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Self-Distraction as a Positive Coping Mechanism for Adolescents of Incarcerated Parents

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Abstract

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by

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MA, Liberty University, 2012

BS, East Carolina University, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Children of incarcerated parents have been an increasing area of scholarly focus, especially considering that the United States holds one of the highest rates of incarceration in the world. The purpose of this qualitative basic study was to explore the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parents are incarcerated in prison, and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism. The study was grounded in Hill's family stress theory. Purposive and snowball sample strategies were employed in this study to obtain participants from a private Facebook group. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with 12 participants who met the study inclusion criteria. Thematic analysis revealed nine primary themes: (a) children of incarcerated parents experiencing emotional turmoil and misunderstood pain, (b) children of incarcerated parents utilizing family members for support, (c) children of incarcerated parents utilizing social connections for support, (d) children of incarcerated parents using creative and structured activities, (e) children of incarcerated parents missing parent-child connection, (f) children of incarcerated parents using spirituality as a source of comfort and resilience, (g) children of incarcerated parents utilized professional supports as a central coping resource, (h) children of incarcerated parents find strength and growth, and (i) children of incarcerated parents perceived coping mechanism as helpful. The findings may contribute to positive social change by informing educators, mental health professionals, and community organizations about coping strategies, thereby promoting strength-based interventions for youth affected by parental incarceration.

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Dedication

First, I want to dedicate this research to my family, especially my significant other, my five children, and two grandchildren, who have sacrificed so much in order to support me through this journey. I want to thank all the staff at Second Chance Behavioral Health, who stepped up and allowed me to step down to complete this dissertation. I would like to thank my parents and my siblings for all the encouragement. Lastly, I want to thank my sister, Zuel Deonca Ushry, who gained her wings in heaven, right in the middle of this process; it is because of your determination for excellence that I began this journey, and in your memory, I completed it. I know you are in heaven smiling down on me right now.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The U.S. prison population has grown. As of 2023, the prison population in the United States is 1.9 million, consisting of people detained in federal and state prisons, local jails, and other correctional facilities (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022). The U.S. prison population by year-end 2022, just in state and federal prisons, was approximately 1.23 million—an increase from previous years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022). However, after comprehending the entirety of mass incarceration, individuals who are imprisoned represent just a tiny portion of those affected by the criminal justice system (Sawyer & Wagner, 2023). The United States is facing a problem of mass incarceration that may lead to complex problems in criminal justice and correctional policies.

In the United States, a significant portion of the incarcerated population are parents. Approximately 47% of individuals in state prisons and 57% in federal prisons have minor children, implicating that there are around 1.1 million fathers and 120,000 mothers who are parents in prison (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022). These parents account for a growing number of children affected by parental incarceration, with estimates suggesting that over 5 million children have experienced parental incarceration at some point (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022). Parental incarceration has an extensive impact on families and communities, as many children face challenges such as economic hardship, emotional distress, and educational setbacks due to the absence of a parent (McCauley, 2022; Obus et al., 2024; Quinn et al., 2022). The children and the families left behind experience various negative consequences in several areas of life due to the imprisonment of a parent.

In this chapter, I will discuss the background, problem statement, purpose of the study, research question, theoretical framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and definitions, limitations, significance, and summary.

Background

Parental incarceration is a significant issue in the United States, affecting millions of children and families. This issue can be traced through several critical factors, including historical trends in incarceration, socioeconomic conditions, and the impact on children and families. The United States possesses one of the highest incarceration rates globally beginning in the late 20th century, largely due to policies such as the "War on Drugs" and "Tough on Crime" legislation, which led to longer sentences and increased use of imprisonment for a range of offenses (Huebner, 2021). In addition, the implementation of mandatory minimum sentences for certain offenses, especially drug-related crimes, resulted in longer prison terms and increased the likelihood of parents being incarcerated (Nellis, 2024). Furthermore, mass incarceration has inherent detrimental consequences, such as the erosion of families and intimate connections, the modification of children's opportunities in life, and the undermining of communities (Wakefield, 2022). Mass incarceration has detrimental effects on children and families, such as the dissolution of families, the alteration of children's possibilities, and the subversion of communities.

Children with incarcerated parents may face numerous challenges. Parental incarceration can lead to adverse outcomes for children, such as behavioral problems, placement disruptions, and an increased likelihood of involvement with the criminal

justice system (Hood & Gaston, 2022; Tolliver et al., 2024; Turney, 2021). In addition, children with incarcerated parents often face stigmas related to emotional and psychological challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and abandonment, that may lead to social isolation and shame, causing behavioral issues like aggression and difficulty forming relationships with peers and adults (Bomysoad & Francis, 2021; Bradshaw et al., 2020; Bradshaw et al., 2021; Siege et al., 2021). Children with incarcerated parents may face behavioral issues, economic hardships, lower academic performance, placement disruptions, and increased criminal justice involvement. and emotional and psychological challenges.

Incarceration causes financial instability, increased poverty, and reduced access to resources for many families. Incarceration often leads to financial instability for families, as the primary breadwinner may be removed from the household, leading to increased poverty and reduced access to resources (Hood & Gaston, 2022; Norris et al., 2021). Similarly, parental incarceration can have a detrimental effect on a child's academic achievement due to the stress and emotional instability it causes (Haskins et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2024). In addition, children who have parents in prison frequently encounter reduced academic performance, elevated rates of being absent from school, and an increased probability of leaving school before completion (Bell et al., 2023; Brae et al., 2020; Haskins et al., 2023). The long-term effects of parental incarceration on children can result in intergenerational incarceration, as the experiences children go through increase their probability of involvement in the criminal judicial system (Hoover, 2022; Niño & Cai, 2020; Noel & Najdowski, 2020). Parental incarceration negatively impacts

children's academic achievement and school attendance and can lead to intergenerational incarceration due to the adverse effects.

The primary emphasis of scholars has been on the negative consequences of parental incarceration, with little attention given to coping strategies. There is a gap in the literature concerning the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parents have been incarcerated for more than a year, and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism (Bomysoad et al., 2021). This study will address a gap in the literature by focusing on the perceptions of adolescents and their use of positive coping mechanisms. Human service practitioners may use the results of this study to improve their practice by addressing the needs of this population, such as creating resources for families and children. This study may contribute to positive social change by empowering teenagers with incarcerated parents to make better decisions to generate more positive outcomes while transitioning into adulthood.

Problem Statement

Parental incarceration can yield enduring adverse effects on children, impacting multiple facets of their lives. Stress on a child caused by the abrupt separation from their parent may result in negative emotional and psychological effects such as anxiety and depression (Barbarin et al., 2022; Carretero-Trigo et al., 2021; Luck, 2023). In addition, children of incarcerated parents may encounter feelings of shame and embarrassment, frequently stemming from the stigma linked to having an incarcerated parent resulting in social isolation or harassment (Bell et al., 2023; Borchet et al., 2021). Parental incarceration influences children's behavior by increasing their aggression and

delinquency, which may lead to criminal activities, often due to insufficient emotional regulation or environmental stressors (Chumchal et al., 2024; Correa et al., 2021). Apart from behavioral problems, children with imprisoned parents can experience academic difficulties due to stressors that may cause a decline in academic performance, reduced motivation, absences from school, or school dropouts (Bell et al., 2023; Borchet et al., 2021). According to Dunlea et al. (2022) and Fox et al. (2023), other manifestations of parental imprisonment among children are instability and financial hardship arising from lost income, which causes poverty and food insecurity. Furthermore, children of incarcerated parents may experience repeated changes of caretakers or living arrangements, occasionally entering foster care (Jackson et al., 2023; Keller et al., 2022; Morrison & Drake, 2023). Parental incarceration increases children's aggression, delinquency, academic challenges, financial distress, and instability, leading to poverty and food insecurity, and may result in repeated caretakers or living arrangements.

Researchers have identified not only negative and positive consequences of parental incarceration. Johnson and Arditti (2023) focused on the capacity of children to navigate challenging circumstances and the positive dynamics within their families and highlighted the importance of effective parenting and maintaining communication with incarcerated parents, which contribute to the overall well-being of children. In addition, Bomysoad and Francis (2021) sought to assess the impact of parental incarceration on the mental health of young individuals and found that youth with a parent who had been incarcerated were found to experience a higher prevalence of mental health conditions; however, they also found that higher levels of resilience, activity participation, and

sufficient sleep are associated with reduced odds of mental health conditions in youth with incarcerated parents. Although these studies have illustrated important findings, there was a gap in the literature on the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parents have been incarcerated for more than a year and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism. The findings of this study could aid policymakers and practitioners in their joint endeavor to enhance support for children with jailed parents and their families.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parents are incarcerated in prison, and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism.

Research Question

What are the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parents are incarcerated in prison, and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

I used Hill's family stress theory as the theoretical framework for this generic qualitative study. Hill (1949) conceptualized family stress by examining the separation and subsequent reunification of families following war. Family stress theory posits that families experience intermittent and severe stressors that impact their capacity to adjust (Hill, 1949). Hill highlighted that the reactions of families to stress are influenced not only by the specific incident but also by their accessible resources and their perception of

the situation. Hill's family stress theory related to my study in comprehending how adolescents manage the stress associated with parental incarceration.

Nature of the Study

I employed a generic basic qualitative design. According to Muzari et al. (2022), qualitative research is a methodology concerned with understanding and explaining the meaning, experiences, and views of people or groups in their natural setting. The primary goal of qualitative research, as argued by Muzari et al., is to explore deep and complex dimensions of human behaviors, feelings, and relationships. Similarly, qualitative research is exploratory in nature because it focuses on how human beings perceive, interpret, and derive meaning from their environment rather than testing a hypothesis (Patton, 2002). Basic qualitative design is employed to comprehend how individuals interpret their experiences, emphasizing the significance they ascribe to those experiences, and is less prescriptive and does not follow a specific qualitative tradition (like grounded theory or phenomenology), making it flexible and more focused on the descriptive aspect of participants' experiences (Kahlke, 2014). Basic qualitative design generally entails the collection and analysis of data via interviews, observations, and records, without the intention of broader theoretical advancement or hypothesis testing (Kahlke, 2014). I chose to use qualitative generic design because it is less rigid and concentrated on the descriptive elements of participants' experiences allowing for flexibility in facilitating variations throughout the study process to enhance comprehension. Basic qualitative design offers flexibility and descriptive depth, while other qualitative designs have specific goals, such as understanding lived experiences

(phenomenology), generating theories (grounded theory), or studying cultures (ethnography).

My sampling strategy was purposeful sampling where I selected participants based on their experience with parental incarceration, which is directly aligned with my research focus. Participants were drawn from 18-21-year-olds whose parents were serving jail terms. I conducted semistructured interviews using open-ended questions regarding the experiences, feelings, and coping strategies of the participants. Thematic data analysis was conducted to analyze the data, which is a systematic identification of the patterns, themes, and meanings derived from the interviews with informants (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). More detail is discussed in Chapter 3.

Definitions

Adverse childhood experiences (ACE): ACEs are negative or harmful effects occurring during childhood (Prevent Child Abuse America, n.d.).

Coping mechanism: Coping mechanisms are actions designed to evade stress or negative feelings. These behaviors may be classified as beneficial (adaptive) or negative (maladaptive; American Psychological Association, n.d.-b).

Mental health: Mental health is a multifaceted notion that influences emotional, psychological, and social well-being (American Psychological Association, n.d.-c).

Resilience: Resilience is the capacity to endure and recuperate from adversities (American Psychological Association, n.d.-d).

Risk: Risk denotes the possibility of injury or negative consequences associated with an individual's mental condition, conduct, or surroundings. It includes both the

probability and the intensity of potential adverse occurrences (American Psychological Association, n.d.-e).

Self-distraction: An element of turning one's attention in the mind from stressful or negative emotions, or difficult situations, into alternative activities (Bomysoad & Francis, 2021). This mechanism is done for temporal focus and reduces distress to a person by giving one a break or an escape (Bomysoad & Francis, 2021).

Stigma: A pervasive sentiment of dislike prevalent among the populace regarding an issue, particularly when deemed unjust (American Psychological Association, n.d.-f).

Assumptions

Assumptions may affect research and how its findings can be interpreted. Assumptions are the elements of the study that the researcher accepts as true while undertaking a study; they are not questioned (Durkin et al., 2020). Similarly, Theofanidis and Fountouki (2019) defined research assumptions as fundamental concepts, notions, or stances presumed and seen as rational and commonly acknowledged, spanning from the initial study design to the last report. For this study, I assumed that participants would provide accurate and truthful descriptions of thoughts, emotions, and coping strategies such as self-distraction. I additionally assumed that participants all have negative impacts as a result of parental incarceration. Furthermore, it was assumed that participants engage in seeking self-distraction techniques as a way to cope. This assumption can be made in investigating adolescents' perceptions of their use of self-distraction as a means of coping.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope and delimitations are essential elements in a study, defining the boundaries and limitations of the research. The scope delineates the aspects of the study, including the target population, extent, and duration (Coker, 2022). Delimitations refer to the parameters a researcher establishes to include and exclude elements, so rendering a project manageable and concentrated on the study subject (Coker, 2022). However, Theofanidis and Fountouki (2019) defined delimitations as intentional restrictions imposed by researchers to guarantee that the study's aims and objectives are attainable. Delimitations largely relate to the theoretical framework, objectives, research questions, variables under investigation, and the study's sample (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Researchers control delimitations, ensuring the study's objectives remain achievable and not become unattainable (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). By defining the scope and delimitations, researchers clarify the focus of their work and set realistic expectations for what the study will accomplish.

This study's scope included focusing on adolescents, aged 18-21 years of age, who has at least one parent who was incarcerated for at least 1 year; both the parent and the child must be living in the United States. Delimitations to this study included exclusion of younger children and older adults, other family members of incarcerated parents, parents who were incarcerated for less than a year, and participants who self-identify as unstable due to experiencing current symptoms related to parental incarceration.

For this study, I used Hill's (1949) family stress theory as the theoretical framework. However, I did contemplate employing Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping, which primarily focuses on how individuals assess and deal with situations mentally. Although it provides an exhaustive overview of individual psychological reactions, it did not encompass the intricacies and interconnections within a family impacted by incarceration. Lazarus and Folkman's theory is valuable in comprehending individual coping mechanisms; however, it does not sufficiently provide a thorough framework for examining the broader implications and interactions within a family in relation to parental incarceration. Another theoretical framework I considered was the constructivist self-development theory (CSDT) by McCann and Pearlman (1992). The constructivist self-development theory (CSDT) focuses on the psychological development of individuals and how they form their sense of self in response to traumatic or stressful circumstances (McCann & Pearlman, 1992). Constructivist self-development theory (CSDT) examines the process by which individuals get significance from their experiences and how these experiences influence their sense of self, identity, and perspective on the world. Although this theory is valuable in comprehending the individual consequences of trauma, it may not consider the broader familial context and dynamics (McCann & Pearlman, 1992). Due to the limitations of other theories, the family stress theory was the most suitable framework for examining the perspectives of children with incarcerated parents.

Limitations

Whether practical or theoretical, a study's limitations cannot always be controlled by the researcher. Ross and Zaidi (2019) defined limitations as problems that have been identified in research, which will ultimately affect the findings of a particular study. Theofanidis and Fountouki (2019) further identified limitations as potential disadvantages linked to the selection of the research design, restrictions of the statistical model, and financial constraints, among other pertinent factors. In addition, limitations will signify a restriction imposed and, therefore, can be beyond the researcher's control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Citing or recognizing limitations enhances the study's credibility, showing that the researcher can be honest and open about its weaknesses. In fact, the citation of imperfections also reveals the grasp of variable limits and circumspection toward study (Vera, 2023). Limitations in research, such as design, statistical model, and funding constraints, can affect findings. Outlining these imperfections enhances credibility and reveals an understanding of variable limits.

Limitations in this study included self-reports, overstating or understating emotions, sample size, and diversity. Self-reported data in this research were a limitation because they depend on the memory and honesty of participants. In addition, participants might overstate or understate their emotions, coping strategies, or experiences. To address this issue, I included validity checks by comparing self-reported data with external or objective data whenever feasible (e.g., academic records and behavioral assessments). Another limitation included sample size and diversity: I employed a purposeful sample technique to select study participants who meet the specific criteria

deemed necessary for investigating this research question. Every study possesses inherent limits; nevertheless, these limitations may provide researchers with the opportunity to mitigate them effectively.

Several biases may be present in a study. Bias is the tendency of the mind or inclination that leads the individual to partiality in analyzing a question, according to (Krishna et al., 2010). More so, Jager et al. (2020) identified three major biases: interviewer biases, explicit bias, and implicit bias. Jager et al. expressed the meaning of interviewer bias as the systematic inaccuracy that occurs when an interviewer knowingly or unknowingly collects selective data or influences the responses of subjects. Standardizing the interview process can help one overcome interviewer bias (Jager et al., 2020; Payne & Hannay, 2021). I recognized a possible interview bias in which I may assume that self-distraction is the main or most efficient coping mechanism. In such a scenario, I may ask leading questions that explicitly push participants to confirm that belief. In order to reduce this possible bias, I consistently reflected on my biases by maintaining a reflexive notebook, where I recorded my thoughts, emotions, and preconceptions both before and after interviews.

Implicit bias, described by Payne and Hannay (2021), refers to an inbuilt orientation, either favorable or unfavorable, towards an individual or a collective group. Vela et al. (2022) argued that, although stereotyping is unintentional and beyond one's consciousness, implicit bias can include the positive or negative judgments held about certain groups of people. Given my personal interest in the topic, I may have unconscious viewpoints or preconceived notions that might impact the study process. In order to

reduce the impact, I maintained a reflexive journal to regularly assess and contemplate my biases by considering how my social background, identity, or personal experiences might shape my perception of the participants' experiences.

Payne and Hannay (2021) described explicit biases as the perceptions, either positive or negative, individuals hold at the conscious level, of which they are aware and feel free to express and share with others in their everyday lives. Similarly, Daumeyer et al. (2019) described explicit biases as preferences, opinions, and attitudes that individuals are typically aware of, support, and can correctly be recognized and expressed. I am aware that my conscious beliefs or attitudes toward this topic may exert deliberate or inadvertent impact on the study process. In order to minimize explicit bias I may possess, I employed a semistructured interview guide that avoids misleading questions, therefore preventing the interview process from being influenced by my own preexisting thoughts or ideas. Biases within research studies include interviewer biases and implicit biases. Interviewer bias represents systemic inaccuracy, whereas implicit bias is the innate tendency toward or against another person or group. Normalizing the interview process, as well as awareness of their influence upon prejudice, can help mitigate bias.

Significance

The present study aimed to provide an understanding of the perceptions held by adolescents, aged 18-21, whose parents are incarcerated, regarding the utilization of self-distraction as a constructive coping strategy. Bomysoad and Francis (2021) proposed that further researchers should investigate if self-distraction functions as beneficial coping mechanisms. This study addressed a gap in research by contributing knowledge and

understanding of real-life experiences of adults who experienced parental incarceration as children, thereby offering context for the creation of support programs and interventions designed to better assist families and communities impacted by parental incarceration.

This study aimed to improve practice by identifying if self-distraction is a positive coping mechanism for adolescents with incarcerated parents. It may provide insights for developing targeted interventions and tailoring support to individual needs. By understanding how different adolescents perceive and use self-distraction, mental health professionals can better understand the emotional and psychological needs of this population. This knowledge can lead to more effective counseling approaches, potentially aligning with self-distraction methods already used by adolescents. This can lead to more personalized counseling sessions and better understanding of the emotional and psychological needs of adolescents.

