EXPERIENCING THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX:
THE IMPACT OF INCARCERATION ON FAMILIES

A Thesis

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Department of Sociology
Abstract

of

EXPERIENCING THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX:

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The purpose of this mixed methods study is to understand how families are affected by the incarceration of their loved ones. This research uses 1) quantitative data to determine the level of family involvedness of incarcerated individuals across race and SES factors, 2) qualitative methods to understand how families cope with incarceration and 3) frames these experiences within the prison industrial complex and neoliberal politics. The results showed that family involvement is not predicted by race and that race was not a salient theme, however, lack of emotional support, stigma, isolation and the acquisition of additional parental roles were salient issues for the families of prisoners. Identifying the struggles of families and understanding how race and class play out in this context may inform future outreach and build upon existing prison research.

________________________, Committee Chair
Kevin Wehr

________________________
Date
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of Ann Richards. Her kind heart and open mind guide me every day and I couldn’t have progressed to where I am today without her love.
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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Prison populations are racially and socio-economically disproportionate, with more people of color and those who fall under the poverty line behind bars. According to recent data, black non-Hispanic males have an incarceration rate of 7 times the rate of white non-Hispanic males. About 7.3% of black men between the ages of 30 and 34 are in state or federal prison (Harrison and Sabol 2012). This means that the family members of racial minorities are also disproportionately affected by the imprisonment and relocation of their family members. In this thesis paper, I illustrate the destructive nature of imprisonment by looking at how families of those imprisoned are affected by the loss of their family member to prison. I incorporate this research into the broader context of social forces that lead to such a racially disparate prison population by explaining this phenomenon as part of the prison industrial complex. I also address the assumption that prison populations are rising in response to climbing crime rates, and instead offer the explanation that it is policy changes and a shift towards neoliberalism that has resulted in this recent prison boom.

My qualitative research explores the differences in experiences among families with incarcerated family members. Initially, I planned to compare those experiences across race to see if and how they compound the racial inequalities that already exist in the prison system and the communities that interact with the prison system, but my findings led me to shift my focus to the financial and emotional hardships faced by
family members. My guiding research question was: how does race shape the experiences of white and non-white individuals who have an incarcerated family member? As I began to collect data, my guiding research question shifted to: How are family members coping with having a loved one in prison and what are the consequences they face?

My quantitative research includes a secondary data analysis of quantitative and qualitative survey data to better understand the family relationships of incarcerated individuals. I use the 2004 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities by the US Department of Justice to determine the inmates’ levels of family involvement and compare this across race and SES factors.

To supplement the quantitative research, I also analyzed online discussion board posts from two online support forums specifically for the families of imprisoned individuals. On top of reading existing posts, I asked my own an open-ended question about the discussion board users’ experiences with incarceration and ask them to privately self-identify their race. I coded the discussion board posts by race, class and coping strategies.

Statement of the Problem

It is important to understand the broad social implications as well as the personal and interpersonal consequences of imprisonment for already marginalized groups so that we can propose alternatives that do less harm to fragile and vulnerable communities and reduce rates of recidivism to keep those communities intact. As mentioned above, incarceration has negative and long term effects on already fragile communities and the
families that comprise them. The existing literature has explained these disadvantages by measuring factors such as: decreased life chances of children, mental health disparities of children, inequality of wage growth across race, and weaker social ties. While these are all efficient ways of measuring the effect of incarceration, I measure the effects of incarceration by asking those who have experienced these disadvantages first hand and then use race and class in the analysis of my findings. I then take the analysis a step further by assessing how these experiences fit within the overarching structure of the prison industrial complex. I also use quantitative data to show how family involvement might differ by race and SES factors. Using quantitative data, I prove that minorities are in fact just as involved with their families as their white counterparts, therefore removing them from their families is equally damaging for all racial groups.

Social Significance

The voices of families with incarcerated family members are often unheard and stigmatized. Therefore, identifying the struggles of these families and placing them within a larger system of inequality may inform future outreach and support efforts. I draw the connection between individual hardships and the structure that systematically creates them. The stories of these individuals build upon the existing research by giving first hand accounts of interaction with the prison industrial complex.

In addition to the significance of giving voice to marginalized groups, this research is also politically relevant. Neoliberalism has and continues to shape American
politics; therefore, the impact on incarceration on family members merits continuous study as long as the political landscape continues to change.
CHAPTER 2 – REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Using concepts of intersectionality, biopolitics, state violence, incapacitation, and historical discourse, I will outline how the prison industrial complex came into existence and how it is sustained by neoliberalist functions. I will identify how these functions work to the advantage of the power elite and to the disadvantage of already marginalized communities of color.

The Prison Industrial Complex

Wehr and Aseltine define the PIC as, “a set of governmental, private and corporate interests that develop policies and practices in order to exert social, political, and economic control, to perpetuate social processes that are biased by race, class, gender and political perspective” (2013:2). The Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) is an example of a neoliberal institution that creates a structure around race to rationalize the disproportionate imprisonment of people of color. The Prison Industrial Complex, like the Military Industrial Complex is the privatization of a government service for profit (Davis 2003), which supports the neoliberalist view that all aspects of life should be run like a business. In Julia Sudbury’s work (2002), it is made evident that “camouflaged” racism, sexism and the culture of poverty are employed to perpetuate the PIC’s existence. Sudbury defines the prison industrial complex as “made up of an intricate web of relations between state penal institutions, politicians, and profit-driven prison corporations” (2002:57). At the forefront of this expansion are politicians and profit driven corporations.
Angela Davis (2003) questions the notion that prison should be considered an inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives. She explains how the policies that fill these structures with human beings are based on racist ideologies and the pursuit of profit. She also explains how privatization turns prison into what she calls the prison industrial complex. She refers to prisons as “a receptacle for those who have not been able to find a place in society. And this is true not only in the US, but literally all over the world…and this is very much connected to the rise in global capitalism. So, prison abolition is about building a new world” (Davis Interview 2010).

Gender discrimination is a factor contributing to the rise in imprisonment rates – more women are being imprisoned than ever. Sudbury talks about how prison abolition work is feminist. She states, “black women are increasingly becoming the raw material that fuel the prison industrial complex: as scapegoats of tough-on-crime rhetoric”. She calls for “a new anti-racist feminist analysis that explores how the complex matrix of race, class, gender and nationality meshes with contemporary globalized geo-political and economic realities” (Sudbury 2002: 57).

The vulnerability of poor black populations is further exploited by harsh drug policies, such as the Three Strikes Law and minimum sentencing for drug crimes. Both of which are aspects of the US led worldwide “war on drugs”, which has increased the amount drug offenders sent to prison. The drugs used by vulnerable populations have also been criminalized. As Sudbury points out, “The mandatory minimum sentencing for crack cocaine is one hundred times harsher for crack than for powder cocaine” (2002:64). The discourse and discriminatory policies around crack has biopolitical effects. Because
crack is prevalent in racial and impoverished areas, demonizing crack users is a direct attack on these communities and their legitimacy as citizens.

