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Article in Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved · May 2016
DOI: 10.1353/hpu.2016.0050

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Alyssa G. Robillard, Rhonda C. Holliday, Dana D. DeHart, Kaleea Lewis, Yamisha Rutherford, Ndidi N. Amutah

Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved, Volume 27, Number 2, May 2016 Supplement, pp. 101-119 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/hpu.2016.0050

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An Exploratory Study Examining Risk Communication among Adolescent Children, Their Incarcerated Mothers, and Their Caregivers

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Abstract: Adolescent children of incarcerated mothers (ACIM) are typically left in the care of adults (primary caregivers) who play a crucial role in children's care and guidance, as well as in the facilitation of contact and communication with incarcerated mothers. The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of relationships and communication among adolescent children of incarcerated mothers, primary caregivers, and incarcerated mothers using pilot data. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with youth aged 12–17 (n=7) and caregivers (n=6) recruited through a non-profit organization working with incarcerated mothers and their children. Incarcerated mothers and primary caregivers represent an important family unit for ACIMs and may play a role in preventing risk behavior. A conceptual framework is offered for further consideration of mother and caregiver communication with youth and youth risk.

Key words: Prisoners, mothers, adolescents, caregivers, prevention.

Incarceration rates in the United States are the highest in the world.1 Although most individuals housed in correctional facilities are male, incarceration rates for women and girls in the U.S. rank first in the world. With nearly 1.5 million prisoners under the jurisdiction of state and federal authorities in the United States in 2010, about...
7% of these (104,629) were women. A third of women held in penal institutions throughout the world are in the United States. Further, Black women and Latinas are disproportionately represented among female inmates. A majority of women are incarcerated for non-violent offenses (such as drug offenses and property crimes) and many female offenders struggle with substance use disorders, mental illness, and posttraumatic stress disorder.

**Existing research on children of incarcerated mothers.** A large proportion of women in prison leave children behind when incarcerated. Over half of women in state (63%) and federal (56%) prisons are mothers of minor children, with 53% between the ages of 10–17. One-third of mothers reported having more than one child, and approximately 61% lived with their children prior to incarceration. Incarcerated women typically provide the majority of care for their minor children (77%), including financial support (52%), and their incarceration can leave a void in the lives of their minor children. The exponential growth in rates of incarceration from the 1980s to 2008 (when rates peaked) increased the number of women in prison and nearly doubled the number of children with a mother in prison. Minor children commonly end up in the care of family or friends who assume responsibility for them. Grandparents (typically grandmothers) are most often the caregivers of children of incarcerated mothers (44.9%), followed by the other parent (37%), or other relatives or friends (30.6%); 11% of the children are placed in foster care. These caregivers become responsible for the child's development and well-being and play a crucial role in facilitating contact and communication with incarcerated mothers.

The nature of the relationship between incarcerated mothers and their children's caregivers can range from non-existent to supportive to contentious. Conflict in these relationships can result in decreased contact of mothers with their children. The corresponding stress associated with limited contact may be linked to higher levels of anxiety and depression among incarcerated mothers and may also have a direct or indirect impact on the child. Kinship caregivers (and other caregivers as well) become caregivers at considerable personal cost, including increased stress. Caregiver stress may affect the level of acceptance caregivers feel for the children in their care, as well as contribute to behavioral problems in the children. The children placed in their care may have experienced past trauma as a condition of their living situations and their mothers' incarceration. Lack of contact with incarcerated parents may be associated with feelings of alienation on the part of the child, thus contributing to psychological distress in the household.

Community and household conditions that affect mothers also affect their children. Children of incarcerated mothers may experience poverty, familial substance abuse, and changes in homes and guardians. Violence in the lives of women prisoners may also affect their children, with witnessed or bystander effects resulting in psychological or physical harm, as well as victimization through sexual and physical abuse directed at the child. This may be compounded as children deal with the maternal separation of incarceration. As Johnston has noted, younger children may be more affected by the separation itself, while older youth experience the “enduring trauma” accumulated over years of poverty, violence, and inconsistent caregiving. All of these experiences...
can generate maladaptive coping through risky or antisocial behavior, especially during adolescence.¹³

