results underscore the critical need for policies that take into consideration the disproportionate impact of criminal law and enforcement on individuals, families, and communities of color. Policymakers should review and be informed by existing research that shows the significance of race on criminal justice matters and the pivotal role the state has played in the destruction of marginalized families. Readers can conclude from the study's findings and analysis that the divergence we see in these justice-impacted families is a result of their interfacing

with the system—and that if we comprehend this reality intersectionally, race and gender

are significant factors.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

MOTHERHOOD AND REENTRY INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

MOTHERHOOD AND REENTRY
INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. The interview will begin with some basicdemographic questions.

1. How would you describe your race/ethnicity?
2. How old are you?
3. How many children do you have?
   a. Biological?
   b. Step-children?
   c. Adopted?
   d. Are there any other children that you are involved in raising or have beeninvolved in raising?
4. How old are your children?
   a. If minors, do you have custody?
5. What is your current living arrangement? [i.e., own apartment/house, transitionalhousing, friend/family]

Now, I want to ask a few questions regarding your views as a mother.

❖ In your opinion, what are some qualities of a good mother? How about a badmother?
❖ What are some things you do as a mother?
❖ Research shows that society's ideas of a good mother are different for whitewomen and women of color. Do you feel this is true? Explain.
❖ How do you view yourself as a mother?
❖ What do you feel are some expectations of you as a mother? How do you feelabout these expectations?
❖ Do you believe that mothers with experiences of incarceration can still be goodmothers? Explain.
❖ Do you feel that the labor you put in as a mother is respected?
   o By family?
   o Friends?
   o Employers?
   o State Supervision (i.e., parole, child welfare)?
❖ Since your release, do you feel you have had enough financial , social, andemotional support to meet your parental expectations?
❖ Some people argue that a woman must live with her children to be considered agood mother. What do you think?

Now, I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences after returningfrom prison.

❖ How long has it been since your release?
❖ How prepared were you for reentry back into society?

❖ Were you released under
parole? If so, what were the conditions of your parole?How did you fe
el about this?
- o How did being on parole affect your relationship with your chil
  d(ren)?

❖ Did being a mother
on parole present any challenges with your parole officer?

❖ Have you noticed people look at
you and/or treat you differently because youwere incarcerated and
have children?

Mother-Child Relationships:

❖ Were you the primary caregiver of your children
before your incarceration?

❖ What happened to your children while you were incarcerated?
- o Who did they live with?
- o How is your relationship with the caregiver?

❖ Did your children visit while you were incarcerated?
- o How often?
- o Was the caregiver supportive of visits?
- o How were your children
  transported to visits while you were incarcerated?

❖ Upon release, what were the expectations of becoming the primary
caregiver ofyour children?
- o Your expectations?
- o Caregivers expectations?
- o Children's expectations?

❖ Do you live with your children now?
- o How long after release did your children live with you full-
  time?
- o Did you have any issues with your children during the
  adjustment periodafter release?
- o If your children do not live with you, why?
  - ▪ Were you included in making this decision?
  - ▪ How do you feel about this arrangement?
- o Is child welfare involved? How? How do you feel about this?
  - ▪ Can you tell me about your experiences with child
    welfare?
  - ▪ How has child welfare affected the relationshi
    p with yourchildren?
  - ▪ What problems, if any, have you faced dealing with
    child welfare?

❖ How has your relationship with your children changed
from release to now?

❖ Do you think your identity as a mother has influenced your experiences sinceyou've been released?

❖ What have been the greatest challenge(s) you faced as a mother since yourrelease?

❖ Do you have any exciting moments you've experienced as a mother since yourrelease?

❖ Do you believe your race/ethnicity has presented challenges to your reentry?How?

❖ How important is your race/ethnicity in terms of how you raise your child(ren)?

    o What cultural traditions, if any, do you use as a mother? Try to show orteach your child(ren)?

❖ How are incarceration and reentry experiences different for women with childrenthan women without children?

We are about to wrap up the interview. I have a few concluding questions.

❖ What are your thoughts about reentry programs for women where you live?

    o Can you describe any services, organizations, or groups that help mothersreturning home from prison?

    o Since your release, have you taken advantage of any of these communityresources?

    o In your opinion, what more could be done to help mothers returning fromjail or prison?

❖ What is your biggest concern for your children? If you had one wish for them,what would it be?

❖ Have your experiences led you to engage in any kind of activism, volunteer work,or public speaking since your release?

❖ What advice would you give to mothers returning home?

That is the end of our interview.
Is there anything else you would like to share?

APPENDIX B

FATHERHOOD AND REENTRY INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

FATHERHOOD AND REENTRY INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. I will begin by asking you some questionsregarding your views about fatherhood.

