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Arrested Development: A Daughter's Autoethnographic Exploration of Paternal Incarceration

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Abstract

In the United States, millions of children currently have an incarcerated parent, with millions more having past experiences of paternal incarceration at some point during their lives (Kjellstrand and Eddy, 2011b). My research offers entry into the often hidden, isolated and fragmented world of children with imprisoned fathers. Historically, research on children with incarcerated parents has been limited, resulting in them being deemed an ‘invisible’ population (McDonald, 2009). More recent research on children with incarcerated parents has tended to be quantitative or take a clinical focus, tending to present such children as ‘victims’ at risk of a variety of adverse childhood outcomes. Few studies utilise the voices of children themselves to understand this phenomenon.

Employing an autoethnographic approach, this thesis provides insights into the thoughts, feelings and experiences of a child who has a father in prison and how this experience impacts their sense of identity as they grow into adulthood. Stigma and shame emerge as powerful organising themes, and the life course approach demonstrates how the experience continues to influence, even construct, the adult-child experience long after their father is released.

The author invites the reader to journey with them through truthful, playful, creative and evocative renderings of memories and experiences spanning childhood into adulthood and past into present. As a storyteller and researcher, the author engages in dialogue with relevant literature to learn more about this population and to develop their own unique contribution to this field of study. Paramount in this is the inclusion of the voices of other children with incarcerated parents, with a central place given to the small body of relevant literature that utilises their voices as research data.

My hope is that this research can be used by professionals to help them better understand this ‘invisible’ population so that support services and research in the future will better aim to hear and

capture their voices and respond more effectively to the needs of this group. As importantly, I hope that adult children with experience of paternal incarceration will find their experience acknowledged and affirmed in this thesis.

Keywords: Children with Imprisoned Parents, Autoethnography, Stigma, Shame

Lay Summary

In the United States of America alone, there are millions of children whose parents are or were incarcerated at one point throughout their lives. There are many impacts to a child's quality of life when they find one of their parents going to prison. Through no fault of their own, they can find their life turning upside down and having to deal with many direct and indirect consequences. Many families and children find their psychological, physical, social and economic wellbeing negatively affected by parental incarceration. My thesis delves into the hidden world of children with incarcerated fathers, exploring their thoughts, feelings and experiences through an autoethnographic lens. My autoethnographic writings share my thoughts and feelings about my father, who was in prison for the majority of my childhood, and the impact that still has on me today as an adult. While research on parental incarceration offers a detailed description of the disruption incarceration causes to the lives of families and children, there are yet too few studies that include the actual child's voice in their research. In my thesis, I utilise the voices of children from relevant studies, my own voice, and autoethnographic writings to contribute to the discussions on the effects of parental incarceration. Within these discussions, stigma and shame emerge as significant themes, shaping the identity and life course of these individuals into adulthood.

The effects of parental incarceration can be extensive and harmful. By understanding the stigma associated with parental incarceration through the eyes of children, the aim is to better understand what they feel they need to support them. I think the research in this area can be expanded so professionals will be better advised when creating assistance programmes targeted towards this population. The hope is we would be better equipped to support the children impacted by incarceration as they should not have to pay for the crimes of their parents.

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Prologue

“Lazy Sunday Afternoon: April 25th 2021”

I love crime documentaries. I have been fascinated with them for as long as I can remember. ‘What do you want to watch? Shall I find some crime show we can binge?’ My partner shares in my fascination, but I do not know if he has ever thought too much deeper into my obsession with them. ‘Yeah, that is fine, but nothing too long.’ As I scroll, I see that the number we have watched outweighs the ones left to view. As I quickly read the brief descriptions, I am always searching for something in the crime or the story that I can relate to. I pause on a documentary titled ‘The Staircase’. I don’t think I have seen it on here before, so it must be new. It is only 13 episodes long, so it should be easy to binge, was my first thought; however, as I look more closely, the more I am drawn in. The documentary follows the story of a husband who finds his wife dead at the bottom of the stairs in their home and is charged with her murder soon after. As the husband builds his case and goes through his trial, the documentary follows the impact this event has on his family and loved ones. It is at this place that something began to spark for me. ‘How about this show?’

Chapter 1: An Introduction

Reaching Through the Bars

When I was young, I wanted to be a criminal lawyer. My family used to joke that I would be the next legally blonde, but I had a secret plan. I wanted to be a lawyer so that I could better understand my dad and what happened to him while he was in prison. When I was young, my father committed a crime and was imprisoned for a total of thirteen years. I was aged five when he was arrested and aged 18 when he was released. The majority of my childhood was darkened by incarceration, and it had a significant impact on my direction. This became something we were not really allowed to talk about, and it grew to something it felt uncomfortable to talk about, especially with my father. While I am sure my family figured out part of the motivation behind my criminal lawyer phase was linked to my father, they may have been unaware of my need to understand my own place within my father's incarceration narrative. If I could not directly ask him, then I would indirectly find out about him and his world through adjacent undertakings.

For a long time, children with incarcerated parents have been invisible, neglected, and forgotten within society. Children with parents in prison have rarely been acknowledged or heard, sadly becoming known as "hidden victims" (Martin, 2017). In 2016 (the most recent estimate I could source), there were nearly 1.5 million children who had a parent in prison (Maruschak, Bronson and Alper, 2021). Additionally, 7% of all children in America have lived with a parent in jail or prison at some point in their lifetime (Murphey and Cooper, 2015). Incarceration can have a lasting impact not only on the prisoner but also their family. 'Children of imprisoned parents face profound and complex threats to their emotional, physical, educational, and financial well-being' (Martin, 2017: p. 1). Furthermore, it is common for the families of offenders to experience stigma and

shame, further impacting their welfare (Condry, 2007). I know for me, the stigma, shame and secrecy that accompanied my father was the most challenging part of being a child of an imprisoned parent. Protecting myself from the stigma, the shame, and his stain became essential to me during my childhood. Additionally, the inability to speak about it to anyone either due to secrecy or shame, made it hard to get support for the complex emotion I experienced growing up. I had much fear of being caught, juxtaposed with needing to be seen.

Lawyer Kayla only lasted up till my sophomore year of college. In my sophomore year of college, I took an Intro to Criminology class and fell in love with this field of study. I found the topics and discussions stimulating and illuminating. Within criminology, I would be able to understand the system that created the environment that led to my father's imprisonment and punishment. Covertly, I was learning about myself and my dad without exposing myself to the stigma of being a child with an imprisoned parent. I loved my criminology classes and felt a sense of belonging within the material. I felt like, for once, the material was getting answers to help me make sense of my father and my experiences. As I neared graduation, I realised I was not yet ready to give up my access to learning and exploring this 'secret' part of my existence. I not only wanted to know the cause and effect at a societal level but also better understand the personal impact. This led me to pursue a master's degree in counselling.

It is not uncommon for many psychotherapists and counsellors to be led to the profession due to childhood wounds (Barnett, 2007). Barnett (2007) conducted research in which he explored the unconscious motivations of psychotherapists and counsellors. As counsellors, we are often encouraged to think and reflect on what motivates us in our work, as this can impact our client work. In Barnett's (2007) study, he describes how a therapist's motivation could be an attempt to learn how to help repair her troubled family. In counselling, there is this concept of *the wounded*

healer, which is when therapists are ‘projecting unmet needs onto others and desiring to be healed vicariously’ (Wheeler, 2002: p. 434). It is not uncommon for wounded healers to fear disclosure because of the potential stigma or judgment related to their concerns (Zerubavel and Wright, 2012). This can result in further secrecy, self-stigma, and shame.

I did not begin counselling with an intentional plan to explore prisoner rehabilitation, but as I moved through the programme, that was the direction I found myself travelling. Through my assignments, I found myself focusing and exploring a counselling path within prisoner rehabilitation. It was like a new level of knowledge and understanding was unlocked, offering new opportunities to further relate to my father. Once again, I was able to learn about my dad without having to break the comfortable silence between us surrounding this topic. For the rest of my time during my degree, I focused on learning about my dad through the academic literature meant to represent him and, by extension, myself. It can be argued that having similar life experiences can lead to greater empathy in the counselling relationship and, hence, good work between therapists and clients (Wheeler, 2002). However, if the therapist has not done the appropriate reflection on their life experiences and how they could impact their client work, then this could cause damage to their client and the working relationship. Especially within the population of children with imprisoned parents, it could be a benefit to have a therapist who has an understanding of the culture of the client’s childhood. The culture of children with imprisoned parents is unique, so having someone who can speak and relate to clients in that space could be valuable. However, that relationship could be negatively impacted if the therapist projects unmet needs onto the other in an attempt to heal themselves. This is why counselling programmes encourage and require personal counselling for students learning to become counsellors.

Towards the end of the programme, when it was time to pick our placement, I went in search of a prison that would let me come in as a counselling trainee. At the time, my lead tutor was not so keen on me going to prison. He had some reservations about me being a female working in a male prison, but I was persistent. I was very determined to work at a male prison. I contacted a prison in Alabama, wrote for permission to intern there from the State, and started my year-long internship. They had never had an intern before me. I was so determined to have that experience, that knowledge, that I helped them establish a whole intern programme so I could get into prison. The prison I worked at was a medium-level security prison. I thought that working there would bring my father and me closer together. I was so excited when I got the post and tried to share the experience with my dad. While he was happy for me, he also seemed reserved, almost nervous. Like he was uncomfortable with how close I was getting to that part of himself. He never really asked me much about my time working there, and although I tried to engage with him during that time, I stopped after a time, trying to talk to him about it. Therapists with childhoods that included loss and/or deprivations expressed feelings of isolation and shame when discussing their childhoods (Barnett, 2007).

For therapists struggling with ongoing wounds, the risk of disclosure to other professionals may appear too great, particularly if the therapist has internalized self-stigma associated with his or her wound and/or perceives that colleagues hold stigmatizing beliefs. (Zerubavel and Wright, 2012: p. 484)

The shame and stigma surrounding incarceration can be very judgemental, especially in the South and in the prison environment. Although I liked being around people who could potentially understand my life, I was too afraid to share my history out of fear of the judgment it would bring me. Too afraid people would change their opinion of me once they learned I was the child of an

incarcerated parent. So once again, I never shared with anyone, friends, classmates, or colleagues, that my father had once been in prison.

After working at a juvenile correctional facility for almost a year, I decided to move to Glasgow to pursue a master's degree in criminology. It was amazing to be back in the theory and discussions about crime and justice. To discuss the changes and improvements needed to improve the lives of prisoners and their families. Due to my history and love of criminology, this thesis will include the use of statistical data more than perhaps the traditional autoethnographic thesis. While I find the statistics included helpful in contributing to understanding the scope of this phenomenon, I feel they only tell part of the story. I have found that many of our experiences expand beyond the statistics that try to contain them. For example, when the statistics try to capture the extensive impact incarceration has had on America's youth. Kjellstrand and Eddy (2011b) report that there could be as many as 8 million minor children in the United States affected by parental incarceration. What the statistic is unable to express is despite our extreme numbers, many of us experience loneliness and isolation.

Unlike in my undergraduate studies, I now had actual experience led knowledge to bring to the discussions after working in the prison and juvenile correctional facility. During this master's programme, we got the opportunity to visit a prison. What a different world it was to see Scottish prisons versus the ones I once worked in. When I told my dad about it, he seemed a bit interested but still didn't engage much in the conversation. Yet again, he had little interest in this part of my life that I had created to get closer to him. All these years, all I wanted was for us to be able to address the elephant in the room. I just kept thinking that if I knew more, then maybe he would open up to me, but he never did.

It wasn't until I began my Doctorate degree in Counselling and Psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh that I really began to heal the wounds. Here, I found an acceptance that allowed me the safety needed to trust others with my vulnerability. I no longer had to be the strong older daughter, watching out for everyone's emotional wellbeing. I finally had people around me that offered me that type of support. I accepted that I no longer needed him to go on this journey with me. In fact, this is my journey and my story, and I am ready to tell it all.

“Permission to Riot”

Breathe. I pick up my phone to video call my dad. My stomach is knotted with nervousness about the topic I want to discuss with him: his time in prison. We never talk about his incarceration other than the occasional joke to remind all of us that it did happen. I think sometimes, though, he would rather we forget like he tries to. He answers the phone with the forged warmth we have built over the past several years. I feel like it took a long time for me to become comfortable around my dad, especially with vulnerability and sensitivity. Mostly because we were separated for most of those bonding years. We start with small talk. 'Hey, baby girl.' 'Hey Daddy, what are you doing.' 'Oh, not much just riding around for work missing you. When are you coming home? It has been forever, and I bet you are missing your Daddy?' Since I moved to Scotland 6 years ago, He always tells me how much he misses me and asks me if I miss home when we talk. Talking about home is pretty much the first 5 minutes of every phone call we have. 'I can't wait to come home, Daddy. You know I be missing that good southern food and my daddy.' After a few minutes of catching up, I know I need to get to the reason I called. I can feel myself retracting a bit, ready for the closeness we had just been sharing to dissipate.

'Dad, I am wanting to change my thesis topic, and the topic I am thinking of would include your incarceration.' It feels so clunky asking. He doesn't use words like incarceration, but I did due to nervousness. I have studied crime and incarceration for many years now, and typically, that is how you refer to a person's time, at least in the books. But my dad doesn't, I don't think. He never really put a word to his time other than 'away' or maybe 'locked up'. His face goes from the open happy Dad that I have grown to expect when I call, to guarded. His smile is still on his face, but there is a wariness in his eyes that saddens me and makes me almost give up discussing this with him. It is a subtle change, but it is enough to shake my confidence a bit by opening this potential wound. I push forward though, *'Daddy, I want to use our letters from that time in a research project where I engage with that part of my life again.'* He looks a bit lost, as he always does when I discuss my counselling or schooling, but I press forward. I explain my idea for the project and my plan with the letters. *'With the letters, I will be able to engage with that part of our lives that we shut out while also looking at the impact your incarceration has had on me throughout my lifespan, not only on me as a child but as an adult too.'* *'There are lots of kids like me who have grown up with a dad or mom in prison, and it could be helpful to explore that in research.'* I stammer through this, maybe trying to convince myself just as much as I am trying to convince him.

His silence during our conversation worries me, and I can feel his discomfort in the same way I sense my own. I am asking permission for access to a part of his and my story that has been locked away for a long time. After a moment and without the humour present in our earlier interactions, he says, *'Your stepmom actually found some of the letters this past weekend when we were looking through some boxes. You can have them if you need them.'* I feel the support, but its reluctance as well. *'Thanks, Daddy. That would be very helpful if you are sure you are okay with me doing this*

project. I know it isn't just my story I will be speaking into.' He replies, 'No, do what you want. We can try and find the letters, but I am sure your mom will have more.' I shake my head, *'Yeah, I am going to speak with her too.'* I then try to move the conversation back to the space it was before, *'What are you doing with the rest of your day.'* He answers but with less excitement this time, *'Oh, just finish up working then home, I guess.'* It feels like the call has been tainted. I worry that I have upset him but am not brave enough to ask. *'Well, I guess I will let you get back to work then, Daddy.'* *'Yeah, alright,'* he replies, *'Love you, can't wait till you come home.'* *'Me either'* I blow him a kiss, and the call ends.

Telling my mom is completely different. I didn't have the same nervousness about discussing this topic with her because, out of the family, she is the only one who, through the years, has been more open to discussing it. I feel like she probably saw the most angles within those years. I call her straight after I get off the phone with Dad. She answers with her usual warmth, "Hey baby girl, what are you and puppy doing today?" 'Oh not much, just watching some Netflix and hanging out. What about you?' I reply. She smiles as she replies, 'Oh, pretty much the same, except Bear is away at her boyfriend's, so I am all alone. Wish you were here so you could watch a movie with me.'

Like my father, the first few minutes of my conversations with my mom are also spent on her telling me how much she misses me and wants me home. 'So, Mom, I wanted to talk to you about my thesis. I am thinking about asking to change my topic, but I wanted to speak with you and Dad first as my new topic would include you more.' Similar to my dad, there is a wariness that enters her eyes, but I also still see trust there. *My mom has always been open with me and my siblings about pretty much everything since we were young. 'I want to use the letters that Daddy and I exchanged when he was in prison to re-explore that time and part of my life. As you can probably recall, I*

was really closed off to most things to do with his incarceration. With the letters, I will be able to engage with that part of our lives that we shut out while also looking at the impact daddy's incarceration has had on me throughout my lifespan, not only on me as a child but as an adult too. There are lots of kids like me who have grown up with a dad or mom in prison, and it could be helpful to explore that in research.'

My mom is silent for a moment, and I can see a flash of hurt in her eyes that I did not expect. It seems like she is a little watery-eyed, but finally, she replies, 'That sounds like it could be interesting Kayla, but do you think me or your dad did something wrong in how we handled the situation when you were growing up, or are you looking for a reason for something now?' This leaves me stunned because I had not thought about how my desire to explore my past may lead my parents to think I was looking to place blame on them for how they handled the situation. I reply gently, 'No, Mom, I am not looking for blame; I am just looking for understanding and discovery. To be honest, I am not yet sure how or what this project will look like; I just know I want it to be on that topic within my life.'

Still a bit wary, 'Oh ok, well then it sounds like it could be really exciting; I think I still have some of yours and your dad's letters saved somewhere.' My mom is an avid saver of sentimental memorabilia... I knew she would be my best bet to find letters from that time. 'Thanks, Mom, that would be really helpful, but I still need to speak to my supervisor about this idea, so it may not happen. I will let you know though what he says.' She looks thoughtful for a moment, then says, 'Also, Kayla, just so you are aware, you were really closed off during that time. Not just during calls to your dad but also in the letters you wrote to him. I just don't want you thinking that all your letters will be you open in them.' I knew I was closed during that part of my life, but I hadn't realised how much my mom saw that until just now. It makes me feel grateful that I might be able

to discuss this project with her more than I thought. 'Yeah, I figured, but hopefully, they will still tell a story or something.' Similar to my dad, you can feel when the limit has been met for this topic. However, this time, I think I am the one who met that limit.

I find myself changing the topic to something lighter, all the while my head full with possibilities. I now hold the keys I feel I can use to open the doors to our family vault full of secrets that are usually locked safely away.

Don't Forget About Me

When exploring research on the children and families of incarcerated parents, I noticed something. Although there were many studies that focused on the experience and impact of incarceration on children, the data was often collected from participants other than the children themselves. Very few studies actually included the children's words about their thoughts and feelings directly. Most of the studies captured data on this population through adults associated with the children, such as their parents, caregivers, teachers, and/or support workers. Following the lack of direct children's voices, I saw no studies where the researcher themselves really incorporated their experiences into the research. The most I could find was when researchers would mention their history of being a child with an imprisoned parent as part of the motivation for a larger project. Researchers have often mentioned the difficulties and risks associated with researching this population. The ethical considerations for working with this population can typically be significant. Not only are you working with children, which comes with its own set of permissions and ethical guidelines, but you are also working with a vulnerable population. The topics researchers are typically interested in exploring concerning children with incarcerated parents could be difficult or uncomfortable for them to discuss. Therefore, I would think a researcher with firsthand knowledge and experience

could offer great insight into the academic literature concerning children with incarcerated parents. While the scope of the research could be considered limited, it could be argued that it also offers a deeper exploration into the topic. Additionally, I noticed that very few studies sought to understand adults who experienced parental incarceration during their childhood. The impact of my father's incarceration did not end as soon as I became an adult. It did not end as soon as he left prison. However, it feels like that is when researchers stopped caring about me and my experience.

Employing an autoethnographic approach, this study aims to explore the impact parental incarceration can have on a child's sense of identity as they grow into adulthood. It is beyond the scope of my thesis to look at all possible adverse outcomes of parental incarceration for children, but I do discuss several in-depth. However, using both my autoethnographic writings and relevant research literature, powerful organising themes emerged, such as stigma, shame, secrecy and emotional labour. This thesis offers a conversation between the research and the population it is supposed to represent. With these themes in mind, the thesis explores a mixture of experiences and understandings within children with incarcerated parents culture. As a storyteller and researcher, I engage in dialogue with relevant literature to learn more about this population and develop my own unique contribution to this field of study. Through stories of my experiences, I build a narrative highlighting the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a daughter who has a father in prison. Along with my voice, I really wanted to try and include the voices of other children with incarcerated parents I encountered in relevant literature. These other children's voices were gathered from research, newspaper articles, books, and television. I feel my use of the words from these other children is like me having a conversation. Growing up, I never had any other children to speak to about this, but using their words, I am able to chat with them to an extent. I invite the reader to take an evocative journey with me through memories and experiences of spanning

childhood into adulthood and past into the present. This journey is a truthful, playful, and creative expression of my life as a child with an imprisoned parent.

“Will they think Differently?”

I still get that pit in my stomach every time I go to tell people about my father’s incarceration. What are they going to think? How are they going to feel about me? Are they going to think less of me now? These are the questions and messages I internalised from a young age and have led me to rarely share this part of my life’s history with anyone, even close friends. Every time I speak with my partner’s family, they always ask about how my studies are going. This time, when we met up with his grandparents for lunch and the question came up, I found myself avoiding it. I have never shared with his family my father’s incarceration. Those fears of them looking at me badly or that I would not be good enough for their grandson/son kept me in fear of sharing. However, a few weeks later I met up with my partner’s mom for lunch. We had had a great day, so when the dreaded question about my studies came up, I felt a bit more brave. I told her about my dad, about his story and mine, about my tendency to keep it quiet. I told her about my new thesis project and my excitement yet nervousness about the journey. All that I received back was support. This was the opposite of what I had told myself I would get for all my life. She accepted me and my father. This emboldened me to start sharing with others. I still get that knot in my stomach, but so far, I have not been made to feel less after sharing. The fears groomed in me since childhood by my family feel like they are losing their hold.

Sometimes, I wonder if it would have been easier if it was all out in the open, in the obvious. In the in-ignorable instead of tucked away into the shadows of whispers and gossip. I think one of

my biggest fears about my father's imprisonment was/is to be overshadowed by it. For his mistake to become my identity in other's eyes. That narrative was a leading silencer in my relationship with stigma, shame and secrecy. I thought if I could just hide from it and stay quiet, then perhaps this chapter would not get out and would not become my story. Rejection is scary and such a controlling force. For me, stigma is a happenstance or condition in life that allows others the opportunity to see or label me as different or not normal. Not every person may respond to my stigma negatively, but unfortunately, due to societal norms, it's like they have the right to the opportunity to decide. Since I was 5, I have felt others have had the right to determine a part of my worth due to my label 'child of an incarcerated parent'. In some ways, I feel as though shame and stigma have stunted the growth of my personality. For so long, I hid behind my masks and roles in order to distract and divert others from my father's incarceration. I also used those same tactics to hide the impact his incarceration was having on myself from my family, father, and myself.

Thesis Navigation and Structure- Here's Your Visitor Pass

For a seed to achieve its greatest expression, it must come completely undone. The shell cracks, its insides come out and everything changes. For someone who doesn't understand growth, it would look like complete destruction. (Cynthia Occelli, 2022)

While reading, I encourage the reader to allow themselves to feel, think, and experience my vignettes. Try to feel and experience the said and unsaid, the known and unknown, and the comfort and discomfort that come with being a child of an incarcerated parent. Envision the vignettes shared throughout the thesis through multiple lenses, such as child and adult, daughter and parent, participant and observer. This thesis is not a journey towards forgiveness and redemption but just an exploration of a part of myself that I held secret and secure from the world for a very long. I

have offered a very raw, authentic view of my childhood that even my family have not been privy to. Throughout this thesis process, I really challenged myself to locate the child I was in the adult I am today. My father's letters offer unique insight into the relationship between a daughter and her incarcerated parent. These are letters I have collected and saved since childhood. The pictures in the thesis are of the actual letters exchanged between my father and me. However, some of them have been edited to help preserve my family's anonymity. Also, you will see that some of the pictures only depict parts of the letters I wanted to use to highlight particular themes discussed by other children with incarcerated parents. My vignettes are a space where I have explored the multitude of feelings, such as shame, anger, hurt, and silence, that I experienced as a child with imprisoned parents and continue to carry as an adult.

You have already had a taste of a few of my vignettes and may have noticed a few things about them. I am from Mississippi, and I really wanted my vignettes to reflect the way my family and I speak to each other. Us folks in the South have a very casual yet endearing way of talking that I really wanted to capture so that you, the reader, would find it easier to be transported into my world. I also wanted to use our Southern tone as I feel it really captures the complexities within my relationship with my father. Hopefully, you will be able to more easily see and hear the said and unsaid in the relationship between a daughter and her incarcerated father.

All vignettes are based on true stories to some extent. However, some hold more truth than others. For example, the vignette "Daddy's on TV" did not happen in real life, but the feeling that led me to write it did. I was always very worried growing up that the news or newspaper would run a story on my father, and then everyone would find out. Additionally, I will offer some additional information below some of my vignettes, but not for every one of them. While I believe some additional thoughts and feelings could offer some deeper context to the stories, I also want to leave

enough space for you, the reader, to place yourself in the emotional driver's seat and experience the stories how you want. Lastly, the vignettes are not placed in any particular time pattern. Like they are scattered throughout the thesis, they also express scattered moments throughout my childhood and adulthood.

Meet the Family

In my family, everyone tends to have a colour that represents them. This could be for gifts, board game nights, or just whenever an opportunity calls for it. When I began writing this thesis, it felt like their words and stories became lost in the sea of black. So, I had the thought to bring a bit more of my family into the thesis. Below, you will find my family member represented by a nickname (not one they are actively known by) and by the colour they will most likely pick if given the chance.

Kayla, me, myself, I- Child of an imprisoned parent

Partner, Husband- Husband of a child with an imprisoned parent

Mom, Mommy- Mother of children with an imprisoned parent

Dad, Daddy, Father- (Previously) Imprisoned parent

Stepmom, Stepmother, Curly- Mother of children with an imprisoned parent

Boss Lady, Grandmother- Grandmother of children with an imprisoned parent

Old Man, Grandfather- Grandfather of children with an imprisoned parent

Bubba, Brother- Child with an imprisoned parent

Sunny, Sister-in-law- Wife of a child with an imprisoned parent

Bear- youngest sister- Sister of children with an imprisoned parent

Peep- younger sister- Child with an imprisoned parent

Lego, Son 2- youngest brother- Child with an imprisoned parent

Aunt Pancakes- Aunt of children with an imprisoned parent

Coach- Stepfather

Terminology

- CIP- Children with incarcerated parent/s
- Imprisonment- the act of putting someone in prison or the condition of being kept in prison. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024)
- Incarceration- The process of confining and segregating deviant populations into specialist institutions for the purpose of punishment, treatment or care. (McLaughlin and Munchie, 2019: p. 272) According to Donte's grandmother (characters in a story for children with incarcerated parents) incarceration is 'the official name for being in jail, locked up in the slammer, going to the big house' (norahS Youth Publications, 2013: p. 40-41).
- Inmate- A person incarcerated in a local jail, state prison, federal prison, or a private facility under contract to federal, state, or local authorities. (Carson, 2015: p. 26)
- Jail- A confinement facility usually administered by a local law enforcement agency that is intended for adults, but sometimes holds juveniles, for confinement before and after adjudication. Such facilities include jails and city or county correctional centers; special jail facilities, such as medical treatment or release centers; halfway houses; work farms; and temporary holding or lockup facilities that are part of the jail's combined function. Inmates sentenced to jail facilities usually have a sentence of 1 year or less. (Carson, 2015: p. 26)

- Mass Incarceration- Mass incarceration is the term used to refer to the extremely high rate of incarceration in the United States and the unjustly disproportionate incarceration of minorities and people of colour. (Bread for the World, 2016; Borrelli, 2023)
- Minor children- A majority of studies classify children under the age of 18 as minors when collecting data. (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008: p. 1)
- Prison- A long-term confinement facility, run by a state or the federal government, that typically holds felons and offenders with sentences of more than 1 year. (Carson, 2015: p. 26) Prison is often defined as a place—typically a building—where a group of inmates are placed as punishment for having committed one or more criminal acts. Furthermore, The purpose of this institution, as defined and discussed within law, criminology, and sociology, has traditionally been to rehabilitate, incapacitate, and/or deter offenders (and the public) from committing crime or, according to some, simply to deliver society’s just retribution. (Condry and Smith, 2018: p. 12)
- Prisoner- An individual confined in a correctional facility under the legal authority (jurisdiction) of state or federal correctional officials. (Carson, 2015: p. 26)

Thesis Structure

In addressing these aims, the outline of this thesis is as follows. Chapter two provides an overview of my methodological choices and ethical reflections. It includes discussions on my positionality as a researcher adopted for this study. The chapter also discussed my rationale for my chosen research method, autoethnography. A brief history is included, along with the method’s advantages and limitations, is provided. Finally, I discuss ethical considerations for myself and my family. Chapter three provides the reader with a broad yet critical review of the existing literature on

American incarceration and parental incarceration. The literature discussed offers the reader an impression of the problems related to American incarceration, such as mass incarceration and the extent of its impact. The literature on parental incarceration lays the informational foundation for the exploration in the ensuing chapters. Furthermore, I introduce the theoretical theories I used to inform my work, primarily in chapters 4 and 5. Chapter four explores the impact of parental incarceration on children with a focus on stigma and shame. The chapter discusses the process of stigmatisation, specifically in relation to children with incarcerated parents. The chapter includes reflections from myself along with additions from other children gathered from relevant literature. Chapter five further explores the impact of parental incarceration on children. Within the chapter, issues such as family instability, economic strain, parent-child communication and parent-child attachment are addressed. Once again, the chapter includes reflections from myself, along with additions from other children gathered from relevant literature. In chapter six, I offer my concluding thoughts and reflections. Additionally, I propose recommendations for professionals and further research. Throughout the thesis, the reader will encounter vignettes written by myself about my experiences of being a daughter with an imprisoned father and actual letters exchanged between my father and me throughout the years of his incarceration. The final part of the thesis you will have to see for yourself. I do not want to spoil the story.

Chapter 2: A Methodological Venture

“Final Presentation”

After two long, intense years, the final assignment is a presentation¹ about our journey negotiating the transition from counselling trainee to counsellor. I have spent two days brainstorming with a fellow classmate all these elaborate, showy, performative pieces that I thought would just wow my classmates with my creative genius. I even bought paint. I am not a painter, yet I thought I could do some sort of live art demonstration expressing ‘self’. I even considered learning how to DJ and mixing up some sort of song. Or wearing all black and wrapping myself in colourful fairy lights to illustrate the light and dark metaphor. I always do this. I always try to come up with some sort of elaborate distraction to hide behind. Is it not better to distract with shine than attract with shame? That’s what I am really afraid of, always afraid of. People witnessing the lacking within. The vulnerable, unguarded, unprotected me. The imprisoned father, the trailer for a home, poor little Kayla. But if not now, when? When do I finally find the courage to be authentic and share my authentic self? For two years, I have heard and read about being authentic, but how do you do that when all you have ever known is a mask, a façade? I feel as though I only know how to be what others need me to be...that is what gets acceptance. Do I have any memories of me getting accepted without shame or censorship? Could this be the beginning of those moments? That is what I want, isn’t it? To find my authentic self and for it to be accepted. To not be seen by the conditions of my family but by the conditions of my ‘self’. Am I brave enough?

¹ I have included my personal notes for this presentation as Figure 1. in the appendices for more context. “Final presentation is a writing piece expressing my thoughts and feelings leading up to me writing “End of my counselling course presentation script” and performing my final assignment.