This research may further raise awareness of the implications that parental incarceration has and guide policy toward improvements that increase quality of life for adolescents in families that face parental incarceration. These results could be used to argue for changes in the policy, thereby giving better support to these children and adolescents with incarcerated parents by policies that include but are not limited to funds for mental health services, educational programs, and family support initiatives, which have proven to decrease long-term psychological repercussions from parental incarceration. In sum, all these programs enhance general well-being and resilience in an individual. The study has the potential to contribute positively towards social change by exposing distinct challenges, such as psychological hardships, social disapproval, and the

usage of coping strategies. Increased awareness can stimulate more knowledgeable discussions in both academic and public domains regarding the needs of children of incarcerated parents. For example, my research might reveal that adolescents with incarcerated parents suffer from heightened levels of anxiety, depression, or feelings of abandonment. By highlighting these psychological challenges, my study could encourage mental health professionals and policymakers to design targeted interventions such as counseling programs, school support groups, or online resources tailored to the unique emotional needs of this population. This increased understanding can lead to better mental health services and foster emotional resilience in these adolescents, improving their long-term well-being.

Summary

In 2023, the population of individuals in federal correctional facilities in the United States hit a record high of more than 1.9 million (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022). Mass incarceration is a chronic issue impacting millions of children and their families (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022). Various key concepts can be used to comprehend the historical trends in incarceration, social contexts, and their effects on children and families. The rates of mass incarceration in the United States have been notably high (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2022). In addition, incarceration rates have skyrocketed since the late 20th century due to policies related to both the “War on Drugs” and “Tough on Crime” (Huebner, 2021). Mandatory minimum sentences for certain crimes, particularly drug-related offenses, not only guaranteed that those convicted would spend much longer in prison but also increased the likelihood of one or both parents

going to jail (Nellis, 2024). Mass incarceration yields detrimental effects, including the disintegration of families and intimate relationships, the alteration of children's life opportunities, and the erosion of community cohesion. Children of incarcerated parents face numerous challenges, such as behavioral problems, placement instability, and an increased likelihood of engaging with the criminal justice system. Most children with incarcerated parents suffer from stigmatization, particularly regarding psychological and emotional complications such as anxiety, depression, and the feeling of abandonment that can manifest as behavioral problems including tendencies toward aggressive behavior and challenges in fitting in with their peers as well as the adult society (Hood & Gaston, 2022; Tolliver et al., 2024; Turney, 2021). This study intended to explore the views of adolescents, aged 18-21, whose parents have been imprisoned in the United States for more than 1 year, focusing on self-distraction as a strength-based approach. The results could help inform policymakers and practitioners in their collaborative efforts to enhance support for children with incarcerated parents and their families. In this chapter, I discussed the background, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical framework, nature of the study, definition of terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, biases and significance of the study. I provide a literature analysis in Chapter 2, which highlights the lack of research that motivated the purpose of the present study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative basic study was to explore the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parents are incarcerated in prison, and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism. Studies have indicated that children who have parents in prison may encounter negative experiences during their youth (Hood & Gaston, 2022; Horton, 2023; Jackson et al., 2021). Some of these negative experiences include lower levels of attained socioeconomic status (SES) and income, increased likelihood of children to use public assistance, and have a higher likelihood of being incarcerated during adulthood, as compared to individuals who have not experienced parental incarceration (Finkeldey & Dennison, 2020; Hood & Gaston, 2022). There was a gap in the research on how adolescents perceive and use positive coping mechanisms when their parent is incarcerated.

In this section, I will present my plan for conducting the literature search. I will then analyze the existing literature on the family stress theory, which serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Next, I examine and consolidate scholarly works on parental incarceration. The themes I address are as follows: the emotional and psychological effects on children, the financial difficulties, the dynamics and structure of families, the social and academic repercussions, interactions with the criminal justice system, resilience, and coping strategies, intergenerational impacts, policy and societal implications, and development and health.

Literature Search Strategy

I conducted a comprehensive literature review by utilizing scholarly resources made available by the Walden University Library. The keywords I utilized were *parental incarceration and child development, impact of parental imprisonment on children, children of incarcerated parents, long-term effects of parental incarceration on children, psychological consequences of parental imprisonment on offspring, social and emotional well-being of children with incarcerated parents, interventions for children of incarcerated parents, family dynamics after parental incarceration, children with incarcerated parents, risk, resilience, intersectionality, intervention, social justice adversity, resilience, mental health, coping methods,* and *psychological well-being.* I utilized the following databases through the Walden University Library: SAGE Journals, Criminal Justice database, Google Scholar, PubMed, APAPschNet, ScholarWorks, SocINDEX, Taylor and Francis, Bureau of Justice Statistics, ProQuest, World Health Organization, Central Psychiatry Online, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycBooks, APA PsycExtra, APA PsycInfo, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Google Datasets, National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD), and ProQuest, CentralProQuest, and Ebook Central. The time range I utilized was from 2020-2024.

Theoretical Framework

Main Components of Family Stress Theory

Family stress theory was the theoretical framework used in this study. Hill's (1949) family stress theory was utilized to examine how a family's internal and external resources might either mitigate or intensify a stressful event, impacting the family's

understanding and perception of a triggering event. Hill postulated that the familial conventions, rituals, and routines exert control over the behavior of family members. Hill defined the family as a closed system, and when this system is endangered by external factors like death, separation, or incarceration, the family unites even more strongly, reinforcing its closed nature. Hill defined a crisis as an external danger that compels the closed family structure to face the possibility of being broken apart or separated. Hill posited that the result of a crisis was influenced by the interaction between the event itself, the family's available resources, and the family's interpretation of the event. This theoretical framework is used to examine the family as a cohesive entity and explores how both external and internal factors can lead to either unity or crisis within the family.

Hill (1949) conducted studies that impacted the development of this model, the potentially disruptive repercussions of World War II and the Great Depression on familial structures. The objective of these studies was to elucidate the factors that contribute to the ability of families to endure the pressures of social and economic changes while preserving their unity and effectiveness (Hill, 1949). Hill indicated that families could alleviate the adverse impacts of stressors on their well-being and functioning by employing coping strategies to better interpretate the circumstances. The primary goal of Hill's research was to identify the factors that help families maintain their unity and effectiveness amidst social and economic pressures. This objective reflects a focus on resilience and adaptability within family systems. The subsequent sections delineate the constituents of Hill's family stress theory.

The Course of Adjustment

During times of crisis, families frequently experience a period of denial before being compelled to confront the truth. Subsequently, they often adapt and recover. Hill (1949) defined the course of adjustment as the process of family adaptation during times of crisis, which varies from one family to another and from one crisis to another. However, a similar pattern between different crises may be observed, which can be likened to a roller coaster ride (Hill, 1949). Hill posited that when faced with a crisis, the impact affects all family members in some way. Initially, they may communicate with friends as if the crisis had not occurred, and subsequently, as the information is absorbed, there is a decline in the effectiveness of the family unit (Hill, 1949). Family roles are performed with reduced enthusiasm; grievances are suppressed or voiced, and conflicts are expressed or transformed into tensions that strain relationships (Hill, 1949). As the family reaches its lowest point, improvements begin to occur, and new ways of life are implemented through negative experiences and by making necessary sacrifices (Hill, 1949). Eventually, some fundamental consensus on the family's direction is developed. The adjustment to a crisis consists of four components: crisis, disorganization, recovery, and reorganization. During crises, families often experience denial before confronting the truth, then adapt and recover.

Effects of Crisis on the Family

The impact of a crisis on a family can be wide-ranging, encompassing emotional, sexual, and psychological impacts that affect each member to varying degrees. Examining the family's transition from old habits to new routines reveal shifts in family

structure (Hill, 1949). The frequency and regularity of sexual intercourse may vary, sometimes coming to a complete halt for certain couples (Hill, 1949). During crises characterized by interpersonal recriminations, if one member is seen as responsible for the problem, their status is may be diminished within the couple (Hill, 1949). The crisis can cause worry and uncertainty, which leads to personality changes in individuals (Hill, 1949). Each responsible member goes through a cycle of shock, disorganization, recovery, and readjustment (Hill, 1949). This is particularly noticeable in the context of bereavement, where family members go through a series of stages: shock, numbness, sorrow, trial-and-error adaptations, resumption of routine, and healing (Hill, 1949). Crisis may affect the family structure, causing emotional, sexual, and psychological changes. Members can undergo a cycle of shock, disorganization, recovery, and readjustment, especially in bereavement contexts.

Resources to Support Families in Crisis

Community Resources. Community resources entail social support and psychological resources that offer the family some necessary aid during a crisis. Social support is vital to a family in crisis and is acquired from relationships of extended family, friends, neighbors, and community organizations, also referred to as social networks (Hill, 1949). Hill (1949) identified social networks as an avenue through which individuals receive emotional, informational, and practical support. Another vital resource is psychological resources, which refer to individual family members' mental and emotional strengths, such as resilience, self-esteem, and a positive outlook (Hill, 1949). These psychological assets enable family members to maintain their mental health

and well-being, thus enhancing their overall ability to cope with stress (Hill, 1949). Community resources, including social and psychological support, are vital during crises, providing emotional, informational, and practical support and enhancing stress coping.

Internal Resources. Internal resources, such as family cohesiveness, good communication, and problem-solving skills, help support families during a crisis. A family's cohesiveness allows the members to interact with one another and, coupled with effective communication and problem-solving skills, are indispensable during a crisis (Hill, 1949). According to Hill (1949), a family characterized by cohesion through intimate communication styles and problem-solving skills can share responsibilities, resources, and each other's problems or difficulties. Problem-solving skills can include the ability of family members to identify stressors, potential solutions, and coping strategies. Hill emphasized that families that have effective problem-solving abilities may handle stress more successfully. Problem-solving skills can develop with experience, education, and training, through which families can become more resilient. Family crisis resilience is enhanced by problem-solving skills, effective communication, and cohesion, which can be developed through experience, education, and training.

Hill (1949) underscored the dynamic interplay between stressors and resources, suggesting that enhancing family resources can improve a family's capacity to handle stress. The effective utilization and enhancement of interventions aimed at strengthening family resources, whether community-based or internal, can bolster a family's resilience and enhance the family's coping mechanisms (Hill, 1949). Hill suggested that enhancing

family resources can improve stress-handling capacity and resilience, highlighting the importance of effectively utilizing and enhancing resources for overall well-being.

Prior Studies Using the Family Stress Theory

The application of family stress theory has been used to identify stressors, engagement of fathers, and disciplinary practices of parents on behavioral issues in children, as well as the psychological effects of parental stress. Additionally, family stress theory has been employed in therapeutic settings and to explore the coping mechanisms employed by military families. Antle et al. (2020) used family stress theory to examine how maternal depression, maternal parenting stress, father engagement, and spanking were linked to children's behavior problems. In this sample of 9-year-old children, incarcerated fathers were found to be significantly related to increased externalizing behaviors as compared to nonincarcerated fathers (Antle et al., 2020). Further evidence supporting a positive correlation between maternal incarceration and child externalizing behavior was found by Antle et al. In addition, Casaburi et al. (2020) used the framework to examine the application of family stress theory on mental health by reviewing other studies that used the family stress theory for different populations. One study utilized family stress theory in a case analysis to identify stressors and develop coping strategies for military families (Casaburi et al., 2023). Family stress theory is frequently utilized to analyze the effects of stress on the family unit by investigating both externalizing and internal behaviors while also finding strategies that the family might employ to manage stress.

Family stress theory has been utilized in investigating social and economic stress on families. For instance, Schellinger et al. (2020) looked at a possible moderating role of social support in child externalizing behavior and parenting stress. They found that reduced support and diminished satisfaction with social support were linked with heightened parenting stress. Casaburi et al. (2023) outlined that parents found it hard to parent their children due to the stress that was generated from living below the poverty line. Researching social and economic stress through the lens of family stress theory has resulted in work done towards helping families to identify and solve problems.

Scholars have also used the family stress theory to examine stressors linked to COVID-19, the maltreatment of children, and economic stress. Wu and Xu (2020) applied family stress theory to identify COVID-19 related stressors within families and examined the connections between these stressors and child maltreatment through the resources, perceptions, and coping methods of parents. Wu and Xu found that effectively tackling the difficulties associated with COVID-19 in family environments and safeguarding children during the pandemic is important. Wu and Xu noted that it was crucial to comprehend the nature of the stressors, exert more significant endeavors in offering consistent resources and support, and foster positive attitudes among parents towards stressors and other occurrences during COVID-19. Casaburi et al. (2023) examined studies that utilized family stress theory to identify economic stress in military families and revealed that experiencing financial stress in general leads to economic insecurity, specifically in terms of being able to afford food and meet basic needs.1 Families also associated stress with periods of either being unemployed or

underemployed while simultaneously caring for children (Casaburi et al., 2023). These studies demonstrated how utilizing family stress theory can be beneficial to examining stressors linked to COVID-19 as well as identifying economic stressors in military families.

Family stress theory was further used to examine issues pertaining to child development and adult violent behaviors. Farr (2017) conduct a long-term study on child development, parenting, and family connections to gain insights into the controversies surrounding the adoption of children by sexual minority parents. Parent-reported child behavior scores and family functioning at W2 (middle childhood) were substantially linked with child sex (Farr, 2017). Boys had a higher frequency of behavior problems, as reported by parents, compared to girls (Farr, 2017). In addition, Lee and Luo (2023) investigated connections between parental incarceration (PI) and violence committed in adulthood. Lee and Luo found that exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) was found to have a substantial association with an increased likelihood of engaging in all types of intimate partner violence (IPV) perpetration behaviors in adulthood, excluding coerced sexual activities. Family stress theory has led to significant work on child development issues, as well as how children witnessing violence can lead to violent behaviors in adulthood.

How Family Stress Theory Relates to the Current Study

Family stress theory was pertinent to the current study as I aimed to explore the perceptions of adolescents, aged 18-21, whose parents are incarcerated. Family stress theory relates to my study as it provides a framework for understanding how adolescents

cope with the stressors associated with parental incarceration. My research investigated these adolescents' use of self-distraction as a positive coping mechanism. The logical connections between Hill's (1949) family stress theory and the nature of my study are evident in the way the theory elucidates the dynamics of stress, coping, and adaptation within families facing significant stressors. In the context of adolescents with incarcerated parents, the experience of parental imprisonment may introduce a significant stressor to the family unit. The separation, stigma, and emotional challenges associated with parental incarceration may contribute to heightened stress levels for both the incarcerated parent and the remaining family members, including the adolescents. In response to these stressors, as outlined by Hill's theory, these adolescents' use of self-distraction can be seen as a positive coping mechanism.

Literature Review

Emotional and Psychological Impact on Children

The incarceration of parents has been recognized as having a significant emotional and psychological effect on children. Bradshaw et al. (2021) revealed that parental incarceration adversely affected children's emotional, scholastic, and psychological achievements. Youth with a parent who had been incarcerated were found to experience a higher prevalence of mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, conduct disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and substance use disorder (Bomysoad & Francis, 2021; Bradshaw et al., 2020; Siege et al., 2021). Similarly, Brown (2003) found that school counselors identified a range of emotions in children of incarcerated parents, encompassing feelings of anger, sadness, anxiety,

nervousness, confusion, and embarrassment. Furthermore, the frequency of parental incarceration is directly correlated with the severity of depression in the child (Jones et al., 2024). Turney et al. (2024) found that children frequently stated that their father's imprisonment reshaped their lives by changing their emotions (hiding their emotions and comforting family members. Another factor is that the prevalence of suicidal thoughts among young individuals with a history of parental incarceration was significantly elevated (Pfluger et al., 2023). Pfluger et al. (2023) found in their study that 41.2% of young individuals with parents who are now in prison reported having thoughts of suicide, whereas 34.9% of young individuals with parents who were formerly incarcerated. Quinn et al. (2022) revealed that boys exhibited a substantially higher propensity than girls to develop a strategy for committing suicide, particularly if their mothers were imprisoned or their fathers had issues with alcohol. The incarceration of parents adversely affects children's emotional and psychological health, resulting in increased prevalence of mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and substance use disorders.

Parental incarceration may lead to troublemaking, attention, and problem behaviors in young adults, particularly those with low emotional independence, and early childhood absence of shame or empathy increases the risk for criminal involvement. The absence of shame or empathy during early childhood is a risk factor that can independently lead to future engagement with the criminal justice system (Chumchal et al., 2024). In addition, Finkeldey et al. (2020) found that parental incarceration was linked to identifying as a troublemaker/partier throughout young adulthood for

individuals who had low emotional independence, meaning they had a need for parental approval. Whereas Barbarin et al. (2022) found that, among the 11- to 17-year-olds included in their study, those who experienced parental incarceration were more prone to attention, internalizing, externalizing, and overall problem behaviors, as reported by their caregivers. Similarly, youth who have experienced parental incarceration, either currently or in the past, had higher levels of internalizing symptoms compared to youth without an incarcerated parent (Pfluger et al., 2023). Parental incarceration in young adults, especially those with low emotional independence and early childhood, may lack of shame or empathy, which increases their risk for criminal involvement and internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

Parental incarceration can result in emotional and psychological effects in children that may entail altruistic behavior, exposure to violence, and a deleterious effect on the bond between parent and child and is found to trigger depression within the primary caregivers. Children with internalizing behavior problems, children who are withdrawn, scared, or anxious—were more likely to have fathers with depressive symptoms who had previously been incarcerated (Pech et al., 2020). In contrast, Reife et al. (2021) found that several coping methods, such as self-expression, self-soothing, soliciting aid, and pursuing safety, and seeking safety, diminished the relationship between stress and psychological symptoms gradually for young individuals with the assistance of adults. Parental incarceration can lead to emotional and psychological effects in children, including altruistic behavior, violence exposure, and negative parent-child bonds, triggering depression in primary caregivers.

Economic Hardship on Children and Caregivers of Incarcerated Parents

Parental incarceration may affect the economic well-being of families left to care for children. Hood and Gaston (2022) examined familial responses to the collateral effects of incarceration and reintegration and found that individuals with few socioeconomic resources faced additional challenges and difficulties that are not directly related to but are worsened by familial incarceration and reintegration. In comparison, Norris et al. (2021) assessed the influence of parental incarceration on long-term economic results and showed that when a child could move up or down the economic ladder, it was what predominantly determined the long-term economic effect of the parental incarceration of a child rather than the level of economic mobility of their parents. Hood and Gaston (2022) found families with limited resources face additional challenges, while Norris et al. (2021) found that the long-term economic effects of parental incarceration are primarily determined by a child's ability to enhance or diminish their economic position, typically assessed through income levels. Individuals with limited socioeconomic resources face additional challenges due to familial incarceration and reintegration, with long-term economic effects primarily determined by a child's ability to enhance or diminish their economic position.

