

**SCHOOLS CONQUERING THE
CHALLENGES OF
PARENTAL INCARCERATION
ON AMERICA'S YOUTH**

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Abstract

Over the last 40 years, the United States prison system has increased by 500%. This has raised concerns about the adverse consequences this has on the children of incarcerated parents (The Sentencing Project). Children who are affected by parental incarceration are vulnerable to a host of negative emotions including sadness, anxiety, fear, anger, depression, and guilt (Lopez & Bhat, 2007). In 1999, an estimated 1.5 million minor children had a parent in a United States prison with 58% of the children being under the age of 10 (Clopton & East, 2008). The number of children with parents in prison increased by 80% between 1991 and 2007 (The Sentencing Project).

The number of people incarcerated in state and federal prisons increased from 1,391,261 to 1,526,792 between 2000 and 2015 (The Sentencing Project). As prisons populations change, as does the number of children who experience parental incarceration in the United States. Parental incarceration is more likely to impact minority children and those with parents with low educational attainment (Turney, 2019).

Following the arrest of a parent, young children need to be supported and cared for. Many adults have difficulty understanding how to support young children. These children tend to have greater trauma and negative outcomes as a result of the

separation from a parent. Younger children are more likely to witness the arrest of a parent, may have more difficulty comprehending what is going on, and are more reliant on their caregivers, all making it more difficult when their living arrangements and daily practices change. With children spending much of their days in a classroom at school, educators must be equipped with the knowledge and resources to support their students impacted by parental incarceration.

School-based interventions from administrators, teachers, counselors, and social workers can help young students overcome the risk factors given by parental incarceration. The impact of incarceration on children is only an emerging area of research.

Methodology

Through extensively reviewing literature and research that has already been done, I will explain the key psychological and educational impacts from parental incarceration on elementary school aged children in Part I. In Part II, I will show the original research I have conducted in interviews to continue to understand education-based responses that schools can implement to support their students through the journey and implications of parental incarceration.

PART I

A Snapshot of Mass Incarceration in the United States

The United States has the highest per-capita incarceration rate in the world, with 2.2 million people in our jails and prisons (The Sentencing Project). The US is less than 5% of the world's population, but more than 20% of the world's prisoners. People of color make up 67% of our prison population, but only 37% of the US population. The number of women in prison has been increasing at double the rate of growth for men in the last 40 years (The Sentencing Project).

This increase in women's imprisonment leads to more children suffering from parental absence and who are affected by parental incarceration. More than 60% of women in prisons have minor children (The Sentencing Project). Roughly half of the parents incarcerated report to have lived with and provided financial support for their child/children prior to their incarceration (Wildeman & Anderson, 2017). As of 2016, parents in America's state and federal prisons had an estimated 1,498,000 minor children (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2016).

The incarceration of millions of adults means that millions of children grow up with incarcerated parents: by age nine, 2.7 million American children will have a parent in jail or prison (Turney, 2019) and an estimated 10 million children will have experienced a parent's incarceration at some point in their lives (Simmons, 2000). These statistics have huge implications for America's classrooms and their students.

Disproportionate Impacts: Race, Class, & Parental Incarceration

The criminal justice system disproportionately impacts people of color and lower-income individuals. Black males born in 2001 had a 32% chance of serving time in prison at some point in their lives; Hispanic males had a 17% chance; white males had a 6% chance. In 2015, the rate of incarceration for black women was double the rate for white women, while the rate of incarceration for Hispanic women was 1.2 times higher than the rate for white women (The Sentencing Project).

As one would expect, the fact that minority and low-income adults are disproportionately incarcerated means that minority and low-income children are much more likely to have an incarcerated parent than their white or wealthier peers (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Indeed, black children are 7.5 times more likely than white children to have an incarcerated parent, while Hispanic children are 2.6 times more likely than are white children to have a parent in prison (The Sentencing Project). These disproportionate impacts of parental incarceration also map on to schools: at schools in lower-income, predominately non-white neighborhoods, it is common for over 50% of students to have been impacted by familial incarceration (Lopez & Bhat, 2007).

Many families who deal with parental incarceration already come from communities that are struggling. America's education system has noteworthy inequities for low-income students and students of color. Children growing up in poorer communities lack access to resources and opportunities (Wildeman & Anderson, 2017). According to a 2018 study by the National Center for Education Statistics, students from low-income families drop out of high school at twice the rate of upper-middle and high-income families. While it can be tempting to think that the consequences of children of incarcerated parents are attributes of marginalized and disadvantaged students, studies such as Poehlmann, 2005 and Snyder et al., 2008, have accounted for these attributes and find that children of incarcerated parents suffer greater, more serious harm.

Children of Incarcerated Parents: Risk Factors and Negative Outcomes

Children experience multiple risks when they have a parent who is incarcerated. According to the Centers of Disease Control (CDC), parental incarceration is a considerable adverse childhood experience (ACE). ACEs are traumatic events that occur in a minor's life and include experiences such as parental substance abuse, divorce, and incarceration (Center for Disease Control). A 1990 study by Kaiser Permanente and the CDC found that there is a significant relationship between the number of ACEs one experiences and negative outcomes later in life. ACEs put children at increased risk for myriad social, emotional, and academic struggles later

on. In particular, research shows that parental incarceration induces behavioral and mental health problems (Geller et al. 2012); worse school outcomes (Haskins 2014); and higher levels of delinquency, criminal activity, and criminal justice contact (Wildeman & Anderson, 2017).

Younger children who have parents involved in the criminal justice system are among the most at-risk, yet least visible and easy to leave behind populations of children (Reed, 1997). Indeed, young children are especially vulnerable to the effects of parental incarceration as your experiences early in life can shape your later outcomes (Geller et al. 2012). When you are still in the early stages of development, major life events can impede the developmental process and hinder a child from growing to their full potential. Thus, younger children may be more vulnerable to the effects of parental incarceration as they have specific needs to be met in their early stages of development (Dallaire et al., 2010).

Parental incarceration can lead to poor impulse control, poor concentration, and poor judgment in children (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Children's responses to the experience of losing a parent to the criminal justice system include fear, anxiety, sadness, and grief. Without intervention, these feelings can be manifested into reactive behavior and actions such as fighting with peers, acting out, and bullying (Dallaire et al., 2010). Research has indicated a correlation between parental

incarceration and an increase in emotional, academic, and behavioral problems among America's youth (Lopez & Bhat, 2007).

Disrupted Living Situation

The children of incarcerated parents often experience a change in living situation. Many of these children have a permanent or temporary change of residence and primary caretaker (Adalist-Estrin, 2014). When a child has a father who is incarcerated, the mother is often the caretaker and a residence change is less likely. Grandparents often become the caretakers when it is the mother that is incarcerated (Schreier, 2020). Children whose mothers have interacted with the criminal justice system report having made as many as seven or eight moves in 5 years (Phillips et al., 2016) Other children appear to go with other relatives, friends, or into the foster care system, which has its own set of risk factors.