Structural economic changes have further harmed these communities through the loss of jobs. Deindustrialization of the 1980’s has affected poor communities of color most. This deindustrialization has resulted in what Marx would call a “human surplus”. As corporations migrate away from communities of organized labor, they leave behind “entire communities in shambles…because the economic base of these communities is destroyed” (Davis 2003:16). Criminalized behaviors such as drug and sex trades become a means to survival for some individuals in the wake of a collapsing economy (Davis 2010). This process leaves communities of color that once relied on the demand for industrial labor in helpless situations and the model of Neoliberalism portrays these social problems as a matter of individual hardship and deficiencies. The economic changes of deindustrialization coupled with policies that enforce a crackdown on drug crimes, increased poverty and imprisonment of people of poor communities of color, make the filling of prisons a class and race issue.

Davis proposes a solution to “discover an alternative system of punishment that would occupy the same footprint as the prison system” and suggests a holistic transformation of society, starting with an overhaul of education, medical care and addiction treatment (2003:106). My research aims to discover what Davis refers to as the “social destruction” caused by the prison industrial complex really is and how families and communities may be experiencing this.
Moving forward, both Angela Davis and Julia Sudbury call for looking at mass imprisonment as a racial and class issue. Both acknowledge the need for a universal change in of society, including the reformation of the education system, and the medical industry. Davis also calls for the decriminalization of drugs, illegal immigration and sex work as a way to eliminate racism from the institutional structure of the PIC.

Incarceration of minority communities is often viewed in terms of a moral question and human rights issue. Roberts (2004) questions the fairness and appropriateness of the punishments of drug crimes compared to the negative impacts this has on communities of color. Like Davis, she regards incarceration a repressive political function, and writes that affirmative action and more resources are needed to increase justice (Roberts 2004).

Likewise, Lyons and Pettit show how racial inequality occurs long after incarceration. They authors conducted a 14 year longitudinal study on how incarceration affects the cohorts lives. They compare white and black ex-inmates in terms of wage growth using data from the Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC) and Unemployment Insurance (UI) records and find that white have faster wage growth by 21%. They ask "whether race conditions the experience of incarceration for inmates after release from prison?" They find that inequality persists by measuring wage growth after incarceration, and that race is a compounding factor, black ex-inmates still earn about 10 percent less than white inmates (Lyons and Pettit 2011). In addition, incarceration is also linked with residential instability and aggression in children. Incarceration increases overlapping hardships for these families (Geller et al. 2009).
Wildeman and Western (2010) explain how the expansion of the prison disproportionately affects fragile communities. Clear (2007) explains how the expansion of the prison and incarceration of poor communities hasn't done much to reduce crime but has rather damaged communities economically, increased crime rates later on, hurt families, and "weakened the social-control capacity of parents" (Clear 2007:173). Clear interviewed 100 people about their experiences with incarceration to determine how it impacted their communities, as well as 26 people who participated in group interviews. He found that incarceration has many negative effects on communities, as it weakens family ties, social networks, financial stability and children become more likely to go to prison themselves. He also explains how drug laws have led to the "differential rate of incarceration" determined by race, and how this has created a stigma around black men (Clear 2007:7), which echoes to Davis’ idea of a racialized prison industrial complex.

Wakefield and Wildeman ask: “How much might mass imprisonment influence racial inequities not just among adult men but also among their children?” in the article, “Mass Imprisonment and Childhood Behavior Problems” (Wakefield and Wildeman 2011: 795). The authors point out that these disparities are passed on through generations and are indeed long term. In response to their findings, Nurse, et al. (2011) argues that resources should be given to the areas of hyperincarceration to help mitigate the effects of losing a parent to incarceration. Wakefield and Wildeman argue that "mass imprisonment may increase future racial and class inequality" (2011:796) They emphasize the decreased life chances for children of incarcerated parents as well for their romantic partners. The rise of parental imprisonment in general makes this a reality for
more and more families, particularly families of color. The authors point out life chances are even worse in instances where domestic violent crime has occurred.

In another article, Wildeman and Western use quantitative research to draw conclusions about diminished life chances for incarcerated family members. They argue that incarceration policy has further made vulnerable already “at-risk” families. They also argue that "mass imprisonment may increase future racial and class inequality" (2010:157). They offer, like Angela Davis holistic solutions through health, education and employment opportunities. The implications of their findings are that "America has become more unequal" and will "persist into the future" (Wildeman and Western 2010:170) if America’s system of incarceration remains the same.

Mental health is another aspect of disparity that is often experienced by families of the incarcerated. According to Wakefield and Wildeman’s (2011) research, 50% of the children with incarcerated parents may need mental health intervention. They use longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data (interviews) to determine these effects of incarceration on the mental health of children and find that it is indeed negatively affected by parental incarceration. They compare the effects of divorce on children to the effects of incarceration and found that it may be at least as harmful as divorce. In an effort to address race, they further argues that because children of black parents are often subject to parental incarceration they are at higher risk for mental health problems than white children, however they do not address outcomes outside of the black/white binary.

Posley’s (2011) article “Children of Incarcerated Parents: In the Children's Own Words” uses qualitative methodology that aims at giving a voice to the children of
incarcerated parents. Posley takes a phenomenological approach to ask the question, "How do adolescents describe their experiences as children of incarcerated parents?" Posley found that children with parents who were still together did better in school and were less involved in crime (2011). This article looks at children of incarcerated parents and their well-being and success; however, it doesn't look at this across racial lines.

Mendez’s (2000) findings show that incarcerated men are willing to improve the relationships with their children and there is need for a program to help facilitate this. The article defines absent fathers as a problem for urban communities. Mendez conducted surveys to gage the willingness of fathers to participate in Programs at New York State prisons. Mendez found that 75% of inmates had children and 29% of them were also married. He found that 92% of respondents wanted to improve relations with their children. Mendez also found that many wanted to be involved with their families and felt guilty that they couldn’t be there for them. In addition, 69% and 59% were found to write their children once a month and call them, respectively (Mendez 2011).

The research on the effects of incarceration on children shows us that the consequences are overwhelmingly negative and often long lasting. More resources are desperately needed to mediate the emotional stressors imposed on children and to better facilitate the connection between parent and child.

*Neoliberalism*

Neoliberalism is an important concept when trying to understand the causes and effects of the prison industrial complex. The prison industrial complex is a part of the
U.S. neoliberal economy. According to the article, “What is Neoliberalism? A Brief Definition for Activists” by Elizabeth Martinez and Arnoldo Garcia, who are associated with the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights describe, “‘Neo-liberalism’ as a set of economic policies that have become widespread during the last 25 years” (2012:1).

