



“The Glass is Half Full”: Narratives from Young Adults on Parental Incarceration and Emerging Adulthood

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Abstract

Prior literature highlights that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to endure negative life outcomes. Yet, this discussion is mainly centered on the immediate impacts of parental incarceration during childhood and adolescent years, with less focus on the longer-term consequences as these children emerge into adulthood. This study examined how young adults interpreted their experience of parental incarceration. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 young adults to understand their interpretations of parental incarceration as a turning point in specific transitions to adulthood: education and employment, intimate relationships, living independently, and parenthood. Findings demonstrate that, for some respondents, this experience created negative turning points, for example, by limiting their academic opportunities due to financial strain or a lack of support, hindering their trust in romantic partners, keeping them from living independently due to feelings of responsibility for the remaining parent, or by creating a fear of repeating the cycle with their own children. For other respondents, this experience created positive impacts on their lives because it provided a motivational push towards acquiring an education, accelerated them into becoming independent, or encouraged their desire to become a good parent and provide stability for their own children. There were also respondents who believed that the experience had no effects on certain life domains. These findings add to the growing body of research by providing support that parental incarceration can influence avenues for success and alter navigations into emerging adulthood.

Keywords Parental incarceration · Emerging adulthood · Turning points · Transitions to adulthood · Life course theory

Highlights

- Young adults were interviewed to examine their interpretations on the impacts of parental incarceration.
- Specific transitions to adulthood (i.e., education/employment, intimate relationships, living independently, parenthood) were discussed.
- They identified both negative and positive impacts of their experience of parental incarceration on their transitions to adulthood.
- Practitioners and policymakers should incorporate strategies that alleviate the consequences of parental incarceration for children.

Exposure to parental incarceration changed dramatically from 1991–2007, reflecting an 82% increase (Schirmer et al.,

2009). Approximately 2.7 million children in the United States currently have a parent behind bars and an estimated 5 million children have experienced parental incarceration during their lifetime (The Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2016; The Pew Charitable Trust, 2010). Often coupled with other disadvantages such as family instability, poverty, parental substance abuse, intimate partner violence, and living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, parental incarceration is associated with negative outcomes for children (Geller et al., 2009; Giordano, 2010; Foster and Hagan, 2015). The consequences of parental incarceration are complex and varied.

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Scholars assert that the negative consequences of parental incarceration can increase inequality and intergenerational consequences for children (Foster and Hagan, 2015; Turney and Goodsell, 2018). Compared to other children during childhood, children of incarcerated parents are at higher risk for low educational performance (Nichols and Loper, 2012), treatment for mental health disorders (Phillips et al., 2004), and economic hardship (Wildeman, 2014). Children of incarcerated parents are also more likely to engage in delinquent activities, to develop substance abuse, and to have numerous contacts with the criminal justice system compared to their peers (Christian, 2009; Murray et al., 2012b; Schirmer et al., 2009; Swisher and Shaw-Smith, 2015).

Although researchers have invested in studies on the consequences of parental incarceration for children during their childhood and adolescence, we know less about the long-term consequences as these children emerge into adulthood. Developmental life course theory asserts that pivotal life experiences—abrupt or gradual changes, referred to as *turning points*—produce a major shift throughout the life course, move individuals along certain pathways, and impact their life transitions (Laub and Sampson, 1993). Research alludes to the fact that consequences of parental incarceration can impact transitions to adulthood. Scholarly work by Mears and Siennick (2016) indicates that parental incarceration may create a negative turning point throughout the life course, in which young adults have increased vulnerability towards negative outcomes as they transition to adulthood. However, other research suggests that parental incarceration can possibly create a positive turning point for young adults in situations where they have extreme social disadvantages and family life exposure to criminal activity prior to their parents' incarceration (Giordano, 2010; Wildeman and Turney, 2014). For example, in situations of intimate partner violence, parental mental health problems, or parental substance use, the removal of that parent can be beneficial by reducing risks for child psychopathy and behavioral problems (Murray and Murray, 2010).

The way in which young adults make meaning of this life experience in order to navigate through their adulthood has been understudied. How do young adults interpret the experience of their parent's incarceration as they are emerging into adulthood? Do young adults define this experience as having a negative or positive impact on their lives? In order to examine these questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 young adults to further the understanding of parental incarceration and emerging adulthood. This qualitative approach provides rich insights on these experiences and adds to the body of theoretical arguments in the extant literature.

Transitions to Adulthood

Although there are multiple milestones used for defining the transition to adulthood—which vary by norms, class structures, and social conditions—the sociological literature points to four domains as core indicators (Arnett, 2000; Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999; Keller et al., 2007): educational attainment and employment, intimate relationships, independent living, and parenthood. Success or failure in one domain can possibly impact other domains within the transition to adulthood (Elder, 1998). For example, intimate relationships and living independently can serve as precursors for getting married, having children, or becoming a homeowner (Fry, 2017; Laub and Sampson, 1993; Mulder, 2009). Parenthood as a long-term role is also likely to influence the transition to adulthood in various ways, impacting young adults' financial stability, educational achievement, career development, and other responsibilities (Cohler and Musick, 1996; Hofferth and Goldscheider, 2010). Disadvantages and negative life experiences can delay such transitions to adulthood (Benson and Elder, 2011). Although the extent of this delay for individuals who have experienced parental incarceration is largely unexplored territory, research points at the presence of adverse effects (Mears and Siennick, 2016; Turney and Lanuza, 2017).

The Effects of Parental Incarceration on Emerging Adulthood

Life course theory suggests that what takes place early on in an individual's life influences the later stages of development (Elder, 1998). In other words, life occurrences that transpire through individual, historical, and social factors will determine the ways in which an individual's life unfolds overtime. These life experiences or occurrences that can redirect pathways are referred to as *turning points* (Elder, 1998). Within an individual's life, turning points can constitute an immediate change at a particular point in time or take the shape of more gradual changes throughout a person's life (Laub and Sampson, 1993). Examples of turning points may include marriage or serious illness of a close relative (Elder et al., 2003; Sampson and Laub, 2005). Positive or negative turning points can condition success or failure in emerging adulthood, as the transition into a new life experience can influence attainments, social networks, intimate relationships, and identity development (Mears and Siennick, 2016; Rutter, 1996).