I wear all black for my presentation. Today, no colours will distract others from what I am finally ready to share. I rise from my chair and make my way to the center of the circle and lower to the floor. Here on the ground, able to see all, I feel safest. I begin. I tell them about my father. Tell my classmates with whom I have shared the past two and half years about a part of my life that I have kept locked safely away. Never before have I talked to such a large group of people about this part of my life, much less classmates. In my head, my grandmother's voice is loud, 'Don't let anyone find out; they will think differently of you.' I want to monitor their reactions and look for disgust. I hold back and focus on my hands. I let it all out and end my presentation, all the secrets and the shame. I look around and see tears, smiles, and acceptance. Not the disgust and repulsion I had feared all my life. Been made to fear. My bravery paid off, but this was only a battle in a long war. I recognise that it took me years before I found the comfort to share this secret and shame. But a win is a win, and this presentation is, in part, why this thesis is possible. The momentum for my healing started that day and has continued since.

When I look back, I feel my victory in this battle was necessary for this thesis to materialise. On the day I presented my father and me to my classmates, I was checking to see if I could finally trust others with my most vulnerable parts. If they would accept me- shame, stigma, sullied and all. I had spent almost two years with my counselling peers, and yet I could count on one hand up to the time of this presentation how many knew of my father's incarceration. During my counselling training, I had opened myself up and challenged myself emotionally like never before, yet I was still safeguarding my 'shame'. In "Final presentation", I try to share the battle within. The narrative between the hurt child trying to protect and the adult trying to trust. I recount several approaches I considered for my final presentation, but ultimately, they were all an extension of my

secreted self. The aim of those approaches was to distract. For most of my life, I have coped with my father's incarceration through distraction. The brighter I am, the harder it will be to see any shadows sticking to me. Therefore, those initial presentation ideas were flashy and colourful in an attempt to control what and how my peers viewed me. Overcoming my fear and inviting my peers into my shadows was my battle. Through the positive experience created that day with my peers and tutors, I began to feel more comfortable sharing my 'incarcerated child'. This battle win communicated to me that people are willing to hold and accept my vulnerabilities openly. The experience of writing and sharing my vulnerable and authentic self with others through this presentation was such a scary yet freeing experience. It was part of why I began to look at the value autoethnographic research can bring to their researchers, topic area, and readers. Autoethnographic research involves communicating one's self and culture to an audience of others (Butz and Besio, 2009), and therefore, it can be challenging and intimidating. In my final presentation, I wanted to invite my peers into my hidden world, and that is exactly what autoethnography research offers. It is research that invites and invokes an emotional relationship between the researcher, writer and reader. 'Every story of the self [...] is a story of relations with others' (Sparks, 2024 p. 5)

In this chapter, I will explore the methodological reasoning and ethical considerations behind my thesis. I begin by discussing my research positioning and where I share my journey through this research project. Next, I explore the history of autoethnography, including what it can offer to this project. Finally, I reflect on the personal and familial ethical considerations connected to my project.

Autoethnography: Disclosure Exposure

My Positionality as a Researcher

‘Being nose-y and a good listener are two primary prerequisites of a good ethnographer’ (Ellis, 2004, p. 27). Ellis describes her desire to understand ‘what’s going on here’ as an indicator that ethnographies would be research that suited her. She found her interests lay in why people say one thing and do another. Similar to Ellis, I have a desire to understand what influences us individually and socially. Through autoethnography, I was able to explore how my reality and knowledge have been constructed and influenced by my interactions with myself and others surrounding my father’s incarceration. It allowed me the freedom to interact and collaborate with multiple voices throughout the research process.

Emerging from postmodern philosophy, in which the dominance of traditional science and research is questioned, and many ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimated, autoethnography offers a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding. (Wall, 2008: p. 39)

It encouraged me to regularly reflect upon my past experiences and ask myself ‘how’ they are influenced and coloured by my morals, ethics, meaning, choices, feelings, and thoughts. I was often being prompted by questions of positionality as subject, writer or researcher. When writing my narrative pieces, my desire to understand and learn was fueled by the autoethnographic process. When writing, I would find myself curious about such things as, “Why is he Father here and Daddy there? What is that telling me as both a writer and researcher?”.

It can be scary how revealing the autoethnographic research process can be. As a writer, this process challenged me to acknowledge my vulnerabilities with myself and share them with the reader. That sense of vulnerability does not only exist in the sharing of the stories but also in how the stories will be read and held by others (Ellis, 1999). I have often contemplated how my family may view themselves in my memories and stories throughout this whole process. While my family has been there for many external experiences, they have not often been privy to internal parallel experiences until now. ‘Reducing a person’s story to words on a page robs it of complexity’ (Kraus, 2003: p. 284). Will they remember it differently? Have I gotten things wrong? Will I upset them with my words and portrayal? Will I let them down? Will it make my dad sad to know how hard this really was for me, or will this be good for us? Will any of them actually even read my thesis? I have also often worried about how others may view my family through my stories. This thesis is about sharing thoughts, feelings, and experiences often hidden from others about being a child with an imprisoned parent. I know I am offering parts of my family and my life for critique. However, I hope that the reader sees the authenticity of my family and my experiences. In my research, I have found no guide on how to survive imprisonment without trauma for the inmate or their family. I hope the reader holds this in mind when engaging with my stories as well as the other children featured throughout my thesis.

By telling my stories, reflecting on them and relevant research, and exploring individual and social meaning, I will be able to contribute to this field of research and offer other children with incarcerated parents a space for acknowledgement and affirmation. Autoethnography offers me a way to openly and honestly converse with this topic, both individually and culturally, in the past and present. By using my own personal experiences, I hope to offer important insights into the

culture of children with imprisoned parents, highlighting experiences not only in childhood but also as they grow up into adults.

Brief History of Autoethnography

In the 60's and 70's, researchers began to challenge the modernist conception of linear knowledge by acknowledging the value of multiple voices in the curation of knowledge (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). They wanted to develop reflexive, experimental and evocative research that expresses the complexities of lived experiences in order to help others better understand and empathise with unique and marginalised groups through vulnerable texts. Ellis and Bochner inform us that narrative inquiry is research in which stories are constructed that 'create the effect of reality, [show] characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection, fragmentation, marginalization, and incoherence' (2000: p. 744). 'Narrative is our means of fashioning experience in language' meant to extract meaning instead of just depicting experience (Bochner, 2000: p. 270). Laslett argues *personal narratives* are 'stories that provide accounts of lives and events as told by or from the perspective of a narrator' incorporating their history, their social lives and the societies they are part of (1999: p. 392). To Ellis and Bochner (2000), personal narratives are about telling stories with emotion and meaning for others but also being part of that meaning learning process. 'Narrative is true to experience in the sense that experience presents itself in a poetic dimensionality saturated with the possibilities of meaning, however perishable, momentary, and contingent' (Bochner, 2000: p. 270). As part of the narrative inquiry genre of writing and research, the autoethnographic approach became popular for its subjectivity, emotionality, and researcher authenticity (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography invites the researcher's voice into the work rather than denying its existence and impact.

There are various definitions and understandings within autoethnographic research practice. However, I have included several that I feel really speak to the hope of self and social awareness gained and contributed as intended by the knowledge movement decades ago. Autoethnographies 'are highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding' (Sparkes, 2000: p. 21). Butz and Besio's definition of autoethnographic work is 'the practice of doing this identity work self-consciously, or deliberately, in order to understand or represent some worldly phenomenon that exceeds the self' (2009: p. 1660). Similarly, Reed-Danahay identifies autoethnography as a 'form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context' and can be accomplished when 'an autobiographer who places the story of his or her life within a story of the social context in which it occurs' (2021: p. 9).

Autoethnographic self-narratives may take a variety of forms and emerge from a range of speaking positions, including (i) academics' systematic efforts to analyze their own biographies as resources for illuminating larger social or cultural phenomena; (ii) researchers' reflective ruminations on their fieldwork encounters; (iii) subaltern subjects' responses to the ways their group has been represented ethnographically; (iv) so-called 'Indigenous ethnographies'; and (v) other types of insider or complete member research. (Butz and Besio, 2009: p. 1660)

Under Butz and Besio's argument, my thesis would perhaps find its place most securely under the first position. My plan is to use my personal stories of being a child with incarcerated parents to engage in conversation with research literature and societal perceptions of the phenomena of parental incarceration. It is important to consider the social, cultural and psychological dynamics behind someone's story (Laslett, 1999).

Ellis describes autoethnography as an ‘autobiographical genre of writing’ featuring ‘relational and institutional stories impacted by history and social structure’ where the writer’s ‘concrete action[s], dialogue, emotion[s], embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured. (1999: p. 673)

This type of research requires a level of honesty between the writer and reader through the sharing of actions, feelings, and thoughts. It is important for the writer to examine their internal and external, past and present, individual and social human experiences. Autoethnographic writers use ‘action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality and self-consciousness’ (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: p. 739) to create stories readers can interact with relationally. Autoethnography projects offer readers the opportunity to engage with the research more actively using their emotions. Readers have the opportunity to feel the moral dilemmas and stories instead of just thinking about them and consider how their own lives can be made a story worth telling’ (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Overall, autoethnography research has become more recognised in academic spaces for its ability to allow the personal self to converse with others and society. However, Butz and Besio (2009) remind researchers of the need to scrutinise and reflect on their own relational and institutional understandings throughout the research project.

Advantages

So, as discussed, the methodological approach most appropriate for this research project is autoethnography because it allows me to explore and examine my experiences as a child of an incarcerated parent from childhood into the present. Stories can help the ‘meaning making’ process as many experiences can feel ambiguous at the time of occurrence (Duncan, 2004). An autoethnographer’s writings journey ‘backward[s] and forward, inward and outward, [making]

distinctions between the personal and cultural' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: p. 739)'reflecting the nonlinear process of memory work- the curve of time' (Bochner, 2000: p. 270). Using past and present experiences, I engage in a dialogue with relevant literature to challenge my knowledge and understanding of being a child with an imprisoned parent. In general, autoethnographers do not view knowledge as fixed or solely informed via external sources, it is our own changing beliefs and perceptions that help shape our knowledge (Duncan, 2004). Linking my personal experience to the existing literature on children with incarcerated parents enables me to analyse my history by examining my "motivations, emotions, imagination, subjectivity, and action(s)" (Laslett, 1999, p. 392). This sort of temporal analytic route requires awareness, reflexivity, and care throughout the process. 'Autoethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world' (Ellis, 1999: p. 672).

One's own personal experiences are often considered valuable and valid data within counselling and psychotherapy research (McLeod, 2015). It can be argued that some lived understanding is best captured by those belonging to those populations (e.g. stigmatised populations). This is what I hope my voice adds to this thesis and the topic area as a whole. Through my stories, I am aiming to offer both a lived and a researcher's perspective. However, it is important to acknowledge while my history has its benefits, it can also have its disadvantages. There is no way to remove yourself or your influences from the knowledge obtainment process. 'To do so would be like trying to see without eye' (Stivers, 1993: p. 410). Autoethnographers believe research is ultimately and inextricably tied to the values and subjectivities of the researcher (Bochner, 2000). While my aim is to be informed during this knowledge process, it is important to recognise that my history will also inform this thesis. The direction and structure of my research will be informed by my experiences- good and bad.

Bochner (2000) judges a narrative on the writer's emotional creditability, vulnerability, and honesty. Bochner expects the writer to 'dig at his or her actions and underneath them, displaying the self on the page, taking a measure of life's limitations, of the cultural scripts that resist transformation, of contradictory feelings, ambivalence, and layers of subjectivity, squeezing comedy out of life's tragedies' (Bochner, 2000, p. 270). I do not know how well I have done at sharing the comedic side of my father's imprisonment, but I have definitely challenged myself to explore my subjectivity in order to write about my experiences in different voices and from different angles. Autoethnography has given me the freedom to explore and express multiple versions of my hidden and visible selves in order to challenge knowledge around a subject that has held me tightly for most of my life.

Therefore, in my opinion, autoethnography is the option that would best assist me in reaching my research aim of exploring the experiences of children with incarcerated parents. My hope is that the reader will be able to use my stories and the relevant literature to examine their understanding and meaning concerning children with incarcerated parents and possibly become an advocate in any work they do with this population afterwards. I also want this to be a space for other children with incarcerated parents to be able to see themselves and their experiences portrayed in research (hopefully in a similar voice to their own). So rare are our voices invited into this research space. Therefore, through my reflective writings, I hope to represent myself as both a child with an imprisoned parent and a researcher. To explore, examine and reflect upon these roles individually and socially throughout the research process.

Limitations

Sparkes (2002) reflects on the idea that autoethnography is seen as 'self-indulgent' research. 'Autoethnographic research tends to be criticised as 'either being too artful and not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently artful' (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011: p. 10). While autoethnography definitely offers numerous benefits to the research space, it is important to acknowledge its limitations as well. Stivers (1993) acknowledged that despite personal narratives being entertaining and even informative, many researchers are reluctant to recognise them as useful knowledge believing they are not logical or scientific. Wall (2008) wrote a paper where they reflect upon and illustrate issues that can arise during autoethnography research. Researchers have highlighted possible issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability. However, Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) reflect in their article that they believe these research concepts have altered context, meaning and utility within autoethnographic research.

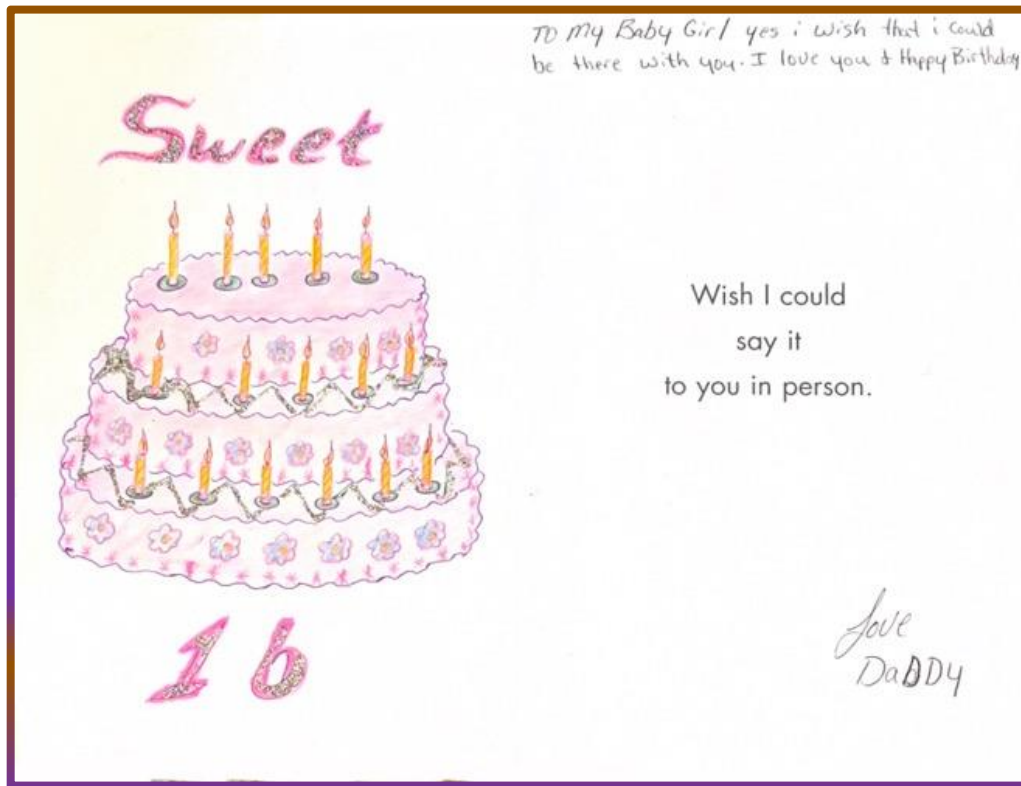
'Personal research methods, such as autoethnography, are that much more marginalised because of their emphasis on the researcher's self as subject.' (Wall, 2008, p. 47). Autoethnographers use themselves and their experiences as data, and this can lead to questions about reliability. 'Reliability refer[s] to the narrator's credibility' (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011: p. 10), meaning how much is factual storytelling and how much is fiction. It is not that writers cannot be creative with their storytelling within autoethnographic research, but it is important for the writer and reader relationship that the distinction is clarified. The writer needs to let the reader know what sort of read they are in for so that they can better understand and connect with the material.

Autoethnographic researchers need to make sure they stay reflective throughout the research process. This should help them better understand how their views and beliefs are informing the

research process. The aim of autoethnographies is not to identify ‘the truth’ but to share ‘a truth’. Therefore, validity is achievable if one considers the work as lifelike, believable, and possible in its purpose to help readers improve their lives and their communication with differences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). My ‘truth’ as a child with an imprisoned parent may differ from others, but it will still be a valuable contribution to the overall conversation on the phenomena.

Personal narratives are founded on intellectual assumptions and constitutive interests (Stivers, 1993). Some researchers consider the universal use of autoethnographies limited, but in fact their research is very applicable as it describes real life in easy to relate details. For autoethnographies, generalizability is measured by the reader’s ability to relate to the writings personally or to the lives of others they know (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). For example, in my thesis, I will not be discussing in depth the relationship between race and the various adverse childhood experiences. That is not to say there is not a need for this to be studied; it just is not a discussion in research I feel qualified enough to speak in an autoethnographic voice towards. Hopefully, though, these same readers will be able to feel met through other writing of my experiences where I possibly shared similar emotions, feelings, and themes they felt in their own experiences. I will not be able to cover all possible experiences that children with incarcerated parents may have, but I know the ‘truth’ shared in my stories will find an audience. Autoethnography can be useful for injecting personal knowledge into a field of expert voices (Muncey, 2005). Overall, autoethnographers present ‘rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena’ research in evocative, aesthetic ways (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 11). It has been important for me to remember that ‘there is no one right way to do social science research’ (Bochner, 2000: p. 268), and my voice and stories can offer a significant contribution to research on children with incarcerated parents.

Ethical Reflections



Ethics Considerations of Self-care

Due to its intimate and personal demands, autoethnography can be one of the more challenging qualitative methods researchers can use (Wall, 2008). I found this project to be very emotional and moving work, personally and professionally. The reflexive writings I created were useful in helping me evaluate my position and understanding of what it is to be a child and adult with an imprisoned parent. Autoethnographies require their author's authenticity, truth, and a willingness to be known (McLeod, 2015: 209). This research project was an emotional undertaking. Therefore, I often evaluated if I had the space and capacity to accomplish it as I hoped. Throughout the research process, reflexivity became a necessary tool. Pillow (2003: p. 178) describes reflexivity as 'ongoing self-awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice

and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research'. It was difficult at times to navigate and confront difficulties in my past and present, but I know good autoethnographic research challenges us. Nevertheless, it was important for me to be aware of how my exploration into the topics impacted me mentally and emotionally and to have suitable support around throughout the process. The writing process was emotional and stimulating, so I tried to go at a pace that allowed a lot of space for awareness and the unexpected. As this was previously a part of myself I had kept secret for so long, part of the work was on acceptance in order just to introduce this research topic to my supervisor, family and others. Tolich (2010) says that doing an autoethnography is like getting a tattoo of your stigmatised experience for all to see, and I think I am ready for the ink.

Ethical Considerations for my Family

Lastly, what impact has my research about my family had on my relationship with my family members? I am aware I have discussed personal events that include close family members and due to my research being an autoethnography, the usual procedures used to maintain confidentiality are not applicable. I have created stories featuring 13 family members within my research. Although they have been anonymised by name in the research, there is still a chance to be overtly identified by the stories being told. 'Autoethnographers often maintain and value interpersonal ties with their participants, thus making relational ethics more complicated' (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011: p. 9). As explored in "Permission to Riot", before beginning my research project, I had a conversation with my family to gain their thoughts on how they would feel about me using my family stories as data. Although they were and have been supportive, I recognise that the topic of my thesis does not come up in conversation often without my instigation. I endeavoured to have ongoing conversations with my family about my thesis and its development throughout the process.

I even shared some of my autoethnographic writings with them and encouraged them to share with me their thoughts and concerns over their representation. My family did not engage in my research process as fully as I would have hoped, but I acknowledge that this is a difficult topic within my family. My research will be available to them if they wish to read it, and I am aware there is the possibility they themselves may have an emotional reaction to the material. If or when this happens, it will be something we as a family have to navigate. This thesis is about my own experiences and not me trying to analyse or interpret the experiences of other family members whom I shared these experiences with. When I started this research project, I knew there was a risk that my relationships within my family could be affected as my family may be hearing my views of these events for the first time. However, I also know the potential benefit my research could have to others. Still, my family is very important to me, so I approached this research project with a lot of consideration for both myself and them while trying to remain neutral as a researcher.

Chapter 3: America's Incarceration Issues are Hurting Families – A Literature Review

“Daddy’s on TV”

REPORTING LIVE from Batesville, Mississippi, this is Fox 13's crime reporter, Kayla Roden. 'We are at a crime scene just outside the town of Batesville, Mississippi, where it appears the authorities believe a murder took place in the early morning hours. We are receiving information that police are currently seeking two suspects in connection to tonight's crime. Both are white males in their early to mid-twenties. From what we can gather, it seems that a fight broke out between the alleged suspects and the victim, resulting in fatal injuries. Eyewitness reports indicate that all three appeared intoxicated at the time of the altercation. While the alleged victim was still alive when the police and medical personnel arrived on the scene, he unfortunately succumbed to his injuries on his way to the hospital for medical treatment. We will continue our story as the narrative develops.'

'Mommy, is that daddy on the TV?'

Perceptions, beliefs and policies pertaining to crime and punishment are socially and politically constructed. Opinions and attitudes can change and differ over time between individuals and society. Nonetheless, typically, individuals who offend are viewed negatively, and those who serve and protect are viewed positively. Bad guys do bad things and go to bad places- prison. In “Daddy’s on TV”, I begin the introduction of my father’s criminality. I do not remember and did not have to live through the trauma of my father getting arrested, but that is not always the experience for many children with an incarcerated parent. Although this is a creative piece of writing and does

not reflect actual events I experienced concerning my father's criminality, it does not subtract from its relevance. With the rise of imprisonment rates in the United States came a rise in crime reporting on television. Crime became a sensationalised television topic. I often wonder how many children did have a similar experience to what I depicted. How many children were sitting at home at night getting ready for bed, wondering where their mom or dad was, only to see them appear on the television with others claiming they are a 'bad' person? Wondering if they will ever see their parent again once they go to prison. I can only imagine the impact that sort of experience would have on a child.

This chapter section examines America's incarceration problem. I offer an exploration of America's incarceration rate over the years, how its use of incarceration compares worldwide, and its intended use of imprisonment. The chapter also provides a brief history of the main drivers of mass incarceration. Additionally, this chapter offers an introduction to parental incarceration through a review of the literature. Finally, I introduce the theoretical framework I used to engage with the conversations taking place within the children with parental incarceration field of study. My autoethnographic vignettes offer an artistic break within a section heavy with historical and statistical information. The plan for the following chapters is to have the autoethnographic vignettes converse with the research material more cohesively.

America's Incarceration Problem

From 1973 to 2009, the United States experienced a steady rise in its prison population from 200,000 to 1.5 million adult inmates (Council et al., 2014). The incarceration rate in the United States had been relatively stable for the past 50 years before growth began in the 1970s. 'The growth in incarceration rates in the United States over the past 40 years is historically

unprecedented and internationally unique' (Council et al., 2014: p. 2). We will explore what contributed to this population boom later in this chapter. In 2000, Mississippi was reported as one of the states with the highest reported incarceration growths at nearly 11 per cent (Beck and Harrison, 2001). Between the years 1990 and 2000, the incarceration population for state (72%) and federal (148%) grew drastically, and this happened to be the timeframe my father began his incarceration (Beck and Harrison, 2001). As of 2022 (the most recent estimate I could source), nearly 1 in 48 adults are supervised by the American correctional system in some way (Buehler and Kluckow, 2024). There are around 1,566 state prisons, 98 federal prisons, 3,116 local jails in America, where almost 2 million American adults are/were incarcerated (Sawyer and Wagner, 2024). Although this number still seems high, reports show that the United States has decreased incarceration since its peak in 2007 (Buehler and Kluckow, 2024).

A report done by the World Prison Brief found that there were nearly 11 million people held in penal institutions throughout the world (Fair and Walmsley, 2024). Collectively, research has depicted and confirmed the United States as one of the leaders in criminal incarceration worldwide (Berger and Losier, 2018). America imprisons around 20 per cent of the world's population (Wagner and Bertram, 2020). While the United States' rate of incarceration is much higher than that of Western Europe and other democracies (Council et al., 2014), countries like China have a similar incarceration rate (1.69 million) (Fair and Walmsley, 2024). However, lower incarceration rates do not exclude countries, individuals and children all over the world from being impacted by incarceration. Australia's prisoner survey reports show the highest incarceration numbers in ten years and that 46% of their inmates have dependent children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015, cited in Saunders, 2018). Similar to the United States, the impact of incarceration has resulted in an estimated 5% of Australian children experiencing parental imprisonment within their lifetime

(Quilty, Levy, Howard, Barratt, & Butler, 2004, cited in Saunders, 2018). Although America's incarceration rates tend to far exceed the rates presented by similar countries, they are not alone in experiencing issues and repercussions due to incarceration.

The American criminal justice system utilises incarceration to address three concerns related to offending. Firstly, the offender's incarceration offers the victim or their family a sense of retribution (Council et al., 2014: p. 20). Depending on severity, crime is paid with years or totality of life. Secondly, the justice system uses incarceration to prevent crime through deterrence and incapacitation (Council et al., 2014: p. 20). Deterrence aims to counteract specific sentenced individuals and others in society by example. Lastly, incarceration serves as a justified method to rehabilitate offenders in hopes of preventing future crime (Council et al., 2014: p. 20). Imprisonment is not a uniform experience and can vary for each prisoner depending on various variables such as imprisonment conditions, duration of confinement and release resources. Some inmates may find imprisonment to be humane and even helpful, providing them with time and opportunities for reflection and personal growth (Council et al., 2014). Sadly, however, it seems that research shows that many inmates find imprisonment to be harmful and degrading. Inmates often experience and are exposed to criminal influence, violence, humiliation, isolation and poor resources (Council et al., 2014). Furthermore, research has found those most negatively affected by harsh criminal justice policy are those within disadvantaged populations. Individuals with a poor education, drug and alcohol addiction, mental and physical illness, poor employment skills, and/or racial and ethnic background have primarily felt the harsh and substantial impact of sentencing reforms over the years (Arditti and McClintock, 2002; Council et al., 2014).

Within Western societies, punishment in the late seventeenth and up to the early nineteenth century was dictated by religious doctrine (Condry and Smith, 2018). Throughout these centuries,

punishment practices commonly included public shaming (e.g. marking the skin, stocks) and corporal punishment (e.g. beheading, hanging). During the nineteenth century, Western societies began to develop the punishment system we see today. They left behind many of the previous punishment methods, and isolation (e.g. jail, prison) became the favoured punishment method. However, I feel that it is important to stress that America's current punishment system does not mean offenders may not still be subjected to shaming or corporal punishment, especially in America. Condry and Smith (2018) argue modern punishment has the unique potential to destroy the lives of prisoners and their families through its use of isolation. They reason that while historic punishment methods were 'physically brutal and barbaric', they were also 'much more liberal and less regulated' (Condry and Smith, 2018: p. 5). It was rare that prisoners were isolated from other prisoners or the outer world and definitely were not separated from their families longer than their punishment required.

I find America's use of incarceration as a form of punishment strange and confusing. They have created a space intended to both punish and heal but with limited autonomy. They remove people through force to punish them and protect society, believing further isolation will "correct" them in order for them to reenter society rehabilitated (Berger and Losier 2018). Pat Carlen describes prison as 'an institution whose primary function, to keep people confined against their will, necessarily (not contingently) perverts any of the other, more therapeutic functions claimed for it' (2005, as cited in Comfort, 2008). Overall, it seems the Western sense of justice expects offenders to make substantial social and personal enhancement while offering them few resources to achieve success.

“Drinking the Family Punch”

Hush hush shush shush

One punch is all it takes

Rips a family apart

Not a man it makes

Whispers in the heart

Turns your face into fake

Hush hush shush shush

This was one of the first writings I did for this thesis. I have never been one to write poems, but for some reason, this poem was crafted out of me and flowed out of me. I offer this poem as an introduction to the complex thoughts and feelings I had as a young child learning about how her father had killed someone. When we are children, the messages we are taught about crime can come across as very black and white. Rule followers are *good* and get rewarded with a star, while rule breakers are *bad* and get punished with *time-out*. Even in elementary school, we are introducing children to the idea of incarceration because that is what prison is, just a more advanced version of ‘time-out’. What children may not be supported with are all the grey areas between *good* and *bad*. Children with imprisoned parents are receiving mixed messages about our parents. We have information about our parents from many directions (e.g. family, peers, school,

support services). How are we expected to explore and understand our own feelings about our parents and their criminality if we aren't given the space?

Mass Incarceration

Leading up to the United States's incarceration boom in the 1970, crime became a prominent political debate for many politicians across the country. For decades, America had experienced intense political and social change (e.g. race relations, war, women's rights), and during this time the rate of crime had steadily risen (Council et al., 2014). As a result, political conversations turned towards transforming sentencing policy to expand the use of incarceration. Arditti and McClintock comment that 'for the supply of prisoners to grow, criminal justice policies must ensure a sufficient number of incarcerated Americans regardless of whether crime is rising or incarceration is necessary' (2002: p. 13). Incarceration as a requirement for lesser offences, increased prison sentences for violent and repeat offenders, and harsher criminal policing and punishments for drug crime became the new standard punishment policy (Council et al., 2014). America's aggressive prosecution of drug offenders during their 'war on drugs' resulted in the state prison population drastically growing from 6% in 1980 to nearly 22% by 1990 (Mauer, 2002). Many states enacted new sentencing laws for drug offences, violent offences and/or repeat offences, and they are required to serve lengthy compulsory prison sentences. Prior to these laws, an offender's history and circumstances, such as children or dependents, may have been taken into consideration during sentencing (Arditti and McClintock, 2002). This could have resulted in an offender receiving a just sentence for their crime while also aiming to limit the impact on the offender's family. Mass incarceration effects usually extend beyond the imprisoned individuals to their families and children. Individuals affected by incarceration are more likely to experience physical and mental health conditions, poverty, home insecurity, and academic/professional limitations.

Researchers in the past several decades have been interested in the cause and effect of America's incarceration problem. Depending on time and place, research has found that our relationships among incarceration, crime, sentencing policy, social inequality, and numerous other variables have influenced the United States incarceration rate (Council et al., 2014). These relationships have been found to be nuanced and complex, often changing across time and place. Nevertheless, research has frequently identified the negative impact mass incarceration has had on America. Mass incarceration is the term used to refer to the extremely high rate of incarceration in the United States and the unjustly disproportionate incarceration of minorities and people of colour (Bread for the World, 2016; Borrelli, 2023). Mass incarceration refers to the significant number of Americans who are at risk of possibly, presently, and/or formerly being incarcerated. While the exact causes of mass incarceration cannot be explicitly identified, researchers have identified three main drivers: '(1) over-policing and overcriminalization, (2) mandatory minimum and generally harsher sentencing practices, and (3) community supervision and the ongoing restrictions formerly incarcerated individuals face after being released from prison' (Borrelli, 2023: pg. 291). Using longitudinal research, Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) aimed to better understand the impact and long-term consequences mass imprisonment has for children experiencing racial inequality. In the following sections, many researchers argue for the significant role inequality plays in the development and growth of America's mass incarceration problem.