The authors outline 5 main points of neo-liberalism which include: 1) Liberating "free" enterprise or private enterprise from any bonds imposed by the government (the state) no matter how much social damage this causes, 2) cutting public expenditures like education and healthcare, 3) reducing government regulation of everything that could diminish profits, including protecting the environment and safety on the job, 4) privatization of state-owned enterprises and infrastructures, and 5) eliminating the concept of the public good and community and replacing it with "individual responsibility" (Martinez and Garcia 2001). According to Linda Gordon (2012), liberal ideals include the belief that laissez-faire economics are part of a natural law and poverty can be attributed to individual failure within a meritocracy. This leads to "pressuring the poorest people in a society to find solutions to their lack of health care, education and social security all by themselves -- then blaming them, if they fail, as "lazy" (Martinez & Garcia 2001:1). Within the principles of liberalism and capitalism, individual failure, particularly in the form of law breaking results in the denial of full citizenship and its rights (Gordon 2012).

Neoliberalism is the revival of the ideals of classical liberalism. Foucault explains liberalism to be the rationalization of government for the “the internal rule of maximum
economy” (Foucault [1978] 2004:318). In his “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts”, Marx (1932) states that in a capitalist society wages are driven down to barely sustainable levels in the name of profit. He says the unemployed are surplus workers and, “would have to die” because they have no utility for the capitalists (Marx 1932:20). Davis (2003) argues that today, this surplus population consists of human beings who are individually blamed for social problems – those on welfare, immigrants, the mentally ill, the unemployed, and the poor. In a Marxist sense, surplus population is no longer valuable to society, and are deemed less than a fully fledge citizen (according to liberalism) and therefore justifies the mistreatment of individuals who fit class and racial stereotypes. Wehr and Aseltine (2013) add to this by saying, “Those who are unable or unwilling to participate in the market are conceived of as solely responsible for their troubles. In this view, poor people are poor because they lack personal characteristics that would make them successful; there is little recognition of structural causes of individual circumstance” (2013:8).

Neoliberalism is a specific economic approach to organizing society by a set of policies that contribute to the growth of the prison industrial complex. What are these tools used by the prison industrial complex? According to Davis the “Three strikes law” in California is an example of a policy that has systematically relocated a population (particularly young men of color, and increasingly women of color).

Another example how the neoliberal political era acts to organize populations can be seen in the disenfranchisement of people of color. This issue is addressed in a speech given to the Correctional Association of New York by Ira Glasser (2006), retired head of
the American Civil Liberties Union and president of the board of the Drug Policy Alliance. Glasser explains how people of color are disproportionately stopped and frisked by police, despite statistics that show that whites use drugs at equal rates. He attributes this to the Drug Enforcement Administration program of 1986, known as “Operation Pipeline”, which effectively trained state troopers to profile cars that “might contain drugs” based on the race of the driver. Glasser states that disenfranchisement is the new form of Jim Crow laws. He states:

The fact is, just as Jim Crow laws were a successor system to slavery, so drug prohibition has been a successor to Jim Crow laws in targeting blacks, removing them from civil society and then denying them the right to vote while using their bodies to enhance white political power. Drug prohibition is now the last significant instance of legalized racial discrimination in America (Glasser 2006:26)

Racially biased drug sentencing, the three strikes law as part of the “war on drugs” in America, and the systematic disenfranchisement of people of color are the real and physical effects of neoliberal ideals. These policies flourish in a culture that blames social ills on individual failure, and seeks to remove such “failures” from social life.

A pillar of capitalism is to exploit for profit (Marx 1844), which is where the PIC comes in as a privatized and profit generating organization and does exactly that. To understand the inequality with in the U.S. prison system one must also understand the forces that sustain it. Davis points to a racialized system of mass incarceration to explain the prison industrial complex. Davis calls it a system that “generates huge profit from the process of social destruction” (Davis 2003:88). She argues that crime and drug policies that have been developed to disproportionately disadvantage communities of color.
**Intersectionality**

Dean Spade uses intersectionality to understand the level of vulnerability in populations. He argues that we should look at all aspects of oppression, and use them to further the activist goals of anti-oppression (2008). Intersectionality is the concept of overlapping layers of discrimination that interact with each other or “interlocking systems of oppression” (Collins 1990). Cathy Cohen refers to intersectionality as, “Multiple systems of oppression…in operation and that these systems use institutionalized categories and identities to regulate and socialize” (Cohen 1997:440). Patricia Hill Collins uses an analysis of oppression by looking at the PIC in a three dimensional way. 1) The institutional dimension can be seen in the way policies and economic and political factors that spurred the prison boom. 2) the symbolic dimension explains how the PIC is a symbol of the historical treatment of people of color in this country, it perpetuates tradition of limiting the rights of people of color, as well as assigns symbolic stigmas to felons and 3) the individual dimension demonstrates how on a micro scale, the PIC has countless negative consequences on the individuals who become incarcerated and their families they leave behind that last for generations (Collins 1990). Intersectionality is a useful term to know when trying to understand the effects of the rise of imprisonment of people of color and the privatization of prisons. Vulnerable populations, who suffer oppression based on race, gender, class, ability or any combination of discrimination, are often unable to voice their grievances because they are not seen as legitimate citizens (welfare recipients, transgender individuals, imprisoned individuals, etc.) in our neoliberal state. The effects of budget cuts in public spending hit the currently oppressed
the hardest because they already face layers of discrimination and hardship. Dean Spade
and Angela Davis both use an intersectional approach in their solutions to combat
injustice holistically. Both have taken a revolutionary stance by wanting to change
society at a basic level that immediately affects the most vulnerable populations. Sudbury
also suggests that we take an intersectional approach to dismantling the PIC.

State Violence and Incapacitation

State governments have rationalized violence in communities of color through
state violence. State violence is violence committed by the government against the
people it governs. This can include things like police brutality, pepper-spraying
protesters, and strip searches in prisons. However, state violence is not always physical; it
can refer to ways in which the government limits rights of certain individuals (people
who immigrate, people who protest, people who commit a crime), affecting their life
chances. An example of indirect state violence is a state policy that requires male to
female transgendered people to serve time in male prisons, putting them at risk for abuse
by other inmates because of their gender identity. In the case of the prison industrial
complex the state government has rationalized violence in communities of color to be an
issue of individual of criminal behavior and with the creation of the “Three strikes law”
in California has systematically relocated a population (particularly by young men of
color, and increasingly women) to a location where bodies are more easily controlled by
the state – prison (Davis 2003).
The states response to the current surplus population is what Ruth Gilmore refers to as incapacitation. Incapacitation, she writes, “Simply calculates that those locked up cannot make trouble outside of prison”. She goes on to say that, “incapacitation doesn’t pretend to change anything about people except where they are” (Gilmore 2007:61). By this, she means that, people are removed from their communities and dropped into new locations in order to have more control over a particular population. Gilmore refers to this as a geographical solution to social problems. Both the reduction of human rights on the grounds of illegitimate citizenship and the physical displacement of bodies exemplify biopolitical strategies. As Foucault ([1978] 2004) says, biopolitics is a response to a problem that has been rationalized by the government to be a matter of population control.

