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## Maternal Absence of Female Offenders Convicted of a Violent Crime

Smarlyn Colon  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Smarlyn Colon

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Stephen Hampe, Committee Chairperson, Psychology Faculty  
Dr. Jessica Hart, Committee Member, Psychology Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost  
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2024

Abstract

Maternal Absence of Female Offenders Convicted of a Violent Crime

by

Smarlyn Colon

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

May 2024

## Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of maternal absence of female offenders convicted of a violent crime from the perspective of violent female offenders. Two research questions were addressed: (a) how female offenders convicted of a violence offense describe their lived experiences with their mother's absence due to incarceration and (b) how maternal absence due to incarceration feature on female offenders' reflections of what led to their violent offending. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to analyze data collected from 13 participants using semi structured interviews. The results revealed four themes: (a) the mother-child bond was positive and strong prior to maternal absence, (b) maternal absence caused emotional distress that other caregivers could only partially alleviate, (c) maternal incarceration was associated with negative developmental outcomes, and (d) negative developmental outcomes stemming from maternal absence led to criminal behavior and incarceration. Insights from the findings of this study both confirm and extend existing knowledge in the discipline of criminology. Positive social changes with the implementation of alternative sentencing options, such as community-based rehabilitation, to support incarcerated mothers and their families to maintain contact with their children and reduce the intergenerational impact of incarceration. The understanding of the role of maternal absence concerning the criminal behavior of female violent offenders. This led to implementing of interventions or policies to address the problem of violent offenses committed by women. As a result, these women can then lead an offense-free lifestyle, having a positive impact on their families.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God for His unwavering guidance, encouragement, and the strength He bestowed upon me. In the face of obstacles, God's divine intervention has navigated me towards the successful attainment of my goal.

As I dedicate my PhD dissertation to my parents and siblings, I want to acknowledge that this achievement would not have been possible without your unwavering support, sacrifices, and love. This is a testament to the values you have instilled in me, the opportunities you have provided, and the belief you have shown in my potential. Together, you have created a nurturing and supportive environment that has allowed me to thrive academically and personally. Your love, understanding, and constant encouragement have been the bedrock of my success.

To my mom, who has always been my biggest cheerleader, pushing me to reach for the stars and reassuring me that I am capable of anything I set my mind to. Her unwavering belief in my abilities has given me the confidence to overcome challenges. Her love and guidance have shaped me into the person I am today, and I am forever grateful for your presence in my life. She has always been there to lift me up when I stumbled, to inspire me when I felt discouraged, and to celebrate my achievements with unwavering pride.

To my sister, who has been my world, my everything since the day she was born. From the moment I held her in my arms, I knew that I had a responsibility to be the best role model I could be. She has been my motivation to strive for excellence, to push through obstacles, and to never settle for less than my best. Her resilience, strength, and determination inspire me every day to reach for the stars and to make a positive impact in the world. This dedication is a small

token of my appreciation for her constant support, love, and belief in me. I am truly blessed to have her as my sister.

Lastly, I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to a special person, who has been standing by my side, for believing in me when I doubted myself, and for being my unwavering source of support throughout this journey. Your love, encouragement, and belief in me have made all the difference. I am eternally grateful for your presence in my life and for the impact you have had on my academic and personal growth.

This PhD dedication is a testament to the love, support, and belief that you have all showered upon me. Without you, this achievement would not have been possible. I am forever grateful for your presence in my life.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Human behavior is influenced by several factors. Violence and crime inclinations of individuals have been strongly rooted in family background and parental history (Eriksson et al., 2016; Glatz et al., 2019; Mok, Antonsen et al., 2018). Crimes have been mostly associated with males because a higher percentage of perpetrators in the United States are males (Cauffman et al., 2017; Trauffer & Widom, 2017). However, the statistics of female violent offenders in the United States have been increasing (Clark, 2019). This study involved an exploration of the issue of parental separation from their children as it is linked to increased long-term violence (see Mok, Antonsen et al., 2018). The purpose of the study was to explore the effects of separation from parents, which have been associated with increased violence risk.

### **Background**

Among the most common factors that have significant influences on an individual's behavior are family background and neighborhood or community (Eriksson et al., 2016; Glatz et al., 2019; Mok, Astrup et al., 2018). A child who has negative experiences of trauma, separation, abuse, and other forms of victimization at home has a higher risk of expressing violent and criminal behaviors in the future (Cauffman et al., 2017; Trauffer & Widom, 2017). An individual's family background and community have a significant impact on criminal behavior. Specifically, parental criminality and family structure have accounted for the heightened criminal behavior among children (Eriksson et al., 2016). In a study by Howell et al. (2017), physical assault, neglect, and witnessing violence during childhood were significantly associated with criminal

behavior in adulthood. Mok, Astrup et al. (2018) also found that an individual's separation from a parent during childhood is associated with an increased long-term risk of violence. In terms of the influence of community, Glatz et al. (2019) found that peer victimization is associated with increased aggression, criminality, and anxiety.

Another unfavorable family setup is having a parent removed from the home through incarceration. The United States has an increased rate of children with incarcerated parents (Huynh-Hohnbaum et al., 2015). For instance, one study indicated that the number of children with parents in prison or jail over the last decade increased from 35,000 to 2.1 million, which represents about 3% of all children in the United States (Adams, 2018). Parental incarceration has a significant negative influence on the ability of male children to construct meaningful relationships with their future families (Adams, 2018). Parental incarceration was also found to disrupt the high school graduation of children (Huynh-Hohnbaum et al., 2015). Maternal incarceration, in particular, was found to have a greater negative impact on children's high school graduation rate, but very little is known about female children (Adams, 2018; Huynh-Hohnbaum et al., 2015).

To alleviate the negative impact of poor familial background and community exposure on a child's future, researchers have proposed several measures. Kamptner et al. (2017) determined that attachment-based parent education courses could be used to improve the ability of incarcerated mothers and fathers to provide positive parenting. Violence prevention should include addressing familiar adversities, with attention to promoting a stable home environment (Mok, Astrup et al., 2018). Having a stable family background and structure could also prevent criminal behavior (Eriksson et al., 2016).



Kamptner et al. highlighted that improving parent education and parenting styles breaks the intergenerational cycle of poor parenting. However, a gap in research has been found in terms of exploring the experiences and background of female violent offenders who have experienced maternal absence in their past. This gap was explored to better understand the hidden consequences of incarceration on dependent children.

### **Problem Statement**

In general, academia has largely focused on the violent criminal behaviors of males (Cauffman et al., 2017; Trauffer & Widom, 2017). From a statistical point of view, female violent offenders account for a lesser percentage of overall crimes committed in the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2019). Despite this variation, there has been a steady increase in female criminality since the 1970s (Clark, 2019). Few empirical studies have been conducted to identify the factors that may be associated with females' increased risk of engaging in criminal activity (Edwards et al., 2017). However, researchers have determined that an individual's separation from a parent during childhood is associated with an increased long-term risk of violent behavior among both males and females (Mok, Antonsen et al., 2018).

The impact of separation from parents due to incarceration has been explored in many studies and has been found to have negative implications for both parents and children (Adams, 2018; Huynh-Hohnbaum et al., 2015; Kamptner et al., 2017). Specifically, Huynh-Hohnbaum et al. (2015) found that maternal incarceration, in particular, had a greater negative impact on children's high school graduation rate compared to children whose mothers were absent and not incarcerated. However, there is

a need for additional research on the impacts of maternal absence due to incarceration on the offender (Huynh-Hohnbaum et al., 2015). Although parental absence is a childhood experience associated with criminal behavior among female offenders, there is a lack of recent literature on female violent offenders regarding the impact of the absence of the offender's mother (Eriksson et al., 2016; Howell et al., 2017; Mok, Astrup et al., 2018). Females who experience maternal absence also experience many adverse psychological effects, such as poorer self-perception and lower levels of cognitive empathy. These psychological effects have all been correlated with increased criminality and the likelihood of incarceration of the child in adulthood (Thompson et al., 2020). Despite these psychological correlates and observational conclusions, the literature directly focusing on the perspectives of female violent offenders on their perceived experiences of maternal absence is lacking. As such, there is a need for additional research on this topic (Thompson et al., 2020).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of maternal absence of female offenders convicted of a violent crime from the perspective of violent female offenders. It is important to understand, from violent female offenders themselves, how they believe that their experience of maternal absence relates to their criminal behavior (Eriksson et al., 2016; Huynh-Hohnbaum et al., 2015). Researchers have determined that separation from parents due to incarceration has negative impacts on individuals (Adams, 2018; Huynh-Hohnbaum et al., 2015; Kamptner et al., 2017), including a higher risk of violent criminal behavior

(Mok, Astrup et al., 2018). Although maternal separation has been determined to have a more significant impact on children than paternal separation, there is a need for further exploration of the impacts of maternal separation on individuals (Huynh-Hohnbaum et al., 2015) as well as its implications for criminal behavior (Pratt, 2016). Such information may be useful in implementing interventions or policies to address the problem of violent offenses committed by women.

### **Research Question (RQ)**

RQ1: How do female offenders convicted of a violence offense describe their lived experiences with their mother's absence due to incarceration?

RQ2: How does maternal absence due to incarceration feature on female offenders' reflections of what led to their violent offending?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bowlby's attachment theory focuses on the bond an individual develops with their caregiver during childhood (Cassidy & Shaver, 2002; Miller, 2012). Therefore, childhood is a critical period in which individuals develop their attachment. The relationship an individual creates with their caregiver, referred to as the parent-child relationship, has important implications for their future development.

A parent-child relationship, particularly the formation of attachment, is key because it forms the foundation upon which individuals form future relationships (Miller, 2012). A lack of secure attachment in childhood, which also includes a negative parent-child relationship, can lead to aggressive and antisocial relationships later in life (Stern & Cassidy, 2017). As such, in the current study, attachment theory was key for

understanding how an individual's lack of attachment with their mother due to maternal separation may be related to violent criminal behavior. I considered attachment theory appropriate for this study to understand the complex factors associated with individual criminal behavior, particularly the impact of maternal separation. The attachment theory helped explore how the lack of attachment due to maternal separation may play a role in the experiences of female offenders convicted of a violent offense. I used attachment theory to both understand and interpret participant experiences to gain insights into the impact of a lack of maternal attachment.

### **Nature of the Study**

Qualitative research allows the exploration of a social or human problem beyond numerical data. This study involved an interpretative phenomenological research design (Smith et al., 2012; VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015) to explore the topic of the perceived role of parent separation on violent female offenders. Phenomenology, a research design within the qualitative methodology, involves the exploration of a phenomenon from the lived experiences of participants (Smith et al., 2012; VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). A characteristic of interpretive phenomenological research is the study of a phenomenon based on the lived experiences of study participants (Smith et al., 2012; VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). An interpretive phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study to explore the evidence collected from the participants' perspectives (see Smith et al., 2012). My role in this research was to analyze the data obtained from the participants to interpret their lived experiences (see Smith et al., 2012) as related to maternal separation to understand the phenomenon of interest.

## Definitions

*Attachment theory:* Attachment theory highlights the importance of the bond an individual develops with their caregiver during childhood (Cassidy & Shaver, 2002; Miller, 2012).

*Childhood victimization:* Childhood victimization refers to various traumatic events that may have an impact on the emotions, behavior, and development of the child. Examples of these events are physical harm, witnessing violence, exposure to community violence, peer/sibling victimization, sexual assault of various kinds, and property offenses such as robbery (Howell et al., 2017).

*Criminal behavior:* Criminal behavior refers to actions that are prohibited by the state and punishable under the law (Eriksson et al., 2016).

*Maternal absence:* Maternal absence refers to the separation of a mother from a child at an early age; thus, the mother is absent from the life of the child during their developing years (Mok, Astrup et al., 2018).

*Parental criminality:* Parental criminality refers to a parent or primary caretaker of a delinquent who has been convicted and imprisoned for a law violation (Eriksson et al., 2016).

*Parental incarceration:* Parental incarceration refers to the state of having at least one parent in prison (Kamptner et al., 2017).

*Violent offense:* A crime that inflicts significant harm and represents a dramatic deviation from standards of acceptable behavior (Klinge, 2019).

### **Assumptions**

The first assumption made for this study was that the participants, who were the sources of data, would provide honest and complete answers during the data collection. The rationale for this assumption is that I could not completely verify the truthfulness of the answers of each participant in this study. The second assumption was that participants would present different experiences and perspectives about the phenomenon of interest. The third assumption was that the data would allow for the emergence of relevant themes that would address the RQs of the study and address the research problem.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The phenomenon explored in this study was the role of maternal absence in the lives of convicted female offenders. The target population was convicted female offenders who experienced maternal absence due to incarceration in their childhood. The delimitation of the study was that the findings do not apply to male offenders.

### **Limitations**

Because of the extensive information-gathering activities that I did about the topic of the study, personal beliefs, opinions, and biases may have developed. This aspect is a limitation because my role as the interviewer in this study could have presented biases that may have influenced the data and findings of the study (see Mohajan, 2018). However, I used two measures to minimize biases, which included expert review of the interview guide and member checking of the transcripts and initial interpretations.

Another limitation is the high subjectivity of perceptions and experiences of participants as data sources. Nevertheless, with data saturation, it can be assured that the

sampling was sufficient. I also ensured that questioning during the interview was exhaustive and in-depth. Before conducting any of the interviews, I used an expert review to ensure the questions would elicit responses that would address the RQs. The other possible delimitation was self-selection bias, which occurs when participants who volunteer to participate in a study differ in relevant characteristics from those who do not.

### **Significance**

Although maternal absence, such as through separation, has been explored in terms of its impact on individuals, empirical research on the role of maternal absence on the criminal behavior of female violent criminals is lacking (Huynh-Hohnbaum et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2020). By understanding the factors that may impact criminal behavior among this population, the significance to social change is two-fold: (a) providing resources for female violent offenders and (b) potentially preventing violent criminal offenses among women through targeted programs based on the findings of this study. Specifically, insights from the present study's findings may be used to address the needs of female violent offenders to prevent future offenses and to address issues of attachment that may have occurred due to maternal absence.

The findings from this study may lead to positive social change by advancing the understanding of the role of maternal absence concerning the criminal behavior of female violent offenders, as perceived by female violent offenders. Such information may be useful in terms of implementing interventions or policies to address the problem of violent offenses committed by women. As a result, these women can then lead an

offense-free lifestyle, having a positive impact on their families. Fewer victims will be created through their offending, having a positive impact on the community generally.