Indeed, parental incarceration (both mothers and fathers) is associated with increased risk for antisocial behavior among children.¹⁵ Effects include traumatic stress, lowered self-concept, emotional and behavioral reactance, and delinquency.¹⁶ Such effects may stem from witnessing arrests, the stress of experiencing a parent’s trial and the resulting media attention, changes in guardianship and living conditions, or separation from the parent.¹⁷,¹⁸ Murray and Farrington¹⁹ argue that parental incarceration creates unique risks, noting that sons of incarcerated parents were about five times as likely to be incarcerated as boys separated from their parents for other reasons. Studies focused on adolescent children of incarcerated mothers indicate they are at higher risk than their peers of dropping out of high school and engaging in delinquent behaviors.¹³,²⁰ Children of incarcerated mothers also have more interactions with the justice system. More adolescent children of incarcerated mothers compared with those of incarcerated fathers reported being in trouble with the law or being in a juvenile detention center.²¹ Incarcerated mothers were also 2.5 times more likely than incarcerated fathers to report their adult children were incarcerated.²² The risk for teen pregnancy and possible sexual risk behavior may also be a concern.²³ Adolescent children of incarcerated mothers may be uniquely at risk given their developmental stage and their history of “enduring trauma,” yet few studies focus specifically on the well-being of adolescent children of incarcerated mothers (as most focus on younger children). Adolescence is marked by physical, cognitive, and socioemotional changes that can be difficult to navigate for many young adults. Many people begin to experiment with sexual activity and substance use during adolescence. Intrafamilial constructs (such as developing connectedness, attachment) and external factors (such as poverty, incarceration) can compound the already difficult stage of adolescence. More research on adolescent children of incarcerated mothers is necessary to gain a better understanding of their unique experiences.

A theoretical framework for examining adolescent children of incarcerated mothers. The current study was guided by two theoretical frameworks, Jessor’s problem behavior theory²⁴ and the social-ecological model. The problem behavior theory describes adolescent risk behavior, e.g., substance use, delinquency, and sexual risk-taking, as a constellation of behaviors that typically occur together and are influenced by both risk and protective factors. This “protection-risk” framework highlights the role of protective factors—e.g., positive parental models and family support—as well as risk factors—e.g., family models of risk behavior and vulnerability risks (including stress, depression, low expectations, and low self-esteem).²⁵ Like Jessor and colleagues,²⁵ Rew and Horner²⁶ describe a framework for understanding youth behavior, specifically resilient behavior that emphasizes family and community in their sociocultural context, in addition to individual risk and protective factors. For youth whose mothers are incarcerated, these family and community factors may be especially important.

Recognizing the multi-layered nature of behavior, the social-ecological model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding factors that influence behavior.²⁷ This framework allows for an examination of adolescent behavior within the context of intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community and public policy factors,
Adolescent children of incarcerated mothers

with the recognition that emphasis on individual (or intrapersonal) behavior alone for youth would be misplaced.\textsuperscript{38} This is especially true of children whose mothers are incarcerated, rendering the social-ecological model, and problem behavior theory, ideal frameworks for examining the experiences of this vulnerable subset of youth. There are multiple social and ecological levels of influence on youth risk behaviors. For the purpose of the present study, we are particularly interested in interpersonal influences that reflect the relationships of adolescent children of incarcerated mothers, emphasizing the family (including caregiver) sociocultural context.

There are a broad range of factors associated with youth risk behavior in children of incarcerated parents.\textsuperscript{29} The aim of this study was to focus on youth’s interpersonal relationships with incarcerated mothers and caregivers. We conducted a preliminary exploratory study to begin to understand the nature of relationships and communication among adolescent children of incarcerated mothers, primary caregivers, and incarcerated mothers. Additionally, we sought to understand how these relationships support or inhibit risk behavior among adolescent children of incarcerated mothers.

Methods

Recruitment and eligibility. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the researchers’ respective institutions. Youth and primary caregiver participants were recruited through a non-profit organization working with incarcerated mothers and their children. Flyers outlining eligibility criteria for both youth and primary caregivers were distributed by staff in the organization. Youth had to (1) have a mother who was currently incarcerated, (2) be between the ages of 12 and 18, and (3) have permission from their primary caregiver to participate. Caregivers had to be the primary caregiver of an adolescent between the ages of 12 and 18 whose mother was currently incarcerated. Interested participants were asked to contact the researchers who followed up by phone to verify eligibility and set up an in-person interview. Following individual informed consent, assent, and caregiver permission for youth participation, caregivers and youth completed a short demographic survey and participated in a one-hour interview in separate rooms of participants’ homes. Study procedures were established to refer youth to organizational and community counseling resources in the event of adverse emotional reactions during the interview. Youth participants received a $25 gift card, and caregivers received a $50 gift card for their time and effort.

Participants. Each participant completed a brief demographic survey before participating in the interview. A total of 13 interviews were conducted. Participants included adolescent children of incarcerated women (n=7) and their primary caregivers (n=6). Sample size for purposeful sampling relies on saturation—the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data.\textsuperscript{30} Guest et al. found saturation to occur within 12 interviews, with metathemes being present as early as six interviews.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, our sample is likely sufficient for exploring broad themes relating to adolescent children of incarcerated mothers.