**Biopolitics**

Biopolitics or biopower are terms used to describe tactics used to manage a population. It is the use of politics to control aspects of human life such as parenting, births, marriage, deaths and the creation of and definition of families (Boggs 2011). Biopolitics gives states control over the masses through control of their physical state and placement. Michel Foucault is associated with concepts of biopower and biopolitics, According to Foucault ([1978] 2004), biopolitics is a way to exercise control over the actual bodies of human beings through discipline and creating social, political and
economic policies that maintain the status quo. Biopolitics define identities and behaviors for individuals through discourse (Foucault [1978] 2004).

Anna Davin (1978) illustrates how the use of politics can be practiced in order to control many aspects of human life such as parenting, births, marriage, the making of families and deaths. She points out that because population can be a means of imperialism and national power, the state had an invested interest in how children were raised in Great Britain. In her example, the state was compelled to interfere within the “private sphere”, encouraging mothers to have children as part of their duty to the state (Davin 1978). This is an example of biopolitics because it is a way in which the state controls the bodies and families of its population through political power. TANF and the distribution of social welfare based on marital status is an example of biopolitics because state policies control who should get married, and how and when they should have children (Mink 2002).

Biopolitical power expresses itself through systems, such as welfare reform and the prison industrial complex. It is only through intersectional analysis of power that coalitions can be made and built around the needs of the most marginalized communities. Ruth Gilmore (2007) explains how the PIC is a mechanism for displacing undesirable populations as a form of biopolitical control. She talks about how the war on drugs where drug crackdowns were aimed in neighborhoods with low income, people of color and the underrepresented although they are not more likely to have more drug affiliations than the upper class group of white people (Gilmore 2007).
Discourse Of The Prison Industrial Complex

Michel Foucault (1975) uses the discourse on sexuality to explain the production of power, but his analysis can help to understand how ideas of prison are formed and become popular. Foucault states that “truth” is found through knowledge. However, those who have power control knowledge. A discourse doesn’t describe reality, it actually constitutes reality. Discourses produce reality by creating the categories, which one needs to use to understand a given topic. Foucault stats that, “power and knowledge directly imply one another”. He goes on to explain how power is dependent on the “modalities of knowledge”; therefore, truth is not “the activity of the subject of knowledge” or what we would consider to be objective (Foucault 1975).

The system of prison privatization works as a neoliberal business, where those with power are profiting and exploiting capital from the poor/working class. The privatization of prisons is sustaining itself through profits gained, and therefore aims to reproduce prisoners in order to sustain the result of even more profits. Power moves through discourse as a way to produce knowledge and it does so by using language, therefore the language used by media, government, and any public outlet shape our own thoughts about the functions of prisons. Foucault argues that whoever has the ability to control discourse also has the power to decide who and what could be said about things. Ultimately, those who are in power shape our realities, and in this case, the people who
have a stake in the prison industry are able to control how the system works in this
discourse, as well as how citizens think of prisons and prisoners.

The historical development of the prison industrial complex can help us to
understand how the current discourse around the PIC was formed. Foucault (1975)
explains how punishment over time has shifted from public execution to the private
punishment in which the “soul” is the object of punishment instead of the body. By
“soul”, he doesn’t mean in the religious sense; he describes the soul as a part of a person
that is shaped by “methods of punishment, supervisions and constraint”. In the past
crimes against the sovereign were punishable by death but in today’s capitalistic society
many of the crimes we see today are not against the “sovereign” or the state but against
private property. People (owners of that property) now demand the protection of their
private property and rely on the legal system to do so. This has become the modern way
of punishment. The exhibition of painful punishment was removed from sight and
replaced with what appears to be a more humane way to discipline “new” criminal
behaviors. He refers to this as the “disappearance of punishment as a spectacle” and the
appearance of a new form of punishment in which “the body now serves as an instrument
or intermediary”. By intermediary, he means that the body is now a tool used to “deprive
individual liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property”. This deprivation can
occur through “imprisonment, confinement, forced labour, penal servitude, prohibition
from entering certain areas, deportation…” He calls this an “economy of suspended
rights” (Foucault 1975:11).
Foucault’s discussion of the Panopticon demonstrates how the shift in discourse of punishment from that of public to private has led to the self–surveillance of us all, and in a way, we are all punished. No physical regulatory force actually need be present in order for individuals to restrict their behavior. Because of the rampant surveillance in our society, we self-regulate. Foucault says, “it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime” (1975:9). Our self-regulation means less work for those in power, or as Foucault would say, the economy of power is in favor of those doing the surveillance since they have to do so little in order to maintain their power. He says, “Surveillance thus becomes a decisive economic operator both as an internal part of the production machinery and as a specific mechanism in the disciplinary power” (Foucault 1975:9). The neoliberal ideals of reduced government intervention, privatization of infrastructure (in the form of building and running prisons), and the promotion of individual responsibility are most effectively achieved when citizens in a society fear punishment and self-regulate their actions in accordance with the ideals of the powers at be.

In today’s society, those convicted of a felony or imprisoned for any amount of time experience other aspects of this “economy of suspended rights”. These individuals, once released from prison are condemned, shunned from society, and not allowed to participate in the work force. They are disenfranchised as mentioned before. In a capitalist society, this is detrimental to one’s life chances. As previously mentioned, Marx states that any person who doesn’t participate in capitalism is part of the “surplus population” and a capitalistic system doesn’t have a place for these individuals. In
addition to the shame that the imprisoned experience, their families also are subjected to similar shame and neglect from society. The punishment is not merely contained to the individual but extends to families, generations and even communities (Clear 2007).

Foucault takes this idea a step further than Marx by explaining how punishment is inflicted on the body in order to control it. Punishment (in this case, in the form of incarceration) is not only used to relocate a surplus population, as Marx points out, but is used to organize and control the daily lives of delinquents. Foucault explains how the delinquent’s identity is created to control groups of people who fall within a particular the category deemed to be delinquent (1975). For example, drug users in our society have been deemed delinquents and therefore their bodies and activities are regulated by a carceral state.