It is still unclear whether children of incarcerated parents interpret this experience as a positive or negative turning point towards their transition to adulthood. On one hand, scholars have asserted that parental incarceration could be a

negative turning point, especially for children who are at greater risk of exposure to other disadvantages (Western and Pettit, 2010). Additional risks may arise after the incarceration of a parent, such as family instability, multiple residential moves, homelessness, and financial hardship. Research has shown that the experience of parental incarceration is associated with negative outcomes, such as mental and physical health problems (Lee et al., 2013; Roettger and Boardman, 2012), low civic participation and trust in the government (Lee et al., 2014), and lasting psychological effects over the life-trajectory (Murray and Farrington, 2008; Murray et al., 2012a). Researchers also indicate that parental incarceration during childhood exacerbates negative economic, educational, societal, psychological, and health-related outcomes during young adulthood (Foster and Hagan, 2015; Miller and Barnes, 2015). Thus, parental incarceration can shift the dynamics of a child's well-being, limit their access to prosocial opportunities, and can create adverse outcomes that accumulate in early young adulthood to later adulthood (Mears and Siennick, 2016; Turney and Goodsell, 2018). On the other hand, studies have shown that parental incarceration can be beneficial to children whose parents are involved in intimate partner violence, engage in substance use, or have mental health problems (Giordano, 2010; Wildeman and Turney, 2014). In these circumstances, the removal of the parent enables stability for children and decreases their risk of mental and behavioral problems (Murray and Murray, 2010).

Indeed, these studies indicate the need for advancing our understanding of the effects of parental incarceration on the transition into adulthood. Acceleration and delay in transitions to adulthood can involve both positive and negative impact on young adults. Acceleration is considered to be positive, for example, when young adults leave home to attend college in a distant location, but negative when they leave home to independently raise a child at an early age. Delay is considered to be positive, for example, when this delay in one transition allows the individual to focus on another transition (e.g., to pursue higher education by delaying employment). Delay can be negative if it starts to hinder growth in one or more life domains (e.g., putting off finding a steady job after completing education, getting into conflict with a partner because of unwillingness to live independently). In a previous quantitative study, Turney and Lanuza (2017) explored the effects of parental incarceration on the transition to adulthood and their findings indicate that this experience accelerated young adults' transitions. By emerging adulthood, young adults who experienced parental incarceration were more likely to be living independently, to be romantically involved with a spouse, and to parent their own children than their peers. The researchers concluded that young adults of incarcerated

parents are more likely to perceive themselves as being older than their objective age and may view themselves as an adult all the time. Their findings document the effects of parental incarceration, however, the study does not cover the various ways in which young adults give meaning to their experience of parental incarceration. Do they consider any acceleration or delay caused by parental incarceration to be a positive or a negative impact on their own development? These personal interpretations are essential to understand the impact of parental incarceration on the transition to adulthood (Smith, 2011). Additionally, parental incarceration is often examined as a discrete event; an event that occurs at a specific point in time (e.g., parent's time in jail or prison). However, parental incarceration should be interpreted as a process that evolves overtime (Parke and Clarke-Stewart, 2002), that includes other major life events (e.g., parent's arrest, trial, sentencing, incarceration, and release). This process can coincide with other experiences (e.g., divorce, residential moves, financial hardship), which combined can shape life domains, events, and transitions.

Current Study

The current study extends past conventional examinations of parental incarceration as a discrete event and situates parental incarceration in the context of life course theory. In line with this theory, we conceptualize turning points "as part of a process over time and not as a dramatic lasting change that takes place at any one time" (Pickles and Rutter, 1991, p. 134; Sampson and Laub, 1997). In other words, this study focuses on various processes that encompasses the parental incarceration experience that may work to accelerate or delay transitions to adulthood. The current study explores the following question: To what extent do young adults interpret the experience of parental incarceration as a positive or negative turning point in their transitions to adulthood? Specifically, the study assesses the effect of parental incarceration in four life domains: education and employment, intimate relationships, independent living, and parenthood. Young and Smith (2019) already suggested that research providing insight into young adults' narratives on parental incarceration is rare, but that these narratives can substantially enhance findings from previous methodological approaches. As mentioned, millions of children are affected by having an incarcerated parent and relatively little is known about the impact that these experiences have on their emergence into adulthood. The current study seeks to add to the extant literature by incorporating personal accounts from young adults to further understand how to address the long-term consequences of parental incarceration, and the ways in which young adults navigate their lives in the face of these experiences.

Method

Data Procedures

Young adults were considered to be eligible for the study if they were between the ages of 18 and 30 years old, had experienced at least one parental incarceration occurrence in their lifetime, either during childhood or during adolescence (i.e., before their 18th birthday), and if the incarcerated parent was incarcerated for at least three months in jail or prison (Arnett, 2000; Gipson, 2019; Young and Smith, 2019). Local organizations, agencies, and community groups were contacted by email or telephone in order to assist with the recruitment process (e.g., disseminating flyers, passing out the first author's contact information to potential participants, etc.). Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, information about the study extended through social media platforms, academic email listservs, community sites, and word of mouth. Once names and contact information were acquired, a screening interview was conducted to verify that all eligibility criteria were met for participation and to address concerns about the study. Next, participants who met the eligibility criteria were asked permission for informed consent and for an audio recording. After the consent form was completed, an in-person, telephone, or video call was scheduled with the participant.

The semi-structured interview was focused on how participants believed parental incarceration impacted their transition to adulthood in various life domains. Afterwards, demographic information was obtained in a structured questionnaire pertaining to their age, sex, race/ethnicity, level of education, relationship status, and employment status. This structured questionnaire also contained personal questions on their individual behaviors and family life context such as the age at which participants experienced parental incarceration, the type of family household in which they lived prior to and after parental incarceration, involvement in risky drug and alcohol use, history of mental health disorders, and history of arrest or incarceration. At the end of each interview, participants were given a debriefing statement and, when needed, offered contact with mental health resources.