Paternal incarceration, a traumatic childhood experience, can lead to tense family relationships, economic instability, and impaired parenting. Family resilience is linked to thriving, but income and wealth inequalities persist, potentially causing intergenerational impacts. According to Turney (2020), Paternal incarceration, a devastating and stigmatizing disruptive childhood experience occurring within broader family-related

contexts, can exacerbate additional strains, including strained parental relationships, financial and housing instability, and weakened parenting and emotional wellness among caregivers. When considering ACE exposures, it was found that children were more likely to flourish in supportive neighborhoods, when cared for in patient-focused medical homes, and when parents indicated receiving emotional support in child-rearing (Westphaln et al., 2022). In contrast, Goldstein et al. (2021) discovered a link between adverse childhood experiences and thriving, partially mediated by family resilience. White and socioeconomically advantaged families showed higher resilience, but their children performed less effectively at high-risk levels compared to Black and Hispanic children (Goldstein et al., 2021). Consequently, Obus et al. (2024) acknowledged that financial and social disparities are primarily influenced by institutional prejudice and gender bias, which, when combined with economics, result in the unequal financial exclusion of families belonging to racial minorities and households led by women. Parental incarceration has a likelihood of having many negative consequences for the family unit, in which the economic burden appears to add to the tense family dynamics and may lead to intergenerational impacts that have a long duration.

Effects of Parental Incarceration on Family Dynamics and Structure

Parental incarceration may lead to disruptions in familial connections and structure. According to Johnson and Arditti (2023), children with incarcerated parents benefit from sensitive and responsive caregiving as well as supportive interactions with teachers and other adults, leading to positive adjustment. As such, defining a caregiver may encompass nonincarcerated mothers and fathers and, in their absence, a rise in

support from grandparents, aunts/uncles, and foster care parents. Muentner et al. (2022) found that both parental incarceration and foster care were correlated with adverse psychological outcomes; however, encountering each simultaneously was connected with an increased likelihood of anxiety, depression, self harm, suicidal thoughts and attempts, evaluations, and interventions. Bradshaw et al. (2021) mediated indirect impacts of parental incarceration on prosocial outcomes using primary caregiver sadness and the caliber of interactions between the caregiver and the child. Consequently, the early onset of pathological impulsivity at the age of 9 was found to be linked with heightened challenges and diminished prosocial behavior by the age of 13 (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Experiencing parental incarceration at age 9 may influence the quality of the parental-child connection and further lead to the depression of the primary caregiver (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Children with incarcerated parents benefit from sensitive caregiving and supportive interactions. However, both parental incarceration and foster care can lead to adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety, sadness, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts.

When examining the impact of parental incarceration on family dynamics, it is essential to evaluate the stability of the household and the quality of relationships between incarcerated parents and caretakers. The presence of financial burden and frequent changes in residence also had a significant correlation with various adverse consequences for children whose parents were incarcerated (Shaw, 2022). In addition, So et al. (2023) noticed a more significant occurrence of homelessness among young people who have experienced persistent instability in comparison to those who have not.

Carretero-Trigo et al. (2021) explored the association between a parent's incarceration and various attributes associated with the imprisoned parent, children, and caregivers and found that imprisoned parents had a positive version of parenting by viewing the primary caregiver as a positive facilitator in the relationship between them and their child. Within households where nonparent caregivers are present, the occurrence of parental incarceration is linked to a decrease in the number of stepparent caregivers but an increase in the number of grandparents, foster parents, and aunt/uncle caregivers (Jackson et al., 2023). An overarching pattern observed from family members, including children, was the desire for interpersonal interaction with their incarcerated family members (Tadros & Presley, 2024). The presence of conflict between the father and caregiver was discovered to result in reduced interaction between the father and child, which had a detrimental effect on father-child relationships (Venema et al., 2022). Incarcerated parents may derive solace from having a supportive caretaker, as it cultivates a positive bond with their children (Carretero-Trigo et al., 2021). Financial burdens resulting in frequent residence changes negatively impact children whose parents are incarcerated, with homelessness being more common among these individuals. Imprisoned parents view their primary caregiver as a positive facilitator, and incarceration increases the number of non-parent caregivers.

Social and Academic Consequences on Children of Incarcerated Parents

Social Relationships Between Peers

Social relationships between peers can have an effect on children who experience parental incarceration. Like other social identities, children of incarcerated parents

undergo a process of socialization that shapes their societal navigation (Noel et al., 2024). Sanders et al. (2020) found that adverse childhood experiences were shown to be more prevalent among young people during their early infancy and associated with the likelihood of belonging to certain adolescent groups characterized by higher levels of social-emotional distress and lower levels of school bonding. In addition, social identities encompass various aspects, such as effective communication with others, navigating the criminal justice system, managing public perception, and navigating the various problems and possibilities individuals may encounter throughout their lifespan (Noel et al., 2024). Incarcerated children's socialization shapes societal navigation, with adverse childhood experiences leading to higher social-emotional distress and lower school bonding. Social identities include effective communication, navigating the criminal justice system, and managing public perception.

Additional consequences of parental incarceration on children encompass the moral judgments made by their peers, diminished levels of trust in the ethical beliefs of classmates, and the impact on children's social cognition. Dunlea et al. (2022). investigated the inferences made by elementary school students about the moral opinions of their peers who have incarcerated parents compared to those who do not and found that children expressed lower levels of confidence in the moral convictions of classmates who had incarcerated parents. In addition, Dunlea et al. (2022) found that, among older children, reduced levels of generosity toward peers who had incarcerated parents compared to classmates who did not. Also, Dunlea et al. (2020) investigated how parental incarceration shapes children's social cognition and discovered that children of

incarcerated parents were more inclined to believe that contemplating close relationships elicited favorable feelings rather than negative emotions. Parental incarceration can lead to negative peer opinions, leading to lower levels of confidence; however, these children demonstrated the ability to experience positive emotions towards others.

Educational Challenges of Children with Incarcerated Parents

Children who experience parental incarceration may have impairments in academics. Jones et al. (2024) investigated the extent to which adverse childhood experiences, assessed at the familial, educational, and communal levels, elucidate the association between childhood parental incarceration and the psychological wellness of young adults, revealing that inadequate school resources intensify the detrimental effects of parental incarceration. In contrast, Bell et al. (2023) academic performance of children subjected to (a) maternal incarceration solely and (b) maternal incarceration alongside additional challenges (i.e., maternal psychological disorders and child protective services [CPS] involvement) and discovered that children who experienced maternal incarceration, either independently or in combination with other adversities, had a greater likelihood of having below-average math and reading proficiency at every level of education. In addition, these children were less likely to achieve above-average numeracy and reading skills (Bell et al. (2023). Similarly, Crouch et al. (2022) discovered that children subjected to parental incarceration exhibited greater likelihoods of grade repetition compared to those not subjected to parental incarceration. Incarcerated parents' experiences may impact young adults' academic success, leading to below-average numeracy and reading skills.

The children of incarcerated parents experience social and academic effects that vary throughout different stages of development and ethnic groups. Fox et al. (2023) found that children who experience parental incarceration late in childhood had a less significant impact on the academic abilities of Black and Hispanic children due to these two groups facing additional social disadvantages that complicate the impact of parental incarceration, making them more resilient. In contrast, Turney (2022) found that adolescents who experience paternal incarceration at any stage of their lives exhibit an increased frequency of behavioral issues in comparison to their peers who have not encountered paternal incarceration. Bridgewater and Yates (2022) investigated the impact of father incarceration throughout early childhood (from birth to age 6) on children's comprehension skills during elementary school years (ages 8-10), finding that early childhood parental involvement had a significant and negative indirect impact on children's reading achievements. Looking into the future, Brae et al. (2020) considered whether parental incarceration produced age-graded performance during adulthood; researchers found that 93% of their participants had completed high school, and approximately 68% had enrolled in college. Research shows that parental incarceration in later childhood has less significant impact on academic abilities of Black and Hispanic children, but higher behavioral issues and age-graded effects on adulthood outcomes.

Research on father and child relationships demonstrates a direct effect on parental incarceration and academics. Haskins et al. (2023) indicated that, while optimism toward the future and the significance of higher education remain strong despite father incarceration, teenagers' expectations of completing college are diminished, especially

among Black adolescents. When investigating the effects of paternal incarceration on the quality of father-child relationships, Turney et al. (2022) determined that the quality of father-child interactions categorizes into three groups: broken relationships, stable relationships, and restored connections. Additionally, an analysis of micro-, meso, and macro-level mechanisms indicates that the initial effects of father incarceration may impact beliefs about future educational paths for children who experience fraternal incarceration (Crouch et al., 2022). Similarly, Bridgewater and Yates (2022) found that paternal insensitivity was associated with reduced levels of mother-supportive caregiving and, thus, was linked to poor reading achievement (Bridgewater & Yates, 2022). The quality of the father-child relationship significantly influences the scholastic performance of children who have experienced paternal incarceration.

The social and academic repercussions of parental incarceration might result in children assuming the responsibilities and functions of the missing parent. Children of incarcerated parents are often seen as being parentified, taking an adult position in the household (Turney et al., 2024). Regarding academics, Borchet et al. (2021) discovered a direct association among instrumental parentification and academic performance. Furthermore, demonstrating that having a positive view of one's own life and its different aspects, as well as feeling a strong sense of responsibility towards parents and siblings, might improve the ability to successfully fulfill other essential duties, such as academic chores and achievements (Borchet et al., 2021). In contrast, although maternal incarceration and paternal insensitivity can lead to lower academic achievement, children who are seen as taking on adult responsibilities in the home may excel academically

(Bridgewater & Yates, 2022). Parental incarceration can lead to children taking on parental responsibilities, potentially affecting their academic performance. However, a positive view and responsibility towards parents can improve academic achievement.

Resilience and Coping Mechanisms Used in Families of Incarcerated Parents

Support Systems for the Families Experiencing Parental Incarceration

The presence of supportive adults and community programs can mitigate some of the negative impacts on children of incarcerated parents. Zhang and Flynn (2020) suggested that the family plays a role in fostering resilience among individuals, and favorable caregiver attributes, close relationships with primary caregivers, and family sustenance helps individuals manage problems associated with parental incarceration. These factors connect individuals with community-based protective processes, such as activities and services (Zhang & Flynn, 2020). Similarly, Berkel et al. (2023) examined the elements that contribute to the ability of children with a parent in prison to recover quickly and effectively, with an emphasis on the influence of caregivers. Berkel et al. revealed that caregivers' parenting directly impacted the enhancement of child behavioral health, and when caregivers adopt adaptive parenting strategies, there was a reduction in children's externalizing and internalizing difficulties. Families contribute to the development of resilience and the reduction of both external and internal challenges.

There are various methods to cultivate resilience to assist families in managing challenges. Ungar and Theron (2020) found that research in various disciplines such as genetics, psychology, political science, architecture, and human ecology has revealed that resilience is influenced not only by individual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors but also

by the culturally relevant resources present in the social, built, and natural environments of stressed individuals. Higher levels of resilience, active involvement in activities, and sufficient rest are associated with the decreased likelihood of multiple mental health disorders in adolescents with jailed parents (Bomysoad & Francis, 2021). Similarly, Boch and Ford (2021) discovered that, after controlling confounders and neighborhood and school protective features, higher degrees of family connectivity were linked to more significant probabilities of achieving overall excellent health and flourishing among Black adolescents subjected to parental incarceration across all models. Various sorts of support services for children with incarcerated parents have been demonstrated to foster resilience by decreasing externalizing and internalizing difficulties and implementing protective factors.

Personal Strength of Children of Incarcerated Parents

Some children and families develop resilience in the form of personal strengths that assist with the challenges of parental incarceration. Kremer et al. (2022) sought to determine the impact of parental visitation on various psychological outcomes in children of incarcerated parents. Kremer et al. found that, when children possess a robust and optimistic sense of purpose, it can give them a clear sense of direction or significance in their lives, motivating them to exert academic effort or avoid encountering difficulties. In addition, Kremer et al. sought to identify behavioral and social problem differences in children of incarcerated parents and found that well-adjusted adolescents had markedly more school solidarity, support from parents, and favorable interactions with teachers. Similarly, Llistosella et al. (2022) identified the empirically supported protective factors

associated with resilience in children, adolescents, and young adults at risk of many adverse experiences. Llistosella et al. found that individual skills, such as communication, including social and expressive skills, showed a correlation with resilient outcomes and self-control including feelings for others, unity, benevolence, kindness, and tolerance for others, having the most significant number of studies reporting a correlation. Children with incarcerated parents may develop personal strengths by cultivating a sense of purpose and effectively adapting to their circumstances through the improvement of their individual abilities and self-regulation.

Intergenerational Effects of Parental Incarceration

Cycle of Incarceration

There is an increased risk that children of incarcerated parents may become involved in the criminal justice system. Noel and Najdowski (2020) indicated that when parents are imprisoned, adolescents may face the possibility of receiving stigmatizing responses and prejudiced assumptions about their future within their own families and from their closest relatives. As such, Hoover (2022) found that any form of household member incarceration leads to increased criminal conduct. Niño and Cai (2020) demonstrated that cigarette smoking, depressive symptoms, and incarceration history were greater among those who had a parent incarcerated during their adolescence. Similarly, adolescents who had parents who were imprisoned, as opposed to those who had not, had caregivers who believed that the adolescents were more prone to being incarcerated by the age of 20 (Noel & Najdowski, 2020). Similarly, Copp et al. (2021) found that youth who witnessed an arrest of a household member had a higher likelihood

of being arrested themselves. Adolescents with imprisoned parents may face stigmatizing responses, prejudiced assumptions, and increased criminal conduct and are more likely to be arrested.

Intergenerational parental incarceration can have both good and negative consequences across generations. Norris et al. (2021) found that parental incarceration has a advantageous impact on children's prospects, diminishing their probability of becoming incarcerated by 4.9 percentiles and enhancing the quality of their future living environment. Similarly, Norris et al. found that parental incarceration decreases the probability of children participating in criminal behavior later in life and improved the children's long-term socioeconomic standing. Furthermore, Del Toro et al. (2023) revealed that children from households who had fathers incarcerated were more likely to break the rules and experience elevated level of depression. Baker (2023) analyzed the effects of parental incarceration, specifically fathers, on the future outlook of young individuals and revealed that incarceration of a father leads to a 25-33% decrease in youth expectations and ambitions, a significant decrease disproportionately affecting underprivileged young people. Zhao et al. (2020) aimed to comprehend the repercussions of maternal incarceration through comprehensive longitudinal measurements and found correlations between the mothers' negative life experiences and experiences of being incarcerated and the likelihood of their children being incarcerated. Thus, the recent arrests of mothers, although lower than fathers, were a significant source of stress within the family (Turney & Sugie, 2021). The patterns of mothers being incarcerated were linked to the occurrence of imprisonment across multiple generations (Zhao et al., 2020).

Parental incarceration may reduce children's likelihood of incarceration and improve their future living environment; however, there is a strong correlation between negative life experiences and incarceration likelihood.

The intergenerational consequences of parental incarceration might manifest through an initial rise in criminal activity within the household, as well as an increase in drug usage and excessive alcohol consumption. Hoover (2022) investigated the impact of having an incarcerated household member on individual variations in criminal behavior and illicit drug use across time and found that the occurrence of any form of household member incarceration leads to an increase in criminal conduct, drug consumption, and excessive drinking. Similarly, Noel and Green's (2022) participants recounted their experiences with parental incarceration and recognized how the impact persists as a continuous phenomenon in their lives as they transition into adulthood. Consistent with the research, Hoover indicated that the presence of an incarcerated parent, whether it be the father, mother, or both, resulted in an elevated likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior but had no impact on the escalation or reduction of substance abuse. Over time, incarcerated family members can lead children to increased criminal conduct, drug consumption, and excessive drinking.

Long-term Impact of Parental Incarceration

The effects of parental incarceration can persist in adulthood, influencing criminal behavior and expectations for the future. Gatewood et al. (2023) aimed to understand better the elements that shape adult African American children of jailed parents' conceptions and characterizations of success. as encompassing tranquility, embracing

life, self-acceptance, contentment, striving towards individual objectives, assuming the role of a parent, achieving graduation, and attaining autonomy. Gatewood et al. indicated that adult, Black children of incarcerated parents can experience favorable life results consistent with their perceptions of achievement. Once a parent is classified as a criminal, it is presumed that children will emulate the parent's criminal behavior if they sustain a relationship (Gatewood et al., 2023). In contrast to this idea, the respondents conveyed robust parent-child bonds and provided instances of accomplished individuals who paved the way for their achievement, challenging the prevailing negative portrayal as flawed (Gatewood et al., 2023). Noel et al. (2024) also found that consistent instances of constructive socialization steered children of incarcerated parents away from engaging in intergenerational criminal behavior. Among adult Black children whose parents are incarcerated, positive life results align with their views on accomplishment, which contradicts negative stereotypes and encourages positive social development.

Development and Health of Children of Incarcerated Parents

The development of young individuals can be influenced by both positive and negative circumstances that have the potential to alter the course of their lives. Mihalec et al. (2022) aimed to examine the influence of policies in both contributing to the widespread occurrence of parental incarceration and the numerous effects of parental incarceration on child wellness and growth and development in the United States and found (2022) a correlation among parental incarceration and adverse impacts on multiple dimensions of child welfare and growth. Herreros-Fraile et al. (2023) demonstrated the influence of parental incarceration on children's age, noting that the most influential

stage was ages 7 to 11. In addition, children between the ages of 6 and 11 who had previously lived with parents who were in prison exhibited greater emotional challenges compared to children who did not have a parent in prison (Poehlmann-Tynan &Turney, 2020). Children between the ages of 3 and 17 were more prone to displaying elevated levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, indicated by their parents, when either their mother or father had been imprisoned (Poehlmann-Tynan &Turney, 2020). In addition, Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2020) found that research on early childhood development (from birth to age 5) has continually demonstrated a correlation amoung parental incarceration and children's externalizing difficulties, such as aggression and disobedience. Whereas Johnson et al. (2020) investigated the characteristics and factors associated with positive youth development (PYD) among teenagers who have encountered incarceration of an individual in their home and found a positive correlation between positive youth development (PYD) and factors such as maternal affection, parental oversight, engagement in faith based practices, the feeling of being accepted at school and feeling linked to the area. However, Johnson et al. indicated a negative correlation between positive youth development, internalizing traits, and criminality and emphasized the significance of using a positive youth development approach in studying youths with family members engaged in the criminal justice system. While the focus of Johnson et al. study is more focused on characteristics and factors, Young et al. (2020) aimed to prove that the impact of parental incarceration varies depending on the child-development stage where it is initially encountered and confirmed that there was a direct impact of parental incarceration during adulthood that varied

according to age groups. There is a correlation between positive support and promoting positive development in youths. Nevertheless, the influence of parental incarceration during adulthood differs depending on the age categories.

Incarcerated parents can expose their children to outcomes such as parental stress, redistribution of child health, and disparities in the use of healthcare services. Children who are exposed to parental incarceration tend to have poorer health outcomes in comparison to those who are not exposed (Jackson et al., 2021; Tolliver et al., 2024). However, Jackson et al. (2022) examined the influence of parental incarceration on the health of children and how it impacts parental stress and found a link among children's exposure to parental incarceration and indicators of childrearing strain. These indicators included observing it challenging to raise the child, experiencing frustration and anger with the child, and facing difficulties coping with parenting responsibilities (Jackson et al., 2022). Child health and healthcare pressures explained around 45% of the link among children's experiences to parental incarceration and the overall stress of parenting the specific child (Jackson et al., 2022). The exposure of children to parental incarceration may have broader implications for other family members by reallocating child health and healthcare obligations, hence exacerbating parenting stress (Jackson et al., 2022). In comparison, So et al. (2022) noted a higher likelihood of having various physical health issues (such as asthma and diabetes), as well as disparities in the use of healthcare services in children affected by parental incarceration. There are governmental programs that assist in positive child health and development; for example, free and reduced lunch programs and monetary aid may influence the connections between parental incarceration

and overall health and well-being (Tolliver et al., 2024). The incarceration of parents can have detrimental consequences on the well-being of children and add additional challenges to the tasks of raising and fulfilling responsibilities towards them by exposing children to poorer health outcomes and increased parenting stress.