Foucault also notes that the power of observation allows power to be dispersed throughout society through fear of being caught. This tactic creates a web of power that no one can escape. He writes, “(punishment) leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness; its effectiveness is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity” (1977: 9). This is the “inevitability of being punished”. Foucault refers to this supervised society as a “carceral network”.

In addition, Foucault explains that in the past, criminals were judged on whether they were responsible for their crime, but now people are judged on what kind of person they appear to be. There is a contradiction between these convictions, which are thought of as objective truths and the methods used to determine guilt, which are based on personal opinions and speculations about past and future behaviors. When guilt is
allowed to be determined by what type of a person someone seems to be, inevitably, a space is created for racism and culturally biased judgments in the justice system. This reveals the hypocrisy of neoliberalism – everyone in a society is seen as capable of success as long as they follow the prescribed path to it, and yet our punishment system seeks to incriminate individuals based on racial profiling and then relies on personal details and subjective judgments to determine guilt.

I have outlined how the prison industrial complex came into existence and how it is sustained by neoliberalism functions by using concepts of intersectionality, biopolitics, state violence, incapacitation, and historical discourse. I have also explained how these concepts perpetuate the advantages of the power elite and the disadvantages communities of color. I will now add to this discourse by discussing the levels of family involvedness of prisoners and the effect that their displacement has on their families.
 CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH DESIGN

I used a mixed methods approach to gain more complex picture of the family involvedness of prisoners and the experiences of their loved ones. My research is qualitative and incorporates secondary analysis of existing quantitative data. For the quantitative portion, I looked at a federal study on inmates to determine their levels of family involvement and compared this across race. In addition to race, I also compared the index of family involvedness along with other factors such as marital status, number of children, income and level of education, while controlling for age and sex.

For the qualitative research, I analyzed two online discussion board posts from an online support forum for the families of imprisoned individuals. I also posted my own thread on both discussion boards in hopes that participants might want to respond directly to my research question.

Quantitative Research Design

The quantitative portion of my research came from an existing data set from the 2004 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities by the United States Department of Justice - Bureau of Justice Statistics. This national survey contains information on inmates held in state prisons and federally-owned and operated prisons in the United States. Personal interviews were conducted from October 2003 through May 2004, and Sentenced federal prison inmates were interviewed in the 1991 and 1997. The inmates provided firsthand information about their “family background and personal characteristics”, among many other factors. I primarily looked at questions that pertained
to family background. The survey used a two-stage sampling procedure where prisons were selected in the first stage and then inmates within sampled prisons were selected in the second stage. The data was collected by personal interview and computer-assisted personal interview. The response rate for state inmates was 89.1 percent, and the response rate for federal inmates was 84.6 percent. The data underwent a confidentiality review and was altered to protect respondents’ information. The survey is funded by the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data (NACJD), the criminal justice archive within ICPSR. NACJD is primarily sponsored by three agencies within the U.S. Department of Justice, which are the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. I decided to use data from this survey because of the survey’s large sample size and because it was one of the few studies that track both race and parental incarceration.

The population I looked at included inmates held in state prisons and federally-owned and operated prisons. The independent variable was race. The dependent variable was an index of family involvement, which includes whether inmates have children, whether any of those children are living with them, how much daily care they provided before incarceration and whether they were the primary source of financial support before incarceration. The index was created by taking three questions (1. Where any children living with you?, 2. Did you provide most of the daily care for them?, and 3. Where you the primary source of finical support?), and assigning a value to each answer. Question 1, was assigned the values of Yes = score of 1, and No = score of 0. Question 2 was assigned the values of: most care = score of 3, shared care with someone else = score of
2, and most care provided by someone else = score of 1. Question 3 was assigned the values of No = score of 0. All other answer options, such as “Don’t Know”, “Refused” and “Blank” were eliminated from the analysis. The scores of all 3 questions were then combined to create an overall index score, which ranged from 0-5.

The control variables are sex and age. Linear regression was used to predict family involvement. Before running the regression, variables were recoded. The original questions and response categories that I will use to create family involvement index as well as their re-codes are below.

1. How many children do you have? Response categories were in discrete numerical values, and None - 997 - Don't know - 998 – Refused - 999 - Blank. Values 997, 998, 999 were removed from the analysis. Responses ranged from 0 through 9.

2. Was this child/Were any of these children living with you just before your current incarceration? Response categories: 1 - Yes, 2 - No, 7 - Don't know, 8 - Refused, 9 - Blank. This was recoded so that for yes: 1=1, and no 2=0, and all else = 0.

3. Were you the primary source of financial support for (this child/these children)? Response categories: 1 - Yes, 2 - No, 7 - Don't know, 8 - Refused, 9 - Blank. This was recoded so that for yes: 1=1, and no: 2=0, and all else = 0.

4. Did you provide most of the daily care for (this child/these children), did you share it, or was it provided mostly by someone else? Response categories: 1 - Inmate provide most of care, 2 - Inmate shared care with someone else, 3 - Care was provided mostly by someone else, 7 - Don't know, 8 - Refused, 9 - Blank.
This was recoded so that for most care: 1=3, shared care: 2=2, mostly by someone else: 3=1, and all else = 0.

The original questions and response categories that I will use for the control variables of race, sex, age, income, education and marital status are below.

1. Which of these categories describes your race? Response categories: 1 - White, 99 - Blank. Race used a dummy variable of white = 0, and blank (non-white) = 1. White was the omitted group.

2. Sex: Response categories: 1 - Male, 2 - Female, 9 Blank. I recoded sex using a dummy variable of male: 2= 1, female: 1= 0, all else = 0. Female was the omitted group.

3. Are you now married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married? Response categories: 1 Married, 2 Widowed, 3 Divorced, 4 Separated (Not because of incarceration), 5 Never Married, 7 Don't know, 8 Refused, 9 (M) Blank. Marital status was recoded so that married, 1=1 and non-married (values 2, 3, 4, & 5) and all else = 0.

4. Age - Response categories were recorded in a continuous interval with a range of values from 0 to 996 and 999 – Blank. Because the actual responses recorded went up to 79 years old, the values 60-79 were collapsed into one value called “60+”. All values above 79 were omitted because they were zero.

5. Income was determined by the question: Which category on this card represents your personal monthly income from ALL sources for the month before your
arrest, that is, from [MONTH] 1st to [MONTH] 28-31, [YEAR]. The response categories were: 0 - No income, 1 - $1 – $199, 2 - $200 – $399, 3 - $400 - $599, 4 - $600 - $799, 5 - $800 - $999, 6 - $1,000 - $1,199, 7 - $1,200 - $1,499, 8, $1,500 - $1,999, 9 - $2,000 - $2,499, 10 - $2,500 - $4,999, 11 - $5,000 - $7,49, 12 - $7,500 or more, 97 - Don't know, 98 – Refused, and 99 – Blank. Values 1-12 remained the same. 97, 98 and 99 were eliminated from the analysis.