### **Summary**

Empirical studies on the factors associated with females' increased risk of engaging in criminal activity are few (Edwards et al., 2017). This study consisted of an exploration of females' history of separation from parents, specifically a mother, and the status of being convicted of a violent crime. Although parental absence is a childhood experience associated with criminal behavior among female offenders, recent literature on female violent offenders concerning the impact of the absence of the offender's mother is lacking (Eriksson et al., 2016; Howell et al., 2017; Mok, Antonsen et al., 2018). This qualitative interpretative phenomenological study involved an exploration of the experiences of maternal absence from the perspective of female offenders convicted of a violent crime.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Female violent offenders commit a significantly lower number of crimes overall in the United States in comparison to male violent offenders (FBI, 2019). However, female criminality has increased significantly since the 1970s, at a rate that far surpasses that of male criminality (Clark, 2019). Despite evidence of increasing female criminality, fewer empirical studies have been conducted to identify factors that predict an increased risk of engaging in criminal activity among women (Edwards et al., 2017). Limited existing research indicates that an individual's separation from a parent during childhood is one factor that contributes to an increased long-term risk of violent behavior among males and females (Mok, Antonsen et al., 2018). However, recent literature on female violent offenders to gain insight into how the absence of offenders' mothers influences violent criminality is lacking (Eriksson et al., 2016; Howell et al., 2017; Mok, Antonsen et al., 2018). Thus, this qualitative interpretative phenomenological study centered on exploring how female offenders convicted of violent crimes experience maternal absence from the perspective of violent female offenders. Specifically, Huynh-Hohnbaum et al. (2015) found that maternal incarceration, in particular, had a greater negative impact on children's high school graduation rate compared to children whose mothers were not incarcerated.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

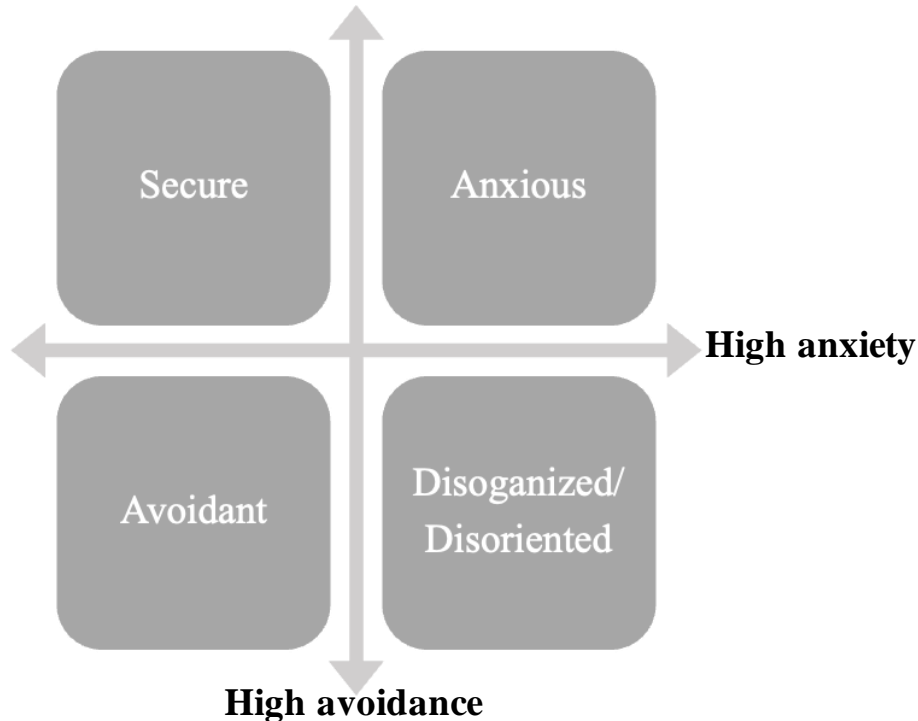
The literature review contains relevant research from multiple databases. The databases used were EbscoHost and Google Scholar. The Walden University Library was a key component of these searches. The following keywords and phrases guided the

literature search process: *maternal absence, criminality among women, violent criminality among women, the relationship between criminality and parental absence, maternal incarceration, parental incarceration, caregiver incarceration, familial implications of incarceration, familial consequences of incarceration, attachment theory, familial attachment, parent-child attachment, and incarcerated mothers*. Most of the included literature was written between 2016 and 2021, making it relevant to this study; however, some older publications were included to inform the theoretical and empirical foundation of this research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework selected to guide this study was Bowlby's attachment theory. Attachment theory centers on the bond an individual develops with their caregiver during childhood (Cassidy & Shaver, 2002; Miller, 2012). Childhood is the critical period in which individuals develop their attachment style that will inform their future relationships (Cassidy & Shaver, 2002; Miller, 2012). The relationship a child creates with their caregiver(s) significantly influences their emotional and social development in many ways (Cassidy & Shaver, 2002; Miller, 2012).

Preliminary explorations of attachment bonds led to the identification of three primary forms of attachment: secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment. However, further research led to the development of a fourth attachment style, which is disorganized-disoriented attachment (see Figure 1). Attachment styles describe individuals' degrees of anxiety and avoidance surrounding attachments and bonds.

**Figure 1***Bowlby's Attachment Styles*

*Note.* The four primary attachment styles that reflect the extent of anxiety and avoidance experienced in the context of personal relationships. Adapted from "The Bowlby-Ainsworth attachment theory," by J. Bowlby, 1979, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 2(4), 637. (<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0140525x00064955>)

Anxious, avoidant, and disorganized-disoriented are forms of insecure attachment. Insecure attachment styles are associated with emotional needs not being consistently met in childhood (Cassidy & Shaver, 2002). As insecure attachment styles develop into adulthood, adults exhibit a poor understanding of emotions felt by themselves and those around them (Bowlby, 1979). As a result, they experience negative feelings surrounding relationships and interpersonal attachment that contribute to anxious, avoidant, or disorganized-disoriented perceptions and behaviors.

Anxious, or preoccupied, attachment often results from inconsistent parenting, or parenting that is not attuned to children's individual needs (Cassidy & Shaver, 2002). Separation from a parent or abuse that is psychological or physical during childhood also increases the likelihood of an anxious attachment style developing (Kamptner et al., 2017). Anxious insecure attachment that develops during early childhood contributes to abandonment and rejection-related fear, poor self-esteem, and reactive or codependent relationships in adulthood.

Avoidant, or dismissive, attachment often develops due to strict, repressive, or distant parenting (Cassidy & Shaver, 2002). Although parents often implement authoritarian or unemotional parenting methods to encourage independence and success in their children, the development of an avoidant insecure attachment style can hinder emotional development and interpersonal relationships in adulthood. Emotionally dismissive or neglectful parenting can similarly contribute to the development of learned self-sufficiency and avoidance. Adults who are characterized by an avoidant insecure attachment style may excel in lone endeavors but struggle to compromise, collaborate, and connect with others (Stern & Cassidy, 2017).

Lastly, disorganized attachment, also known as disoriented or fearful-avoidant attachment, results from children associating their caregiver with fear rather than safety (Cassidy & Shaver, 2002). Many individuals who experience abuse and other significant adverse events during childhood develop a disorganized attachment style. Among the insecure attachment styles, disorganized attachment is thought to contribute to challenges in adulthood that are the most difficult to overcome, as individuals with this attachment

style experience significant and frequent inner conflict over their desire to form relationships with others and fear of, or aversion to, trusting others (Bowlby, 1979).

These attachment styles describe how infants react when separated temporarily from parents, which later informs the nature of attachment with nonparental figures in the later childhood years and into adulthood. Bowlby (1979) emphasized the significance of attachment style not only for relationships in adulthood but also for emotional and social well-being. Secure attachment contributes to appropriate and healthy reactions and responses to stress, willingness to explore independently and have new experiences, healthy relationships and positive perceptions of relationships, and effective problem-solving strategies (Bowlby, 1979). By contrast, insecure attachment in childhood that results from negative parent-child relationships can contribute to aggressive and antisocial relationships, avoidant coping, exaggerated or inappropriate responses when faced with stress, and frequently experiencing fear and anxiety in new situations (Stern & Cassidy, 2017).

Attachment theory has informed numerous studies and interventions by researchers including Kamptner et al. (2017), Islam and Talukder (2021), and Poehlmann-Tynan et al. (2017) that center on the relationship between parental absence and criminality, primarily with the intent of developing solutions to the detrimental effects of parental absence. Poehlmann-Tynan et al. studied attachment among children whose fathers were incarcerated using a newly developed instrument intended to measure attachment-related behaviors and emotions experienced by children visiting their incarcerated parents. Participants were 77 children aged between 2 and 6 years and their

fathers were incarcerated at the time of the study. They determined that 22% of the participating children observed their fathers being arrested, whereas 27% of the participating children observed their fathers committing the crimes that led to their incarceration. Participating children who observed either event were significantly distressed and were significantly more likely to exhibit an insecure attachment style. Despite these experiences, Poehlmann-Tynan et al. also found that caregivers' responsiveness, sensitivity, and engagement with children following their fathers' incarceration had a significant influence on whether they were eventually able to develop secure attachments.

In response to studies such as that by Poehlmann-Tynan et al. (2017), which emphasized the detrimental attachment implications of parental absence due to incarceration for children, Kamptner et al. (2017) sought to evaluate the efficacy of a psychotherapeutic program informed by attachment theory for incarcerated parents. They evaluated the effectiveness of a program for incarcerated parents that focused on parent-child attachment. The researchers determined that attachment-based parent education courses could be used to effectively improve the ability of incarcerated mothers and fathers to provide positive parenting. The attachment-based parent education courses they examined were intended to reduce the likelihood of incarcerated parents' children developing insecure attachments due to separation from their parents. Kamptner et al. emphasized the importance of improving parent education and parenting styles to break intergenerational cycles that perpetuate poor parenting and consequences associated with insecure attachment in adulthood, such as an increased likelihood of criminality.

Like Kamptner et al. (2017), Islam and Talukder (2021) found significant connections between the detrimental attachment implications associated with parental absence and criminality. Islam and Talukder determined from an attachment perspective that parental absence and separation are indicators of vulnerable family relations, which, in turn, contribute to female criminality. They noted that female criminality has received increased attention in social discourse and research in recent years. Through their investigation of family units as “workforces” whereby members have different positions, roles, and levels of power, Islam and Talukder determined that the detrimental impact of familial separation and conflict lies in the practices and procedures that inform how families operate. They specifically named maladjustment in the family, domination, and different necessities as sources of vulnerability that can contribute to female criminality.

Attachment theory has also informed emergent research and theoretical exploration of the causes of criminality. Lindberg and Zeid (2018) sought to test a theory of criminality that is informed by attachment, development, and systems theories, specifically, the attachment and developmental dynamics systems theory of crime. Lindberg and Zeid tested the emergent theory among 206 male inmates by surveying them regarding key attachment indicators and adverse life experiences. Path modeling revealed connections between adverse childhood events and insecure attachment and between exposure to criminal peers and addiction to behavioral crime. Criminal behavior frequency was predicted by peer crime, insecure parental attachment, and crime addiction. In a separate but similar test of the theory among a sample of 239 female inmates, the established model was also a suitable fit. Lindberg and Zeid concluded by

emphasizing the importance of comprehensive, holistic, and systemic approaches to addressing impactful adverse life events and preventing recidivism.

In an empirical investigation, McGauran et al. (2019) conducted a comparison study to examine how childhood parentification, attachment style, and emotional resilience affect antisocial behavior exhibited in adulthood. They noted that although significant evidence of the association between antisociality in adulthood and unfavorable attachment styles exists, research concerning how emotional resilience and parentification influence delinquency or criminal deviance in adulthood is still lacking. The researchers conducted a pilot study involving 137 participants, 66 of whom were on probation and 71 of whom had no history of arrest. McGauran et al. found that the participants who were on probation were significantly more likely to have an anxious attachment style. Among the nonoffender group, antisociality and emotional resilience were significantly associated.

Similarly, Simane-Vigante et al. (2018) examined the association between criminal violence, personality characteristics, and adult attachment styles among male offenders who committed violent crimes. The researchers surveyed a sample of 77 male prisoners aged between 20 and 62 who committed violent crimes. Simane-Vigante et al. determined that violent prisoners were significantly more likely than nonviolent male prisoners to exhibit an anxious-ambivalent style of attachment. They also found that attitudes towards criminal violence were significantly influenced by attachment insecurity, beliefs about violence, and neuroticism.



The findings mentioned in this section highlight how attachment styles and other elements derived from attachment theory have informed emergent studies and theories meant to explain criminality. In the current study, attachment theory informed the understanding of how a lack of attachment with one's mother during childhood due to maternal incarceration may relate to violent criminal behavior in adulthood. Specifically, attachment theory informed the understanding and interpretation of participants' experiences to gain insight into the central research phenomenon.

### **Review of the Literature to Key Variables and Concepts**

The literature referenced in this section of the review relates to the key variables and concepts of the study. The key variables and concepts discussed in this section include criminality among women, the influence of maternal absence, violent criminality among women, and the relationship between parental absence and violent criminality. This section leads into a discussion of how these variables and concepts have been addressed through various methodologies in the existing literature.

#### **Criminality Among Women**

Criminality research has long focused on the experiences of male offenders, leaving many research gaps and needs regarding the experiences of female offenders (Añaños & García-Vita, 2019; Andreea, 2019; Coleman et al., 2018; Dastile, 2017; Kalemi et al., 2019; Liles & Moak, 2018; Solinas-Saunders & Stacer, 2017; Vladimirovna, 2021; Walsh et al., 2020; T. Wang & Stamatel, 2019). Many research findings that broadly reference the nature of criminality are not male-specific. However, where gender is not explicitly addressed or controlled, it can be assumed that male

criminality is being referenced (McConnell, 2017). In some cases, explanations of criminality that have only been tested among male participants are assumed to apply to female offenders. Walsh et al. (2020) referred to this tendency as “malestreaming” explanations of criminality. Walsh et al. expounded that although similar factors contribute to criminality among men and women, the implications of differences in day-to-day experiences that are solely attributable to gender extend to daily choices, interactions, and incidents that contribute to criminality. Walsh et al. also noted that victimization and trauma are more likely to be apparent in the histories of female offenders than male offenders.

Different theoretical explanations for crime have been empirically determined to be more or less accurate for explaining criminal behavior depending on the offender’s gender (Andreea, 2019). Despite an overlap between the causes of criminality relevant to men and women, some influences are more likely to shape the behavior of offenders of one gender more than the other (Andreea, 2019; Solinas-Saunders & Stacer, 2017). Likewise, Solinas-Saunders and Stacer (2017) determined that gender differences in criminality are also reflected in different rates and causes of recidivism among formerly incarcerated offenders. Solinas-Saunders and Stacer determined that recidivism perpetrated by women is more likely to occur in tandem with “drug abuse, exposure to family members’ and friends’ drug addiction, parental incarceration, and unemployment” (p. 138).

Concerning criminality and recidivism among women, Solinas-Saunders and Stacer (2017) determined that theoretical explanations for social control, female

criminality, differential association, and general strain theory were the most relevant explanations. When considering these theories as explanations of female criminality, social control theories position female criminality as the consequence of weak structures and institutions such as family units, communities, and governments failing to influence social behavior in a positive way (Gainford, 2017). Regarding differential association theory, female criminality is considered a consequence of women learning offending behaviors based on social interactions that shape their attitudes, motives, behaviors, and values (Gainford, 2017). Concerning general strain theory, an increase in the number or magnitude of strains (failing to achieve an objective, the presence of detrimental impulses, and the lack of positive impulses) experienced by women increases their likelihood of committing crime (Gainford, 2017).

A key research gap that has been addressed in recent years pertains to the negative implications of incarceration among current or former female inmates. McConnell (2017) studied the negative implications of female incarceration, namely, the long-term implications associated with property and drug sentencing for women. McConnell noted that although the incarceration rate has increased significantly among women in recent years, most existing research has focused on the impact of incarceration on men or children, rather than women's experiences. McConnell also noted that a significant difference in female criminality is the higher prevalence of crimes committed in a context where their survival was threatened. The researcher also emphasized the lack of effective and appropriate addiction treatment and mental healthcare for female inmates, as well as

the lack of efficacious support resources for women upon reentry. This article highlighted the extended implications of female incarceration.

Social norms and public perceptions of criminality perpetrated by women reflect the expectations that criminality is a primarily male phenomenon (Barlow, 2020). These perceptions have contributed to the lack of research on many aspects of the causes and nature of female criminality (Eriksson et al., 2016; Howell et al., 2017; Mok, Astrup et al., 2018). In turn, the lack of research on female criminality stalls the development of solutions and interventions that could lessen the detrimental implications of female criminality, such as how families are negatively affected by mothers being incarcerated (Lockwood, 2017). To better understand public perceptions of female criminality, Barlow (2020) explored how female offending and co-offending are regarded in the media, and specifically, in crime news contexts. The researcher noted that some of the most sensationalized media representation of female criminality and offending is presented in crime news contexts, thus increasing negative public attention to female criminality. Upon analyzing recent news stories, Barlow determined that many prevalent narratives and biases presented in crime news present female offenders as “others” who are lesser in comparison to the general populace. Barlow found evidence that if a male and female commit similar but separate offenses, female offenders are often framed as more accountable or worthy of blame. This article highlights how perceptions of criminality can vary based on gender and how public perceptions surrounding female criminality reflect the lack of public knowledge and research clarity surrounding female criminality.

