



International Centre for Criminal Law Reform  
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Our Partners





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# Psychological Consequences for Children of Incarcerated Parents

Barbara J. Pickering

At present, the number of children affected by incarceration is unknown. Some researchers have used population statistics,<sup>1</sup> and a dated study from corrections Canada about fathers in prison,<sup>2</sup> to conclude there could be up to 450,000 children affected by incarceration.<sup>3,4</sup> From a scholarship perspective, exploring the impact of parental incarceration is rare in Canada. International sources are unequivocal in understanding that the effects of parental incarceration are far reaching and predominantly detrimental.<sup>5</sup> Children of incarcerated parents (COIPs) have been shown to experience both internalized (e.g., anxiety, depression, attachment disorders)<sup>6</sup> and externalized concerns (e.g., school refusal, substance use, gang involvement) across the developmental trajectory.<sup>7</sup> The ongoing Adverse Childhood Events (ACE) study lists parental incarceration *as a significant predictor of health risk behaviours in later life and adult-related quality of life.*<sup>8</sup>

In this paper, I hope to expand on the understanding of both psychological and sociological consequences of parental incarceration in order to inform those who are in direct contact with children or their parents. This qualitative account adds to the quantitative data that tells us what the observable behaviour is likely to be. Qualitative data tells us *how* children might emotionally experience and navigate the consequences of parental incarceration. Hopefully this knowledge helps mitigate the effects on children that arise from their parents' arrest to incarceration to release and follow-up community support.

The bio-ecological model of human development<sup>9</sup> proposes that individuals live and learn in a nested set of social contexts that have inter-relational effects over time. The four dimensions of this model, (a) process, (b) person, (c) place, and (d) time, encapsulate the theoretical proposal that proximal interactions between the individual, and the contexts in which the individual exists, affect development over time. This theory is used to understand the layered ecology in which COIPs exist and highlight both proximal (microsystems) risk factors as well as more distal (exo and macrosystems) influences. Proximal risk factors could include exposure to violence or trauma,<sup>10</sup> stressed caregivers,

<sup>11</sup> or parental criminality and incarceration<sup>12</sup> whereas examples of distal influences include depleted financial resources, social isolation due to stigma,<sup>12</sup> or lack of policy support.<sup>13</sup>

Dallaire and Wilson<sup>14</sup> use the ecological theory to explore the relationship between a parent's criminal activity (micro systemic influence), child-witnessed arrest (meso- and macro-systemic in terms of policies regarding arrests made in the presence of children) and sentencing in caregiver and children's reports of maladjustment. They concluded that children who witnessed a parent's arrest were more likely to have difficulty regulating emotions, performed worse on a receptive vocabulary test, and exhibited more anxious/depressed behaviours than children who did not witness the arrest.

Children react to a parent's incarceration differently at different points in their developmental trajectory. For infants and toddlers who are separated from a parent by incarceration, this concern is often conceptualized from an attachment perspective. Dallaire<sup>15, 16</sup> argued that separation early in life disrupts the formation, development, and maintenance of the mother-child relationship, which results in insecure attachment<sup>17</sup>. Insecure attachment can predict behavioural concerns that manifest as either internalizing (e.g., anxiety, guilt, loneliness), or externalizing (e.g., aggression, rule breaking) problems later on in development.<sup>18</sup> Geller et al.<sup>19</sup> utilized data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a Princeton University study that followed a cohort of nearly 5,000 children born between 1998 and 2000<sup>20</sup> to explore developmental consequences of paternal incarceration on five-year-old children. By the time these children had reached adolescence, aggressive behaviour had increased significantly and attention issues were more prevalent in children with imprisoned fathers versus children whose fathers were absent for other reasons. Comparatively, children of incarcerated mothers appear to be more at risk for these developmental consequences than those with incarcerated fathers.<sup>15</sup> Disruption in maternal care can interfere with a child's ability to develop secure attachment with a caregiver, which, in turn, may affect wellbeing in a number of contexts including home, school, and community. Poehlmann found that younger children with an incarcerated mother were more vulnerable to developing insecure attachment patterns than older children.<sup>21</sup>