Over-policing and Overcriminalisation

The interplay among over-policing, overcriminalization and mass incarceration has been well explored (Bread for the World; Gamblin, 2018; 2016; Borrelli, 2023). The arrest and incarceration rates within the United States have significantly increased by means of over-policing and overcriminalisation. America's relationship with policing has historically experienced many

controversies. Over-policing is often experienced in low-income and marginalised communities where the elevated police presence is not proportional to the rate of serious crime (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2017). Law enforcement officers are provided with a significant level of power over U.S. citizens. That power allows them to stop, search, detain, and arrest individuals for substantiated or suspected crimes. Police are likelier to stop, ticket, and/or arrest individuals in over-policed communities (Gamblin, 2018). Due to overcriminalization, many Americans face increased opportunities to incur criminal fines and fees. ‘Overcriminalisation refers to the overwhelming number of acts that have been labeled as criminal’ (Borrelli, 2023: pg. 291). America’s excessive use of fines and fees has turned the criminal process into a booming source of revenue, resulting in a ‘Cash register justice’ (Appleman, 2016). Individuals could face court, jail, prison, community, bail, legal, dismissal, and/or probation costs with or without being convicted of a crime. Improvised and marginalised communities already have to contend with biased policing practices, but now they are saddled with the bill. ‘You do the crime, you will serve the time, and now you will also pay the dime’ (quoted in Appleman, 2016: p. 1485).

Longer and Harsh Sentencing

Secondly, longer and harsh sentencing practices fuel mass incarceration. In the 1980s and 1990s, the United States Congress introduced new punishment policy legislation that ultimately had an unsettling impact on the American criminal justice system (Council et al., 2014). Laws such as ‘mandatory minimum sentencing,’ ‘three strikes and you’re out,’ and ‘truth-in-sentencing’ influenced the severity of criminal charges and sentence duration offenders experienced. Due to mandatory minimum sentencing, career, drug or violent criminals would face lengthy prison sentences of 5,10, or 20 years (Borrelli, 2023). The “three strikes and you’re out” law was aimed more at ‘career criminals’ and mandated minimum 25-year sentences for offenders convicted of a

third crime (Gamblin, 2018). Even if that crime would not normally warrant a 25-year sentence. Lastly, the “truth-in-sentencing” law meant offenders had to serve at least 85 per cent of their prison sentence (Council et al., 2014). Many judges found their discretionary power restricted due to implementing these new sentencing laws (Borrelli, 2023). As discussed, those most impacted by mass incarceration are the impoverished and marginalised communities. Even if judges recognised the injustice and wanted to sentence accordingly, due to the punishment laws, their discretion would be limited. The implementation of these sentencing laws has required and/or judges to enforce harsh and lengthy sentences. Politicians and policymakers developed these laws in an attempt to deter people from committing crimes, however, the incarceration rate in the United States steadily rose after their implementation until recently (Council et al., 2014).

Ongoing Restrictions After Release

Lastly, the impact of mass incarceration continues even after people are released. Leaving prison does not necessarily mean incarceration ends (Gamblin, 2018). Typically, individuals leaving prison/jail are released on parole, also known as community supervision. Community supervision includes parole services as well as pretrial supervision and probation. Offenders leaving prison/jail may also be required to continue serving a portion of the sentence from their home, called house arrest, in which they may experience restrictions on their travel or be unable to leave at all. Individuals accessing community supervision often face strict rules, must report regularly to a court official, and meet other specific requirements (e.g. drugs, alcohol, contact). The challenging requirements and complex supervision relationship enhance an individual’s likelihood of failing and returning to imprisonment (Borrelli, 2023). Paroled individuals are also likely to face significant obstacles when trying to re-enter society (Borrelli, 2023). Some states limit the rights (e.g. to vote, weapon possession) of offenders even after they have served their sentence and paid

for their crime. Having a criminal record can make it more difficult for parolees to find housing or employment, which can be part of their parole requirements (Gamblin, 2018). Unfortunately, an individual's inability to comply with community supervision requirements increases the likelihood of recidivism and further social and family disadvantages.

In an article with Teen Vogue, rapper Chaz French explains the impact his father's incarceration had on his childhood (French, 2017a). In the article, he speaks about how his song 'Pops' is a letter to my loved ones and those in power that speaks to how mass incarceration affects way too many people in this country' (French, 2017a: para. 2). French shares feeling a lot of uncertainty throughout his childhood, and he was left with many questions related to his father. They went unanswered because his mother thought she was helping him, but for a long time, he just thought his father did not want to be part of his life. Overall, he describes the life of children with imprisoned parents as hard and calls for supportive action from the government.

My daddy was a dope dealer

My daddy was a street nigga

Wasn't around a lot and I blame it on prison

As crazy as it may sound I wanna be just like him

Nobody can tell me no different

You may say he ain't shit

But to me he's the realest

He the realest

"Pops" by Chaz French (2017b)

“Daddy is my Homework”

Seven-year-old Kayla enters her mom's room. 'Mommy, I have some homework that I can't do on my own.' 'Why not? You are smart.' she replies. 'Well, it is about my family. Mommy, can you tell me about Daddy? I don't remember much about him?' I admit guiltily. For as long as I can remember my dad has both been here and not. I do not have memories of really ever living with him. Just flashes of him there from time to time, like holidays or birthdays. My mommy sighs and begins, 'Well, your dad came from a very poor family and did not really have anyone to look out for him when he was growing up. He left school when he was in the 9th grade because there was no one around to help him or care for him.' My mom begins to reminisce about them; she has always had a soft spot for him despite his actions towards her or us.

'I met him when he was around 18 years old. She smiles as she recalls how much of a flirt he was.' I can tell how much love she still holds for him despite their many years of divorce. *'He never stayed home longer than a few days. Your grandmother was not fond of him. A tomcat he was.'* With a smile, my mommy said, *'But I loved him, faults and all. When we found out I was pregnant with you, he was so excited.'* I notice then a slight cloud wander into the conversation. *'I thought that would keep him home, but...'* she trails off into a brief silence. She collects herself enough to share a “funny” story about my birth. *'You know your grandmother wouldn't even let him into the hospital to see you the day you were born? She was mad because he was late.'* She smiles at me with the love of a mother in remembrance of her firstborn. *The child that made her a mother. 'You came when I was at work at the factory. I had them call your dad, but he wasn't where he was supposed to be. Luckily, your grandmother was home and was able to meet me at the hospital.'* My mummy continues, *'We were able to finally get in touch with your father to let him know I was at the hospital maybe around an hour after we arrived. I was in labour with you for around 5 hours*

before they decided I needed a C-section. After a long 7 hours, you were finally born around 1.28 am.' Here, my mummy gives me a look like she is including me in a family secret, 'Your father, however, did not come to see you until around 3 pm that day. Your grandmother was so infuriated that she refused to let him in to see you.' She smiles a slight smile as if she is still there lost in the memory, 'I had to reason with your grandmother to finally let him in to see you later that evening. I don't think she ever planned on letting him in if she could help it. Stubborn woman your grandmother. Stubborn and so in love with you from the first moment she held you.'

'We didn't get married until I was pregnant with your brother. We figured after having two kids together, we should try and give it a go.' 'It was a small courthouse wedding, not even sure if there are many pictures.' As I sit listening through the memories with her, I feel the sadness begin to creep back into her memories. 'Our marriage did not last very long as you know. Your father never was one to stay at home. He needed to be loved.' She looked at me to make sure I understood my father was a cheat to her and our family, yet behind the hurt, I could still see the love she carried for him.

I grew up getting to know my father more through stories than through actual interactions. At least, that is what it feels like. I had to learn about my father through others, mostly my mom. My father and I missed out on the natural opportunities for me to ask him those personal questions and for him to provide those answers. An expensive, timed phone call you may or may not get once a week is not always the best time to remanence. Even to this day, I tend to still go to my mother when looking for information concerning my father. This missed connection between a child and parent is what 'Daddy is my homework' tries to voice.

In 2014, DeVuono-Powell et al. (2015) conducted focus groups and surveyed formerly incarcerated people, their families, and other individuals impacted by incarceration from fourteen U.S. states. In collaboration with 20 community-based organisations, they portray the unjust costs families experience maintaining a relationship with an incarcerated family member. Their project revealed that there are many of the costs and penalties associated with incarceration that negatively impact both the incarcerated individual and their families. Their study explores both financial costs as well as latent costs (e.g. mental health, physical health, children relocation, income decline, and loss of education and employment opportunities). Their research additionally does well emphasising the reality of these costs continuing beyond incarceration and for long after imprisonment ends.

Introduction to Parental Imprisonment

In the United States alone, there are millions of children who currently or in the past have had an incarcerated parent (Kjellstrand and Eddy, 2011b). In 2016 (the most recent estimate I could source), nearly 700,000 state and federal inmates reported being a parent to a minor child (child aged under 18) (Maruschak, Bronson and Alper, 2021). Research indicates parental incarceration can impact and disrupt individuals' and families' psychological, physical, social and economic wellbeing (Arditti and McClintock, 2002). 'Incarceration rates in the United States have increased so dramatically over the past half century that parental incarceration is no longer an uncommon adverse childhood event' (Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney, 2021: p. 3).

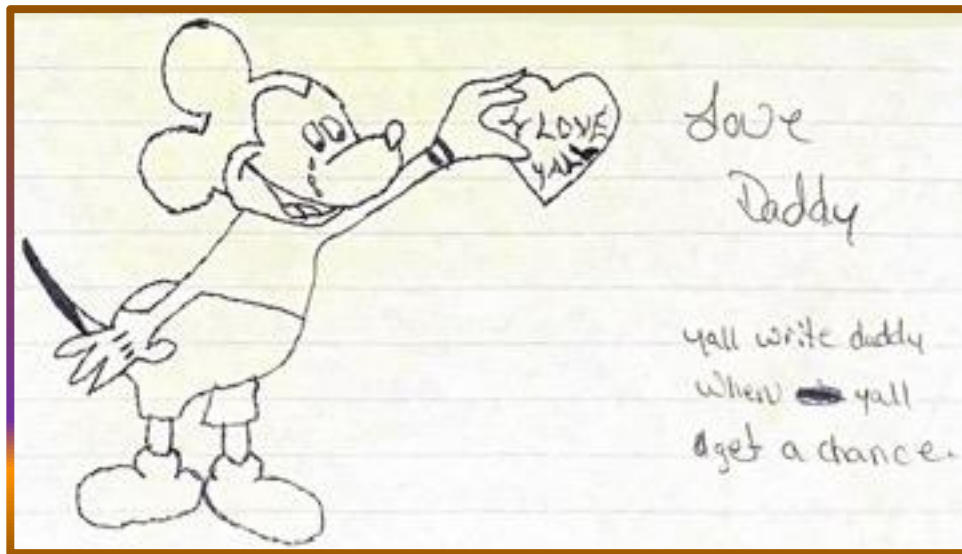
Despite the dramatic rise of incarceration in the United States, it appears research on the families of prisoners actually began in the United Kingdom. Predominantly, studies on the impacts of parental incarceration have been conducted from a Western perspective. Most of the research has

been conducted in Europe and the United States (Saunders, 2018). Pauline Morris is often credited with the birth of prisoner family research in 1965 with her study 'Prisoners and their families'. She used interviews with the wives of prisoners from England and Wales to bring awareness to this previously unseen population. 'No systematic attempt in [the United States was made] to study the families of men experiencing separation as a result of imprisonment' (Morris, 1965: p. 17). Morris's study provided an analysis of the 'economic, social and psychological problems and needs' of the families of imprisoned men (1965: p. 19). Her study also offered insight into the families' adjustment to separation and the social support needs available to families. Morris concluded that imprisonment does pose a significant challenge for families. The issues families of prisoners revealed in Morris's book were as relevant in the 1960s as they are today. 'Families pay both the apparent and hidden costs while their loved ones serve out sentences in our jails and prisons' (DeVuono-Powell et al., 2015: p. 7). Later in this chapter, we will look at these costs more closely.

In the 1970's and 1980's, research publications focusing on prisoners' families were limited in number and scope. Despite the limited representation of prisoners' families and children in academic research, prison statistics, public policy and media coverage, what little research did materialise identified these families as vulnerable (Liebling and Maruna, 2005). 'Roger Shaw (1987) pointed out almost 20 years ago, if we do not attend to the effects of imprisonment on children, we face the possibility of punishing innocent victims, neglecting a seriously at risk group, and possibly causing crime in the next generation' (Liebling and Maruna, 2005: p. 443). Shaw is also often considered an early pioneer in the study of prisoner families and children. Similar to Morris, Shaw was interested in the significant disadvantages children suffered as a result of having a father incarcerated (Condry and Smith, 2018). Their research highlighted the social and

economic disadvantages that were exacerbated by paternal incarceration. However, their research also questions the support available and ethical and human rights granted to this population (Boswell, 2018).

Does the state have a right morally—as practice shows it has legally—to strip a child of its parent because that parent has offended, although the crime may have been less harmful to the victim than the imprisonment of the offender is to his or her child? (Shaw, 1992: p. 195, quoted in Boswell, 2018: p. 213)



Our knowledge on the disadvantages experienced by the families and children with prisoners due to incarceration historically has been limited. Fortunately, in the last few decades research has begun to fully emerge and find its relevance in academic discussions. Johnson and Easterling (2012) conducted a published research search that revealed only three articles were published in the 1980s, forty were published during the 1990s, and 144 were published in the 2000s. A remarkable surge in the literature on prisoners' families occurred in the 2010s and onward (Condry

and Smith, 2018). More than 260 new articles were published on parental incarceration and children with imprisoned parents, and more are published every year (Condry and Smith, 2018).

Parental incarceration research has repeatedly aimed to define and understand the scope and impact many families experience due to incarceration. Glaze and Maruschak (2008) generated a report presenting a largely statistical perspective of parents and minor children impacted by incarceration. Utilising survey data from both state and federal correctional facilities, Glaze and Maruschak depict a concerning picture of the difficulties experienced by parents and children due to incarceration. Between 1991 and 1997, prisons experienced rapid growth in their imprisoned parent population, thus the number of children affected increased drastically too (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). This growth would continue upwards through 2007, resulting in over 800,000 imprisoned parents and 1.7 million minor children. It was also reported that incarcerated parents aged 25 to 34 were most likely to have children who were minors (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). My father was around 22-23 when he committed his crime and therefore spent his years aged 25-34 in prison. Also, since he was sent to prison around 1996, he would have been part of the rapid growth of imprisoned parents.

Research within this discipline has typically had a robust quantitative representation, while the qualitative representation has taken some time to find its voice. The impact parental incarceration can have on children's behaviour, mental health and delinquency has been well documented in quantitative research (see e.g. Poehlmann, 2005a,b; Kruttschnitt, 2011; Turney and Lanuza, 2017; Saunders, 2018; Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney, 2021). Additionally, quantitative parental incarceration research typically relies heavily on the secondary analysis of existing datasets to help researchers with their results and conclusions. Boswell (2018) conducted a study identifying some of the deficits within parental incarceration research. Although their study was conducted in the

United Kingdom, much of their findings seemed similar to those found in research within the United States. The first deficit they identified was that there was a lack of relevant statistical information concerning this population.

Finding appropriate data sets—and in particular, contemporary, large-scale, broadly representative, and longitudinal data—that include information about both parental incarceration and children’s well-being is not an easy task. (Turney and Haskins, 2019: p. 53)

While the Survey of Prison Inmates (SPI) collects data on biological and adopted children, they do not collect data on the stepchildren with incarcerated parents (Maruschak, Bronson and Alper, 2021). Adult children are also often left out of these data collections (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008: p. 1120). Therefore, the number of children with an incarcerated parent could be much higher depending on how one defines family and who is collecting the data. Due to the ambiguity in documenting children with incarcerated parents, it is challenging to get an accurate depiction of the number of families and children impacted by incarceration (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008).

Moreover, Boswell (2018) claims parental incarceration literature needs to invest in more longitudinal research projects, particularly projects exploring prisoner-father and child relationships. ‘The importance of longitudinal studies is their ability to document change from one point in time to another, and to yield more reliable and valid data than can single-point studies’ (Boswell, 2018: p. 217). Many of the research projects with a longitudinal focus use pre-existing datasets. While it is a great benefit to have this data, it can also be limiting. These pre-existing datasets mostly likely would not have been originally designed to understand the impact of incarceration on children and families and therefore may lack relevant information related to the

experience of parental incarceration (Dallaire, Zeman, & Thrash, 2015). However, due to researchers relying on existing data, one criticism has been its ability to truly understand the effects of incarceration on families and children.

Through a developmental perspective, Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2021) review relevant research relating to children with incarcerated parents in order to explore parent and child well-being and the contribution developmental scientists can offer to these discussions. Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney feel parental incarceration research could be enhanced if developmental scientists were to contribute research ‘focusing on the timing of life course events, processes underlying the experience of incarceration (for parents and children), developmental cascades, and resilience among children’ (2021, p. 3).

Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney’s (2021) article mostly focuses on research from eight population-based studies conducted in the United States. Population-based studies are designed to find a generalizable answer to research questions for a defined population using data gathered from a well-represented research cohort (Lieb, 2013). In addition, Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2021) compare results from research samples that are not based on population but that attend to developmental and family processes between parental incarceration and children’s well-being.

In their article, Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2021) organise their findings around children’s age and by psychosocial problems and educational outcomes, including a developmental timeline of findings to help illustrate the overall impact of parental incarceration on children’s well-being according to population-based studies. While Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney’s (2021) research offers a lot of insightful data on parental incarceration, there are still some areas of research that could fill some gaps in our knowledge. Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2021) argue that research

is still unclear as to why the effects of parental incarceration appear to grow as children grow older. Developmental science is well placed to explore this, but I also feel this is an idea my thesis explores through my autoethnographic writings. Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2021) also argue that our understanding of separation and loss related to parental incarceration is still lacking, especially concerning its impact on children's future relationships. This is an area that could be well placed to be further explored by counselling researchers. Many counsellors work relationally and therefore have several theoretical frameworks to draw from in their research process. It would be nice to see both an increase in qualitative research and the presence of counsellor led studies within parental incarceration research.

Overall, Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2021) conclude that research evidences the negative association between parental incarceration and child, adolescent, and adult well-being. With some exceptions these children often experience less optimal behaviour, poorer mental health, and poorer academic outcomes. Additionally, 'children's gender, race, relationships with parents, and exposure to incarceration-related events (e.g., witnessing a parent's arrest) appear to be significant moderators, while family environments and economic hardship appear to be important mediators' (Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney, 2021: p. 9). Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2021), acknowledge that while there has been some growth in the use of population-based data to better understand children with incarcerated parents, there is still much that could be improved on, especially through a developmental lens. Below I briefly discuss in more detail a few of the population-based studies referenced by Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney's (2021) article to better highlight the important role population-based studies have had on parental incarceration research.

The Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study is one of the more commonly used data sources used in parental incarceration research (Turney and Haskins, 2019). The Fragile Families

and Child Well-being Study (hereafter, Fragile Families) includes data collected from a cohort of new parents and their children born in the US in the year 2000 (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, and McLanahan, 2001). Using a sample of 4700 births in 20 cities in urban areas across the United States, the Fragile Families gathered information on the conditions, capabilities, and well-being from a cohort of mostly unmarried parents (3600 nonmarital, 1100 marital) and their children (Reichman et al., 2001). Turney and Haskins (2019) conducted research drawing upon existing literature that had made use of the Fragile Families data. The researchers used this comparative data in order to understand and discuss the intergenerational consequences of parental incarceration.

Turney and Haskins (2019) found that using the Fragile Families data was advantageous for parental incarceration research in various ways. A strength for the Fragile Families study is its longitudinal design. The timeframe in which data was collected for the Fragile Families study aligns well with mass incarceration trends in the United States. Turney and Haskins (2019) found in their research that ‘by age 15, 12% of children experienced maternal incarceration and 35% of children experienced paternal incarceration’ (Turney and Haskins, 2019: p. 54). This means that many of the children from the original data sample experienced parental incarceration during the first 15 years of their lives. Additionally, data was collected in the Fragile Families during multiple time points and across various developmental life stages (Turney and Haskins, 2019). This allows researchers the unique opportunity of examining data to better understand the intergenerational consequences of parental incarceration. It is uncommon that researchers in this field have access to data that spans infancy, early and middle childhood, and adolescence. Especially data with a focus on a child’s well-being. Another advantage being that when the Fragile Families was designed, the researchers employed well-established and standardised

measures to examine the participant's well-being (e.g. Child Behavior Checklist, Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children IV, Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement, Things You Have Done scale) (Turney and Haskins, 2019, p. 55). Lastly, Turney and Haskins (2019) discussed how the use of multiple reporters offered the data collected by the Fragile Families more accuracy and reliability. The Fragile Families collected data from various respondents within the families (e.g. mothers, fathers, and the children themselves) as well as those connected to the families such as teachers. Researchers were able to compare the data of child well-being from multiple angles allowing researchers to develop a well-rounded understanding of the consequences of parental incarceration for children.

Although the Fragile Families has been useful and beneficial to research on parental incarceration, it does have some limitations that Turney and Haskins (2019) acknowledge and discuss. To begin with the sampling frame excludes data from families and children living in smaller cities in rural areas. I have found that this is not uncommon amongst research data collected on this topic. I imagine this has a lot to do with public and federal funds towards the grants allocated to conducting the research in this area. Subsequently due to the sample size, it can be difficult for the data to show certain differences in experiences particularly around race/ethnicity, social class, immigration status (Turney and Haskins, 2019). The Fragile Families also fails to include certain details about incarcerated-related experiences. Turney and Haskins observe that the Fragile Families fails to include data about certain incarcerated-related experiences such as 'incarceration duration, type and severity of crime, and number of incarceration spells' (2019, p. 56). Additionally, the Fragile Families offer no data focusing on whether the children witnessed their parent's criminal activity and/or arrest along with the following the judicial process. Once again this does not appear be uncommon to other data

sources on parental incarceration. Lastly, Turney and Haskins (2019) highlight that the Fragile Families does not collect any data with a focus on parent–child communication during incarceration. Research has shown that parent–child communication during incarceration can have a significant impact on the experience of parental incarceration for both the parents and children. Therefore, it can be seen as a significant disadvantage that the Fragile Families did not collect data on the ‘frequency or type of visits, calls, or written correspondence or how information about the parent’s incarceration has been communicated to children’ (Turney and Haskins, 2019, p. 56). Not having this information could potentially distort the image the data portrays of the impact parental incarceration has on children’s well-being. With these advantages and disadvantages in mind, researchers primarily use this data set to compare children with no experience of parental incarceration with children who have experienced it.

Using the Great Smoky Mountains Study, Gifford, Eldred Kozecke, Golonka, Hill, Costello, Shanahan, and Copeland (2019) examined the association found between parental incarceration and the level of psychiatric, legal, financial, and social outcomes during young adulthood. The Great Smoky Mountains Study is a community representative, longitudinal study that gathered data using the Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Assessment and interviews with both parents and children. Data was gathered from participants in mostly rural counties in North Carolina between the years 1993 and 2015 (Gifford et al., 2019). Children were assessed and interviewed several times from aged 9 into adulthood up to aged 30. (Gifford et al., 2019). Using a sample of 1334, Gifford et al., (2019) reported that parental incarceration was associated with a higher chance for children to experience psychiatric disorders such as depression, ADHD, and conduct disorder. Furthermore, their data found that parental incarceration increased a child’s potential of experiencing/having an adult anxiety disorder, substance abuse problems, criminal justice

problems (e.g. incarceration, felony charge), academic difficulties (e.g. not completing high school), early parenthood, and social isolation. Overall Gifford et al., (2019) concluded that the impact parental incarceration has on the developmental life course of children is substantial. Their data supports the idea that parental incarceration can disrupt a child's successful transition into adulthood and may have consequences that continue from generation to generation.

Foster and Hagan (2013) also use longitudinal data in their parental incarceration research. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (hereafter, Add Health), Foster and Hagan (2013) explore the impact maternal and paternal incarceration has on changes in young adult mental health. The researchers utilise a stress process perspective to conceptualise and understand the place parental incarceration holds in the 'stress universe' for children during their childhood and adulthoods. The Add Health consists of data collected from 9421 US adolescent students as they transitioned into adulthood. Data collection began in 1995 through interviews with students around the age of 15 and ended in 2008 with those same students aged between 24-32. Researchers also interviewed parents or guardians at the onset of the study.

Foster and Hagan (2013) found that both maternal incarceration and paternal incarceration are influential on a child's wellbeing. Parental incarceration can lead children to experience different mental health problems in young adulthood and therefore may require different supports in adjusting to parental loss. According to the Add Health data, Foster and Hagan (2013) found that by the time the children had reached adulthood 3% had experienced maternal incarceration and 11% had experienced paternal incarceration. Using this data further, Foster and Hagan (2013) conclude that paternal imprisonment is more common than paternal death which was found to be only experienced by 7% of the participants. Researchers found a higher rate of depressive

symptoms reported by respondents with an imprisoned mother compared to an imprisoned father. Children who experienced maternal incarceration between the ages of 0-18 had increased reports of depressive symptoms compared to those who experienced it between the ages of 19-31. The respondents' level of depressive symptoms was also found to be influenced by the number of times they had experienced maternal incarceration. Researchers discovered higher levels of depressive symptoms among children whose mothers had been incarcerated numerous times. This indicates maternal incarceration has a significant impact to the lives and wellbeing of young children, possibly due to the level of disruption caused because mothers are often the primary caregivers for young children. Additionally, Foster and Hagan (2013) noted an increased presence of substance problems for participants with paternal imprisonment. Paternal incarceration in childhood (ages 0-18) but not in later adulthood (ages 19-31) increases substance problems from early to young adulthood. Researchers also found that 'males are more at risk than females for increases in substance use problems' (Foster and Hagan, 2013: p. 660). Finally, Foster and Hagan (2013) briefly explore their results through a gendered vulnerability lens. While they found that both male and female children find maternal imprisonment stressful, their results indicated a uniquely high level of young adult depressive symptoms in male adolescents aged 13-18. Similarly, Foster and Hagan (2013) hypothesise that adolescent males are particularly vulnerable to paternal imprisonment. It seems adolescent males may need a lot of guidance and support in those formative years. Therefore, not having those important figures in their lives can have a negative impact on their wellbeing and transition from childhood into adulthood.

Like others, Foster and Hagan's (2013) research explores the impact parental incarceration has on children's well-being. Using the children's self-reported data, they are able to develop an

almost fifteen-year representation of the wellbeing experienced by children with incarcerated parents. Although this is a topic many researchers have been interested in prior, their use of longitudinal data helps them differentiate between maternal and paternal incarceration. Their exploration of loss and stress was interesting. In the field of parental incarceration, socially and professionally, it does not feel that the concept of loss is often given much space. Luckily their research indicates the impact loss and stress can have on the depressive symptoms and substance use experienced in families with parental incarceration. While their research results were very insightful, it would have been interesting to hear more about changes in opinions since data was collected over a fifteen-year span. Essentially, they are getting the thoughts and opinions of children and teenagers about the same topic in one data set. I know my relationship with my father was a lot different when I was a child than when I was a teenager. Through my research I am able to depict a data in the form of experiences covering childhood to adulthood. I present a range of stories and experiences that depict the complexities and struggles faced by children with an imprisoned parent.

Turney and Lanuza (2017) conduct research to explore transition to adulthood for the children with incarcerated parents and their relationship with their parents. They felt if we can gain insight to the life course consequences of parental incarceration, then it may lead to a better understanding of the inequality created, maintained and experienced by those in transition from adolescents to adulthood. Like Foster and Hagan (2013), they used the Add Health as their primary data source. Using the Add Health data, Turney and Lanuza (2017) compare respondents who experienced paternal or maternal incarceration between ages 0-17 to respondents who have never experienced parental incarceration. They additionally use the Add Health data to examine seven subjective and behaviour indicators of adulthood. The two

subjective indicators ascertained: (a) the respondent feels older than others his or her age and (b) the respondent feels like an adult all of the time (Turney and Lanuza, 2017: p. 1318). The five behaviour indicators ascertained: (a) the respondent has his/her own residence, (b) the respondent is not enrolled in school, (c) the respondent is employed full-time, (d) the respondent has ever been married, and (e) the respondent has at least one child (Turney and Lanuza, 2017: p. 1318). Turney and Lanuza (2017) decided that affirmative responses to the subjective and behaviour indicators indicated a greater number of adult transitions. However, they were indecisive if a greater number of adult transitions resulted in a positive or negative outcome for the respondent's transition experience.

Ultimately, Turney and Lanuza feel their research offers 'the first comprehensive examination of the relationship between parental incarceration and both subjective and behavioural adulthood transitions' (2017: p. 1326). Using and contributing to existing literature, their research extends our knowledge about the developmental impact of parental incarceration along with the intergenerational consequences. Their research produced three main enlightening results. Firstly, Turney and Lanuza (2017) found that parental incarceration in childhood and adolescence (ages 0-17) resulted in a more affirmative responses to the subjective and behavioural indicators suggesting a greater number of adulthood transitions. Interestingly, researchers found that although 'parental incarceration may accelerate the life course of offspring', their data suggests that 'the timing of parental incarceration matters little in predicting the number of adulthood transitions' (Turney and Lanuza, 2017: p. 1326). This understanding holds some similarities and differences to Foster and Hagan's (2013) research. This could be due to Foster and Hagan (2013) using gendered vulnerability lens to analyse their data. If we recall, they found some evidence in the data on the impact incarceration timing can have on adolescent males is greater.

The second result Turney and Lanuza (2017) explored relationship between parental incarceration and subjective transitions. They found that there was an important association between parental incarceration and subjective transitions. 'Paternal incarceration was associated with having a perceived age older than one's objective age and maternal incarceration was associated with feeling like an adult all the time' (Turney and Lanuza, 2017: p. 1326). The data suggests that for children with imprisoned parents, maternal and paternal incarceration can have implications for their sense and development of identity and self-concept.

The third evidence Turney and Lanuza (2017) found suggested that both maternal and paternal incarceration is associated with behavioural outcomes. Their results indicated the children of incarcerated parents were more likely to not be enrolled in school and to have a child, although the researchers did not mention the likelihood of these results co-occurring. Additionally, Turney and Lanuza (2017) found that most of the respondents with experiences of parental incarceration did not report full-time employment, independent living (living on one's own or away from family), or marriage. While their research does suggest the parental incarceration does possibly accelerate adulthood transitions, there is an argument to the quality of adulthood these children experience due to parental incarceration. For these children the life course consequences of parental incarceration extend far beyond childhood into adulthood and can have a lasting impact for generations.

Turney and Lanuza's (2017) research does well at demonstrating that the transition to adulthood has a strong subjective dimension that is complex and needs just as much acknowledgment and consideration as the behavioural dimension. I like how the authors hold space for the discourse of loss and pressure that many children of incarcerated parents can experience. This loss can

involve finance, security, support, identity, self and so much more. Add that with the pressure to 'be helpful' 'be the man of the house' 'not be like your father/mother', these children may find themselves taking on adult roles within the family and household long before their peers. I explore this idea further in Chapter Five through relevant research along with some autoethnographic writings.

I found Turney and Lanuza's (2017) research particularly enlightening. It can often feel like parental incarceration research forgets that children turn into adults. If we do not get the support and guidance we need in relation to our parent's incarceration, then how can we be expected to have healthy skills in adulthood. The results that explored the children's feelings towards their parent's incarceration were interesting. I know me and my siblings all had different experiences of my father's incarceration and in turn our experiences impacted our overall child and adult wellbeing differently. I experienced my father's incarceration through a very stressful and stigmatized lens resulting in feelings of social maturity in some areas ahead of my peers and developmental delays in others. I grew up feeling so ahead of my peers in life experiences in some areas, and drastically behind in others. Interestingly both of these related to social in one way or another. It would have been helpful if Turney and Lanuza (2017) had explored a bit more of the role society plays in our transition to adulthood. The pressures, guidance or support that would have interacted with our identity as a child of an imprisoned parent. These are themes I explore in this thesis, but having data on these topics from a larger data source could have been beneficial to the discussion.