Differences in perceptions of female criminality and male criminality mirror differences in sentencing, determinations of the risk an offender poses to the public, and other key distinctions that shape how offenders experience the criminal justice system (Bostrom & Tasca, 2018). Public perceptions of female criminality, particularly violent female criminality, reflect the evolution of gendered persecution and stalled equality in criminality research in the United States. Gainford (2017) examined the evolution of female criminality and how women have been persecuted throughout history. They noted that the common theme in past persecutions of women has been the stigmatization and eradication of women who do not comply with social norms. Historical examples provided by Gainford included witch-hunts and the Victorian medicalization of what is now understood as depression. Early criminologists also identified biological factors that contribute to female criminality as being entirely different from biological factors that contribute to male criminality, a now-defunct perspective. This article highlights how female criminality has been regarded throughout history and understood differently from male criminality. The historical reliance on biological explanations of female criminality, as emphasized by Gainford, is in stark contrast to modern explanations of female criminality, which emphasize the role of variables including environmental factors, familial relationships, and social interactions (Gainford, 2017; Solinas-Saunders & Stacer, 2017). Rather than emphasizing male and female criminality based on biological sex differences, modern explanations of criminality emphasize differences in the experiences, environments, and perceptions between women and men that are associated with the social construct of gender (Gainford, 2017; Solinas-Saunders & Stacer, 2017).

The lack of understanding and research on female criminality, including criminality perpetrated by mothers that results in incarceration, also has critical policy implications. Bostrom and Tasca (2018) wrote a brief article about the research and policy significance of understanding the reentry experiences of women after being released from prison. They emphasized the disproportionate prevalence of women of color, poor women, women with low education levels, and mothers of small children among women reentering society after being incarcerated. Bostrom and Tasca also emphasized that the co-occurrence of mental health issues, trauma, history of substance abuse, poverty, and/or physical health concerns often significantly complicate the reentry process. The reentry process for parents also significantly differs based on gender, which is primarily evident in the differences in parenting responsibilities and expectations before, during, and after incarceration. Bostrom and Tasca not only emphasized the significance of formal and informal prosocial relationships and support but also noted that social relationships can be a source of stress and formal support is limited. This article lends insight into the reentry process for recently incarcerated mothers.

Similarly, Steyn and Booyens (2017) examined the rehabilitation policy and practical implications of incarceration among women. The researchers used quantitative methods to survey 120 female inmates who were incarcerated in South Africa. Statistical analysis of survey, background, and demographic data revealed significant differences in prior arrests and sentences, substance abuse, socio-demographic traits, self-harm, the likelihood of future criminality, and participation in rehabilitation efforts based on whether participants were short or medium-term offenders. Steyn and Booyens concluded

by calling for policy and practice reforms to enhance prison reform efforts and equality. These findings highlight factors that influence female criminality. Specifically, violent criminality that is perpetrated by women is under-researched (Kalemi et al., 2019). Violent criminality that is perpetrated by women is discussed in the subsection that follows.

### **Violent Criminality Among Women**

In the United States, violent criminality refers to incidents involving the perpetration of homicide, robbery, rape, and aggravated assault (Coleman et al., 2018). The most recent data on violent criminality that were released by the FBI reflects incidents that took place in 2019. When considering crime rates that are a representation of the number of crimes reported per 100,000 members of the United States populace, there was a .005% homicide rate, .03% or .04% rape rate that was definition-dependent, .1% robbery rate, and .3% aggravated assault rate. Collectively, these crimes contributed to a .4% overall violent crime rate in 2019, the majority of which was attributed to male offenders (FBI, 2019).

Although gender-specific predictors of violent criminality are complex and require further research, numerical data and quantitative research provide clear and definitive evidence that incarceration for a multitude of offenses has increased steadily over time (Gotsch, 2018). The Sentencing Project, a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to social justice, has prioritized addressing the exponential increase in incarceration among women in the United States since 1980. Incarceration has increased dramatically in the United States in recent decades, a phenomenon that has come to be

known as mass incarceration. However, when the gender of offenders is considered, incarceration among women has increased at a rate that is 50% greater than the rate of incarceration among men since 1980. This disproportionate increase in incarceration rates is somewhat incongruent with pervasive public perceptions of criminality and gendered social expectations (Allen & Bradley, 2018; Barlow, 2020).

Violence and precursors of violence, such as aggression, are forms of behavior that are often considered deviant, not unlike criminality. However, as Kalemi et al. (2019) noted, aggressive or violent tendencies demonstrated by women are not always effective predictors of violent criminality. Similar to criminality in general, the researchers noted that violent criminality perpetrated by women is predicted and triggered by different factors from violent criminality that is perpetrated by men. Specifically, among a sample of 157 female inmates and a control sample of 150 women with no criminal history, Kalemi et al. found that aggression was predicted by high sociability, high levels of narcissism, lower self-esteem, and poor self-perception among both the inmates and the control group. The researchers concluded that the aggression that informs violent criminality among women differs significantly from the aggression associated with violent male criminality.

Researchers have identified some notable differences in the causes and risk factors for violent criminality that are specific to women, which, however, significantly overlap with factors that contribute to violent criminality among men (Coleman et al., 2018; Kalemi et al., 2019; Kalunta-Crumpton, 2019; Matos, 2018; Orr, 2018; Rodriguez, 2018; Schmidt, 2020; Uma, 2020; Van Der Heijden & Pluskota, 2018; Walsh et al.,



2020). In a study on criminality risk factors that are relevant among both women and men, Glatz et al. (2019) examined the link between victimization experienced by children, causes of behavioral/emotional problems within family sub-systems, and criminality in adulthood. The researchers noted that although childhood violence has been determined to impact children negatively, research on the impact of violence by different family members on the problems experienced in young adulthood is lacking. Exploring this issue is important because the individual development of children may be impacted differently by different family relationships. They explored the association between parent and sibling violence and emotional behavior problems among individuals. Glatz et al. also considered the direct and indirect impacts of peer victimization. Peer victimization overall was found to be associated with increased aggression, criminality, and anxiety. These findings highlight the negative implications of physical violence within family subsystems for behavioral/emotional development and criminality. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which predictors of violent criminality vary based on gender, as criminality among women has not been researched as frequently as criminality among men (Allen & Bradley, 2018).

The significance of gendered perceptions of criminality and violence primarily concerns criminal enforcement and sentencing. Allen and Bradley (2018) compared female violence against men and male violence against women by examining third-party evaluations of criminal labeling, perceived injury severity, and whether police contact was recommended following reports of violent altercations. The researchers determined that perceptions of the severity of victims' injuries had a mediating effect that partially

explained criminal labeling differences. Gender differences in police contact support were significant regardless of injury perceptions, in that police contact was more likely to be recommended when the victim was female and the perpetrator was male. Gender differences were also apparent in injury evaluations that involved male victims or female perpetrators; however, the injury rating of male perpetrators or female victims did not vary significantly. Overall, the researchers' findings suggest that third-party observers of violence are significantly influenced by gender stereotypes in direct and indirect ways that ultimately shape injury assessments and law enforcement officers' ability or willingness to criminalize violent actions. This study highlights how violent actions and criminal offenders are regarded differently based on gender.

In many studies such as the one recently conducted by Beaudoin et al. (2019), male sex and gender are named as risk factors for criminality, meaning that, conversely, female sex and gender are factors that make criminality less likely. The researchers examined risk factors that predict criminality and violence among patients who have been previously discharged from mental health services. They conducted a longitudinal study that was guided by a growth mixture modeling approach. The researchers analyzed the results of five follow-up appointments attended by 825 patients who took part in the MacArthur Violence Risk Assessment Study. Beaudoin et al. determined that low verbal intelligence, high anger and psychopathy, persistent moderate affective symptoms, and persistent cannabis use predicted a violent trajectory. Further analysis revealed that low education level, high psychopathy, male sex, persistent use of three or more substances, and persistent cannabis use predicted criminality. Both the violence and criminality

models had moderate predictive power. These findings highlight the predictors of violence and criminality. However, given that the male sex was determined to be a risk factor for criminality, risk factors that are specific to female criminality were not clarified.

There is ample research evidence of the association between observing violence at different stages of childhood development and the violence that is exhibited later in life by female offenders (Juan et al., 2020; Sariaslan et al., 2016). Juan et al. (2020) recently studied the linkage between violence observed or experienced by children and their propensity towards violence in adulthood. The researchers noted that most existing research on the topic has considered exposure to violence in adolescence, and research on early childhood outcomes following exposure to violence is lacking. Using data sourced from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, the researchers conducted a five-wave longitudinal study with a total sample size of 2,896 children born in the United States. Structural equation modeling revealed that aggression between the ages of 5 and 9 years is significantly more likely following exposure to partner violence in their first three years of life. Parent-child attachment was found to completely mediate, but not moderate, how partner violence influenced children's aggression and development. The findings of the study by Juan et al. have significant implications for how adverse experiences in childhood contribute to aggression during childhood and contribute to violent criminality among female offenders later in life.

Juan et al. (2020) emphasized how violence observed or experienced during a female offender's childhood can contribute to violent tendencies later in life. However,

Sariaslan et al. (2016) determined that observing or experiencing violence in adulthood can also be a trigger for violent criminality. The researchers examined violent criminality triggers among patients who have been diagnosed with psychotic disorders. They noted that although it is known that certain violence risk factors are more prevalent among patients diagnosed with psychotic disorders, the extent to which related triggers catalyze violence among this population is unclear. After analyzing patient data for 34,903 patients diagnosed with schizophrenia, 29,692 patients diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and 2,763,012 control subjects, the researchers determined that exposure to violence, self-harm, unintentional injuries, parental bereavement, traumatic brain injury, and substance intoxication significantly increased the likelihood of violence among patients regardless of gender. Exposure to violence was the most significant trigger. These findings highlight factors and experiences that can trigger violent criminality among women in adulthood, and emphasize that adverse experiences are among the most significant predictors of violent criminality among women.

In a related study, Widom and Osborn (2021) used the results of a prospective cohort study to examine how and why young girls who experience neglect or abuse are disproportionately likely to commit violent crimes later in life. Their research involved an analysis of the trajectories of girls who experienced significant adverse life experiences as they grew into adults. Through their research, they determined the significant effect childhood abuse and neglect had on girls' propensity towards criminality, violent criminality, criminal career trajectories, and the likelihood of abusing their children. This

study lends insight into the extended implications of violence experienced by girls during childhood.

To summarize the research on criminality that is perpetrated by female offenders, the domain of criminology has primarily centered on the experiences of male offenders since it became a topic of research interest. Some notable gender differences in the causes and risk factors for violent criminality that are specific to women have been emphasized in recent research, though there is a significant overlap with contributing factors that predict violent criminality perpetrated by men. Ample evidence in existing research has reinforced the significance of the association between observing violence at different stages of childhood development and the violence that is exhibited in adolescence or early adulthood. Gendered perceptions of criminality and violence are significant because they shape criminal enforcement and sentencing, including the rates of incarceration. Despite advancements in criminology that are specific to female offenders, many research gaps and needs regarding their experiences and how they differ from those of male offenders prevail. Particularly, further research is needed to determine how risk factors, such as maternal absence, contribute to violent criminality among female offenders.

### **Maternal Absence**

The absence of mothers at different stages of their children's development can have significant negative implications for their emotional well-being and other outcomes later in life (Bergman, 2019; Bishop, 2019; Bruni et al., 2018; Čater & Majdič, 2021; Harsch, 2020; Johnson & Pascal, 2018; Levine Keini & Klonover, 2021; Milan et al.,

2017; Munch et al., 2018; H. Wang et al., 2021). Specifically, consequences of maternal absence identified in existing literature include, but are not limited to, academic delays, a lower likelihood of graduating, apathy, and difficulties related to mental health, deviant behavior, and personal relationships. The extent of these consequences can vary significantly depending on the stage of a child's development when maternal absence is experienced, the length of the maternal absence, other parental influences and sources of support, and other factors (Kamptner et al., 2017).

The negative implications of maternal absence are possible as soon as infants are born (Bergman, 2019). The consequences of maternal absence at birth, such as absences experienced by underdeveloped infants who require neonatal care, can be life-threatening, as toxic stress can occur if separation from the mother is not done carefully and strategically. Maternal absence from infants, particularly newborns and vulnerable infants, triggers complex processes and developmental outcomes that make an insecure attachment style significantly more likely (Bowlby, 1979). As Bergman (2019) explained, autonomic development and physiological regulation contribute to emotional connection and resilience. Maternal separation during infancy prevents or stalls these critical neural processes, resulting in the development of alternative strategies and processes.

Although alternative neural processes and strategies that result from maternal separation in infancy can produce effective short-term coping mechanisms to apply in stressful situations, they may also result in permanent elevation of stress signals and systems that can detrimentally affect long-term mental and physical health (Bergman,

2019). More specifically, infants and young children naturally view their caregiver(s) as a source of protection due to innate awareness of their vulnerability. When a caregiver is consistently present and meets the child's needs, their internal amygdala-dependent threat system is suppressed, allowing the child to pursue nonsurvival-related motivations.

Sullivan and Opendak (2020) emphasized that the issue is not that children process their caregiver's absence to a more severe or heightened extent in infancy than they would later in childhood after self-regulation develops, rather, attachment learning during infancy involves a different neural circuit and mechanisms from attachment learning that occurs during other stages of life. This phenomenon offers a partial explanation for the increased incidence of developmental problems among children with attachment issues, and, broadly speaking, the developmental implications for health and disease.

By contrast, as children age into and beyond early childhood, the consequences of maternal separation are less of an issue of survival and more of an issue of detrimental developmental outcomes (Sullivan & Opendak, 2020). A selective review of biological explanations of criminal behavior by Ling et al. (2019) indicated that the short-term implications of maternal absence, such as behavioral difficulties in school, are well-established in decades of research. However, the long-term implications of maternal absence in adulthood, such as an increased likelihood of criminality, are not as clear (Ling et al., 2019).

Although some implications of maternal absence require further research, there is growing evidence of the relationship between maternal absence and criminality or other negative consequences in adulthood. In a systematic review of existing literature, Ling et

al. (2019) sought to provide a biological explanation for criminal behavior. The researchers found that an individual's separation from a parent during childhood is associated with an increased long-term risk of violence. However, at the time of the study, how the relationship between separation from a parent during childhood and the risk of violence varies based on gender, separation group, and age at separation was not understood. The associations between violent offenses and parent separation were also stronger for paternal separation than for maternal separation. Separation from a father at an earlier age was also associated with a higher risk for violent offending (Ling et al., 2019). The researchers concluded that violence prevention should include addressing familiar adversities, with attention to promoting a stable home environment. These findings highlight how parental absence and other biological influences can predict criminality.

The direct experiences of children or adults who were or are currently separated from their mothers offer the most relevant research insights into the implications of maternal absence. Melo and Ribeiro (2020) studied the experiences of children who were separated from their mothers due to their imprisonment. Their phenomenological study involved gathering evidence of children's experiences through their participation in dramatic therapeutic play. Eight children aged between 3 and 10 years took part in the study. The researchers found that children represented their experience of being initially separated from their mother as a storm of thunder and lightning, but their experience of growing up over an extended period of years without their mother was represented as a rainstorm that has some periods of sun. Thus, the participants highlighted their capacity



to develop emotional resilience over a short period, though it is important to note that no long-term follow-up was conducted to examine their emotional resilience later in life. These findings lend insight into the consequences of maternal absence directly based on the experiences of participants.

Addressing and preventing the consequences of maternal absence in different contexts has been a growing topic of interest in recent research. Kamptner et al. (2017) sought to evaluate the efficacy of a psychotherapeutic program informed by attachment theory for incarcerated parents. Recognizing the impact of parental absence due to incarceration on the family, the researchers evaluated the effectiveness of a program for incarcerated parents focused on attachment. The researchers determined that attachment-based parent education courses could be used to improve the ability of incarcerated mothers and fathers to provide positive parenting and decrease the detrimental effects of parental absence. Kamptner et al. also emphasized the importance of improving parent education and parenting styles to break the intergenerational cycles of poor parenting. These findings highlight approaches used to lessen the negative familial implications of incarceration.