When children are moving between homes or family members, there is often a financial burden, as those members were likely not prepared to raise a child (Schreier, 2020). The removal of a parent from the household and from a child's daily routines and rituals can be an emotional period of change and getting used to. Many parents had to leave their children at home confused and with a disrupted routine (Simmons, 2000).

Children's family and home environments are impactful to the person they grow to be, and the quality of the child's caregiver may help mediate the relation between cumulative risk and child outcomes (Poehlmann, 2005). For all children, stimulating, safe, and responsive family environments help foster a child's cognitive and language development, whereas low-quality environments contribute to negative outcomes (Poehlmann, 2005). Ultimately, children living in an unpredictable day-to-day life are known to have more stress and greater emotional difficulty (Adalist-Estrin, 2014).

Negative Outcomes: Emotions

These disruptions can lead to a change in academic performance, as well as a variety of mental and emotional effects that children may feel. For example, some children may experience distrust of authority, fear of vulnerability, and fear of judgment from peers and adults at school (Adalist-Estrin, 2014). It is not uncommon for these children to have emotional numbing and avoidance. These disruptions to a student's life can complicate their identity formation as they grow up and begin to develop a sense of self and belonging to the greater world (Adalist-Estrin, 2014).

The stigma, strain, and separation resulting from parental incarceration can manifest in internal and external behaviors of stress and acting out inappropriately (Wildeman et al., 2017). Internalized problems include feelings of worthlessness or

inferiority or feeling sick and needing to go to the nurse's office despite a lack of noticeable symptoms (Dallaire et al., 2010). When children feel the need to take control of something in their life, they often resort to physical actions which society views as aggression and punishes the child instead of providing care for them. Additionally, these children tend to have low tempers and are triggered quite easily because of the instability in their life, making it even more likely that they take actions that may not appear as their normal behavior (Dallaire et al., 2010).

Negative Outcomes: Academics

Children with incarcerated parents are at a significantly increased risk for academic failure and school dropout (Dallaire et al. 2010). According to their caregivers, 58% of children with incarcerated parents experienced learning or behavioral problems at school (Simmons, 2000). There are many reasons why children with incarcerated parents could be at risk for academic failure. There may be an increase in school absences if the child's caretaker is unable to take the child to school every day (Simmons, 2000). These children are more likely to show problematic academic behaviors such as being tardy and absent and less likely to participate in afterschool activities or make honor roll (Simmons, 2000). Chaotic family environments, attachment disruptions, and behavioral and emotional difficulties can make success at school difficult (Hanlon et al., 2005).

Social Challenges

In addition to the myriad emotional and academic risk factors, children with incarcerated parents also experience social challenges. A study tracking the lives of children with incarcerated parents revealed that all the children who participated faced many social challenges as a result of having a parent in prison (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). The social challenges they faced inhibited or interfered with the child connecting to those outside of their families and having a sense of belonging with others. One of the greatest reasons for children having difficulty with their social relationships was due to children being keenly aware that negative assumptions would be made about them because they had a parent in prison. When compared to other students, children of incarcerated parents face greater insults and judgment by peers (Lopez & Bhat, 2007).

Shame at School

Data shows that children with incarcerated parents often feel stigmatized as a result of students at school, friends, or school faculty knowing about their parent's status (Gadsden & Jacobs, 2007). Many of these children are aware that people will treat them differently and that negative assumptions will be made about them. When a child faces stigma, shame, or isolation, it tends to impede the views the child has of themselves (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008).

Many children have difficulty talking about the stressors in their lives and report not having someone to talk to about the issues following their parents' arrest (Clopton & East, 2008). These children often feel very alone and isolated and as a result of not knowing how others may react, many children feel torn about whether they should reveal their situation or keep it private (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). The secrecy and lying that may accompany the parent's absence can be devastating for a child who has already lost so much (Snyder et al, 2008). Some children feel the need and desire to reveal their secret but are also aware of the risks that come with doing so (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). The inability to discuss a parent's absence can intensify the anxiety and fear of the child.

A young girl in Nethmith & Ruhland's 2008 study recalls feeling very uncomfortable when she was called into the counselor's office. The counselor asked her publicly, in front of all of her friends, to come into the office and as a result, all of her friends questioned why she was in there. The counselor would single the girl out and ask how she was doing in the hallway, surrounded by others. The girl explains that she felt exposed. Rather than feeling comforted by the counselor, she felt only additional shame and embarrassment (Nethmith & Ruhland, 2008).

Schools as a Key Site for Intervention

Children spend around thirty-five hours a week at school. This is a significant amount of time in their childhood life. The interactions that students have at school can dramatically shift their attitudes and behavior, either for the better or worse (Schreier, 2020). Schools, in particular, are a critical place for students to receive support from teachers and resources.

Students from lower-income families, the same students who are disproportionately affected with incarcerated parents, rely on their schools for a great deal of their day-to-day resources including free breakfast and lunch, and medical care from a school nurse. Support and resources that come from the school are especially helpful for their accessibility, mainly because the children are already there (Arenson et al., 2019). Similar to why putting primary health care clinics in schools are beneficial, the accessibility of providing support for at-risk students through the school can allow students to take advantage of it as it does not require additional funding or transportation (Arenson et al., 2019).

Schools need to provide a structured and theoretically based intervention to support their students who have parents in jail or prison (Lopez & Bhat, 2007). These students need support and guidance from their schools in order to be

successful. Teachers and counselors can take on this supportive role; but they cannot successfully do this if they do not have the proper information.

There is a crucial need for America's schools to assist their affected students in a structured and comprehensive manner to confront the stigma that students with an incarcerated parent may face (Lopez & Bhat, 2007). The support, or lack of it, given by the school or by teachers can act as a supplemental form of care that students may not be able to receive elsewhere (Turney, 2019).

Communication Between the School & Child's Caregivers

Urie Bronfenbrenner is a well-known American psychologist who is most famous for his development of the Ecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner's 1979 Ecological Theory is comprised of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. His systems theory can serve as a powerful theoretical aid in understanding how a parent's incarceration could impact a child's development. The microsystem is one's social relationships and settings and the mesosystem is making connections and relationships among the microsystems. Through using this model, we can explore the extent to which a child's school and family interact, if they are on the same page or share the same values (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). We can look at how teachers enhance or impede a student's relationships and if they take action to change them. Children with enriched

mesosystems have access to more supportive adults who are concerned for the child's well-being and who can help support healthy child development, be it academically, socially, or mentally (Dallaire et al, 2010).

When thinking about Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory being applied in the classroom, the relationship and communication between a students' caregiver and their teacher is a key mesosystem. Poelmann explains how communication between schools and parents is crucial for children to feel supported when they go to school and come home from school. When teachers are up to date in communicating with the caregiver and knowing what is needed, they can provide more accurate resources and interventions for the child (2005). The development of trust between the teacher and caregiver is essential (Clopton & East, 2008).