The mean age for youth participants was 14.6 years (sd=2.1). Four males and three females participated in the youth group. The mean age for caregivers was 54.8 years (sd=14.7). Two men and four women made up the adult sample. Two of the caregivers
reported the mother’s current incarceration as her first time being incarcerated. The average time the youth reported living with their caregiver was 84 months or seven years (sd=54.7), ranging from 24 months (two years) to 180 months (15 years). All participants self-identified as African American (see Table 1 for demographic characteristics).

The demographic survey also included a question developed for this study for participants to rate their relationship with either their mother and primary caregiver (youth) or the incarcerated mother and adolescent (caregiver) on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is “poor” and 10 is “excellent.” Participants reported relatively high ratings for their interpersonal relationships. The average rating for youth–mother relationships (as rated by youth) was 9.00 (sd. 1.15). When asked to rate their relationship with their caregiver, the youths mean score was 8.28 (sd. 1.49). Caregivers, when asked to rate their relationship with the youth, reported a mean score of 8.28 (s.d. 1.70). When asked to rate their relationship with the incarcerated mother, the caregivers mean score was 7.800 (sd. 2.58). In spite of these relatively high ratings, qualitative data offered a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the nature of these relationships.

**Interview guide development.** The interview guides were developed using an ecological perspective to account for the interaction of the adolescent and their physical and sociocultural environment.28 Open-ended questions addressed intrapersonal,

### Table 1.
**SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Youth (n = 7)</th>
<th>Caregiver (n = 6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>14.6 (s.d. = 2.1)</td>
<td>54.8 (s.d. = 14.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>57.0%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Grade Completed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; High School</td>
<td>42.9% (n = 3)</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th–12th</td>
<td>57.2% (n = 4)</td>
<td>83.3% (n = 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than High School</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>16.7% (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;$25,000</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>40.0% (n = 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25,000–34,999</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>60.0% (n = 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulltime</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>33.3% (n = 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabled</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>33.3% (n = 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>16.7% (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>16.7% (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Caregiver</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>50.0% (n = 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunt</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>16.7% (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>16.7% (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor/Coach</td>
<td>n.a</td>
<td>16.7% (n = 1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
interpersonal, institutional, and community factors; however emphasis was placed on youths’ interpersonal relationships, especially with mothers and caregivers.

Youth were first asked to describe themselves and their involvement in school, church, and their community. They were also asked to share their aspirations. Youth were then asked about their feelings and experiences regarding their mother’s incarceration, as well as how the incarceration has affected them (including issues of stigma, social support, emotional reactions, and family environment). Additional prompts addressed the youths’ relationships and communication with their mother (e.g., When you talk to or visit your mother, what are some things you talk about? What was your relationship like with your mother before her incarceration and did it change after she was locked up?), and caregiver (e.g., How would you describe your relationship with your caregiver? How comfortable do you feel talking to your caregiver about sensitive topics?). Questions addressed youth risk behavior, such as academic involvement, substance use, and sexual risk-taking (How has your behavior changed since your mother’s incarceration?) as well as communication about risk (e.g., Do you ever discuss topics such as sex, alcohol or drug use with your mother or caregiver? If so, what are some of the things you discuss?).

Caregivers were asked to describe their relationship and communication with the youth and the mother before and since mother’s incarceration, as well as their own needs and experiences related to support in caring for youth. They were also asked about youth’s risk behavior and to describe any behavior changes of the youth pre- or post-incarceration.

Data analysis. This study used a grounded theory approach. Symbolic interactionism is the theoretical basis for grounded theory, and it stresses that human behavior is developed through interaction with others. In this sense, it is complementary to the social-ecological perspective. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and NVivo qualitative software was used to store, manage, and analyze data. In the tradition of grounded theory, three types of coding were conducted: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding was used during the early stage of coding to document first impressions and thoughts about the data. Members of the research team reviewed transcribed interviews individually to develop possible categories. Next, axial coding was conducted to explore and verify relationships between the categories and subcategories generated in open coding. During this stage of coding, the researchers met to discuss and finalize categories, e.g., discussion was necessary to clarify the subcategories under the “Communication about Risk” theme. Finally, selective coding was conducted to refine categories and integrate concepts around core themes. Together, researchers revisited coded data to interpret findings.

Results

Grounded-theory analysis revealed several themes related to the study aims. Seven themes and corresponding sub-themes were identified as pertinent to interpersonal relationships and their role in supporting or inhibiting risk and resilience behavior in youth. (See Box 1.)