### **Absence Due to Incarceration**

The absence of one or both parents due to incarceration is associated with numerous negative implications and latent effects within family systems (Besemer et al., 2019; Billings, 2018; Giordano et al., 2019; Haskins & Turney, 2018; Jackson et al., 2021; McCauley, 2021; Poehlmann-Tynan & Arditto, 2018; Shaw, 2019; Turney & Goodsell, 2018; Wildeman et al., 2018). The trauma, stigma, and extended effects of

parental absence due to their incarceration can be more impactful than the absence experienced for other reasons, such as work-related travel. Although the immediate negative implications of parental absence due to incarceration are clear in existing research, the long-term implications of parental absence due to incarceration require further investigation (Besemer et al., 2019).

Reviewing the body of existing research on the implications of parental incarceration has lent limited insight into how and why absence due to parental incarceration is particularly detrimental. Adams (2018) conducted a review of the existing literature published in the previous 15 years on the implications of parental incarceration for families. The researcher explained that many individuals who enter the criminal justice system in the United States are young, low-income, low-educated, men of color. Parental incarceration, which removes the parent from the home, impacts the ability of incarcerated parents to construct meaningful relationships with their families. Parental incarceration disrupts relationships within the family and leads to further inequality within family systems. This review lends clarity to the familial implications of parental incarceration.

The nature and extent of parental absence due to incarceration can be difficult to quantify, though estimates lend evidence to the significance of the problem. Bohmert and Wakefield (2018) reviewed existing research that gave insight into how incarceration affects families. They noted that nearly 2 million children living in the United States had currently incarcerated parents, whereas an estimated 5 to 8 million children experience parental incarceration during their childhood. The researchers emphasized racial

disparities in parental incarceration, noting, “44% of Black women and 32% of Black men had a family member incarcerated while only 12% of white women and 6% of white men reported the same” (Bohmert & Wakefield, 2018, p. 143). Key negative effects associated with parental incarceration that were identified in their review pertained to health, family relationships and dissolution, economic insecurity, delinquency, and educational attainment. They concluded by emphasizing the importance of addressing the familial consequences of incarceration through criminal justice proposals and reform policies. This review lends further clarity to the negative implications of parental incarceration that have been identified by Adams (2018) and numerous other researchers.

Like Fochi et al. (2020), Lockwood (2017) framed their research on maternal absence from the perspectives of mothers who have been incarcerated. Lockwood used qualitative methods to collect and analyze written narratives provided by incarcerated mothers. They noted that though the experiences and narratives of incarcerated mothers constantly influence their identities and social roles, their incarcerated status and the contradictory nature of being a mother while housed in prison make it difficult to effectively gather their narratives. Through narrative analysis, the researcher found that the participants’ narratives contained the common elements of “‘challenge’, ‘repair’, and ‘fracture’” (p. 123). These elements highlighted common experiences and perceptions that informed or characterized participants’ time being incarcerated, the effect incarceration had on their relationships, and, particularly, the detrimental process through which incarceration weakened their bonds with their children by barring their ability to fulfill responsibilities and behaviors associated with motherhood. This study highlights

how incarceration shapes and informs the identities of mothers who are incarcerated, which, in turn, shapes and informs the identities of their children. The subsections that follow include further discussion of the implications of parental incarceration for children, adolescents, and adults.

### *Implications During Childhood and Adolescence*

Findings on how children and adolescents are affected by parental absence due to incarceration are consistent across many countries and cultures (Besemer et al., 2019). Although obtaining reliable data to represent the impact of parental incarceration across numerous countries can be difficult, Besemer et al. (2019) determined many commonalities and trends. Overall, parental incarceration had a considerable and negative impact on children regardless of country. However, the researchers found that the context surrounding parental incarceration could significantly influence the extent to which parental incarceration detrimentally affected their children. For instance, whether children had other family members to provide support and care, their age, whether they witnessed their parent's arrest, and numerous other factors shaped their experiences after their parents were incarcerated. Children who had supporting and caring guardians were less likely to experience negative long-term consequences of their parent's arrest, whereas those who witnessed their parent's arrest were more likely to experience negative long-term consequences (Besemer et al., 2019).

Concerning the consequences of parental absence at a specific stage of development, Huynh-Hohnbaum et al. (2015) examined the disruptive implications of parental incarceration for children's high school graduation. The researchers noted that

the United States has an increased rate of children with incarcerated parents. Huynh-Hohnbaum et al. used quantitative methods to conduct regression analysis and compile descriptive statistics based on multiple waves of data collected during the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health or Add Health study. The Add Health study centered on gathering and analyzing school outcomes and health behaviors among seventh to twelfth-grade adolescents. Four waves of data were collected periodically into the participant's mid-adulthoods. The analysis of the Add health data by Huynh-Hohnbaum et al. revealed that parental incarceration, which separates the parent from the child, disrupts the high school graduation of children. The researchers also found that maternal incarceration, in particular, has a more significant negative impact on children's likelihood of graduating high school. These findings lend insight into how parental incarceration and absence influence children's educational trajectories. Particularly, the findings of Huynh-Hohnbaum et al. suggested that the negative implications and risks associated with parental incarceration are cumulative and make students more vulnerable to other risk factors that detrimentally impact educational outcomes.

In childhood and early adulthood, some of the most well-evidenced consequences of parental incarceration pertain to mental and emotional health and well-being. Turanovic and Rodriguez (2017) examined the factors that influence mental health service utilization by children whose mothers are incarcerated. The researchers analyzed data representing 700 children whose mothers were incarcerated in Arizona. Analysis revealed that children were more likely to use mental health services when their grandparents cared for them or child protective services were involved in their welfare.

Children were less likely to use mental health services if their mothers were Native American or they had experienced exposure to violence. These findings highlight the nature of support services intended to help children whose mothers are incarcerated and factors that predict service utilization.

In a related study, Zeman and Dallaire (2017) examined the emotional regulation of children and adolescents whose parents are incarcerated. They noted that approximately half of all prisoners incarcerated in the United States are parents, and thus, many children are affected by their absence. They noted that though the negative emotional implications of parental incarceration are well-evidenced, research on how the detrimental effects of parental incarceration may be mediated or moderated is lacking. Zeman and Dallaire also noted that only one existing study included evidence of both positive and negative emotional reactions associated with visiting an incarcerated parent. This article lends insight into the emotional implications of parental absence due to incarceration and emphasizes the need for more research on moderating and mediating influences.

### ***Implications in Adulthood***

To clarify certain negative implications of maternal incarceration in adulthood, Brown (2017) estimated the extent to which maternal incarceration influences labor and education outcomes. The researcher conducted discussions with mother-child panels to gain an understanding of the research phenomenon. Brown determined that grade repetition and dropout were more common among children whose mothers were incarcerated in their first 10 years of life. College attendance was less likely among

children whose mothers were incarcerated when they were aged 15–17. Although employment in adulthood was not significantly affected by maternal incarceration, maternal incarceration appeared to negatively influence wage potential. These findings lend insight into the latent consequences of maternal incarceration.

Adams (2018) conducted a review of existing literature published in the previous 15 years on the intergenerational implications of parental absence due to incarceration for families. The researcher explained that many individuals who enter the criminal justice system in the United States are young, low-income, low-educated, men of color. Parental incarceration, which removes the parent from the home, impacts the ability of incarcerated parents to construct meaningful relationships with their families. Parental incarceration disrupts relationships within the family and leads to further inequality within family systems. This review provides clarity surrounding the familial implications of maternal incarceration in terms of future involvement in the criminal justice system.

Thomson et al. (2020) also focused on the implications of maternal absence due to incarceration in adulthood. Specifically, they examined how parental incarceration influences crime, psychopathy, and violence that occurs in women's prisons. They noted that though interest in the implications of parental incarceration is growing, research on how parental incarceration affects criminality among women remains limited. The researchers used a correlational approach to examine the risk factors within a sample of 170 female offenders. The findings indicated that interpersonal psychopathy was correlated with prison violence and fraud-related crimes, affective psychopathy was correlated with prison violence and violent crime, and behavioral psychopathy was

correlated with drug-related crime and prison violence. Paternal incarceration was more prevalent among offenders who presented with interpersonal psychopathy, whereas maternal incarceration was more prevalent among offenders who presented with affective psychopathy, prison violence, and violent criminality. These findings lend evidence to the negative implications of parental incarceration and, particularly, maternal incarceration, among current or formerly incarcerated women.

Like Kamptner et al. (2017), Fochi et al. (2020) studied a program that was designed to reduce the negative implications of maternal absence due to incarceration. Fochi et al. also produced an experience report detailing the nature of motherhood during incarceration. Their qualitative study specifically centered on a nursing care project designed to prevent maternal separation from their infants while incarcerated. The program involved nursing consultations that centered on childcare, participation in thematic discussion circles, and the provision of child development documents and women's health care. The ultimate success of the program led to the expansion of the nursing care project. The researchers concluded by suggesting that prisons and the inmates they house offer key training opportunities for health professionals to learn to serve diverse populations. This study highlights a program that is designed to decrease the detrimental implications of maternal absence and incarceration for children.

In summation, maternal absence can significantly and negatively influence their emotional well-being and outcomes later in childhood, or even adulthood. In the short term, issues that arise due to maternal absence, such as behavioral difficulties in school, are well evidenced in research conducted across multiple decades. Conversely, the long-



term impact that maternal absence has when children reach adulthood, such as an increased likelihood of criminality, is not as well established, or agreed upon. As evidence of the consequences of maternal absence in different contexts has grown, researchers have made preventing the consequences of maternal absence a research priority, particularly as it pertains to the absence due to incarceration. Parental absence from children due to incarceration can have particularly devastating implications and latent effects within family systems, though many factors can mitigate or moderate the extent of negative outcomes. Although the nature and extent of the issue of parental absence due to incarceration can be difficult phenomena to quantify, recent estimates support researchers' assertions that the issue is significant. Some of the well-evidenced consequences of parental incarceration pertain to mental and emotional health and well-being in childhood, which can contribute to more severe adverse outcomes in adulthood.

### **The Relationship Between Violent Criminality and Parental Absence**

The association between parental absence and violent criminality is explored in this section. Violent criminality is referenced as a potential latent consequence of parental absence earlier in life. Research gaps and limitations are identified.

A clear linkage has been established in existing literature between violent criminality in adulthood and parental absence that is experienced during childhood, particularly the absence due to parental incarceration. However, the nature of the relationship between violent criminality and parental absence is still unclear in some contexts (Glatz et al., 2019). The relationship between violent criminality and parental absence due to incarceration has been investigated as a part of larger studies of the causes

and predictors of criminality. Eriksson et al. (2016) sought to quantify how neighborhood effects and family characteristics influence the likelihood of incarceration or criminal conviction. After examining sibling correlations within a large data set, the researchers determined that family characteristics and neighborhood effects collectively explained 24% of the variance in criminal convictions and 39% of the variance in incarceration. The researchers further determined “that parental criminality and family structure can account for more of the sibling crime correlation than parental income and education or neighborhood characteristics” (p. 219). However, the sibling correlations were found to be unaccounted for among these factors. The findings by Eriksson et al. (2016) demonstrate the importance of family structures and characteristics as related to violent criminality. Parental absence due to incarceration or other causes is one of many familial factors that shape the likelihood of violent criminality in adulthood (Glatz et al., 2019).

In a national cohort study ( $N = 1,346,772$ ) that centered on the prevention of violent criminality in adulthood, Mok, Astrup et al. (2018) found that an individual’s separation from a parent during childhood is associated with an increased long-term risk of violence. However, at the time of the study, how the relationship between separation from a parent during childhood and the risk of violence varies based on gender, separation group, and age at separation was not understood. The researchers determined that the association between violent offenses and parent separation was stronger for paternal separation than for maternal separation. Separation from a father at an earlier age was also associated with a higher risk for violent offending. Mok, Astrup et al. concluded

that violence prevention should include addressing familiar adversities, with attention to promoting a stable home environment.

### **Review of Methodological Literature**

Existing research that centers on the topic of this study has been conducted using a multitude of research methodologies and designs. Researchers have primarily used qualitative methods to understand how or why factors such as maternal absence or incarceration have negative implications for children or adults later in their lives (Melo & Ribeiro, 2020). By contrast, researchers have primarily used quantitative methodologies to understand the extent of the negative implications of parental incarceration or the degree to which specific factors predict criminality (Simane-Vigante et al., 2018). Because this research encompassed an exploration of the nature of the experience of maternal absence among female offenders convicted of a violent crime from the perspective of violent female offenders, I considered qualitative methods the most appropriate. Qualitative research is conducted with the intent of exploring phenomena that are difficult to represent through numerical data (Smith et al., 2012).

An interpretative phenomenological research design guided this study to clarify the perceived role of parent separation on violent female offenders. Phenomenology centers on exploring a research phenomenon based on the relevant lived experiences and perspectives of the participants (Smith et al., 2012; VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). Interpretive phenomenological research, specifically, entails analyzing and interpreting phenomena through a designated perspective or paradigm (Smith et al., 2012; VanScoy &

Evenstad, 2015). The interpretive phenomenological approach involves the analysis of the data that are collected based on the perspectives of participants (Smith et al., 2012).

Although other researchers have used related qualitative methodologies to examine the central topic of the study, there were no other known interpretive phenomenological studies that have centered on the association between maternal absence and violent criminality that is perpetrated by women in adulthood. The numerous existing research gaps that concern female criminality and inmates include a lack of direct evidence of their perspectives and responses to questions about their experience (Bostrom & Tasca, 2018). By collecting the direct perspectives of violent female offenders, I could use the participants' perspectives as a framework to interpret the research phenomenon (see Smith et al., 2012).

### **Summary**

In summary, this phenomenological study centered on the relationship between the absence of a maternal figure and criminal violence among women. The theoretical framework selected to guide this study was Bowlby's attachment theory. Explorations of attachment bonds by numerous researchers led to the identification of three primary forms of attachment: secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized-disoriented attachment. In the current study, attachment theory informed the understanding of how a lack of attachment with one's mother during childhood due to maternal incarceration may relate to violent criminal behavior in adulthood. Specifically, attachment theory informed the understanding and interpretation of the participants' experiences to gain insight into the central research phenomenon.

Strong research evidence indicates that maternal absence that occurs at different stages of their children's development can significantly shape and influence their emotional well-being and outcomes later in childhood, or even adulthood, to their detriment. Short-term challenges and issues that arise from maternal absence, such as behavioral difficulties in school, are established and clear based on the findings of research that has been conducted across multiple decades. In contrast, the long-term impact of maternal absence on their children as they age and reach adulthood, such as their increased likelihood of committing crimes, is not as well-established or agreed upon by researchers.

As a field of research, criminology has historically centered on the experiences of male offenders. Despite evidence of increased female criminality and numerous advancements in criminology that are specific to female offenders, many research gaps and needs have persisted. Many of the experiences of female offenders and how they differ from the experiences of male offenders remain unclear. Notably, some gender differences in the causes and risk factors for violent criminality that are specific to women have been emphasized in recent research, though there is also significant overlap with contributing factors that predict the violent criminality perpetrated by men.