Criminal Justice System Interactions and Effects on Children and Families

Visitation Challenges for Families and Incarcerated Parents

Families maintaining contact with the incarcerated parent can be difficult due to the prison's location, visiting hours, and regulations. The main obstacles faced in prisons are strict laws that restrict communication, difficulties in aligning prison schedules with the lives of family beyond the institution, and the frightening atmosphere of the institution (Venema et al., 2022). Pritzl et al. (2022) revealed that the jail's location influenced the relationship between the frequency of visits and the occurrence of child behavior problems. Consequently, Turney (2023) indicated that parental incarceration was inversely correlated with the level of intimacy between young individuals and their incarcerated parents. Prisons face communication restrictions, scheduling challenges, and a frightening atmosphere, impacting child behavior problems and intimacy between incarcerated parents and young individuals.

Interactions between incarcerated parents and their children are vital to the well-being of these children. Regarding father-child interactions, although families valued in-prison communication as a way to preserve family-child relations while incarcerated, communication was frequently regarded as being of poor quality (Venema et al., 2022). As such, Shlafer et al. (2020) aimed to address this deficiency by delineating the

frequency and nature of interactions between incarcerated dads and their underage children, as well as identifying characteristics associated with such interactions. Firstly, telephone contact was found to be the most prevalent method of communication between fathers and their children during the father's incarceration, where 22% of fathers indicated daily telephone communication (Shlafer et al., 2020). Secondly, there was a correlation between different types of contact, indicating that there was a correlation between phone interaction and letter writing. with a higher frequency of visits (Shlafer et al., 2020). In contrast, Charles et al. (2021) found that video chat communication was predominantly favorable, particularly when utilizing a familiar platform, performing visits from the comfort of their homes, and accessing a communication method that enables regular parent-child conversations. In-prison communication between fathers and children is often poor quality, with phone contact being the most common method; however, letter writing and video chat may lead to more frequent visits.

Criminal justice system interactions and effects on children of incarcerated parents may include caregivers who lack the financial means to provide transportation for the children to visit their parents in correctional facilities. As a result, these children are disadvantaged compared to families with the resources to facilitate such visits easily. Rubenstein et al. (2021) utilized survey data from a nationally representative sample of state prison inmates to investigate the effects of economic disadvantages on children visiting their incarcerated parents. Rubenstein et al. indicated that parents with less earnings were less prone to receive visits from their family. The outcomes were comparable for fathers and mothers (Rubenstein et al., 2021). Rubenstein et al. also

observed that economic disadvantage might influence the effects of other logistical obstacles, such as the distance from one's residence. However, family members, including children, were allowed to communicate with their incarcerated parents through phone calls, letters, and scheduled visits (Rubenstein et al., 2021). Although these forms of communication may also be restricted due to financial difficulties and the distance from the correctional facilities, children who engage in written correspondence and phone conversations with their parents tend to visit them more frequently. Consequently, Venema et al. (2022) found that children reported comfort and satisfaction in family interaction, even when subjected to logistical and emotional difficulties. Parents with fewer financial resources are more unlikely to experience visits from their kids despite logistical obstacles like distance; however, despite these limitations, children receive solace from engaging in familial interactions.

Legal and Advocacy Needs for Families of Incarcerated Parents

For families, navigating and comprehending the legal system can be challenging. Correa et al. (2021) examined the effects of parental incarceration on family members and kids from the viewpoint of the incarcerated parent and found five primary themes to identify significant challenges experienced: the significant hardship experienced by children and families due to parental incarceration, the numerous barriers that hindered communication and the preservation of relationships between jailed parents and their offspring, the challenges faced by incarcerated parents in comprehending and maneuvering the criminal justice system, the ubiquitous cycle of incarceration; and the necessity for enhanced programs and services. In contrast, Abraham et al. (2022)

explored the perspectives of justice among 16 college students who endured parental incarceration and substance abuse and found that the participants believed that existing judicial system as ineffectual, demeaning, and detrimental, leading to bias and a deficit of trust in the legal framework. However, the participants continued to rely on the official criminal justice system instead of the community to provide punishment or other forms of treatment (Abraham et al., 2022). There are notable obstacles associated with parental incarceration, such as adversity, difficulties in communication, and difficulty inside the criminal justice system, ultimately resulting in inefficiency and an absence of confidence in the criminal justice system.

Policy and Societal Implications of Parental Incarceration

There is a significant demand for training and regulations that consider the effects of imprisonment on families. There have been notable rises over several decades in parental incarceration identified as a uniquely detrimental childhood experience (Finkelhor, 2020; Jones et al., 2024). Researchers highlighted the significant scale and consistency of mass incarceration's role in the transfer of inequality between generations in the United States (Baker, 2023). However, the prison system, disproportionately affecting people of color, has been influenced by changes in federal and state legislation, leading to extended imprisonment and significant implications for generations of families (Mihalec et al., 2022). Considering the future, it is crucial to prioritize policies that address the root causes of social problems and find effective ways to aid children, families, and communities (Mihalec et al., 2022). This approach aims to reduce this nation's dependence on the criminal justice system for solving complicated public issues

(Mihalec et al., 2022). Mihalec et al. acknowledged the significant influence that municipal, state, and national governments can have in reducing the negative effects experienced by the millions of children affected by a parent's imprisonment. Parental incarceration has increased significantly over decades, causing inequality and disproportionately affecting people of color. To address this issue, policies should address root causes and support children, families, and communities, reducing dependence on the criminal justice system.

A comprehensive study of the interwoven systems of oppression within and outside the criminal justice system can provide insights into the interconnections and impacts on children and parents. Difficult circumstances experienced by children with relatives on the verge of imprisonment have illustrated the potential for guidelines to influence their long-term financial success (Norris et al., 2021). In addition, Obus et al. (2024) found that an examination of overlapping systems of oppression within and around incarceration can provide context for understanding the experiences of families engaged in the legal system for crime. Focusing on these overlapping systems can help create policies and identify the basic explanations of problems, such as racism, sexism, and financial disparities (Obus et al., 2024). Children of incarcerated parents may experience challenging circumstances, highlighting the potential for policy that may impact their long-term economic success.

Interactions between families and criminal justice systems when facing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) call for interagency collaborations on policy solutions, including health, human services, education, and prison agencies. Clark et al. (2023)

investigated whether parental incarceration was an independent risk factor for legal skepticism, separate from other ACEs, and whether police stops may influence this relationship and indicated that race, parental incarceration, and ACEs have a direct impact on the likelihood of police stops and also implicit influence the level of legal disparagement. Clark et al. also found children exhibiting elevated levels of ACEs had an increased likelihood of police intervention, suggesting that police training should include instruction on the significance of trauma-informed care, enabling police personnel to assist young individuals who have experienced terrible childhood experiences. Similarly, Mihalec et al. (2022) found that policy solutions necessitate robust interagency collaboration involving health, human services, education, and prison agencies. Prioritizing policies to address social problems and support children, families, and communities is essential for children and families who interact with law enforcement agencies. Police training should include trauma-informed care instruction for youth with higher levels of ACEs, enabling them to assist young individuals who have experienced terrible childhood experiences effectively.

The interactions and impacts of the criminal justice system on children and families do not cease upon the parent's reentry back into the community; instead, parents encounter hurdles as they strive to reintegrate into society. Keller et al. (2022) sought to elucidate family experiences and offer insights on how to enhance care for children throughout the parent's reentry phase. Keller et al. found that three major themes emerged: challenges in relationship development, misaligned familial expectations, and familial burdens associated with parole. Keller et al. also found that families went

through a process of acclimating to new roles and dynamics once released, and connections within the family were either repaired or rebuilt. More specifically, Williams et al. (2021) demonstrated that, for Black women, the process of reentry can be equally criminalizing as the act of engaging in criminal behavior. Similarly, Correa et al. (2021) reported that their participants expressed the challenges they faced in avoiding incarceration as a result of their inability to secure employment due to their criminal history. In contrast, some families found that the transition was simpler because they were able to stay in touch often and try to keep the parents who were incarcerated informed and involved (Keller et al., 2022). Positive interactions, however, were hindered by family members unfamiliar with each other or uncertain of how to conduct themselves in a new role, not understanding what the relationship would entail, and not knowing how they would fit back into the family unit (Keller et al., 2022). Keller et al. (2022) also found that each participant had a distinct anticipation regarding the jailed parent's release, based mostly on concerns about family members' recidivism rates. When their parent left the house, some of the young participants expressed concern that they may wind up back in jail or prison (Keller et al., 2022). In comparison, Muentner and Eddy (2023) found that the circumstances surrounding parental incarceration might impact children while their parents are reintegrating into society, with the effects varying contingent upon the child's age as well as gender. Participants also discussed difficulties that directly resulted from the returning parent's parole limitations, such as the parent not being able to live in the home with the child due to legal restrictions and restrictions on parole, causing family members' confusion (Keller et al., 2022). Muentner and Eddy

(2023) indicated the need for further measures to assist families in discussing parental incarceration, broaden opportunities for contact, and provide reintegration programs that prioritize the well-being of children with incarcerated parents. By recognizing trends and highlighting the obstacles that families have when adjusting to new roles after a parent's reentry, families can work towards repairing and strengthening their relationships.

Summary and Conclusions

Parental incarceration has had detrimental effects on various aspects of children's well-being, including their emotional, psychological, economic, educational, and developmental aspects. However, it is important to note that parental incarceration does not always result in an inability for children and families to succeed. Regarding mental health, Turney (2021) revealed that the imprisonment of close family members was statistically significant with the reporting of good or bad mental health. Similarly, Ruhland et al. (2020) discovered that adolescents with an incarcerated parent—currently or in the past—reported significantly higher levels of externalizing behaviors compared to those without an incarcerated parent. In addition to emotional and psychological implications, children who were academically subjected to domestic confinement had greater chances of grade retention (Ruhland et al., 2020). In contrast, Arrastia-Chisholm et al. (2020) found that children of incarcerated parents were less prone to misbehavior, demonstrated elevated grades on tests and reduced high school graduation rates. Their chances of living in supportive neighborhoods were diminished relative to children without exposure (Crouch et al., 2022). Parental incarceration can affect children's psychological well-being, educational achievement, and social support systems; however,

children with incarcerated parents may report higher externalizing behaviors, lower academic achievement, and lower high school dropout rates.

In economic terms, families tend to suffer because parents are incarcerated, leaving children with family members who hardly receive any support from anyone. These caregivers expressed difficulties locating reliable and transparent resources, such as seeking government aid, securing guardianship for school or medical visits, and maintaining communication with an incarcerated parent (Jones et al., 2024). Thus, incarcerated parents entrusted caregivers with facilitating communication with their children, which adds to the economic strain and parent-child bonding (Jones et al., 2024; Rubenstein et al., 2021). Similarly, when connecting economic strain and parent-child bonding, researchers revealed that parents with lower income were less inclined to receive visits from their children, ultimately destroying parent-child bonds (Kremer et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2024; Rubenstein et al., 2021). Parental incarceration causes damaging consequences to children and has economic implications for almost all aspects of a family unit.

Studies on parental incarceration revealed numerous difficulties associated with the criminal justice system, resulting in intergenerational repercussions for the family. Copp et al. (2021) concluded that when household members, including parents or siblings, are engaged with the criminal justice system, criminal justice behavior and outcomes affect the youth within that household, pronouncing intergenerational impacts. Similarly, Ruhland et al. (2020) demonstrated that the incarceration of parents had significant ramifications for the likelihood of delinquency and engagement in high-risk

behaviors among young individuals. In contrast, a limited number of research studies have found positive qualities. Noel et al. (2024) concluded that multiple occurrences of positive socialization had the effect of desensitizing the inclination of the youngsters to engage in intergenerational offending behavior. Despite such adversities related to parental incarceration, the child with an incarcerated parent shows protective coping mechanisms and even some advantages when exposed to adaptive parenting and positive interactions. In addition, however limited, researchers acknowledged that children with parents in prison face many adversities but show adaptation, especially with positive parenting caregivers (Arditti & Johnson, 2022; Berkel et al., 2023). Incarceration of parents can lead to delinquency and high-risk behaviors among youth, but positive socialization can desensitize them to offend despite adversities, children with incarcerated parents show adaptation.

Coping methods, supportive caregiving, and resilience are crucial for children with incarcerated parents, as they may be less interrupted. Hood and Gaston (2022) discovered that the most crucial aspect of managing stress is the dependence on coping methods. Moreover, attentive, adaptive caregiving and nurturing interactions with educators and peers facilitate favorable adaptation in children with parents imprisoned (Johnson & Arditti, 2023). Furthermore, research on resilience reveals significant differences among children and challenges negative views about families affected by parental incarceration. Torche et al. (2024) emphasized that the individuals least expected to be disrupted might be those most affected by the events; hence, a support network is crucial. Coping methods are crucial for managing stress in children with incarcerated

parents. Supportive caregiving and relationships with teachers and adults can help them adjust. Resilience is also important, as children with incarcerated parents may be less expected to be disrupted, emphasizing the importance of a support network.

As researchers look toward the future. Noel and Najdowski (2020) observed that when a parent is incarcerated, teens discover stigmatic responses and prejudiced assumptions of what their life would be like right in their very own homes. Hence, local, state, and national government assumes an important function in reducing the magnitude of such harm that millions of children currently experience because of parental incarceration (Mihalec et al., 2022). Among individuals who engaged in government services, there was a weakened connection among parental incarceration and well-being (Tolliver et al., 2024). Similarly, Shaw's (2022) interviewees expressed that they felt stigmatized in both social and professional environments because of parental incarceration or their parents' criminal record. Policy and societal implications are called upon to address economic hardship, family dynamics structure changes, social and academic consequences, negative criminal justice system interactions, intergenerational effects, and overall development and health. Chapter 3 will include a comprehensive account of the research method.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative basic study was to explore the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parents are incarcerated in prison and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism. This chapter will include a discussion on the research method including research design and rationale and the role of the researcher. This chapter will focus on methodology, including participant selection logic, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Lastly, I will also discuss issues of trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and a chapter summary.

Research Design and Rationale

I used the qualitative research method with a basic generic design to conduct this study. Qualitative research is basically investigative and is used to understand human behavior, feeling, attitudes, and experiences by collecting non-numerical data usually from interviews, focus groups, or textual analysis (Muzari et al., 2022). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is particularly appropriate for probing complex phenomena and gaining insights into human viewpoints, feelings, and subjective experiences (Patton, 2002). I chose the qualitative method to explore the unique experiences of adolescents, aged 18-21, with incarcerated parents, focusing on self-distraction as a coping mechanism. This approach captured detailed narratives, authentically representing participants' voices and allowing for emergent themes to surface. In addition, the flexibility of semistructured interviews was crucial for exploring complex and personal coping mechanisms in the context of parental incarceration.

I used a basic qualitative research design with a flexible and exploratory approach to enable it to produce rich information on the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Pure or fundamental research, sometimes referred to as basic research, is a subset of scientific inquiry that tries to further a researcher's understanding of a given topic (Ellis & Hart, 2023). Basic generic qualitative design is known for its flexibility and view of descriptive research data (Ellis & Hart, 2023). Generic qualitative investigations can leverage the advantages of conventional methods while maintaining the flexibility that appeals to researchers whose inquiries do not conform strictly to a particular method of study (Kahlke, 2014). In addition, the basic generic qualitative design is exploratory, providing an account of how events appear in the real world to their inhabitants. I chose the basic qualitative design for its flexibilities and concentration on the descriptive elements of participants' experiences.

Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher was multifaceted. The qualitative researcher traditionally assumes the primary instrument for data acquisition, utilizing methodologies such as focus groups, interviews, measurements, and analysis of documents (Taquette & Souza, 2022). Furthermore, the researcher is responsible for engagement between participants in order to thoroughly analyze their perspectives, experiences, and interpretations (Berkovic et al., 2020). As the researcher, it was my responsibility to interview the participants; collect all data by creating an interview protocol; safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of participants' data; and avoid causing harm to participants, whether physical, emotional, or psychological. It was also my responsibility to employ

appropriate research designs, methods, and tools to confirm the research process is systematic and the outcomes are credible and legitimate.

Researcher Bias

Researcher bias has the potential to impact the findings of a study. Researcher bias denotes the phenomenon where a researcher's personal beliefs, preferences, or expectations affect the conclusions of the research (Martin & Ricciardelli, 2022). Similarly, researcher bias occurs when an individual researcher's background, opinions, and experiences influence every part of the research process, from selecting a particular question to study to deciding how to present the findings (Johnson et al., 2020). The primary objective of quality and rigor in qualitative research is to reduce the potential for prejudice and increase the precision and dependability of study findings by careful and intentional preparation, persistent and continuous implementation of researcher reflexivity, and transparent communication between the researcher and the audience concerning the study and its findings (Johnson et al., 2020). I used systematic and uniform data collection techniques such as developing an interview guide where all participants are offered identical basic questions in a consistent sequence. This ensured that the information gathered was comparable across participants and helped to minimize interviewer influence. I established a set of predetermined follow-up questions to ensure consistency in how additional information was elicited from each participant to minimize possible variability and bias. In addition, I adopted reflexivity through active reflection, disclosing my biases and assumptions, and their probable impression on the research process, with the exercise of maintaining a journal. I completed this task with daily or

post interview entries: After each interview or data collection session, I wrote a reflective entry where I addressed my emotional responses to the participants or data, any personal experiences, values, or beliefs that shaped my reactions daily.

Qualitative research with human participants requires safeguarding confidentiality by keeping participants' names confidential and avoiding potential conflicts. When conducting qualitative research with human participants, it is necessary to safeguard their confidentiality which is an essential element of every main data collection procedure in qualitative research including interviews (Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). Similarly, qualitative research represents a dynamic process full of unpredictable events, and for this reason, researchers need to predict possible hurdles and try to avoid them in advance (Taquette & Souza, 2022). According to Taquette and Souza (2022), ethical codes and norms are not always enough to solve the problems that occur in the practice of research, as unexpected situations may intervene and require decisions beyond the plain ethical principles. Key ethical concerns in qualitative research may encompass conflicts arising from the failure to uphold confidentiality and anonymity (Taquette & Souza, 2022). Certain concerns may arise with the potential violation of confidentiality; for example, disclosures made by participants to the researcher that might harm their participation, a third party, or the integrity of the research if not revealed (Taquette & Souza, 2022). A conflict of interest refers to the potential for a secondary interest to exert influence, such as when a funder or researcher who is closely involved in the design, execution, or reporting of a trial stands to benefit financially, contingent upon the published trial outcomes (Østengaard et al., 2020).