All interviews were conducted by the first author over a period of five months, between November 2019 and April 2020. Interviews ranged in length from 1 h to 2 h and 31 min, with an average of 1 h and 36 min. Each participant completed the full interview and was compensated with a \$25 Amazon voucher. Interviews were transcribed through an online transcription service and edited by seven research assistants. Research assistants reviewed each transcript to assure it was transcribed verbatim (i.e., directly as stated; Rudestam and Newton, 2014). After each transcript was edited, a second reviewer was assigned (e.g., the first author or another research assistant) to ensure participants' words

were truly reflected in the transcript. All participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym and these names were used in the final version of the written transcripts. The Institutional Review Board at the first author's university approved of the described data procedures.

Sample

Twenty young adults between the ages of 20 to 30 years old were interviewed for the research study; however, based on the brevity in responses and inconsistencies, consensus was reached by the research team that one participant should be removed from the analysis. Therefore, the sample ($N = 19$) consists of 12 females and 7 males, with an average age of 25 years old. We deem the sample to be sufficiently large to ensure variety of experiences in the life domains, but sufficiently small to enable in-depth analysis of the narratives and do justice to the richness of the respondents' stories. Importantly, we were able to reach saturation on the phenomena under investigation (Alase, 2017; Guest et al., 2006). The study includes participants who reside in the Northeast, Midwest, and the South regions of the United States. Participants in the study were predominantly Black or African American ($n = 12$; 63%), while others identified as Afro-Latino ($n = 2$; 10.5%), Hispanic ($n = 3$; 16%) and White ($n = 2$; 10.5%). These demographics were expected as Black and Hispanic children are disproportionately more likely to experience parental incarceration (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2010). Within the sample, one participant's highest level of education was less than high school, two participants acquired at least a high school diploma or equivalent, five received some college education, five had a four-year college or university degree, and five obtained a master's degree. At the time of the study, two were enrolled in a Ph.D. program. Most were employed ($n = 12$; 63%) or were students who picked up part-time work ($n = 7$; 37%). In regard to romantic relationship status, thirteen participants were single and never married, three were partnered in long term relationships, one was married and living with their partner, and one had been married but was now separated. Over half of the young adults were living independently ($n = 13$; 65%), others were still living with a parent ($n = 6$; 32%). Only one participant was a parent.

All participants had experienced parental incarceration with a biological parent. Seventy-nine percent of participants ($n = 15$) experienced their father incarcerated; two participants experienced their mother incarcerated and two experienced both mother and father incarcerated. Time spent in prison ($n = 11$; 58%) for parental incarceration was more common than time spent only in jail ($n = 4$; 21%), or time spent periodically in both jail and prison ($n = 4$; 21%). The length of their parents' sentences ranged from 4 months to 25 years. Furthermore, some participants experienced

Table 1 Descriptive Information on Young Adults ($N = 19$)

Variables	<i>N</i>	%
Sex		
Male	7	36.8%
Female	12	63.2%
Age		
20–22	5	26.3%
23–25	3	15.8%
26–28	7	36.8%
29–30	4	21.1%
Region		
Northeast	16	84.2%
Midwest	2	10.5%
South	1	5.3%
Race/Ethnicity		
Black or African American	12	63.2%
Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Origin	3	15.8%
Afro-Latino	2	10.5%
White	2	10.5%
Highest Level of Education		
Less than high school	1	5.3%
High school diploma or equivalent	2	10.5%
Some college	5	26.3%
Bachelor's Degree	6	31.6%
Master's Degree	5	26.3%
Employment Status		
Employed (Full-time)	12	63.2%
Employed (Part-time)	7	36.8%
Romantic Relationship Status		
Single, never been married	13	68.4%
Partnered	4	21.1%
Married	1	5.3%
Married, but separated	1	5.3%
Living Arrangements		
Living independently	13	68.4%
Living at home with parent	6	31.6%
Own Parenthood		
Parent	1	5.3%
Not a parent	18	94.7%

multiple occurrences of parental incarceration from birth to early adulthood ($n = 10$; 53%), and others only had one occurrence of parental incarceration ($n = 9$; 47%). Tables 1 and 2 present a descriptive overview of all 19 participants.

Data Analysis

Both deductive and inductive approaches were used to analyze these interviews and several steps were taken to

Table 2 Descriptive information on young adults' experiences with parental incarceration ($N = 19$)

Variables	<i>N</i>	%
Experienced Parental Incarceration of		
Father	15	78.9%
Mother	2	10.5%
Both	2	10.5%
Age of Parental Incarceration		
0–5	9	47.4%
5–10	4	21.1%
10–15	3	15.8%
15–18	3	15.8%
Type of Parental Incarceration		
Jail	4	21.1%
Prison	11	57.9%
Both jail and prison	4	21.1%
Length of Parental Incarceration^a		
Less than one year	4	21.1%
2–5 years	2	10.5%
5–10 years	2	10.5%
10 years or more	7	36.8%
Deported	3	15.8%
Unknown	1	5.3%
Occurrences of Parental Incarceration		
One occurrence	9	47.4%
Multiple occurrences	10	52.6%

^aThe length of parents' incarceration only includes calculations for one parent and uses the longest duration experienced if both parents were incarcerated

attend to issues of reliability and validity. First, after each interview, the first author held a reflective session with the participants in which she verified that her observations and interpretations during the interview were correct. Her observations from both the interview and these reflective sessions were reported in an analytical memo.

Second, each interview was transcribed with the aid of Otter.ai and a multidisciplinary team of research assistants (i.e., seven undergraduates with a background in psychology, sociology, and criminal justice). One research assistant would edit the software transcriptions and another would read and check the transcription. When a transcription was completed, the first author and these research assistants discussed preliminary interpretations and general themes that emerged from the interviews. These meetings were reported in the analytical memo.

Third, the first author analyzed the transcribed interviews using line-by-line coding with the aid of NVivo. Initially, this analysis was based on themes that had been identified in prior research (i.e., deductively; Hyde, 2000). Particularly, based on the implications of extant research (Giordano

et al., 2019), general concepts were drawn to analyze the interviews, which included: *Family Life Dynamics, Immediate Effects, Long-Term Effects, Positive Impacts on Transitions, Negative Impacts on Transitions, and No Impacts on Transitions*. After the initial deductive coding, an inductive approach was applied to garner new ideas from these narratives and generate specific themes from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Specifically, an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (hereinafter, “IPA”) was utilized to examine and interpret the narratives. IPA assisted in the process of understanding historical and situational factors that situated or influenced an individual’s interpretation—ultimately, acquiring an understanding on how individuals interpreted meanings from their life experiences (Alase, 2017). Typical of IPA, this inductive approach was not centered on developmental life course theory but was applied more broadly to focus on meaningful interpretations from critical life experiences. The first author created a codebook in the first round of coding and refined this in subsequent rounds of coding.