Kjellstrand & Eddy have two studies providing excellent examples of the beneficial information gained through longitudinal research in incarcerated parent research. Their first study used

longitudinal data to examine youth adjustment to parental incarceration through externalising behaviours and serious delinquency (Kjellstrand & Eddy, 2011a). Through the structural equation modelling (SEM), Kjellstrand & Eddy (2011a) compare the relationship between youth antisocial behaviour and four potential child adjustment indicators: parental incarceration, social advantage, parent mental and physical health, effective parenting. The longitudinal data used was gathered from the Linking Interests of Families and Teachers (hereafter, LIFT) study. LIFT gathers its data from school-based participant in areas and neighbourhoods in Oregon with high rates of juvenile delinquency. This is an ongoing study that began in 1991. For this study they had a sample of 655 participants.

Kjellstrand & Eddy (2011a) found through their research that social advantage, parent health, and effective parenting can play an important role in the development of youth. Their proposed theoretical model supports the idea that ‘risk and protective factors do not operate in isolation but are interconnected in a complex manner’ (Kjellstrand and Eddy, 2011: p. 562). Despite higher amounts of reported youth delinquency among children with incarcerated parents, youth antisocial behaviour can be a result of numerous other risk factors. Furthermore, ‘many children with incarcerated parents lead healthy and positive lives’ (Kjellstrand and Eddy, 2011: p. 562). This study indicates that there are many factors such as parenting and family factors that can influence a child’s developmental outcome, not solely parental incarceration. Kjellstrand and Eddy’s research offers us the opportunity to further explore and understand how different risk and protective factors are connected to one another. Ultimately this could lead to proactive versus reactive practice and policy aimed at supporting our children at all developmental stages.

Kjellstrand and Eddy’s (2011b) second study also used longitudinal data to compare the childhoods of children with and without a parent in prison. Kjellstrand and Eddy ‘hypothesize that adolescents

who experienced parental incarceration during their childhood are more likely to experience family risk in the areas of social advantage, parent health, and parenting, as well as have higher levels of problem behavior across adolescence than those adolescents who did not experience childhood parental incarceration' (Kjellstrand and Eddy, 2011: p. 21). The population-based longitudinal study the research utilised was yet again the LIFT study. Their study focuses on the effect of parental incarceration during the first 10 years of the child's life and consisted of data from 655 LIFT study respondents.

Kjellstrand and Eddy's (2011b) research revealed that 10.2% of youth had at least one parent incarcerated during their childhood. Their research revealed several significant differences between children with experiences of parental incarceration in their childhood versus children who had not. For families with a history of parental incarceration, the data indicated that parents often 'had less education, worked fewer hours, had less household income, received more financial assistance and had a lower overall socioeconomic status (SES) than parents in families without such a history' (Kjellstrand and Eddy, 2011: p. 27). While the study found significant differences in health (e.g. depression, physical health) between both groups of families, the study found no significant differences concerning reported alcohol problems by either group of families. Kjellstrand and Eddy (2011b) found significant differences concerning antisocial behaviour. 'Adolescents with a history of parental incarceration consistently had higher levels of problem behaviors between the fifth and 10th grades' (Kjellstrand and Eddy, 2011: p. 29). Their data also indicated that children with parental incarceration were more likely to live with either a single parent or within a stepfamily member's household. Lastly, Kjellstrand and Eddy (2011b) found that the two groups of families were similar in overall family size and general parenting strategies. However, the researchers do note that differences in parenting strategies were found noted on the

topic of punishment. Parents from families with an incarcerated parent were more likely and more frequently reported to use inappropriate discipline practices.

I can very much appreciate the contribution Kjellstrand and Eddy have offered to parental incarceration research. I got the sense from both of their research inquiries that they were trying to look for a different or often overlooked view of the experiences children with imprisoned parents are faced with. In their first study, it feels like Kjellstrand & Eddy (2011a) are both making space for children's negative external behaviour and lack thereof. Their research acknowledges that although parental incarceration can be detrimental, many (teachers, peers, family) forget or lack understanding that it is only one of the risks that our childhoods are faced with. I myself did not have delinquency problems, but we as a family did struggle with economic hardships, single-parent struggles, and general stressed family circumstances. In their second study, Kjellstrand and Eddy (2011b) did a good job presenting the similarities and differences between families who have and have not experienced parental incarceration. I feel as though families with parental incarceration are often thought of through a negative lens both in public and through research. Luckily their research offers an opportunity to find commonality and to not feel so different or odd. Feelings that can aid towards the development and growth of shame around parental incarceration. Although in both articles Kjellstrand and Eddy discuss external and internal concepts, their research does not give us a clear understanding of that picture for the children themselves. Although both research studies use data collected directly from children with imprisoned parents themselves, Kjellstrand and Eddy only interpret their experiences for us through data that was collected by other researchers. I think it would have been really interesting to hear some of these theoretical concepts further explored through the inclusion of the children's thoughts and ideas.

Despite the dates and ages aligning with me and my father's incarceration, I can confidently say I was not included in any of these longitudinal population-base studies. I am an adult, and my father is no longer in prison. It seems that not only did I miss all of the longitudinal studies that I could have been part of, but now I am probably too old. Furthermore, I would most likely not be counted in federal or state funded research studies despite still being impacted by his imprisonment. It makes me wonder how many other children with imprisoned parents in the United States are being missed by research due to location, age, gender, and more. Arditti and McClintock state, 'there is no requirement that agencies such as social services, children's bureaus, foster care, law enforcement, or correctional institutions, systematically collect data on children and families of incarcerated individuals' (2002: p. 19). That means we can assume the number of impacted children by incarceration could be much higher than we currently know through data. Perhaps due to these discrepancies, researchers should evaluate their recruitment process and aim to include and hear from the children themselves. Children of various ages with both current and past experiences of parental incarceration.

It is odd feeling little connection to statistics and research that should include and represent me. Glaze and Maruschak (2008) and Maruschak, Bronson and Alper (2021) describe millions of children with an incarcerated parent, and yet I felt so isolated and different because of my father. I don't recall ever knowing about other kids with an incarcerated parent, yet statistics imply there must have been more of us in my hometown than just me and my siblings. While I agree with Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney (2021) in the usefulness of population-based data, it seems to struggle with longitudinal studies. The data in longitudinal studies on imprisoned parents often included participants whose parents spent a minimum of one day imprisoned. I believe their experience and needs will be different than a child like me whose father was behind bars for most

of her childhood. Additionally, my experiences and needs will be different than a child whose father is facing life in prison or death row. This style of quantitative studies may struggle to capture our experiences even generally due to the complexities of parental incarceration.

Moreover, I feel that it is sometimes harder to find yourself in the words and ideas depicted through population-based studies. While it is nice to not feel alone, population-based studies can be harder to imagine and empathise with if the reader cannot find a place for themselves between the lines. I understand population-based data is thought to provide a more universal understanding, but I do not want to discredit a lived experience that many can relate to. Especially a lived experience that is often not given a voice or space therefore that offering is insight into the unknown so that it can become more relatable to others.

Using a ‘phenomenologically-informed’ qualitative research approach, Easterling and Johnson (2015) explore family issues related to incarceration. Qualitative studies can offer a window into experiences that are often difficult to express and fully understand solely through graphs and numbers.

Qualitative research can give voice to the lived experiences of children of incarcerated parents, help us understand how children make meaning of their circumstances and provide tools to explore the complexities of the challenges faced by families of the incarcerated. (Eddy and Poehlmann-Tynan, 2019: p. 149)

Utilising qualitative data, Easterling and Johnson’s (2015) research focused on American families experiencing incarceration, particularly those with experiences of mothering in prison and having an incarcerated parent. Their research aims to articulate the benefits and challenges associated with using qualitative methodology in family research along with strategies for overcoming potential

difficulties researchers may encounter during the research process. Their differing backgrounds, sociology (Easterling) and psychology (Johnson), lends their research a unique interdisciplinary perspective via the research used as examples.

A flexible phenomenologically-informed approach can be beneficial for parental incarceration research as it allows for intimate interaction while discussing a sensitive topic, and can lead to participants explaining their perspectives of their life experiences more in depth (Easterling and Johnson, 2015). This approach has the potential to offer multiple perspectives of what families experience due to incarceration including the good, the bad, and the everyday.

Qualitative research can give voice to the lived experiences of children of incarcerated parents, help us understand how children make meaning of their circumstances and provide tools to explore the complexities of the challenges faced by families of the incarcerated. (Eddy and Poehlmann-Tynan, 2019: p. 149)

I have often felt that statistical research has been too focused, often missing elements of our experiences. Not every child with an imprisoned parent is doing bad, some of us are okay. While both styles of research are needed to fully understand the impact of incarceration on individuals and their families, I personally think qualitative research projects are more inviting and invoke reflection.

All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated (Bernstein, 2007) depicts the stories and themes surrounding children with incarcerated parents. Within this book, Bernstein (2007) provides a voice to a population that has largely gone unheard. Bernstein uses the perspectives of both adults and youths who have faced the effects of being a child of the criminal justice system. Existing literature primarily focuses on the childhood experience, and few have explored the

lasting impact on adulthood (Boswell, 2018). Not only is there a range of ages reflected in her book, but the stories shared also span childhood and adulthood periods within their lives.

Benninger, Schmidt-Sane, Massey, and Athreya (2023) conducted a study that not only included the voices of children with incarcerated parents but also included them in the research process. They viewed their study as an opportunity to collaborate with the children with incarcerated parents. Through youth participatory action research, the youth participants had an opportunity to contribute as partners and co-creators of the research, giving them purpose, power, and control in the discussion to improve the lives, communities, and institutions intended to serve them. The research project explored the impact of incarceration on children with incarcerated parents' wellbeing and offered feedback concerning their needs to flourish. It was really refreshing to read a research project that utilised children with imprisoned parents so thoroughly. This is intriguing as I feel their research goes beyond just adding the children with incarcerated parents' voices into research. Benninger et al.'s (2023) research incorporates the ideas of children with incarcerated parents to help assist the research in its quest to understand their experiences. For example, for some time, research on children with incarcerated parents has heavily focused on their deficits and adverse experiences.

Additionally, I feel it is also essential to acknowledge the representation of non-empirical accounts of parental incarceration, especially as they tend to often include the child's voice in their productions (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008). Many children express their views of their parents' incarceration in books (see e.g. norahS Youth Publications, 2013; Curcio, 2015; Strempek, 2015), magazines (see e.g. Anspach, 2017; French, 2017a), documentaries (see e.g. McDonald, 2009), TV shows and support group websites (see e.g. Prison Forum, n.d.). These various knowledge outlets offer valuable insight into parental incarceration in their own ways. Nesmith and Ruhland

(2008) conducted research in partnership with the Minnesota Council on Crime Justice's Racial Disparities Initiative, which attempted to address this shortfall in research. Through the children's own perspectives, Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) examined the effects of parental incarceration, coping strategies, and support.

Qualitative explorations offer detail and texture, give "voice" to participants, and can capture aspects of family processes and functioning that are inaccessible via quantitative protocols. (Easterling and Johnson, 2015: p. 1550)

Children know their own world best, and therefore, it would be a benefit to hear their descriptions of their experiences in their own words.

Although historically there has been a heavy quantitative research representation, the growth of qualitative research on parental incarceration has developed. However perhaps due to potential ethical concerns, much of the research on children with incarcerated parents comes from the perspective of the parent or other guardian figures, teachers, and/or support workers (see e.g. Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest, 2003; Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008; Murphey and Cooper, 2015). The studies tend to include observational behaviour data as evidence for their theories and conclusions instead of including the feelings, thoughts, ideas or voices of actual children with imprisoned parents. This choice could mean a level of understanding is not reached in the research concerning the children's experiences of parental incarceration. This is not to criticise their value of support perspective data, but to highlight the potential knowledge gap in this field of study. 'Little is known about the impact of parental incarceration from the perspective of the children' (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008: p. 1119). Studies that include the children's own thoughts and words include (see e.g. Boswell, 2002; Bernstein, 2007; Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008; Benninger,

Schmidt-Sane, Massey, and Athreya, 2023). The growth in this research field indicates the need for understanding this population better in order to serve them better both individually and as a marginalised group. In the following chapters, I will use some of this expanding literature to explore in-depth selected key issues families and children encounter due to parental imprisonment.

Theoretical Framework

“Daddy’s Little Girl”

There was no countdown, no party. We didn’t decorate the home with balloons and streamers. No one baked and decorated a cake. We didn’t have a BBQ, didn’t sit around eating and chatting all night celebrating. For 13 years, he was incarcerated, and for 13 years, I went without having a dad. I found out via a phone call that he was coming ‘home’ after 13 years.

I had started college. No one knew me here. Although I was only 2 hours away from home, it felt like I was worlds away. When I got to university, I was able to leave the shame behind a bit. I didn’t feel like I had to avoid it all the time. While some people asked me about my family, they mostly just wanted to know about me. No one really seemed interested all the much in my past. Finally, it felt like I was able to live in the present more. That didn’t mean I didn’t worry about people finding out somehow. I stayed vigilant with my prepared stories, but finally, I felt like I could breathe.

I’m on my way to meet up with my new friends. We have gotten close over the last semester. We have only been back for a few weeks from winter break, so it will be nice to catch up with everyone. As I am walking across the drill field, my phone rings. When I look at the screen, I don’t recognise the number. Normally, I wouldn’t pick up the phone, but what if it is one of my pals who got a new phone over winter break?

'Hello?'

'Hi, baby girl. It's daddy.'

'Hey daddy?'

'Guess who got out?'

I stop walking. 'Like out out?'

'Yeah, I'm free.'

I look around to see who might hear me. 'When did you get out?'

'A couple of days ago.'

I begin walking to a secluded part of the drill field. 'That's awesome. I bet you are happy.'

'Yeah, did you miss daddy?'

I feel this weight as I answer, 'Yeah, I miss you.'

'When are you going to come home next?'

'Maybe in a few weeks, I think. I have a lot of schoolwork in the next few weeks, so can't come home this weekend.'

'That sounds good, baby girl. Daddy can't wait to see you and give you a big hug.'

I smile weakly. 'Me too, Daddy. I can't wait to see you either.'

'Well I will let you go, I just want to let you know. I love you, baby girl.'

'I love you too, Daddy. Bye.'

'Bye'

I let out a breath I didn't realise I had been holding.

I continue on my way to see my friends. By the time I meet up with them, I have found my mask again.

'Hey Kayla! How have you been? How were your holidays? Anything new with you?'

'Hey!!! They were good and nothing at all.'

At times, when I reflect back on the time my father was imprisoned, there is this frozen quality to it. I always got the sense that he wanted to be met by the five-year-old little baby girl he left on the day he was released to come home. My dad would often remind me in letters throughout his incarceration that I would always be his *Baby Girl* forever. That is not to say that over the years, he did not see or acknowledge that I was growing up, but I feel I presented the image of the daughter he wanted or needed more than showing him the woman I was truly becoming. Especially through my teenage years into early adulthood, I felt like we almost had a script that we stuck to. He needed a *Baby Girl*, and I needed to be that for him, even if, on the inside, I resented the falseness of the role. I struggled a lot with playing the role of the *Baby Girl* while simultaneously feeling so much shame about him being my father. This inability to feel truthful with my dad about his imprisonment is part of the reason I feel our relationship has been more distanced compared to those of my other siblings. How does one get closer to someone when the biggest block in their relationship is an off-limit topic? This worry about my role as *Baby Girl*, as well as the fear of stigmatisation, definitely shadowed my happiness for my father's long-awaited prison release. As soon as I heard he would be coming home, I was worried about how he would ruin the new life, the new Kayla I was building away at college. I wondered how I could continue to keep my distance between him and the rest of my life like I had learned to do so long ago.

Emotional Labour

Unfortunately, the struggles that parents experience in relation to parental incarceration do not go unnoticed by their children. One of the young children in Boswell's (2002) research expresses her sadness about the changes she has noticed in her mother's demeanour. Arditti et al. (2003)

concluded that parental incarceration can cause feelings of stress, fatigue and isolation among the non-incarcerated parents. Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) wrote in their research that children ‘were in fact keenly attuned to their caregivers' stress and often worked to ease it by taking on adult responsibilities’ (2008: p. 1124). Children with incarcerated parents are much more aware and connected to their caregiver’s emotions than the caregivers were aware. Similar to Boswell, a participant in Nesmith and Ruhland’s noticed a decline in their mother’s welfare due to incarceration. He wished he could help change things for her because ‘...she breaks herself a lot. I wish she wasn't as fragile’ (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008: 1124).

Arlie Russell Hochschild describes emotional labour as the ‘management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display’ (2012: p.7). It requires someone to ‘induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others’ (2012: p.7).

My search soon led me to the works of Erving Goffman, to whom I am indebted for his keen sense of how we try to control our appearance even as we unconsciously observe rules about how we ought to appear to others. But again, something was missing. How does a person act on feeling-or stop acting on it, or even stop feeling?. (Hochschild, 2012: p.xviii)

We often have a private and public face we use to help us manage our emotions and navigate through society. While Goffman does discuss this concept, he does not go to the same depth as Hochschild. Hochschild theory includes two ways of acting: *surface acting* and *deep acting* (Hochschild, 2012). *Surface acting* tends to be the way a person uses their body language to maintain their act. *Deep acting* typically is when a person tries to express a self-induced real feeling. We all do a bit of acting, but Hochschild’s theory examines the role certain feelings can have on

our actions. In the following chapters, many of the stories feathering other children with incarcerated parents highlight the emotional labour many children find themselves responsible for.

It is not uncommon for counsellors with difficult childhoods to have established defences while growing up to help mask their vulnerability (Barnett, 2007). ‘The need to care for others is closely linked to feelings of shame and insecurity’ (Barnett, 2007: p. 267). ‘Therapists may become self-sacrificing in order to avoid losing clients, just as they had felt compelled to put the needs of their parents first in order to feel secure’ (Barnett, 2007: p. 267), but I am sure this could be more widely applied than to just therapists. To me, this sounds like what many people call a *People Pleaser*.

“Kayla has a Secret”

Kayla has a secret that none of her friends can know. If any of them were to find out she fears that they may all want to go.

Kayla has a secret she keeps it deep inside. Her daddy is in prison, this she can't confide.

Kayla has a secret she misses her dad a lot. She doesn't tell her mom but he is always in her thoughts.

Kayla has a secret that makes her feel very ashamed. She is scared if her friends find out she will be blamed.

Kayla's secret is loose, her cousin let it out. Now everyone knows, she is going to stand out.

Kayla had a secret; it has now been set free. Now my friends no longer see me.

I think I was introduced to ‘stigma’ through my father. I was around five years old when he committed his crime, but what I remember most vividly from that ordeal is something my

grandmother told me. Before I went back to school, she told me to make sure I did not tell anyone about my dad going to jail. 'If they did find out they may think differently about you.' I believe that was the moment I began to understand and internalise the fact that his actions were my shame to carry. My poem 'Kayla has a secret' is my way of beginning to speak about my relationship with stigma, shame, and secrecy. Stigma has a way of making a person feel really isolated in both their experience and feelings. My father's imprisonment was something I felt I was not allowed to speak of, and later, it became something I could not talk to anyone about, including my own family.

The culture of silence around parental incarceration runs deep. Back in 1978, while researching children with imprisoned fathers, researchers Sack and Seidler noticed that the children reacted with anxiety or worry when asked about their fathers. They state the typical response they received was 'We're not supposed to talk about him' and that being up the topic was very taboo (Sack and Seidler, 1978: p. 263). This was definitely how I interpreted the tone of the message my grandmother gave to me. From that moment, my father's incarceration was taboo and, therefore, should be approached with caution.

An Introduction to Stigmatisation

The Greeks were the originators of the word *stigma* and its use to signify someone with immoral status who was a slave, criminal, or traitor (Goffman, 1990). They chose to mark these immoral people with physical cuts and burns to advertise their shame to everyone so that they could be avoided. The idea of physical expression of stigmatisation continued during the rise of Christians. They believed stigmatised people would be affected by eruptive marks on the skin or signs of physical disorder (Goffman, 1990). This practice continued worldwide as a form of stigmatisation and punishment for criminals well into the 18th century. People would often be branded with marks

identifying them as criminals, denoting their specific crimes (Koslofsky, 2023). Skin markings made people more socially and morally legible and, therefore, label them and treat them accordingly. Although today we do not mark the skin of the stigmatised, other methods are still used to differentiate ‘them’ from ‘us’. I argue that my father’s striped pants could be seen as a new form of stigma marking or an ex-prisoners inability to vote or travel to certain places. While I have had no issue obtaining a passport and travelling to see the world, I cannot say the same for my father. I am not even sure if he is legally allowed to ever visit me at my home here in Scotland due to him being an ex-felon. Additionally, the use of prison numbers instead of names during incarceration could be seen as a process of stigmatisation. Those with power are literally stripping the identity away from offenders and labelling them as ‘Property of ... Correctional Facility’ as described in norahS Youth Publications (2013: p. 44).

Erving Goffman’s (1990) book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (originally published 1963)* was an important sociological research examination of society’s influence on stigma. He was interested in understanding and exposing the *ground rules* governing everyday interactions that people conform to, knowingly or otherwise, in order to maintain social order. These *ground rules* allowed people to perform in society with normative regulation, avoiding the stain of stigma. Goffman defines stigma as undesirable attributes that reduce a person from ‘whole and usual to a tainted, discounted one’ (1990: pg. 10). Goffman (1990) identifies three types of stigmas that can keep individuals from easily being received in society. The first stigma type is for people with ‘abominations of the body’ or ‘physical deformities’ (Goffman, 1990: pg. 11). The second is ‘blemishes of individual character’ (Goffman, 1990: pg. 11). This can be perceived as attributes of being ‘weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty’ (Goffman, 1990: pg. 11), often assumed attributes found among populations with

experience of 'mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts, and radical political behavior' (Goffman, 1990: pg. 11). Lastly tribal stigma recognises those stigmatised due to race, nation, and/or religion (Goffman, 1990: pg. 11). Goffman highlights the potential of these stigmas being 'transmitted through lineages and equally [contaminating] all members of the family' (Goffman, 1990: pg. 11). Under Goffman's stigma categories, my father's stigma falls into the second category, but I am unsure where my stigma should be placed. Goffman (1990) discussed tribal stigma as a transmitted stigma that contaminates the family, but the impact of incarceration is not highlighted as a possible transmitter.

Following Goffman's inspiring research on stigma, many researchers furthered his research in order to better understand stigma's nature, sources and consequences across various academic disciplines. Contributions to the conversation of stigma have come from researchers in psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, and social geography (Link and Phelan, 2001). Multidisciplinary research was beneficial in developing diverse interpretations of stigma; however, in that process, many definitions of stigma were developed among the different disciplines. Through my exploration of stigma one definition I resonated with was by Jones et al. (1984). Jones et al. (1984) describe stigma as the relationship between attributes and stereotypes. To me, Jones et al.'s interpretation of stigma expresses how a person's undesirable trait or condition can be amplified by others' preconceived ideas or beliefs. Incarceration is a socially devalued condition; therefore, those who receive that label either directly or indirectly may receive negative societal reactions resulting in adverse repercussions.

Scrambler (2020) explores the relationship between stigma and deviance. Scrambler defines stigma as 'an infringement against cultural norms of shame' and deviance as 'an infringement against cultural norms of blame' (2020: p.25). The stigmatised label stems from an *ontological deficit*,

trait or attribute in the ‘being’ rather than just a ‘wrong action’ (Scambler, 2020: p.26). Whereas deviance is deserving of ‘sanctions or punishments’ as they are ‘at fault’ and therefore *morally deficit* (Scambler, 2020: p.26). Scambler (2020) considered it important to extend our understanding to incorporate *enacted, felt, and projected* stigma and deviance. Enacted stigma or deviance includes those experiences of ‘actual discrimination on the grounds of perceived ontological and moral deficits’ (Scambler, 2020: p. 26). Felt stigma or deviance includes those experiences of ‘[possessing] an internalised sense of shame and blame respectively, plus, critically, a fear of meeting with actual discrimination’ (Scambler, 2020: p. 26). Project stigma or deviance includes those experiences of ‘explicit rejection of enacted and felt stigma and deviance, respectively, and a purposeful intent to resist and counter them’ (Scambler, 2020: p.26). Scambler argues for the importance of understanding in the difference between stigma and deviance and shame and blame.

Link and Phelan (2001) also explore the topic of stigma. They acknowledge Goffman's academic contribution and expand on his ideas of the relationship between an ‘attribute and stereotype’ (Link and Phelan, 2001: pg. 366). In their research, they conceptualise stigma as ‘elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur(ing) in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold’ (Link and Phelan, 2001: p. 367). Expanding their definition to allow the convergence of interrelated components led Link and Phelan to conclude that being associated with a stigmatised group can dramatically impact a person’s ‘life chances’. These life chances could determine opportunities such as ‘careers, earnings, social ties, housing, criminal involvement, health or life itself’ (2001, p. 381). Stigma can affect several of a person’s life chances, aiding in keeping the stigmatised person in a persistent predicament of disadvantage (Link and Phelan, 2001). Of the definitions of stigma I have come across, Link and Phelan’s (2001)

seems the most well-rounded. It speaks to various experiences within the overarching experience of stigma. It allows the subtleties in stigma to breathe and have space to be voiced. Not all experiences of stigma and shame are so overt but are instead held in a side glance or an unreturned phone call. Link and Phelan (2001) conceptualise the stigma process through the exploration of five key components: (1) distinguishing and labelling human differences, (2) linking cultural beliefs to undesirable characteristics or negative stereotypes, (3) distinguishing “us” from “them”, (4) experiencing inequality due to status loss and discrimination, (5) understanding that it takes social, cultural, economic, and political power to stigmatise. I will go into more detail about the experience of being a child with an incarcerated parent and the stigmatisation process using these components as a guide in the following chapter. This thesis aims to understand the stigma attached to incarceration for offenders and their families and explore the relationship children with incarcerated parents have with stigma related to their parent’s incarceration.

Chapter 4: Solitary Confinement – Shame and Stigma

“To be or not to be Roden”

Looking back on my teen years, I can imagine I probably was not the easiest daughter to get to know, especially when I spent most of those years trying to distance myself from the image of a ‘child of an incarcerated parent’ as much as I could. At that point in my life, my mother had already remarried, and while I don’t think I ever really looked to my stepfather to fill that ‘Dad’ role, what I did look to for was his legitimacy. He helped make me and my family look normal, or at least that is what I thought in my head. He could play the role of the father figure in all the situations that my real dad couldn’t because he was in prison, but better than a place figure, my step-father stopped the questions. Because he was around, people didn’t ask as much where my real dad was, and that meant I didn’t have to lie. Although I had one prepared if they did. ‘Oh, my dad lives and works away.’ All I wanted during those years was to stop the questions. To distance myself from the shame of having an incarcerated parent.

So, at the age of 14, I came up with a brilliant idea. ‘Dad, would it be okay if I changed my last name to match Coach’s?’ Silence... During those years, I was the one who had begun to talk less on the phone calls, so when my dad went silent for a while, it was noticeable. Finally, ‘Why would you want to do that?’ I replied, much less convinced of my previous brilliance, ‘Oh, it was just a thought, you know, ‘cause Bear and Mom have that last name.’ However, I knew the tone of the call felt different. No longer was he talking as freely to me. I had hurt his feelings, and silence burned me through the phone like frost, coldness spreading fast. In my desperate need to distance myself from being a ‘child of an incarcerated parent’, I hadn’t actually thought about what that would feel like for my dad. That the distance I craved for safety might actually feel like he was

fading from my life. While he probably suspected over the years that I was cutting him out of my 'family picture,' this was the first time I had been so blunt about it. So, in his face about my desire to not be associated with his 'bad apple' legacy. Although my worries about the implications and expectations associated with the 'Roden' name continued for many years, I never again brought the discussion up to my dad.

I wrote this vignette before I started reading a lot of children with incarcerated parents literature. When coming up with the concept of my thesis, I knew I wanted to include this moment. This moment with my father has always haunted me, and I wanted to write about it to explore it. Throughout my childhood, I had always tried to balance being his daughter with also hiding him as my father. He needed me to be his daughter, to need him as a father. But I needed distance from him. The distance was not because I was ashamed of him as a person but of what he represented. To me, he represented rejection, seclusion, and damage. When I asked him to change my name, it was not because I did not want him as my father, but because I did not want his damaged name. Within my family, it did not seem like anyone else struggled with this dynamic. That is why I was a bit surprised when I read similar stories from other children shared in research. I thought I was a horrible daughter and person for feeling the way I did. However, reading that other children with incarcerated parents also experienced similar feelings felt vindicating. It helped validate this experience for me, even though it happened almost twenty years ago.

In this chapter, I will explore various theories and concepts of stigma and shame. The literature I present will be from various disciplines. Using these concepts, I explore the impact stigma and shame have on children with incarcerated parents. The autoethnographic vignettes in this section

depict my struggle with these themes and the significance of their impact on my life. My use of them is to add to the words of other children with incarcerated parents to create a robust image of the effects parental incarceration can have on a child's relationship with stigma and shame.

The Harm We Ignore: Stigma and Shame

Stigma and incarceration are no strangers to the inmates or their families. In Goffman's theorising of stigmatisation, he discusses the concept of *wise ones*. These are individuals who may appear normal while also being intimately connected to stigma. The concept of wise ones can be applied to children with incarcerated parents.

Goffman (1990) states: A second type of wise person is the individual who is related through the social structure to the stigmatized individual—a relationship that leads the wider society to treat both individuals in some respects as one. Thus the loyal spouse of a mental patient, the *daughter of the ex-con*, the parent of the cripple, the friend of the blind, the family of the hangman, are all obliged to share some of the discredit of the stigmatized person to whom they are related. One response to this fate is to embrace it, and to live within the world of one's stigmatized connexion. It should be added that persons who acquire a degree of stigma in this way can themselves have connexions who acquire a little of the disease twice-removed. The problems faced by stigmatized persons spread out in waves, but of diminishing intensity. (p.30, emphasis added)

There is still so much to be learned about the child's experience of stigmatisation (Arditti et al., 2003; Phillips and Gates, 2011; Condry and Smith, 2018; Saunders, 2018). Phillips and Gates (2011) conducted research to study the stigma experienced by children with incarcerated parents

in an attempt to understand this phenomenon better. Primarily using Link and Phelan's (2001) research on the stigmatisation process as a foundation, they provided insight into

Why children and families may conceal the fact that a parent is in prison, the potentially protective function of social withdrawal, how the fear of stigmatization may impede help seeking, and the potential for helping efforts and research to contribute to the stigmatization of this group of children. (Phillips and Gates, 2011: p. 291)

They concluded that the stigmatisation process does impact the children with incarcerated parents with both internal and external consequences. Their research explores how these children may experience perceived, enacted or felt stigma. While their research is informative and incorporates other research well in its argument, it would have been nice to hear from the children themselves about these experiences. Phillips and Gates (2011) agree that including children's voices would be beneficial within research moving forward. I found that the research by Saunders (2018) was quite similar, except that she did include the voices of children with incarcerated parents when discussing examples of stigmatisation. Saunders's (2018) research sets out to hear from the children directly about the social, emotional, and practical challenges of having an incarcerated parent and accessing support (e.g. family, friends, school, social). Saunders concluded that due to the stigma around parental incarceration, the children experience 'dilemmas for them in which they must weigh the costs of seeking support against others learning about their circumstances' (2018, p. 26).