When wanting to support their students who have incarcerated parents, teachers report having difficulty understanding how to do so, especially if they are unclear about the risks and situation that these children are in (Dallaire et al. 2010). Many teachers express that it would be helpful to know about their students' family situation so that they can be more sensitive to the child and be more understanding if the child is acting out. According to the teachers of middle school students, teachers would like to be aware of the incarceration so that if a child is disturbing

the class, the teacher will understand why the child is acting out and be less harsh (Dallaire et al. 2010).

Teacher Expectations & Stigmatization of Students with Incarcerated Parents

While teachers think it would be beneficial to be aware of the situation of the child, research shows that the knowledge of a parents' incarceration can translate into lower teacher expectations of the students and think that the parent in prison explains who the child is and what their behavior is like (Dallaire et al. 2010).

Wildeman et al. studies how teachers stigmatize students and the way their expectations may affect student outcomes (2017). The expectations that teachers have at the beginning of the school year are highly correlated with students' year-end achievement (Jussim et al., 2005). A large reason for this stigmatization is reported in Rosenthal & Jacobsons' well-known 1966 study on the self-fulfilling prophecy. A self-fulfilling prophecy is when our expectations lead us to act in ways that cause others to confirm our expectations. The way we behave changes the way people behave towards us, which can, in turn, lead us to confirm our own expectations. In schools, students who belong to a stigmatized group are particularly vulnerable to self-fulfilling prophecies (Jussim & Harber, 2005). Many teachers have shown to have lower expectations of a students' academic potential upon finding out that they have an incarcerated parent. Teacher's expectations of

the students' academic competency may be influenced by this information (Dallaire et al. 2010).

Teachers may show self-fulfilling prophecies by giving more encouragement or calling on some students more than others. When teachers expect certain outcomes from some students, teachers change their behavior by acting in certain ways to support that outcome. Preconceived notions from teachers can be incredibly harmful to students. For example, throughout a school day, teachers may show small micro-aggressions about a student's potential. This can lead the child to have a narrowing effect on their own future and personal motivations (Adalist-Estrin, 2014). The attitudes of the teachers are internalized by the students who in return may adjust their actions and behavior to meet the expectations which are placed on them by schools and teachers (Wildeman et al., 2017). It is especially important to look at the ways teacher expectations affect student outcomes as teachers not only predict student achievement but are the ones who shape and determine it.

In a study looking at teacher's expectations of children with incarcerated parents, when teachers expected certain randomly chosen students to academically bloom, these students showed intellectual gains over the course of the year, whereas children of equal intelligence in a comparison group did not show such gains

(Dallaire et al. 2010). Teachers with average and above average student expectations seem to employ a completely different set of tools as well as provide more constructive and consistent feedback than to the students of whom they have low expectations (Rubie-Davies, 2007). If teachers feel that certain students have 'no hope' they may not want to spend their time and energy focusing on those students. Teachers with high student expectations structure classroom time to engage with these students and allow them to work together leading children to socialize with peers and work closely with the instructor.

Adalist-Estrin feels it is crucial for the child's safety and future that their teachers act as a support system and an advocate for them as the attitude and demeanor of the adults at school towards these children can drastically affect the way the children feel and respond (2014). Children of incarcerated parents are typically rated significantly lower compared to other students in the classroom (Wildeman et al., 2017). In a study where teachers were randomly assigned to a scenario that described a student whose mother was either away at prison or away for other reasons such as a vacation or business trip, teachers consistently rated the child whose mother was in prison as being less competent than the children whose mother was away for other reasons despite a lack of any additional information (Dallaire et al. 2010).

Parental incarceration shapes how educators view and characterize children, often rating a child whose parent is incarcerated to be less competent behaviorally, academically, and socially (Anderson, 2019). Anderson explains the need to educate teachers on the intersection of mass incarceration with race, class, and ethnicity to help teachers to face their biases. Educators need to be aware of the issues associated with incarceration and address their own personal views as well as understand the issues associated with parental incarceration and how to support their students through it (2019).

Possible Interventions at the School: School Personnel

School staff could benefit greatly from learning how to assist and support their students in an effective manner (Lopez & Bhat, 2007). Everyone from nurses, who may interact with the child from stomach aches or headaches that appear because of their stress, or teachers who spend most of the day with the child, should be informed of each child's situation, their risks, and how to best serve them (Lopez & Bhat, 2007). Schools should take a look at their practices and policies to see how they may hinder the children and families of those who are incarcerated (Anderson, 2019).

Lopez & Bhat recommend that teachers maintain communication with their students' caregivers (2017). They can check in on the caregivers, ask if they can do

anything, and provide information about how they can help the child cope with this new life matter (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). With more students being affected by parental incarceration, school personnel face a greater need for information on appropriate responsive services to assist students (Lopez & Bhat, 2007). Adults at the schools must recognize the importance of working closely with these students and develop programs and services to address their needs.

Teachers should be encouraged to use thoughtful language in the classroom.

Teachers can seek to create a classroom environment that is inclusive and diverse in family composition (Clopton & East, 2008). Many underlying assumptions can be made when talking about people, laws, and criminality and mostly how they portray individuals who commit criminal offenses. For example, in an elementary classroom teachers may use words such as 'good guy' or 'bad guy' to describe characters in a story. Language like this should be avoided in the classroom and teachers should think wisely of language to use when speaking of certain laws, even classroom laws or rules, and what happens if you do not follow them properly (Clopton & East, 2008).

Teachers can also be mindful and considerate of different circumstances when assigning activities such as drawing a picture of your family or sending home gifts for a parent (Dallaire et al., 2010). These activities can be stressful for students and

while these activities do not necessarily need to be fully removed from the classroom, it is important to have a sensitive, adept, and well trained adult there to help the child cope with possible stressors and to check in on them (Dallaire et al., 2010).

School counselors need to be trained to successfully serve their students with incarcerated parents as they can play a leading role alongside the teacher to advocate for students (Adalist-Estrin, 2014). Counselors can provide confidential, 1-on-1, or group support for students and their families. By keeping communication with students and their families, adults at the school can reach out to see what needs there are and how to best support them such as giving families recommendations of free resources and programs (Lopez & Bhat, 2007).

Possible Interventions at the School: Support Groups

Support groups for students with incarcerated parents can help kids find a sense of belonging and safety among their peers. Knowing others who are in a similar situation as yourself may help these children feel less alone (Anderson, 2019).

Support groups provide students with social support in an environment where they are free and safe to discuss their thoughts and feelings regarding the incarceration of a loved one. Group treatment can address the need for social support and provide a structured setting that allows the members to express their concerns

(Springer et al., 2000). Support groups can be a mechanism to help diffuse the sense of shame that often accompanies parental incarceration. Surrounding children with members who have similar experiences can help offer a sense of affirmation and acceptance to struggling students (Springer et al., 2000).

Each age of students will require different information and ways to present this information. Children need to have accurate and age-appropriate information about their parent's incarceration. Support groups that are arranged by age can help facilitate an appropriate discussion as children need information that gives them more than just their imaginations from which to draw their images of their parent in prison (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008).