6. Education was determined by the question: Before your admission on [MOST RECENT ADMISSION DATE], what was the highest grade of school that you ever attended? The response categories were: 0 – Kindergarten, 1 – First, 2 – Second, 3 – Third, 4 – Fourth, 5 – Fifth, 6 – Sixth, 7 – Seventh, 8 – Eighth, 9 – Ninth, 10 – Tenth, 11 – Eleventh, 12 – Twelfth, 13 – College Freshman, 14 – College Sophomore, 15 – College Junior, 16 - College Senior, 17 - One year of graduate school, 18 - Two or more years of graduate school, 19 - Attended school in other country/system not comparable to grades, 97 - Don't know, 98 – Refused, and 99 – Blank. This variable was recoded so that values 0 though 11 (K – 11th Grade) = 1, 12 (Completed High School) = 2, 13-15 (Some College) = 3, 16 = 3 (Completed College), 17-18 = 4 (Graduate School) and all other values were removed from the analysis.
Qualitative Research Design

For the qualitative portion of this research, I used discussion board posts from the family members of inmates to gain insight into the hardship that these family members face, how they cope with them, and if race plays any part in their experiences. I looked at posts on the websites www.PrisonTalk.com (Prison Information and Family Support Community) and www.dailystrength.org - Daily Strength: Families of Prisoners Support Group. The tagline for this website is, “Free, anonymous support from people just like you”. I used the search function on the discussion boards to search for posts with terms relevant to my research – race, ethnic/ity, coping, family, parent, child, husband, wife, hardship, and class. I read through posts with at least 10 responses and coded the responses for themes of race, class and coping techniques.

Although race is important to this research paper, race, age and gender are typically not explicitly disclosed on the forum. Family was a dominant topic brought up on the forum, so I decided to focus on threads that included topics about family involvement and searched for themes of race with in them. After coding, I sorted the posts into larger themes and identified the patterns, which I will discuss later in my findings.

I also posted my own discussion post thread asking:

Hello, I’m a student of Sociology and currently working on a Master’s thesis. As a part of my project, I am trying to better understand how families are affected by the incarceration of their loved ones and how race might contribute to these hardships. If you are interested in contributing to my research, I would like to ask you: What
challenges have you faced since your family member was put in prison and how do you cope with those challenges? How would you identify yourself in terms of race or ethnicity?

If you would like to respond to this question privately, please email me here: familiesandincarceration@gmail.com or private message me on this forum.

Please note that reflecting on this topic may make some people feel sad or upset, if you feel sad or upset during or after posting and would like to talk to someone about your feelings, you can call Lifeline Nationwide Crisis Hotline 1-800-273-TALK.

Asking my own question may have posed a risk of alienating discussion board users, however based on the responses to the previous person who asked a research question, that doesn’t seem to be the case.

Human subject protection

Both discussion boards use avatars to identify the users. I refer to users by their avatar name, as it may provide some insight into their relationship with their incarcerated family member – i.e. “Prisonwife123”, If a first and last name is used as an avatar, I created an alias for the user. The private email account that I provided to participants was only allowed to be accessed by myself and is password secured.

Sample

By taking advantage of the online format, I had access to thousands of discussion board user’s responses. I analyzed 49 discussion board posts and used discussion board
threads that had at least 10 responses to gain a comprehensive and balanced understanding of the participants’ view on certain issues. The unit of measurement is the individual. For my analysis, I used two national discussion board support groups. The first is PrisonTalk.com (Prison Information and Family Support Community). This discussion board requires a login to be made by a user before they can view the discussion board posts and the responses. I made an account and disclosed my intentions with the example post mentioned above. The second discussion board I used for my research is called Daily Strength: Families of Prisoners Support Group. This website does not require a login in order to post and read discussion posts.

For the purpose of this research, I use the term “family” to identify diverse social connections. For example nuclear, extended, stem, joint, blended, members of a household, as well as any person that identifies themselves or others as part of a family (regardless of their genetic relationships) will be described as a “family” in my research.

**Benefits & limitations**

The benefits of using an online discussion board include anonymity, as this format provides a safe environment to express emotions, and is convenient for users, since they can log on whenever and as often or infrequently as they want to. It also allows users to take their time in writing thoughtfully crafted responses in the privacy of their own home, whereas in an interview format, participants have to be able to express complex feelings on the spot. Using online discussion boards can reduce interviewer effect. Online discussion boards allow researchers to search through vast amounts of data.
provided by individuals who are already involved and interested in the topic of research. Discussion board posts are organized by theme or have searchable keywords, making it more effective for researchers to locate interested participants (David and Sutton 2011).

I have identified five potential limiting factors of this research: 1) a lack of generalizability, 2) the anonymity of users which could lead to possible inaccuracies, 3) possible unreliable or sporadic use of such discussion boards, 4) the possibility that users comments could be sensors by discussion board moderators, and 5) the lack of personal interaction and visual cues between researcher and participant.

Because this research only asks about the individuals’ experiences of each person affected by the incarceration of their family member, it will not be a representative sample of all family members of the incarcerated; and therefore it is not generalizable to a greater population. In addition, anonymity can possibly affect the accuracy of the responses on discussion boards. For example, users might exaggerate or mislead other readers because there is no accountability to verify their honesty. On the other hand, this forum also provides a safe haven to express emotions freely, lessens social stigma and therefore might actually increase the honesty of users.

The intermittent use of discussion boards means that some users might log in infrequently. This may lead to less accurate results because users may only log in to the discussion boards when they have free time. Family members of inmates are faced with enormous finical and emotional burdens, and might not always have time to discuss their experiences online. The posts on these discussion boards might not reflect the true hardship that these individuals face. Infrequent or inconsistent use might mean that the
number of active users may be unpredictable over time – making this study more difficult to replicate or track an individual’s responses for any length of time. However, the infrequent use of some participants might mean that I will be able to include a more diverse array of experiences in my research because one person’s opinion won’t dominate the discussion board.

Another limitation to be considered is that moderators may censor discussion boards. The discussion board on PrisonTalk.com sates:

“By agreeing to these rules, you warrant that you will not post any messages that are obscene, vulgar, sexually-oriented, hateful, threatening, or otherwise violate of any laws. The owners of Prison Talk reserve the right to remove, edit, move or close any thread for any reason”

A final drawback is that the researcher is unable to pick up on body language or visual cues when using online research (David and Sutton 2011), however, I believe that the increased potential for more reflective responses and reduced interview affect outweigh this drawback.

Assumptions

My research project assumes that participants will have access to a computer, or possibly own their own computer and pay for internet services. This research also assumes that all users have a basic level of computer proficiency.