The emphasis on open communication, mutual respect, and collaboration between myself and participants ensured that my research would be free from conflict or power imbalances. Power imbalances may occur when there is unequal authority, control, or influence between the researcher and the participants and these imbalances can shape how data are collected, how participants respond, and even the overall outcomes of the research (Råheim et al., 2016). If power imbalances occurred, I would have mitigated them by reflecting on how my position as a researcher may influence the way participants respond to me. I considered whether participants might be trying to please me or avoid topics based on their perceptions of my authority or background. My objective was to provide a setting in which participants felt appreciated, and their viewpoints were genuinely portrayed. I adopted a reflective methodology, where I acknowledged biases and took measures to avoid exerting influence over participants. I did not give any incentives to participants.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

Accurately determining the population and sample of a study was important. A study population includes individuals, pairs, associations, or other organizations that a researcher seeks to understand thoroughly, to whom the researcher's conclusions can be transferred or generalized and serve as the primary focus of the research (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). A research population is also a substantial and diverse group of items or humans, known as applicants or participants, who serve as the primary subject of a research inquiry or challenge (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). The sample is a chosen group of

units that accurately characterizes the population of significance and the data that are examined, and findings are deduced or extrapolated to the target population (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). A sample is typically characterized as a minor segment of a population whose properties are studied to acquire understanding into the properties of the whole (Turner, 2020).

The target population in my study was the group of individuals who are aged 18-21 and have one or both parents either currently incarcerated or previously incarcerated in prison. My study sample consisted of 12 participants, contingent upon the attainment of saturation. The range of eight to 12 was frequently advised as it achieved a balance between depth and manageability, providing comprehensive, detailed data without being excessive or redundant (Guest et al., 2006). Following this sample size, researchers frequently observe that more interviews or data sources produce redundant information, indicating that they have already documented the primary variances in experiences and perspectives (Guest et al., 2006). Engaging 12 individuals facilitated a comprehensive analysis while preventing researcher overload, hence providing superior outcomes.

The purposive sample strategy was employed in this study. The purposive sampling method is employed to choose study participants who satisfied the criteria considered essential for addressing a research inquiry (Staller, 2021). In addition, in purposeful sampling, every person is chosen based on their known possession of a particular attribute that is relevant to the research problem (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). In order to recruit individuals who satisfied the sampling criteria, I established a private

Facebook group for potential participants and contact community members to find prospective participants who fulfilled the study's criteria.

I did not obtain enough participants with purposeful sampling, so I employed an additional sampling strategy known as snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a technique that involves the researcher extending invitations to those already involved in the study to refer additional individuals who might be interested in participating (Leighton et al., 2021). Snowball sampling, also known as chain sampling, chain-referral sampling, or network sampling, is a nonprobability sampling method in which study participants recruit subsequent subjects within their own personal community of influence. (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants who met specific criteria. Snowball sampling was used when there is difficulty finding participants in which I asked initial participants for referrals for others who may meet the criteria enabling more access to qualified participants who may not have been located via traditional forms of recruiting.

Participant criteria are explicit prerequisites that individuals must fulfill to be eligible for the study (Hornberger & Rangu, 2020). These criteria help guarantee the study population is pertinent to the research subject and the data collected are reliable and valid (Hornberger & Rangu, 2020). The participant criteria for my study consisted of individuals, aged 18-21 years old, who reside in the United States, speak English, and have at least one parent who has been incarcerated for a span exceeding 1 year. Participants disclosed using self-distraction (such as hobbies, media, or social activities) as a means of coping. To ensure that the participants met the criteria, I implemented a

prescreening questionnaire asking direct questions relevant to my criteria to verify if participants match the eligibility requirements. Moreover, the participant requirements ensured that my study was focused, generated data that were reliable, worked with ethical standards, and produced accurate and generalizable results.

There are a number of differences in sample size between quantitative and qualitative designs. Qualitative designs are used to collect non-numerical data, and their requirements for sample size are less dependent on numerical measures of data (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). Guest et al. (2006) suggested that a sample size of eight to 12 participants is necessary to achieve data saturation in qualitative research. The participant range of eight to 12 is typically sufficient to attain saturation in qualitative research with a specific emphasis, as it strikes a compromise between depth and manageability (Guest et al., 2006). I based my sample size on these recommendations; thus, I interviewed 12 participants.

Qualitative research recruitment involves finding participants with the desired criteria. In qualitative research, recruitment is the art of finding, gaining contact with, and mobilizing the people who possess a certain desired criterion to cooperate in a research study (Bonisteel et al., 2021). Hence, the researcher must gather considerable relevant data from individuals who can provide insights into the study topic (Bonisteel et al., 2021). Insufficient recruitment can cause a total cessation of the study, leading to its premature conclusion before the research question is answered (Houghton et al., 2020). Online qualitative research recruitment offers many advantages, particularly in achieving a larger variation of participants by ensuring an efficient recruitment process; however,

online recruitment compared to conventional recruiting, including in-clinic recruitment, participant solicitation through mail and telephone utilizing health records and registrations, media campaigns, and newspaper advertisements, may access those communities that are not presently involved with specialized psychological services (Brøgger-Mikkelsen, 2020).

I developed recruitment materials such as flyers, social media posts, and informational brochures. These materials included an overview of the study and its purpose, the importance of participants' participation, details on what participation involves (interviews, confidentiality, etc.), and my contact information in order to make contact with potential participants via cell phone or email. I created posts on online forums (Support Group for Families with an incarcerated loved one, Parents & Families of the Incarcerated, and Incarcerated Loved Ones) that cater to young adults who have experienced parental incarceration. When I made initial contact with potential participants, I inquired as to how they would prefer to communicate whether phone, email, or text. I verbally explained my study and reviewed with each participant the goals of the study and research criteria. I screened out ineligible participants on that initial call, thanking them for their interest in my study but notifying them if they did not meet criteria. For those participants who did meet criteria, I emailed a consent form to the participants via PDF. I notified the participants that the informed consent needs to be signed before the call is completed. I scheduled a time utilizing Zoom platform in which I conducted the first interview and sent each participant a reminder, via email, 1 week

before the interview and another reminder, via email, the day before the interview requesting confirmation in a “yes or no” that they would attend interview.

Data Saturation

Data saturation is a key concept in qualitative research that helps determine the appropriate sample size. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) explained that saturation is the phase in data collection where no new insights emerge, and data starts to exhibit repetitive patterns, rendering further data collecting unnecessary. Similarly, Casteel and Bridier (2021) reported that achieving saturation is regarded as fundamental to rigor in establishing sample sizes in qualitative research, signifying that an adequate sample size has been attained. Qualitative researchers collect data until saturation, avoiding predetermining sample size by recruiting participants and gathering data until new interviews or observations no longer provide fresh information (Guest et al., 2006). Data saturation is a crucial concept in qualitative research, signifying that an adequate sample size has been attained by collecting data until no further insights are detected. I knew I had reached data saturation when new interviews or data ceased to yield new insights or information, and I repeatedly encountered the same patterns.

Instrumentation

I developed the interview protocol for this study. The foundation for development of the interview protocol was by Crabtree (1999). Crabtree focused on using semistructured interviews within interview protocols that provided freedom for both the interviewer and participant, facilitating an in-depth examination of intricate subjects. Crabbtree emphasized attaining equilibrium between organized and open-ended inquiries

to investigate participants' viewpoints while permitting flexibility to delve into unforeseen topics that emerge throughout the dialogue. The six fundamental components of Crabtree's interview protocol are (a) a semistructured method in which the interviewer adheres to a predetermined list of questions or subjects while remaining open to exploring other themes that arise naturally throughout the interview; (b) rapport building, which is establishing essential for ensuring the participant's comfort, promoting a more open and candid dialogue, particularly in sensitive research contexts; (c) adaptability in inquiries in that, although a fundamental set of questions directs the interview, there exists latitude in the manner and timing of their presentation. The interviewer should modify their inquiries according to the responses provided; (d) iterative method as the interview method is characterized as iterative, indicating that interviews may be modified based on insights from preceding interviews, enabling the researcher to enhance questions and explore emerging topics more thoroughly; (e) contextual sensitivity, which is the importance of comprehending the context surrounding participants' responses, indicating that the interviewer must recognize the social, cultural, and personal variables that shape the participants' experiences; and (f) probing, which involves the interviewer posing follow-up questions to get more comprehensive information and explain unclear responses. I developed my interview protocol based on Crabtree's six steps listed above (see Appendix A).

The content validity of the interview protocol was determined by three experts in the field. This technique effectively guaranteed that the interview questions were adequate and consistent with the study's objectives (Paredes et al., 2021). The panel's

criteria for validating my interview instrument were as follows: Expert 1 was a Ph.D. professor of human development & family science doctoral trained in developmental psychology and social work who studied how adverse environmental exposures shape human development. She was particularly interested in how contact with the U.S. criminal legal system affects developmental processes, and much of her work has focused on risk and resilience among adolescents who have experienced parental incarceration. Expert 2 was a Ph. D professor of human development. Her fields of study encompassed familial disruption, parent-child dynamics in at-risk families, and policy making. Expert 3 was a master-level clinician and licensed clinical social worker with a vast background in counseling, mental health, human services, and collaborating with foster children and their families. Upon reviewing the interview questions, two panel members (Expert 1 and 3) proposed no modifications. One panel member (Expert 2) suggested that I concentrate my inquiries on self-distraction as a method for positive coping. Consequently, I incorporated two additional questions to emphasize self-distraction as a coping method, in accordance with the recommendations given by Expert 2.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Data collection is a step in the research process. Data collection is an organized method of acquiring, measuring, and analyzing data gathered from diverse sources to address research inquiries, test hypotheses, or assess outcomes (Lobe et al., 2020). Data collection involves selecting appropriate methods to gather accurate and reliable data relevant to the research objectives. The data obtained may be qualitative (e.g., interviews, observations) or quantitative (e.g., surveys, experiments), contingent upon the study's

nature (Lobe et al., 2020). The data collection for this study was conducted by me utilizing the HIPAA-compliant version on the Zoom platform. Data collection consisted of participants engaging in an individual, semistructured interview, lasting roughly 45 minutes to 1 hour, via video utilizing Zoom platform. I opted to take written notes during the interviews.

Upon concluding the interview, a debriefing was provided to the participants. Debriefing is an analytical technique employed to involve participants in a reflective dialogue regarding their performance relative to the learning objectives of the experience, supplemented by other significant occurrences that may transpire (Kainth & Reedy, 2023). When debriefing participants, I conveyed my appreciation through a thank-you email to all participants in the study. Upon completion of the research, I sent an email to the participants containing an executive summary, not the full dissertation, of the research findings in a PDF document format.

Data Analysis Data

The data analysis methodology is detailed and systematic, particularly in qualitative research. For the aim of data analysis, I used the data analysis steps of Saldana (2021). Saldana's approach to data analysis, particularly in qualitative research, is detailed and systematic. The data analysis process, as delineated by Saldana, has four essential steps: (a) identifying encryptions within the data, (b) categorizing codes into detailed classifications, (c) examining these elevated categories to extract motifs via analytical memoing, and (d) utilizing such themes to address the research question. The purpose of the inductive coding procedure for data analysis, as described by Saldana, is to

develop codes while evaluating the data. Saldana emphasized coding, categorization, and theory-building through an iterative process.

Following Saldana's (2021) method for data analysis, I undertook the subsequent stages for analysis.

1. I familiarized myself with data by meticulously reviewing all gathered information. (interviews, field notes, etc.) multiple times and taking initial notes to capture first impressions and key points.

2. Initial coding (first cycle coding) where I labeled segments of data to summarize their content in short phrases or terms.

3. I utilized Microsoft Word to read the transcript and highlight and code exact words or phrases used by participants that seemed particularly meaningful or revealing to preserve their voice and perspectives.

4. Memo writing throughout the process: I continuously wrote reflective memos as I coded, documenting my thoughts, insights, and questions about the data and explored emerging patterns and themes.

5. Reorganize and refine codes (second cycle coding): This is where I grouped similar first-cycle codes together to begin identifying broader patterns and categories

6. Develop categories: I organized the refined codes into categories that represent broader ideas or concepts. I examined how different codes are related to each other and identify what larger patterns will emerge.

7. Identify and name themes: I synthesized categories into overarching themes that capture the essence of the data addressing my research question.

8. Visualize my analysis: I created visual representations such as a concept map to better understand relationships between categories, themes, and patterns. Doing this allowed me to ensure the organization of my findings is logical and coherent.

9. Refine themes and theories: I revisited the data to refine themes, ensuring that they are supported by the data and are meaningful to the research context. Here I developed theories or explanations based on the identified themes.

10. Write the analysis and share the findings: Here I wrote up my analysis, presenting the key themes supported by direct quotes from the data. I clearly documented the coding and analysis processed to ensure transparency.

These 10 steps, adapted from Saldana's coding and analysis process, were utilized as a guide through a systematic and reflective qualitative analysis, helping to extract meaning from the data in a structured manner. I continued the process until all interviews were categorized and data saturation was attained. I did not utilize software for analysis.

Addressing discrepancies is crucial for ensuring data validity and reliability. Discrepancies refer to data points or events that diverge from the standard or anticipated trends within a dataset or process (McAleese & Kilty, 2019). In addition, discrepancies can occur due to data collection errors, reporting inaccuracies, or differences in interpretation (Durand et al., 2021). Upon discovering a discrepancy, I traced and confirmed the data through the comparison of many sources or points in my data set to determine where the difference came from. I checked whether methods/conditions were identical across participants. I assessed if the consensus had arisen from differences in interpretation, different social or cultural backgrounds, or the unique experiences by the

participants. I documented and reported discrepancies in Chapter 4, if any, in hopes of being transparent regarding implications of disparity, any constraints exposed, and its impact on my study or results. Sometimes, discrepancy reveals important insights, sometimes it signals errors, but in any case, addressing it is part of ensuring data validity and reliability.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility is essential in ensuring trustworthiness and accurately representing the experiences of the participants. Prosek and Gibson (2021) defined credibility in qualitative research as the truthfulness and validity of research outcomes. Similarity, Ho et al. (2024) stated that credibility encompasses showing the level at which the study depicts a correct description of experiences, perspectives, and realities of the participants and requires a meticulous collection and analysis of data where any interpretation must reflect what participants meant. The traditional ways to enhance credibility involve triangulation, multiple causes or procedures, member checking in which response is solicited from participants to check findings, and thick descriptions that guarantee transparency for reliability (Ho et al., 2024). I employed member checking where I presented findings to participants to confirm if my interpretations accurately represent their experiences and intended meanings.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research is crucial for generalizing findings. Transferability denotes the degree to which the results can be extended across other

situations and populations, also known as external validity (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). To ensure transferability in qualitative research, researchers need to provide enough detailed information for others to determine whether the findings are applicable to different contexts or groups (Byram, 2022). To ensure transferability, I furnished comprehensive explanations of my research environment, participants, and settings. I was transparent in data collection, ensuring the reliability and relevance of the findings, and included information that allowed readers to compare my study with other research.

Dependability

Dependability ensures researchers can replicate the study. Janis (2022) defined dependability in qualitative research as the stability and consistency of data throughout time and across diverse settings. Similarly, dependability emphasizes that research findings should be consistent and replicable when the same methods are applied under similar circumstances (Janis, 2022). Essentially, dependability accesses the logical coherence, traceability, and thorough documentation of the research process, enabling others to replicate the techniques (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). I used member checking where I involved participants in reviewing and validating findings enabling participants to verify the reliability of the data and interpretations.

Confirmability

Another essential part of qualitative research is confirmability. Confirmability ensures that the findings accurately represent the participants' viewpoints rather than those of the researchers, accompanied by sufficient detail for replication (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). Similarly, Byram (2022) defined confirmability in qualitative research as

the extent to which the study's results can be validated or substantiated by others, and it emphasizes the objectivity of the results and the extent to which the research outcomes are molded by the participants' perspectives instead of the prejudices or preconceptions of the researcher. In order to ensure dependability, I used member checking involving participants in reviewing and validating findings. This allowed participants to provide feedback on the interpretations and ensured that the results accurately reflect their experiences and perspectives. I employed reflexivity by engaging in regular self-reflection regarding my biases, assumptions, and the influence they may have on the research, by documenting daily using a reflexive journal.

Ethical Procedures

Adhering to ethical procedures is a part of any study. Ethical treatment in qualitative studies are the principles and techniques that safeguard the rights, self-worth, and welfare of research participants are respected throughout the research process (Reich, 2021). Because qualitative research often involves in-depth interactions with participants and a deep exploration of personal experiences, ethical considerations are essential to protect participants from harm and to guarantee the execution of the research responsibly and with veracity (Taquette & Souza, 2022). I guaranteed ethical treatment by obtaining approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection. I secured signed voluntary, informed consent from participants prior to their involvement in the study. I ensured the participants grasped the research's objective, their obligations, any possible dangers or advantages, and their right to resign from the study at any time without consequences. I safeguarded participants' privacy by maintaining the

confidentiality of identifying information in all reports or publications. I securely stored data on a password-protected computer only assessable to myself, to safeguard sensitive information. These data, along with any other written content, will be shredded after 5 years. I implemented measures to avoid injury to participants, psychological, or emotional by providing the participants with a list of organizations that offer free and confidential mental health assistance if needed. I did not exploit participants in any way. I guaranteed that participants were treated with dignity and were permitted to make autonomous decisions on their involvement at any time during the study. I acknowledged and honored the cultural, social, and individual distinctions of participants by acknowledging power dynamics, being cognizant of language, and ensuring that research methodologies and inquiries were suitable for the cultural context. I explained the objectives, methodologies, and prospective results of the study, ensuring that the participants understood the utilization of the data, who would have access to it. Finally, I debriefed the participants poststudy, providing an opportunity to explain research methodology and to address any inquiries participants may have. By adhering to these ethical principles, I effectively safeguarded participants' rights and welfare while ensuring that the research was performed with integrity and social responsibility.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology employed in the study, which aimed to explore the perceptions of adolescents, aged 18–21, with incarcerated parent(s) and their use of self-distraction as a positive coping mechanism. A generic qualitative design was selected to focus on descriptive data while minimizing researcher bias. Purposive

sampling, private Facebook groups, and snowball sampling were employed to recruit participants. A sample size of 8–12 was deemed adequate to achieve data saturation, and a prescreening questionnaire ensured participant eligibility.

Participants were recruited using tailored recruitment materials and effective communication methods. The study relied on a structured interview protocol developed by Crabtree, which has been reviewed by experts, including a Ph.D. professor in human development, to ensure its reliability and relevance. Data collection was conducted via HIPAA-compliant Zoom, ensuring participant confidentiality. Semistructured interviews and debriefings formed the core of the data collection process, offering flexibility while maintaining focus on the research questions.

A systematic and detailed approach to data analysis was utilized to discern themes and patterns throughout the qualitative data. The study prioritized trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, ensuring accuracy and reliability. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality, were integral to the research process to protect the rights and welfare of participants. In summary, the methodology ensured a rigorous and ethical approach to exploring the coping mechanisms of adolescents with incarcerated parent(s), providing a robust framework for meaningful insights into their lived experiences. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the findings of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parents are incarcerated in prison, and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism. The following research question guided this study: What are the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parents are incarcerated in prison, and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism? The sections in this chapter include the study setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and summary.

Setting

There was nothing unusual that impacted data collection. Interviews were conducted via Zoom to facilitate accessibility and convenience in the scheduling process for respondents. Due to the maintenance of respondent confidentiality and the reduction of prospective risk factors, the Zoom visual function was disabled while only the audio capability functioned during each interviewing session in order to minimize the possibility that respondents could be identified by appearance and helped to create an environment that facilitated free conversation.

Respondents were also informed to conduct the interviews in a quiet private area to assist with the continuance of confidentiality and minimization of distractions. Interviews were digitally recorded via the incorporated secure recording capability provided with Zoom and uploaded immediately to an external encrypted password-secured drive to maintain the security of the information. A specific participant ID and

not a name was applied to every interview file for added protection against identification during transcription and analysis. These measures conformed with approved IRB standards of ethics and optimal practice for qualitative research with distance interviewing.