Fourth, the first author shared and discussed her interpretations with a senior scholar, experienced in qualitative research, who brought up alternative explanations and themes to look for in the texts. After several rounds of discussion and going back-and-forth between conclusions and text, in the final step, the identified themes were solidified by comparing and contrasting observations between the narratives (Maxwell, 2012). The first author re-read the interviews and integrated her ideas with insights reported in the analytical memo.

In summary, the analytical process involved reviewing the interview transcripts several times while using NVivo as an organizational tool to identify patterns, discussing the data and findings with multiple researchers, comparing and contrasting stories to develop consistent patterns across participants, and consistent journaling to produce an audit trail of any preconceptions in the development of the findings (Vicary et al. (2017)).

Results

Educational Achievement and Employment Opportunities

Of the 19 participants, ten expressed that their experience with parental incarceration positively influenced their educational achievement. For some individuals, parental incarceration became a motivational push towards acquiring an education and focusing on their studies. For example, Leon describes having a close relationship with his father prior to his father’s incarceration. As a child, Leon’s father would assist him with his homework assignments and

provide educational support. One early morning, at 8-years-old, Leon witnessed police officers in his home and his father being arrested. Leon’s father received a felony charge and was later sentenced to an out of state prison. As a result of the long distance and rigorous travel preparations, Leon could only visit his father approximately four times throughout the years. Parental incarceration shifted the dynamics in Leon’s educational achievement during elementary and middle school. Now as a college student, Leon views the absence of his father as a positive shift towards his education:

You know, just me having to learn a little more on my own was, I guess, a good... experience or just a good, kind of motive ‘cause like since he’s not here to help me, I have to do things on my own a little bit more.

Due to his father’s imprisonment, Leon could no longer depend on his father for academic assistance. As a result, this experience pushed Leon to stay focused and figure out how to succeed on his own. The idea that parental incarceration can create a motivational push is in line with Trevor’s experience, whose father was also an advocate and supporter of his educational achievement. By Trevor’s senior year of high school, his father was sentenced to 18 years in prison. Trevor reflects back on the impacts of parental incarceration and his ability to reach his highest educational level by obtaining a Master’s degree:

I think when it came to education, I had to really push myself to, you know, achieve. Like I couldn’t afford to fail classes. I couldn’t afford to not get my degree because I have to make something of myself. In order for me to be able to make money and support my family, the right way, I need to really push myself.

A second way in which participants believed parental incarceration created a positive impact on their educational achievement was by inspiring them to acquire an education that would allow them to be an advocate for social justice issues. These experiences are described, respectively, by Gabriella, a Ph.D. student in sociology, and Jasmine, a psychology and criminal justice undergraduate student:

I am like trying to do this work and like finding some parallels between, like, the mass incarceration of Black Americans and the mass incarceration and deportation, of like, black and brown immigrant men. So like, I guess maybe I would have come into this like, passion or need to write and do this work maybe on my own, had I not have [sic] this really vivid experience of going through the jail and like seeing his orange jumpsuit and hearing him cry. Maybe I

would have still done it. But I feel like I am doing that because I did have that experience and what else am I going to do? What else am I gonna [sic] write about? What else am I gonna [sic] dedicate my life to if it's not...that.

It's like part of the reason that I want to do forensic psych and work with like inmates and I'm really interested in like the rehabilitation part like post-jail. Like getting them reintegrated. So, like, getting them like back into society, like helping them like be able to cope better with the transition so that they don't feel like they have to go back because I feel like since my dad's been in and out of jail so much like, that's why he wants to go back all the time. Like, it's like, it's what he knows he's comfortable... Like, if my dad like, met somebody in my profession, then he might have been able to stay out or like even like my mom like usually if given like the services. So like, yeah, it's always gonna [sic] be in the back of my head. It's gonna [sic] it's like one of the major drives that I have to like even finish school, because like, college is not easy.

The experience of parental incarceration seemed to positively influence Gabriella and Jasmine's educational achievement. It fueled their passions to enter into an educational path that will allow them to provide solutions for those incarcerated or formerly incarcerated.

Despite these shared experiences of a positive impact, other participants ($n = 7$) expressed that parental incarceration had a negative influence on their educational achievement. The absence of a parent disrupted their means of support academically. Malcom describes how his father's incarceration negatively impacted his educational achievement:

Hm... [pause] [clears throat] Okay, I'll be honest with you. College...is very important to me...And it's kind of hard to tell this—well it's not hard to say 'cause it's just honest, but I've never actually went to a college class that I paid for. And it's not like I got a scholarship or anything—I was sneaking to like universities and city colleges, just like—listening to college classes, but I never went to higher education myself...It was a dream of mine, but none of my parents went to college. And so, I had no help during the process. And I really had no help. And I got frustrated to the point where I was like, “you know what Mom, I don't wanna [sic] do this no more,” and there was no encouragement to ever go back. I tried.

In addition, Rumi, a first year Ph.D. student, explains the financial strains that created a barrier in her educational achievements:

I feel like I would have already even started my doctoral degree, like a while ago. Because I would have had like financial support to do it. Versus like now. And for a long time like everything needs to be on my own. My mom is a nanny and doesn't make a lot of money. And so, what she has [I'm] not going to ask for her to help right? And so, I think in those ways having him around would have made my life a lot easier.

Although all participants believed in educational achievement, some participants were hindered from attaining their educational goals due to parental incarceration. Kuro states why he believes he did not graduate from high school:

I didn't have nobody [sic] really telling me, except for my mom...But honestly, you need to have two people doing it for you. You know, you need to have two people telling you. So, my dad wasn't really there to like, you know, basically tell me what to do, or like you, you know like, “Hey, you need to get this education.” That was never in my ear from my dad... So I never saw education as a vital point in life, which it is.