Based on these confines, the research is limited to family members with an assumed higher socioeconomic status than those who cannot afford a computer and
internet services, and have had the training to allow them to be proficient in using a PC and the internet. Based on this assumed computer efficiency, discussion board users may be a younger representation of the family members of inmates. Future studies could be conducted to include the family members without the luxuries of a computer, internet and training on how to use a computer by using interviews as an alternative means to collecting information rather than discussion boards. For the purpose of my research, discussion boards are the most effective method because of the amount of data accessible to the researcher and the non-intrusive format that discussion boards offer.

*Risks*

Losing a family member to prison for several years at a time is an emotionally charged topic and the information they may share with me could be mentally traumatic to talk about as they recount their experiences. To help with this, I made sure that participants had information to access counseling services provided by the Lifeline Nationwide Crisis Hotline to participants.
CHAPTER 4. – RESULTS

Overview of Results:

Using linear regression, the quantitative findings showed that sex, income and marital status were significant predictors of levels of family involvement of prisoners. Race, age, level of education were not significant predictors of family involvement. The R squared of the regression was .108 was and therefore explained 10.8% of the variation in family involvement.

The qualitative findings revealed that race was not a consistent theme on the online discussion boards. Themes of financial and emotional hardships were much more salient. Specifically, some prevalent themes included a feeling of a lack of emotional support for families of prisoners, a stigma around standing by these prisoners, as well as a lack of acceptance from family members and society as a whole. Family members in general felt alone and stigmatized. A theme of additional parental roles was also prevalent and I will discuss this more in the qualitative results section.

Quantitative Results: Descriptive Statistics

On the family involvement index, 43.3% of inmates scored a 5 out of 5. The descriptive table (Table. 1) shows that more inmates are male (74.0 %) than female (26.0%). The mean age of the inmates is 37.7 years old. Most of the inmates have no children (30.4%), and of those who are parents, most have 1 or 2 children (32.4% total). Inmates have a mean of 1.35 children. The majority of inmates had their child living with them before incarceration (57.6%) and provided most of the child’s care (47.8%) and
financial support (65.2%). See Table 2. The greatest number of the inmates (73.7%) are not married. Non-white inmates only slightly outnumber white inmates with 53% being non-white and 47% being white. 25.3% of inmates completed at least high school and 27.6% of inmates had completed some level of college or graduated from college. Average income was relatively dispersed, but the highest percentage (14.0%) fell within the highest income category of $7,500 or more a month. Most fell somewhere between the $200 and $4,999 a month range. See Table 1.
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Involvement Index (Scored 1-5)</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>534</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>958</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Mean: 37.7 yrs.</th>
<th>SD: 10.72</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Of Children</th>
<th>Mean: 1.35 Children</th>
<th>SD: 2.313</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>971</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Married</td>
<td>2715</td>
<td>73.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Continued on the next page.
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Table, Cont.

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1734</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>53.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K – 11\textsuperscript{th} Grade</td>
<td>1698</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed High School</td>
<td>912</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed College</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate School</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly Income Before Arrest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Income</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1 - 599</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$600 – 1,199</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1,200 - 2,499</td>
<td>781</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$2,500 - 7,499</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$7,500 or more</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 2004 (ICPSR 4572) - United States Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics
Table 2. Descriptive Statistics Table of Family Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breakdown of Family Index</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are any of these children living with you?</td>
<td>1238</td>
<td>910</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you provide most of the daily care for them?</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared care with someone else</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly provided by someone else</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where you the primary source of financial support?</td>
<td>1415</td>
<td>733</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 2004 (ICPSR 4572) - United States Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics
Quantitative Results: Linear Regression Findings

When explaining the levels of family involvedness, the only significant variables were sex, income and marital status. Race was not a significant predictor, nor was age, education, or number of children. Table 2 show that being male decreases family involvement by .440 levels. Higher income increased family involvement by .019 levels. Being married decreases family involvement by .230 levels. The R squared was and was .108, meaning that the model explained 10.8% of the variation in family involvement.

Table 3. Linear Regression Predicting Family Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race (Non-white)</td>
<td>-.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (Male)</td>
<td>-.440*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number Of Children</td>
<td>.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status (Married)</td>
<td>-.230*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.019*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>.108*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 2004 (ICPSR 4572) - United States Department of Justice. Bureau of Justice Statistics

*Significant
Qualitative Results

Race as a consistent theme was lacking from my qualitative findings. When conducting a search of forum post headings using terms, “race”, “white”, “black” on the forum, few results were found with these terms in the title. My results showed that race was only mentioned in the forums within the context of interracial relationships and did not address the themes of incarceration as a result of racial discrimination. I did, however, gain valuable insight into the hardships of the families members with a connection to the prison industrial complex, which I think is equally important to bring to light. The four most prevalent themes I found on the discussion board were (1) the lack of emotional support and rejection from extended family members and, (2) the stigma of being associated with a “prisoner”, (3) the physiological toll that this isolation causes, and (4) additional parental labor in the form of keeping children connected to their incarcerated parent.

I did not receive very many responses to the question that I posted to the discussion board and will discuss why I believe this happened in my analysis of the findings. The three responses I received are below.

Response 1 from DailyStrength.com user ThoughtAsWeak:

Hello,

I'm responding to your questions for your thesis.

What challenges have you faced since your family member was put in prison and how do you cope with those challenges? I have dealt with financial issues, even though I was in a major bread winner as my hub did side work to help supplement our income ($600-$1k month). I almost paid off our credit card debt and just finished paying off car loans when he was arrested. Since then, I have has to max
out cards and my savings has been depleted. We have dealt with harassment by law enforcement during investigation and trial process. Dealing with him being ripped out of our lives and our children forbidden to see their dad. This has been very difficult for all of us. I have dealt with depression and anxiety since his arrest, and been taking medication to help and we all have been in counseling. Daughter was FORCED to testify against her will against her will, causing her to have severe insomnia for 6 months before the doctor was able to get her on medication to correct her sleeping patters.

How would you identify yourself in terms of race or ethnicity? We are white (non Hispanic).

Response 2 from DailyStrength.com user ThoughtAsWeak:

Thank you. This has been life altering. I am now advocating to change the system, instead of being reactionary (new laws, harsher punishments), I am trying to have them move to preemptive position by educating and offering services to those who have the temptation to do harm. Also work on the restorative nature of those who were convicted so they can become productive members of society again.

Thank you for your questions and good luck on your thesis.

Response 3 from PrisonTalk.com user trauma4us

Incarceration affects each family differently. In addition to race, the socioeconomic status of the family, the emotional maturity, past relationship and crime all impact how a family deals with incarceration.