The Pain of the Prison (POP) support group is a club for high school students struggling with family incarceration. The POP club provides a safe and inclusive space for students who have been stigmatized and silenced by their experiences. POP helps shed the veil of secrecy that students may have (Anderson, 2019). This group, in particular, focuses on writing to help students open up about their experiences and feelings through the power of the written word. The club focuses on building positive self-identity through peer and adult support and an understanding that is fostered by shared experiences (POPS, The Club). The Pain of the Prison System club is now a program at 17 schools across the country to help

adolescents break down the systemic barriers that are in their minds, school, and communities (Anderson, 2019).

Studies such as Lopez & Bhat, 2007 have conducted research that analyzes support groups for middle and high school children, but few support groups are seen for elementary aged children, although they can still be helpful for these younger age groups. Similar programs to the POPS club need to be developed to be geared towards younger students. Support groups can be helpful for all ages by providing information and providing a sense that members are not alone in their suffering by reducing the sense of confusion and stigma that comes with parental incarceration (Lopez & Bhat, 2007). A study of a group of 3rd-5th graders was made for students struggling to cope with having a parent in jail or displaying negative reactive behavior such as a loss of self-esteem, aggression, or defiance (Lopez & Bhat, 2007). This group allowed students to have an opportunity to interact with others and engage in activities that helped foster self-esteem and everyday social skills that may now look different for them. A key component of support groups is instilling trust and confidentiality within the group. However, this may be difficult as many of these studies have difficulty with trust from prior experiences or a sense of abandonment by having their parent taken away (Lopez & Bhat, 2007).

Support groups in the school setting are particularly valuable because they are accessible. They do not require someone to transport the child somewhere else to receive help, and it does not require additional scheduling or time out of the caregivers' day. Utilizing support groups through school for young students, in particular, will allow for additional support in a place that they already have to be each day. Additionally, support groups may actually be easier to facilitate for younger students as it is much more common for elementary school students to be pulled out of the classroom for various interventions (Klingner et al, 2000).

Support groups should be worked on collaboratively and centered on empathy and unconditional trust. Counseling theories employed in these groups should work to emphasize the strengths of the participants and the positive attributes that they bring to the group. Highlighting strengths can help the child understand that just because they are being told that their parent 'did something wrong' does not make the child or their parent a 'bad person' (Lopez & Bhat, 2007). Groups should work to identify coping strategies that diminish their fears and worries as well as work towards finding people whom they trust and are able to talk to about their feelings. Groups should also validate the feelings of the students and explore and work through them. All children with incarcerated parents express stress as a result of the situation as it just piles on top of life stressors they and their families may already have (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). The problematic behavior that children

present such as defiance, aggression, attachment disorders, and antisocial behavior can all be addressed in support groups if the leader of the group is properly trained and ready to take on the task (Lopez & Bhat, 2007).

Possible Interventions at the School: Books

The libraries at schools can provide developmentally appropriate books and encourage teachers to read them in the classroom. Adding books into the library and classroom about parental incarceration will help children normalize their feelings by seeing it portrayed in someone who is not themselves (Anderson, 2019). Many books have now been written for young children coping with the loss of a parent through incarceration to help better represent these children. Adding these books to schools can help answer questions of kids who are and are not affected by parental incarceration and help normalize the process of grief for those children who are struggling.

Visiting Day by Jaqueline Woodson and James Ransome is a picture book about a young girl living with her grandmother preparing for the one day a month that she gets to visit her father in prison. *Waiting for Daddy* by Jennie Lou Harriman and Kylie Ann Flye looks at the different way that a young girl copes with the loss of her father who she is unable to see as he is in prison. *Kofi's Mom* by Richard Dyches is a story about a young boy who explores his feelings of loss and confusion when his

mother is sent to prison. *Knock, Knock: My Dad's Dream for Me* by Daniel Beaty shows the love that a parent can leave behind even when they are absent. Other great books to get in the hands of young children affected by incarceration and to place in school libraries include *What is Jail, Mommy?* by Jacie Stanglin and written in both English and Spanish; *Our Moms* by Q.Futrell about a support group for young children whose mothers are incarcerated; *Sing, Sing, Midnight!* By Emily Ridge Gallagher & R.B. Pollock Jr.; *Mama Loves Me From Away* by Pat Birsson and Laurie Caple; *Kennedy's Big Visit* by Daphne Brooks; *My Daddy's in Jail* by Anthony Curcio which follows the questions of two bears who have a father in prison; *Doogie's Dad* by Richard Dyches; *Almost Like Visiting* by Shannon Ellis and Katrina Tapper; and *Two of Every 100* by Richard Dyches which is a great book for a teacher to read to a classroom about kids who have a parent in prison look just like any other kid, yet they may need some extra attention.

Conclusion

In concluding the literature review, we can see the risk factors of students with incarcerated parents and how through increasing awareness within schools, informing adults and children of the needs and challenges of students with incarcerated parents, and pinpointing ways we can support and advocate for affected students, schools can become a key site in supporting this student population. In the next section, I have conducted interviews with school teachers

and mental health professionals where I discuss their experiences working with students with incarcerated parents at school as well as with members of a non-profit who discuss the needs of this population of children.

PART II

Interviews

Upon completing my Literature Review, I was eager to hear the ‘real world’ experiences of adults who have worked in schools. In this next section, I will discuss the six interviews I conducted this year, in January and February of 2021. Due to the pandemic, my interviews did not take place in person; rather, I spoke to my interviewees over Zoom and phone calls.

My desire to conduct interviews was to understand what structures are, or rather are not, in place to support students of incarcerated parents. My hope was to interview a range of teachers, administrators, mental health professionals, as well as an after-school program. Through my family and friends, I was put in contact with two elementary school teachers, two mental health care workers, a school principal, and a non-profit organization.

In my interviews, we discussed the need more for mental health professionals in schools across America, some promising initiatives that are beginning to arise in schools, the ways in which mental health care workers and teachers should interact with their students and families, the role schools play in the lives of children, emotional training and wellbeing for school staff and students, and greater structural inequities that take place across America’s school system.

Interviewee Bios

Motherly Intercession is a non-profit organization in Genesee County, Michigan, that developed because of the enormous gap in services for incarcerated families.

Motherly Intercession seeks to stop the cycle of intergenerational incarceration through empowering children of incarcerated parents by fostering a strong community (Motherly Intercession). On February 16th, 2021, I interviewed Executive Director Necole Hayes and Program Administrator Ja'Lessa Mayes to learn more about their organization's work.

On February 1st, 2021, I interviewed Danielle Valner Abramson who received her Master's degree in Education from UCLA Graduate School of Education in 2012. She spent nearly a decade as a first and second grade classroom teacher at Palmati Charter School, a public charter school authorized by the Los Angeles Unified School District in North Hollywood, California.