Similarly, Dakota recalls his difficulties with obtaining a high school degree and not finishing college:

Educational achievement goes back to the like suppressing. Like I was that kid in class that could do better, but I wasn't like into it...You don't have a older [sic] father figure to really tell you, like you know, like set that authority with you or something like that...So yeah it was just, it was just, there wasn't any control.

Nikki, a college graduate, recalls that she “just wouldn't communicate” and “would not raise [her] hand” after her father was incarcerated. After becoming “mute” and “not getting that extra help that [she] needed because [she] was still quiet”, Nikki describes challenges towards her educational performance in high school:

Like I was really introverted, I suppressed everything. I never, you know, told people how I felt. So, that impacted my education in high school because I just was not a verbal person. Like even, like I would be in class, and I knew the answer, I would not raise my

hand at all. Like, to even talk. So, I wasn't engaging in school.

These participants believe parental incarceration created a negative turning point towards their educational achievement. Parental incarceration led to financial challenges towards participants' educational achievement, the removal of motivational support from their incarcerated parent, difficulties in suppressing their feelings, and disengagement from school. The participants felt that if their parent had not been incarcerated, they would have reached their educational attainments or would not have experienced delays in these attainments.

In contrast to the perceptions on educational achievement, a majority of the participants (15 out of 19) did not believe that parental incarceration had an impact on their employment opportunities. While some participants voiced that parental incarceration created financial burdens and initiated their early entry into the workforce, they did not interpret this as a negative impact on their employment opportunities. When asked the question, "Do you believe your experience with parental incarceration has impacted your employment opportunities?" participants often responded, "I don't think it's affected it like detrimentally," or "it probably hasn't impacted me a lot there." Others answered in more assertive ways such as, "No." and "I don't think his incarceration has impacted that as far as employment," or "I had the jobs I had because of God." For example, Marie who is 24-years old and self-employed, is currently in the process of launching her own business, she states:

Hmm, I don't think it impacted that at all. Um, yeah. I think it didn't touch it. You know? Like it didn't get in the way of anything... I don't think it impacted it at all.

The experiences of two participants were quite different in this regard. One participant was denied an employment opportunity because his potential employer searched his name and came across his father's criminal record. In this case, the participant had applied for a job position, successfully completed the job interview, received onboarding paperwork, and was considered a new hire with only the background check as the final hurdle. Unbeknownst to this employer, the participant shares the same name as his incarcerated father. As a result, the background check revealed information about his father's conviction of sexual assault. The employer associated this criminal history with the participant. The participant tried to explain this association by revealing that his father was incarcerated. However, he was denied the job position and recalls his employer stating: "We can't really pursue you [based on]

this circumstance because you know you're working with [us] and he's incarcerated." Another participant worked as a school clinician and felt that her employment opportunity could be put at risk because her father was a registered sex offender. She describes that her father wanted to meet up with her after work, but she felt reluctant in giving him the school's address because of his criminal history. Rumi states, "Like it's natural for people to be afraid of pedophiles." Although Rumi's employer was not aware of her father's incarceration, she constantly feared that her experience with parental incarceration would "affect [her] career or affect [her] reputation." It is important to note that the negative impacts on the employment opportunities of these participants are likely to be an indirect result of the stigma attached to their parents' criminal offense as sexual offenders, and not a direct result of having an incarcerated parent.

In sum, just over half of the participants (10 out of 19) expressed that parental incarceration positively influenced their educational achievement and did not impact their employment opportunities, although several participants also mentioned negative effects of parental incarceration on their educational achievements (7 out of 19) or employment opportunities (2 out of 19 participants). These responses may align with Foster and Hagan's (2015) work, which indicates that educational achievement serves as a mediator that reduces the effects of social exclusion during emerging adulthood. In other words, it is possible that participants who are positively impacted in their educational achievement may not feel socially excluded from employment opportunities.

Intimate Relationships

Almost all participants (16 out of 19), believed that parental incarceration had negatively impacted or continued to negatively impact their romantic relationships. However, one participant identified positive effects because he was able to see how much his mother loved his incarcerated father which inspired him to "search for something different in love and romance." The other participants did not feel the experience had impacted their romantic relationships (2 out of 19). The most commonly expressed interpretations were that parental incarceration led participants to seek attention in unhealthy ways ($n = 8$) and that the experience hindered their trust in others ($n = 8$).

Janae's story provides an overview of the impact of parental incarceration on her romantic relationships. Janae experienced parental incarceration of her father from the time of her birth to 10 years old. During childhood, Janae describes feeling hurt and "see[ing] everybody with their dads" and "doing things that [she] couldn't do." The incarceration of her father often left a "void" because she

never that she had a “positive male model to help her feel any other way.” Consequently, Janae found herself in situations with a “bad guy” and was unable to pick up on certain signs that the relationship was unhealthy. Janae also expressed that the lack of relationship with her father and reconciliation after his release from prison allowed her to gravitate to any display of affection. In Janae’s own words:

Sometimes I might not pick up on certain signs, just... Cause it’s like, oh well, the way you’re treating me is like I’ve never had that, you know. In my mind a girl is supposed to like their father—should be that person who, you know, shows them that, that manly love, right? So, that they don’t have to look for it in other people. And I missed that. So, sometimes attention is... feels good and even if it’s like the wrong attention. So, that’s kind of the thing that sucks.

As a result of her father’s incarceration and strains on their relationship, Janae believes that she desired the wrong type of attention in romantic relationships. Although Janae knew she should be with a romantic partner who displayed productivity and a career-drive, she found herself in bad relationships and unhealthy situations.

