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Daughters of Incarcerated Parents  
*Introduction*

PACE Center for Girls is a “gender responsive” program funded by the Juvenile Justice System. One of PACE’s introductory pamphlets states that the staff actively works to “discover the underlying reasons behind a girl’s behavior and lack of success.” PACE identifies having a parent or relative in prison or on probation as a risk factor to becoming involved in the Juvenile Justice System, and I’ve decided to do further research into why this is a risk factor.

While there has been significant research on the effects of parental incarceration on black teenage boys, research regarding its effects on girls is almost nonexistent. The disproportionate arrests and incarceration of black people seems to create a situation where black teenage girls are at a higher risk for criminal activity, delinquency, and poor performance in school. This paper will examine what it is about parental incarceration in black families that results in daughters’ poor performance in school and delinquency. I will consider not just the direct consequences of parental incarceration such as less supervision and parental involvement, but also how having parents incarcerated may affect black teenage girls psychologically. According to Girls Study Group, overall juvenile crime has been decreasing, however young women are making up an increasing number of the juvenile arrests. Between 1990 and 1999, Girls Study Group reports that the number of delinquency cases involving females increased by 60%, which is an indication of a problem. Historically, “gender-neutral theories of crime causation have provided reasonable explanation,” however, the recent increase in female arrests and “contextual differences in criminal behavior” have lead to a need for more gender sensitive research (Girls Study Group).

I want to assist in the PACE mission by researching how parental incarceration affects black girls. According to PACE's "Portrait of Risk" from 2006, 25.6% of Alachua PACE students had incarcerated parents, and the students are primarily non-white (76.9%) and come from households with very low or low-income levels. The number rises to 34% of girls having one or both parents incarcerated when looking at all the girls in the PACE program across the state of Florida as opposed to just Florida.

### ***Relationship to My Academic Focus: Law***

My interest in PACE stems from my major, women's studies, combined with my future plans of law school and becoming a criminal defense attorney. By examining the effects of parental incarceration on black females I can help future generations avoid repeating their parents' mistakes. Additionally, there could be other applications of this research such as in deciding whether parents should receive incarceration as opposed to drug treatment for drug crimes due to the impact imprisonment has on their children. Fox Butterfield wrote in a recent New York Times article entitled "As Inmate Population Grows, So Does a Focus on Children: [Special Report]" that "the criminal-justice system is set up to deal with offenders, not their children," so research like this can help shift the focus to offenders children in order to improve the system and prevent future offenders. Butterfield goes on to question whether imprisonment is the best way to fight crime, due to its role in creating a new generation that is inclined to commit crimes due to an incarcerated parent.

### ***Incarceration Rates***

The Bureau of Justice Statistics released the numbers of prisoners in 2005, and the statistics show that 40% of inmates with a sentence lasting more than a year were black, which is an amount much greater than the percentage of black people in the U.S. (Harrison and Beck 8). The same report states that black females are three times more likely than white females to be

incarcerated (8). With such high numbers of black people incarcerated, it is fair to think there is some psychological effect on black children. Direct effects include single-parent households or having both parents incarcerated. In some families it appears that going to prison is almost a family “tradition.” The U.S. department of Justice reports that the number of children with a mother in prison has nearly doubled between 1991 and 2000 (Mumola). Having a parent in prison is a form of a “broken home” and Schichor and Kelly found that “although research on broken homes and male delinquency has yielded inconsistent findings, the relationship between the broken home and female delinquency has consistently been supported” (66).

### *Effects of Incarceration on Children*

Beginnings: The Social and Affective Development of Black Children has a section entitled “Enforced Family Separation,” that identifies seven stages of socialization involved in a mother’s imprisonment:

(a) deviant activity stage where the mother may have been associated with a socially defined deviant activity; (b) arrest stage where mother was apprehended and/or arrested by law enforcement officials; (c) court proceedings stage where the mother’s case was adjudicated; (d) offense stage where the mother was convicted of a specific socially defined deviant activity; (e) *jail/detention center stage* where the mother was incarcerated in a short term facility; (f) *prison stage* where the mother is incarcerated in a long term facility; and (g) half-way house stage where the mother resided in a community based facility, serving the remainder of a sentence. Harris 251

In each stage children may or may not know what is happening and this can affect their understanding of the situation. All of these stages can be traumatic and can lead to feelings of “sadness, anger, fear, and shock for their mothers” (Harris, LaPoint and Pickett 251). Harris,

LaPoint and Pickett discovered that the older a child is at time of maternal arrest, the more stages of the criminal justice system they have encountered (Harris, LaPoint and Pickett 252).