Amanda Earnstein received a Master's in Urban Education from Loyola Marymount University while simultaneously working at an elementary school in the West Contra Costa Unified School district in San Pablo, California, where she taught fifth and sixth grade for four years. I interviewed her on February 5th, 2021.

I spoke with Alana Goldman on February 7th, 2021. She received her Master's degree in Clinical and Medical Social Work from the University of Southern California in 2018. She has since worked as a school social worker at two different elementary schools in the Pasadena Unified School District. She primarily works with students with mental health issues as well as repetitive attendance problems.

Talia Leibovitz received her Ph.D. in Psychology in 2017 with an emphasis on school psychology. She worked as a school psychologist at an elementary school in the San Juan Unified School District for over two years. In this role, she supported teachers as a consultant in designing behavior plans for students; provided interventions for students who exhibited aggressive behaviors, and helped monitor the needs and behaviors of children with emotional needs. She has also been a school psychologist in the San Francisco Unified School District at a school where most of the students were system-impacted in some way. I interviewed her on February 10th, 2021.

Danielle Hauser received her Master's Degree in Elementary Education and Teaching from Columbia University in 2010. She also received a Master's in Education Policy and Management from Harvard University in 2015. She worked as a first, third, and fifth-grade teacher for four years and served as the principal for two years at Success Academy Charter School in the Bronx, the poorest congressional district in the county. I interviewed Danielle on February 17th, 2021.

Lack of Mental Health Professionals in the Schools

My interviewees expressed concern about the lack of counselors and psychologists on site at schools on a daily basis. Motherly Intercession, Necole Hayes and Ja'Lessa Mayes, proclaimed dismay about the lack of support their students receive at school. They explained how the schools that their students attend in the Flint School District are "such bad schools and many of them don't even have counselors or social workers." Mayes believes that if students could get support at school, there would be great results that would happen rather quickly and dramatically.

Just as Hayes and Mayes lamented the lack of school counselors and psychologists for their students in Flint, Danielle Valner Abramson recalled working as a Kindergarten teacher at a Los Angeles elementary school that only had one counselor and one psychologist, both of whom were shared with several other schools in the district. Because the school did not have a social worker, the school psychologist ended up taking on this role. Valner Abramson mentioned that both the counselor and the psychologist were great, but that they were each on-site no more than once a week. She noted that with one counselor caring for thousands of students, it is difficult to have any consistent care in place for the students. Despite these challenges, however, Valner Abramson felt grateful to even have one single counselor, as she knew many schools do not even have that.

Similarly, at Amanda Earnstein's San Pablo school, the counselor was there about three times a week, if they were lucky. Earnstein felt the counselor's absence when she was not on campus, as the counselor was not only a resource for students but also a point person for the teachers to consult with. Therefore, when the counselor was not present, there was no one for her to go to when she felt a situation arising or needed advice.

Alana Goldman shared a similar story from her work as a social worker in the Pasadena School District: there were 3 school psychologists for the 22 schools in the district and not a single full-time social worker on any of the campuses.

Goldman noted that this all comes down to funding. Many schools want and need more official support in place, yet they do not have the financial resources to hire more support. At one elementary school Goldman worked at, she was the only social worker that came to the school and she only came twice a week. That same school had a part-time school psychologist who also came in twice a week, but this schedule left the school without any mental health support for at least one day each week. At the other elementary school where Goldman worked, she only attended once a week while one of her counterparts worked at the school two other days of the week.

At the San Juan elementary school where Talia Leibovitz worked as a school psychologist, she was the sole form of mental health support the school got, yet she was only present twice a week. The school had no full-time mental health care professionals nor did they have a full-time nurse. She described the school to be very low-resourced and with lots of high-need students who were unhoused and would have benefited greatly from the support of multiple social workers, counselors, and/or psychologists. Leibovitz stated that the kids at the school needed therapy and many families needed to be plugged in to support systems, but there was no dimension of school support. At a different school where Leibovitz worked, there was a social worker present twice a week who was only able to see the most at-risk students. She did not have time to meet or see any other students. According to Leibovitz, there were dozens of students who needed help and therapy, yet there was no way that the social worker could meet that need.

Promising Initiatives

Despite the pervasive understaffing of counselors, psychologists, and social workers across schools and districts in America, some of my interviewees did share promising initiatives. Danielle Hauser's school in the Bronx included a community of students and families who, she explained, have been failed by the system at every turn. As the principal, her job was to make sure that no student was slipping through the cracks academically and psychologically. Because of this mission,

Hauser ferociously and successfully advocated for a full time school psychologist on her staff.

While Hauser's advocacy earned her a full-time school psychologist, Leibovitz discussed an even more robust initiative in San Francisco: the San Francisco Wellness Center Initiative. In 1998, a survey of San Francisco youth identified the need for safe, easily accessible health services on high school campuses. In response to this survey, the San Francisco Wellness Initiative was created to help high school students address challenges common to urban youth. They have since provided students free, confidential, physical and behavioral health services where they can easily access them – inside their own schools (SF Wellness).

The program is dedicated to improving the health, well-being, and academic success of the city's high schools. Each center is run by a full time licensed social worker who is carefully vetted and trained to be culturally and racially responsive in their work (SF Wellness). This initiative is the only school-based program for adolescent health and wellness where the goal is for students to learn positive, lifelong habits that contribute to their well-being and success, and ultimately, to the health of the communities in which they live (SF Wellness).

Leibovitz feels that this Wellness Center is essential and has been one of the most critical support systems that a school could have, most notably for the continuity of care it provides to the students. She explained that having the same staff there every day creates a sense of intimacy, which “could help students who have been continuously pushed out of places [to] find a space in which they feel seen and supported.” Another unique aspect of the initiative is the self-referral aspect. At many schools, you must be referred by an adult to receive professional care. In the Wellness Center, anyone is eligible to refer be it for oneself or a student referring a peer.

Leibovitz disclaimed that while the Wellness Centers are critical, schools will never be able to provide enough support for students and families who are barely surviving because of the inequality our society perpetuates. While counselors, social workers, and centers like these do help, there is only so much they can do, Leibovitz feels.

Mental Health Professionals Working with Students

As a school social worker, Alana Goldman dealt mainly with mental health issues. While counselors tend to deal with more academic based issues, and psychologists typically do testing, Goldman took on many of these roles herself due to the lack of staff. These jobs do have some overlapping components; for example, if a student is

not doing well in school the psychologist would look at academic factors while the social worker would explore external reasons why the child might be having difficulty, including a factor such as the incarceration of a parent. A big part of Goldman's job was spent dealing with attendance problems, as this often is correlated with greater issues at home and with familial mental health, she explained.

When Goldman first started working as a school social worker in an elementary school, she received a list of referrals from teachers and the principal based on their knowledge of the student which included their name, grade, and primary concern. From there, she would reach out to the parents. At one of the schools she worked out, the parents almost always knew that the concern existed upon her reaching out. At the other more racially and socioeconomically diverse school, the parents did not understand why she was reaching out and did not trust her as a person or her role in the school.