A lack of trust was also described as a negative effect of parental incarceration. At 12 years old, Rumi found out that her father had sexually assaulted her older sister. As a young adult, Rumi finds that the absence of her father within her life is often an “odd concept” for romantic partners who are more family oriented. Like Janae, Rumi believes that her father’s incarceration led to a cycle of unhealthy relationships. Even further, Rumi expressed finding herself in repeated situations where she was taken advantage of and sexually assaulted. Rumi expresses, “those situations, [w]ould have not happened, had I learned from a young age, what boundaries are.” Rumi also believes the experience of witnessing her father’s incarceration and choosing not to maintain a relationship with him impacts her level of trust in her romantic partners. She describes:

I think it’s maybe made me super hyper vigilant of my partners and how close they get to kids. Like in a really unhealthy way. And like I remember like my ex is, like such a kid person and literally, kids love him. And he’s got the biggest heart in the world I mean he really is such a good person. But I couldn’t help but feel like “wait why are you getting close these kids for [sic]?” Like I didn’t tell him that, but in my head it’s like wait are your intentions good? Are your intentions bad, are you purposely building trust with them, are you going to do, like, are you gonna [sic] be like my father, right? I can’t help but have those feelings come up for me, even now that I’m with a

woman. Um, those feelings will come up for me if I see that my partner is like getting really close to like her niece, it like freaks me out. Just like, why do you have to get so close to her? And my partners just like, “what’s wrong with you, it’s my niece [laughter].” And it’s, and then it’s like when you, when you take, when you take out the experience of what my dad did it’s like yeah, it’s your niece, and you’re allowed to get close to your niece, you’re allowed to be affectionate with your family. I think I get so scared of what is... what is appropriate and what’s not, because of that experience I’m like, too, I just like I’m hyper aware of it and like hypersensitive to it.

According to Rumi, the sexual crimes committed by her father have led to her distrust in romantic relationships. She often questions the genuine intentions of her romantic partners when they are around children. Rumi finds difficulty in believing that her romantic partners are completely trustworthy and believes her experience with parental incarceration and lack of trust in her own father has led to this sensitivity. Similar sentiments about a lack of trust in romantic relationships were voiced by Kyrrah:

If someone gives me an inkling of a reminder of my father, it kind of like, trauma, like it triggers me. But I will say like, it definitely impacted my trust issues. Like I can’t, no matter how much somebody could prove to me that they’re trustworthy, I can’t trust you. Because like the main man in my life proved to me that like, you know? And I know what it’s like for like someone to be like really active in your life that one minute, and then just disappear. So yeah. I don’t trust.

Prior to the incarceration of Kyrrah’s father, Kyrrah describes her father as “making all of this money” and not having any concern that she was “living in hotels, motels, [and] shelters” with her mother. During his incarceration, their relationship grew “really close” but after he was released their “relationship drifted apart.” Kyrrah expressed that she was being used by her father during his incarceration. Additionally, her father’s inconsistencies of being “in and out” of her life had led to “resentment” and inability to trust romantic partners.

Living Independently

More than half of the participants (11 out of 19) believed that parental incarceration had positively impacted them in wanting to live on their own. They believed that the situation had accelerated them into this role as it, “pushed them out of the house” or made them want to “get out of the house” and “get away.” For example, at 21 years old, Kyrrah

describes why it was important for her to leave her home and live independently:

I definitely was ready to get away. Like I was so ready to get away. I did not want to be like associated with anyone. Like I was ready for a fresh start where people wouldn't know like, "Oh," like, "That's your dad?" Like or whatever the case may be. So like I was definitely like, that's why I chose my university cuz [sic] it was like several hours away... And it's just like, I barely went home, honestly. So, it definitely made me want to be on my own and like disassociate.

Kyrah described the need to have a fresh start and to move to an area where people would not know about her father's incarceration. Parental incarceration propelled Kyrah to seek independent living arrangements and disassociate herself from her past experiences, which she described as a positive impact. Marie and Nikki express similar viewpoints of living independently based on their parents' incarceration:

Marie: Yeah, it definitely made me want to get out of the house. Made me want to prove to everybody that I wasn't like her. It made me want to live out, away from her."

Interviewer: How do you feel it has impacted you to live independently?

Nikki: Positive. [laughter] Because I'm able to like—when I'm by myself, I can like, meditate, as much as I want, do yoga, like, eat at weird times [laughter] make all the food that I like that people don't like. It's a positive thing for me.

Like Kyrah, Marie and Nikki felt the experience of parental incarceration had a positive impact on their ability to live independently. In Marie's case, her mother's incarceration made her want to disassociate with the stigma and stereotypes of parental incarceration. Marie wanted to show her family members that she would not walk in a similar pathway as her mother, instead Marie would build a stable home. Nikki's experience of parental incarceration led her to seek "peace and quiet" which pushed her to live independently and focus on her mental health as she anticipates her father's release from prison.

Other participants (4 out of 19) believed that parental incarceration had negatively impacted their ability to live on their own. Either because it had held them back in living independently or, in contrast, had forced them to live

independently earlier than expected or preferred. Aaron said, for example:

Cause, um, because my mom is so like overprotective and my mom doesn't have that support, like, like have him or like a husband or anything. It kind of makes me feel bad about leaving home. So, that I do feel like him, like that void has kinda like, made it a little bit harder for me to wanna [sic] live independently. Because I feel like if he was around and he was here, [and] they were together then maybe, I think I would've probably moved out a long time ago, like I wouldn't be still living out here.

Taylor, who no longer had familial support after her father's incarceration and deportation, believes that parental incarceration accelerated her transition into living independently in an undesirable way. During Taylor's young adulthood, she found herself moving across several states and seeking living opportunities outside of the United States. She explained that she knew she could not rely on her parents anymore and felt forced to take on hard responsibilities at a young age.

Like Aaron and Taylor, participants explained that parental incarceration had thwarted them in living independently or, in contrast, had forced them to take care of themselves earlier than they would have liked. Both Aaron and Taylor interpreted their situations as a negative impact in this specific life domain. Although other participants believed that the acceleration or force to live independently at a young age was a positive impact, Taylor disagreed and felt it was a negative impact as she had to grow up too quickly.

Lastly, four participants did not believe that their ability or desire to live independently had been influenced by their parental incarceration. They started living independently, for example, because they had moved in with a romantic partner, settled in a specific area after college that was away from their parental home, or because they no longer wanted to abide by their family's rules.