In Families of Black Prisoners, Alex Swan reports that in one study of families of black prisoners, 30.8 percent of mothers claimed their children had been deeply affected by their fathers' imprisonment and 27.6% claimed their children had been slightly effected (90). Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, and Kennon state that the "first point of crisis for children who are living with their mothers is the actual arrest," which is "characterized by bewilderment, shock, and stress" (15). In fact, one in five children is present when the mother is taken away according to the same article. Fifty-five of the 200 women interviewed by Swan's study stated that "their children were depressed and unhappy" about their father's incarceration, "disliking the whole situation very much" (88). One study reports that delinquent girls are characterized by poor self-images, a deep sense of isolation, fear and distrust of adults, and communication problems with others" (Schicor and Kelly 65).

Charlene Wear Simmons, Ph.D. states in the California Research Bureau article "Children of Incarcerated Parents" that a family is impacted more by a mother's arrest than a father's arrest (4). Children at Risk reports that "maternal delinquency had a much strong effect than paternal delinquency" on the delinquency of a daughter (20). Perhaps this is because the mother is a source of nurturing and also serves as a same-gender role model. Age at time of the mothers' arrest can make a big difference in a child's experience, due to their different developmental stages. As a young child or a baby, a mother is needed for physical contact or breast-feeding that may help children bond with their mother (Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen and Kennon 17). It has been suggested that "two- to six-year old children are the most impacted from separation from their mothers" due to their likeliness that they will be present during the crimes or arrest (Myers, et al. 17).

For older children, Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, and Kennon discuss Phillips and Harm's concept of 'enduring trauma,' which they define as "accumulation of years of poverty, abuse, neglect, molestation, community violence, grief, parent-child separation, multiple placement, and changes and caregivers" (18). The build up of all the negative experiences related to a mothers' arrest lead to emotional and behavioral problems, such as "anger, aggression, hostility toward caregiver, sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, gang activity, lying, and stealing" (Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen and Kennon 18). Children of incarcerated parents then look for acceptance from peers who also suffer from family problem and who are "more likely to be engaging in risky or illegal behavior" (Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen and Kennon 19). Since the children of incarcerated black parents tend to be poor, they can't afford positive after school activities such as girl scouts or musical organizations in many cases.

Children with incarcerated mothers have very different experiences than children with incarcerated fathers, and consequently they may need different support as a result. When a father goes to jail, the children tend to stay with their mother, however when a mother goes to jail an alternate situation may be set up for the children. In "Children of Incarcerated Mothers," Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, and Kennon report that children stay with the father when the mother is incarcerated only twenty-five percent of the time, staying instead with grandmothers fifty-one percent of the time or other relatives twenty percent (14). The U.S. Census bureau reported in 2000 that twenty-seven percent of the black female population was in poverty, so although it is good to maintain family continuity in caregiving, poverty adds difficulty to the lives of African American children (Mckinnon and Bennett15).

Huub Angenent and Anton de Man explain that what makes parental incarceration so problematic is that children can learn criminal ways at home (112). Parents tend to be role models for children, so if their parents are involved in illegal activities the children may follow

their lead; “training, modeling, and reinforcement by parents [...] appears in a child’s view of involvement with the legal system” (Stanton 13). If both parents are delinquent as youths and commit offenses as adults, Children at Risk states that there may be a ‘double dose of parental influence,’ because those children have a 67% chance of being delinquent (20). Angenent and de Man use the term “intergenerational effect” to describe delinquent families, meaning there is “a greater involvement in delinquency by children whose parents are not free of such behaviour themselves” (110).