Youth relationship with incarcerated mothers. Prior to mother’s incarceration,
some youth-mother relationships were described as close and others as chaotic. Most youth described close relationships with their mothers. After incarceration, many youth recognized mother’s mistakes that resulted in incarceration and expressed disappointment or anger about her poor decisions. In spite of this, most youth respected their mothers and desired close relationships with them.

I really do want that time that we used to have before she left, and sometimes it makes me angry that she did—left . . . and that she did the things that she did to leave. ’Cause I would say to myself, “Why did she have to do that? Why is she in there now?” It’s hard, ’cause we can’t see her. I mean, I watch these movies sometimes, and I see all these kids seeing their moms and dads, and sometimes I get upset.—Male Youth

Caregivers also perceived youth to be very concerned about their mother’s opinions regarding risk behaviors. One caregiver described how the mother, although incarcerated, still had some influence over her child’s behavior.

She still parenting from there, because I have to tell her a lot of times about his attitude. . . . to talk to him, because she kind of had that same attitude. So, I guess that’s where he got it from. Like, “You need to talk to him about this.” So she talks to him, and it actually calms him down, even though she’s incarcerated. He does get better with it.—Female Caregiver

**Youth communication with incarcerated mothers.** Method, frequency, and subject matter of youth communication with mothers constituted a recurring theme in interviews. In most instances, youth and mothers communicated regularly according
Adolescent children of incarcerated mothers

to both caregivers and youth. One caregiver, who is the legal guardian of multiple children, recounted that one child communicated with his mother, while the other did not, in spite of his being encouraged to do so. The caregiver noted that communication between this youth and his mother ceased due to the mother’s incarceration.

I [make] sure they get their regular visits [with their mother] every third weekend of the month and that they write in between visits. . . . like I said [Youth] [hasn't written], and he [hasn't] visited. So it’s something there, but . . . he ain’t gonna talk about it.—Male Caregiver

The most frequent method of communication discussed between youth and their incarcerated mothers was telephone calls, followed by letters, face-to-face visits, and email. The organization from which youth and caregivers were recruited was frequently mentioned for organizing and facilitating face-to-face visits between youth and their mothers, which usually occurred once a month. The frequency of communication between mother and child(ren) varied by the method of communication. For example, the frequency of letter-writing ranged from once per week to once per month. In addition to letters sent via mail, there were also pictures, cards, and gifts. The frequency of communication by telephone ranged from every day to once per month. Only one youth recounted emailing his mother, and he said they communicated via email multiple times per week.

Youth indicated that their incarcerated mothers expressed their expectations for their children’s behavior. Some emphasized education and future plans. Mothers reportedly were very interested in the lives of their children and often participated in disciplining them along with caregivers when allowed to do so. In the eyes of several of the youth, mothers were still seen as disciplinarians. Conversations between incarcerated mothers and youth about risk and resilience behaviors seemed to be open, very succinct, and to the point.

And like me and my momma even talk about it. I’m not [going to] like, do it raw and risk being pregnant or getting an STD or one of those. Like I’ll think before I, you know . . .—Female Youth

According to caregivers, the content of communication was usually disciplinary and advisory in nature. On the contrary, youth reported communication with their mothers covered a variety of topics, including sports, school, boyfriends/girlfriends, daily life occurrences, and the mother’s expected release date.

When we talk, it’s like we having a conversation. It’s like she ask about how I’m doing and what’s new and stuff like that. And I ask her about some of the friends she got in jail and stuff . . .—Male Youth

Well, I basically like, tell her like what’s going on in the house, how I’m feeling, let her know how I’m doing in school, you know, keep her up to date.—Female Youth

We talk about what’s going on, how our brothers are doing . . . are they having any problems in school [sniff]. She worries if we are having any problems with her being locked up, if it’s like, how it’s affecting us.—Female Youth
We talk about when she's getting out and when we're gonna be able to see her. Sometimes I tell her what I'm going through, if I'm upset, and she just tries to encourage me: “It’s ok. You’ll get through it.”—Male Youth

**Caregiver relationship with incarcerated mother.** Relationships between caregivers and incarcerated mothers ranged from close bonds to strained or distant, with the specific nature of relationships including mothers, an ex-spouse, sisters, and one relationship between a coach and the youths’ mother.

*Pre-incarceration.* Two caregivers who were sisters of an incarcerated mother described their relationship with the incarcerated mother as “sisterly” or “close with the usual sisterly spats.” The caregiver in the mother/incarcerated daughter relationship said she never felt as if she had a relationship with her daughter. This realization affected her views of the current state of their relationship and her relationship with the grandchild in her custody.