Parenthood

Approximately half of the participants (10 out of 19) mentioned that their experience with parental incarceration had made them want to "be the best parent in the world" or provide stability for a child ("giving a child a family"). They often expressed that they had insufficiently received such parenting or stability as a child or adolescent due to the incarceration. Despite these clearly expressed attitudes toward parenthood, of the 19 participants, only one participant was a parent. Kuro was 6 years old when his father became incarcerated and 12-years-old when his father passed away while

incarcerated. Kuro expressed how parental incarceration has impacted the relationship with his son:

It has impacted me a lot. My father was not in my life. And if he was, it would have made a big difference. So, I'm not gonna [sic] to do the same thing to my son. I'm going to make sure my son has everything he needs, and everything he will need to become the perfect man. The perfect man. You feel me? So... that's one thing I can say that I have learned from not having a father.

Due to the absence of his father, Kuro desires to live a better life by being involved in his son's life. Kuro shared that his father passed away while incarcerated and the inability to have a relationship with his father largely influences the way he desires to parent and connect with his son. He views his father's incarceration as a life lesson that pushes him to maintain a positive outlook towards parenthood.

Contrary to these interpretations, other participants (7 out of 19) believed that parental incarceration created a negative impact on their desire to become a parent. The inability to maintain a consistent and healthy relationship with their incarcerated parent influenced their outlook towards parenthood. The experience of parental incarceration hindered them and created a fear of repeating the cycle. For instance, Kyrah explains why she has a fear of having children:

[T]here's nothing that like he did that like makes me like, "Oh," like, "This is the type of dad he was, and I want to make sure I do this for my children." But it also makes me scared to have children because my worst fear is like them going through the same thing that I did. Like I meet a man. We have kids, and like if me and him don't work out, he'll disappear, and he'll come in and out, and play with my kid's emotions. And so, I definitely think that it impacted, impacted me wanting to be a parent in that way.

Similarly, Jasmine describes why she does not want to have children:

I don't know. Like I don't want to be a parent because I don't want to have to deal. I wouldn't want to put my genes into somebody, into like another being. So, then they have to deal with like the same like psychological downfalls, the same like addictive personality it's like, it makes me not want to have kids.

Kyrah and Jasmine highlight their fears of intergenerational transfers. These "generational curses" make Kyrah

and Jasmine fearful that their children will experience the same negative experiences that they encountered in childhood. Jasmine continues by explaining that, although she did not grow up with her biological mother and lived with a loving adoptive family, she shares similarities with her formerly incarcerated mother. They both struggle with anger issues and mental health disorders. Therefore, Jasmine concludes that she does not want children, stating: "I think a lot of it's like genetic. And I don't want to do that."

Only 2 out of 19 participants discussed no impacts on their desire to become a parent. Participants voiced that, "It never had a negative impact on you know whether or not, I felt I want kids" or, "I don't think it has impacted that. Like I've always wanted to be a mom." These participants believed that parental incarceration does not impact their personal decision to one day become a parent.

Discussion

Existing quantitative research indicates that parental incarceration can be a negative turning point in the lives of young adults (Mears and Siennick, 2016). Yet, narratives from young adults who have experienced parental incarceration are rarely explored. The current study sought to address this gap in the literature. The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which young adults make meaning of this experience in relation to four life domains: education and employment, intimate relationships, living independently, and parenthood. The interviews with young adults provided a deeper understanding on their interpretation and navigation through these life domains and revealed that, while young adults identified negative impact of parental incarceration in some areas, they also acknowledged positive impact of this experience on their transition to adulthood.

A slight majority of the participating young adults believed that parental incarceration had positively influenced their educational achievement: they felt motivated to succeed on their own or aspired educational careers to advance the social justice movement. These perspectives differ from quantitative work which demonstrates that parental incarceration is associated with lower levels of educational attainment (Mears and Siennick, 2016; Turney and Lanuza, 2017). However, the findings align with those from qualitative research by Young and Smith (2019), who concluded that higher education served as a way for young adults to reconstruct a negative experience and turn it into a positive outcome, thereby reaching acceptance of their parent's incarceration. Participants who described parental incarceration as a negative impact on their educational achievement mentioned economic hardships and a lack of support throughout their life trajectory, which they felt had

hindered their enrollment and achievement in school. These interpretations support the outcomes of previous quantitative research that parental incarceration can decrease school enrollment (Turney and Lanuza, 2017). With two exceptions, the participants did not express that parental incarceration had affected their employment opportunities. This aligns with Foster and Hagan's (2015) suggestion that the effects of parental incarceration are often mediated through educational achievement. It is possible that as parental incarceration positively impacted young adults' educational achievement, it reduced the effects of feeling excluded from employment opportunities.

Almost all participants (16 out of 19) expressed that the experience of parental incarceration had negatively impacted their intimate relationships. The most common consequences expressed were them seeking attention in unhealthy ways and lacking trust in romantic partners. This is in line with prior research findings suggesting that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to develop antisocial behaviors and insecure attachments to others (Murray and Farrington, 2008; Makariev and Shaver, 2010). Particularly, it is possible that changes in the relationship with the incarcerated parent can disrupt attachment bonds in childhood which translate to negative outcomes for intimate relationships in emerging adulthood. The current study illustrates that participants' views towards intimate relationships were heavily influenced by their perceived relationship with their incarcerated fathers. Janae expressed that her father's unfulfilled promises made her negatively seek attention within romantic relationships. Rumi's disassociation from her father influenced the way she trusts her intimate partners when they are around children. Kyrrah's experience of feeling used by her father and seeing their relationship drift after his release influenced her hesitancy and trust towards future romantic partners. Thus, the quality of the relationship and attachment bond with their incarcerated parents influenced how the participants made meaning of this transition to adulthood.

In regard to living independently, 11 of the 19 participants believed that parental incarceration had positively impacted this life domain, compared to 8 participants who shared it had no impact or had negatively impacted them in this area. Although participants expressed that parental incarceration had a positive influence with them living on their own, some voiced that this living situation occurred earlier than they would have liked (e.g., late teens to early 20s). These experiences illustrate that, while parental incarceration can have a positive impact on young adults living independently, parental incarceration can also accelerate transitions to adulthood in an undesirable way (Turney and Lanuza, 2017).