Although they may have some ability to make cognitive sense of a parent's absence due to incarceration, school age children become acutely aware of the stigma attached to

parental incarceration<sup>14, 15, 20</sup> and will withdraw into isolation in order to protect their secret. Children in the middle years are viewed as being particularly susceptible to stigmatization as they become aware of their social position.<sup>23</sup> By the age of 10 most children are conscious of cultural stereotypes and group differences; should the child belong to a stigmatized group, this awareness appears even earlier.<sup>24</sup>

For adolescents, the literature suggests they have more difficulty than younger children as they grow toward adulthood<sup>23</sup> and attempt to navigate the balance between individuation and connectedness.<sup>15, 25</sup> Numerous authors have discussed the negative consequences of parental incarceration as it affects adolescence.<sup>26, 27</sup> For example, in addition to community and home problems, Trice and Brewster<sup>30</sup> report that 36% of their adolescent research sample had dropped out of school (compared to a national average of 9%), the majority required disciplinary visits at school from caregivers, and 50% had been arrested. Lack of caregiver supervision, associations with peers who may encourage delinquent behaviour, and continual strains on the family position them as vulnerable to unhealthy external and internal behaviours.

Developmental theories can provide insight into age related consequences of parental incarceration. However, most models do not acknowledge developmental processes as continuing into and throughout adulthood. A view that assumes development across the lifespan enhances a longitudinal perspective where early care can be improved and interventions can anticipate the challenges in later life development. Although there are a number of quantitative studies focused on the outcomes (usually deleterious) of parental incarceration on young adults qualitative studies are rare.<sup>31</sup>

Research using statistical modelling<sup>26, 36</sup> can help practitioners understand that multiple adversities are influential; however, this offers a limited understanding. Qualitative data that includes experiential understanding is sorely absent in the literature. It is worth noting that literature that focuses solely on the risks in store for COIPs may add to the stigma perpetuated by professionals who work with these children.

## **The Study**

Some of the most startling pieces of information gleaned from my work with women who had in regard to released from prison was lack of effective support for their

children.<sup>33</sup> The mothers in the group shared that at no point from arrest on were they asked about their children (e.g., whether they had any, who was looking after them, or how to contact family members regarding the children's well-being). So, I determined to continue my research and focus on the children's experience. As briefly laid out in the background section, it is clear that the consequences of parental incarceration can be dire. But I also realized that many children resisted the narrative of risk and were able to make different choices. This is the focus of my work: what we might learn from these stories of resilience and resistance that could help illuminate social service providers and law enforcement or justice professionals.

In this work, seven adults impacted by parental incarceration shared their stories and four of the seven engaged in an advocacy group to raise awareness, invite acknowledgement, and instigate actions that can mitigate the consequences of parental incarceration. They completed a series of interviews and group meetings in what is methodologically known as action research. This means that they were not mere subjects of the research, but fully engaged participants who helped guide the process and had decision making capacity along the way. Our work culminated in a documentary: *Bonds that Hurt: Bonds that Heal*. It will be released in full on November 18, 2022, as part of the Canadian Coalition for Children of Incarcerated Parent (CCCIP) event to mark The International Day of the Child. The data gathered from the interviews and focus groups guided the documentary's narrative, which explores the pressing concerns people impacted by incarceration would like service providers and policy makers to consider. Data consisted of transcribed interviews and focus groups. Participants are referred to by their initials.

## **Findings**

In this section I will present in greater detail the information shared by participants using their own words. That information is partially summarized here under four main themes: surviving chaos, turning toward resilience, group cohesion, and ongoing impact.

Surviving Chaos	Turning Toward Resilience	Group Cohesion	Ongoing Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Instability:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• home/schools</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Traumatic arrest</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grief and loss</li> <li>• In the dark</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Stigma and isolation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peers, adults</li> <li>• Growing up quickly</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Coping</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distraction: pos/neg</li> <li>• Thoughts of suicide</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Resisting stigma</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing internalized stigma</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Self-compassion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counter stories</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Compassion for others</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forgiveness</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Developing competencies</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determination</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Transformative relationships</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Mental health care workers</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Sense of normal</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepted</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Belonging</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust</li> <li>• Feeling heard</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Sharing counterstories</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making peace with the past</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Engaging in advocacy</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Relational distance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty trusting</li> <li>• Fierce independence</li> <li>• Residual shame</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Mental health</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• Disordered eating</li> <li>• PTSD</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## Surviving Chaos

Through this process I had not intended to focus on the arrest or the circumstances surrounding the incarceration. The open interview questions were focused largely on how incarceration was navigated. Arrest stories were offered unbidden as I had chosen early on not to explicitly ask questions that invited specifics about the nature of the offences or details of the arrest. However, participants would often use the arrest story as an anchor, and perhaps as a way to legitimize their response stories, lending weight to the enormity of their struggles, and conversely, the courage it took to prevail. Both NV and CK related upsetting accounts of at least one of the arrests they witnessed. In NV's case, mentioned above, the arrest included an assault on their home.