The majority of the time Goldman worked and spoke with students, she had to pull them out of class. This made confidentiality in the school setting quite difficult to maintain because when you are taking a child out of their classroom, everyone sees and knows they are meeting with the counselor. For this reason, some kids hated

seeing her because they knew they would be met with questions from peers while other students enjoyed their time together because it meant they got to skip class.

The schools Goldman worked at had many students with incarcerated parents, though she does not know the exact statistics. She worked closely with a third grader and two fifth graders whose parents were either currently or formerly incarcerated. She became aware of the incarcerated parent during her assessment period when she spoke with students' parents, caregivers, and teachers. When working with the students, Goldman did not explicitly talk about the incarcerated parents often in her sessions with the students. She recalls talking a lot about ambiguous loss with one of her students. This student in particular was in her grandmother's care and did not ever have a stable relationship with her mother. Therefore, their conversations were not directly focused on the mother's incarceration, but rather around dealing with a parent who is not present.

When providing therapy in a school setting, Goldman thinks it is essential to remember that everything does somehow need to lead back to academics, including academic functioning. It is crucial, she feels, to keep in mind that you are working with this kid in the middle of their school day and when they are finished meeting with you, they have to be sent back to the classroom to focus on academics and interact with peers. She was always very conscious about not

wanting to dysregulate a child so much to the point where they were not in the right mindset or space to go back into the classroom. If a child is unable to pay attention in class or appropriately work with others because of a conversation they just had, this will affect their academic function. Goldman was very cognizant of not wanting to push a kid to the point where they could not function and focus properly back in the classroom.

In her role as a school social worker, Goldman ran many support groups. Typically, these groups were around 5 students and took place either after school or during lunchtime. She believes that working with groups in a school setting can be strongly impactful especially because of the stigma around something such as parental incarceration. Yet because of the extreme stigma around this topic in particular, Goldman mentioned that she would be hesitant and a “little nervous to run a support group exclusively about incarceration so would probably make a broader group such as parental absence in general because support groups in schools are really useful and productive.” The school Leibovitz worked at also provided school based support and therapy groups for students who were system impacted. The school psychologist at Hauser’s school ran several support and prevention groups which she reported to be quite popular among the students.

Teacher Interactions with Student & Families

When Valner Abramson worked as a Kindergarten teacher, one of her students had a mother who was going to jail for cocaine trafficking near the last month of school. The girl's mother had informed Valner Abramson that she would be incarcerated at their parent-teacher conference together. This did not outwardly change the way Valner Abramson interacted with the student, though she kept it at the front of her mind that this child was "going through a lot and comfort and support would be necessary." It also helped explain to Valner Abramson when she saw a sudden shift in the child becoming very shy and compliant. When other students and adults asked the little girl why her father started picking her up from school rather than her mother, which had been the case all school year, Valner Abramson was able to intervene. Valner Abramson did not recall seeing major academic changes, though she did see significant emotional shifts in children whose parents left and disappeared for reasons such as rehabilitation and incarceration. She could see that these children "were carrying weight on their shoulders that they had not been previously," they had less self-control, were more impulsive, and had difficulty regulating their emotions.

When Earnstein worked as a sixth grade teacher in San Pablo, CA she was only aware of one student in her classroom who had an incarcerated parent for part of the time she was his teacher. The school administration informed Earnstein of the

incarceration but did not provide her with any information or resources on specific ways to support the student. Earnstein never directly spoke with the student about his mother's incarceration. She felt stuck and "didn't really know what to do."

Because the student never revealed this information to Earnstein directly, she did not want to invade his privacy by bringing it up. Earnstein explained that her approach for all of her students was constantly telling them "I am here" and saying "if you ever need someone to talk to, I am always available." She does feel that she was still able to act as a support system for the student even if she did not bring up his exact situation. Earnstein was glad to have been privy to the information of what her student was going through and believes "communication and overall awareness is really important" so that she, as the child's teacher, can keep the information in mind when working and interacting with him.

Just as Valner Abramson did not, Earnstein did not remember seeing an academic change in students whose parents were absent, but definitely saw behavior changes. She feels that parents who were more active, willing to work with her, and on the same page as her when it came to "behavior systems and rewards as well as following through with them" had children with more positive behavior and listening skills in comparison to parents who were not as communicative or involved. She explained that the students whose parents were more involved would often finish their homework more regularly and on time.

Earnstein believes that having general services at school for students is so important, though she knows that this comes with difficulty as you often need to get approval from the parent or guardian who may not always be willing to grant it. While this can make it troublesome to get students the services they need, Earnstein believes that support and communication are absolutely necessary. She feels that “it can be a huge help for students who are struggling or are having a difficult time at home to have someone that they can talk to and can be another safe adult in their life.”

In the school setting, Hayes and Mayes feel that we will see a different student outcome if and when a teacher is able to build a relationship with the child and truly care for them. They feel that it is so important that teachers develop the patience to work towards building a one on one relationship with all students in some form. They feel that teachers need to take the time to figure out what is going on with the student rather than resorting to pulling them out of the classroom or sending them to the office or just yelling at them. Mayes makes it clear that these children do not *want* to be getting in trouble and acting out, they just do not know a better alternative to expressing their emotions.

Role of the Schools

Danielle Hauser admitted that a lot is expected of the schools. She feels that “the school’s core competency is academic instruction but when you think of supporting the whole child, the goal of schools, you cannot ignore the realities and stresses and trauma’s that the child experiences.” Inevitably, schools are trying to think about how to respond so that student needs are appropriately met within their capacity. Hauser feels strongly that while all kids have limitless potential and can achieve academically, sometimes schools do too much and are not building the competencies within the student. She explained that if you want to see your kids succeed, you have to invest in them, work hard, help your kids understand the material, and teach in multimodal ways.

Hauser knows that for a lot of the children who have harder home lives, school is a sanctuary where they get their meals and get services and are taken care of. She feels that we need to let it remain a sanctuary by providing students with support and continuing to provide beneficial services. Services must remain in place and expand in order to make sure that all the kids have a path to success in the future. She explained that “we cannot choose where we come from or what happened to our parents” so schools need to do right to the promises we make which is to give students instruction and be supportive.

Communication and Understanding at the Schools

In agreement among all of my interviewees is that communication between the school, home, and other agencies is crucial. From a social worker's perspective, Goldman feels that it is important for teachers to be conscious of what is going on in the kid's life and for skills to be reinforced by all parties. When Goldman is working on a specific skill or coping mechanism with a child, she makes sure that the child's teacher knows, the caregiver knows, and any other critical people so that everyone can reinforce the behavior in the same way.

Hauser made sure she had a read on where every kid was at each day. For her, this meant starting every morning by shaking each student's hand before they entered the school building. That way, she had a touchpoint with every single student before they came into school that day. Also in this moment, Hauser did a scan and got a peek of what was going on in the child's life. She would mentally check if the kids had showered, had clean clothing on, appeared to have slept the night before, and could answer other questions to assure basic needs were being met. Hauser always made sure that the adults and faculty at her school were very mindful about the way they spoke to one another as they knew the kids were always watching and learning from example.