As was noted throughout this review, maternal absence or separation is understood to have a significant impact on individuals. However, the lack of empirical research on how maternal absence contributes to the phenomenon of criminal behavior continues to limit the extent to which programs and other solutions can be developed to lessen the consequences of maternal absence. Gaining insights into factors that may

influence criminal behavior among female inmates may contribute to an effective provision of resources for female violent offenders and may potentially lessen the risk of violent criminal offenses being perpetrated by women through targeted programs and intervention approaches. By enhancing the support and resources that are available to female violent offenders, they may be more likely to lead an offense-free lifestyle and pursue positive relationships with their families. If fewer victims are affected by violence committed by female offenders, there may be a positive impact on their communities as a whole. Details of the methodology selected for this research are discussed in Chapter 3.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

Although parental absence is a childhood experience associated with criminal behavior among female offenders, recent literature on female violent offenders regarding the impact of maternal absence on the offender is lacking (Eriksson et al., 2016; Howell et al., 2017; Mok, Antonsen et al., 2018). This qualitative interpretative phenomenological study involved an exploration of the experiences of maternal absence of female offenders convicted of a violent crime from their perspective. The phenomenon of interest was the role of maternal absence in the lives of convicted female offenders.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The RQs formulated to address the purpose and problem statements identified informed the selection of the research design for this study. The RQs that guided this study are as follows:

RQ1: How do female offenders convicted of a violent offense describe their lived experiences with their mother's absence due to incarceration?

RQ2: How does maternal absence due to incarceration feature on female offenders' reflections of what led to their violent offending?

In addressing the purpose and answering the RQs, I implemented a qualitative methodology with an interpretative phenomenological research design. A qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study because it provided a means for me to explore and make sense of a phenomenon (see Lew et al., 2018). This qualitative interpretative phenomenological study involved an exploration of the experiences of maternal absence of female offenders convicted of a violent crime from the perspective

of violent female offenders. Based on this purpose, the phenomenon explored was the role of maternal absence in the lives of convicted female offenders through the experiences of violent female offenders. According to Jormfeldt and Carlsson (2018), qualitative studies allow participants to describe the details of a phenomenon first-hand and allow further analysis based on experiences and perceptions. Therefore, in-depth data on the phenomenon were necessary to address the problem and purpose. A qualitative methodology was appropriate for fulfilling such a research purpose.

I used an interpretive phenomenological research design for this study because the purpose was to explore the lived experiences of female offenders convicted of a violent crime. According to Yardley (2000), there are four principles of interpretive phenomenology: (a) sensitivity to context, (b) commitment and rigor, (c) transparency and coherence, and (d) impact and importance. Phenomenology is used when exploring the lived experiences of participants, as aligned with the purpose and RQs of this study (see Moustakas, 1994). Creswell and Poth (2018) described phenomenological research as a universally common description from all participants of several shared experiences collected and compiled about a phenomenon. It is only through gathering information about the lived experiences of convicted female offenders that I could address the purpose and answer the RQs of this study. Therefore, a phenomenological design was appropriate for this study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The main role of the researcher in most qualitative studies is that of the main data collection instrument. Researchers commonly serve as interviewers, or observers, and



data analysts and ensure the study's trustworthiness (Kaplan et al., 2017). For this study, I recruited participants through purposive sampling, conducted open-ended interviews for the data collection of this study, and performed interpretive phenomenological analysis to process the data.

As a recruiter of participants, I obtained site permission before conducting purposive sampling (see Ames et al., 2019). Part of my role in this study was initiating contact with probable sites for recruitment and invitation of potential participants through email. In this phase of recruitment, conflict of interest must be minimized (LeCroix et al., 2017).

The researcher must also ensure professionalism and integrity throughout the study (Friesen et al., 2017; Mozaffor et al., 2019). As it is common to have deep knowledge about the research topic, possible biases about the topic of the study may develop. To prevent these biases from influencing the findings of the study, the researcher must ensure credible data collection and analysis procedures. An important means of addressing personal biases is to acknowledge the possible sources of bias (Bero, 2017). Thus, I used an expert-reviewed interview protocol during data collection to avoid asking irrelevant, biased, or leading questions, which may have led to invalid results.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

#### ***Target Population***

This study focused on convicted female offenders who committed violent offenses and experienced maternal absence in their childhood.

#### ***Sampling Strategy and Criteria***

I used purposive sampling for this study. When a researcher uses purposive sampling, respondents are identified depending on a set of characteristics that are aligned with the problem, purpose, and RQs of the study (Campbell et al., 2020). Researchers of qualitative studies often use purposive sampling, as it allows better matching of the sample to the aims and objectives of the study (Campbell et al., 2020). This sampling technique was appropriate for this study because of the need to target a specific group of individuals to gather relevant information that would help directly answer the RQs of the study.

For this study, the following are the eligibility criteria that participants were required to satisfy: (a) a convicted female offender, (b) committed a violent offense as the cause of their conviction, (c) had been imprisoned, (d) had experienced maternal absence in their childhood, (e) were willing to be involved in a 60 to 90-minute semi structured interview. I informed potential participants about the eligibility criteria through the invitation email. The participants also responded to a series of screening questions to verify their eligibility.

### ***Sample Size and Data Saturation***

The usual range of sample size for achieving data saturation is between 10 to 30 participants (Saunders et al., 2018; Tracy, 2019). For this study, I recruited a sample of 20 convicted female offenders using purposive sampling. The indicator of data saturation in this study was when no new information was gained from the interviews. After each interview, I conducted data analysis to determine when data saturation was reached. Analyzing data after each interview allowed me to identify emerging themes and patterns early in the data collection phase.

### ***Instrumentation***

Semi structured interviews were the primary form of data collection. I used an interview guide to ensure the questions asked during the data collection were valid and aligned with the topic and RQs of the study (see McGrath et al., 2019). The interview guide to helped provide structure and focus the conversation on each interview. The questions in the interview guide were researcher-developed based on existing literature about female offenders, maternal absence, and parental incarceration. The questions were aligned to directly address the RQs of the study.

Because the instrument was researcher-developed, I conducted an expert review to validate the questions included in the interview. Reviewers were professionals with at least 5 years of experience in their respective fields. The expert review panel included one expert from each of the following fields of interest: (a) qualitative research, (b) psychology of offenders and criminals, and (c) child developmental psychology. I asked the three experts for their feedback and comments about the items in the interview guide.

The experts reviewed and assessed the appropriateness of the interview questions using the following criteria: (a) proper word use, (b) correct sentence structure, (c) ease of understanding, and (d) completeness of questions. I reviewed the recommendations for changes and identified prominent feedback from experts. I made changes to the interview guide before proceeding with the data collection procedures.

### **Procedures for Recruitment Participation and Data Collection**

#### ***Recruitment***

The recruitment process began with securing site permission from the head of social welfare organizations working with convicted female offenders to conduct recruitment and data collection with potential participants. I asked the head of the organization to provide the email addresses or mobile numbers of the potential participants of the study. The initial emails received from the head of the organization were 32. I then sent invitation emails to the first 20 female offenders. The invitation contained a discussion of the purpose of the study, coverage of participation, and the eligibility criteria. Interested individuals could reply to the email to express their intent to be a part of the study. I then sent the eligibility criteria and informed consent form to the participants after they expressed their interest in participating in the study. The eligible and consenting participants signed the consent form and sent the signed copy to me via email or through the social welfare organizations which they are affiliated.

#### ***Data Collection***

Individual interviews occurred for each of the participating convicted female offenders. I expected each interview to last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The

interviews occurred via the Zoom™ teleconference platform in consideration of the COVID-19 pandemic. I sent emails to each participant containing instructions for installing and using Zoom™. The participants also received details of the meeting identification number and password to ensure the security and confidentiality of each interview session.

Each interview began with an introduction to welcome the participant and provide an overview of the study and the interview session. After the introduction, I asked questions based on the interview guide. Whenever needed, relevant follow-up questions were asked to gain more insight and deeper explanations into the answers of participants. After the interview session, participants were allowed to ask questions or provide comments about the interview. At this time, all participants' comments and questions were addressed.

I then transcribed each interview and documented initial interpretations of the interview data after every session. These documents were useful in conducting member checking. This process of member checking entailed seeking feedback from the participants regarding the accuracy of the initial interpretations of the interview answers (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I sent initial interpretations of an interview to its respective source or participant. The participant had 7 days to review the accuracy of the initial interpretations. If there were points that needed to be changed, the participant sent the details of the misinterpreted information and corrected the wrong information within the given timeframe. Seven days after sending the document, I made no changes to the transcripts with no feedback, considering the information in the initial interpretations as

correct. After member checking, the transcripts were loaded into NVivo software for analysis.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data analysis used was interpretive phenomenological analysis, involving the following steps: (a) organizing the data, (b) immersion into the data, (c) generating categories and themes, (d) coding the data, (e) developing interpretations, (f) examining and searching for alternative meanings, and (g) presenting the findings of the research study. Data organization involved the process of transcription, member checking, and loading into the NVivo software. Bracketing out (setting aside) personal assumptions and knowledge was necessary to obtain new findings through a fresh lens of the phenomenon from the consciousness of the participants. In this study, I acknowledged my assumptions, biases, and preconceptions about the topic under investigation so that the analysis could be conducted with a more open and unbiased perspective. Through documenting the assumptions and biases in a reflexive journal, I was constantly aware of these.

In the next step, I read and reread the transcripts to achieve an understanding and gain familiarity with the data. This data immersion and familiarization resulted in the development of a coding scheme from a small set of data. The initial codes generated represented data that were reoccurring in the transcribed interviews and were related to the RQs. In applying the codes to the entire data set, I expanded the coding scheme as needed.

From the codes, I developed the themes through the grouping of similar codes. This step entailed reviewing and grouping common codes from the previous step to identify emergent themes. I used each group to form themes that addressed the RQs. Related themes were also associated with each other, if applicable. From the codes and themes, I provided descriptions for each of the finalized themes and developed the interpretation of the findings using existing literature to support the findings of the study.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

The evaluative criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are recognized by many qualitative experts and include the issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I addressed and adhered to these issues of trustworthiness in this study. In qualitative research, any prejudice and experiences that the investigator brings into the study must be addressed to maximize the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Merriam, 2009).

### **Credibility**

Qualitative research is judged by its transparency, consistency, and communicability (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Credibility refers to the confidence that can be placed in the research data and findings by establishing whether the research findings represent plausible information from the participants' original data and are a correct interpretation of the participants' original views (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The field-tested interview questions aligned with the RQs and were informed by the literature. Member checking procedures occurred 1 week after interview sessions. I sent the

transcripts to participants via email to check for accuracy and return them to me in 1 week.

### **Transferability**

I established transferability in this study by thoroughly describing and providing detailed information about the context of the study, the participants selected, and the entire research process. By doing this, other researchers can assess the relevance of this study's findings to other contexts based on these details. The use of purposeful sampling also contributed to transferability by ensuring the selection of participants who had diverse perspectives and experiences. The use of purposeful sampling increased the likelihood of the findings having a broader applicability.

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the research findings as consistent and repeatable. Therefore, the dependability of a study is high if another investigator can readily follow the research and decision trail used by the initial investigator and arrive at similar findings and conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure the dependability of the study, I sought input from a colleague in Academic Affairs to ensure the research process and findings were void of any inconsistencies or biases. Another measure used to achieve dependability in this study was ensuring that the data collection procedures were consistent and using the same interview guide for each of the interviews. The detailed documentation of the research process, which included the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures, can allow another researcher to



replicate this study. I also achieved dependability in this study by consistently applying and adhering to the interpretive phenomenological research methodology throughout.

### **Confirmability**

In qualitative research, the investigator brings a unique perspective to the study. Confirmability refers to establishing the authenticity of the study findings and that findings represent participants' views and do not reflect investigator bias (Elo et al., 2014). To ensure confirmability, I derived codes and themes from interviews and audit trails developed to enable other investigators to follow the analysis path and confirm the study findings. The use of a peer debriefer also helped establish confirmability in the data collection and analysis processes.

### **Ethical Procedures**

One avenue used to address ethical procedures in this study was obtaining approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board, approval number 12-12-22-0980613. I followed the informed consent process, which is important during the recruitment phase (see Biros, 2018; Cocanour, 2017). Through the informed consent form, I disclosed any arrangement and understanding that existed between the participants and myself throughout the study. All interested individuals underwent this process before becoming an official participant of the study. All participants in the study had to agree and sign the informed consent form before conducting any kind of data collection (see Biros, 2018; Cocanour, 2017).

All participants' identities remained confidential. I used pseudonyms for the names and social welfare organizations, an effective means of keeping participant

identity confidential (Surmiak, 2018; Thackray, 2018). I used these pseudonyms on the data sheets and the discussion of findings in Chapter 4.

All the participants voluntarily agreed to be part of this study. Any individual could refuse the invitation to be part of this study. Participants could withdraw from their participation in this study at any time. Participants incurred no consequences for refusing or quitting the study, and I respected the decision of every participant regarding this matter.

I secured all data and kept all physical documents in a locked cabinet inside my home office. All electronic data and files for this study were protected in my password-protected hard drive. All data for this study will be kept for 5 years after which all physical data will be burned and the hard drive will be reformatted to remove all electronic data of this study.

### **Summary**

Although parental absence is a childhood experience associated with criminal behavior among female offenders, recent literature on female violent offenders regarding the impact of the absence of the offender's mother is lacking. The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological study was to explore the experience of maternal absence of female offenders convicted of a violent crime from the perspective of violent female offenders. This chapter included a discussion of the details of the methodology and research design. The research methodology for this study was a qualitative interpretive phenomenological research design. My main role in this research was to recruit participants through purposive sampling, conduct open-ended interviews

for the data collection of this study, and perform interpretive phenomenological analysis to process the data. I also served as the main data collection instrument. The target population for this study included convicted female offenders who had violent offenses and had experienced maternal absence in their childhood. The method used to obtain this sample was purposive sampling. The eligibility criteria that the participants were required to satisfy are as follows: (a) a convicted female offender, (b) committed a violent offense as the cause of their conviction, (c) has been imprisoned, (d) have experienced maternal absence in their childhood, (e) willing to be involved in a 60–90-minute semi structured interview.

The main instrument for collecting data for this study was semi structured interviews. Member checking occurred to enhance the credibility of the study. This analytical process involved the following steps (a) organizing the data, (b) immersion into the data, (c) generating categories and themes, (d) coding the data, (e) developing interpretations, (f) examining and searching for alternative meanings, and (g) presenting the findings of the research study. The findings from implementing the procedures discussed are presented in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of maternal absence of female offenders convicted of a violent crime from the perspective of violent female offenders. Two RQs guided this study: RQ1: How do female offenders convicted of a violence offense describe their lived experiences with their mother's absence due to incarceration?

RQ2: How does maternal absence due to incarceration feature on female offenders' reflections of what led to their violent offending?

### **Setting**

No personal or organizational conditions influenced the participants or their experience at the time of study that should influence the interpretation of the study results.

### **Demographics**

The participants of the study consisted of 13 female offenders convicted of a violent crime. Each of the 13 participants met the following inclusion criteria: (a) a convicted female offender, (b) committed a violent offense as the cause of their conviction, (c) had been imprisoned, (d) had experienced maternal absence in their childhood. Data saturation was reached at 13 participants.

### **Data Collection**

Data saturation was identified as achieved in this study when the following two conditions were met: (a) data from at least 10 participants had been analyzed, and (b) analysis of the data from the last two consecutive participants who were interviewed (in

this case, participants P12 and P13) resulted in the identification of no new codes or themes that had not been identified in the data from previous participants. Each of the 13 participants participated in interviews for between 60 to 90 minutes via Zoom. The online videoconference platform Zoom facilitated data collection. I emailed each participant instructions for installing and using Zoom before the scheduled meeting time. They also received the meeting identification number and password via email to ensure the security and confidentiality of each interview session. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's permission using Zoom's integrated audio-recording feature. There were no variations from the data collection plan described in Chapter 3, and no unusual circumstances were encountered during data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis method used was a thematic analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2012). Before conducting data analysis, I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews verbatim into Microsoft Word documents using Zoom's automated transcription feature. I then read the transcripts while simultaneously listening to the audio files to ensure the accuracy of the transcribed files. For analysis, I imported the transcripts into NVivo 12 computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software as source files. The analysis procedure applied to the data had six steps: (a) gaining familiarity with the data, (b) coding the data, (c) finding themes in the data, (d) reviewing the themes, (e) naming the themes, and (f) reporting the findings.