*The first time my mother was arrested, she was, we were flash-banged by the emergency response teams for [local municipalities]. There was three response teams. It was chaotic. I was watching "Bob the Builder." We had a flash-bang through the back door. I was eating beans and wieners with some peas on the side with my brother on the couch right beside me. Flash-bang comes in. I open my eyes. There's two guns in both our faces. I hear commotion in the front of the kitchen. Then I see my mom push, just bulldoze three or four SWAT members, and then gets tackled in front of me, face hitting the ground in front of the TV, and telling me, "It's okay." That's traumatizing. I walked outside the back door. There's dogs barking. There's helicopters. The neighbors are staring at me. The entire street's blocked. That's traumatizing. No one talked to me about it.*

NV's account is offered as the beginning of his hard-won story of survival. Over the course of this research the story surfaced more than once. I noticed the first time he shared the story it was delivered tentatively, in a flat tone of voice, curiously devoid of emotion. As I pondered this narrating style I termed *arms-length reporting*, I retrospectively wondered if he was waiting for my reaction to check that his assessment of trauma was reasonable. In the recording I responded to the account with relational process comments such as "oh my gosh", "that sounds really scary, I'm sorry", and "It makes sense that the events right after the arrest are unclear". I believe these responses invited NV to follow up with more details in subsequent tellings. I noticed over the different recordings and the multiple times the story had been recounted that it had changed not in detail, but in emotional register. NV was more emotionally connected as could be seen by the tears he allowed to appear and in his tone of voice. Together we bore witness to the fear and confusion that was experienced by a small boy and his twin brother and constructed a giving-receiving narrative process that was appropriately sensitive, compassionate, and caring.

CK shared another frightening arrest story. She recounted the time her mother had brought home some gerbils as pets. They were not cared for properly and multiplied, infesting the apartment building where they lived. There was a complaint and her mother, angry and intoxicated, had left their apartment, grabbed a cat she suspected had been hunting the gerbils, and threatened to throw it off the balcony. CK continues with the story in the following exchange:

CK: Yeah, I remember that. So, the neighbor who had the cat complained, but the cat came to our house to eat a gerbil 'cause there's lots of dead gerbils (light tone) and my mom lost her shit because she was drunk and wasted (matter-of-fact tone). And I think I was coming home from school because my friend was, two of my friends were walking with me that lived in this apartment building.

BP: Okay (prompting, inviting more story)

CK: And it was my girlfriend that lived next door. It was her cat that was standing right beside me like this watching. And she was screaming and screaming and screaming 'cause my mum had the cat over top of the [balcony] and was hanging it and saying, if I can't have fucking gerbils, this fucking cat's going to ... And then she,

:: she hucked it ::: and everybody was screaming and then she ... Oh, I was watching (tears beginning). Yeah.

BP: Let's take a breath. (long pause as CK composes herself, body is turned toward CK)

CK: And the police went up and I remember one of them said, "That crazy mother fucker." My mom: and it was the, her ::: my friend's dad. Her dad was the police officer that arrested my mom (quietly).

Up until this last telling of the balcony incident, CK had maintained a joking can-you-believe-this-actually-happened tone that appeared to help manage the emotional enormity of this particular experience. However, rather than becoming less connected to the story through multiple tellings, CK demonstrated that she was more willing to touch the emotional processes that appeared to emerge as a function of the safety of our relationship. In follow-up conversation we made space for the shame, confusion, chaos, and fear that accompanied this story. I did not try to change the subject or distract attention from this jarring story. Together we continued to explore the aftermath through a therapeutic narrative tool called the Life Story Board<sup>34, 35</sup> and CK found compassion for herself, her childhood friends, and her mother.