Demographics

This qualitative inquiry did not necessitate the generation of detailed demographic information. Consequently, demographic inquiries were excluded from the data collection instrument for this research. However, all volunteers were required to meet specific inclusion criteria to align with the purpose of the study. Data collection consisted of participants from different parts of the United States. Participants were ages 18-21 years old, reside in the United States, speak English, and have at least one parent who has been incarcerated for a span exceeding 1 year. In addition, participants disclosed using self-distraction (such as hobbies, media, or social activities) as a means of coping.

Data Collection

I distributed my recruitment flyer to approved social media platforms subsequent to receiving IRB approval. I verified that the participants met the criteria and subsequently sent them the consent form via email when they contacted me. The interview was scheduled after the participant responded to the email with “I consent.” The Zoom link was sent to their preferred email address via email. Data collection commenced on February 8, 2025, and was completed on March 23, 2025.

I utilized the Zoom platform to record interviews; in addition I employed a password-protected digital recorder to record the audio as a backup. The interview

commenced with an explanation of the study's objectives and the fact that it would last approximately 45 to 60 minutes and include seven questions. Before we began, I inquired whether the participant had any queries or concerns. I expressed my gratitude to the participant for consenting to participate in the interview. I then informed the participants that their name and any other personally identifiable information would be kept confidential and would not be published with the contents of this study or any other publications. In addition, I clarified that the participants had the option to forgo any question that they were uncomfortable answering and that they could terminate the interview at any time, without explanation, and for any reason. I verified that they comprehended their rights and that they consented to all the terms outlined in the consent form. Finally, I inquired as to whether I had their consent to record this audio interview solely for research purposes.

Before the audio interview was completed, I asked for permission from the participant to email a list of resources for support if they felt overwhelmed or needed someone to talk to, especially given the sensitive nature of the topics that we discussed. Once I received verbal consent, I immediately emailed the list to the participant. I then thanked the participant again for volunteering for my study. I explained to the participant that, within 1 week, they would receive an email transcript of our interview; I instructed them that if anything was wrong or needed to be corrected, to reach out to me by email. I verified the participant did not have any questions, comments, or concerns for me at that time.

I then proceeded to download the transcript from Zoom. I ensured that the information I had acquired was accurate and comprehensible by reviewing each document, rectifying any grammar errors that I discovered, and amending any misspelled terms. I conducted this procedure on numerous occasions to guarantee that I had an exhaustive understanding of the material. I then sent the transcript to the participants via email in accordance with the informed consent form.

A total of 12 interviews were completed, making a preliminary determination that I reached data saturation. The duration of the interviews varied from the shortest time of 5 minutes 49 seconds to the longest time of 13 minutes 31 seconds, depending on the participants' level of communication. The average interview length was 8 minutes 50 seconds. The data were transcribed after being audio recorded using Zoom's recording capacity and a backup recorder. The transcript of the participants' Zoom audio interview was sent to the participants via email within 1 week of their interview. Participants were given the opportunity to respond and inform me of any errors or misinterpretations in the transcript. Transcripts were determined to be legitimate and finalized due to the absence of any participant inquiries regarding their transcripts. I did not encounter any unusual circumstances during data collection, and the procedures presented in Chapter 3 were not altered.

Data Analysis

Saldana's (2021) systematic approach to data analysis, particularly in qualitative research, was utilized in the data analysis steps. At first, I familiarized myself with the data by meticulously examining all acquired information from interviews and notes

multiple times and taking initial notes to capture first impressions and key points. I subsequently initiated the initial cycle of coding, which involved labeling data segments to condense their content into concise phrases or terms. Then, I employed Microsoft Word to read the transcript and identify and classify the precise words or phrases that participants used that were particularly significant or revelatory in order to preserve their voice and perspectives. I subsequently transferred those codes to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. As I coded, I consistently composed reflective memoranda to record my thoughts, insights, and inquiries regarding the data, as well as to investigate emerging patterns and themes as they emerged. I subsequently initiated the second cycle of coding, which involved the reorganization and refinement of codes by combining similar first-cycle codes together in order to identify broader patterns and categories. Next, I established categories in which I categorized the refined codes to signify broader ideas or concepts. I investigated the interrelations between various codes and determined the broader trends that emerged.

I retrieved various codes, categories, and themes from the data collected from the participants. Examples of codes I created based off the data were a little stressful, felt kind of lonely, made me more emotionally strong, I use sports, games, toys, praying, and going to church, painting and reading, and they were super helpful. I then created categories from the codes. Some main categories were children taking care of their siblings, negative emotional impact, feeling emotionally strong, support from immediate family, support from extended family, peers as a personal support system, creative activities as supports, focusing on God, reports self-distraction as very helpful, support

from teachers, and support from therapist. From these codes and categories, the following nine themes emerged from the data:

- Theme 1: Children of incarcerated parents experiencing emotional turmoil and misunderstood pain
- Theme 2: Children of incarcerated parents utilizing family members for support
- Theme 3: Children of incarcerated parents utilizing social connections
- Theme 4: Children of incarcerated parents using creative and structured activities
- Theme 5: Children of incarcerated parents missing parent-child connection
- Theme 6: Children of incarcerated parents use spirituality as a source of comfort and resilience.
- Theme 7: Children of incarcerated parents utilized professional support as a central coping resource
- Theme 8: Children of incarcerated parents find strength and growth
- Theme 9: Children of incarcerated parents perceived coping mechanism as helpful

I found one potential discrepancy. All participants except one, Participant 2, noted negative experiences of parental incarceration. Participant 2 stated that she felt it was a great experience getting to visit her father in prison. labeled this statement an outlier. After reviewing the audio as well as the transcripts, I found that Participant 2 was not responding to Question 1, part 2 (How has it impacted different areas of your life?), but

instead expressed how it felt to visit her father while he was incarcerated by stating "I'd say it was great, because we got to travel a lot, visiting him all the time." I determined there was no outlier.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

In order to maintain credibility, I ensured I understood participants' responses to interview questions by seeking clarification during the interview. The transcripts were compared to audio recordings from the Zoom platform and my personal audio recorder used as a backup. To guarantee that all information was accurate and to rectify any typographical errors, I meticulously reviewed the transcripts on numerous occasions. In order to verify that my interpretations accurately reflected the experiences and intended meanings of the participants, I implemented member verification, which involved sending participants copies of their transcripts via email in order to check for accuracy. No modifications to the transcripts were requested by any participant.

Transferability

Transferability means the research findings can be generalized to various contexts and groups. To ensure transferability, I furnished sufficient information for readers and researchers to ascertain the applicability of the findings to various situations or groups. I provided detailed descriptions of my research environment, participants, and settings. I maintained transparency in gathering data while ensuring the findings' trustworthiness and relevance and provided information enabling researchers as well as readers to compare my study with other research.

Dependability

To ensure dependability, I ensured participants met the criteria listed in Chapter 3. I used member checking involving participants in reviewing and validating findings. This allowed participants to provide feedback on the interpretations and ensured that the results accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives. I employed reflexivity by **e**ngaging in regular self-reflection regarding my biases, assumptions, and the influence had on the research, by documenting daily using a reflexive journal.

Confirmability

The study's conclusions can be corroborated by others, highlighting the impartiality of the findings and the degree to which the research outcomes are shaped by the participants' viewpoints rather than the biases or preconceptions of the researcher. To establish confirmability, I employed member checking, where participants reviewed and validated the data. This enabled participants to offer comments on the interpretations, ensuring that the results appropriately represented their experiences and viewpoints. I utilized reflexivity through consistent self-reflection regarding my biases, assumptions, and potential impacts on the research, by maintaining a daily reflexive journal.

Results

This chapter reports the study findings, which explored the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parents are incarcerated in prison, and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism. A qualitative research strategy was used, and data were gathered using semistructured interviews meant to elicit participants' personal experiences and coping behaviors. This chapter is

organized to give in-depth description of the themes that were created from codes and categories.

Theme 1: Children of Incarcerated Parents Experiencing Emotional Turmoil and Misunderstood Pain

All participants in this study shared information about how they coped with any emotions or challenges related to parent incarceration. Participants reported often experiencing emotional turmoil that was difficult to identify or articulate at the time of the event, leading to misunderstood or unresolved emotional pain. Reinforcing this theme, P5 reported,

> I felt that I, I was very sad at that time. I feel that I had no idea about depression, but, like now that I look back at it, I feel that I was definitely depressed, angry, and experiencing this mix of emotions, I didn't know at all how to manage. I feel like it just kinda makes me like a little anxious nowadays. I would say. A memory that stood out for me was him actually getting arrested, because at the time he was actually arrested in front of me and my younger sister. So that memory was a little traumatic for me.

Participants' accounts illustrated the intricate emotional reactions of children to parental incarceration. Similar to P5, other participants illustrated the negative psychological impact that parental incarceration can have on a child, especially when that parent is their primary emotional connection. For example, P7 stated,

> It was like a downfall for me, because that was my closest parent, and I really didn't get like, I really didn't have a close relationship with my other parent, so

> when they took that parent away, it just felt like a piece of me was gone. I couldn't. I didn't want to live anymore, like it was just hard for me to cope with everything, so I just started isolating myself from everyone.

Participants reported feeling grief, abandonment, and a struggle to cope with overwhelming emotions, aligning with themes of emotional turmoil and misunderstood pain often experienced by children of incarcerated parents.

Participants also noted that, in certain instances, they were unsure of what they emotionally experienced. P9 stated, "I was sad I felt, I ain't gonna say empty, but like something was missing." Participants described experiencing an ambiguous sense of loss, characterized not by acute sadness or delayed awareness, but rather by a persistent feeling of absence that was challenging to articulate. Building on this theme, P11 shared, "I always had my grandma to be there for me when I was feeling sad or feeling like I was missing my parents." Given that participants reported emotional pain and confusion over their feelings stemming from parental incarceration, it is imperative that policymakers, human services professionals, and community support systems heed these reports and implement necessary changes.

Theme 2: Children of Incarcerated Parents Utilizing Family Members for Support

Many participants reported relying more on close family members than anybody else for support while coping with parental incarceration. P2 stated, "I went to talk with my family, my sisters about a lot of all my coping. They helped me get through and talked me through a lot of stuff." Participants identified the immediacy of family members as a source of emotional nourishment in children dealing with the parent's

incarceration. Similarly, P11 noted the special relationship with their twin brother leading to a shared experience that facilitated both mutual comprehension and survival, stating,

> I had my twin brother, and we were super close growing up, and we were going through the same thing at the time, so I had him there to, you know he understood me, and we were both coming from like the same place.

Participants' accounts verified that the immediacy of family members acts as both emotional anchoring points and supportive witnesses to the process of coping. Other participants acknowledged sibling relationships, as in both examples, as being support systems by way of restoring a sense of stability in the face of an interruption of the family unit.

Many participants recognized their grandparent as a means of support when experiencing parental incarceration. P11 stated, "I was also really close with my grandma, that was a good coping skill, because I always had my grandma to be there for me when I was feeling sad or feeling like I was missing my parents." Similarly, other participants reported grandparents as being a stabilizing influence in their lives when experiencing parental incarceration. For example, P8 stated,

> my support really came from my grandma, a lot, like my grandma is like my right hand man. Anything that I had or anything that I needed. I would go to my grandma, anything that was confusing, or I had questions about. I would go to my grandma… My grandma, my siblings, my friends, but more so, my grandma.

Participants reported that their grandparents provided steady emotional support serving as a buffer against parental incarcerations psychosocial distress.

Participants also reported the importance of extended family members such as cousins to provide support in coping with parental incarceration. P1 stated,

> I think it helped that I had my cousin because we went to the same school so we would go home together and then I would go to his house right after. So I think being with him and then my life still feeling somewhat normal-ish, although it had happened, it was comforting because it didn't really feel like anything was wrong when it kind of was.

Likewise, participants stated how family and relationship bonds assisted them in adapting to the loss of a parent who were incarcerated, but they described such bonds very differently. For example, P6 stated,

> My support system was always my mother, my grandma, my aunts and cousins. I just always had them around. They were very helpful, and they always taught me things, and they were just always there for me. We would always do stuff together. So being around them helped me, and I didn't really notice as much that he was gone. I noticed a little bit, but being around them just helped me growing up.

Participants noted family members as being central, helping to provide stability of emotions as well as a sense of normalcy while their parents were incarcerated. Both narratives fall within the larger category of children of incarcerated parents using family members for support

Theme 3: Children of Incarcerated Parents Utilizing Social Connections for Support

Some participants talked about peer support systems that helped them to cope and aid in self-distraction with parental incarceration. P4 stated, "just talking to like my 2 best friends who actually were the only ones like who knew about the situation." Participants noted the importance of sharing their experience with trusted people, especially those who also experienced parental incarceration. Further illustrating this point, P7 said,

> One of my friends. I talked to her about it because she had an understanding, because her parents were recently locked up, too. So it's like she understood she understood what I'm going through. So it's like I liked it. And I actually got a better understanding when I had somebody with me that understood and not just say, Oh, I know the feeling and really don't know the feeling.

Participants illustrated the function of peer and social support as part of coping strategies for parental incarceration, noting that this type of support was based on emotional expression and seeking support within a safe, caring, and nonjudgmental context. Together, participants affirmed the value with which peer relationships, specifically, through shared experience, rendered authentic emotional recognition and were of help in dealing parental incarceration.

Keeping along the same lines, participants continued to report that social support in the form of peer support assisted in coping with parental incarceration. P5 said, "Back in middle school, Well, back at the time I was in middle school, I really just focused on hanging out with friends." Participants' testimonies highlighted the importance of having

someone to communicate with and enjoy liked activities. In unison in echoing this sentiment, P12 stated,

> I would build like Legos and hanging out with friends, and just like enjoying hobbies together with other people. Having other people around to just talk to and kind of feel that fill that space from having the parent not in your life. I used a lot of friends' houses, and going over to friends that I would meet in church.

Both interviewees emphasized the significance of friendship and camaraderie as a way of providing distraction in the form of emotional support, as well as a sense of normalcy during the de-stabilizing time of their lives.

Theme 4: Children of Incarcerated Parents Using Creative and Structured Activities

Participants noted that they also depended on creative and structured activities to aid in self-distraction when exposed to parental incarceration. For example, P9 said, "I journaled", "I found resources", "like it was a program", "different activities." Participants reported employing structured activities and creativity as conscious modes of self-distraction for managing parental incarceration. Participants mentioned "different activities" and "a program" that provide support systems on a structural level, like programs within the schools or the community that established a climate within which one could be involved as well as having support. Comparable to this viewpoint, P2 shared,

> I use sports, games, toys, things of that nature, whenever I did those activities, I just felt a different level of comfort. Like, there's no worries in the world about anything. Like, I could just be me and have fun.

Participants described how creative activities and participation in programs based on resources created a pattern of expressive and reflective coping. Participants also reported journaling assisted in self-regulation of complex emotions within an environment out of public view.

Participants reported that self-distraction strategies, such as creative activities, helped them to adapt and to resist the internalization of the effects of parental incarceration. Participants highlighted the importance of formal extracurricular activities, especially arts and sports, as successful self-distraction coping strategies. For example, P3 stated,

> I like to draw. I used to draw all the time. Sometimes I would like draw him pictures and stuff, and I like give them to my mom. So maybe like coloring books and stuff. I used to color all the time to try to like. Yeah, like softball, like having, like the physical pain, and like having to work out and like, push your body to certain limits. It like kind of kept my mind busy and like cheerleading and stuff, kept my mind busy from thinking about my dad a lot.

Participants highlighted that regular participation in organized sports activities, basketball, volleyball, softball, and camp activities created positive social contact, routine, and a sense of belonging. Further illustrating this point, P6 shared, "I always played sports. So volleyball, softball, basketball. I also went to basketball camp. So I had

like activities in school, and I also was in after school programs." Participants stated that these activities served not only as diversions, but as sites for self-esteem building and achievement. Together, the participants noted how participation in sports and arts activities functioned as a healthy coping strategy, providing distraction in the form of emotional regulation, and empowerment.

Participants shared a pattern of using self-distraction as a physical and creative means of emotional regulation while their parents were incarcerated. Consistent with this idea, P7 reported, "As I mentioned before, I like to swim so like when I go swimming like to clear my head like when I'm in the water. I just let everything go like that I just be free, spirited." Participants noted engaging in activities that served as not only a mental escape, but emotional coping as well. Participants also reported utilizing activities such as reading and painting as an indicator of a type of expressive and cognitive distraction. In contrast to social aspects of coping, participants reported consciously diverting attention from emotional regulation into nonlinguistic creativity. Further demonstrating this point of view, P9 reported, "I did a lot of painting and reading, but I did a lot of painting and that helped me, it kept me distracted and kept my mind off him being gone." Participants highlighted how physical, intellectual, and art activities helped facilitate self-distraction through helping build transient distance from their pain, promoting self-efficacy, as well as identity.

Theme 5: Children of Incarcerated Parents Missing Parent-Child Connection

Some participants expressed feelings of the physical loss of their absent parent and emotionally not being able to cope. For example, P6 shared,

> My experiences. Well, for me it was kind of bad because I had to talk to my dad through a cell phone, and I only could visit him one time in person, I was younger at the time I was younger than like 5 years old. I was maybe about, I would say 4, 5, and the only way I could visit him was through the cell phone. We talked. We talked, but I was never allowed to see him unless there was an officer who let me see him. It was bad because I didn't have my dad growing up, and the only way we could talk was through a jail phones, and I wasn't able to see him or have him around. It impacted me by not having a dad and not knowing certain things about being around boys or just having a dad growing up to go play with, or be here, or be around and having protection, and just having, like a dad figure.

Participants provided rich descriptions of early childhood disconnection, including the physical absence of access to her father and how the void carried over into a deprivation of male guidance and protection. In contrast, some participants amplified the affective severity of parental loss by highlighting the emotional and existential costs of parental incarceration. Further noted by, P7 stating,

> It was like a downfall for me, because that was my closest parent, and I really didn't get like, I really didn't have a close relationship with my other parent. So when they took that parent away, it just felt like a piece of me was gone. I couldn't. I didn't want to live anymore, like it was just hard for me to cope with everything.

Participants highlighted a loss of normalcy, what was generally assumed in typical parent-child relationships, such as spending time with the parent, receiving guidance, or

within house modeling of masculinity. Participants also noted how the absence of their parents due to incarceration was suggestive of unresolved grief, as well as insufficient emotional support.

The participants reported that parental incarceration created enduring emotional scars. Carrying this thread forward, P9 shared,

> I was sad I felt, I ain't gonna say empty, but like something was missing. You know.I don't know what that is. But yeah, sometimes angry. Like, isolated without him, like not him having him there. Me and my dad are really close. So usually, if I wanted to call him, those moments, I would sit in my room and was lonely, because that is the person that I vented to about everything. So it wasn't a good time."

Participants reported that the emotional and relational break caused by the incarceration of a parent represented the fracture of the parent-child relationship and its lasting emotional toll. In a different but analogous way, P10 reported,

> It was different for real like, I don't really know how to explain it, just like they. You can only talk to him when they call. And then he didn't really call as much like every time he did call. I was like I was never really around, because he always called my sisters, and they're like that. But he never really called me. I don't know why, but it was just different. It just felt like I lost something".