**Step 1: Gaining Familiarity with the Data**

I read and reread the 13 interview transcripts in full to gain holistic familiarity with the data that would allow preliminary identification of patterns of meaning within and across the participants' transcripts. To facilitate preliminary identification of patterns of meaning, I made handwritten notes regarding repeated words, phrases, and ideas. These notes served as the basis for the identification of initial codes in the following step of the analysis.

**Step 2: Coding the Data**

Each participant's response was broken down into phrases or groups of consecutive phrases that each expressed one idea relevant to addressing an RQ. An example of a 'meaning unit' was the following response from P1: "I would say the biggest effect [of maternal absence] on my development is I do not trust people anymore. I lost trust and that has affected my life into adulthood." In total, I identified 147 meaning units across the 13 transcripts.

For the data broken down into meaning units, I assigned those units to codes. This process involved labeling each meaning unit with a brief, descriptive phrase in general, third-person language that indicated its relevant meaning. For example, the just quoted item from P1's transcript was categorized as a meaning unit, labeled lack of trust in others. When multiple meaning units from the same transcript or different transcripts expressed similar meanings, I assigned them to the same code, and, in this way, the meaning units were clustered to form inductive codes, based on patterns of meaning identified in the data itself. The 147 meaning units were assigned to 17 initial codes.

Table 1 contains a list of the initial codes, indicating how many times each code was identified in the data.

**Table 1***Initial Codes*

Initial code (alphabetized)	<i>N</i> of participants contributing ( <i>N</i> = 13)	<i>n</i> of times code was identified in the data
Absence of adult support to resist criminal temptations	11	13
Drugs and criminal behaviors	11	16
Emotional distress	8	8
Emotional distress resulting from mother's incarceration	10	19
Extended family tried to fill gap	6	6
Lack of protection and comfort	8	8
Lack of trust in others	6	6
Most positive memories were with mother	13	14
Mother and father were primary caregivers	5	5
Mother and grandparents were primary caregivers	1	1
Mother was primary caregiver	7	7
Mother's substance use leading to neglect	9	9
No effect on development	1	1
No maternal contribution to criminal behavior	1	2
Paternal support	7	9
Positive early relationship with mother	13	13
Problems in school	9	10



### **Step 3: Finding Themes in the Data**

The third step was finding themes by grouping related codes. For example, the code lack of trust in others was grouped with two other codes, emotional distress resulting from the mother's incarceration and problems in school, because they all indicated sub criminal developmental outcomes of maternal absence on the participants. Five codes, most positive memories were with mother, mother and father were primary caregivers, mother and grandparents were primary caregivers, mother was primary caregiver, and positive early relationship with mother, were identified as related and grouped in one category because they all indicated early life experiences before the maternal absence. Overall, the 17 initial codes were grouped to form four preliminary themes.

### **Step 4: Reviewing the Themes**

In this step, I reviewed the themes to ensure that they were accurate and presented appropriately. The establishment of accuracy entailed comparing each theme to the original data in the transcripts to confirm that it reflected a pattern of meaning in the participants' original responses. Appropriate presentation was achieved by comparing themes to one another to ensure that they were sufficiently distinct that they would not be more properly combined into a smaller number of themes. I then reviewed each theme individually to ensure that it represented a sufficiently cohesive idea and that it would not be more appropriately broken up and presented as two or more smaller themes.

**Step 5: Naming the Themes**

This step entailed reviewing each of the four preliminary themes to identify which RQ it was addressing. I reviewed the data and codes under each theme to assess the meaning of the theme as an answer addressing the question. When the meaning of each theme was assessed, it was named with a propositional sentence phrased as an answer to the RQ it was addressing.

This step also entailed identifying discrepant data. For example, under the theme that included the codes lack of trust in others, no effect on development, emotional distress resulting from mother's incarceration, and problems in school, the code no effect on development indicated the view of only one participant, whereas the other 12 participants indicated negative effects of maternal absence on their development in responses that were assigned to the other three codes. Therefore, I identified the code no effect on development as discrepant data because the data assigned to it (a) contradicted the views of a majority of the participants and (b) represented the views of only a small minority of participants. I labeled the discrepant data as such, as discussed in the presentation of results about the themes from which it diverged. Table 2 indicates the process of grouping the 17 initial codes to form the four finalized themes.

**Table 2***Grouping of Initial Codes to Form Finalized Themes*

Initial code grouped to form theme	<i>n</i> of participants contributing ( <i>N</i> = 13)	<i>n</i> of times theme was identified in the data
Theme 1. The mother-child bond was positive and strong prior to maternal absence	13	40
Most positive memories were with mother		
Positive early relationship with mother		
Theme 2. Maternal absence caused emotional distress that other caregivers could only partially alleviate	13	40
Emotional distress		
Extended family tried to fill gap		
Lack of protection and comfort		
Mother's substance use leading to neglect		
Paternal support		
Theme 3. Maternal incarceration was associated with negative developmental outcomes	13	36
Emotional distress resulting from mother's incarceration		
Lack of trust in others		
Problems in school		
Theme 4. Negative developmental outcomes stemming from maternal absence led to criminal behavior and incarceration	13	31
Absence of adult support to resist criminal temptations		
Drugs and criminal behaviors		

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

The evaluative criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) are recognized by many qualitative experts and are the main emphases of this section. To optimize the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of a qualitative study, it is essential to confront and address any preconceptions or biases introduced by the researcher during the investigation (Merriam, 2009). In this study, field-testing of the semi structured interview ensured its alignment with the RQs and the literature; it was designed to draw out the experience of maternal absence of female offenders convicted of a violent crime from the perspective of violent female offenders. Member checking procedures occurred 1 week after concluding the interview sessions. I sent the transcripts to participants by email to check for accuracy and return them to me in 1 week. Member checking built credibility of the qualitative interpretive phenomenological study.

Transferability refers to the degree to which the findings can be transferred to other contexts or settings with confidence of fit by consumers of the research. I established transferability by being thorough in describing the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research. I provided a thick description of the research processes and findings for others to consider in applying these findings to other settings and populations (see Elo et al., 2014).

To ensure the dependability of the study, a colleague in the Academic Affairs Department of Walden University conducted an inquiry audit to ensure findings were supported by the data collected. The colleague was not a participant in the study.

In qualitative research, the investigator brings a unique perspective to the study. Confirmability refers to establishing the authenticity of the study findings and that the findings represent participants' views and do not reflect investigator bias (Elo et al., 2014). To ensure confirmability, I derived the codes and themes from interviews and developed audit trails to enable other investigators to follow the analysis path and confirm the study findings. The use of a peer debriefing also helped establish confirmability in the data collection and analysis processes.

### Results

This presentation of the results is organized by RQ. Under each RQ, the themes used to address the question are presented. Table 3 is a preliminary summary indicating how the themes addressed the RQs.

**Table 3**

*Alignment of Themes With Research Questions*

Research question	Themes addressing question
RQ1: How do female offenders convicted of a violence offense describe their lived experiences with their mother's absence due to incarceration?	Theme 1: The mother-child bond was positive and strong prior to maternal absence  Theme 2: Maternal absence caused emotional distress that other caregivers could only partially alleviate
RQ2: How does maternal absence due to incarceration feature on female offenders' reflections of what led to their violent offending?	Theme 3: Maternal incarceration was associated with negative developmental outcomes  Theme 4: Negative developmental outcomes stemming from maternal absence led to criminal behavior and incarceration

**RQ1**

RQ1 was as follows: How do female offenders convicted of a violence offense describe their lived experiences with their mother's absence due to incarceration? Two themes addressed this question: (a) Theme 1: the mother-child bond was positive and strong prior to maternal absence and (b) Theme 2: maternal absence caused emotional distress that other caregivers could only partially alleviate. The following subsections address these themes.

***Theme 1: The Mother-Child Bond Was Positive and Strong Prior to Maternal Absence***

All 13 participants contributed data to this theme, and no participants provided discrepant data. Seven of the 13 participants reported that before their mother's absence, their mother was their primary caregiver. Another five participants reported that their mother and father were both their primary caregivers before the maternal absence, and the remaining participant reported that her primary caregivers before her mother's absence were her mother and her grandparents. Thus, for all participants, their mother was either their primary caregiver or one of their primary caregivers before becoming incarcerated. All 13 participants reported that before their mother's incarceration and absence, they had a strong, positive relationship with her and that their most positive early life memories were of spending time with and engaging in activities with their mother.

P1 described her mother as a positive teacher and role model during her early life: "My mother was a teacher in every aspect of life. Mom served as my first teacher, and her lessons guided me. I wanted to learn from her. When you are a kid, you always

want to imitate your parents.” P2 described herself as loved and cared for in her early life by her mother, a form of care she perceived as positively impacting her development: “My mother had a significant impact on my life by providing for, adoring, educating [me], and so much more . . . The way I developed can be greatly attributed to the role that my mom played.” P3 said of her early childhood, “The best presence in life then was my relationship with mom.” P4 described her special bond with her mother in early life in saying, “She is the only one [who] could understand me when the world could not.” P6 said of her mother’s role as the primary caregiver while her father was away at work, “She was there for me because my dad was not always around.” P7 described her mother as a continual, comforting presence in her early life: “My mother was always there and always made time.” P9 described her mother as a protector who aspired to be a role model: “She loved me because to her I was always her small daughter. My mother tried to be the best mother and a perfect example to her children, which unfortunately was never to be.” P10 described her mother as realizing the value to a child of maternal love: “She did everything for me. I think she knew parental love was very significant in a child’s life. She did as much as she can develop a bond with me, which I still cherish.”

All 13 participants also described their most positive early life memories as involving spending time and engaging in activities with their mothers. P1’s mother would let her pretend to cook and then praise the products: “I used to pretend to cook with my mother. She would teach me how to cook by giving me ingredients. I would cook bad meals, but she said, ‘Wow, you prepare such good meals.’” P2 remembered playful experiences: “You know, at times we would go crazy with my mom. We would spray

each other with water when in the farm watering crops or throwing water when cleaning. I really missed her after that. It was emotional.” P3 remembered how her mother made her birthdays a large occasion: “My birthday was always a huge day for her. She would invite almost all her friends for that special day, and she made sure everything was in place, from the food to the decorations.” P4 recalled that her mother was her confidante: “I used to spend a lot of my time with mom. I would share my feelings with her, and she would help me with anything. My troubles were hers.” P5 recalled a more general feeling of being supported: “I felt supported by her all the time. That is what I remember about my mom during my childhood. When life is difficult, you know, the kids need to know that their mother is there for them.” P6 remembered her mother participating in children’s games, a level of involvement she found meaningful in retrospect: “I had quality time bonding with my mom. Playtime was not just for us kids; our mother was always with us, even when playing. She would take roles in our games, and that meant a lot to me.” P8 remembered that she would confide in her mother while playing:

When playing games, we would talk about new words and their meanings just to improve my vocabulary. She wanted me to be the best in school, and any trouble I encountered in school, I would let her know, especially while we were playing games.

P9 said, “The most positive memory from my childhood with my mother that I still cherish to this day is when I used to accompany her to the grocery store and mall to get household stuff and ice cream for me.” P10 described her early childhood as best when she was with her mother: “My early childhood experiences were the best with my mother



around. She loved taking me to the playground.” P12 remembered feeling grateful to her mother because, “She taught me the alphabet before I joined elementary school which was the base of my early childhood academic success.” P13 also reported acquiring early literacy skills when bonding with her mother: “We used to read and share stories with my mother, which helped me understand language, sounds, words, and even acquire literacy skills.” In summary, all 13 participants reported a strong, early bond with their mothers, who were either their primary caregiver or one of their primary caregivers. All participants reported that their most positive early childhood memories involved spending time engaged in activities with their mothers. This theme indicated participants’ experiences before maternal absence. The following theme indicates participants’ experiences during maternal incarceration.

***Theme 2: Maternal Absence Caused Emotional Distress That Other Caregivers Could Only Partially Alleviate***

All 13 participants contributed to this theme, and no participants provided discrepant data. The findings indicated that after forming strong, positive bonds with their mothers during early childhood, participants’ separation from their mothers during maternal incarceration caused significant emotional distress. Other family members who took over caregiving duties during periods of maternal absence, such as fathers and grandparents, were able at most to partially alleviate participants’ emotional distress, which was associated for most participants with a sense of lacking a source of the protection and comfort that their mothers had previously provided.

Nine participants reported that before their mothers' incarceration, their mothers' substance use led to a partial absence during which they experience maternal neglect. P1, for example, said, "I would say substance abuse was high back then. My mom used to drink alcohol and smoke bhang, and then she would just be unbearable." P1 added regarding the negative effects of maternal neglect on herself, "I suffered a mental breakdown and health problems because my mom was not paying close attention to me." P2's mother became an alcoholic and began to neglect her: "My mom used to drink alcohol, and she reached a point where she did not take care of me. She had no time to understand how my life was going as she was always drunk." P4 reported that both of her parents became heavy substance users:

My mother was a drug addict and most of the time she would spend with her friends looking for drugs. I was left alone at home. My father too was a drug addict so I had no one who was close to me who I could talk to.

P5 reported that stress in her mother's marriage led her mother to become a heavy alcohol user, which, in turn, led her to neglect P5: "I was neglected the moment my mother started having issues with my dad. She was stressed and turned to alcohol for comfort. In the process, she forgot about me. We did not spend a lot of time together." P8 said, "During my childhood I was neglected by my mother. My mother turned to drugs all the time and spent most of her time with her friends, who were drug addicts as well." P9 said that when her mother began to drink heavily: "My mother would come back home drunk in a stupor, and it seemed like she never had time for me anymore. She started to be abusive both physically and verbally." P9 added of the effect on her: "I think

being neglected massively impacted me negatively and I was filled with stress and depression and felt angry towards my whole family.” P10 reported that her mother followed her father into substance abuse: “I think my dad had a bad influence on my mother. He was a frequent opioid user coupled with binge drinking. Soon my mother followed him in these behaviors, and she started feeling distant from me.” P10 said that when her mother was using substances heavily, “She became harsher and more abusive, both verbally and physically.” P11’s mother started binge-drinking after losing a job:

My mother lost her job as an office clerk at the local water office, and this greatly affected her wellbeing. Being a single mother of three became tough on her, as she could no longer afford to raise us. She started having depression and stress, which later led her to start excessive alcohol intake, which worried every family member. Within a short period, my mother would disappear for days without a trace or any word to any of us. I started feeling like my mother was neglecting us.

P13 reported severe negative outcomes from her mother’s substance abuse: “My mother used to smoke crack and drink booze, which made her intolerable . . . My mother was not giving close attention to me, which caused me to have a mental breakdown and develop health issues.”

When participants’ mothers became absent, six participants reported that members of their extended families assumed a caregiving role, but those substitute caregivers were not able to fully replace their mothers. P10 reported that her grandparents tried to care for her, but that they were inadequate substitutes for her absent mother:

My paternal grandparents had to take me to their farm home 100 miles away from our home. My grandparents tried their best to put my life back on track, but they could not manage since all I longed for was my mother's love and care.

P9 reported that her older siblings would not care for her, so she was placed under the care of her mother's brother. Her maternal uncle was a good caregiver, but he was unable to fill the emotional gap left by the absence of her mother. P9 said,

Since my siblings never bothered about me, I was put under the care of my maternal uncle, who took me in as his child. He cared about me so much that I almost felt at home again. But we all know no one can substitute a mother's love. I still needed my mother's presence for me to erase all the perceived negativity I had about life.

P11 had to rely on care from her aunts and uncles in her mother's absence, but she found them to be only partial surrogates: "My uncles and aunts came through for us in my mother's absence. They helped us and supported our academic and social lives. But they just could not replace my mother's presence."

Seven participants reported that their fathers became their primary caregiver in their mother's absence, but like other participants, they indicated that their fathers could not entirely fill the emotional gap left by the absence of their mothers. P1 said, "My dad was there for me during my mother's absence. My father was loving and caring . . . But there is that special bond with your mother that even your dad cannot satisfy when your mom is not there." P13 reported that her father was a fun parent and that she missed being able to confide in her more serious mother:

I spent more time with my dad after my mom was incarcerated. My mom was a strict but loving parent, whereas my dad was a fun but sporadic father. You don't spend a lot of time explaining to him the difficulties you're having. That was what I needed in the absence of my mother.