At Hauser's school, communication was enforced before the beginning of every school year, when families and caregivers would be brought in to have an hour to hour and a half long talk with their child's new teacher. In this conversation, things such as school culture were brought up as well as looking through how the child had done the previous year in terms of attendance, lateness, homework, etc. The caregiver and teacher would use that historical data to partner together and discover how they can be more successful in the upcoming year. This meeting allows teachers to understand what support to put in place as well as guides the teacher and caregiver to get a general sense of where that child is academically and socially. During these meetings, the school made sure to start relationship building and get updated contact information from the parents. Hauser recalled that during these meetings they would help set up email accounts for caregivers without them.

Keeping communication with the child's home was very important for Hauser, though Hayes and Mayes expressed that communication with parents can prove to be difficult as phone numbers, addresses, and place of residency are often changing. Hayes and Mayes also noted that many teachers do not know what the students are experiencing and going through at home. They believe that if the schools did know what was going on in the child's life, teachers would likely have a "better understanding of why these kids are struggling to such an extent or having certain continuous behavior issues." Now more than ever, schools can be in the dark

of what is going on at home, though Motherly Intercession believes that teachers would be more patient and understanding with students and families if they were aware of their situation.

Motherly Intercession firmly believes that it takes a village to raise a child. They know that these children of incarcerated parents, in particular, are in need of this community aspect and 'village' support. Motherly Intercession also knows that there is a correlation between education and improving the intergenerational cycle of incarceration. Education, they said, provides opportunities and motivation for students. Despite this clear connection, the relationship between schools and organizations such as Motherly Incarceration needs to be cultured and improved.

Motherly Intercession believes that schools are "missing a lot of things" that outside organizations could help with and cultivating a relationship with each other could be beneficial to all parties. They believe they can support the schools and in turn support the child and their families to a greater extent. At the time this interview took place, schools were not actively responding to Motherly Intercession and were not willing to meet with them. However, Motherly Intercession is not giving up on building a partnership with the schools that their students attend. They believe that they can provide assistance and relieve stress on schools. Hayes and Mayes feel that

if they had a relationship with the schools they could be more hands on and help make rational and wise decisions when it comes to these vulnerable kids.

Emotional Training & Wellbeing

My interviewees brought up the need for socio-emotional support at school.

Leibovitz expressed dismay at how little training there is on emotional and behavioral needs and how to address them in the classroom. She recalled the time she worked with a very experienced Kindergarten teacher who had been in the classroom for over thirty years. The teacher was incredibly responsive to trauma, she was very caring and gentle, and had a great behavioral support system in place. Yet all these factors were because of the personal work she had done and not from any structural support she got from the school. Because of the little help she got from the school, the teacher was always incredibly stressed but continued to put the students first and “tried so hard to work with students who she knew were struggling” and with parents “who were very poor and worked multiple jobs.” Most parents in her class only spoke Spanish. Luckily, the teacher was fluent in Spanish and able to communicate and provide support for parents. If the teacher had not spoken Spanish; however, verbal communication would not have been an option and a parent’s basic need of being understood and heard would not have been met.

At the same school, Leibovitz had a contrasting experience. She worked as a teacher consultant in a fifth grade classroom to a middle-aged, white, male teacher who struggled deeply with attending to student's mental health needs. It was clear to Leibovitz that he had very little psycho-education around trauma, how it functions, what it looks like in the classroom, and how to support students of trauma. Many of the students in his class who had behavioral issues tended to spend a lot of time outside of the classroom, which Leibovitz found to be very inappropriate. Sending students out was his form of a punishment system. She thinks back on him sending the students outside and closing the door to the classroom so that the students literally could not access the curriculum they were supposed to be learning. She found this to be very hard to watch as it was very stigmatizing.

There was one student in particular that Leibovitz was working closely with who had a long history of trauma and whose mother had been incarcerated. Prior to the incarceration, the girl and her mother were unhoused, hopping around from place to place, often living in women's shelters. Because of this, the girl often came to school and had not eaten. Leibovitz suggested that the teacher should attend to her basic need of needing to eat by making sure that even if the student was late, she can still "go into the cafeteria and have breakfast and then come and join the classroom or even bring her tray of food and sit in the back of the class and eat at

her desk.” The teacher was not willing to compromise on this situation and felt that if a student was late, that was her problem and she lost her opportunity to eat breakfast. The teacher continued to be resistant to incorporating any trauma-responsive system or culturally-responsive system into his classroom.

For these kids who come from so much trauma and whose basic needs are not being met, it is important to structure your classroom set up and activities to support these children, said Leibovitz. This fifth grade teacher, for example, lectured often which she did not feel was a very effective way to teach. She wished there was more group work involved, more one-on-one time with the students, buddy systems and other structures that created a social environment to eminently support the students.

In an elementary school classroom with young students, Leibovitz thinks teachers could get a read on their students by children handing the teacher a card with a certain color on it. The color could signal the student’s emotional space and capacity to learn in that moment. For example, a certain color could signal ‘you need to go into the quiet corner and grab a book and have some time to yourself’ or ‘you need some extra support right now.’ Leibovitz feels that this could allow the students to have some agency over communicating their needs. She feels strongly

that schools need to make a shift from constant punishment to more positive reinforcement.

The carceral logic that results in low-income parents of color being incarcerated gets replicated and reproduced within the schools and in turn on the students themselves, said Liebovitz. She explained that this can happen through certain punitive systems or regulating black and brown bodies of students in a more controlled way than you would with white students. We need to shift that carceral logic out of schools by helping administrators, teachers, and other school personnel to understand that much of the training that they have and practices that they hold are rooted in carceral logic. There is a lot of unlearning that needs to take place.

One way of working with the socio-emotional aspect of students such as those with incarcerated parents can be done so using restorative justice practices. Restorative justice aims to repair the harm caused by crime, emphasizing accountability and making amends through a “cooperative process that include all stakeholders” in hopes of leading to “transformation of people, relationships and communities” (Centre for Justice & Reconciliation). While somewhat similar, transformative justice “seeks to change the larger social structure as well as the personal structure” by understanding the injustices of the world (Centre for Justice & Reconciliation).

When restorative justice practices are put in place, we often see greater and more frequent support. However, this is not always the case. For example, at a school that Leibovitz worked at, the restorative practices in place were not at all restorative in her opinion. Rather, there was a lot of blaming and no restoration that took place. She believes this may be either due to a lack of extensive training on restorative justice or because it was just a practice that teachers had to fill, a box they had to check. This particular school did not even have a full-time social worker, so a lack of school support led to a breakdown in the restorative justice space. Leibovitz acknowledged the call to transition from restorative justice to transformative justice to “identify the ways in which racism gets replicated through things such as restorative justice and transformative justice is trying to push against that by offering a different model.” Still, Leibovitz believes that restorative justice can be productive in school settings, particularly for teachers and principals to hold space for students to speak to and for their actions.