*Post-incarceration.* Caregivers described their current relationship with the incarcerated mothers as being “in limbo,” broken, or ambivalent. Although these phrases and terms may have negative connotations, even in the most strained relationship the caregiver and incarcerated mother had a symbiotic relationship through which they prioritized the well-being of the child over their own feelings for one another. In most cases, caregivers seemed supportive of youth-mother relationships for the sake of the youth. The two male caregivers described efforts to distance themselves from the mothers as a means of boundary-setting, while also intending to keep the youth and incarcerated mother’s relationship stable and intact.

The male caregiver who was the youth’s coach described his relationship with the incarcerated mother as cordial, but also stated that there were strict boundaries set within their relationship. For example, as legal guardian of all four of the incarcerated mother’s children, he said that he abides by mother’s requests when these are within reason, but notices when requests are beyond his realm of guardianship.

A male caregiver and ex-husband of the incarcerated mother expressed his perception that the children were the only common interest currently between the incarcerated mother and him. He recognized the children needed their mother, and he could not fulfill that need. Due to their divorce, he redefined the boundaries of their relationship.

It’s not like I would be friends with her outside of our commonality with the boys . . . We’re divorced so you don’t get all that. But I umm . . . I just want her to be a stand up person for those boys because they, they need her. And I never try to replace her—I don’t do that. I’m dad, and she’s mom. I don’t do what moms do. Uh, so I recognize the need that they have for her.”—Male Caregiver

The mother/incarcerated daughter relationship was characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty. A caregiver whose daughter was incarcerated (and who was thus caring for her grandchildren) recounted hardships faced in her relationship with her daughter—such as theft of personal items and money—and noted how that affected their current relationship.

Now it’s sort of in limbo. For the first time in four or five years, I have a smile because of something that she did. She sent me GED papers. I haven’t felt that in years. But
my thing... now is, when she writes and she says, “Mom, I love you,”—Is it genuine or is [she] just accommodating for the situation?—female Caregiver

**Youth relationship with caregiver.** Some youth-caregiver relationships were not close prior to the mother’s incarceration. Such pre-existing close relationships were described only by the father and aunt caregivers. Current relationships varied in their characterization, from “great” or “pretty good” to “better than it was,” “if-fy,” or “improving.” Youth and caregivers in the latter instances said they were getting to know each other better.

Relationships between youth and caregivers were affected by caregiver’s expressed opinions about incarcerated mothers. One youth described how her mother’s incarceration negatively affected her relationship with the caregiver. For this youth, the hardest part of the youth-caregiver relationship was her caregiver’s fear that the youth would grow up to be like her incarcerated mother.

[The caregiver] feels that [I will] be like my mother. Like she figured [I will] run away and be on drugs and all this stuff like my mom did. And she feels that I am my mother. I be trying to tell her, “I’m not my mother. I’m my mother’s child.” I’m a different person, and I feel that she doesn’t trust me. And I be like, “Well if you think of me as my own person and not my mother, you might be able to understand me more, and we might not clash as much as we do.”—Female Youth

**Youth communication with caregiver.** Youth and caregivers did appear to communicate, although some of these communications were strained. Youth did not want to talk to caregivers about their mothers. They also expressed hesitation about talking to friends, teachers, or others outside of their immediate family about their mothers. Youth recounted instances of defending their mothers when their caregiver would speak negatively about the incarcerated women. One youth described her caregiver sharing stories of her mother’s past risk-taking behavior and her regret that they never shared a meaningful relationship. In contrast, other instances of caregiver communication about the mother to the youth were intended to soothe, support, or comfort.

Caregivers said they talked to youth about risk; however youth suggested this communication was not always open. Some youth were hesitant having open dialogue with caregivers because of concerns about the anticipated caregiver response.

One caregiver recounted an instance when she sought help from the local police to help her communicate with her two youths regarding the rules and regulations of her household.

I even called the police out here to talk to both of ‘em to let them know. If they don’t want to stay here, they don’t have to. And we decided to come to a compromise.—Female Caregiver

**Communication about risk.** Some caregivers were more effective in talking with youth because they actively encouraged communication. Older caregivers, particularly grandmothers, seemed less able to communicate with youth. There appeared to be four different pathways to communication about risk by caregivers: (1) youth’s behavior necessitated communication after youth engaged in risk behavior, (2) caregivers
shared stories of their past involving risk, (3) caregiver raised the issue with youth, and (4) conversations between incarcerated mother and youth regarding risk behavior.

**Caregivers shared stories of the past.** Caregivers shared past indiscretions with alcohol and drugs as a way to show youth the consequences of bad behavior. In these instances, caregivers said they advised youth not to engage in risk behavior (e.g., drinking alcohol) while at the same time sharing the poor consequences of their own behavior (e.g., DUI-driving under the influence).