P2's oldest sibling and father became her primary caregivers in her mother's absence. She said, "The love of your mother cannot be compared to that of your siblings or dad. It is different and special." P4 said that she could not develop a close relationship with her father because of the amount of time he needed to spend at work:

I had a good relationship with my dad. He was my other caregiver, especially when mom left. Even during the period where mom was doing drugs, my dad was very caring. The problem was that my dad used to spend a lot of time working. That was a challenge for me because I could not develop a close relationship with him.

The participants reported that because of their mothers' absence, they experienced significant emotional distress. P1 said that her emotional struggles resulting from her mother's absence affected her ability to attend school: "I was emotionally damaged at a very young age. I had to start going to school sporadically due to the challenges I faced at home and also my mother's absence." P3 said the following regarding her emotional distress during her mother's absence that it resulted from not getting the care and affection she needed:

I felt lonely and worthless during this period because I did not get the care and affection I deserved as a child. You know, when a person doesn't get the care and affection, they need it can lead to anger and frustration.

P4 also said that during her mother's absence, "I was always angry and frustrated, which was not good for my health overall." P6 said that because of her mother's absence, "I felt that like I was short on confidence and self-esteem growing up without her." P11 described herself as developing diagnosable disorders because of her mother's absence: "I developed mental health problems just by experiencing depressing situations in my early life. My siblings too had depressive and stressful lives by being denied parental love and care. I developed mood disorders." P12 described herself as engaging in isolating behaviors and developing other signs of emotional distress:

My mother's absence affected me. I would stay in my room the whole day isolated just thinking about what time she would come back. My dad was an alcoholic who never really took notice of my experiences with my mother's absence. I started developing adverse mental health outcomes at a very young age, which would later have a detrimental effect on my life.

P13 said that during her mother's absence, "I was constantly irritated and angry."

The participants associated their emotional distress during their mothers' absence with lacking a source of the protection and care they had previously received from their mothers. P1 explained the profound sense of loss she felt when her mother's absence deprived her of a source of comfort and protection:

The absence of my mother was hell. It was emotional, and it is still emotional today. Nothing beats the love and presence of your mother. Nothing! You know, that care and tenderness she gives was not there anymore. It was tough. When you talk about a mother, the first thing is protection. It was no longer there. There was nothing like a mother's protection. My mom used to care for me and nourish me every day, and that bond we developed was indispensable, a key part of our existence. As I grew older, I had no one to comfort me, especially when I felt down. That is when I missed my mom even more.

P2 described herself as missing her mother's support and as developing insecurities and an inability to trust as a result her absence: "I missed the unconditional support of my mother. The absence of mom resulted in me developing a lot of insecurities as a child. It was difficult to trust and develop relationships with other people." P3 described herself as feeling worthless in the absence of her mother's care and love: "I felt lonely and worthless during this period because I did not get the care and affection I deserved as a child." P4 reported a similar experience to P3's, saying that she felt she had little value because she did not have the care and protection of her mother: "I always had negative feelings. I felt lonely and worthless at a times because I did not receive the care and love other kids were getting from their moms." P5 described a perpetual sense of distress in the absence of maternal protection:

When I was nervous, I had nobody to turn to. I was left looking for that unconditional motherly love, which I could not find anywhere in this world. They

say, mother's love cannot be replaced, you know? That is right . . . I was never comfortable in her absence.

P13 described herself as feeling neglected and devalued during her mother's absence: "I always felt bad and upset. Because I did not receive the attention and love that other kids did from their mothers, there were moments when I felt abandoned and unworthy." In summary, when participants' mothers became absent, other caregivers stepped in to assume the primary caregiver role. However, other caregivers were not able to provide an adequate substitute for the unique bond that the participants had formed with their mothers during their early childhoods, and as a result, the participants experienced profound emotional distress during their mothers' absence, which they associated with lacking a source of the comfort, protection, and validation they had previously received from their mothers.

## **RQ2**

RQ2 was, "How does maternal absence due to incarceration feature on female offenders' reflections of what led to their violent offending?" Two themes were used to address this question, including (a) Theme 3: maternal incarceration was associated with negative developmental outcomes and (b) Theme 4: negative developmental outcomes stemming from maternal absence led to criminal behavior and incarceration. The following subsections address these themes.



### ***Theme 3: Maternal Incarceration Was Associated With Negative Developmental***

#### ***Outcomes***

Twelve of the participants contributed to this theme, and one participant provided discrepant data indicating no negative developmental outcomes resulting from maternal incarceration. The contributing participants indicated three types of negative developmental outcomes. The first and most frequently attested negative outcome was psychological distress resulting in symptoms associated with trauma or other mental illness. Contributing participants also described themselves as having academic and behavioral problems in school and having difficulty forming trusting relationships and bonds with other people.

Ten participants reported that during and because of their mother's absence, they experienced emotional distress resulting in symptoms of trauma or other mental illness. P10 reported suicidal ideations and trauma resulting from her mother's absence:

My mother's incarceration damaged me psychologically. Let me say my mother's incarceration changed my life forever. The psychological and emotional connection I had with people just was not there anymore. I had mental trauma. I had suicidal ideations at some point and contemplated slitting my wrists to enable me to bleed to death.

P5 said that she experienced depression: "When your mother is in jail, that is the biggest pain . . . You do not want to imagine that your mother going through all that. It was a hard pill to take. I had to fight depression and stress." P8 exhibited symptoms of mental

illness sufficiently severe that she was taken to a psychologist, and she began to abuse substances:

My mental condition was getting worse every day, to the point where I needed to be brought to a psychologist. I had to start binge drinking and using drugs to deal with my mother's incarceration, using my father's opioids to ease my emotional and physical suffering. I quickly developed a full-blown drug addiction, and I found that my body needed opioids to operate properly.

P9 reported that she suffered from trauma and was almost hospitalized in a psychiatric ward because of her emotional distress over her mother's incarceration:

I developed posttraumatic disorder that impacted both my personal and educational life. I was in utter shock. Seeing her going to jail brought fear and grief in me, as I never knew how to survive without her. I had a mental breakdown, which almost got me into a psychiatric institution . . . I had to drop out of school due to my mental health problems.

P11 perceived herself as developing PTSD, suffering a psychotic break, and developing a substance dependency because of her mother's incarceration and the stigma associated with it:

I developed PTSD and almost developed schizophrenia. I had to deal with the shame and guilt that my mother brought on our family. At school, I was constantly victimized by students and teachers with taunts of my mother being an addict and a criminal . . . I started using drugs to alleviate the effects of trauma and self-denial brought on by my mother's incarceration.

P12 experienced depression and began to use substances:

I developed psychological problems such as stress and depression . . . I became a frequent drug user at an early age. My drug use was a way to hide the pain I felt due to the incarceration of my mother.

Nine participants reported that they experienced significant challenges in school because of their mothers' absence. P4 associated her challenges in school with others' reaction to the stigma of her mother's incarceration: "I had behavioral problems, which meant I could not perform well in academics. I had problems in school because my peers and even teachers used to tease me about the fact that my mother was in jail." P10 reported dropping out of school because of shame associated with her mother's incarceration: "I suffered from shame and ridicule at school as other students made fun of the situation, with some calling my mother a criminal. Eventually, I had to drop out of school." P6 said,

My studying was largely affected by the absence of my mom. I was stressed and always fell into depressions, and I think my teachers did not understand how to handle me. I was always the quiet kid, but a lot was going on in my head . . . I lost concentration in the classroom. Eventually, I dropped out of school.

P8 reported that her mother's absence led to her truancy and her abandonment of her ambition to become a teacher, which was her mother's profession before she became an addict: "After my mother was imprisoned, I did not develop at all. I first stopped going to school, which hindered my educational advancement and put an end to my desire to

become a teacher like my mother.” P12 dropped out of high school: “I dropped out of senior year in high school since teachers deemed me a threat to other students.”

Six participants reported that because of their mother’s absence, they became unable to form trusting relationships with other people. P1 explained: “I would say the biggest effect on my development is I do not trust people anymore. I lost trust and that has affected my life into adulthood.” P1 added, “What an absent mother leaves behind is an individual who has only learned how to create relationships based on hostility, anxiety, and most importantly, distrust.” P2 described a similar experience, saying, “I have struggled with keeping friends and partners. The absence of my mother made me grow up with a lot of anger and trust issues. I easily get frustrated as I feel people are not loving me enough.” P3 said, “I have trust issues with everyone and everything.” P6 also described trust issues associated with her mother’s absence: “I have had problems trusting people and even having close relationships and friendships with them. When my mother left for jail when I was a kid, I struggled with trust issues because I always felt insecure without my mother.” P11 said, “I have never maintained a solid romantic relationship in my life, since I lost trust in everyone.”

One participant, P7, provided discrepant data indicating that she perceived no negative developmental outcomes resulting from her mother’s absence. P7 said, “I do not think there was a great effect in my development.” P7 explained that being raised by her grandparents had filled some of the void left by her mother’s absence: “At first, I felt resentment toward her because she abandoned me. However, as I grew older, I just missed her. Having my grandparents truly made the experience better.” P7 said of the

effect of her mother's incarceration on her: "The worst effect was the loss of her presence and not being able to share quality time without speaking through a window, or not being able to physically touch her when it came time for visitation." However, she added that because she was raised by loving grandparents in her mother's absence, "I did not have it as bad as others did." In summary, 12 out of 13 participants indicated negative developmental outcomes resulting from their mothers' incarceration, including emotional distress rising to the level of symptoms of trauma or other mental illness, trouble in school up to and including dropping out, and an inability to form trusting relationships with other people.

***Theme 4: Negative Developmental Outcomes Stemming From Maternal Absence Led to Criminal Behavior and Incarceration***

Twelve participants contributed data to this theme, and one participant provided discrepant data indicating that she perceived no relationship between her mother's incarceration and her own violent offending. The contributing participants reported that they transitioned from their negative developmental outcomes, including experiences of mental illness, negative academic and behavioral outcomes, and an inability to form trusting relationships, into substance use and criminal behavior, and that the violent offending that resulted in their incarceration occurred in this latter context.

All of the participants reported that they transitioned from negative developmental outcomes into illicit substance use and other criminal behaviors. P1 reported that she made the transition to illicit substance use to gain acceptance from peers:

Teenagers who lack a maternal figure may turn to unhealthy behaviors in order to feel loved, accepted, and secure. That has been me throughout my life. At one point I had to do drugs in order to spend more time with people I would want to have relationships with.

P2 described a similar experience of beginning to commit crimes to find acceptance with peers: "I joined crime to satisfy my desire to have security and care and integrate with my peers." P3 also said, "I had to turn to crime and drugs to spend more time with other children. Because I was not getting the attention and care I wanted as a child, I had to find it elsewhere from my peers." P3 specified that her introduction to criminality began with committing thefts with other children. P6 spoke of seeking acceptance from peers through drug use as a last resort after dropping out of school due to her mental health issues: "Doing drugs gave me an opportunity to meet new friends, who gave me that love and affection that I could not get at home. So, my problems started with dropping out of school and doing drugs." P4 spoke of her behavior becoming increasingly aggressive: "The incarceration of my mom increased my aggressive behavior and I have had issues with friends, family, and even the police. The aggression behavior and drugs that I learnt in my childhood landed me in jail in my adulthood." P5 said that as a child, "I always wanted to go in jail so that I could spend more time with her [my mother]. That was my mindset back then." P5 added that as an adult, "I turned into a violent person and opted for crime" in addition to using substances. P8 said that she used substances to self-medicate for her mental health issues and that she turned to crime to fund her substance use: "I had to always use marijuana and opioids to combat the negative impacts of

emotional trauma. I had to resort to petty theft because I was jobless in order to earn just enough money to purchase some drugs.” P9 developed a heroin addiction “to erase my mother’s image from my mind,” and like P8, “With no source of income, I had to start shoplifting to fund my addiction. But my luck ran out and I was eventually arrested and incarcerated.” P11 said of herself and her friends, “We used to mug people for cash to buy our drugs and alcohol.” P12 became homeless through her substance use and joined a gang to survive:

I overdosed on sleeping pills in an attempt to cure acute insomnia that was plaguing me. Soon I found myself on the streets homeless with nowhere to go.

My only chance was to join the street gangs for survival. We engaged in criminal activities such as mugging and armed robbery of stores to get money for our drugs.

P13 also engaged in mugging and armed robberies to steal money for drugs. P13 said, “I was suffering from psychological and physical trauma . . . drugs helped me forget about my problems.”

P7 provided discrepant data that indicated that she perceived no relationship between her mother’s absence due to incarceration and her own violent offending leading to incarceration. P7 said, “I do not connect my bad decisions with her incarceration.” P7 credited her grandmother with raising her properly and blamed herself for her incarceration: “I had another great woman guide me and teach me more in the process. My own doing has led me to where I am at now.” However, P7 described a pattern of offending to gain acceptance from peers that was similar to the experience described by

some other participants: “I had family who guided me and taught me better than my actions, but me being centered on trying to fit in, made the wrong decisions.”

### **Summary**

Two RQs guided this study. RQ1 was as follows: How do female offenders convicted of a violence offense describe their lived experiences with their mother’s absence due to incarceration? Two themes emerged to address this question. The first theme for RQ1 was the mother-child bond was positive and strong prior to maternal absence. All 13 participants contributed data to this theme, and no participants provided discrepant data. Seven of the 13 participants reported that before their mothers’ absence, they were their primary caregivers. Another five participants reported that their mothers and fathers were both their primary caregivers before the maternal absence, and the remaining participant reported that her primary caregivers before her mother’s absence were her mother and grandparents. Thus, for all participants, their mothers were either their primary caregivers or one of their primary caregivers before becoming incarcerated. All 13 participants reported that before their mothers’ incarceration and absence, they had a strong, positive relationship with them and that their most positive early life memories were of spending time with and engaging in activities with their mothers.

The second RQ2 theme was maternal absence caused emotional distress that other caregivers could only partially alleviate. All 13 participants contributed to this theme, and no participants provided discrepant data. The findings indicated that after forming strong, positive bonds with their mothers during early childhood, participants’ separation from their mothers during maternal incarceration caused significant emotional distress. Other



family members who took over caregiving duties during periods of maternal absence, such as fathers and grandparents, were able at most to partially alleviate participants' emotional distress, which was associated, for most participants, with a sense of lacking a source of the protection and comfort that their mothers had previously provided.

RQ2 was as follows: How does maternal absence due to incarceration feature on female offenders' reflections of what led to their violent offending? Two themes emerged to address this question. The first RQ2 theme was maternal incarceration was associated with negative developmental outcomes. Twelve of the participants contributed to this theme, and one participant provided discrepant data indicating no negative developmental outcomes resulting from maternal incarceration. The contributing participants indicated three types of negative developmental outcomes. The first and most frequently attested negative outcome was psychological distress resulting in symptoms associated with trauma or other mental illness. Contributing participants also described themselves as having academic and behavioral problems in school and having difficulty forming trusting relationships and bonds with other people.