Understandably these were big stories recalled in detail, however, in many ways, childhood memories were generally sparse among the participants. When MM brought up the arrest and I invited him to elaborate, he shared that he could not remember much in that he *"kinda blocked out everything actually. Ah, that's probably why I'm not in jail right now maybe ... I don't know"*. Scholars recognize that when a story contains extraordinary circumstances, the attention can become hyper-focused on some details of the threatening experience and block out the rest<sup>36</sup>. In addition to honouring the very loud details of the arrest stories and other traumatic experiences, I adopted the role of co-editor to draw attention to instances of wisdom, strength, and resilience. In other words, I wanted to be with participants as a witness to both their pain and their response to overwhelming circumstances. To that end, I not only acknowledged the terrifying aspects of their accounts, but also noted moments of courage, conviction, compassion, and care. For example, I drew attention to NV's admiration of his mother's care for her children and tended to the emotional moments shared during CK's account. In this way, we shared stories such that shame, embarrassment, and stigma were minimized. By way of the

relationships created throughout the research process, details of experiences started to come into focus. In the fourth focus group NV shared that *“I’m starting to remember things, things that I had totally forgotten”*. KA observed that *“I haven’t thought about that for a long time. I had sort of forgotten ... I guess it helps to talk about it”*.

### **Grief and Loss**

In addition to the tumultuous and fearful events during arrests, chaos included feeling lost and frustrated by lack of information about where their parents had been taken, where they as children were going, and what would happen next. NV shared, “During that [time] no one told me, they told me why I was here cuz my mom was in jail. But no follow up”. CK reflects “they don’t explain, nothing was ever explained to us, what had happened, why it was happening, where we were going”. The lack of predictability and security triggered anxiety responses that have lasted up until adulthood. Most participants experienced acute feelings of abandonment. LV poignantly observed that “they left you, and you feel abandoned. You feel like they didn’t want you anymore like they kinda just – like you were able to be just thrown away and that was that .... It still hurts”.

The most far reaching stories were those of being in foster care and the intensity of loss and feeling abandoned. NV shared the story of how he and his brother who has autism were put into foster care with a family who had no idea how to care for a child with special needs. NV recounted that he adopted the responsibility of *caregiver* for his brother and how that was not what most eight-year-olds were up against. He recalls that “for like ten months that I was there it was just hell for me”. He goes on to say that he

*had to help him [his brother] shower, I slept in the bed with him for two months. Even when he peed the bed I would stay because he was scared. The first few months I was just hard, like I was just solid like stone. After that I think I cried almost every night because of my mom that was hard for me getting over that.*

Our conversation about this could inform the focus of interventions for working alongside COIPs. I drew attention to the sacrifices that he made for his brother and how this indicated loyalty and commitment. I said “so you had to grow up fast”. NV connected to this notion and understood it as a strength. He shared “yeah, I guess so. It was just something that was important to me”. Helping COIPs note their strengths and resilience refocuses their emotions and makes space for post traumatic growth.

After her mother was arrested CK was taken to a neighbour's place for a few nights as she and her siblings waited for a social worker to take them to a foster home.

*No, we never went back to the apartment building ever again. When we got moved out to, we went, we were in Kamloops and we got sent to Sorento. The next day ... the social worker came and went to my mom's [without us] and got a guard. So, I never even went into the room again. Our house again. She went in and collected a few things and put them in a garbage bag and grabbed me and [my brother]. I don't remember [my other brother] being in the car, but he came to the, he was in the foster home with us and I remember on the way there she was telling me she was ... all I remember is just bawling. I was crying, crying, crying and crying. And then they introduced us to the new foster parents who are all smiling and happy people. It was bullshit.*

### **Stigma, Isolation, and Resistance.**

Participants shared that the stigma of having a parent in prison ensured that you were isolated: particularly from peers. LV admitted that friends eventually deduced that her parents were “never out visiting family and they figure out the truth and then you know you're bullied for it and you're put down and you just feel bad”. MD put it this way “So it was like these kids just see you coming back and leaving and stuff ... it's kind of, kind of I don't know, kind of puts you in your own little group and no one really wants anything to do with you”. Substantiating the academic literature, stigma prevented participants from seeking help, connecting with peers, and reaching out to social supports. All participants spoke of how their relationships with peers were affected. KA shared the following:

*I lost contact with friends from school. We just stopped being friends, whether it be their parents, or my own judgment, because there was one friend who she almost wanted the scoop for gossip reasons, and when I got that feeling it became very uncomfortable to be around her.*

KA demonstrated both feelings of shame and pushing back against stigma, revealing elements of resiliency that are consistent with *compassion for self* and *competency*.<sup>38</sup> In this reflection KA indicated that she had wisdom to both recognize when she was being used as a source of gossip and then choose self-protection through distancing. NV shared

*[t]he most difficult thing about school was the relationships with kids and peers, but as well as with the teachers, because I'm not sure if they could just tell I was an oddball but I was ... I felt like I wasn't liked. I felt I was ignored just like my peers would ignore me or outcast me. It felt the same way. It was very isolating.*

Sometimes subtle, often overt, resisting stigma took many forms. LV responded to a question about the truth of what happened to her parents and if she shared it with her peers. She said

*[I hid it] for as long as I could because I was ashamed of it. I didn't want people to look at my parents and then look at me and be like 'You're gonna be just like them'. Because I was constantly told that in school by um, bullies that bullied me. I didn't like hearing that. I didn't like hearing that I was maybe just like them. Honestly, I think what's made me not [be] like them is just because knowing that everybody expects you to be exactly like them and you not becoming like them, kinda just proves that you were a lot stronger than they all thought you were.*

Not surprisingly, school was a place where it was hard to avoid being stigmatized. Yet it was often the only source of possible support. Although CK had a number of stories that included shame and persecution, she recounted this:

*[W]hen there's kids that have nothing, that come from my background ... that's all we have. That's all there is. Cuz the community doesn't surround you and support you and if you don't have extended family, the only place you have is school. Like, I honestly believe school was all I had. When I was lucky enough to get a teacher that cared about me, I was in heaven. I mean I wanted to be there on weekends if I could be.*

All participants mentioned teachers in association with both positive and negative experiences. In addition to shaming experiences, CK suggests there were teachers who saw past her circumstances. In one story CK recalls a teacher who took the time to scold her for wearing too much make-up saying that she was beautiful underneath the mask.

*CK you're such a beautiful girl, why do you have all this shit on your face? Tomorrow you're coming to school and it's gonna be gone, you're not wearing this in my class". I was like "Screw you". Then I showed up the next day with no makeup on and she stopped me again and she grabbed me and she said "See I told you what a beautiful, beautiful girl you are, you don't need all that stuff"*

KA shared some insight after an incident at school where she chose to hide her situation from her teacher rather than talk to her openly.

*If I could go back right now, I'd go and tell her that she did make a difference in my life. Like I was very comfortable in her classroom, except for after that incident. I think if I would've talked to her about it ... when something like this happens to you, you usually end up losing trust and that was one thing for me is I lost trust in adults, but that teacher was just amazing. She was able to draw people in, so if I just would've just stuck with my gut and my feelings, like she was awesome, I*

*could've talked to her about the situation. She would've been open to talking about it. I knew she would.*

As alluded to above, participants spoke repeatedly about bullying, being ostracized, and feeling shame as children. However, most participants shared an element of resistance by internally reorganizing how they were perceived and engaging in behaviours that would ultimately prove that the stories that others told about them were inadequate. Helping professionals can take the initiative and counter stories of shame by highlighting strength and positive attributes when the time is right. CK offered a cautionary note: “Therapists are too quick to tell you how awesome you are. If it’s done too soon, you just shut down and don’t let them know that you are struggling. The best thing to do is just listen and reflect, don’t put in all this sunshine and daisies crap before they’re ready to hear it.”

## **Coping**

By drawing attention to how participants managed the difficult experience of parental incarceration I was afforded the opportunity to highlight resistance, strength, and counter stories. Coping strategies adopted by participants included positive and negative consequences. Participants admitted that some of the short-term consequences were both costly and protective. NV shared that *“I’m a fast learner so my coping strategies would have been developed fast and they would have been, from what I can tell they were just to be a hard, I just became a hard shell”*, which meant that connecting with peers or teachers was unlikely. MM shared that in order to manage persecution, he used physical force that resulted in suspension from school but also afforded him a measure of respect and, ultimately, peers left him alone. He reflected that *“I don’t know it’s like, I can’t make them shut up through words I’ll make them shut up through like being physical”*. He also shared an instance where he stepped in to protect his younger brother. I took this opportunity to point out this aspect of his experience as a way to draw attention to the value of family and fairness.