**Caregiver raised issue with youth.** Risk and resilience conversations related to school, gangs, bullying, substance use, and sex were also discussed. In most instances caregivers initiated discussion about youth behavior while attempting to make youth comfortable with open communication.

> We talk about the gangs and the bullying in school. I always ask him if he is having trouble with anything in school—“Is anybody at school bothering you?”—because I see now a lot of kids don't tell their parents. So I try to make him feel comfortable with telling about anything. —Female Caregiver

> The issue of sexuality and sexual orientation was also raised by one caregiver in a supportive effort to help his son personally clarify his sexual orientation to avoid being taken advantage of later in life.

> While many caregivers raised the issue of sex in a way that invited communication, one youth discussed an instance where her caregiver raised the issue of sex and condom use in a way that did not foster open communication.

> It was ugly, 'cause [the caregiver] was just like, “Oh, you having sex,” and “You betta be this,” and “You betta be that.” So now, every other day, she like, “You betta not be pregnant.” Like that just . . . it kills me.—Female Youth

**Conversations between incarcerated mothers and youth regarding risk behavior.** As discussed previously under the Youth Communication with Incarcerated Mother theme, youth did indicate that mothers were still seen as disciplinarians in spite of their physical absence. From the youths’ perspectives, conversations between mothers and youth about risk could be described as open but to the point.

**Effects of incarceration on youth.** The emotional and behavioral effects of the mother's incarceration were noted by both the caregiver and youth. One caregiver noted that the mother’s incarceration made the youth more focused and certain of the direction he wanted to follow in life, and that it awakened the youth's sense of determination to work on past anger and mood issues.

> He's more focused now, he's, um, very comfortable with the direction of where he's going in life, he's less . . . I don't want to say worried, because he used to always be lost in thought when he first got here. But slowly but surely he started coming out of that. . . . as if he was always real concerned or worried about something. Um, yeah, he's more solid. He's more rooted now than he's been in the past.—Male Caregiver

**Coping.** When youth were asked how their mother’s incarceration affected them, many also addressed the ways that they cope with not having their mothers around.
These coping skills reflected both resilience and risk behaviors. Resilience behaviors were internal (individual) and external (e.g., family contact, sports). One youth discussed going outside or going upstairs to a room to be alone. Another youth cited using creative outlets such as writing stories and poems to help with the mother’s absence. Auxiliary family members, such as aunts, uncles, and family friends played a significant role in the youth’s process of coping and moving past their mother’s incarceration. A male youth discussed using sports to cope, with his mother’s incarceration as motivation to do his best athletically. Another male recounted how his uncle helped him move past the pain he felt from his mother’s incarceration, encouraging him to stay focused and not to allow her situation to hinder him academically. When asked probing questions about why one participant didn’t share his problems with anyone, he replied that he didn’t like talking to people about his mother.

Risk behaviors included substance use and delinquency. Some youth reported alcohol and marijuana use, discussed in the context of “first-time use,” as well as more regular use. Substance use was discussed in the context of coping—to help youth sleep or when depressed.

If I’m like, depressed, I’m gonna do [drugs or use alcohol]. I mean, I try not to, but if I’m like . . . if I’m aggravated, I’m angry . . . Like, that’s the way I can release myself, but when I do it I just go to sleep. It just helps me go to sleep good.—Female Youth

Youth discussed their knowledge of the consequences of using substances and wanting to avoid those consequences as well as wanting to excel athletically, therefore avoiding them. As for delinquency, one participant exhibited behavioral problems after her mother was incarcerated and was subsequently detained in a juvenile detention center for a year. With regard to academic success—there were examples of youth doing very well in school, and others who had difficulty. One youth discussed an improvement in his grades after his mother’s incarceration. Several youth said they were not sexually active; however one did indicate using condoms consistently. Another admitted turning to sex because she didn’t know how to deal with her mother’s incarceration.

Emotional effects. One father described his attempts to strengthen his child emotionally during the mother’s incarceration. The father noted a sadness that had overcome his son due to his mother’s incarceration. The father attributed this sadness to the youth’s inability to escape into his “made up world,” something his mother allowed more than the father thought was healthy.

Caregiver observations of emotional changes in the youth since the mother’s incarceration were observed throughout the interviews. Caregivers noted youths’ emotions regarding the mother’s incarceration, such as embarrassment, anger, and sadness. Some youth longed for the mother to return in order to restore a semblance of the life they had together before the mother’s incarceration. Caregivers mentioned youths’ sadness after visits with mothers, as well as “positive” ways youths responded to their mothers’ incarceration.