Participants noted the loss of their parents not only left them feeling deprived of emotional support, but contributed to bringing on unhappiness, isolation, social exclusion, most notably, lost experiences such as "daddy-daughter dates."

Participants reported a sense of familiarity as well as emotional nearness with their father within captivity. For example, P4 reported

> us talking on the phone every day and like us, just still keeping that connection really helped me going, because I feel like if I was a kid who, like father, just went away and like, didn't speak to them the entire time that they were in prison. It would be a completely different story, but I feel like I still have my father in my life, in my daily day-to-day life and basis. So like, I was able to just still keep that connection and bond with him.

In contrast, participants noted feelings of emotional alienation and disconnection from their father for his absence during their early years. For example, P12 stated, "I feel as though my relationship with my father has been weird, through not having grown up with him and having him raise me in my childhood." Some participants reported that the absence of a parent during their development left a void nurturing emotional dissonance that could have easily developed through joint experiences and continuous presence.

Theme 6: Children of Incarcerated Parents Using Spirituality as a Source of Comfort and Resilience

Participants expressed their spirituality as being an effective form of distraction. For example, P8 stated, "So when I was going through something, I would just read my Bible or write different things out that I could do to the Bypass time." Participants noted that praying and reading the Bible served as effective ways to handle emotional difficulties stemming from parental imprisonment. Though not considered as conventional distractions such as sports or creative hobbies, participants reported that

these spiritual practices offered a focus-based diversion which helped stabilize emotions and increased personal strength. Similarly, P9 stated,

> Absolutely I used God. I'm a very strong believer of God, and I prayed to Him all the time to get me through it. Some days. It was, you know, tough, but I feel like he

Participants illustrated how coping using spirituality differs from physical or social distractions but works using the same core idea: engaging in something meaningful to shift focus away from stress, offering clarity, comfort, and a renewing sense of purpose.

Some participants indicated that their faith served as a vital resource for coping with the emotional difficulties of their parent's incarceration. P3 reported,

> I've learned that I guess I don't know I like nowadays I just surround myself by myself, and I talk to God, and I go to church now. So, I guess I just talked to God about my problems, and it really does help.

Many of the participants noted relying on religious practices and personal spiritual exercises to aid in distraction from parental incarceration. Participants recounted engaging in spiritual practices with deliberate intentionality by extending prayers beyond personal comfort to express their worry about their incarcerated parent's condition. Similarly to P3, P4 said,

> So praying, going to church? yeah, really, like putting my faith into God and just praying that, like, my dad is okay in there and like every day, yeah, he's just okay. And yeah, just wishing that he would come home praying that he would come home safely.

Collectively, participants reported experiencing how spirituality can function as an emotional stabilizer when confronted with the difficulties of parental incarceration. Through introspective reflection or purposeful, optimistic prayer, participants noted how faith offered a structure for managing emotions, maintaining hope, and fostering a sense of connection despite physical distance and ambiguity.

Theme 7: Children of Incarcerated Parents Utilized Professional Supports as a Central Coping Resource

Participants reported utilizing professional support as coping resources. For example, P5 reported,

> I think my main thing was therapy cause like that was like my 1st time, like kind of getting into it, and I feel like it played a huge role in how I coped with that I feel like therapy really helped me, and it changed me. It changed my perspective as a person and so like it, just it helped with my mental state a lot.

Participants identified therapy as an essential intervention that significantly impacted their coping strategy. P7 also shared similar thoughts with P5, by stating,

> Personally, I had got a therapist. So when I got a therapist that really helped a lot like I could actually talk to someone, no judgment. She gave me advice, and it was like good advice to take in and listen.

Participants noted how therapy was a support by serving as a coping mechanism when dealing with the psychological effects of having an incarcerated parent. Participants illustrated how therapy enabled them to see themselves differently which demonstrated

that professional assistance extended beyond alleviating symptoms to enable cognitive changes and emotional development.

Participants reported learning powerful coping techniques through therapy thanks to the trust built between therapist and child. To further illustrate this point, P8 stated,

> I'll say, my therapist. A lot of people don't like talking to therapists because they feel like they're telling their business, but when you have somebody you trust, and you actually got a bond with, then you're able to talk with them. So I would say, my therapist helped me a lot.

Some participants noted the common reluctance to engage in therapy due to fears of vulnerability and mistrust. However, P8 shifted this narrative by highlighting that when a secure bond is established, therapy becomes a valuable and supportive outlet. Similarly, P9 described therapy as beneficial by stating "I went to my therapist for support with that and I managed to overcome." Both participants relayed that reducing therapy-related stigma along with developing culturally sensitive relationship-centered interventions represented critical methods in their support.

Particiants noted the significance of school-based mental health professionals such as counselors and therapists in helping to manage emotional difficulties stemming from parental incarceration. P10 stated,

> My school counselor She helped me a lot, too. She'd be helping me with my sports stuff. And then when I'm feeling down, I go to her office. I go to her office and talk to her. She helped me. And stuff like that. So yeah, her.

Participants reported that starting therapy early in life helped manage their anxiety while teaching them crucial emotional regulation skills during their developmental periods. Similarly to P10, P11 said, “I had a therapist when I was younger, that I could talk to, and I think that helped with some of the anxiety that I was feeling at the time.” Participants noted that the accessibility and empathetic nature of school counselors exemplified by their ability to support students made these professionals crucial in establishing a psychologically safe school environment. Participants expressed how professional support created a trust-based relationship helping to meet emotional needs created from experiencing parental incarceration.

Theme 8: Children of Incarcerated Parents find Strength and Growth

Participants reported feeling internal resilience and emotional maturation that emerged from the difficult experience of parental incarceration, directly supporting the theme that children of incarcerated parents find strength and growth. For example, P2 shared,

> I feel like if anything it has made me more like emotionally strong because I’ve already been through something what some would call traumatic. I feel like it’s important to find something that you like to do to take off or distract or cope. Just find something that you like to do that could help you take your mind off the situation.

While participants’ individual coping strategies and perspectives differed slightly in form, they converged on the message of self-empowerment and transformation through adversity. Similarly, P11 stated,

> I think that it made me more independent because I felt more dependent on my parent at the time, and it made me more, a little bit more outgoing. Yeah, being more independent and willing to reach out to different family members that I otherwise probably wouldn't have reached out to for help.

These participants demonstrated that, although parental incarceration introduced grief, instability, and emotional loss, it can compelled youth to develop maturity, independence, and inner strength. Their reflections affirm that growth does not necessarily mean the absence of pain, but rather the ability to navigate that pain with resilience and positivity.

Other participants reported resilience, self-empowerment, and social connection as avenues to individual development in the face of hardship through parental incarceration. P3 reported,

> if anybody's like going through something or their dad's gone, and they're like, I don't have nobody to count on, or whatever I would say, definitely, count on yourself, and like, don't put yourself in a position where you don't want to be, where your parents at and not push towards the other way and take away your personality, basically because, you're upset missing somebody.

P3 reported utilizing internal sources for self-reliance and emotional development, in contrast, P12 highlighted external sources. P12 stated,

> I really did enjoy the toys and stuff and I would use them, and like the people I met, then I think that they've all really helped me grow in my life, and I'm still friends with some of the people.

In the face of adversity, some participants reported finding strength and growth, and demonstrated how introspection and self-identity assertion were key coping strategies; others reported how productive peer interaction and available resources were capable of making a positive difference. Participants confirmed this overall theme that children whose parents were in prison were capable of gaining strength and personal development through both inner fortitude and outer support.

In keeping with this theme, participants reported generally cultivating inner resiliency and fortitude through drawing on internal affirmations and external sources of support. P7 shared, “I’m gonna be in a better place soon. It’s gonna be all right. Things gonna work out. I don’t have to do this. I’m not by myself. I have other family. I can’t just give up.” Similarly, participants noted that dimensions of resiliency included drawing on internal affirmations but also on reconstituted family support. Participants reported reinforcing the value of intergenerational transmission of resilience and provided a religious context through which one copes with adversity, demonstrated by P8 stating,

> I would tell them to stay strong, Hard times don’t last always And then I would say this because it’s something that my grandma always told me. If you pray, then don’t worry if you worry, then ain’t no need to pray. so just keep going. Stay strong. You got it.

Participants shared a universal truth in the theme: children of prisoners tend to convert pain into persistence through a mixture of personal hope, familial bonds, and religious insight. Instead of giving in to despair, participants internalized empowering stories to

overcome their situation and bring about similar motivation in others, facilitating strength and growth.

Theme 9: Children of Incarcerated Parents Perceived Coping Mechanism as Helpful

Participants presented strong narratives demonstrating how self-distraction strategies were effective coping mechanism in their early lives. For example, P1 stated,

> I think they were really helpful because I was on top of my stuff and wanting to do good in school. It really helped when I went on into high school because I got to skip some classes because I was ahead of everyone else. And it made me care for my siblings more because as an older sibling, it's like I don't want to be near my little siblings because they're annoying, but it really made me value my time with my siblings.

P1 described academic and interpersonal gains in their use of distraction techniques. Similarly, participants also found elevated social and emotional worth in self-distraction activities, demonstrated by P2 sharing,

> I feel like they were very helpful because they. because they helped me take my mind off of it and it developed a joy for all the things that I like to do now. Before and after I felt great. made me happy. It helped me get through a lot of stuff I was going through. I didn't have to worry about anything while I was doing those activities. I just got to have fun, interact with others. you know, bonds that could help me get through everything while doing things that I love.

Collectively, participants confirmed the value of self-distraction as a healthy and developmentally positive strategy for children coping with the negative effects of having a parent in prison. Their accounts supported the argument that these strategies work to reduce distress and foster adaptive functioning in academic, social, and family contexts.

Some participants reported coping strategies to be useful but not everyone's solution. P5 said, "They were kind of helpful but like I still feel like I will have moments where I was. Just kinda angry all the time, or just like not really in the mood." Participants illustrated the inadequacy of coping strategies when underlying deep emotional distress exists. In contrast, other participants endorsed more stable emotional regulation gains through these strategies, as noted by P7 stating,

> It was very helpful, honestly like it calmed my nerves down. I wasn't easily self-destructive, and it was like I was more respectable, like being more open, and not just dropping everything and just going mad, going crazy, and stuff.

Participants highlighted that, although coping strategies can be useful outlets in some cases, their effectiveness will be determined by emotional resilience on an individual basis, internal processing capacity, and possibly by trauma severity related to the experience of incarceration.

Participants indicated coping strategies as beneficial but limited, by illustrating how adaptive coping strategies and strategies of distraction served to operate partially against emotional stress despite some restrictions. For example, P6 reported,

> They were helpful sometimes, but not all the time, because I did wish that my dad could come to the school and visit me, or be there when we had, like the parent

> teacher meetings, or when we had the dances with the d0ad, I wasn't able to attend, or I just had my mom there for me.

Participants highlighted the bittersweet worth of survival tactics: though they were capable of providing temporary comfort, they cannot possibly substitute for an absentee parent. Equally so, participants reported some that although distraction was useful to some degree, it only reduced rather than averted emotional distress. For example, P8 stated,

> That was pretty much helpful. I still have different things on my mind, but I'll always try to. You know I would always try to like Cope with different things through doing those things. So that was helpful. I would say one out of 10, that was about a 7.

In combination, participants highlighted that, although self-distraction and other coping strategies are helpful, they cannot completely alleviate the pain or unrecognized emotional needs associated with parent incarceration. Rather, they are partial means of relief, acting almost like survival techniques in nature and not total remedies.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the data in this qualitative study. This chapter outlined the setting, demographics, data collection techniques, data analysis procedures, and strategies employed to establish evidence of trustworthiness. Nine themes were identified from the data analysis. Each theme examined the research question, providing sufficient information to explore the perceptions of adolescents, aged 18-21, with incarcerated

parents and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism.

The findings were presented thematically to correspond to patterns and observations developed in the data. Each theme was substantiated using direct quotes from participants to maintain authenticity in their voices and to anchor in real-life realities of what participants experienced. The developed themes shed light on the coping mechanisms that adolescents use; the significance they ascribe to their experiences; and overall emotional, social, and psychological influences upon which they respond. Theme 1 identified from the data was that children of incarcerated parents often assumed adult tasks during their parents' incarceration. These participants shared their experiences, including balancing being a child and a parent, emotional distress, and misunderstood pain. Theme 1 addressed the mental distress and misinterpreted feelings of children with incarcerated parents, and provided data about their feelings and emotions when dealing with the loss of a parent. Theme 2 presented data regarding the ways in which children of incarcerated parents sought help from family members. The reflective accounts highlighted the role of immediate and extended family members, particularly peer-aged relatives, in supporting children of incarcerated parents during periods of emotional distress. Theme 3 included data on how children of incarcerated parents leveraged social ties, identifying peer support as a mechanism for self-distraction. Theme 4 included data on children of incarcerated parents engaging in creative and structured activities, such as drawing, journaling, cheerleading, basketball, group activities, reading, praying, swimming and spending time with friends. Theme 6 examined the coping mechanisms

employed by children of incarcerated parents utilizing spirituality. Spirituality was identified by participants as a coping skill used to cope with parental incarceration. Theme 7 discussed how children of incarcerated parents also employed personal and professional support systems to aid in coping with parental incarceration. Nevertheless, some participants indicated a lack of engagement with professional support. Theme 8 addressed resilience and development in children of incarcerated parents. Children of incarcerated parents expressed a sense of hope and resilience, believing that their situation will improve when their parents return. In addition, children of incarcerated parents further noted that their experiences have made them more independent and outgoing and facilitated growth and development in their lives. In Theme 9, the participants reported whether they felt self-distraction techniques were helpful or not. Participants overall reported self-distraction techniques to be helpful with coping with parental incarceration.

In Chapter 5, I will present the findings of this generic qualitative investigation. An interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and conclusion will also be presented.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parents are incarcerated in prison, and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism. The findings of this study could assist policymakers and practitioners in their collaborative efforts to improve support for children with incarcerated parents and their families by comprehending their experiences and the impact on them as adults.

With a qualitative approach, the study sought to preserve the rich experience, perception, and narrative of a population often rendered invisible in scholarship, policy, and practice. These emerging adults navigate life at the intersection of a significant developmental transition out of the adolescent experience into adulthood and the persistent legacy of parental incarceration upon their experience of stability, a place of belonging, and a future.

The study aimed to fill a significant gap in the literature by elevating children of incarcerated parents' voices and learning how they make sense out of their lives, how they manage stigma, and how they grew resilient out of their parents' incarceration. Through their voices, this work provides data that can inform social service interventions, counseling strategies, and community interventions that can better address emerging adults who bear the after-effects of parental incarceration. The data generated nine themes: children of incarcerated parents experiencing emotional turmoil and misunderstood pain, children of incarcerated parents utilizing family members for support, children of incarcerated parents utilizing social connections, children of

incarcerated parents using creative and structured activities, children of incarcerated parents missing parent-child connection, children of incarcerated parents use spirituality as a source of comfort and resilience, children of incarcerated parents utilized professional support as a central coping resource, children of incarcerated parents find strength and growth, and children of incarcerated parents perceived coping mechanism as helpful. In this chapter, I will provide an interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, potential recommendations, the implications of the study and the conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

Theme 1: Children of Incarcerated Parents Experiencing Emotional Turmoil and Misunderstood Pain

A common issue that emerged from the study was that children of incarcerated parents endure emotional distress and unrecognized suffering. This topic aligned with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 confirming that children of incarcerated parents frequently experience emotional turmoil and misunderstood pain. Children of incarcerated parents reported feeling a mixture of emotions related to their parents' incarceration, such as elevated levels of anxiety, diminished levels of happiness, and heightened emotional challenges (Bradshaw et al., 2020). Similarly, Jones et al. (2024) demonstrated that children with parents who are in prison are more susceptible to experiencing depression. I found that participants in this study experienced negative emotions due to their experience with parental incarceration.

This theme aligned with Hill's (1949) family stress theory. For example, family stress theory accounts for how families handle stress and different factors influencing

their coping capacities. Specifically, the incarceration of a parent is the major stressor event that severely impacts family life and emotional security of the child. Numerous participants expressed feeling depressed, grief, confusion, abandonment, and a lack of sufficient emotional resources such as insufficient assistance from the remaining parent. In addition, the children's internalization of incarceration perceiving abandonment, being misunderstood, or feeling shameful portrays how adverse internalization of the event exacerbates emotional suffering. These internalized meanings are decisive factors toward determining whether the child is coping. Emotional suffering, depression, worry, and withdrawal from society, as portrayed by the participants, symbolize the crisis point when coping is weak. As a whole, the theme is consistent with family stress theory as it provides an explanation for how stressors (such as parental incarceration) may cause emotional crises for children.

Theme 2: Children Of Incarcerated Parents Utilizing Family Members for Support

The findings for Theme 2 are in alignment with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 positing that children of incarcerated parents utilize family members for support. Theme 2 findings revealed that children leaned on family members (e.g., grandparents, siblings, aunts/uncles) for emotional support and coping during their parent's incarceration. Children of incarcerated parents experience difficulties, but their positive familiar interactions mitigate the condition for the children (Arditti & Johnson, 2022). Similarly, Zhang and Flynn (2020) also felt that the family played a role in the building of resilience of the child of the imprisoned parent. Hence, I found that participants in the current study used family members as support more often than any other type of support,

supporting that positive familial engagement fosters emotional stability, promotes resilience, and mitigates the psychological impact of parental incarceration.

This theme aligns closely with Hill's (1949) family stress theory. Parental incarceration is the stressor experience in Hill's model, bringing about an abrupt interruption in the stability of the child, and dependence upon other family members for emotional or social support. Most participants reported only using family members to help them get through the stress of parental incarceration through comfort and shared experiences. Extended family support systems refer to the family's existing resources, including mobilization of familial resources to buffer the impact of incarceration. Participants shared how their siblings, grandparents, and cousins helped them cope when they were feeling sad or depressed. The family's perception of the stressor, whether the child sees it as manageable or overwhelming, can positively influence the child's adjustment and reduce the psychological impact of the event. The family interprets and responds to the stressor using available resources, and this response determines whether the situation becomes a full-blown crisis or a manageable period of stress supported by family resilience. Thus, Theme 2 illustrates that the presence and involvement of family members who play a protective role, aligns with Hill's emphasis on the role of resources and perceptions in determining a family's ability to adapt to stress.

Theme 3: Children Of Incarcerated Parents Utilizing Social Connections For Support

This theme is aligned with the literature presented in Chapter 2 highlighting the benefits of children of incarcerated parents using social connections for support. Grief

and self-stigma were predictors of a decline in resilience, but social support was a predictor of an increase in resilience (King, 2021). Similarly, recognition of the social stigma linked to parental incarceration is particularly evident when children expressed their reluctance to disclose their parents' incarceration within their social circles (Martoma et al., 2022). However, participants in this study reported that even though they were reluctant to share their experiences, they chose to disclose to close friends who made them feel safe and often shared experiences of parental incarceration.

This theme is in congruence with the family stress theory of Hill (1949). Social peer relations, for instance, functions as resources that provide emotional, relational, and instrument support during the disruptions caused by parental incarceration. Children use social relationships as coping mechanisms, drawing on internal and external resources to reduce the negative effects of parental incarceration. Social relationships help guide the child and provide balance during times of abandonment, confusion, and stigma. This theme highlights how resilience is fostered not in isolation, but through relational networks that offer validation, guidance, and consistency.