Hauser was proud that her school did a significant amount of work around behavior communication. She wanted to meet the needs of students and teach coping skills rather than immediately get upset and reactive. Her school had many responsive and restorative practices and conversations. They wanted to make sure people were “okay and be able to move forward” but they also placed emphasis on accountability. Consequences, she said, did need to be put in place sometimes, and

Hauser was not afraid to do so. She explained that by the time these kids are in high school, there is so much ground to remediate and that the system has failed them for so long, so she feels that this early intervention and responsibility is key. The social-emotional and the community aspect were very important at her school. She knows that we need to make sure that children are feeling safe and seen and connected to someone at the school.

Hayes and Mayes agreed with the importance of working on emotional regulation, knowing your feelings, and knowing how to positively express them. Mayes explains how even if you are upset, there is a way to positively express that which allows you to get your anger out. The issue, they feel, is that people have not learned how to express their feelings. Mayes thinks it's important for students to "speak truth to their emotions and know it's okay to feel sad or upset." Mayes feels that it is important to teach children how to regulate their emotions "because you can see how people make bad choices and get in trouble when their emotions aren't handled and dealt with." She feels that they must be prepared for anticipating the emotions that children will feel. This often comes up during the holidays, as they know that this can be a particularly hard time for children because they are not spending it with their parents, and their parents are instead spending it incarcerated. Hayes and Mayes explain that during this time they know that children may act out more than usual and instead of putting kids in time out or in

trouble, you can pull them aside and work to understand what is going on more deeply.

Funding & Greater Structural Inequities

Schools need to be funded, teachers need to be paid a livable wage, and families need housing and food. If schools had adequate funding they could offer significantly more supports for their students with incarcerated parents. These supports could start with at the minimum, attending to students' basic needs. To Leibovitz, this looks like schools having accessible food and snacks and having extra clothing in the classroom if students need to change, "because many students have very dirty clothing if they are unhoused" or in the foster care system, as many children of incarcerated parents are. She explains that providing students with basic needs also means having some sort of system where students can communicate their emotional needs without it being so public and stigmatizing.

However, Leibovitz explains that as long as there is this level of inequality in our country, schools can only do so much. She resists placing so much of the emphasis and responsibility on schools because we do have to think about these situations more broadly and structurally. Still, she knows that there is so much room for transformation in the school system to support students of incarcerated parents. This change, she feels, can be done through educating the school staff and teachers

and administrators, but we can only do so with funding. Leibovitz explains that when we are thinking about what schools can do, “we have to think about how the schools who serve majority white and wealthy students are so able and equipped to support their students.” We look at the funding and resources of these schools and we need to look towards a redistribution of the funding at wealthy schools to schools that serve more high-needs and low-income students, and could really use and need that additional funding.

In Genesee County, 45,000 kids are affected by parental incarceration. Hayes points out that this number is likely quite larger due to the underreporting of this matter – “if there is an option or a box to check that you are or have been incarceration, probably not everyone will put or check it,” she said. In the research conducted by Motherly Intercession, it shows that 53% of those who are incarcerated are parents. There are millions of kids affected by parental incarceration, and “there is still so much of a stigma with it and it is a stigma that is really hard to break,” Hayes explains.

Hayes and Mayes pointed out that society does not talk about incarceration. It is a system that is so connected with systemic racism and poverty, two key issues in our country. This makes it that much more important that we start addressing incarceration and those that it affects more seriously. Mayes believes that this can

start with showing these affected kids that there are still people who care about them and believe in them. She has noticed that these younger kids, especially, need as much positivity and care as possible. Motherly Intercession hopes that they can show their students another lifestyle than the one they have grown up with: a lifestyle that does not lead towards them ending up in prison. The only thing these children are familiar with is their own life and their own struggles that happened to them and their community, “all they know is where they are at,” says Mayes. Most students in the program are not familiar or at all exposed to the greater world, be it due to financial struggles or who their caregivers are. Motherly Intercession is determined to “open their eyes up to show them that there is more to life than what they’ve been seeing in their own neighborhoods.”

Relationship Building & Seeing Every Child as an Individual

Stopping the intergenerational cycle of incarceration continues to prove to be difficult for Motherly Intercession as it is very challenging to intercede these cycles. Doing so would monumentally change where families and children go moving forward. Hayes and Mayes both firmly believe that one-on-one attention for these children is crucial because ultimately, these kids just want to feel love. The women feel that building a relationship with the children should be the number one priority as this allows you as the adult to have the accessibility of “being serious with them and get to the real work but also knowing that they know you care for them.” They

feel that building a relationship and genuinely showing that you care is what needs to happen in all settings when working with children of incarcerated parents.

This also applies to schools and to teachers who need to work to build relationships with students and their families. Having this relationship intact, they feel, will allow school personnel to provide greater support, know when they need to be there for their students/families, and can help provide basic needs. These parents are sending their vulnerable children into schools, and teachers should work to build trust with the families and be able to treat them properly, without bias. Hayes and Mayes acknowledge that teachers already have so much on their plate to deal with and they understand that it can be hard to build a relationship with every student, especially when there is a large class size. Still, teachers can work to build relationships by just acknowledging each student and giving them attention through looking them in the eye, giving them a handshake, and getting a read on what is going on in their life.

The women realize the importance of not walking into a community of vulnerable children and start giving demands. For this population of children, all that would be to them is another person coming into their life and telling them what to do. Mayes and Hayes do point out that you have to be cautious when developing a relationship with these students. Many of these kids are prone to think you will be another

person in their life who will leave, especially if they get attached to you. With that being said, the more support a child has and the safer they feel at school, the more successful this child will likely be, Mayes said. At Motherly Intercession, they have claimed the term 'permanent connection' meaning someone a child can turn to at any time, for anything.

Hayes and Mayes also acknowledge the importance of recognizing that each child is so different and has their own needs. This group of children is easy to categorize, though it is important to remember that we still need to treat each child as an individual and therefore meet their individual needs. Because this group of students is at particularly high risk, Mayes feels strongly that schools cannot do the job alone. Rather, they need community partners to support them in order to support the children. She feels that it would be beneficial to look at how schools can reallocate funding to accommodate these high needs students to the best of their ability, specifically through adding more mental health services into the school.

Conclusion

None of my interviewees, with the exception of Motherly Intercession, felt prepared or qualified to be interviewed about this topic. Despite the fact that they had all interacted with children of incarcerated parents, there is something notable about the fact that they did not feel that they had the knowledge to speak on it.

There is a profound population of children with incarcerated parents, yet the people working with these students every day do not feel prepared or trained to support them. Moving forward, there is an earnest need to provide training, support, and resources for school based personnel. We can attempt to do this with additional full time mental health professionals in schools, teachers who are trained and willing to incorporate culturally-responsive and restorative practices into their classrooms, and relationship building between schools, families, and the community.

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