I know that he misses her a lot . . . he’s her only child so he got all the attention . . . I have other kids so he don’t get that one-on-one attention that he’s used to. I don’t want to say it caused a . . . some positive [change] but it’s letting him know he don’t
want to go out and do [bad] things . . . because he see what the consequences are. So I think that's help . . . keeping [him] grounded as well.—Female Caregiver

When asked how their mother’s incarceration affected them, youth also discussed emotional effects including anger, sadness, and loneliness as well as self-described mental stress and difficulty in school.

Cause like it was like a lot of mental stress on me. That’s why I started messing up in school and stuff. Grades started slipping.—Male Youth

Youth also talked about emotional pain associated with their mother’s absence during important events in their lives. For example, one youth noted feeling angry and distant but also recounted how a family member helped him cope with that feeling. Although some could articulate their feelings, other youth were unable to express how their mothers’ incarceration affected them, or they seemed to be indifferent.

She kinda raised us to be independent. So, that’s kinda how I go about . . . not . . . knowing like, you don’t have a mom so, when other kids are talking about having “mom days” or going out with their parents . . . It’s hard knowing that you don’t . . . you can’t go out with your mom.—Female Youth

Discussion

In this sample, adolescents’ relationships with their mothers did not seem to be affected by the relationship mothers have with caregivers, although caregivers did have influence on mother-child interactions because they could serve as a barrier or facilitator to communication. This may likely be a consequence of youths’ involvement with an organization to help facilitate communication between children and their incarcerated mothers. Prior to the interview, youth participants were asked to rate their relationships with their incarcerated mother and their caregiver. The relatively high scores suggest that youth value relationships with caregivers, and that they especially value relationships with their mothers. This may also reflect youth’s idealization of their mother and their relationship prior to her incarceration.

Few studies have explored the nature of communication among incarcerated mothers, their children and the caregivers of their children. This exploratory study highlights the importance of communication between youth, their incarcerated mothers, and their caregivers, in the well-being and functioning of youth as they adjust to and attempt to manage their mother’s incarceration as they develop towards their own adulthood. This study also offers insight into the nature of relationships among youth, primary caregivers, and mothers, as well as the role of caregiver and mother in youth risk and resilience.

Even when strained, caregiver-mother relationships often reflected the best interest of the youth. Caregivers seemed to be willing to work with incarcerated mothers for the sake of youth. For some caregivers, communication with youth was much easier (and more palatable for youth) than for others. Some caregivers developed effective methods to communicate with youth, while others (e.g., grandmothers) were particularly strained. For most youth, the relationship with their mothers was one they appreciated.
From the youth perspective, communication with mothers helped to maintain closeness despite distance. From the caregiver perspective, mother’s communication with youth benefitted youth and was helpful in disciplining and advising youth.

Youth were affected emotionally by their mother’s incarceration, exhibiting sadness, anger, disappointment, and an inability to express their feelings. Some youth, with guidance from supportive adults, were able to channel those feelings positively to excel academically and athletically. Others coped by engaging in risk behavior (e.g., substance use, delinquency, and sex). Youth coped in different ways, however very few discussed their mother’s incarceration with others outside of their family-caregiver unit. This speaks to the importance of the caregiver-youth relationship with respect to the youths’ need to communicate about their mothers.

Both incarcerated mothers and caregivers openly shared past indiscretions relating to risk behavior, which created teachable moments that benefited youth. These strategies may be effective in helping youth to avoid risk behavior while building upon their natural ability to thrive in spite of their circumstances. In spite of this, caregivers seemed less well equipped to address the emotional effects of mothers’ incarceration.

Research has demonstrated the importance of parent/ guardian communication in preventing or moderating youth risk behavior. Parents remain an influential presence in the lives of their children, often more influential than peers. Researchers have argued that contact with incarcerated parents and communication regarding their incarceration and reentry can help children adjust. Strategies to improve communication among adolescents, caregivers, and mothers may help reduce risk among youth. The mother-caregiver relationship is an important one. Incarcerated mothers and primary caregivers represent an important family unit for adolescent children of incarcerated mothers, and may play a role in supporting or inhibiting risk behavior.

Collaboration between caregivers and incarcerated mothers is essential to providing a network of discipline and support. Further, mother’s experiences can be instructive, while caregiver’s day-to-day contact can reinforce prevention messages. Limited communication among this triad makes for a natural point of intervention to increase communication and potentially impact engagement in risk behavior. A prevention intervention for youth that incorporates both incarcerated mothers and primary caregivers may be effective in improving communication and attenuating the impacts of maternal incarceration and other adversity for these youth. With this in mind, we offer a conceptual framework for further consideration.