External coping strategies included listening to music, choosing friends wisely, being close to animal friends, dance, art, prayer, finding a job, and joining a faith community. MM shared that he adopted a habit of going out into the forest with one of his few friends, taking an axe with them and randomly chopping wood. *“Yeah ... it’s kinda*

*weird but somehow it felt good to just go out there and whack away at trees. We weren't trying to be destructive or nothing, it just felt good".* In all participants' stories there were few instances of reaching out to peers, teachers, counsellors, social workers, or any other adults. From most perspectives, isolation was the preferred adaptation to facing judgement.

Internal coping strategies invoked as a protection against shame were dominated by anger. CK shared that one of her key coping strategies "*was my anger, for sure, which pushed me through and gave me the motivation and the desire to want something different in my life*". All participants referenced anger as a motivating force. In an exchange about coping strategies I invited some elaboration on how anger was important for LV in order to manage the hurt that others who assumed she would turn out like her parents had inflicted. After reflecting that LV does not want to lose the anger she said:

*Exactly, it makes me, because I know that even today like I know that they will hurt me. Because it always happens. I mean it always has since forever. But it was like protection. It was like a shield. Knowing that they were going to hurt me but being able to act like it was ok, even if those nights I cried myself to sleep I made them believe I was ok. That was really all I could do. I mean even if I wasn't ok, I thought I was and eventually I made myself believe I was.*

CK credits anger as the reason for her success all through her life and how, although adaptive at the time, may not be as useful in her adult life.

*Anger was what motivated me to get everywhere I got. There's no question, but unfortunately, it's always caused problems which is what I'm dealing with now because I don't need it anymore. So, it was a really good viable coping skill to get me through when I was scared. It helped me push through every fearful thing. Like not knowing where money was gonna come from, not like figuring out how in the hell I was gonna get the money to go to university, ... I just kept pushing through and pushing through and pushing through and it was anger that motivated me through a majority of that.*

These strategies were a way to counter, and resist, chaos. All participants reflected on the necessary role anger played in their coping strategies. Professionals working with COIPs should make space for (rather than suppressing) anger and help direct its significant energy in positive ways. Of course, this is after it is acknowledged and accepted as a legitimate emotional experience.

## **Turning Points Toward Resilience**

The construct of post traumatic growth (PTG) has been an area of interest for researchers and psychologists for the last two decades.<sup>37</sup> Researchers have described PTG as an experience of positive adjustment resulting from how a person responds and rebuilds following a life altering event. However, children impacted by incarceration are typically exposed to chronic, rather than acute, trauma experiences and demonstrate incremental shifts over time. A model<sup>38</sup> that more closely reflects the carceral experience uses the concept of *turning points*, which is congruent with managing the effects of parental incarceration with resilience. Central to how turning points spark resilience is the concept of self-stigmatization. Three perceptual components of internalized stigma mediate the shift toward resilience: concordant/discordant views of self; social distance, and balance of power in relationship. These mediating factors are central to the development of three concepts considered fundamental for resilience: *competence, compassion for others, and self-compassion*. In this research the data reflected numerous stories where participants demonstrated competence, compassion for others, and self-compassion. However, there were as well, many reflections on how participants saw themselves in the eyes of critical others, maintaining social distance through isolation, and felt powerless in the face of structural and relational oppression. For the four participants who took part in the group meetings up to the filming event, I noticed that reflections around feeling powerless and wounded decreased over time and comments about connection, competency, and healing became more numerous. For example, participants spoke of protecting siblings, showing understanding around how parents of peers might be concerned, compassion for their parents and siblings, and competence as they shared victories in terms of, for example, being accepted to university, having a lucrative job, getting through university, and becoming a professional. As participants increasingly connected to their strength and resilience they gained more appreciation for these aspects of their identity, which in turn perpetuated resilience.