Section 1: Perceptions of Fatherhood

1. What does it mean to you to be a father?
2. In your opinion, what are some qualities of a good father? How about a bad father?
3. How do you view yourself as a father? [probe]
4. Do you feel the efforts you put in as a father are respected by your family?
   a. Intimate Partner? [probe]
   b. Child(ren)? [probe]
5. Do you believe that fathers who have been incarcerated can still be good fathers? Explainwhy or why not.
6. Do you believe that a man must live with his children to be considered a good father?Why or why not?
7. In your opinion, how should a father be judged?

Section 2: Incarceration and Fatherhood

8. Did prison/jail affect how you view yourself as a father?
9. How did prison/jail affect your relationship with your child(ren)?
10. Did your child(ren) know you were in prison/jail?
    a. How was it explained to them?
    b. What was their reaction?
11. Were you able to have contact with your child(ren) while incarcerated? If yes, how? Ifnot, why?
12. Who did they live with?
    a. Did you approve of this?
    b. Was it a safe and healthy living environment?
    c. How was your relationship with their caregiver?
13. What were your thoughts and concerns about your children while you were incarcerated?
14. In your opinion, what is the hardest part of being a father in prison/jail?
15. In your opinion, are incarceration experiences different for men with children? If so,how?

Now I would like to ask a few questions about your experiences after transitioning backinto society.

Section 3: Reentry Experiences

16. In your opinion, how prepared were you to reenter society?
17. Did you receive any reentry assistance while incarcerated?
18. What were some immediate challenges you faced after release? [probe]

       a. Housing?

       b. Employment?

       c. Family Support?

19. Were you released under probation or parole? If so, what are/were the conditions?

20. Did/do you experience any challenges while on probation or parole? [probe]

21. Did being on probation or parole affect your relationship and/or involvement with yourchild(ren)?

22. Do you feel that race has been a factor in the challenges you faced after release? If so, inwhat way(s)? [probe]

23. In your opinion, are reentry experiences different for men with children? If so, how?

Father-Child Relationship

24. After release, what were your expectations of having contact with your child(ren)?

       a. Involvement with them?

       b. Living together?

25. Did you experience any issues with your children after reuniting with them? [probe]

26. How has your relationship with your children changed since your release? [probe]

27. Have you faced any barriers (e.g., caregiver, child support, transportation issues, etc.) thatmake it difficult for you to be involved with your child(ren)? If so, explain.

       a. Have you overcome these barriers?

28. Do you have any exciting moments you have experienced as a father since your release?

29. What is your biggest concern for your children? If you had one wish for them, whatwould it be?

30. If any, what effect did fatherhood have on your life after incarceration?

Father-Caregiver Relationship

31. How did the caregiver feel about you getting out?

32. How long did it take before you could see/visit your child(ren)?

33. Were there any issues regarding your child(ren)? If so, why? [probe]

34. Do they support you having a relationship with your child(ren)? If not, why? [probe]

35. Have they been supportive of you during your transition back into society? [probe]

We are about to wrap up the interview. I have a few concluding questions.

36. What programs/services,
if any, have you taken advantage of since your release?
    a.   Have they helped? If so, explain?
37. In your opinion, what more could be
done to help men with children returning fromprison/jail? [probe]
38. What advice, if any, would you give to fathers returning home
from being incarcerated?

That is the end of our interview. Is there anything else you would like to share?

APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL

TEXAS SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY
Office of Research

July 14, 2021

Good day, Michael Mitchell!

This is to inform you that your protocol #**ES036**, *"Parenting from the Margins: The Lived Experiences of Reentry into Family Life"*, is exempt from Texas Southern University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) full committee review. Based on the information provided in the research summary and other information submitted, your research procedures meet the exemption category set forth by the federal regulation 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2):

> *Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).*
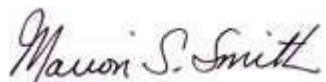
The Federal Wide Assurance (FWA) number assigned to Texas Southern University is FWA00003570.

If you have questions, you may contact the Research Compliance Administrator for the Office of Research at 713-313-4301.

PLEASE NOTE: (1) All subjects must receive a copy of the informed consent document, if applicable. If you are using a consent document that requires participants' signatures, signed copies can be retained for a minimum of 3 years of 5 years for external supported projects. Signed consents from student projects will be retained by the faculty advisor. Faculty is responsible for retaining signed consents for their own projects, however, if the faculty leaves the university, access must be made available to TSU CPHS in the event of an agency audit. (2) Documents submitted to the Office of Research indicate that information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subject; and the identities of the subjects will not be obtained or published; and any disclosures of the human subjects' responses outside the research will not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation. The exempt status is based on this information. If any part

of this understanding is incorrect, the PI is obligated to submit the protocol for review by the CPHS before beginning the respective research project. (3) Research investigators will promptly report to the CPHS any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects and others.

This protocol will expire July 14, 2024

Sincerely,
Marion Smith, PhD,
Chair Institutional
Review Board (IRB)

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