Lastly, a slight majority of the participants stated that their experience with parental incarceration was a positive

turning point towards parenthood. Ten of the 19 participants expressed the desire to become a parent so they could do a better job than their incarcerated parent or to allow their child to experience what they never experienced—family stability. While young adults faced difficulties within their intimate relationships, parental incarceration did not appear to collectively hinder the desire to become a parent. The focus of the current study on emerging adults is particularly relevant in addressing the implications of parental incarceration on individuals' own desires of becoming a parent. In younger samples (i.e., children or adolescents), this will be more difficult to assess because family formation is less common at that age and, therefore, individuals in those age groups are unlikely to have realistic perceptions of what parenthood entails (Turney and Lanuza, 2017). The participants in the current study might have friends who have become parents (the average age of becoming parent is 26 for women and 31 for men; Geiger et al., 2019) and are likely to be connected to sources of support and independency that would allow them to start a family themselves (Cohler and Musick, 1996). Future research should further explore the long-term implications of parental incarceration on individuals' own parenthood.

Limitations

This research study sought to provide insight into the narratives of young adults who experienced parental incarceration. When interpreting the findings, one should keep in mind the following limitations. First, the findings are based on a relatively small sample of 19 young adults. Recruitment strategies were utilized through various outlets, but only a select number of participants came forward for an interview. It is likely that these participants exhibit characteristics that are distinct from those in the general population, such as a willingness to share their hardships and experiences, and a willingness to contribute to scientific research. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic may have caused physical, economic, and psychological challenges for the target population (i.e., young adults who experienced parental incarceration) that prohibited them from responding to the call for participation and, thereby, the study period may have impacted the diversity of the sample. Additionally, the research study could not reach young adults who were detained or incarcerated themselves. Only one participant had been previously incarcerated. Future work should seek to also capture accounts of incarcerated young adults as it might widen our understanding on the collateral impacts of parental incarceration. Despite the small size and possible selectivity of our sample, we were able to obtain saturation on the phenomena under investigation. Indeed, prior research suggests that saturation can be achieved through examination of the first twelve interviews, and major themes can be found in as few as six interviews (Guest et al.,

2006). Note also that our sample size exceeded prior qualitative work on the experiences of young adults with incarcerated parents (Gipson, 2019; Young and Smith, 2019).

The study findings may also have been impacted by social desirability and recall biases inherent to retrospective self-reports. It was evident through some of the interviews that young adults did not know all the details surrounding their parent's incarceration or suffered traumatic experiences and could not remember what occurred to them during a period of time (e.g., family life context before parental incarceration, witnessing crime, prison visits). The sensitive nature of the interview and unfamiliarity with this type of interview may have impacted responses in that young adults were reserved with their answers or held back certain information.

Implications

As the consequences of mass incarceration are not limited to parents but extend towards their children, practitioners should seek to alleviate these collateral effects, especially since these consequences have longevity—effects continuing into emerging adulthood. First, approaches should be implemented that seek to identify the needs of this population and help navigate the continuing relationship between parent and child after parents' incarceration. For example, by providing accessible prison visitations for children and adolescents who would benefit from consistent communication with their incarcerated parents, and by counseling those who experience problematic interactions with their incarcerated parents or who struggle with their parents' absence. The narratives suggested that access to parenting programs might be beneficial for incarcerated caregivers and their non-incarcerated partners to maintain or establish healthy relationships with their children and to learn how to effectively parent in the context of parental incarceration. For young adults who are unable to maintain a relationship with their incarcerated parent, interventions should be offered that aid in fostering healthy relationships with other adult role models and build trust within intimate relationships (e.g., mentor or sport programs).

Second, in regard to educational achievement, we observed that the slight majority of our sample was able to obtain academic success through support systems or by having access to resources from childhood to young adulthood (e.g., scholarships, therapy and supportive circles, affordable housing, and family reunification). We note, however, that our participants achieved a level of educational attainment that was higher than what would be expected from children of incarcerated parents. Thus, their experiences for this life domain may not be representative of this population. Future research should continue to examine educational achievement outcomes for children of

incarcerated parents through the lens of strength-based perspectives. Particularly, there is need to further examine the motivators and factors that lead to resiliency within this transition to adulthood for some but not others. Participants who did not have adequate means of support were less likely to obtain their desired educational attainments and to move out on their own as young adults. Our study suggests that access to support groups, educational services, mental health care services, and family counseling can assist in successful transitions for these young adults. The narratives also suggest that these resources should be extended to the non-incarcerated remaining parents and caregivers as they play an essential role in the transition to adulthood. Insufficient aid to the remaining parent may restrict the child's opportunities both in regard to education and independent living.

Third, while half of the participants expressed interest in becoming parents themselves and in doing a better job than the previous generation, not all of them might be able to put this aspiration into practice. To help young adults with becoming the parent they want to be, it might be useful to offer training to enhance interpersonal skills and provide them with knowledge and role models.

Fourth, as a more general remark, it is important for practitioners to recognize that while young adults of incarcerated parents have strategies to navigate through their own stigma, the weight of parental incarceration is still carried heavily and internally into emerging adulthood. The majority of the participants expressed this was the first time they shared their story with someone outside of their family and it was the first opportunity they received to open up and express themselves about the experience.

Fifth, in future research, attention to the type of crime committed by the incarcerated parent might help disentangle the various processes underlying the impact of parental incarceration on the life course development of children, adolescents, and young adults. Particularly, three of our participants expressed issues relating to the stigma attached to their parent's conviction of sexual assault against a minor. This may have affected their employment opportunities and intimate relationships even more than their experience of parental incarceration.

Lastly, the main theoretical implication of this study is that parental incarceration should not only be viewed as a negative turning point throughout an individual's life course but that it can also be positive. In fact, many participants highlighted that while parental incarceration created abrupt changes in their lives, this experience did not impact certain life domains and led to positive outcomes in other life domains. In their eyes, "the glass is still half full." Policies can build on these stories by incorporating strength-based messages and focus on avenues that initiate successful transitions from the turning point that is parental incarceration.

Conclusion

This study aimed to shed light on young adults' narratives about the ways in which parental incarceration impacted their transitions to adulthood in four life domains: education and employment, intimate relationships, living independently, and parenthood. Findings reveal that parental incarceration is not just a discrete event but a process that evolves over time and that has impact even into emerging adulthood. Future studies should continue to unfold the collateral effects of parental incarceration on children throughout their life course.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Consent to Participate Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Ethical Approval This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board of SUNY University at Albany (9/11/2019, Protocol: 19E204).

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