Factors related to delinquent youth of incarcerated parents include lack of supervision. “Parental supervision of children’s behavior very much inhibits the development of juvenile delinquency,” so having a parent incarcerated lessens the amount of supervision a child will get in most cases (Angenent and de Man 108). Anne Campbell extends upon this point stating that, “as girls spend more time out of the home and on the streets, the possibility of their becoming involved in delinquent subcultures increases” (64). The effect of delinquent subculture being part of home life prior to a parent’s incarceration creates an added risk for delinquency in children. Durkheim developed the social control theory, which states that family is one of the three main influences on children in developing morality, therefore having a parent go to prison or be involved in criminal activity may affect how the children act (Geismar and Wood 32). Swan reaffirms Durkheim’s theory in direct relation to black people, “the black family as a social institution is a most important force in the lives of black people,” which could be why black families exhibit a lot of intergenerational crime (144).

Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, and Kennon include data from a study in 1964 that reported that 60% of children had a change in placement from their first placement after their mothers’ incarceration. Black female children, like all children, need stable households to grow up in, so having shifts in guardians and caregivers causes chaos and feelings of insecurity.

Having consistency in child rearing is very important, so disruption caused by arrest, incarceration, and consequent change in parenting or caregiver can cause children to become insecure, confused, and troubled (Angenent and de Man 107). Ann Stanton suggests that it may not be parental incarceration, but the resultant home instability that causes delinquency (8).

### *Nature of Delinquent Girls' Offenses*

It has been noted that females and males get arrested for different types of crimes. Girls, Inc. distributes a fact sheet with the percentage of arrests of young women under 18, by offense, in the year 2000, and the number one reason for their arrests was larceny-theft (21%). Following theft was running away from home (13%), non-aggravated assault made up 11%, curfew and loitering law violations accounted for 8%, liquor law violations made up 7%, disorderly conduct accounted for another 7%, and drug abuse violations represented 5% of offenses (Collins). It is clear from these statistics that young women are committing primarily non-violent crimes. These crimes can help reveal what needs and support aren't being met by parents. For example, these girls are likely living in low-income situations that are leading to theft. Running away is an indication of an unhappy family life. Furthermore, drug use, alcohol abuse, and curfew violations indicate inadequate parental supervision. Shichor and Kelly state that in one study female delinquent activity "were expressions of hostility toward parents or effort to obtain needed gratification such as affection" (67). Running away may be seen as an example of this.

### *Development of Black Female Identity*

It is important to consider how a young black female develops a sense of identity and self amidst parental incarceration and high levels of incarceration of other members of their community. African American girls face special challenges when it comes to developing a positive sense of self. Racism and sexism create two dimensions of challenge in the lives of black female, particularly in that they are both often internalized leaving black females to feel

negatively about themselves. Angela Davis discusses the “racial assumptions of criminality” and since race is an integral part of identity, this criminality may be internalized by black youth who see it so pervasively throughout society (570). A Washington Post article from 1949 states that “more than three fourths of all Negro children are of the lower economic class. Therefore the impression is created that lower-class characteristics are Negro characteristics. It is a vicious circle...” (Hechinger). This vicious cycle is similar to the cycle of criminality through generations in that children see their parents’ criminality and believe it to be the family way, then they go on to have children who do the same. The U.S. is a tough place for black adolescents: “it is a country that imprisons black people at a rate much higher than that of apartheid South Africa” (Sklar 281). “*Strain* explanations of adolescent law violation [explains that] some adolescents are driven to law violation in response to the frustration of [...] anticipating failure,” which could be the result of a family history of law violation (Johnson 1).