1- Labelling Difference

Similar to Goffman, Link and Phelan are interested in the role society plays throughout the stigma process. In their research, they discuss the concept of difference and how that leads to *labels*. They

highlight that once society identifies and labels something as different, it often goes unquestioned in order to maintain the status quo. Socially, beliefs or situations become “just the way things are” and, therefore, not challenged or questioned. This sort of difference labelling can lead to stigmatised experiences. Many differences are identified and reinforced through the language utilised in the stigmatised labelling process (Phillips and Gates, 2011). The label “felon” tends to immediately inform others that you have disrupted the status quo. As for the label “child of an imprisoned parent”, it signifies to others that your childhood is different than theirs. *Children with incarcerated parents* has become more than a harmless descriptor. It is now a label where they are stigmatised for attributes they personally do not possess because they have an incarcerated parent (Phillips and Gates, 2011: p. 287).

Stigma is not confined to only the stigmatised individual but can also span those associated with him or her, especially their families (Goffman, 1963; Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest, 2003). The stigma associated with criminals often extends to their families. Children with incarcerated parents have reported feelings of being socially deficient in some way compared to their peers and often secluded from school or friendship opportunities (Saunders, 2018). Additionally, some of the males in Saunders's (2018) research believed they were targeted by police and had their behaviour more heavily scrutinised, compared to their peers, because of their parent's criminality. Having an absent parent can make it difficult to participate in normal family activities, further highlighting your differences. You are labelled as different when you are a child of an incarcerated parent, but that difference is not due to you or your actions. Difference is not always welcome from others. Different is unknown, and the unknown is often met with doubt and concern. At least, that is what I grew up believing and feeling I would be met by others.

2- The Undesirables: Negative Attributes

When labelled differences are linked to negative qualities, the process of stigmatisation occurs (Phillips and Gates, 2011). Link and Phelan believe that a ‘stigma involves a label and a stereotype, with the label linking a person to a set of undesirable characteristics that form the stereotype’ (2001: p. 369). Link, Yang, Phelan, and Collins (2004) determined views towards differences and negative attributes can be influenced by the following factors: 1. the ability to conceal, 2. if feelings of fear or threat are elicited, and 3. the level of responsibility for creating or ending the stigmatised conditions. According to research, our process for making decisions can be impacted by our relationship with labelling and stereotyping. They can impact our beliefs and social understanding, presenting as though our cognitive process appears to operate on a preconscious level.

Concealability

Some differences are easier to hide than others. When you look at a child, it will most likely not be readily apparent if they have experienced parental divorce, abandonment, death and/or incarceration. Alternatively, other differences, such as physical disfigurement or illness, are more visible. ‘Individuals who hide stigmatized differences must be constantly vigilant for signs others know about their difference and alert for circumstances that might lead to discovery’ (Phillips and Gates, 2011: p. 287). Answering questions about their family and even sharing the same family name was described as a source of relentless stress for children with an incarcerated parent (Saunders, 2018). Like I shared in my vignette, “To be or not to be Roden”, I was always worried someone would make the link between my father and me simply because of my name. Every time I introduced myself, I was scared of recognition and watching for warning signs. Some participants described that in order to limit this stress, they avoided new situations and people.

Then when people ask you, oh yeah what does your dad do for a living, you're like hmmm. You're not really sure what you say to people, you don't want to be judged and you feel like if you tell someone you're going to be shamed and embarrassed and humiliated. (Julie, 15 years, Saunders, 2018: p. 24)

Many stigmatised individuals turn to secrecy as they are unsure whom they can trust, even among friends and family. Over half of the children in Sack and Seidler's (1978) research either would not discuss their father's criminality or offered distorted versions that helped make the situation bearable. It is not uncommon for children with incarcerated parents to make up stories about their incarcerated parents either to lessen the severity of their crime, *He came here because he stole a watermelon*, or make it seem like he isn't in prison at all, *He's here to work and earn money* (Sack and Seidler, 1978: p. 263, emphasis added). When people would ask me about my father, I would tell them that he worked in a different state. When he was released from prison, it was not easy, but at least my cover story helped to maintain my secret. *Oh, my dad has just moved back to the state*. No one really ever questioned it. I do, however find it very interesting how similar my cover story is to one of the children in Sack and Seidler's research despite the time difference. It makes me wonder how much of children's protective actions are instinct, learned from society, or a mixture.

In my poem "Kayla has a Secret", I speak about the struggle of trusting others with this vulnerable part of myself and ultimately trusting my secrets more. If no one knows, then no one can hurt me, right? Stigmatised individuals may try to conceal their differences (Link et al., 2004), but this can keep them from finding others with similar differences who might be able to support them. Concealment may impede stigmatised individuals from connecting and sharing their true selves. For so long, I felt the need to project the image of a person whose manner could not possibly be

connected to a criminal. I believed that if I were “smart” enough, “good” enough, “popular” enough, it would be unfathomable that “I” could have a father in prison.

Although I knew from the beginning about my father’s imprisonment and had to navigate the stigmatisation that came with that label, that is not the experience for all children with incarcerated parents. As discussed earlier, some families make the choice to conceal the parent’s imprisonment from their children ((Phillips and Gates, 2011). Growing up, I would often feel envious of my step-sister and step-brother as it did not seem like they had to live with stigma. It seemed like everyone protected them from the stigmatisation of being a child with an imprisoned parent. As an adult, I know that their way of growing up came with their own challenges (e.g. when they eventually did find out), but to a kid, it seemed like they had a life unbothered by the stressors dominating mine. Alternatively, my brother grew up like me, knowing about my father, but didn’t seem to conceal it at the same level as me. He may not have openly offered the information, but I do not also recall him actively hiding it in the same ways I did. I find it interesting that within one family, you can have so many different stigmatisation experiences as a child of an imprisoned parent. I think researching parental incarceration concealment experiences between siblings and as children into adulthood would provide valuable insight into the lives of children with incarcerated parents.

Perceived Threat

‘Negative attitudes about stigmatized differences are also influenced by the degree to which they are believed to pose a danger or threat’ (Phillips and Gates, 2011: p. 288). The threat of physical or emotional harm could influence a person’s decisions regarding their stigma (ie. concealment). Some children with incarcerated parents may also have the additional worry and consideration that the “apple doesn’t fall far from the tree” (Phillips and Gates, 2011; Saunders, 2018). While

growing up, I was so worried that people would think I was ‘bad’ or ‘spoiled’ just because my father was who he was. As covered earlier, I feel much of the motivations behind research on inmates’ children is related to this ‘apple’ idea. Research seems focused on locating criminality within the family.

When you do finally get the courage to tell someone about your imprisoned parent, or someone finds out, inevitably, they want to know: for what, what happened, the details. This is the part of the interaction I dread the most. Stigmatising attitudes may differ depending on the type of crime and level of responsibility (Phillips and Gates, 2011). Children with imprisoned parents may have some understanding of these attitudes as it is not uncommon for them to sometimes give altered explanations about their parent’s criminality. Is a child whose parent is in prison for embezzlement treated differently than a child whose parent is in for murder? I know that I worried and believed people would think the worst of my family because my father had killed someone. I know that every time I tell others about him and his crime, I always add a disclaimer about how he was never a fighter and this was a freak accident in a way. Unfortunately, although I do not think poorly of my dad for his actions as I understood his circumstances, that does not stop negative attitudes from developing towards him in relation to his criminal and murderer labels by others. The worries about him being perceived negatively and me by the association are a lot of stress for a child. If I can worry and think poorly of these labels, then how can I not believe others will not as well?

Responsibility

‘Individuals are also generally viewed more negatively if they are believed to be responsible for their condition or to have control over ending it’ (Phillips and Gates, 2011: p. 288). I feel many people would class criminality and imprisonment as a controlled responsibility. Thus, more

negative stigmatised attributes may be applied to prisoners and their families. For this reason, Phillips and Gates (2011) believe in the importance of communicating to the children with imprisoned parents that they are not responsible for their parent's actions and circumstances. My mother was the person who offered this assurance to me while I was growing up. She tried her best to reinforce the idea that my father's mistake was his shame to carry. Unfortunately, it appears I was not a good listener, and, in some ways, I feel like I did share that responsibility with him. Not the responsibility for his actions, but the responsibility of paying for those actions.

3- Social Status: Us vs Them

When first meeting someone, we tend to use our first impressions to determine their “social identity” and thus determine their “social status” (Goffman, 1990). With these impressions, we are able to determine if they are similar to us and, therefore, should be treated similarly or if they are different and, therefore, deserve different treatment. Using labeled differences, the stigmatisation process separates people into categories of “us” and “them” (Phillips and Gates, 2011: p. 288). The stigmatisation of “them” identifies and attributes undesirable labels that distinguish “them” as different. Once differences can be identified, then stereotypes can be formed, further separating “us” from “them”. The “them”s become the stigmatised people of the society, and are often treated unfavourably compared to the “us”. Link and Phelan (2001) note a few incidents in America's history with establishing social order by identifying “us” and “them”. Some of these examples included America's history with African-American Slaves, American Indians, Irish and other immigrant populations.

At times, a person may belong to multiple stigmatised groups. ‘Negative attributions about one stigmatized difference [...] can reify negative attributions about other stigmatized differences’

(Phillips and Gates, 2011: p. 289). People within the criminal justice system are often seen to interrelate with the stigmatising attributes of ‘racial/ethnic groups, people with mental illnesses, people with drug addictions, people who are poor’ (Phillips and Gates, 2011: p. 289). Society tends to believe these stigmatised groups are dangerous, threatening the status quo, and should be segregated. I would argue that using this logic, stigmatising beliefs about children with incarcerated parents often interact with stigmatising beliefs about youthful deviant behaviour.

4- Devaluation and Discrimination

‘When people are labeled, set apart, and linked to undesirable characteristics, a rationale is constructed for devaluing, rejecting, and excluding them’ (Link and Phelan, 2001: p. 370-371). Link and Phelan (2001) concluded that this component of the stigma process leads stigmatised people to experience status loss and discrimination. Individuals recognised as belonging to a lower social status may be subjected to distancing or exclusion within their communities and perceived as ‘unsuitable marriage partners, friends, playmates, team-mates, co-workers, or business associates’ (Phillips and Gates, 2011: p. 289). The low status established due to a person's connection to stigma becomes just another reason for further experiences of shame and discrimination. Research has indicated that stigmatised groups experience inequality in such areas as income, education, psychological wellbeing, and health (Link and Phelan 2001).

Discrimination or Enacted Stigma

Status loss is not the only experience stigmatised people face but also discrimination. Discrimination is probably what most people think about when they think about the negative experiences stigmatised people have to endure. ‘Discrimination refers to behaviors toward or against a person based on their membership in a group or class.’ (Phillips and Gates, 2011, p. 290).

Discrimination is often categorised into either individual or structural. Link and Phelan (2001) comment that while individual discrimination does occur with considerable regularity towards stigmatised groups, it is seen as a simplistic form of stigma. I agree that while individual discrimination may be the most direct, I argue it is probably the scariest and most visible. I feel it is the scariest because it is often the most confrontational and the “perceived threat” that many stigmatised people imagine. Children with incarcerated parents have shared experiences of emotional, physical and virtual bullying and discrimination from their family, teachers and peers (Saunders, 2018).

Experiences of bullying and discrimination can begin as early as elementary school and are perpetrated by both teachers and peers (Saunders, 2018). Children in the studies shared experiences where they felt they were their parent’s incarceration was used as an excuse to treat them differently.

One young person described how, when asking for some assistance with homework, the teacher became aware of the fact that their parent was currently incarcerated. Rather than (sic.) responding to the young person's needs, the young person described that the teacher reflected inaccurate and offensive ideas about the young person. (Saunders, 2018, p. 24)

Some children even reported that they felt that their teachers used the information about their parents against them as a way to manipulate their behaviour, telling them if they continued to act in certain ways, they would end up incarcerated like their parent/s (Saunders, 2018). Additionally, children expressed beliefs that teachers were often reluctant to help them and made negative assumptions about them just because they had a parent incarcerated.

It's not very common for somebody to tell you their parents are in jail, and that's [the reason] why you're struggling because you've had to take on all these responsibilities...So

when you tell somebody they kind of take a step back ... Yeah. He [the teacher] just... started telling me stories about these children in the drug world and yeah I was just like, 'is that how you see me, is that like what you're visualising me as?' I didn't really know how to take it so yeah, it was just awkward, very awkward. (Jessie Claire, 17 years, Saunders, 2018, p. 24)

Teachers are not the only ones to treat children with incarcerated parents differently and poorly. Children with incarcerated parents have also reported experiencing problematic behaviour from their peers. They have shared a range of bullying experiences, such as being excluded, teased, and physically abused. Many children also expressed how rumours and stories would be spread about them and their families by peers amongst peers. Peers are not always the most empathetic support for children with incarcerated parents. Many children have expressed feeling bullied by their peers and experiencing physical and emotional abuse from them. Children can be excluded by others or teased because of their parent's incarceration (Saunders, 2018: p. 25).

So it was really hard because every kid was teasing me and they're like "I'm going to see my mum this weekend, what are you doing?" and then I'd be like "I don't know" and they'd be like "well at least I get to see my mum" and then it'd just be really hard especially because there's lots of bullies in primary school and high school. (Rebecca 15 years, Saunders, 2018: p. 25)

As we have been discussing, we are taught about stigma from a young age. Unless we actively teach our children to be empathetic and understand differences, then the likelihood of them participating in the stigmatisation process will not diminish. Growing up, I do not remember any examples of direct discrimination, but I definitely feel like I spent a lot of my time navigating my

childhood in order to avoid potential direct discrimination confrontations. I know I was definitely worried about my peers and teachers finding out about my father and them starting to pick on me or treat me 'less than' for it. When I think about my fear of discrimination, oftentimes, it is about possible actual discrimination confrontation versus fear of institutional or structural discrimination. I have found that the fear of actual discrimination has often dictated my interactions with others throughout my life.

Research is just beginning to explore the impact social media plays on the experiences of children with incarcerated parents. In Saunders's (2018) research, a small number of children expressed how social media exacerbated their bullying experiences. In the age of the smartphone, it can feel as though privacy is not always guaranteed. It has always been common for news or newspapers to report crime, but the use of social media has increased in the past few years. When they report a crime story and post it on social media, the likelihood of the criminal's children being identified, harassed and stigmatised increases (Saunders, 2018).

So I felt really embarrassed that people I'd never even met before know who I am because of my dad. So I just want to change my last name because it's embarrassing. I don't have a criminal record, I've never done anything wrong but the police know who I am because of my dad's mistakes. Yeah, and even at work, like because it was published in a newspaper article about him, I didn't really appreciate that, whoever published it, because they said where I worked and they said my dad's name. And at work when I serve people my name comes up on the screen that they can see so actually like the week after that I started working again and these customers came in, like: oh, yeah, you're the girl that had the dad....And I felt so embarrassed. (Rochelle, 16 years, quoted in Saunders, 2018: p. 25)

As a kid who was often in the newspaper for her accomplishments, I think I would struggle if my father's crime happened in today's "visible" world, and that became my identity online. Perhaps part of my success in remaining incognito for all those years was partially due to the slowness of information. Alternatively, I argue that video-based "accountability" social media posts have greatly increased. Individuals who are experiencing individual discrimination are video recording these interactions and posting them for accountability and support. Despite the rise of support offered to these stigmatised individuals, there is still a lot of negativity via the comments and reaction videos. Research acknowledges that children experience discrimination due to having a parent in jail or prison, but little is known of any discriminatory treatment by others such as family, teachers or helping professionals (Phillips and Gates, 2011, p. 290).

Structural discrimination explores how stigmatised groups can be discriminated amidst institutional practices. Link and Phelan (2001) explore this through an exploration of the discrimination those with schizophrenia can face due to their mental health label. They highlight that due to the negative labels associated with schizophrenia, this stigmatised group receives less funding and resources in several areas, including care, management and research. As a result of stigma in our systems towards this group, they are left exposed to adverse circumstances and experiences. Structural discrimination could easily also apply to groups impacted by incarceration. Policies and practices often discriminate against people with convictions such as making it difficult for them to improve their lives post-incarceration (Phillips and Gates, 2011). Ex-offenders can experience difficulties finding employment, securing appropriate housing, and re-establishing their parental rights/visitation because of their criminal label. Sadly, the structural discrimination parents experience can also trickle down, affecting the lives of their children and contributing to intergenerational incarceration.

Phillips and Gates (2011) note that research understanding the level at which discrimination impacts children with incarcerated parents' experiences with institutions such as public schools, mental health organisations, child welfare, and juvenile justice is still lacking. As I have discussed, politics and government agencies have played an important role in the construction of America's crime and incarceration image. Individuals and families impacted by incarceration have felt structural discrimination, whether through the limiting of their civil rights, lack of support sensitive to their particular circumstances or needs, and/or even lack of research awareness or funding.

Perceived or Felt Stigma

In Saunders's (2018) research, children and young people expressed fear of being judged or treated negatively because of their parent's criminality. They described themselves as needing to be alert to the possibility of being exposed by others.

Children are aware of societal attitudes toward stigmatized groups from a very young age' and 'understand that they and others around them are subject to being judged based on negative stereotypes. (Phillips and Gates, 2011: p. 289)

In connection with my discussion earlier about the level of stigma depending on the type of offence, Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest (2003) may have an example of this phenomenon in action during their research. In their research notes, they commented that 'some study participants seemed reluctant to answer survey questions regarding the type of offence for which their family member was being held (2003: p. 199).' I wonder if the family's unwillingness to disclose is due to worries over the perceived stigma related to their family member's particular crime.

In “Starting Over”, I explore my belief that this threat would lessen the farther I got away from the source. My power over this threat felt like it grew with each mile because the opportunity of others finding out felt more in my control. It was less likely that my friends, co-workers, or colleagues would find out about my stigma membership without me actively choosing to tell them. That meant I had the power to decide to involve that part of myself in my relationships when I was ready and felt safe to do so.

Internalised or Projected Stigma

Stereotype conceptions are developed early in life through socialisation (Link and Phelan, 2001). Society teaches us to have expectations regarding stigmatised people relating to their character, beliefs, values and behaviours. Negative labelling and stereotypes can negatively affect a person’s social status, resulting in a diminished view of self in one’s own eyes as well as others. These stigma expectations can not only lead to external experiences of devaluation and rejection but also internal ones. If a person grows up believing certain things about a stigmatised group and then finds themselves part of said group, it may be a struggle for them not to reject or devalue themselves or fear others doing so. Just because you are a member of the stigmatised group does not mean you do not begin to develop negative beliefs about yourself. If you hear enough negativity from society about who you are supposed to be just because you fall into that group, sometimes those beliefs begin to stick.

While reading the children’s book *My Daddy’s in Jail* by Anthony Curicio (2015), I felt like I began to see the struggle with stigma and discrimination depicted in the story. *My Daddy’s in Jail* is a true story written and illustrated by an imprisoned father for his two daughters during his five-year sentence in prison (Curicio, 2015). I assume that while the story may include some true actual

stories, it mostly conveys the family's true emotional experiences of parental incarceration. This story depicts a cockroach (Rhymer Roach) interested in getting answers for the children (Bella and Lyla Bear) about what life in jail is like for their father (Daddy Bear). However, on the way to the jail, Rhymer breaks a law, resulting in his own incarceration. Prior to his own incarceration, Rhymer associates 'rule breakers' with adjectives such as mean, flawed, and bad. The book insinuates common beliefs that those who are 'rule breakers' do not care, lack the ability to share, and do not treat others the way they should be treated. During Rhymer's trial, he points out that he is good and polite as a defense to justify his difference from the 'rule breakers'. After some time in jail, Rhymer begins to question if he is bad like the rest of the 'rule breakers'. Luckily, as the story progresses, so do the ideas about the 'rule breakers'. They are not bad but have only made a mistake and, therefore, should be forgiven on their path to redemption. I believe Rhymer provides a good example of how society can shape our understanding of stigmatised groups. In this example, we can ask ourselves where Rhymer's original negative feelings towards 'rule breakers' develop if not through society. I feel it can be safely assumed he had not had previous interactions with any 'rule breakers' in jail, or the book would have referred to that. Particularly since he was curious about helping the Bear daughters find answers to their own questions about jail. While I am happy this book is out there as a resource for children with a parent in jail or prison, I do get frustrated with its morality focus. I feel that many of the books marketed to children present messages of forgiveness and lessons on 'good versus bad'. I think Curicio (2015) got a bit sidetracked from his initial goal of providing us insight into the experience of jail for fathers and children to this debate on the morality of 'rule breakers' and forgiveness.

Earlier, I discussed children with incarcerated parents' worries about how the "apple does not fall far from the tree", and this was further confirmed in Saunders's (2018) research. Worries about

being a “bad apple” can be both externally and internally driven. Young people in Saunders’s research expressed uncertainty if being related to their imprisoned parent made them a “bad person” too or meant they also had “damaged or “tainted” attributes predetermining who or what they are going to be (e.g. a bad apple) (2018: p. 23-24). If children with imprisoned parents experience judgment enough, it would be difficult for them not to internalize that judgment into negative messages about the self and feel shame. This is why having supportive people in these children’s lives offering positive societal messages can be crucial. Sadly, that supportive narrative is not always available through family, teachers and other adults.

Like everyone gives up on me...they just know that I'm going to be exactly like my mum. My grandma does, everyone does. I got told since the age of eight that I'm going to pregnant by the time I'm 14...at times I'm like I want to prove everyone they're wrong but at the end of the day I know me and I know that's too much fucking effort so fuck that I'll just have fun and die young, that's pretty much what I'm doing. (Natasha, 14 years, Saunders, 2018: p. 24)

5- Stigma power

‘Stigma is dependent on power’ (Link and Phelan, 2001: p. 376) and ‘stigmatization cannot occur without differences in social, cultural, economic, and political power (Phillips and Gates, 2011, p. 290). “Stigma power” is the concept that ‘stigmatizers have strong motivations to keep people down, in or away and that they best achieve these aims through stigma processes that are indirect, broadly effective and hidden in taken-for-granted cultural circumstances’ (Link and Phelan, 2014: pg. 24). In Benninger et al. (2023) research they explore the concept of incarceration as a social determinant of health. According to the World Health Organization (2008), social determinants are

conditions caused by the unequal distribution of power, income, goods, and services that often have a negative impact on their ability to lead a flourishing life. For stigmatised populations in particular, life with social determinants can impact a person's access to health care, education, work, housing, or community support. This inequality can be attributed to poor social policies and programmes, unfair economic arrangements, and bad politics. Those in power utilise labels and stereotypes to keep stigmatised groups isolated and disadvantaged.

Distance between the powerful and stigmatised groups can also be attributed to the labels and stereotypes the stigmatised create for the powerful. Link and Phelan (2001) do not go into a lot of detail about this phenomenon but give a few examples of how stigmatised groups use stereotypes against the powerful. Individuals of relatively powerless groups may avoid or minimise contact and also create and share derogatory comments and jokes about those in more powerful groups. It seems important to acknowledge how power is essential in society's understanding of and engagement in stigma-related processes (Link and Phelan, 2001). Stigma-related processes appear to generate division on both ends of the power scale, further contributing to power disparities and misunderstanding. Research has explored how labels and stereotypes regarding crime and incarceration generally have a negative impact on the resources and opportunities available to individuals and families impacted by imprisonment. As explored in a few of my vignettes, I was definitely aware of the weight of my father's 'criminal' label and the perceptions people may think about him, my family and me solely based on that label alone. The power words can possess can really be seen and felt through the experience of labels.

Prisoners are often powerless, a state of being they must begin to face and tolerate from the initial arrest. Many inmates experience their privileges, civil and human rights, and autonomy being stripped from many directions. My father never really shared much about this part of his experience

with us children, but that does not mean we did not see glimpses of the power dynamics within prison. I briefly reference one of the ways in which I understood prison power in my vignette “Road under construction”. In that story, I make a reference to coloured stripe pants that my dad always wore and how the colour was significant to what privileges he was allowed. Even young Kayla learned early that my dad only saw me when he was allowed to see me by the people who had the real power. I do not remember the distinction to all the colours, but I know that when he wore green he was trusted. Trust I am sure he had to fight for the privilege to keep every day. The stigma of power at play alone in the coloured stripe clothing system is only a taster of the power inequalities prisoners face inside and outside prison. Without those privileges afforded him and his green striped pants, I can only wonder how much worse prison would have been for my father. Society and the institutions with power need to acknowledge and redress the policies, rethink their approach to accountability and rehabilitation, reconsider personal and social perceptions, and remove barriers that disproportionately impact current and formerly incarcerated individuals and families (DeVuono-Powell et al., 2015). Without these social and institutional improvements, those affected by incarceration will continue to have their resilience and ability to thrive questioned, challenged and diminished.

“Starting Over”

When I was around 11, my family and I went on this trip to Illinois because there was the possibility that my stepdad’s job might move him there. So, we took a trip to go and check the town out. I remember how excited I was at the possibility of leaving my hometown behind for a ‘fresh start’ a ‘new beginning’. The town we visited wasn’t anything special that I can recall. I think it may have been even smaller than the town I grew up in, but I could not have been more excited. I was already thinking about the ‘Kayla’ I could be when I moved here. No one would know me, and I

could start over. I could be just an 11 year old girl. Not a kid with a dad in prison that I'm sure everyone knows about but doesn't talk about. Not a kid that lives in a poor house that matches the image of having a dad in prison. No, here in the middle of nowhere Illinois, I can be a no one if I want, or I can be someone. It will be up to me, finally!! But we did not move, and I was back to being Kayla on Monday at school.

'Mom, can you send me to boarding school??? Please!!!' Once again, here I am, trying to escape, and my newest route is boarding school. I know we don't have the funds, but darn it, it sure is nice to dream. Can you imagine how lovely it would be to escape from the town and go far, far away? To go someplace where no one knows me or my family. There, I would finally be able to figure out who I am. Be able to take off this mask for a while... perhaps.

Finally, I get to leave!!! Yeah, it is only 2 hours from home, but surely that will be enough space. Mom wanted me to go to either of the universities closer to home, but they were too close. So close she probably wouldn't even have let me live on campus. No, this way, I will actually get my chance at a fresh start. Kinda. Yeah, one of my schoolmates is also going, but it will be fine. Maybe we won't see each other too often. This will be my fresh start, my chance at self-reinvention, and I just know it. Maybe I will even start going by my middle name, Mercedes... 2 hours isn't really all that far. What if they hear about my dad?

Scotland!!! Here I come!!! An ocean has to be far enough to finally find the space I need to feel comfortable in being me. It took some time and a lot of trust, but finally, I have found that space. I have found a home where I no longer have to worry about managing my stigma image. I no longer have to worry about not finding a space to be accepted. Moving to Scotland allowed me the confidence to finally explore myself. Explore the self behind the masks I had worn for so long to

protect me against stigma, shame, and negative labels. Scotland was my 'fresh start' and 'new beginning'.

As mentioned earlier, as a consequence of the rise in incarceration rates, the number of children with an incarcerated parent has also risen. That means more and more children are having to navigate the numerous feelings and experiences that come from having an absent, incarcerated parent. These feelings and experiences can range from grief, loss, anger, uncertainty, and/or fear, but for this thesis, I shall be focusing more on experiences surrounding stigma, shame, and labels. The stigma, shame and labels of incarceration are not felt only by the incarcerated but can also forcefully be felt by their family. 'It is evident that children and young people experience a range of negative effects as a result of the stigma that arises from parental incarceration' (Saunders, 2018, p. 26). For so long, I felt like I wanted to run away from the stigma and shame I felt about my father's incarceration. The fear of the labels and stereotypes associated with crime and incarceration dictated much of my external and internal world interactions. In some ways, stigma and shame felt like my own adjacent prison to my father's physical. I thought, if only I could leave the town and people who knew, then people would have the chance to judge me more fairly. See me without the label of a *child with an imprisoned parent*. I could be a *kid of divorce*, which to me felt so much safer. That was a narrative I could work with. A narrative that would not outshine *me* in my relationships and impressions. There is still so much to learn about how stigmatisation impacts children's lives in areas such as family relationships, school, community involvement and inclusion, social resources, mental health and behaviour (Phillips and Gates, 2011). I do not remember anyone outside my family ever making me feel like it was okay to acknowledge or discuss my father's incarceration, and to me that just further confirmed to me that this was

something to feel shameful about and hide. I do not remember anyone, family or friends, offering me a safe space to explore the complex feelings around this complicated part of my life.

Conclusion

Over half of the children in their study experienced isolation due to parental incarceration (Sack and Seidler, 1978). Many admitted to having few, while six children admitted to having no friends because their friend's parents 'would not allow them to come over to play because *Dad's in jail*' (Sack and Seidler, 1978, p. 263, emphasis added). 'The children who suffered from social stigma and isolation were at times able to locate some supportive resources, but on the whole, they were without role models, unable to connect to others like themselves, or to find trustworthy people who would help them feel less marginalized in general' (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008, p. 1123). Stigma is believed to spread from the incarcerated family member to their children, and this can contribute to a lack of social support or avoidance (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest, 2003).

So, how are children with incarcerated parents managing their stigmatisation? One finding within Saunders's research I found interesting was that the 'children and young people did not directly use the terms "stigma" or "being stigmatised", rather they described feelings and experiences as they appeared in their consciousness' (2018: p. 23). However, she observed that as children grow and mature, so does their awareness of the impact their parent's incarceration has had on their childhood experiences.

Before I went into POPS [Pain of the Prison System]. . . I kept to myself. I felt like I was trapped in a box when it came to the subject of my father," she says. Since she joined the club, in 10th grade, Jessica recognized that she needs "to let go of my shame and really

love who I am, with or without my dad being in my life. (Jessica, quoted in Anspach, 2017: para. 15)

Unfortunately, even when children and young people express beliefs of being different from their incarcerated parents, they may still experience anxiety and fear that they may still end up in prison (Saunders, 2018). For me personally, it was the fear and anticipation of being rejected because of my father being a criminal that had the most significant impact on my childhood growing up. From the moment my grandmother introduced me to the stigma around crime and prison, it became the boogeyman hiding in my closet at night. Stigma became the nightmare chasing me in my sleep. There was never a social interaction where I did not have to consider either how I was presenting myself or how I could prove myself different from my “bad” father.

So, how do we help children with incarcerated parents with the stigma and shame of their label? Phillips and Gates (2011) found that despite good intentions from researchers and public service systems, some of their tactics reinforce this population as ‘different’. There is a risk of reinforcing ideas of ‘us’ versus ‘them’. Phillips and Gates (2011) highlight the uncertainty for professionals to acknowledge children with incarcerated parents as a distinct group and develop policies and practices to address their specific needs or treat the experiences of this population similarly to other adverse childhood experiences such as parental divorce or domestic violence. The children’s experiences of anxiety withdrawal, anger, low self-esteem and protective responses to stigma and discrimination were found to be natural per the literature on stigma. While the ideal response would be to address society’s attitudes and beliefs about and towards children with incarcerated parents, that will take a lot of organised effort and time. Phillips and Gates (2011) feel it would be better to support and teach this population stigma resistance skills. Finally, Phillips and Gates think there is a ‘need to empower children with parents in prison to shape and lead change efforts’ (2011: p.

292). They feel that many of the current voices in the *children with incarcerated parents movement* are led by advocates who most likely have no personal experience of parental incarceration. I agree that hearing the voices of those with personal experience could benefit research, social care systems, and the stigmatisation of this population.