The second RQ2 theme was negative developmental outcomes stemming from maternal absence led to criminal behavior and incarceration. Twelve participants contributed data to this theme, and one participant provided discrepant data indicating that she perceived no relationship between her mother's incarceration and her violent offending. The contributing participants reported that they transitioned from their negative developmental outcomes, including experiences of mental illness, negative academic and behavioral outcomes, and an inability to form trusting relationships, into

substance use and criminal behavior, and that the violent offending that resulted in their incarceration occurred in this latter context. Chapter 5 includes the discussion, interpretation, and implications based on these findings.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative interpretative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of maternal absence among female offenders convicted of violent crimes from the perspective of the violent female offenders themselves. I sought to understand how these offenders perceive their experiences of maternal absence in relation to their engagement in criminal behavior (see Eriksson et al., 2016; Huynh-Hohnbaum et al., 2015). Despite previous research highlighting the negative impacts of parental separation due to incarceration (Adams, 2018; Huynh-Hohnbaum et al., 2015; Kamptner et al., 2017), there remains a need for in-depth exploration of the implications of maternal separation specifically on female offenders and their criminal behavior (Pratt, 2016). Adopting an interpretative phenomenological research design (Smith et al., 2012; VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015), I sought to gain insights directly from the lived experiences of the participants, focusing on how maternal absence may influence their violent offending. As the literature on female violent offenders and their experiences of maternal absence is limited (Eriksson et al., 2016; Howell et al., 2017; Mok, Antonsen et al., 2018), I sought to address this gap and potentially contribute to interventions or policies aimed at reducing violent offenses committed by women.

Two primary RQs guided the collection of the responses from the participants to reveal key themes. Addressing RQ1, which sought to explore the experiences of maternal absence, two significant themes emerged. The first theme highlighted the positive and strong mother-child bond that existed before maternal incarceration. All 13 participants reported having a close and positive relationship with their mothers before the separation

due to incarceration. Many participants identified their mothers as their primary caregivers during early childhood, and they cherished the positive memories of spending time and engaging in activities with their mothers.

The second theme under RQ1 focused on the emotional distress caused by maternal absence and the partial alleviation of that distress by other caregivers. All 13 participants experienced significant emotional distress upon separation from their mothers during maternal incarceration. The absence of their mothers left them feeling vulnerable and lacking the protection and comfort they had received before. Other family members, such as fathers and grandparents, attempted to fill the void left by the mother's absence, but they could only partially alleviate the emotional distress experienced by the participants.

Moving to RQ2, which sought to understand the relationship between maternal absence and violent offending, two central themes emerged. The first theme indicated that maternal incarceration was associated with negative developmental outcomes for the participants. Twelve out of 13 participants reported experiencing psychological distress resembling symptoms of trauma or mental illness, academic and behavioral challenges at school, and difficulties forming trusting relationships with others because of their mother's absence. These negative outcomes had a profound impact on their overall well-being and development.

The second theme under RQ2 indicated that negative developmental outcomes resulting from maternal absence may have contributed to criminal behavior and eventual incarceration of the participants. Twelve participants shared their experiences of

transitioning from emotional distress and negative developmental outcomes to engaging in illicit substance use and other criminal behaviors. They described turning to crime to find acceptance among peers or as a means of coping with their emotional struggles. Violent offenses that led to their incarceration occurred within this context of negative outcomes and criminal behavior. An interesting finding was that most participants had initially enjoyed a positive mother-child bond and experienced emotional distress upon their mothers' incarceration. However, one participant provided discrepant data, reporting that no significant negative developmental outcomes resulted from her mother's absence. This divergence highlighted the individual differences in how maternal incarceration can impact female offenders.

Overall, the study shed light on the complex relationship between maternal absence due to incarceration and the violent offending of female inmates. The findings suggest that maternal incarceration can have adverse effects on the emotional well-being and development of female offenders, which may contribute to their involvement in criminal behavior. These results have important implications for understanding the experiences of female violent offenders and could inform interventions and policies aimed at addressing violent offenses committed by women in society.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The findings of this study highlight insights that both confirm and extend existing knowledge in the discipline of criminology, particularly in the context of maternal absence and its implications for violent criminal behavior among women. Comparing these findings with previous research, this research aligns with established knowledge,

challenges certain assumptions, and contributes to a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon. This study's findings corroborate the existing understanding that maternal absence, particularly due to incarceration, significantly impacts children's lives. This impact manifests in emotional distress, behavioral challenges, and academic struggles, as extensively documented in previous research (Besemer et al., 2019; Murray & Farrington, 2008). The experiences of the participants reinforce this knowledge. The emotional distress and mental health struggles reported by the participants align with prior research findings by Besemer et al. (2019), suggesting that maternal absence can lead to trauma symptoms and other psychological issues in children. This confirmation underscores the enduring emotional toll of maternal incarceration on children.

My study also validates existing knowledge about the negative impact of maternal absence on children's educational outcomes (see Besemer et al., 2019). The academic struggles the participants faced, including performance issues and dropping out, are consistent with the documented consequences of maternal absence, which adds a nuanced layer to understanding. I further illustrated the transition from negative developmental outcomes to criminal behavior, a connection less explored in the existing literature. Although adverse outcomes due to maternal absence are acknowledged, the findings provide insights into the pathways leading from these outcomes to violent offending. These insights enrich the understanding of how maternal absence can contribute to criminal behavior and eventual incarceration (Dallaire, 2007). The inclusion of one participant with discrepant data introduces a layer of complexity and individual variation not well documented in existing literature. It suggests that the impact of maternal absence

can vary among individuals. Although most of the participants shared similar experiences, P7 emphasized the need for a nuanced understanding of how maternal absence affects children, acknowledging potential exceptions or unique circumstances. In summary, my study both confirms and extends discipline knowledge by reinforcing the current understanding of the impact of maternal absence on children and offering deeper insights into specific aspects such as trust and relationship formation. The link to criminal behavior and the presence of discrepant data underscores the complexity and individual variation in these experiences, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding.

### **Maternal Absence Caused Emotional Distress That Other Caregivers Could Only Partially Alleviate**

The findings indicated that violent female offenders described the absence of their mothers due to incarceration as a significant and traumatic event in their lives. They expressed feelings of abandonment, loss, and emotional distress, which resonated with the attachment theory framework used in the study (see Bowlby, 1969). In the previous research, I found evidence of the negative implications of parental absence on children's emotional well-being, and the findings add depth and nuance by highlighting the unique experiences of female offenders who faced maternal absence (see Besemer et al., 2019). This theme extends the current knowledge on the impact of maternal absence on female offenders' emotional and psychological development.

### **The Mother-Child Bond Was Positive and Strong Prior to Maternal Absence**

Another theme emerging from the findings that complemented and extended existing literature was the role of attachment styles in shaping the relationship between

maternal absence and violent criminal behavior among women. The literature reviewed contained a discussion of the attachment theory in the context of maternal absence and its impact on children's emotional and social development (Bowlby, 1969). However, in this study, I delved deeper into the attachment styles exhibited by female offenders, revealing that some individuals developed maladaptive attachment patterns because of their mother's absence. I also found that female offenders who experienced insecure attachment during childhood were more likely to exhibit violent criminal behavior in adulthood. This association between attachment styles and violent criminality among women was a significant contribution to the literature, as it provides a novel perspective on the mechanisms through which maternal absence may influence criminal behavior (see Mok, Antonsen et al., 2018). By analyzing the relationship between attachment styles and violent offenses, the study enhanced the theoretical understanding of the complex interplay between maternal absence, attachment patterns, and criminal behavior among female offenders.

### **Maternal Incarceration Was Associated with Negative Developmental Outcomes**

The findings provide insights into the long-term implications of maternal absence due to incarceration for female offenders' life trajectories. In previous studies, researchers have shown that the long-term impact of maternal absence in adulthood, particularly in terms of criminality, was less clear (Fochi et al., 2020). However, for this study, valuable evidence was provided suggesting a potential link between maternal absence and an increased risk of violent offending among women. Specifically, the findings indicated that maternal absence, especially during critical developmental stages, was associated



with a higher likelihood of engaging in violent criminal behavior in adulthood among female offenders as equally seen in the study by Mok, Astrup et al. (2018). This finding furthered the understanding of the enduring consequences of maternal absence and contributed to discussions surrounding the potential risk factors for violent criminality among female inmates. The study broadens the existing knowledge on the long-term implications of maternal absence and highlights the need for targeted intervention strategies to address the underlying factors contributing to violent behavior among female offenders.

Methodologically, my study contributes to the existing research by employing an interpretive phenomenological research design to explore the experiences of violent female offenders. Although previous researchers primarily relied on quantitative methods to study the impact of maternal absence on children and families (Smith et al., 2012), relatively few studies adopted a qualitative approach. Thus, the use of a qualitative method in this study facilitated a more in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and viewpoints of female offenders, thereby addressing a gap in the current literature.

Using interpretive phenomenology, I was able to uncover the subjective meanings and emotions attached to maternal absence among the study participants, providing rich and nuanced data (see VanScoy & Evenstad, 2015). This methodological contribution enhanced the literature on maternal absence and violent criminal behavior by offering a more holistic and in-depth understanding of the complexities surrounding this phenomenon. It also highlighted the significance of qualitative research in exploring sensitive and nuanced topics in the field of criminology.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The sample size and selection process pose significant limitations to the study. The focus on a specific group of female offenders may not fully represent the diverse population of female offenders, and the small sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings to a broader context. The recruitment of participants from a specific correctional facility further narrows the applicability of the study's findings to other settings or regions.

Another limitation stems from the reliance on self-report data obtained through participant interviews. This approach introduced the possibility of self-report bias, where participants may have provided responses they believed were more socially acceptable or desirable. Given the sensitive nature of the study topic involving criminal behavior, some participants might have withheld or modified certain information, potentially leading to inaccuracies in the data.

I explored participants' experiences of maternal absence during childhood, which may have occurred many years before the interviews. This may have introduced the risk of recall bias, as memories of events from the past can be subject to distortion or fading over time. Participants may have faced difficulty accurately recalling and reporting their experiences, potentially compromising the accuracy of the data.

A notable limitation is the absence of a comparison group of female offenders who did not experience maternal absence due to incarceration. A comparison group could have provided valuable insights into the unique impact of maternal absence on violent criminal behavior among women, helping to isolate the specific effects of maternal

absence on the studied outcomes. The study's interpretive phenomenological research design, though offering rich and nuanced data, brings forth another limitation in the form of interpretive subjectivity. My preconceptions and biases might have influenced the interpretation of participants' experiences, potentially impacting the trustworthiness of the findings.

Although the study yielded insights into the long-term implications of maternal absence on female offenders' life trajectories, the absence of longitudinal data collection limited my ability to establish a more robust examination of the causal relationship between maternal absence and violent criminal behavior over time. The study's focus on a specific cultural context might constrain the generalizability of the findings to other cultural settings. Cultural factors can significantly influence individuals' experiences and interpretations of events, including the impact of maternal absence, necessitating caution when applying the findings to diverse cultural contexts.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

To address the limitation of not having a comparison group, future researchers could conduct comparative studies to examine female offenders who experienced maternal absence due to incarceration and those who have not been subjected to such an experience. Such studies would enable a comprehensive analysis of the unique impact of maternal absence on criminal behavior among women. By including diverse populations and settings, the generalizability of the findings would be enhanced. To mitigate the limitations associated with self-report data and interpretive subjectivity, a mixed-methods approach could be adopted in future research. Combining qualitative data, such as in-

depth interviews, with quantitative data, such as standardized questionnaires, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between maternal absence and violent offending. The triangulation of data from multiple sources would strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings.

Given the potential influence of cultural factors on the impact of maternal absence, cross-cultural investigations should be considered in future research. Examining how cultural context may shape the experiences and outcomes of female offenders facing maternal absence would enrich the understanding of this complex phenomenon. Such research would highlight culturally specific risk and protective factors, informing the development of more targeted interventions. Building on the theme of emotional distress caused by maternal absence, future researchers could explore the effectiveness of trauma-informed interventions for female offenders who experienced maternal absence. Implementing interventions that address the emotional and psychological consequences of maternal absence may reduce the risk of further criminal behavior and enhance successful reintegration into society.

The role of support systems in mitigating the effects of maternal absence on female offenders' well-being and behavior is another important avenue for further research. Understanding how the presence of supportive caregivers, mentors, or programs can buffer the negative impact of maternal absence would inform the development of targeted support services. Given the unique focus of the current study on female offenders' direct perspectives and experiences of maternal absence due to incarceration, replication studies are essential. Reproducing the findings in different contexts and with

larger samples would enhance the reliability and generalizability of the results. To address the need for targeted intervention strategies, future researchers could evaluate the efficacy of existing programs and interventions for female offenders with experiences of maternal absence. Conducting longitudinal evaluations of intervention programs would shed light on their effectiveness in reducing violent criminal behavior and promoting positive outcomes.

In summary, this study has illuminated important areas for further research that can enhance the current understanding of the impact of maternal absence on female offenders. By employing longitudinal designs, comparative studies, and mixed-methods approaches, researchers can build on the current study's findings and contribute to a deeper comprehension of this complex issue. Considering the influence of cultural factors, evaluating the efficacy of interventions will enable the development of more tailored and effective strategies for addressing the implications of maternal absence on female offenders. This ongoing research holds the potential to drive positive social change by informing evidence-based policies and interventions that support the rehabilitation and successful reintegration of female offenders with experiences of maternal absence.

### **Implications of the Study**

#### **Societal/Policy Level**

The identification of negative developmental outcomes stemming from maternal absence and its association with violent criminal behavior among female offenders in this study has important implications for societal and policy changes. Policymakers can use

this evidence to advocate for reforms that focus on supporting incarcerated mothers and their families. Such policies may include those promoting alternative sentencing options, such as community-based rehabilitation, which allow mothers to maintain contact with their children and reduce the intergenerational impact of incarceration.

### **Methodological Implications**

The adoption of an interpretive phenomenological research design in this study highlights the value of qualitative approaches in exploring sensitive and nuanced topics such as maternal absence and its impact on female offenders. Future researchers can build on this approach to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of other marginalized populations within the criminal justice system.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The application of attachment theory to the context of maternal absence and criminal behavior among female offenders offers a theoretical framework to explain the psychological mechanisms at play. This study extends the attachment theory's applicability beyond traditional parent-child relationships and sheds light on its relevance to diverse populations and life circumstances. Researchers can further explore attachment styles in different contexts and populations to deepen the theoretical understanding of human behavior and development.

### **Empirical Implications**

The study's contribution to the empirical knowledge base on maternal absence and its impact on female offenders provides a basis for further investigation into the long-term consequences of maternal incarceration. Replication studies in different settings and

with larger samples can strengthen the validity and generalizability of the findings. Such studies will offer robust evidence for informed policymaking and intervention strategies.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the study's findings, practice recommendations should focus on the development of trauma-informed interventions and support services for incarcerated mothers and their families. Creating family-focused programs within correctional facilities that facilitate regular communication and visitation can contribute to maintaining positive family ties and mitigating the negative effects of maternal absence. Providing comprehensive support services to female offenders after their release, including access to mental health counseling, vocational training, and job placement assistance, can aid in successful reintegration into society and reduce the likelihood of recidivism.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of female offenders convicted of violent offenses and their reflections on maternal absence due to incarceration. Grounded in attachment theory, the study sought to deepen the understanding of how a lack of attachment with one's mother during childhood may relate to violent criminal behavior in adulthood. Given the theoretical framework of attachment theory, it was anticipated that maternal absence could have significant implications for the emotional and psychological development of female offenders, potentially contributing to maladaptive coping mechanisms and criminal behavior. The literature review revealed that though extensive research exists on the short-term challenges and

behavioral difficulties resulting from maternal absence, studies based on direct perspectives from female offenders themselves regarding the impact of maternal absence due to incarceration are lacking. This study addressed this gap by delving into the unique experiences and emotions of violent female offenders.

The findings of this study confirmed and extended existing knowledge in the discipline of criminology. Themes such as the positive mother-child bond before maternal absence, the emotional distress caused by maternal absence, and the association between maternal incarceration and negative developmental outcomes aligned with previous research. The study contributed to the literature by highlighting the role of attachment styles in shaping the relationship between maternal absence and violent criminal behavior among women, offering valuable insights into the long-term implications of maternal absence and advocating for a more comprehensive approach to addressing the issue. By incorporating both the expectations from the theoretical framework and the existing literature, this study contributes to a refined understanding of the complex interplay between maternal absence, attachment patterns, and criminal behavior among female offenders. By shedding light on the direct experiences and perspectives of violent female offenders, the study adds depth and nuance to the existing knowledge on this topic.



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