**Conceptual framework for understanding relationships and risk communication.**

We postulate that youth connectedness (with incarcerated mothers and caregivers alike) as well as communication about risk, play a role in youth risk behavior (specifically sexual risk behavior, substance use, and delinquency). Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of mother and caregiver communication with youth and youth risk. Parental involvement and communication about risk has been shown to inhibit sexual risk behavior, substance use, delinquency, and aggression in youth in general. Although nontraditional in family structure, families with incarcerated mothers—specifically the mother’s involvement and ability to communicate effectively with their children about risk—may be important in reducing youth risk behavior.

Several studies have examined mother-child connectedness linked to parent out-
comes for incarcerated parents, e.g., stress and depression, however fewer studies have examined mother-child attachment from the child's perspective, and especially from the perspective of adolescents. To our knowledge, no studies have specifically examined mother-child communication regarding problem behavior or avoidance of problem behavior. Having a mother in jail or prison is suggestive of problem behavior in youth. This problem behavior might be attributed to a lack of connectedness by adolescents to socializing institutions and people such as family, friends, and school. This “connectedness” to family structures may serve to reduce the likelihood of delinquent behavior in youth.

An incarcerated mother's involvement and ability to communicate and connect is dependent on numerous factors (e.g., the nature of mothers’ relationship with their children, the frequency of communication, and the level of caregiver support in facilitating the relationship). The relationship between mothers and caregivers, as well as the support for the mother's relationship with the child by the caregiver are important factors. Often, this support is demonstrated by the frequency of communication—especially in the case of caregiver support for child and mother communication.

Although emphasis in the literature may be on the incarcerated mother's relationship with her children, the nature of the caregiver's relationship with the child also plays a role in connectedness to youth and may also help to facilitate effective communication about risk. Children of incarcerated mothers reported less risk behavior when they felt warmth and acceptance from caregivers, suggesting the importance of the child/caregiver relationship. For caregivers, the level of involvement and the ability to effectively communicate and connect with youth also depends on numerous factors, e.g., the nature of the relationship between the caregiver and the child and the mother's support of the caregiver, or more specifically—the nature of the relationship between the mother and the caregiver. Lastly, the skills needed to communicate with the child may also be an important factor in connectedness and effective communication about risk.

This preliminary, exploratory, qualitative study helped to highlight issues around communication among adolescents, incarcerated mothers, and caregivers. However, we recognize our modest sample size and reliance on a convenience sample of youth and caregivers in contact with an agency limits the generalizability of findings. In particular, our participants were engaged in services intended to improve mother-child relationships. Additionally, it is difficult to say that we have exhausted all major themes based on our small sample. With a larger sample, researchers might also be able to examine whether our identified themes vary as a function of gender, age, or relationship between.
the youth and their caregivers. We were also unable to interview incarcerated mothers for this study. The additional layer of their perspective would have provided additional and meaningful insight into the youth/incarcerated mother/caregiver dynamic. Finally, some youth may not have been forthcoming about their risk activity given the sensitive nature of some questions.

**Future directions.** Additional qualitative and quantitative research is needed to examine more fully the proposed conceptual model. Examining the constructs and pathways in the proposed model will provide more information on the dynamics of the mother-child, caregiver-child and mother-caregiver relationships. Future research should examine whether similar themes emerge with samples of adolescent children of incarcerated mothers when these youth and their caregivers are not involved in services. Research to quantify the current status of adolescents whose mothers are incarcerated would also offer a better demographic picture of the impact of maternal incarceration on youth.

Adolescent children whose mothers are in prison experience vulnerabilities that increase their chances of negative life outcomes. This study highlighted such vulnerabilities; however, youth in this study also demonstrated resilience by engaging in positive behavior and resisting activities that could lead to poor outcomes. Future research should attempt to elucidate resiliency factors, more fully. Often, resilience was facilitated by the youth themselves, their families and their communities, specifically incarcerated mothers and caregivers, as well as positive role models (e.g., teachers and people at community agencies). Rew and Horner describe this in their Youth Resilience Framework. Fergus and Zimmerman also describe examples of resilience-based family interventions that focus on youth assets and family resources. Interventions of this type may succeed in this population. Family interventions to develop resilience in this subset of youth can do so by strengthening the mother/youth/caregiver unit, where possible, and building on existing resources to provide opportunities to improve relationships and communication through targeted interventions. Policies to support caregivers are also important and warrant further action.

**Acknowledgments**

The research team extends thanks to the youth and caregivers who participated in this research, as well as the collaborating organization for their support. This study was funded through the RCMI Infrastructure for Clinical and Translational Research award funded to Morehouse School of Medicine by the National Center for Research Resources (Grant No. 5U54RR026137).

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