Chapter 5: Children with Incarcerated Parents – Arrested Development

“Cop Shows”

Bad Boys

Bad Boys

What ya gonna do?

What ya gonna do when they come for you?

There were no blue and red lights filling my childhood bedroom in the wee hours of the morning. Cops did not come barging through the door with their riot gear on guns locked and loaded, shouting for obedience. Helicopters didn't circle our home while reporters gathered outside waiting for gossip to report to their hungry audience. No, instead, it was all quite mundane. The trauma was quiet, faceless. One day, I had a dad, and the next, I didn't.

I believe my decision to write in a creative voice is, in part, a reflection of my discomfort with my own father's crime. When sharing a parent's faults, a child often wants to 'cover' for them. With every story of my father's transgression, I tried to include more stories of his virtue, highlighting to the other that my father isn't really a 'bad guy' despite being a killer. It had almost become a script in a way. It can be a lot of pressure on a child to introduce a flawed parent to others. What do I say? How much do I reveal? How can I make them look better than their circumstances? For these reasons, perhaps it was easier for me that a newscaster presented my father's crime to you with cold, hard facts. That way, I did not feel pressured to always 'make it better'.

In this chapter, I will attempt to provide a brief overview of some of the central themes in the literature concerning children with incarcerated parents. The literature emphasises familiar hardships many families encounter, such as communication hardships, emotional health, family relations (especially parent-child), and economic strain. My autoethnographic vignettes offer insight via my own voice and experiences interacting with these themes during my childhood and beyond. Many of the feelings and thoughts presented in these vignettes are parts of my CIP self that were often hidden throughout my childhood.

The Impact of Parental Imprisonment

Family Instability

Research indicates that ‘parental incarceration is a distinct and risky form of family instability.’ (Arditti and Johnson, 2022, p. 58). Research in this area shows just how difficult families and children can find their lives impacted by incarceration. A research project that I find demonstrates the various experiences incarceration has on a family's life well is by Boswell. Boswell (2002) conducted investigative research into the lives and relationships of children with incarcerated fathers. Using interview quotes, they provide a rich description of the impact paternal incarceration has had on their childhoods. Boswell (2002) covers topics such as visitation, thoughts about parent's criminality, school, hopes and fears, communication, and support. The study offers voices from children differing in age (3-19), sex, family background, social status, and developmental stages. Boswell (2002) expressed that the children were expressive in their feelings about having an absent father, their thoughts about their father's behaviour, and their views on the impact his incarceration has had on themselves and their families.

I want his sentence to be over (he's out in two months' time) and just have life and our family back to normal. I hope nothing like this will ever happen again – and I don't think it will. (Hindpal, 14 years, quoted in Boswell, 2002, p. 7)

I decided to feature several of the children's quotes throughout this thesis because I feel they offer so much insight and add texture to the discussed topics. Overall, Boswell (2002) found that it was apparent that children were affected by their father's imprisonment.

Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest (2003) conducted semi-structured interview-based research with the families of felony offenders. The research gained insight into the impact incarceration has on the social, health and economic wellbeing of offender's families. The interviews took place with parents or caregivers during visiting hours on Saturdays within selected American jails. A majority of the parents/caregivers participants were female, while a majority of the inmates being visited were male. Through their research, participants expressed how family incarceration has impacted their emotional stress, parenting strain, work/family conflict, financial strain, social stigma, structural parameters and concerns about children.

Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest's (2003) research explored the impact of parental incarceration on familial relationships. They found that '(81.6%) [of participants] believed that incarceration had created problems for their family' (Arditti et al., 2003: p. 200). Parents and caregivers felt that due to the incarceration, they were spending less time with their children and were having to rely on the support of others to help take care of their children (e.g. relatives and childcare services). I never really thought about how much my mom had to rely on my grandparents for childcare support after my father's incarceration. It just seemed normal to me because many kids were in similar situations to my own as they also came from single-parent households. Even once my

mother remarried, my step-grandparents often helped with our care. My brother, sister, and I would frequently spend after-school hours at one grandparents' house and weekends at the others. Interestingly, though, our father's family was not in the rotation of care. Research has indicated that children feel their contact with extended family (e.g. grandparents, aunts, and uncles) has been impacted by their parent's incarceration (Saunders, 2018). Some children have even sometimes reported a rupture in relationships with stepsiblings. These children expressed feeling excluded from extended family because of their parent's incarceration. Losing more family after losing a parent can contribute to feelings of sadness and confusion.

They kind of disowned me and my brother. If it wasn't for my dad I reckon I would be able to go and stay with that side of the family. (Jane, 15 years, quoted Saunders, 2018: p. 25)

I somewhat have memories of them before his incarceration, but afterwards, our interactions seemed more limited. What few interactions we did have seemed fostered by my mother's desire for us to still have a relationship with his side of the family. Even my relationship with my stepsiblings really began to flourish post-prison. It was not that we did not see them or my stepmother while my father was locked up, but he was the connection between the two families. It feels like without him there, perhaps the motivation to build the connection between the two step-families is impacted. I do know that pre-prison, it felt like I mostly only saw my step-family on special occasions, whereas post-prison, I see them much more frequently and ordinarily.

Arditti et al. (2003) found that almost half of the non-incarcerated parents believed incarceration had affected their relationships with their children, notably by limiting the amount of time they were able to give to that relationship. To this day, my mother often comments on the close relationship my grandmother and I had. I feel there has always been a bit of jealousy and

resentment that I did not have the same level of closeness with her. After reading Arditti et al.'s research, feelings and interactions throughout my childhood with my mother make more sense to me as an adult. It must have been so hard for her to be forced to sacrifice time with her children in order to ensure their wellbeing. Many participants (e.g. mothers and caregivers) expressed feeling alone in their struggles with little support or help to cope with the difficulties faced with familial incarceration. Caregivers made comments such as, *I'm struggling all by myself to handle this*, *Everything is harder, I feel like I'm in jail myself*, and *It's rough* (quoted in Arditti et al., 2003: p. 200, emphasis added).

Perhaps the feelings of stress, fatigue and isolation expressed in Arditti et al.'s (2003) research help explain the findings within Saunders's (2018) research. Within Saunders's (2018) research, children with incarcerated parents have also expressed feeling more mature for their age. Children from homes with an incarcerated parent may have more responsibilities within the household as a result of only having one parent in the house. Children reported these extra responsibilities made it harder to connect with their peers and made them feel isolated from friend groups and activities they previously would have been interested in (Saunders: 2018, p. 24). This is an experience one of the male children in Boswell's research also reflected on.

... I had to develop a 'hard streak' and grow up quickly. Me and my brother have to help Mum a lot with the chores in the house and garden that my Dad would normally do. We do it because she needs us to, but I'd rather I hadn't had to. (Mike, 13 years, quoted in Boswell, 2002: p. 5)

While Mike's family situation felt familiar, it was not one I had directly experienced. I did, however, witness similar messages being pushed onto my brother. Growing up, it was understood

in my family that my brother was in charge of the ‘man’ chores. He had to do all of the outdoor chores by himself essentially, and he hated that. Even to this day, my mom relies on him for many of the tasks she might have asked my father to do but can’t because they are divorced. So not only did my brother have to become ‘man of the house’ while my father was in prison, but he has had to retain that role to a degree. My parents’ marriage may not have ended due to his imprisonment, but I wonder how my father’s incarceration has affected her ability to move on. I can’t imagine it was easy for my mom to balance the past and the present.

While a majority of participants find incarceration a detriment to their families, it is also important to highlight that almost a third of participants believed incarceration had solved problems for their families (Arditti et al., 2003).

When he was at home there was lots of tension in the house. Dad was emotionally up and down. At 7.0am one morning there was a knock on the door. The Police had come to arrest Dad and search the house. Within minutes my mother was saying: ‘That’s it. I want a divorce’. He stayed in the house from charge to sentence and life was hell for everyone. Now he’s in prison, he and my Mum have split up. But it’s actually reduced the tension and life is really much easier now. I only realised two months after he’d gone what a nightmare it had been. If you live with something long enough you get used to it. He’s my Dad though, and I love him anyway and always will. (Jim, 19 years, quoted in Boswell, 2002: p. 18-19)

Sadly, research indicates that for many families, incarceration is not the first or last risk factor they are exposed to. Socioeconomic and high risk factors can include housing instability, homelessness, food insecurity substance abuse, delinquency, and/or violence (Kjellstrand and Eddy, 2011b; Arditti and McGregor, 2019). Poehlmann (2005a) conducted a study to investigate the impact the

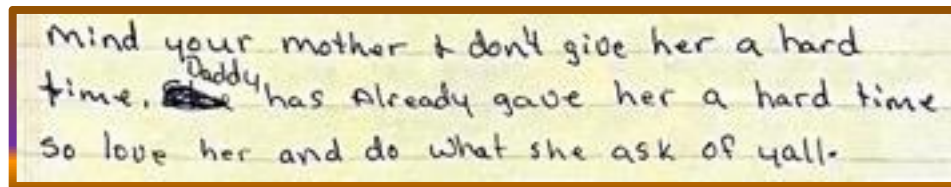
home and family environments have on intellectual outcomes for children with incarcerated mothers. Not surprisingly, they found that a majority of children in the study were exposed to four or more risk factors that could affect their development. Similarly, Murphey and Cooper (2015) conducted research that examined the relationship between life stressors and child outcomes associated with parental incarceration. They found that parental incarceration is associated with ‘a higher number of other major, potentially traumatic life events—stressors that are most damaging when they are cumulative’ (Murphey and Cooper, 2015: p. 2).

I wish I had nothing to do with mum's stresses, it's hard to deal with, it's hard. It's kind of just like, I've just gone from a child to an adult in five months like that, and now I'm dealing with all these things I wasn't prepared for, and it's stressful, and I have bad anxiety, and that kicks in all the time now. (Jessie Claire, 17 years, quoted in Saunders, 2018: p. 24)

As research indicates, parental incarceration is a risk for children and their families because it ‘co-occurs with adverse experiences, intensifies economic hardship, and contributes to various forms of family instability’ (Arditti and Johnson, 2022, p. 59). I only included some of the narratives I read from studies of children, but the picture they painted about their experiences was so sad. Ensuring parents create a safe and responsive family environment through effective parenting strategies can positively impact children’s emotional and behavioural health (Kjellstrand and Eddy, 2011b). Parental incarceration is really stressful, and stress can cause a lot of disruption if not supported. Interventions and programmes should be put in place to assist parents in improving their parenting quality for children with incarcerated parents (Arditti and McGregor, 2019). Additionally, interventions could approach this population with the aim of locating and cultivating the strengths within the children and families of incarcerated people. Utilising a strength-based approach, professionals may be able to assist families in building their connections and supporting

each other through the difficulties introduced due to incarceration. Children will continue to feel the negative impact of incarceration until our society can improve the trauma and stigma experienced by this population, offer better communication options for improving family relations, and make visitation more accessible and enjoyable (Murphey and Cooper, 2015).

“Be Good for Mommy”



Be good for Mommy is at the end of every letter.

Do I have to be extra good so that they don't see your bad?

Be good for Mommy is at the end of every letter.

Am I just the whiteout to cover up your mistakes?

Be good for Mommy is at the end of every letter.

Was I not good enough for you to begin with?

Being good became such a big part of my image once my father went away to prison. I thought being a *good girl* was the best defence against his criminal stigma. The more a *good girl* I was, the farther it would separate us, and maybe I would not have to worry so much or stress so much about my image. In my family, I got used to playing the role of perfect daughter. I played sports, got good grades, had an active social life, and was always home by curfew, well, most of the time. My

family did not have to worry about me much, and yet the letters continued to tell me to be good and do better. Looking back now, I feel this has more to do with my father's need to still be a parent in my life, but as a child, it was a lot of pressure to meet everyone's expectations, especially my own. I became really hard on myself, especially about maintaining my *good girl* image when I was a teenager and should have had the freedom to get a bit wild. But I could not let myself have that freedom at the cost of others finding out about my father. So, I stayed secure behind my *good girl* shield, missing out on a lot of life lessons that can only be learned through mistakes.

As I mentioned earlier in the thesis, my professional aspirations have always somehow been related to my father's incarceration. First, I wanted to be a lawyer, then I studied crime in university, and now I am a counsellor with a particular focus on working with clients impacted by incarceration. Sack and Seidler (1978) discuss the idea of how some children with imprisoned parents may identify with *law and order* as a way to protect themselves from the dangerous image of their father's criminality. Although they were mostly talking about boys wanting to be policemen, I still feel like this could be relevant to me and maybe others, too. I know I thought the closer I was to *good*, the harder it would be for others to associate me with my father's *bad*.

Economic Strain

I was too young to remember the financial impact of my father's imprisonment in the beginning, but as I grew older, I could see the strain on my family. The economic hardship faced by families impacted by incarceration is depleting both financially and emotionally. Research indicates that individuals and families from low-income households often struggle to meet the financial cost of incarceration (Arditti, Lambert-Shute and Joest, 2003; DeVuono-Powell et al., 2015). Families encounter economic burdens such as legal fees and fines, communication expenses (e.g. prison

visits and phone call costs), and money to contribute to their family members during their incarceration (DeVuono-Powell et al., 2015). Due to the loss of income resulting from incarceration, many families struggle to meet the basic needs of the family and the incarcerated family member. Research has indicated that growing up in poverty could increase an individual's chance of involvement with crime and incarceration (Sutton and Routon, 2024). However, their finding indicates that within areas with high incarceration rates, poverty does not feature as a dominant factor contributing to incarceration. Nevertheless, on average, research shows that within the United States, when the poverty rate rises, so does the incarceration rate. I would say that both my mom and dad came from low-income families, more so my father. I grew up with the understanding that my father's side of the family was really poor and his opportunities limited. Although the crime mentioned throughout my thesis is the only one I am aware of my father ever being involved in, that cannot be said for other members of his family.

DeVuono-Powell et al. (2015) observe the impact of incarceration itself often leads to even greater poverty levels. As I was very young when my father first went to prison, I do not know the full extent of the economic struggles my mother faced concerning my father's incarceration. However, I do not remember our living improving after my father went to prison. Similarly, Sutton and Routon (2024) argue that familial association with incarceration can leave families in a cycle of poverty for generations. It could be argued that mass incarceration and the harsh sentencing lengths due to the United States 'war on crime' have aided in the cycle of poverty many individuals and families affected by incarceration encounter. In their research, Borrelli (2023) examines the interplay between mass incarceration and poverty in the United States. They conclude that mass incarceration and poverty itself are currently stuck in a vicious cycle where they each drive the other. This vicious cycle not only criminalises poverty but also hinders social progress for

current/formerly incarcerated individuals and their families. Many formally incarcerated individuals experience limited opportunities concerning employment, earning potential, housing, access to support services, education, and personal development, consequently further ingraining them in poverty. I know my father was fortunate that he landed on his feet after he left prison and found a good job that has aided his social progress. As Borrelli's research reveals, this is probably not the typical experience for many former incarnated individuals or their families. It is not uncommon for families to survive off incomes below the poverty line even after their incarcerated family member returns home (Gamblin, 2018). Additionally, since I was already eighteen, when my father was released from prison, I have not been able to benefit from my father's decent employment like I would have been able to during my childhood. I would definitely say my mom, brother, and I were impacted by poverty during childhood and that some of those effects have lingered into adulthood.

Furthermore, I wonder how the lack of disposable family wealth available to children with households impacted by incarceration could influence their ability to get a debt-free start in life (e.g. funds for a car, school, and house). It could be argued that children with imprisoned parents probably face more economic hardships than opportunities. 'Nearly 2 in 3 families (65%) with an incarcerated member were unable to meet their family's basic needs' (DeVuono-Powell et al., 2015: p. 7). By incarcerating one parent, a family has fewer financial resources, leading to a life of reduced opportunities and support. That reduction often impacts the children with an incarcerated parent, contributing to their struggles to overcome their poverty status.

Research has suggested male incarceration has ramifications on the level of poverty within their communities and families (Sutton and Routon, 2024). Glaze & Maruschak (2008) found that over half of incarcerated fathers reported providing primary financial support for their minor children

before their incarceration. I was too young to remember if this was the situation for my family before my father's incarceration. However, I know we relied heavily on my grandparents' financial help. Research indicates that financial support from others does not appear to be an uncommon experience for the families of prisoners (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest, 2003). Unfortunately, for my family, that financial support came with its own particular complications. Their financial support caused problems within our larger family due to worries about favouritism. While other family members would whisper, my mom would tell my brother and me not to worry about it, that we just needed a little more help than they did. Unfortunately, I do not recall my mother ever receiving child support for the entire time my father was imprisoned. Imprisoned fathers are more likely to need assistance from others to provide their children's care, and typically, that assistance comes from the children's mother (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). Even when my mother remarried when I was around 7, we continued to need my grandparent's financial help with our living costs.

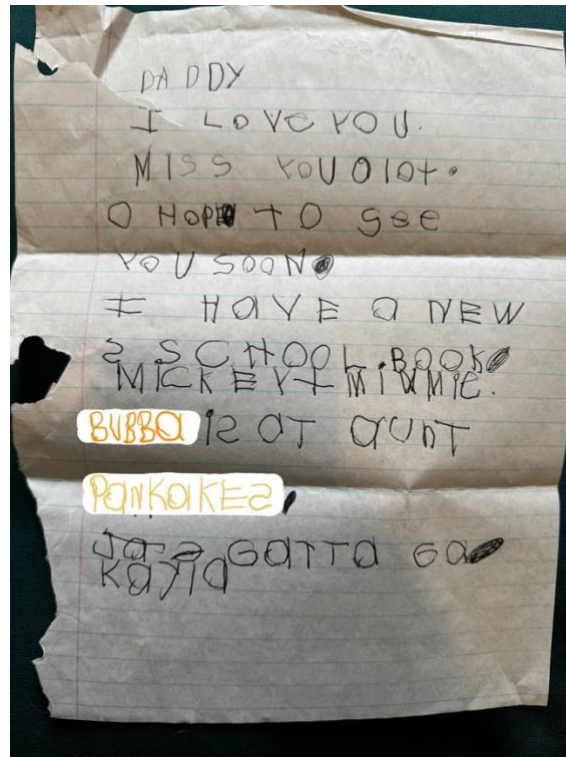
It must have been so hard for my mom to be fully responsible for the cost of my brother and I's wellbeing. When she married my father, I doubt that she thought she would have to care for our family without his help or support. Nevertheless, my mom did not hold any of these struggles against either my brother or me. She consistently ensured we had enough money for phone calls and visits with our father. According to my mother, a relationship with our father was essential, and she always found the money for our calls, letters and visits. In fact, as we grew older, it felt like she was more invested in me having a relationship with my father than I was at times.

Additionally, my mom never wanted my brother or me to feel poor or lacking because of our father. Not only can being a child of an imprisoned parent be a stigmatising experience, but so can being poor. It is not uncommon for impoverished individuals to fear the threat of or encounter actual stigmatisation (Stewart, Makwarimba, Reutter, Veenstra, Raphael, and Love, 2009). The stress of

this can lead to social avoidance and self-isolation behaviours. Despite our limited funds, my mom always strived to dress us well and provide us with a decent quality lifestyle. Perhaps she was conscious of this potential and wanted to make sure my brother and I felt comparable and included amongst our peers, if only outwardly.

Many families feel financially that incarceration has had a negative impact on their quality of life (Arditti et al., 2003). The financial burden of having someone incarcerated, such as legal costs, communication and travel expenses, and spending money inside, can really limit a family's ability to thrive. It is really sad and disappointing the cost families are expected to pay for the crimes of others. These costs are visible in the way the government and society treat the families of the incarcerated. The debt the families must incur just to survive, the lengths they must go to maintain a relationship with their incarcerated family member, and the stigma they are labelled with for actions they themselves have not committed.

“You’ve got Mail”



Why was this never sent? ‘Kayla, have you written your daddy?’ *Don’t forget to write me back, baby girl.* How naive little Kayla was that her letters would always make it to her daddy. This letter wasn’t important enough to send, but it was important enough to keep for all these years. When I asked my mother for help searching for any letters kept over the years sent from my dad while he was incarcerated, I came across this one. As you can see, there is no date, but from my handwriting, I can tell I was probably very young. This was mostly likely written towards the beginning of my father’s incarceration when I was around 7. Reading it now as an adult, I feel like I can already see the pressure of support on the page. I wonder if when writing this, my mother was next to me, reminding me to tell my dad that I love him and miss him a lot. I wonder if little Kayla believed she would actually get to see her dad soon or if she wrote that because it was what she thought she should write. Had my grandmother’s words of shame settled into my understanding

yet? Had I already begun pulling away from him emotionally by the time I wrote this letter? Was that why it wasn't sent? Was it not good enough, not supportive enough, or was my mask not ample enough yet? There are so many questions, and yet they will never be answered absolutely. 'I don't know why I didn't send it or why I kept it instead, but you can have it for your project if it would help.'

Staying Connected

Contact between prisoners and their families can play an important role in helping them stay connected to the outside world. Morris argued that the sense of not knowing is often more significant for the families and children on the outside than for the incarcerated parent on the inside (1965, p. 09). Prisoners usually still have access to radio, TV and newspapers to remain in touch with the ongoing outside of incarceration. Their families, however, do not have the same insightful glimpse into their world. The vision of life on the inside families and children develop is usually done through communication with their parents, controlled visits or general media. However, to counter Morris's statement a bit, inmates can only obtain information about their families, and this can be curated if desired. Inmates may encounter a loss of power in knowledge that their families will not. They don't get to control their access to knowledge, whether it be information on world events or information within their family. Inmates are dependent on either the prison, their families, or others to keep them informed and in the loop. To keep them included so that the world does not leave them behind. Ultimately, the feeling of the unknown is challenging whether you are inside or out.

Children with imprisoned parents often have three options for contact, including supervised in-person visits, telephone calls and letters (Saunders, 2018). Every one of these contact options has

some potential financial cost to them and, therefore, may not be an actual option at all, depending on the family's circumstances. 'The high cost of maintaining contact with incarcerated family members led more than one in three families (34%) into debt to pay for phone calls and visits alone' (DeVuono-Powell et al., 2015: p. 9).

The first time Madison spoke to her father on the phone after his incarceration, she was greeted with:

This is the county jail. You are receiving a call from an inmate. This call will be recorded and monitored. Press 1 for your balance. Press 2 to add money to your account. Press 3 to stop receiving calls from this inmate. Press 0 to accept the call. (Strempek, 2015: p. 20).

This is a message children with imprisoned parents become very familiar with. I cannot begin to imagine the number of times I have heard this message over the thirteen years my father was imprisoned, but I know it is a memory that will stay with me forever. My father would usually call at least once a week, sometimes more. As a child, I did not understand how expensive these calls were. As I grew up and my relationship with my father became more strained, I was more reluctant to want to talk to him on the phone. I could slowly see my mom grow frustrated at me for this. She had never really shared with me the cost of maintaining a relationship with my father and the sacrifices required to do so. As a teenager, her frustration would become visible when she felt I was not valuing my call with my father. To be honest, as a child, I did not value our calls, financially or emotionally. Reflecting back on my childhood, I now see the amount of effort both of my parents put into trying to maintain the parent-child relationship. It is just unfortunate that being a child of an imprisoned parent is not that simple, and other factors hindered the relationship between my father and me from developing more during my childhood.

Bibba & Kayla
 Hey my baby well it dont look yall
 have much free time to write I know
 that yall stay busy that is ok with Daddy
 I know that yall still love Daddy. so
 how is every thing with yall make
 sure that yall hit Daddy a home run.
 So how is school yall make sure that
 yall keep those grades up or Daddy will
 get upset & we dont want Daddy to get
 upset Do we. So what are yall going
 to do for mommy for Mother's Day make
 sure yall give her a big Hug & kiss for
 me. It is this Sunday make sure yall dont
 forget. Well I cant wait to see yall i want
 to give yall a big hug & lots of kiss I
 miss yall so much Daddy. lots at yall's
 pictures every Day it Not a Day goes
 By that i dont think of yall Daddy love's
 yall so much & cant wait to see yall. Tell
 Bear Daddy. Bibba make sure you take care
 of your sister's & MOMMA you are the man
 of the house until Daddy get's home. Hu! Hu!

write Daddy back Love
 I Love yall Daddy
 Tell momma Happy Mother's Day. Always

Where do I even begin with my relationship with letter writing and incarceration? Research indicates that exchanging letters is the most common method of communication between incarcerated parents and their children (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). 'For many children, mail correspondence can be a supplement to visits or an alternative means of communicating if visitation is not feasible' (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, and Shear, 2010: p. 20). Although I do remember speaking on the phone to my dad often throughout my childhood, it is his letter that I

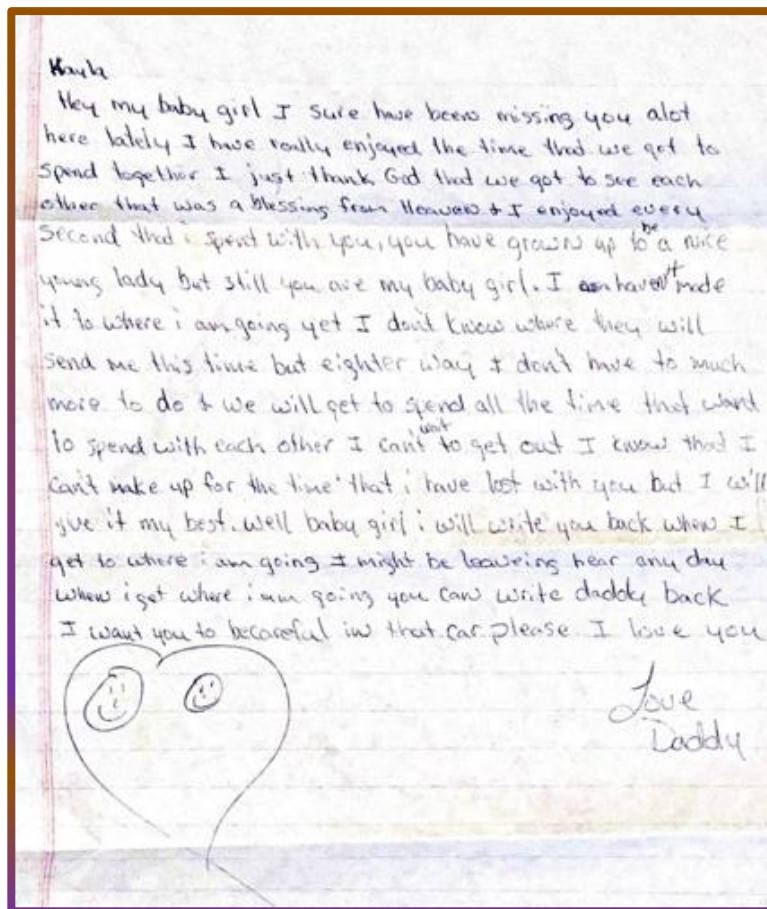
think of more clearly. I can remember receiving letters from him from a very young age. I remember aspects of his letters clearly, like him drawing his hand on the back of them. I would often secretly put my hand to his when I was alone. It was my way of connecting but in a non-threatening way. I think our letters were very important to my father. He often spoke about how he needed them, and that they made him happy.

They (the letters) make the time go by quick...and let me know that I'm still wanted. It...strengthens my morale.... As long as the letters keep coming in, as long as...your child's sending you something even once a month, then you know that you're still remembered, that you're still wanted...as a father... The more contact you have with your child and your family, the better off you are, the easier you get to do your time, the less stress. (Arditti, Smock, and Parkman 2005: p. 12)

I often came home from school, and my mom would hand us a letter that our dad had sent my brother and me. Sometimes, the letters were addressed to us together, and others were individual letters. When I turned about the age of ten, I believe I started keeping his letters in my room. Before this, my mom had always saved his letter for us. His letters felt like my ticket to feel and connect with my Daddy. Reading his letters were the few times I allowed myself to feel the intense sadness, longing, and ache of missing him. Most of the time, I pushed those feelings away so I could maintain my mask and hide from his stigma. So, while I often found his letters cathartic, I struggled to offer that same experience to him in my letters. When preparing for this project, I spoke with my mother about my letters, and she told me about how closed off I was throughout my childhood. It is interesting how much my relationship with his stigma kept me from sharing my inner world with anyone, even in letters with the person who might be able to understand me the most.

Similar to the phone calls, my mom played a vital role in ensuring this line of communication stayed open between my father and us. As teenagers, she really had to stay on us about writing back to our father regularly. I remember her often asking: 'Have you written your dad back yet?'. Not all families have that type of support from the non-incarcerated parent.

I wrote a letter, but you know, she never sat down and helped them write me back, so I don't know if it's because she's like upset with me or what.... I think she's got some issues. (quoted in Arditti, Smock, and Parkman, 2005: p. 13).



Visitation can play an important role in helping maintain a relationship between inmates, families and children (see e.g. Arditti, 2003; Bernstein, 2005; Poehlmann et al., 2010). The negative impact

separation can have on both children and inmates was documented in a study back in 1978 by Sack and Seidler. In their research, they note the positive correlation between family and parole success and that the children in their study found visits with their incarcerated parents a positive experience. Obviously, their study was almost fifty years ago, but imagine if we had listened to those children then. What might visitation look like today, and how might families and children be better supported to maintain healthy relationships?

Many correctional facilities are built in remote rural areas (Bernstein, 2005). A majority of parents are incarcerated over one hundred miles from their homes. 'The distance between a child's home and the prison is also a significant obstacle in the child's ability to visit their parent' (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008: p. 1120). Arditti (2003) conducted research examining the experience of parents and children while visiting an imprisoned family member. Using a mixture of data collection techniques, they explored the obstacles and barriers to maintaining contact with an imprisoned family member. Arditti found that many parents and caregivers find visiting their family members at the jail difficult, with over half stating the visits went 'very badly' (2003: p. 122). The study revealed visitation could be emotionally painful for families, that the visiting area was often unsuitable and unpleasant, and correctional staff were harsh and disrespectful, even towards the families (Arditti, 2003).

Prisons are known for their rules and restrictions. The impact of these rules and restrictions can go beyond the inmates and also impact their families. Families are often subjected to strict policies that can affect their contact with their incarcerated family members. Physical contact between visitors and inmates is rarely allowed. Children can sometimes find it difficult to understand why they are not allowed a hug or kiss from a parent.

A child of about 5 came in the front door and immediately ran to the locked door, crying and jumping up to try to get in. [...] She pointed to the deputies inside the glass encasement, 'See them? They're gonna come get you', referring to his trying to get into the locked door. He continued to cry over and over 'Oh daddy, I want daddy, I want daddy, I want daddy,' pushing against his mother, 'daddy, daddy, daddy'. After about 10 minutes the mother took him to the bathroom---I could hear him screaming louder and louder, 'I want daddy, I want daddy, I want daddy'. He could not be quieted and she sounded as if she were seemingly near tears herself. 'Ya gotta' wait,' she said. [...] He continued to scream for a while longer. Finally, she came out, sat down, and just held him until he fell asleep. The room became very quiet. (Scenario observed by interviewer in Arditti, 2003: p. 129).