### **Group Cohesion**

The four participants who engaged in the group processes and the eventual filming of the documentary reported numerous benefits. These are a clue for professionals as to the needs of COIPs from childhood on. They all shared that the group had offered them a

previously unrealized sense of belonging and purpose, characterized as *feeling normal*. NS had this insight:

*It's, I went through life thinking what I went through was normal. Nobody ever looks at it normal. If you tell somebody, they're like, "What? Your mom's a crack dealer? What? You've had the SWAT flash-bang you?" This group has been good for my well-being, just my general understanding of myself has been opened up because I've been able to express these feelings I've never been able to express before. I don't even know how to put it into words. I just really hope that what I felt from this group can somehow get out to the world somewhere. Even if it touches one or two kids, or one or two adults, that can help other people, that'd mean the world to me because I would love for somebody in my situation feel how I feel now. That relief and that comfort, I hope I can bring that to them through this group. That's what I would want.*

### **Ongoing Impact**

Stories shared in this inquiry indicate that people can carry shame far into adulthood. All participants admitted that they maintained a level of caution when sharing that their parents had been incarcerated. The extreme difficulty associated with recruitment for this study (> three years, N=7) underscores the hidden nature of this experience. It became clear that the difficulty of recruitment for this inquiry reflected the influence of stigma and shame as a hallmark of the parental incarceration experience. As mentioned previously, the impacts of parental incarceration do not subside completely after childhood.<sup>31, 32</sup> All participants admitted they carry some measure of anxiety and feelings of separation from other members of society. They said that joining the research had mitigated a number of negative effects but they would always be working to come to terms with their experience of parental incarceration. Advice to supports were such that they cautioned those working with COIPs to prepare them for ongoing struggles. KA shared how she didn't have the support she needed to prepare for the future.

*I don't think there was really anything that helped me [prepare for adulthood]. There's nothing that gives you guidance if you wanna have a relationship with your parent that was incarcerated. Even now, I still feel like I'm being judged ... It's caused me some anxiety and I do have anxiety, depression, some mental health issues. I have succumbed to self-harm. I just think if there was a better system to help ones with incarcerated parents I think I would be a little more stable. It's hard. It's really hard. Still is.*

Like most of the other participants, CK admitted that trust is an ongoing concern.

*It's a hard one for me to allow someone to come close, because not only was I violated by people that love you, but the people that were supposed to take care of you, foster homes et cetera, some of them were quite abusive and it was very difficult to allow myself to learn how to trust somebody. And I think that's an ongoing thing that I have to face throughout life.*

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I presented an overview of a study with people who have experience with parental incarceration. Scholarship is clear that there are many risks for negative outcomes for these children. However, there are also stories of coping, resilience, and success. Focusing on significant and supportive relationships, helping children find a semblance of “normal”, making sure that they are informed as to the whereabouts of their parents are a few of the ways people in contact with these children can help mitigate the effects. The documentary *Bonds that Hurt; Bonds that Heal*, includes interviews with the participants who informed this module. Below, I have included some recommendations proposed by all the participants in this work.

## **Participant Generated Recommendations**

- Before arrest, officers should be made aware of children present in the home.
  - a. The arrest experience was most cited as the genesis of anxiety and PTSD
  - b. Social workers or others that come in contact with children should understand that not knowing anything about their parents is worse than knowing the truth. All participants clearly stated they needed to know more about what happened to their parents.
- Pervasive stigma interferes with social development, well-being, and ongoing concerns into adulthood and should be addressed as early as possible.
  - a. All participants shared how profoundly the shame of having a parent in prison affected their experience.
  - b. This shame is present even as adults and contributes to high levels of anxiety and maladaptive coping strategies.
- Resources that would sensitize teachers, social workers, and counsellors to the specific needs of COIPs should be made readily available.

- a. In particular, the school setting has the potential to be both harmful and helpful: Teachers, parents, and students would benefit.
  - b. Social workers and other front-line workers would benefit from sensitization training.
- Mentoring programs should be initiated where adults who had a parent in prison can support children currently experiencing parental incarceration.
  - a. The group found that talking to others with similar experience was the most beneficial aspect of the study.
  - b. Mentors should engage in normalizing experiences that invite feelings of belonging and acceptance that are often rare for a child of incarcerated parents.
- Information for the documentary screening should be made public for all the above reasons.

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**Note: References of particular interest have been bolded.**

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