Theme 4: Children of Incarcerated Parents Using Creative and Structured Activities

Theme 4 is consistent with the evidence in Chapter 2 that the practice of structured and creative activities offered assistance in coping with parental incarceration. Family members provided support that helped individuals form connections within the community that included activities and services (Zhang & Flynn, 2020). Correspondingly, when reconstructing and interpreting parental incarceration

experiences, children learned coping mechanisms that entailed doing tasks and engaging in activities in an effort to distract themselves (Noel & Green 2022). Participants in this study reported taking part in intentional activities, not only acts as a means of regulation of one's emotions but as a route towards resilience with the assistance of the family and the wider community.

This theme is supported by the theoretical framework of the current study in depicting adaptive coping mechanisms that enable resilience against family disruption as stipulated by Hill's (1949) theory. Creative and structured activities can be defined as internal and external family assets used by children in the process of coping with the stressor of parental incarceration. These activities provide an emotional outlet, offer routine and a sense of purpose, and facilitate a sense of normalcy that act as a buffer against the negative emotional outcomes of separation. In these activities, the child's perception of the situation is potentially influenced by the active mobilization of accessible resources and internal capacities that work toward the restoration of emotional balance, in line with the paths laid out in Hill's family stress theory.

Theme 5: Children Of Incarcerated Parents Missing Parent-Child Connection

Theme 5 was consistent with the research in Chapter 2, which emphasized that children of incarcerated parents experience a loss of parent-child connection. The presence of parental incarceration has been found to have an impact on parental-child connection quality (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Similarly, Shlafer et al. (2020) found that communication between incarcerated parents and their children has significant consequences for the parent-child connection. The presence of a parent in prison during a

child's early or middle childhood has a detrimental effect on the bond between the child and the jailed parent (Turney, 2023). Likewise, participants from this study reported being negatively affected by the loss of their parent who sometimes were their only caregiver. Other participants noted experiencing the loss in terms of not having a father figure to teach or guide them through life.

Theme 5 aligns with Hill's (1949) family stress theory in that it shows how the disruption of family roles and relationships that comes with parental incarceration operates as a compelling stressor. From the perspective of Hill's theory, family stress is created whenever a crisis (in this case, incarceration) exceeds a family's coping potential. The lack of parent-child contact under such conditions interferes with normative relationship dynamics and creates emotional distress, role confusion, and impaired support systems within the family organization. The disruption compromises the functioning of the family unless cushioned with accessible resources and positive interpretations or definitions of the event. Specifically, the absence of contact between the parent and the child may create a sense of abandonment, confusion, or mourning that is oftentimes compounded by restricted contact and physical distance. Therefore, this theme both displays the vulnerability and capacity for adaptation within Hill's framework as it demonstrates how parent-child contact disruption that is a byproduct of incarceration serves as an unstable force that challenges but does not destroy resilience.

Theme 6: Children of Incarcerated Parents Use Spirituality as a Source of Comfort and Resilience

No studies were identified in Chapter 2 related to the topic of spirituality being utilized as a coping mechanism. However, in Chapter 2, literature was presented that focused on the relationship of self-expression and self-soothing. Reife et al. (2021) found that these coping methods diminished stress and negative psychological symptoms caused by parental incarceration. The use of spirituality as a coping mechanism among children of incarcerated parents often enhances other coping strategies and can be identified as a way to express themselves and self soothe (Heinecke & Eklund, 2017). For instance, children may engage in self-expression through prayer or faith-based journaling, self-soothing through religious rituals or meditative practices (Heinecke & Eklund, 2017). Rather than functioning as an isolated mechanism, spirituality often operates as a flexible, stabilizing framework within which other adaptive behaviors are nurtured and sustained. Participants in this study reported that their spirituality helped them cope with difficult moments when their parents were incarcerated. Similarly. Allen et al. (2018) found that children, especially those who are going through tough times, require all the physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual resources they can get to survive and flourish. Spirituality in children is an attribute that all children have from birth and that they use to connect with themselves, other people, the world, and God (Allen et al., 2018). Some participants in this study reported the importance of spirituality when not seeking outside resources to cope with the negative effects of parental incarceration.

However, more research is needed to better understand how spirituality plays a part in self-distraction.

This theme is supported by Hill's (1949) family stress theory. The theory describes how families respond to adversity based on resources that exist, and they assign meaning to the situation, which affects crisis resolution. The incarceration of one's parent is an extreme and disruptive stressor, but spirituality as a coping asset, psychological and sometimes communal, acts as an emotion regulator, helper in creating hope, a safety marker and support in the absence of an incarcerated parent. A stabilizing ongoing mechanism is accessed by children, using prayer, faith community integration, or individual belief systems, to manage instability. This reinterpretation is congruent with Hill's contention that subjective interpretation of stress is most responsible for determining families' and individuals' response.

Theme 7: Children Of Incarcerated Parents Utilized Professional Support as a Central Coping Resource

I interpreted the findings of Theme 7 to be aligned with the literature presented in Chapter 2 highlighting how children of incarcerated parents used professional supports as a coping mechanism. Children of incarcerated parents used coping methods, including seeking help, to weaken the link between stress and psychological symptoms over time (Reife et al., 2021). Similarly, participants in this study reported how professional support provided a safe space in assisting in alleviating stress caused by parental incarceration. However, Shaw (2022) noted that interviewees expressed that they felt stigmatized in both social and professional environments as a result of their parent's incarceration or

criminal record. Similarly, some participants in this study reported not using professional support due to the fear of being judged.

Congruent with Hills's (1949) family stress theory, in the case of parental incarceration, the stressor experience tends to interfere with family process and subject children to financial, social, and emotional strain. However, resources that become accessible to the child and to families, such as school counselors, therapists, case workers, or case managers, become protective elements. Such professional support fills in gaps of emotion that an absent parent leaves behind and provides an outlet that is stable for an expression of feelings, guidance, and problem-solving. In addition, professional support might change how the child perceives the experience of incarceration. Children who experience being stigmatized or abandoned in the beginning might reinterpret what took place using therapeutic talk or organized interventions, recontextualizing the experience in this way to build resilience and reduce isolating or shameful emotions. In turn, proper support and positive meaning-making can reduce the intensity of the crisis and enable the family to adapt rather than experience dysfunction. Overall, this theme highlights professional support as an effective buffer, augmenting the resilience capacity of the family system to adjust under adversity by accumulating structure and affective resources as fundamental components in the family stress theory.

Theme 8: Children of Incarcerated Parents Find Strength and Growth

This theme aligned with the research presented in Chapter 2, which stated that children of incarcerated parents find strength and growth despite their negative experiences with having a parent incarcerated. Specifically, individuals successfully dealt

with the negative social perception of parental incarceration and maintained a positive and helpful self-image by using three strategies: (a) distancing themselves from their imprisoned parent, (b) considering their imprisoned parent as a source of inspiration, and (c) interpreting their parent's incarceration in a favorable light (Luther, 2020). Likewise, for some participants, this encounter had beneficial effects on their lives as it served as a catalyst for pursuing education, expediting their journey towards self-reliance, or fostering their aspiration to become responsible parents and ensure stability for their offspring (Noel & Hoeben, 2022). Participants in this study indicated that parental incarceration enhanced their independence and facilitated alternative relationships that would not have developed otherwise.

This theme is also linked to Hill's (1949) family stress theory in that it shows families and individuals becoming strong and resilient in difficult situations. In accordance to Hill's theory, what allows or enables a family to adapt to stress is an interaction of a stressful incident, resources of the family, and incident perception, which affects together the probability of a crisis. In the case of parental incarceration, the removal of one's parent is the stressor, even as this extreme disruption, many of these children reveal an evolving capacity to become emotionally and psychologically strong. Supportive caregivers, peer affiliations, community support programs, and internal coping skills buffer individuals from the stressor, preventing them from being deeply affected. For example, children who develop self-reliance, emotional maturity, or a strong sense of self are using internal and external resources to manage adversity. Children who recast their experience not just as something lost but as something to be

overcome develop meaning-making that promotes positive adaptation. This reframing transforms experiences into one that leads to strength, insight, and resilience. Overall, this theme shows Hills's idea that families and individuals manage stress based upon what resources they utilize and cognitive appraisal, ultimately deciding what capacity remains for positive change.

Theme 9: Children of Incarcerated Parents Perceived Coping Mechanism as Helpful

This theme aligns with the literature in Chapter 2 which suggested that children of incarcerated parents perceive coping mechanisms as helpful. The utilization and implementation of constructive coping mechanisms have contributed to the personal and emotional achievements of adolescents who experienced parental incarceration (Gatewood et al., 2023). Correspondingly, scholars proposed that processes linking people to community-based protective processes, such as an active involvement in activities, assist children in coping with parental incarceration-related challenges (Bomysoad & Francis, 2021; Zhang & Flynn, 2020). Respondents in this research mentioned that coping strategies came in different forms or for various reasons but, in general, were helpful. Overall, coping strategies provided a significant contribution toward assisting respondents in coping emotionally and feeling in control during moments of distress.

This theme aligns with the theoretical framework in that it shows that members of a dyadic unit of a family react adaptively to an acute stressor employing coping mechanisms that restore equilibrium and functional well-being to that unit. Hill (1949)

suggested that what enables or disables families to manage a stressor, like parental incarceration, depends on resources within the family and on what meaning is perceived about an event by the family. Combined, these elements lead to either disorganization or growth in terms of crisis resolution, such as using self-distraction, structuring, or cognitive reframing. By utilizing and recognizing the effectiveness of these coping strategies, these children demonstrated resilience and adaptation, supporting family stress theory's assertion that accessing resources is key to managing family crises. A positive interpretation reduces the risk of long-term crisis and facilitates post-stress adjustment, demonstrating how individual action contributes to total family adaptation even when an incarcerated parent is not there.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is its small, purposive sample, which affects the transferability of the findings. Because the research focused on a specific group of adolescents, the results may not capture the full range of experiences among youth affected by parental incarceration, especially across diverse geographic, racial, or socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, if the participants were primarily adolescents from urban areas in the Eastern United States, their coping strategies and lived experiences might differ significantly from those of rural youth or individuals in regions with limited support services or differing cultural attitudes toward family and incarceration. As qualitative research emphasizes depth over breadth, readers should consider the contextual nature of these findings when applying them to other settings.

Another limitation was self-selection bias. Participants volunteered to provide their experiences, which introduced the possibility for self-selection bias. This bias occurs when those who participate in a study are different from those who do not, and, therefore, the results may be skewed. In this case, young adults who are more self-aware, emotionally expressive, or interested in the subject may be overrepresented, while adolescents who are less outgoing or use other coping methods could be underrepresented or nonexistent in the study.

Recommendations

This generic qualitative study served to address the lack of research about children of incarcerated parents, but additional research is required. To further bridge this gap, I would suggest using a mixed-methods research approach to further assist in building validity and applicability. Though qualitative procedures like in-depth interviews well capture nuanced experience and personal coping accounts of young people, an inclusion of quantitative elements such as standardized coping inventories or symptom ratings for mental health would enable across-groups comparisons and provide empirical rigor when reporting results.

The research has indicated special emotional and developmental issues based upon whether the mother or the father is incarcerated. Another direction for future research is examining how the gender of an incarcerated parent, mother or father, influences the coping strategies adopted by children. Although current research has referred to the negative consequences for children resulting from parent incarceration, there is emerging evidence that these consequences could be different based on whether a

child is separated from mother or father. This is an important distinction, since incarcerated mothers tend to be the child's attachment figures preincarceration while incarcerated fathers tend not to have been the child's attachment parent. Correspondingly, maternal incarceration could lead to more significant disruptions in daily routines, a sense of security, and stability for children.

Implications

The research contributes to furthering positive social change by examining the effect of parent incarceration on individuals, family, community, and societal levels. This research may impact individuals and families by aiding in the progress of developmentally focused interventions, enabling educators, social workers, and mental health professionals to enhance resilience and reduce risky behavior. Community strategies from the results of this study comprise awareness-raising activities, coalitions, and partnerships to create wraparound services for children of incarcerated parents. Societal strategies from the results of this study comprise of the movement towards reforming sentencing and community alternatives to incarceration for parents. The study results may be used to reduce stigma by highlighting developmental and emotional concerns and the longer-term societal effect of untreated trauma in children with incarcerated parents, leading to increased investment in preemptive and early intervention.

This study may offer practical implications for improving mental health services and support interventions tailored to children impacted by parental incarceration. Practitioners can integrate these findings into trauma-informed care models and develop

structured programs that include expressive arts, mindfulness practices, journaling, and structured peer engagement. By understanding the stress and coping mechanisms of children with incarcerated parents, human service professionals can design more empathetic, culturally competent, and developmentally oriented interventions. Narrative and play intervention strategies can be used by therapists to facilitate safe externalization of the experiences of the youth, while caseworkers and school counsellors can stress mentorship and skill enhancement consistent with their tendency towards distraction, control, and self-regulation. Policy advocacy could be guided by the study's identification of the resilience and resourcefulness of the affected young people. In addition, program development would break away from a framework focused strictly on deficits to one drawing on the strengths of these adolescents, with the potential to promote longer-term wellbeing and emotional resilience.

The study results align with the social determinants of health by demonstrating the immediate impact that environmental, social, and psychological aspects of parental incarcerations have on children's health. On the social and community level, primary social determinants disrupt family dynamics, social support, and community stability. This study focused on the role of resilience and adaptive coping of young people in the midst of challenges, which exemplifies the significance of the social networks and support systems in health. When focusing on accessing education and educational quality, school counselors and case workers may guide young people through mentorship and skill development in education settings to promote both mental and emotional health. Correspondingly, clinicians and therapists providing culturally responsive and

developmentally sound interventions help ensure that the services of mental health are adapted and available, meeting the aim of equal care. Overall, the findings of the study outlined how mental and emotional health in marginalized groups must be responded to in relation to larger social and structural conditions, as the social determinants of health framework espouses.

Conclusion

This study explored the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parents are incarcerated in prison, and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism. Building upon Hill's (1949) family stress theory, the research sought to discover how these individuals coped with the emotional, social, and developmental stresses that are part of parental incarceration at a critical age. Nine central themes emerged from qualitative interviews: children of incarcerated parents experiencing emotional turmoil and misunderstood pain; children of incarcerated parents utilizing family members for support; children of incarcerated parents utilizing social connections for support; children of incarcerated parents using creative and structured activities; children of incarcerated parents missing parent-child connection; children of incarcerated parents use spirituality as a source of comfort and resilience; children of incarcerated parents utilized professional support as a central coping resource; children of incarcerated parents find strength and growth; and children of incarcerated parents perceived coping mechanism as helpful. Respondents detailed multifaceted stories of survival that involved loss and the formation of identity that resulted from the stigma and void that resulted from the parents' detention.

Limitations identified were the limited purposive sample size and self-selection bias. Future research could explore the differential influence of maternal vs. paternal incarceration that can inform gender-specific intervention strategies. In summary, this study discovered that while parental incarceration is a significant adversity, there are coping strategies with adaptive outcomes manifested in self-distraction including family support, professional support, cognitive reframing, organized activity, and religious beliefs for most children. However, emotional pain that is unresolved and conflict about identities are frequent factors that indicate continued needed mental health support, educationally focused support and social service support.

The results of this study are a reminder that youths experiencing the effects of parental incarceration are not passive victims of circumstances, but active agents of resilience moving through difficult social and emotional terrain. This matters because their lives are influenced by larger social determinants; targeted and culturally competent interventions are not discretionary, they are necessary. Educators, clinicians, policymakers, and communities ought to prioritize attending to these youths because it is not simply a question of personal empathy, it is a matter of societal obligation. By moving away from deficit-oriented models toward a strength-focused lens, this approach not only affirms the potential of these young individuals but also contributes to the development of healthier, more just communities for all.

Building upon this paradigm, researchers recognize that the long-term payoffs to intervening with young people whose parents are incarcerated extend beyond personal development to the larger social fabric. Stewardship of these young people by responsible

mentoring, trauma-sensitive intervention, and educational support not only strengthens the path of their lives but halts the cycle of intergenerational incarceration. Favorable public health results from intervention at an earlier stage on the dimensions of mental, emotional, and social problems. By amplifying the voices and resilience of these young people, society takes an anticipatory step towards equity and prevention rather than reaction and punishment.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Introduction:

Hi, good morning/afternoon/evening. My name is Tysha Ushry, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. The purpose of this video interview is to explore the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parent(s) were incarcerated in prison, and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism. This interview contains seven questions and will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes to complete. Before we proceed, do you have any concerns or questions for me at this time?

First, I would like to say thank you for agreeing to proceed/talk with me. Your name and any other personally identifiable information will be kept confidential and will not be published with the contents of this study, or any other publications. Please know that you may skip any question you are not comfortable answering, and you may end the interview at any time, for any reason, and with no explanation.

Before we start, I just want to confirm that you understand your rights and agree to everything listed within the consent form. Do I have your permission to record this audio interview for research purposes only?

Interview Questions:

1. What were your experiences while your parent(s) was incarcerated? How has it impacted different areas of your life?
2. How did you cope with any emotions or challenges related to your parent(s) incarceration?

3. What self-distraction strategies or activities did you use to help you cope with your parent(s) incarceration?
4. How helpful were these self-distraction strategies?
5. Tell me about some personal support systems that helped you cope and aided in self-distraction with parental incarceration.
6. Tell me about some professional support systems that helped you cope and aided in self-distraction with parental incarceration.
7. What else would you like to tell me about self-distraction or coping strategies you used while your parent(s) were incarcerated?

Before we finish, I want to make sure you have access to resources that can support you if you ever feel overwhelmed or need someone to talk to, especially given the sensitive nature of the topics we've discussed today. I will email these resources to you, if that is ok?

Thank you again for talking with me today and volunteering for this study. Within 1 week, you will receive an email transcript of our interview; if anything is wrong or needs to be corrected, please feel free to reach out to me by email. Do you have any questions, comments, or concerns for me at this time?

List of organizations that offer free and confidential support to be emailed to participants:

1. National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Website: www.nami.org

Helpline: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

They offer support for mental health challenges, including dealing with family members in the justice system.

2. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Website: www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org. Phone: 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or 988

Available 24/7 for anyone in crisis or emotional distress.

3. Youth.gov: Resources for Children of Incarcerated Parents Website: www.youth.gov

This platform offers resources specifically for youth affected by parental incarceration, including information on support programs.

Appendix B: Study Flyer

Interview Study seeks adolescents ages 18 to 21 who has experienced parental incarceration.

8-12 Volunteers Needed

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of adolescents, ages 18-21, whose parent (s) are incarcerated in prison, and their use of self-distraction from parental incarceration as a positive coping mechanism.

About the study:

- 45- 60 minute audio interview utilizing Zoom platform that will be recorded for research purposes only
- There will be no compensation for participation
- Participation is privacy protected and confidential, no personal info published

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Mothers must be 18-21 years-old
- At least one parent incarcerated for more than a year.
- U.S. resident
- Must speak English
- Valid email address
- Must be able to access Zoom

WHY PARRTICIPATE

The information gathered from participants in this study may contribute to positive social change by empowering teenagers with

incarcerated parents to make better decisions to generate more positive outcomes while transitioning into adulthood.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Tysha Ushry, a PhD student at Walden University. To confidentially volunteer, contact the researcher:

Tysha Ushry XXX-XXX-XXXX
XXXXX.XXXXX@XXXXXXX