Dr. Stephanie Evans’s S.C.A.A.A.R.R.S. framework of identity articulates different attributes and affiliations that make up a person’s identity, some of which are sex, class, affiliation, artifacts, and race. These particular characteristics examined in the context of parental incarceration and criminal justice trends that are making young black females more likely to be delinquents. One’s racial identity interacts with the law through stereotypes and institutional racism. Many black female youth may feel that the world and society is against them because of attempts to subordinate them in all realms of life (Manning 161). Social control theory states that school is a way to “create bonds” and help delinquent youths, therefore an educational atmosphere like PACE, that tries to give delinquent girls the tools to survive in a positive manner, to help “at-risk” teenage girls reformulate their identities (Geismar and Wood 32). Black girls need to “be shown how to recognize negative distortions of her own culture and how to move

beyond allowing these distortions to shape her identity” (“Juvenile Female Offenders: A Status Report”).

The 1998 status report of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, entitled “Juvenile Female Offenders,” describes how young women experience a particular developmental stage where they go from a “self-assured, confident child” “into a self-conscious, insecure teenager.” This is a stage where parents and particularly a mother may be helpful in helping a girl develop healthy attitudes. Furthermore, a stable home life may make this developmental stage less traumatic because it can serve as a place for support and safety for a girl.

The available research hasn’t examined what it is that causes delinquency in girls, and gender-neutral hypotheses don’t seem adequate because males and females are committing different sorts of crimes, suggesting different motivations. Anne Campbell writes in Girl Delinquents, “the male is driven to delinquency by a perceived failure to achieve success and prestige, while girls are compelled by a sense of their own failure to deal effectively with personal relationships within the family” (76). Another finding reported by Campbell was that a high association between poor self-concept in black females and delinquency (78). Their poor self-concept is likely the result of racism and sexism in society. Both male and female delinquents studied had a “lower level of perceived opportunity” than non-delinquents (Campbell 79). Poor self-concept and “lowered levels of perceived opportunity” can both be a result of having a parent incarcerated, because children perceive parents as role models and having them violate the law can make children ashamed or thought to be doomed to similar outcomes themselves.

### ***PACE: An Important Tool in Developing Positive Identity***

On Friday, April 13<sup>th</sup> I was at PACE and a woman came to talk about Edward Waters College, which is a predominately African-American four-year institution located in Jacksonville, Florida. The woman told her own story that included delinquent activities and a moment of

change leading her to pursue an education. She embraced her black cultural identity and used contemporary rap lyrics to show the girls that she was like them, but that she had received a bachelor degree, masters degree, and was pursuing a doctoral degree. She told the girls to look at their hands and their feet and then said that they were college material. Having speakers like this woman shows these girls that they can better themselves and move off the path to delinquency.

The girls that PACE serves range in age from twelve to eighteen, and in that range of ages there are different developments in character being established. Charlene Wear Simmons, Ph.D. includes the findings of Dr. Denise Johnson on “possible developmental effects on children of parental crime, arrest, and incarceration” (5). For those in early adolescence, the developmental tasks are “ability to work productively with others” and “control of emotions,” so being separated from a parent can result in “rejection of limits on behavior” and “trauma-reactive behaviors” (Simmons 5). In late adolescence, identity is being achieved, adult work and relationships are established, and conflict with family and society are resolved, so the effects of parental incarceration, arrest, and crime is “premature termination of parent-child relationship” and “intergenerational crime and incarceration” (Simmons 5). PACE addresses these developmental issues through individual and group counseling, as well as through gender-specific teaching in “SPIRITED GIRLS” – a class that teaches healthy living.

### *Conclusion*

Louis A. Fitzgerald, Jr. states in a 1974 Chicago Defender piece entitled “Black woman’s destiny:” “A father’s touch; a father’s love and firmness coupled with a mother’s tenderness and understanding is what a child needs and this absence of the father in the home is what creates and perpetuates the increasing problems of juvenile delinquency.” If Fitzgerald is correct, our community needs organizations like PACE for at-risk children because current statistics released by the U.S. Department of Justice on “Incarcerated Parents and Their Children” states that nearly

half of all imprisoned parents are black. A 1948 New York Times article entitled “Crime on the Increase” states that “real reduction in the crime rate will not be realized until every adult recognizes his responsibility to youth.” PACE has the right idea when it comes to helping at-risk teenage girls “[grow] in the face of adversity,” whether that adversity is parental incarceration or any other of other risk factor (Ford 304).

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