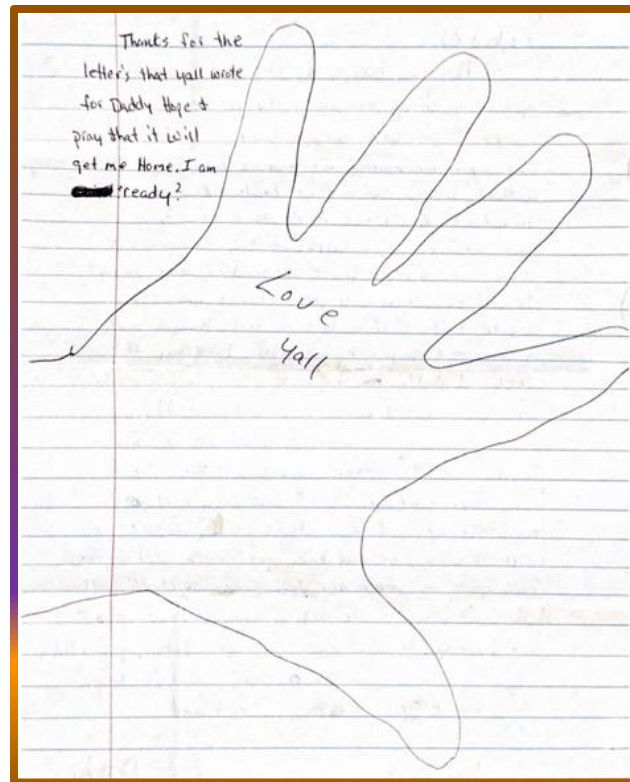
Additionally, visitation is already typically considered short, so any disruptions to these visitations can feel devastating, especially after all the effort and resources families have allocated to come and visit their incarcerated family member. Some families even make the long trip to see their family members only to have their visit cut short or be told they are not allowed visitors that day.

I just have a problem when they cut the visits short; he's screaming at me, and he don't want to go, and I have to explain, you know, there's other daddies in here who want to see their kids. And then the last time when he came to visit, he was screaming in the hallway for me, and that was kind of hard. (Arditti, Smock, and Parkman, 2005: p. 12).

It is easy to see how families can easily get discouraged or distant when parents are faced with all of the challenges just so their children can see their parents. Research has shared that parents often worry about their children's experiences within the prison environment (Arditti, Smock, and Parkman, 2005). Some parents choose not to have their children visit them in prison because of

the uncomfortable and unfriendly visitation environments. Parents worry that visitation could be unsafe physically and emotionally for their children and inhibit their opportunities for natural and comfortable interactions in the future. It is sad that despite research and parents themselves indicating the good visitation can have on prisoner wellbeing, prisons do not try more to improve the culture. I know that in recent years, several prisons have tried to improve their visitation rooms, and make them more child-friendly, but the problems run deeper.

I think my father had a unique experience in the area. This is part of the reason I have relied so heavily on the experiences of others to help me share my message in this section. Throughout my father's thirteen years of incarceration, he would often move from being imprisoned in Mississippi's state penitentiary and our hometown's correctional facility. When my father was imprisoned in our hometown, we would go and visit him regularly. The entire time my dad was incarcerated, I never not once went to visit him while he was in prison. I think there was fear on both of our parts about the image we would be left with. He was perhaps worried about what I would see and I was worried about who would see me. For me, visiting prison was a very public way of announcing my association with his criminality. This was not the case so much when he was located at our hometown's facility because of the special privileges he was granted there. Once again for the entire thirteen years he was incarcerated, I never once set foot inside the actual jail to visit with him. We always got to meet at the airport next to the jail, and for a child very worried about her image, meeting there was a lot safer. Others couldn't shame me if they did see me go into the jail to visit him--- I was just going to the airport to visit my dad, who worked there.



It can be argued that the effects of parent-child contact cannot generally be described as good or bad. Poehlmann et al. (2010) determined that there are several factors that can impact the quality of parent-child contact, thus affecting the parent-child relationship. Our current parent-child contact systems can affect 'children's development, caregivers' well-being, and incarcerated parents' stress, mental health, and possibly recidivism' (Poehlmann et al., 2010, p. 22). Unfortunately, as it stands in the United States, communication rights between children and incarcerated parents are not acknowledged or valued by those in power. Kruttschnitt (2011) argues for the importance of policymakers remembering that parent-child contact can contribute to lowering recidivism rates and the need for government assistance. Research needs to further evaluate the contact and visitation programmes available to families. Do these programmes benefit the wellbeing of the families or the prison? If the answer is not the families and children with an imprisoned family member, then I ask why they are punished. Despite the difficulties, many

families and children feel contact with their incarcerated parents is essential. Yes, the contact may not always be comfortable or pleasant, but it still has a place in the incarcerated family narrative. Something is better than nothing.

“Road under Construction”

Some of my fondest memories with my dad took place during the times he got moved briefly from state prison to the jail in our hometown. When this happened, my mom always made sure we got to see my dad regularly, usually at least once a week. The whole time my dad was locked up, we only got to see him if he did when he got these transfers. We never visited him in prison. When I was young, I remember these times at the jail as usually being enjoyable.

We would get to go to the jail where, due to my dad's 'good prisoner' status, he was allocated certain privileges, which included visiting us in less restrictive circumstances. We were allowed to hang out in this aeroplane hanger located next to the airport, which had an office with nice comfortable furniture. We never had to go into the jail to see my dad. At the time, I never questioned it. I think I was just glad I didn't have to see him around bars. It helped me keep the illusion in place that I wasn't a kid with a parent in prison. It also felt normal when I saw him. Other than his prison attire, we almost looked like a normal family.

It was during these visits that my relationship with my dad maintained its greatest normalcy. In these visits he was our dad. We didn't have to share him with his other family. His focus was solely on us. He was always in a good mood from what I can recall. We always had fun in the early days. One time, we brought him some Baskin Robbins ice cream. Mint chocolate chip. I was allowed to have 3 whole scoops. This has stayed with me because going to see my dad was always outside my

norm because he wasn't my norm. I don't think that, at the age of 10, I realised the gravity of that difference, but as I got older, I began to.

As I said earlier he got certain privileges depending on if he was a 'good prisoner'. This was indicated on his clothing. I learned this early on. He always wore colourful stripes, and the different colours indicated his privileges. Sometimes, we could only hang out in the aeroplane hangar, and sometimes, we could go farther. I remember the times we got to go farther a bit more. He took me and my brother fishing once in the stream in the land behind the jail. I remember it because, once again, this is something we usually did with our grandfather. We also had to stop by the bait shop before heading there that day to get crickets. I hated hooking the crickets so my grandfather had always done it, but I remember my dad trying to get me to try it that day. Always slightly off from the norm.

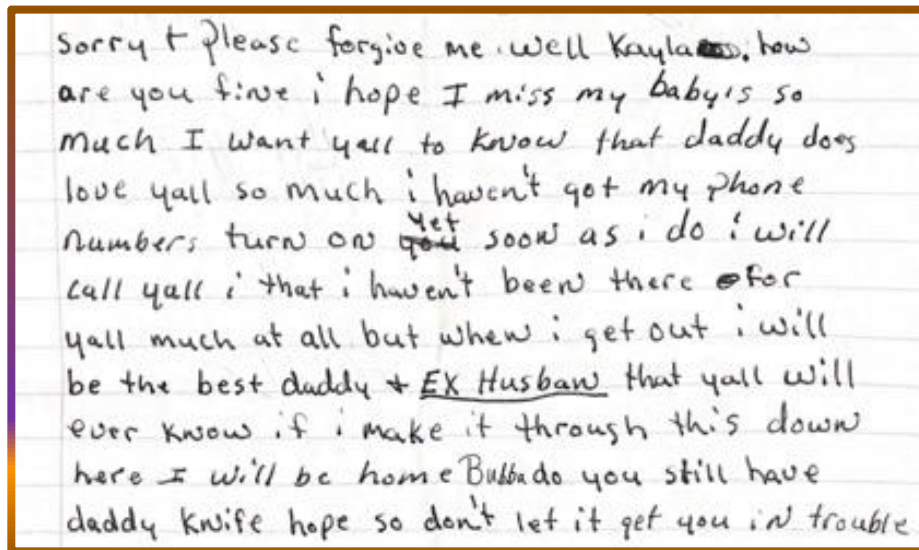
My dad also got to give me a driving lesson. Once again, his stripes allowed us freedom out of the office, so we were able to use my mom's truck. I was about 12, and he sat me in his lap because I wasn't tall enough to reach the pedals, and he let me steer. We just drove around in an empty field. The memory is hazy, but I remember the feeling as warm and sheltered, like those old country songs about dads and daughters.

I also had some experiences that I am sure my dad and mom didn't know about. I saw my first Playboy magazine while visiting my dad. I have never told anyone this. I found it in the bathroom. There was a whole stack of them. Although I didn't have to see my dad in jail, that does not mean that office was child 'friendly'. It always had this strange odour of oil and metal. To this day, the smell of metal gives me a queasy feeling. There were huge planes everywhere and lots of machines. Lots of places for children to get into mischief.

I do not remember ever feeling like a real family with my father. Perhaps this is because most of the opportunities to create my ‘family’ building blocks were taken from me by his imprisonment. In “Road under construction”, I artistically reconstructed memories created to illustrate relational moments between my father and me. My hope was to depict the complexities of navigating the ups and downs of the father-daughter relationship within the restrictions of incarceration. Because he was locked away during my childhood, no one really taught me how to have a father. How to understand, interact and relate to a father. Prison restricted the natural building of our father-daughter relationship, and I can still feel those effects a decade after his release. It was not that I never had good or fun moments with my father while he was incarcerated, but that I did not get unrestricted opportunities to interact with him as a father. He missed so many milestones throughout my childhood that we could have used to enhance our bond. For instance, it is usually supposed to be your father who teaches you to drive. Although we got a brief driving session, he was not the one who actually took me out and taught me the ropes. He didn’t drive me to the DMV to take my test for my learners permit or later for my official license. Other kids and families can take these moments for granted, whereas children with incarcerated parents get experienced at finding replacement people to act as fill-ins. For me, I really remember the driving lessons my grandfather gave me. However, that does not mean we don’t still feel the sting of missed moments and milestones with our imprisoned parents or stop us from wanting or waiting for them.

When a child talked about his hopes concerning his relationship with his father. ‘Just to have him home with us on ... (inmate’s earliest parole date). I want to help him with his work and for him to teach me to drive. (Mike, 13 years)’ (quoted in Boswell, 2002: p. 7)

Bonding and Parenting During and After Incarceration



Sorry + please forgive me. Well Kayla, how are you fine i hope I miss my baby's so much I want you to know that daddy does love you so much i haven't got my phone numbers turn on ^{yet} soon as i do i will call you i that i haven't been there for you much at all but when i get out i will be the best daddy + EX Husband that you will ever know if i make it through this down here I will be home Bulbado you still have daddy knife hope so don't let it get you in trouble.

In Bernstein's (2005: p. 77) book, a young girl writes a poem capturing the vulnerability she feels because her father is absent. The girl's poem simultaneously expresses the security the contact with her father offers. She wrote the following poem:

911 emergency

It's a bad man who's hurting me

And my father here to rescue me

Now it's OK he saved me

I always know

That my dad will love me so

With that in mind

I don't care about him serving time

Bowlby's (1969, 2005) attachment theory offers insight into the development of relationships between children and their parents. Through our attachment relationships, is how we begin to

understand ourselves and others. Attachment theory is well suited to helping us understand how and why children with incarcerated parents experience disrupted attachments (Johnson and Easterling, 2012). Interestingly, Bowlby used *forty-four juvenile thieves* to help better understand attachment-related aspects, so why not allow this population to continue to benefit from his knowledge (Cassidy Poehlmann and Shaver, 2010: p. 287, emphasis added)? Bowlby believed that attachment theory was primarily concerned with the fundamental needs of safety and threat (Dallos, 2006). How these were or were not met could impact if a parent and child would have a secure or insecure attachment bond. Additionally, Bowlby believed people could experience psychological and physical health issues if they suppressed their grief (Cassidy and Shaver, 2016).

Poehlmann's (2005b) explored attachment relationships between children and their incarcerated mothers. She found that over half of the children had representations of insecure relationships with mothers. Common emotions experienced initially after separation were sadness, confusion, anger, and loneliness in relation to their parent's incarceration. Her research indicated secure relationships were more likely to lead to stable caregiving situations. However, when these children grew older, they may still experience sadness over the separation. Murray & Murray (2010) also conducted research exploring the relationship between attachment and parental incarceration. They find that parental incarceration is a strong risk factor for psychopathology, and can threaten a child's attachment security. The separation caused by parental incarceration generates confusion and instability in the lives of children. Sack and Seidler (1978) concluded in their research that children with imprisoned parents will be forced to arrive at some understanding of their parent's criminality if they hope to maintain some sort of a positive relationship with them.

Father's Perspective

Arditti, Smock, and Parkman (2005) conducted a qualitative exploration into incarnated fatherhood. The researchers interviewed 51 incarcerated fathers to investigate their experiences and perceptions of fatherhood and measure their level of involvement with their children during their imprisonment (Arditti, Smock, and Parkman 2005: p. 2). The participants shared feelings of helplessness, dependence and powerlessness. While situating fatherhood in their research, researchers theorise that an incarcerated father's experience of fatherhood cannot be understood, excluding their experiences of prisonization (Arditti, Smock, and Parkman 2005). 'Prisonization is a term popularized by Donald Clemmer in 1940 to indicate the process of socialization or assimilation that takes place when a prisoner enters prison. (Jewkes and Bennett, 2013: p. 210). ' Due to the overregulated, hierarchal and institutionalised nature of prison, many inmates find that during their incarceration their identity begins to transform in order to mirror that of the norms and values of the prison community. Through prisonization some inmates find a proactive survival strategy, however this further journey into the 'prisoner' label may make it harder for them to find their way home upon release.

When exploring the constraints and efforts fathers experienced while incarcerated, their interviews depicted few 'fathering opportunities to display affectional or behavioral aspects of involvement' (Arditti, Smock, and Parkman 2005: p. 10). This resulted in the fathers experiencing feelings of helplessness and lack of control in their roles as fathers. Roles such as protection, support, guidance, and discipline were highlighted as a few essential functions the fathers felt 'out of the loop' regarding their contribution as fathers.

Prisoners incarcerated for violent offences, like my father, were the least likely to report parenthood (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). A majority of fathers in prison are incarcerated for drug-related offences (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). Glaze and Maruschak further reported that '[p]risoners with a criminal history were more likely to report being a parent than prisoners with no criminal history' (2008: p. 4). This seems right on trend per the previous chapter's discussion on mass incarceration drivers. In the past several decades, the 'war on drugs' has severely impacted our criminal justice system aiding in mass incarceration. As their data indicates, the war has not only punished the offenders but has also punished the children by association. Many children's parental attachments and relationships have been impacted.

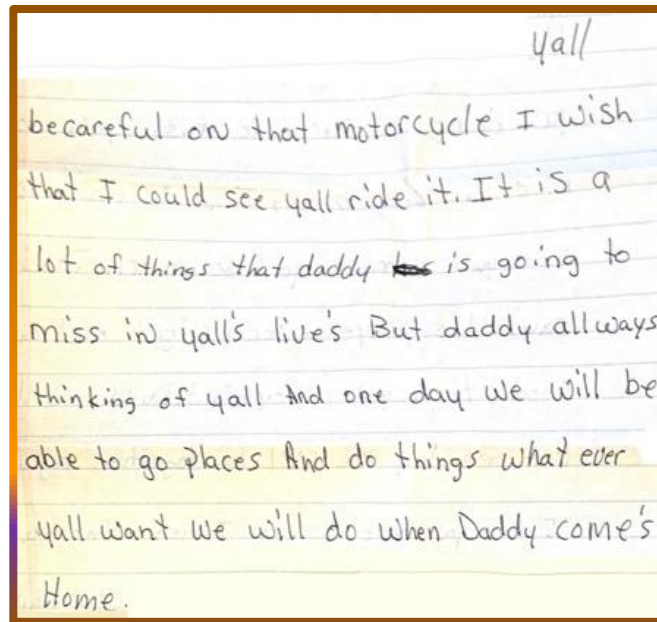
'Being a father inside prison could only be defined by what one did before and the kind of father one hoped to be upon release' (Arditti, Smock, and Parkman, 2005: p. 13). Arditti, Smock, and Parkman (2005) also theorised that due to the stigma often linked with incarceration, imprisoned fathers might experience a lack of social support, ambiguous relationships, and avoidant relationships that may impact their experience of fatherhood. '[T]he outcome of an individual's going through the prison system in the United States has been described as a "stigma that never fades."' (Arditti, Smock, and Parkman 2005: p. 4).'

Research has found that children with incarcerated fathers tend to be a fragile population. They come with a complex set of difficulties connected to their parent's imprisonment, such as trauma, poor academic performance, substance abuse and criminal involvement (Arditti, Smock, and Parkman 2005: 3). Arditti, Smock, and Parkman's (2005) research aimed to understand how a father's identity and involvement with their children were impacted by imprisonment through the experiences of imprisoned fathers about to be released from prison. To achieve their aim, Arditti, Smock, and Parkman's (2005) conducted qualitative research consisting of interviews and coding,

resulting in significant themes leading to reflective interpretation. The data was coded into three main themes. The first theme discussed the experience of fatherhood and imprisoned fatherhood (Arditti, Smock, and Parkman 2005). Many inmates expressed that their identity as a father was characterised by impotence because they cannot do for their children what fathers should be doing, helplessness (Arditti, Smock, and Parkman 2005). ‘Prolonged incarceration reduces parenting capacity and attachment to children (Arditti and McClintock, 2002: p. 20).’

‘Her (his daughter’s) mom makes reference to me as "Rusty" when it comes to her (their daughter) and...I don't appreciate that. Anytime my daughter's with me, she'll call me Daddy. But when she's with her mom, she'll call me Rusty.... How would she (child's mother) feel if I was to send her back home calling her mom by her first name? We suspect that, for many men in the study, prison meant going from "Daddy" to "Rusty," and shifting to an ambiguous role without definition. Helplessness and ambiguity were evident in this prisoner's account, creating ambivalence with regard to his fathering intentions upon release:.’

‘Incarceration seemed to represent a dormant period for men in terms of fatherhood, and reentry signified its resurrection (Arditti, Smock, and Parkman 2005: p. 9).’ The inmates’ descriptions of fatherhood described their desire to try more in their relationships upon release and held hope for an improved fatherhood role in their children’s lives. I wonder if the timing of the interviews impacted this. Since the discussions were held with prisoners within one month of their release, there may have been a difference in experiences of fatherhood for inmates a lot farther from their opportunity to reengage with their children upon release.



I also wondered a lot about how my dad felt about being a father. Did he miss me? Did he think about me often? Was he mad when I did not write back? Was he sad we could only talk once a week? Had he realised my life was moving on without him? I can only imagine the fear people in prison must experience. Feeling stuck while the world continues around you.

“Seeing my Father is Charity Work”

The light flicks on early on a Saturday. ‘Wake up and get dressed.’ As my eyes pry themselves apart, I search for the source of the demand and find my mom at my doorway. ‘Why?’ ‘You and your brother are going to get up and do some charity work today.’ Charity work, what is she talking about, I think as sleep quickly fades from my mind. ‘Charity work, what charity work.’ ‘Don’t worry about it, and do as I say. Get dressed.’ I look at the clock, and it is around 9 am. What 16-year-old wants to be awoken on their Saturday morning to go do charity work?

I get dressed as I was rudely demanded to do and go into the living room to my awaiting mother and just as irritated brother. He seems just as annoyed with having to do charity work on our day

off as I do. *'Why do we have to do charity work?'* She answers with a smirk on her face, *'Because y'all are ungrateful for all you have and need to give back and learn that others have it worse off than you do.'* *'How have we been ungrateful?'* I counter. *'You have been complaining about your chores and fighting with each other.'* My brother just stands there, still trying to wake up but definitely appearing to be on my side. *'Fine, whatever.'* We get in the car and leave, she never lets on to where we are going. The whole car ride, my brother and I just stared moodily out the car windows.

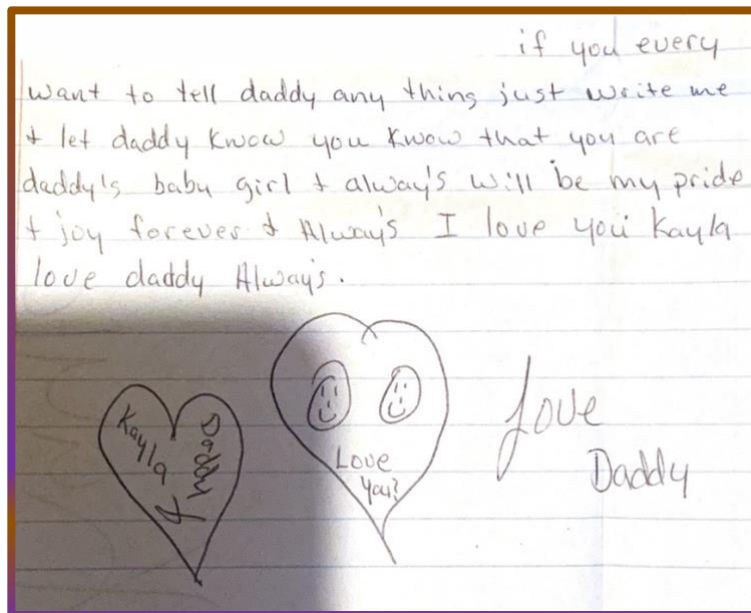
We start driving towards town, which is about a 10-minute drive. The whole time I say nothing. Just sulk in my head about the unfairness of this whole interaction. What have I done that is so bad that I have to give up my Saturday? As we pass the exit for the town, I barely even notice, still wrapped up in my sullenness. As we exit on the north exit for our town. In my head, I think there is nothing out here; what charity could we be doing here? We drive past the DMV, past the fields, and into the jail. *'Surprise! We are here to see your dad!!'*

At this point, I haven't seen my dad in about 3 years. *'Tricked you. I got you good with the whole charity work didn't I?'* my mom smugly says. I look back at her, annoyed. For multiple reasons. Not only has she drug me out of my bed on an early Saturday morning, claiming we were about to have to do charity work, but she also thinks this is better. She doesn't know how I have changed internally towards my dad in the past few years. I don't want my friends to find out about him. What if they drove past and asked me why I was at the jail? She doesn't know about the walls I have put up to separate me and him. I am not daddy's little girl, and yet he is going to want me to be. That is what all his letters say. He acts like I haven't changed. That he should be my hero. Someone I should love. I do love him, but can't I love him from afar? But of course, I can't say any

of this; I put on my smile (the best I can as a teenager) and greet the man who causes me so much shame and anxiety.

'Hey Daddy, I have missed you!!!'

Child's Perspective



In an article written by Teen Vouge as part of their *Kids Incarcerated* series, several children share their experiences of having a parent incarcerated. One of these children is a 17 year old named Jessica from California whose father has been in and out of prison throughout her childhood. Like the other children in the article, she shares the impact her father's incarceration on her childhood and young adulthood. 'My very first time hugging my dad that I could remember was at age 16' (Anspach, 2017: para. 1).

Bernstein's book a child describes the non-traditional route she had to take in order to help build a relationship with her father.

‘He has been determined by the court to be of no further use to society. But he matters to Susana. From the scraps of contact she has been granted over the years---a drawerful of letters, a few dozen collect calls, and intermittent visits---she has built herself a father’ (Bernstein, 2005: 71).

Susana’s father has told her stories about early days together, when he was free and she was small and he would pick her up and take her places; carry her in her arms. Susana can’t recall a single image from that time’ (Bernstein, 2005: 72).

Through her story it feels like she is describing something I myself experience where my father held on to the memories he made with me as a child. It is not uncommon for children to become adults (age 18) while their parent is incarcerated (Glaze and Maruschak (2008). This was true for me. He left me and child and came back to me and adult, and I definitely think that had an impact on our relationship.

norahS Youth Publications (2013) released a collaborative book created to help teenagers understand and process their feeling and experiences related to parental incarceration. Dontae is a male teenager who lives with his grandmother due to his mother’s substance addiction and his father’s incarceration. Although this book is fiction, the life lessons explored and discussed are based on real life. Working together a psychology educator, prison chaplain, behavioral specialist, and law enforcement personnel created a story where a teenager explores his relationship with his imprisoned father. This book does well revealing the vast and complex feelings children can experience towards their incarcerated parent. In the book, Dante shares ‘I do love my dad, but I’m angry, and disappointed’ (norahS Youth Publications, 2013: p. 92-93). During the story, Dante encounters several experiences common for children with incarcerated parents. Dante shares his

thoughts and feelings concerning living with his grandmother, prison visitations, his father being released from jail, his father's subsequent return to jail, and generally, his father-son relationship. Donte's story demonstrates the confusion, uncertainty, fear, disappointment and anger many children with incarcerated parents experience.

'Dante realized that he had felt all those emotions. At first he was in disbelief, then the anger came then the sadness, knowing that his daddy would not be around when he graduated from college, when he got married, when he had kids, All the things normal people did' (norahS Youth Publications, 2013: p. 91-92).

Luckily for Dante, he had a support system around him, encouraging him to open up about these intense emotions. However, this is not the experience for many children with incarcerated parents. Hopefully, this book can help those teenagers who may have to navigate the complex landscape of parental incarceration unaided.

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, missing out on the regular relational life events that you are supposed to be entitled to as a child from a parent can be difficult to cope with at times. The loss of these moments can be very emotional, and some children with prisoners may choose to alter or postpone specific plans to try and have their incarcerated parent present. Bernstein (2005) offers a story where a girl who would be an adult before her parent was released had to make promises to put certain life events on hold. Susana promised to wait until her father's release to get married, or at least arrange for the wedding to be on prison grounds so he could walk her down the aisle. While Susana explains she is okay with making this promise, I wonder how easy it is to say no. I know that with my own father, I felt a lot of responsibility to not let him down or upset him. So, while

he may not have been the only factor in me becoming an overachiever, his letters frequently reminding me to 'do good in school' did not help that pressure.

Everyone Makes Mistakes: Living With My Daddy In Jail by Madison Strempek (2015) is a book written by a kid for kids affected by parental incarceration. In the book, she shares her experiences concerning her father's imprisonment with the hope of helping other children navigate difficult times. She felt that there were books written by doctors and psychologists but none written by actual kids with incarcerated parents. A sentiment I share with her. Her aim for her book was to offer a space for children not feel alone or embarrassed for having a parent in jail. While written primarily for kids, she also hope it can help adults better understand the thoughts, feelings, struggles and needs of children with incarcerated parents.

The one problem I had with most of the books, and even my fathers letters over the years was the portrayal of the forgiveness message.

'Son.....I made a lot of bad decisions when I was young, thought I was invincible, too good to get caught. Don't you make the same mistake. I know I haven't been there for you, but I want you to know that I love you , I'm proud of you and I'm sorry for not being in your life. Son, I'm going to make it up to you when I get out' (norahS Youth Publications, 2013: p. 45-46).

This passage in a book about a teenage boy's relationship with his imprisoned father reminded me so much of things my father has either said or written to me during his incarceration. It felt like his way of parenting from a far. So often, we are told over and over to behave so we do not end up like them and to forgive them. Such as when Donte's grandmother told him, '[although] your father is in prison he's still your father, be respectful' (norahS Youth Publications, 2013: p. 40). That they

just made a mistake. While I completely agree with that, it also feels like it takes away the space to be angry about the situation. I cannot think of a single time I shared my anger with either of my parents, partly because it took me so long to get in touch with it myself. I had shoved it down so far in myself out of fear of upsetting my father or my family. But that does not mean it didn't exist.

“Disney Dreaming”

Dear Kayla & ~~Bill~~ Well Daddy said he will write yall i miss yall so much i love yall & miss yall so much i cant wait until i get out so we can do a lot of stuff first thing we are going to do is go to walt disney & have so much fun Daddy loves yall so much yall are still my baby girl & Boy Yall keep doing good in school & minding your Fat head mommy yall take care of her don't let Coach be mean to her even though she is mean I think about yall all the time i love yall so much so what has been going on with yall i bet yall are having a lot of fun daddy cant wait until he gets out so we can go a lot of places & have fun ~~Bill~~ take care of the tackle box & fishing poles so we can go fishing & catch a lot of fish how is ~~Bill~~ yall & little sister doing i bet she is growing 'get mommy to carry yall to see Peep sometime & play with her Kayla her is a Birthday card for your birthday daddy want ever forget yall, yall are my kid for ever and always I Love yall don't ever forget that i cant wait until i get to hold yall in my arms & see yall i love yall so much Daddy is doing ok just miss yall, yall stay on my mind all way i want never stop loving yall. write daddy back as soon as yall can I Love yall
Daddy!

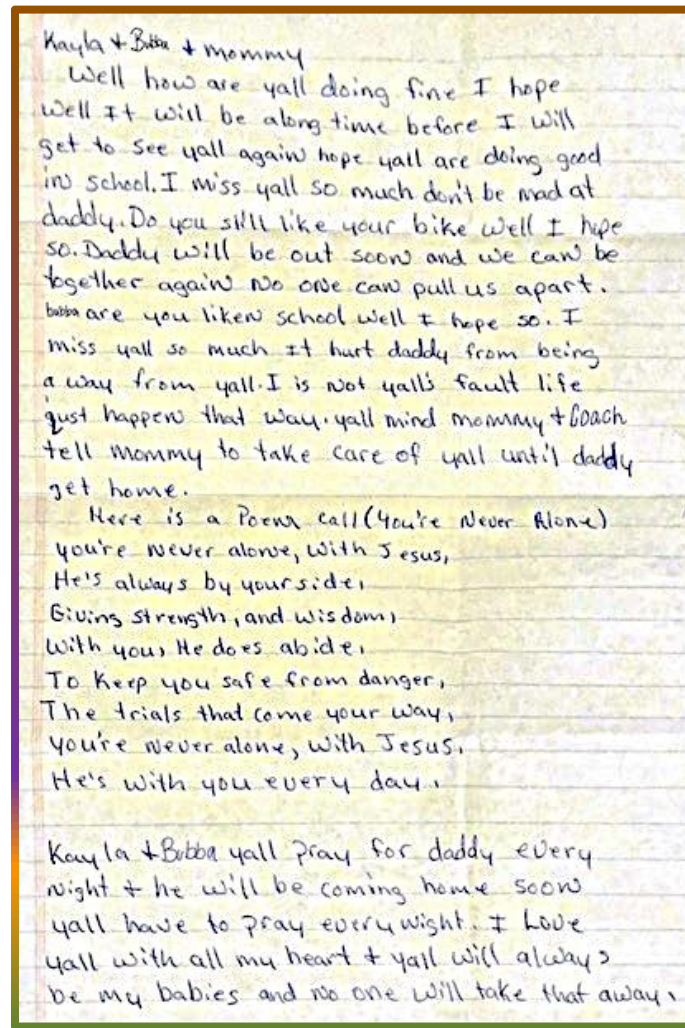
What little kid doesn't dream of going to Disney World? I feel like it is practically instilled in us as children to dream of visiting Cinderella's Castle, meeting Mickey and Minnie Mouse, riding in Alice's teacups and flying with Dumbo. The first comfort item I remember as a child is this small brown and pink Minnie Mouse blanket. Going to Disney World was my childhood dream, and it was a dream my daddy said he would make happen.

You know, after the Super Bowl, when the MVP (most valuable player) is asked, 'What are you going to do now?' They always reply, 'I'm going to Disney World'. Well, I guess for my dad, leaving prison was supposed to be his equivalent of winning the Super Bowl. For as long as I can recall, I remember my dad promising me that he would take my brother and me to Disney World once he got out. Calls, letters and visits ended with this lingering promise of a better, happier time for us just ahead. A time when we will be like a normal family. The kind of normal family that goes to Disney World. For years I remember my brother and I holding tightly to this promise. This promise felt like a guarantee that the future would hold more hope for us as a family.

Even as I grew older and my relationship with my dad rode waves of push and pull, I never once let go of his promise of Disney. His promise of our Happy Ever After. Because that is what Disney is about, is it not? The promise is that no matter how bumpy the story gets or how many obstacles are placed in front of the princess or hero, they still get to have a happily ever after. I needed my hope for happily ever after that my life would return to normal again.

My dad never did take my brother and me to Disney World.

Conclusion



As I went through all of my father's letters for this thesis, I noticed how repetitive they were. Often, my dad spoke about how we were still a family and what we would do once he was released. He made so many promises that were never kept or just simply forgotten. The taste of disappointment becomes familiar for children with incarcerated parents. There is the disappointment of the loss of a parent and all of the moments you were supposed to be entitled to as their child. There is the disappointment of not having a father/mother around to teach you the things they are supposed to.

There is the disappointment of a missed call. There is the disappointment of missed holidays and especially birthdays.

The change doesn't really bother me, he's been in prison like six times, and missed some of our Christmases. But it doesn't really bother me anymore. [...] I've got used to it now, so it was ok. I just like pretended it wasn't happening. So like blanked it out. And that's what I do with most things. My mum says it's wrong to blank things out. (Holly, quoted in Weidberg, 2017: p.377)

There is the disappointment of constantly feeling different from your friends because you may have more responsibilities or less money than your friends. There is the disappointment of not having anyone else understand, not even family. At some point, that disappointment may turn to anger. Anger for all the things that have been done to you and taken away from you. Anger that that parent was not there to protect you the way they were supposed to. And while you are holding all this anger and disappointment, you are receiving messages and letters about forgiveness. As I have mentioned earlier, many of the supportive materials children may receive to help them understand parental incarceration speak about forgiveness. In both books written by Curcio (2015) and Strempek (2015) the authors write about the forgiveness needing to come from the children. In Weidberg's study, he talks about how varying the coping strategies can be for children with imprisoned parents.

All the young people had developed their own individual coping mechanisms. These included normalising and adapting to their situation, blocking out emotions, using avoidance and distraction strategies, their own perception of time (how fast or slow the past, present and future go), and wanting to be independent. (Weidberg, 2017: p.377).

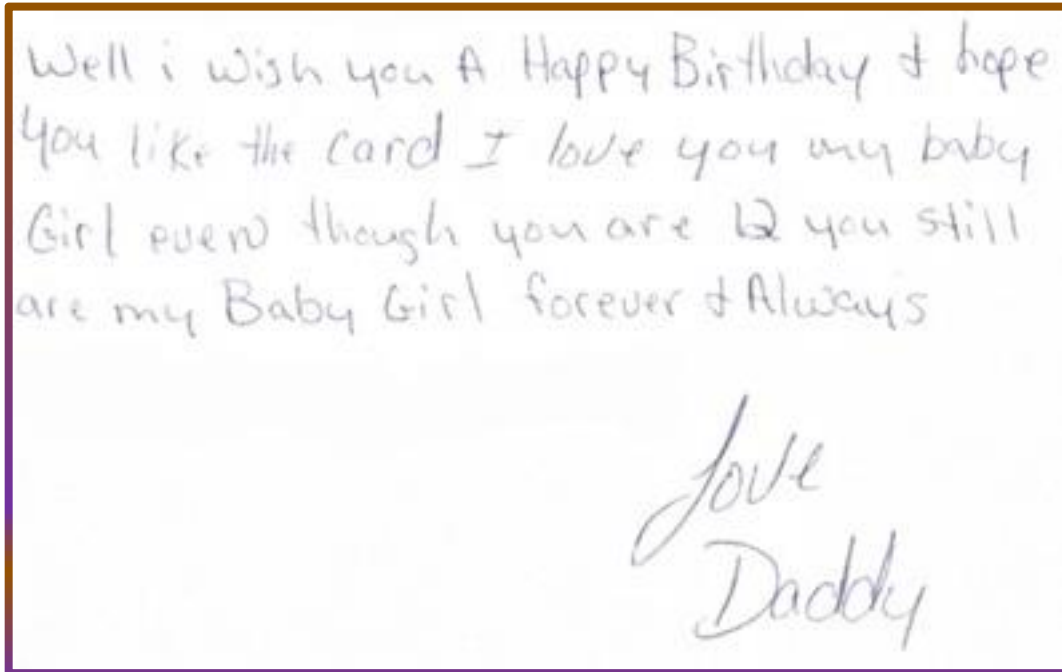
I feel like that is a lot of pressure and expectations for children with imprisoned parents. Many of these children may already feel pressured to minimise their feelings so as not to upset their parents, and now they also are a key figure in their parent's redemption. I know for myself I often would and still do hide my negative emotions concerning my father because I internalised a message really young about the vital role I play in maintaining his wellbeing. Scattered throughout this chapter were examples of the emotional labour many children with incarcerated parents experience growing up and into adulthood.

Mum like hates taking [anti-depressant tablets] cos apparently they taste really horrible and sometimes I go mum have you taken your tablets and she goes "yeahhhhhh", and I'm like mum have you taken your tablet and she's like "nooooo". And the other night I put a DVD on and she started sulking cos she had to take it. And she was like hmmm. So basically I took the role of the parent and she took the role of the child. (Anna, quoted in Weidberg, 2017: p. 378)

Benninger et al.'s (2023) research found that despite parental incarceration being an adverse childhood experience, with the proper support and guidance, many children can still thrive and flourish. Their study emphasised that the strengths of children with incarcerated parents should be recognised and emphasised as much as their struggles. Too often, research has approached this population looking for the negativity instead of learning from them how they have overcome so much with little support and guidance. We should be helping children with imprisoned parents to feel empowered to discuss their thoughts and feelings on the mental health impact, available social programmes and support, universal interventions, avoiding stigma and blame, and school support systems (Benninger et al., 2023).

There is a similar tone in the stories of children with incarcerated parents, where their time just to be a child is severely impacted by incarceration. Whether that is due to financial strain, family instability, and/or lack of parenting, these children often find themselves responsible for things 'above their pay grade'. The time being a carefree and relaxed child is cut short by the pressures and stress allocated to them due to their parent's incarceration.

Chapter 6: Beginnings and Endings



“Daddy Date”

I wait by the door anxiously. He said he would come pick me up. Check my hair, check my clothes, check my face. I want to look nice but not like I am trying too hard. We haven't done this as far as I can recall. Go on a daddy-daughter date. I was too young when he got locked up to remember if this was normal for us. I don't have any core memories of just the two of us doing things together, being together. Since he has been released, he hasn't asked for this kind of time with me. It has taken him 13 years, us 13 years, to get to the point in our relationship where we can spend time alone. That is about the same number of years he was locked away, away from being a present dad and in-person dad. We were locked away from potential daddy-daughter dates as I grew from child to teenager, from teenager to adult, and from girl to woman. Pivotal dates that lay and reinforce the foundation of a daddy-daughter relationship. Does that mean our foundation is weak? It feels

like it. How do I act? What do I say? Does he feel the same? We don't talk about this. We stick to our script. I love you. I wait for him to come pick me up. I wait for him.

He leads, I follow, he leads, I follow. Should I do more leading now that I am an adult? Is that what adults are expected to do, lead? Why has it taken 13 years for this to happen? Is that my fault? Have I pushed him away with my failure to lead our repair? With my hesitancy to revert from woman to girl, from adult to child? Has it taken 13 years for us to finally meet in the middle? I wait with these questions but not consciously. No, these questions tend to only be felt and answered in my anxiety, in my uncertainty, in my discomfort. No, the questions I wait with are... Will he show up? (I fear that maybe he will cancel, but then I can just stay at home... relief) Do I look okay? (I worry, I don't want to dress too weird with him and make him uncomfortable... accept me) What will we talk about? (I am nervous because we don't really share any interest, not like him and Bubba. I am going to bore him, or he is going to think I am stuck up... stiff) What will we do? What will we do? What will we do? What is the goal of today? What is he hoping to get from today? What does he want from me? I don't know, and that is scary. I am scared of letting him down. Scared of not giving or saying what he needs. That is the role I am used to performing. "I love you too, Daddy." Everything is good, Daddy." "I am fine, Daddy." "I can't wait for you to come home too, Daddy."

He is finally here. "What do you want to do today?"

Is it ironic that our daddy-daughter date led us to a hardware store? A store for home repair and improvement. That's what our relationship needs, no? When pressured with the responsibility of organising our day, all I could think about was: What are the things he is into? What are things he could help me with? So, we are off to the hardware store so he can show me what I need in order to lay tile. So he can talk about something he is comfortable with, and I don't bore him with me. I

listen and learn and enjoy. But what I really want to talk about is him, his life. Before prison, after prison. Learn about the family I never really got to know. But I am not brave. I stick to the safe zones. I learn about tile and grout. And in some ways, it is nice to feel that my dad will be part of my home in some way if/when I put these skills to the test.

He drops me off back at home. We say our goodbye script, but I leave feeling a bit more comfortable with him and hope he feels the same. It was a good date. It was a small start. Construction work was in progress.

Where being *Baby Girl* once felt heavy and abrasive, it is now an endearment that I treasure when my Daddy calls me that. This is because I feel it speaks to the growth and future of our relationship versus the weight of responsibility it held while he was in prison. You may have noticed that in my vignettes I call him *Daddy*, and in the other parts of the thesis, he is *Father*. This is because our relationship is still figuring itself out. It didn't seem right to call him Father when I was writing about our stories, but it also did not seem right to call him Daddy (an endearment) when I was talking about our history in relation to research. My relationship with my father has come a long way, but I think a lot of that healing has happened within me. Time, distance and counselling gave me the safe space to begin to unlock the doors I had kept tightly shut since childhood. My father and I have still never had any of the conversations I was yearning for throughout my childhood, but that need to connect with him is not as strong since finding other spaces that would accept me. While that still stings at times that we cannot talk freely and openly, I am more secure in the validity of my own experiences. It would be nice, however, to be able to talk to him about my professional aspirations and goals, but as they relate to criminal justice and incarceration, he often shies away. My father is supportive, but for someone who is probably the reason I am in the

profession I am in, he could be a bit more engaged. I have often asked myself, through the years, if my passion for criminology is mine or if it is a result of my circumstances. It is really a chicken-and-egg question at this point, to which I may never have a clear answer.

Conclusion and Reflections

The autoethnographic journey for this thesis has been a process that was such a scary yet validating experience. It has been full of many knowns and unknowns that encouraged a lot of self-reflection. Throughout the different stages of this process, I have been challenged by past protective instincts. The thoughts and feelings shared throughout this thesis are part of my childhood that I have protected for a long time out of fear. In my vignettes, I really wanted to challenge myself to share the darkness I feel has followed me ever since my father went to prison. Not a day goes by that, in some way or another, I am reminded of his incarceration and the impact it has had on my life as an adult. Growing up, people would always describe me as happy and strong without knowing what I was fighting with underneath. Being a child with an imprisoned parent can be such an isolating experience. This thesis has been a space to engage in conversation with other children with incarcerated parents, even if only via literature. A conversation I have never been able to have due to shame, stigma and fear, as well as just not knowing where we all are. I wanted to collect these voices to show that we are many and our voices have value.

‘The experience of imprisonment does not occur in isolation for a man with a family, and the prison wall can never be a complete barrier to the emotional currents which flow between a man and his wife and children’ (Morris, 1965: p. 9).

The use of imprisonment in America is not going to be replaced anytime soon, if ever. Although statistics show that the incarceration rate has been decreasing in recent years, for many, the damage

done by mass incarceration has already been done. As discussed, mass incarceration has had a substantial impact on the American people, particularly those belonging to minority groups. Subsequently, research has repeatedly shown the adverse outcomes children with imprisoned parents experience due to parental incarceration. It is important to remember that not every child is going to experience their parent's incarceration the same. This is not a universal experience, but that does not mean there are no commonalities within our experiences. This thesis does not aim to represent a definitive statement on the impact and experiences children with incarcerated parents may or may not encounter. Instead, I aimed to intersect my experiences with various voices and topics to facilitate examination and dialogue around children's experiences of parental incarceration.

[The] whole basis of justice and punishment collapses when one repeatedly identifies children of prisoners who suffer more as a result of their father's sentence than did the original victim of the offence. (Shaw, 1987: p. 71, quoted in Condry and Smith, 2018: 6)

The most significant contributions of this thesis to this area of knowledge are my autoethnographic writings and commentary on the lasting impacts of stigma and shame for children with imprisoned parents. Within this thesis, I am able to offer stories and commentary from moments in my life as a child with an imprisoned parent that spans both childhood and adulthood. As discussed previously, research in both of these areas has been lacking up to date. While there are a growing number of research studies that use the words of children with imprisoned parents to validate their findings, I did not find any that offered the scope of years covered in my thesis. Additionally, I have not found another research study in this field where the researcher reflects and adds commentary to the research meant to represent her. Finally, this thesis brings together the voices of children with imprisoned parents from various forms of media and research. This is to help

show the commonality in experiences found within the culture of children with incarcerated parents, especially since many of these children grow up feeling different and alone. I know this was very true for me and hopefully is reflected in my autoethnographic writings.

So, you are all caught up. As you can see, my interest in crime and incarceration is still very much alive. I have been lucky to be able to offer some counselling sessions to inmates at a prison here in Scotland. I hope to continue to do this in my career, whether in prison or by providing a space for ex-prisoners upon release. Additionally, I would also like to expand my therapeutic work to include work with kids and families of prisoners as well. My hope is that this research can be used by professionals who work with children, families or adults with incarceration issues to help them better understand this population. Perhaps then, support services and research in the future will better aim to hear and capture their voices so as to respond more effectively to the needs of this group. As importantly, hopefully, through my thesis, other children and adults with experience of parental incarceration will find their experiences acknowledged and affirmed in this thesis. It does not seem fair for the lives of children with incarcerated parents to have their entire lives darkened because of the choices their parents made, and hopefully, other children with parental incarceration will feel validated enough to begin their healing journey. With any luck, this thesis can help stop kids like me from having to live under the shadows cast by parental incarceration in silence, shame, and secrecy.

Implications for Professionals

Effective collaboration between researchers and social support providers is needed (e.g. politicians and community organisations) if we want to improve the impact incarceration is having on children and families in America (Boswell, 2018). Unfortunately, it does not seem that governments and

politicians have kept children with imprisoned parents in mind when making decisions regarding paternal incarceration. It would appear Kruttschnitt (2011) feels similarly because, in their research, they questioned if legislators ever considered the consequences of their decisions or if they even cared about the repercussions. The impact parental incarceration is having on children in America is not going to improve unless policymakers and corrections administrators fund research aimed to develop programmes, policies and procedures designed to acknowledge and improve the impact of mass incarceration on children's well-being (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, and Shear, 2010).

Sadly, however, I feel few legislators or policymakers have kept us in mind when allocating government aid and support to those in need. I feel this can be evidenced simply by their lack of care to even accurately document the number of children affected by paternal incarceration. There are also limited social support organisations available to children, especially in rural areas. Due to their lack of interest, this has led to a lack of funding for research and support for this population. If the government does not feel we are worth the money, then why would other charity organisations? I do not know if I have ever heard of a public or community event to support or raise awareness for children with imprisoned parents. Ultimately, when one's parent is taken into incarceration, that child becomes a stepchild to state and country and not often a beloved addition.

We need to enhance the visibility of this population in positive ways so that support services aim to serve this population's needs better and the children with incarcerated parents feel able to accept the support free of shame and stigma. Support from peers, extracurricular activities, and neighbourhood community programmes can have an important impact on youth development.

These are children who are our children, who go to school with our children. These are children who are hurting very much, and as a compassionate society, we have to care about

that. But they are also kids who are so invisible that if we don't make an effort to know them to identify them to want to know who they are, they will stay invisible, and that's not okay. (Angie quoted in McDonald, 2009, 0:02:32)

Sack and Seidler (1978) found that over half of their children participants showed some emotional problems related to parental incarceration. That means that for decades, we have known the emotional cost of parental incarceration that children are being asked to pay. As recently as 2023, Benninger et al. conducted research on children with imprisoned parents, where they collected their stories about their experiences and recommendations for interventions that could improve their lives. These interventions addressed the root causes of high crime (e.g. poverty, limited access to education and employment opportunities, lack of mental health services), improved support at school (e.g. afterschool programmes, counselling services, free food services, and social and emotional psychoeducation), and transforming relationships between police and communities (building meaningful partnerships instead of punitive relationships full of fear and distrust) (Benninger et al., 2023: p. 27). The last recommendation the children suggested was 'increasing opportunities for children to communicate with adults about their experiences and to make decisions regarding their lives and their relationships with incarcerated family members' (Benninger et al., 2023, p. 28). Continuously, the children in parental incarceration research are telling us how meaningful relationships are to them and that they need a space to feel safe. The children of incarcerated parents are willing to talk to us, parents, professionals, researchers, and politicians. We just have to be willing to make the space to hear them.

Therapists and professionals working with children with imprisoned parents are afforded a unique opportunity to facilitate and empower the healing process for this population through a variety of practices. The support of this may aid children with imprisoned parents in their recovery from the

effects of parental incarceration. First and foremost, it is of vital importance that professionals working with this population are aware that many of the children in this population have a long history of stigma, shame, and secrecy. 'The whole problem of managing stigma is influenced by the issue of whether or not the stigmatized person is known to us personally' (Goffman, 1990: p. 48). We first need to acknowledge their unique experiences and invite them into the conversation. It may take some time before children in this population feel safe enough to share their true thoughts and feelings about their relationship with their parent's incarceration. It will be vital that professionals working with children with imprisoned parents be mindful that there are a lot of variations in children's relationships with their parent's criminality. Some children may have little understanding or awareness of the impact of their parent's incarceration. 'Clients disguise [shame] by expressing a range of other emotions such as embarrassment, self-blame or guilt rather than give voice to shame' (Sanderson, 2015: p. 190). Professionals may be greeted with walls when working with these children, as they have used these to protect themselves from potential hurt, shame or stigma. The work will be to create a safe space for them to address, release and work on those feelings. Alternatively, other children may be more aware but still struggle to share because of shame and stigma. Clients also try and hide their shame behind 'anger, hostility, grandiosity or [dissociation]' (Sanderson, 2015: p. 190). For many children with imprisoned parents, they felt the need to take an emotionally strong stance growing up. Therapists working with this population should, thus, work hard on creating an environment free from judgment for them so they can feel safe. Helping those children let those walls down in order to heal will be part of the work. 'Healing-centered engagement with youth results from building a healthy identity, and a sense of belonging, and collectively advocating for policies and opportunities that address the root causes of ill health' (Benninger et al., 2023: p. 4). Acknowledging and valuing the children's shame, stigma, isolation,

anger, disappointment, and various other emotional experiences regarding parental incarceration will contribute to their identity work and enhance their sense of purpose, power, and control over life situations.” (Benninger et al., 2023, p. 4)

“Why is it Different for my Siblings?”

*One father four siblings
Yet only one feels different*

*Son 1 so much the same
Daughter 1 restrained by shame*

*Daughter 2 daddy’s biggest fan
Daughter 1 hides from the bogeyman*

*Son 2 easy smile quick with a joke
Daughter 1 always composed but about to explode*

*You share blood not experiences
Leading to emotional misalliances*

I have often wondered what made my relationship with my father’s incarceration differ from those of my siblings. Bubba never seemed to feel the same pressures about our dad that I did. He could always talk with our mom and friends about our dad more freely than I felt I could. Gan-Gan didn’t put the same pressure on him to maintain our family’s image as she did on me. Pressure to appear apart from the mistake that was my father. My sister Nugget and Lego never even knew our dad was in prison until they were in their teens. In fact, Lego found out about our father’s imprisonment during this thesis, but not as a result. This past Christmas, they could even joke about it together with t-shirts featuring his mugshot. But with me, when I want to know more about my father’s criminality and incarceration, there is still hesitancy. Wariness, I feel, may be felt by both him and me. Have we labelled this topic a “no go” for so long that now we both cannot approach it, even

to heal? Seeing his ease with this topic with my other siblings and the perceived ease it adds to their relationship makes me envious. Jealous but unsure how to improve.

Further Research

I believe research in this field could continue to encourage the child's voice to enhance the knowledge in the field. Including participants, either adults or children, will enrich our understanding of the impact parental incarceration can have on individuals. In the studies utilising children's voices, the researchers noted the benefit they believed it added to their study and the overall field of knowledge. Moreover, too often, research is only interested in the child's experience, but these children grow up to become adults. For myself, it was not until adulthood that I finally had the space to begin to unpack the trauma from my childhood. That is why I also recommend that future studies should actively try to recruit adult participants with a history of childhood parental incarceration. This will help us better understand the lasting impact parental incarceration is having on the youth in America and hopefully can be applied worldwide.

Additionally, there is space for research to investigate the differing experiences and relationships individuals from the same family can have. What factors influence one sibling's relationship with stigma to differ from the other? Age, gender, birth order, or relationship with the incarcerated parent. As I have referenced in one of my vignettes, I have always felt my relationship with my father's criminality was different than that of my siblings. I know in my particular family, my brother and I were told about his incarceration while our stepsiblings were not. There are also big age gaps between my brother and I and our stepsiblings. I wonder what exciting information could be gained through research investigating the differences in experience and impact related to parental incarceration among siblings.

Finally, the adverse outcome parental incarceration can have on children has been well documented, but that does not mean we know everything. As stated, there has been limited longitudinal research done with this population. As our attitudes towards crime and punishment change, we would hope so too would the stigma and shame attached (e.g. drug use, sex work, etc.). It could be helpful to have research conducted exploring the experiences of children with incarcerated parents from different generations to try and capture the changing societal attitudes and beliefs. Have our experiences gotten better, worse or the same, and why? This information could help us better understand the direction our research, support and criminal justice policy should be heading to try and reduce the impact of parental incarceration on children. The children impacted by imprisonment should not have to continue to pay for the crimes of their parents with their futures.

Epilogue

"Let's Ride Baby Girl"

Hey my baby girl so how are you doing
 fine I hope I sure do miss you I can't
 wait to see you I am missing you so much
 me I am doing ok wishing that I was there
 with you ~~or~~ just maybe you and me go
 out to eat & go watch a movie Daddy loves
 you so much you are my baby girl &
 Always will be. I have been riding horse's
 it's ok I guess I like it some time's. Have
 you ever been on a horse this was my
 first time maybe ~~we~~ we can find a ranch
 some where one day and go riding I can't
 wait for us to spend some time together
 so how is school good I hope keep those
 grade up. I hope that I can get out before
 you graduate I want to be there for you.
 I don't have to much more time down here
 I will get out next year 😊 I can't wait.
 How is thing around the house fine I hope
 I can't wait to see you Here is a ~~card~~ card
 I got out of a book I don't know if you can
 use it or not I just thought about you when
 I seen it. Well baby girl keep your head up
 and I will be home soon. Your mamma has done
 a great job with yall I have got some GREAT
 kids. Here is your KISS, KISS from me. P.S.
 be careful in that car I just wanted you
 to know it not a day goes by that you are not
 on my mind I say a prayer for yall every Day!

How do you learn to connect with someone who isn't around? How do you learn to connect with someone to whom you only show your best? Every time I speak to my dad on the phone, I tell him the good. I am his good.

"I got an A on my math test this week, Daddy. And I got a 100 on my spelling test. Mommy made Bubba and I write our words ten times every day before she let us go jump on the trampoline."

"That's good baby girl. You sure are smart, not like your daddy. You got to make sure you do well in school so you don't end up making dumb decisions like me."

How do you connect with someone when you get messages your whole life about how you are meant to be different. Are meant to do different. Eventually, you hold on to your difference and wear it like a shield. Use it as a checklist of confirmation that you are nothing like them and, therefore, better, not connected.

"Mom, I don't understand why we have to go see his family, we don't have anything really to do with them."

"They are still your family, Kayla, even if you think you are better than them."

I don't want to think I am better than them, but I am also afraid of others, my friends, finding out I am connected to them. They don't fit the image I have curated. The image I was told to create around myself. The smart girl, the good girl. They don't fit in that picture. How do I connect to the family of a parent I barely know? How do I explain this to my mom? I don't. I play my part like I am supposed to.

"Kayla, while you are home if you want to spend the night at our house one night you can. Just know that."

"Thanks, Daddy, that sounds nice."

How do I tell him that I don't yet feel comfortable staying with him? That he doesn't feel like home? I don't tell him the truth, especially the difficult truth. So I just avoid. Make up excuses. Will we get there? I don't know. But I don't feel comfortable staying with a stranger.

"Kayla, while you are home, I was thinking we could spend the day together tomorrow if you want?"

"Yeah, Daddy, that sounds nice."

Inside I am freaking out. What will we talk about? What will we do? All night before, I was worried about how it would go. On the day, I feel polite, not relaxed. This is the first time we have had a day like this together. Just the two of us. How can two people know so much about each other yet nothing at the same time? He has been there for most major events in my life, by phone or letter, but is that enough to know me? Is that enough to know him?

"Daddy sent you a Snap"

"Daddy sent you a Chat"

"Daddy replied to your Snap"

"Daddy Replied to your Chat"

Does sending almost daily SnapChats with your dad count as working on your relationship? Does he count it? He sends me a SnapChat almost daily of either a picture of him at work or a message telling me he loves me. It isn't much but at the same time it feels like a lot. It feels like effort.

"Love u"

"Love you too," Delivered.

I ask myself if he does this with my other siblings or if this is something just for us. I like to think it is something that is just ours, especially when I feel like we don't have much. Do these little snaps of each other's lives repair years of the hidden? Or is it more superficial communication

built on the idea of how a daughter and father should be? How they should communicate. I am trying to be more honest with him. Does he feel it, is that why he tries? Sometimes I just don't know how to, don't know how to be his daughter.

"Do you want to come to the rodeo with Curly and me? Your brother and Sunny are also coming."

"Yeah, that sounds like it could be fun. I haven't been to a rodeo in years."

I always get nervous doing things with my dad. I'm not sure how to act or how he will want me to act. Am I still supposed to be 'Daddy's Little Girl', or does he want to get to know the real me now? Are we at that level of honesty, or are we still play acting?

"Your brother and Sunny can't make it tonight, so it's just you, me and your Curly."

"Oh, cool."

This is so awkward. I like it when my other siblings are around. I feel like they act as a buffer between my dad and I. I wonder if he feels the same. It feels like he is more natural around them and, therefore, can be more comfortable with me when they are around, too. Or at least that's how I feel. I often wonder why it is easier for them. How did they get to that level of relation with him, and I didn't? What do they share that I don't? Why am I left out?

"I haven't been to a rodeo since I went to one on a trip with my college criminology programme to Angola Prison. It was pretty cool, to be fair. They had the show but also an arts fair where inmates got to sell things they made. It was cool to see a prison that had so much farmlands and tried to be mostly self-sufficient."

"We had horses in prison, and I actually used to help take care of them. They taught me how to ride them and take care of them and all of that while I was down there. They were used for farming, and if any inmates tried to escape. Sometimes, I got to help out with that."

“Really? That’s pretty cool. I took a horseback riding class in college and really liked it. We learned how to ride them and how to take care of them. We had partners in the class, and they paired me up with the tallest girl and the tallest horse. I never was able to mount the horse by myself. I also had a friend at college who owned a horse, and she would let me go with her from time to time to visit it.”

“Yeah, I liked working with the horses. It was one of the better prison jobs because it meant I got to spend a lot of time outdoors. That was better than being indoors all day. That is also where I got to learn to hunt.”

“Oh, now I see. Cause I didn’t really remember you as a big hunter before you went to prison like you are now, so it makes sense that it is something you developed there. I can still remember the first time I rode a horse. Old Man and Boss Lady took Bubba and I for a lesson at a place they done some work at. I loved it right away, but Bubba cried the whole time. Did you know that we did that?”

“Yeah, I think I remember your mom or you telling me about it.”

“Well, I loved it and wanted to take lessons, but either Boss Lady or Mom wouldn’t let me. But I still had a good time and have liked horses since. Who knew we both liked horses.”

So, we don’t completely have zero in common. A weak connection but still a connection, a link. A thread that can be woven into a bigger picture. A picture that depicts lots of little moments between a lost father and daughter on their journey of relation.

“Hey, I was thinking I could maybe spend the night at y’all’s if that’s cool.”

Appendices

Figure 1. End of my Counselling Course Presentation Script

All my life I have felt this need to entertain with colours or brightness in order to distract from my darkness and vulnerability. When I was preparing for today's presentation, I found myself devising ways I could dazzle and divert you and myself from sharing what has laid beneath the colours for so long. However, in the end, I decided that I finally wanted to share a side with you that I have felt scared to share for most of my life. The stripped-down, scared, emotionally vulnerable Kayla. This is a side of myself that began its protective journey at the age of 5.

Share story about father's prison.

Share story about step-father.

Share story about step-father's death.

I learned to protect myself from my past by making these events the unspeakables and the unfeelables. I built strong walls to protect my internal self and separate my external self. The external self I was shined so bright and was so colourful that you would never suspect that this sort of darkness lurked just beneath the surface and that is exactly what I wanted. I had felt this constructed persona protected me for most of my life, so when I began the counselling course it stayed in place.

My supervisor was a big part in helping me start the process of leaving this constructed persona behind. Every week, he would ask me how I feel about my clients, and every week, I would struggle to connect with my own emotions. (story) That is when I decided to challenge myself in

the Person-centred course to really push myself to pay attention to my feelings. Something I had never felt I wanted to do. In the past, it felt better to quickly feel negative emotions and then move back to happier ones, more acceptable ones. But for once, I tried to give myself both internal and external space to experience all my emotions. I have been truly scared of the dark parts of myself for most of my life, but for once, I felt I was being offered space and encouraged to feel them.

As the course moved to psychodynamic, so did my emotional understanding. Now that I was finally able to sit with emotions I had run from all my life, I was given theory to help me understand where these feelings originated. You may find my aversion towards emotional expression obvious based on the stories I have told, but it actually was not till towards the end of the course that these revelations truly set in. This course really made me feel emotionally stunted in many ways, at times, unable to keep up with the emotional progress of others. Yet, it also helped me find a voice in advocating for my own emotional speed and needs.

I feel that without the dialogue, my emotional growth and learning would have been unbalanced. Both person-centered and psychodynamic theories offered and taught me so much about how to be authentic with myself and with my clients. Perhaps in the future, I will gravitate towards one more than the other, but at this moment, I still feel I need both of their guidance and wisdom to explore my internal and external work.

I feel my biggest struggle throughout client work has been my use of the therapeutic self, and I feel it has, in part, been because I did not really know myself until I came on this course. For a while, I struggled to own my emotional space in the room with my client; I often feared my colours would outshine my clients. I have really been striving to create a space that allows both my authentic colourful self as well as the client's authentic colours to mix harmoniously. While I feel

my exploration of my emotional ownership has helped me in this area, I am still faced with other challenges. Recently, my supervisor told me that it appears it is easy for me to develop relationships, but what about sustaining them? Internal defences and saboteurs are surfacing the more I open myself up to my work with clients, but I see that as progress. To me, it means that, finally, the constructed persona that I have clung to for so long is becoming more and more transparent.

So, in conclusion, my colours are me; I am my colours. I am just finally accepting the whole range of them, light to dark. As I transition into the future I hope to continue to personally and professionally grow through personal therapy, supervision, client work and peer support. I want to incorporate my authentic, colourful personality more into my work, possibly through art. I plan on continuing towards my professional doctorate and, hopefully, one day working with prisoners and families affected by prison. Although I have a real passion for this specific area, I am open to any opportunities until I get there.

Thanks.

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