In our situation, our adult son is the one in the penal system. He did not contribute to our family financially, so there is no deficit there. However, he is a much-loved son so it is an emotional hole in our family. We love and miss him very much.

As his parents, we contribute financially to his well being by paying for a lawyer, paying off the truck he totaled and helping out financially with his son (our grandson).

We are a white, upper-middle class family and both of us are professionals.

The two respondents identified as white and their responses centered on the emotional distress that losing a family member had caused and issues such as depression, anxiety
and loss. Although I received fewer responses than I anticipated, the responses echoed the themes that I found throughout both discussion boards. One possibility for the low response rate could be that I am an outsider to this supportive and private environment. I might have perhaps, alienated users by posting in their territory as someone they might not identify with. Another explanation might be that several new threads are created daily on both discussion boards and my question simply may have gone unnoticed by the users. Despite this, I was still able to use existing posts to glean meaningful information about the experiences of coping with the incarceration of a loved one.

*Lack of emotional support*

My findings showed that many family members feel that they were alone in dealing with the emotions of waiting for their loved one to come home. They feel abandoned by others and need to cope with the loss without much outside support.

In the thread entitled “Only Son in Prison”, Debz1234 (the original poster of the thread) talks about the lack of support from her husband in dealing with her son being imprisoned. She says, “My husband just cannot handle me being upset and doesn't even seem to realize or understand why I am upset. He is nasty to me about me crying and calls me weak and basically ignores me”. She goes on explain how tensions among her extended family have taken a toll on her. She is grateful for the support that she does receive from the online community. She says, “It’s just so nice to be able to talk to people who won't judge and offer such kindness”.
In the post entitled “Worried about little nephew”, 745girl says she feels like she is in prison too due to all of the emotion and financial stress she must deal with in caring for her nephew who is now without a father. She writes, “I’m worried about his little boy. I have offered to fly home every 6 weeks or so to take him to see his dad. I am busy and have a family of my own but I can't seem to enjoy life without doing something to help”. This is just one of many examples on the forum of how the time, money and emotional resources are pulled to support a family member in prison. User 2013KeepingTheFaith responds with a comment about how his/her children are dealing with the situation. He/She writes, “He's been showing out in school screaming at me crying all the time getting sent to the principal’s office and that's just not our son at all....so I think they (The parents of “little nephew”) are making a big mistake he needs his dad he will grow up to resent them for it”. He/she mentions that is his/her 4 year old child involved can’t comprehend the situation, but the 8 year old child can, and therefore has been told the truth about what’s going on. Other commenters also advise that they should explain the situation to him because they fear that child will feel lied to, become angry and/or come to resent his father if he is not told the truth. This is an example of the emotional toll that a parent in prison has on the children involved, as well as the caregivers of that child.

For many users, the financial uncertainty can manifest as a constant emotional stressors. The post, “How am I going to make ends meet?” is a thread created by user CallMemara, who is a student writing about the social problem of losing a primary breadwinner. She asks:
Would you all mind sharing with me how your lives changed financially when your man was locked up? How did you do daycare, pay rent etc. What sorts of support systems were available to you? Shelters? Food pantries? Welfare? Counseling? Day care? Extended family visits? Parenting classes?

The responses to this question show that there are few “support systems” available for families of inmates. Gpbob, the parent of a son in prison writes, “Tens of thousands of dollars are going to his testing and legal defense”. Gpbob continues, “He was the sole breadwinner”, and, “My grandkids are hurt, ashamed, feeling vulnerable, and angry.”

Gpbob adds this statement:

Society has deserted them and the family is being punished for a crime they had no part in. I no longer call it a justice system. There is no justice in punishing innocent children and women. Our legal system is a punishment system: Society hates us because of the crime of our loved one.

This statement exemplifies how a financial burden can become an emotional burden.

Again, commenting on the financial burden she faces, Coffeelovinglady writes, “The financial hardships for some of these families are unimaginable. The emotional toil is so much more”. Ihatewisconsin writes about his/her fears of not being able to make ends meet:

It has cost so much to be able to talk to him, and go see him. They never put them near us, the calls are terribly expensive. I lost my job. I get food stamps and unemployment, and still cannot pay my bills on time. I am always hoping the lights stay on, or the heat.

Based on my findings relating to the lack of emotional support, these online forums are good place to discuss the emotional issues associated with having an incarcerated family member and are often the only outlet available to those suffering. Unfortunately, while the online forums are helpful, they simply are not enough. It was
apparent that adults were not alone in their distress; children were also in need of emotional support to cope with the incarceration of their parent. Children, especially younger children do not have access to support groups like these discussion forums, therefore they may be getting even less emotional support than the adults suffering. As Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) point out, children of incarcerated parents are known to be at higher risk for mental health problems. This is just another example of how the prison industrial complex perpetuates disadvantage. The emotional stress of making ends meet with a partner in prison and the emotional damage caused by parental incarceration in children are just a few long lasting consequences of having a family member incarcerated. The stigma of being the partner of or related to a prisoner can take its toll on individuals, as well.

*Stigma*

In a response, user Neverdi relates to Debz1234 by saying, “It's easier (for family members) just to not be involved with it (the imprisonment of a family member). It's messed up that they can't be there for you when you need them. None of my family agrees with me staying with my fiancé while he's in jail or did any of my friends”. Like Debz1234, Neverdi is also experiencing a lack of family support in addition to dealing with stigma associated with his/her fiancé being in jail.

User Ihatewisconsin agrees with Neverdi; he/she says, “My fiancé is HATED by my family for being in prison for drunk driving, yet my brothers drink and drive”.
Dol169 also feels shamed by his/her family. “My only son is also in prison for sex crime. My brother and his wife told me to stay away they want no part of me”.

Overall, users tend to feel punished by their friends and family for their association with an inmate. They were often encouraged by others to cut ties with their imprisoned loved one in order to maintain their social status. Based on my findings, no users on the forum actually took this advice and abandoned their family member. In fact, they were adamant about “sticking by (their) man” and there was a general consensus on the forums that this was the “right” thing to do. Perhaps, a more effective solution might be to work to create less of stigma around incarceration through education. Giving family members information and counseling might better equip them to deal with the stigma that is placed on them and to challenge it. The forums serve as an effective means to vent about the stigma and connect with each other to combat the feelings of isolation.

*The psychological toll of isolation*

A side effect of the constant stigma felt by others is a feeling of isolation from mainstream society. In order to combat this feeling of isolation, a common tactic I found among users was that they use each other as resources, since there are so few available to them from outside sources. User Ihatewisconson talks about how she councils a neighbor and facilitates networking and helping those going through similar experiences. Ihatewisconson writes:

I go sit with her when she is down. It helps her, but helps me too. We are two different sorts of people, but have bonded in this situation we are not both in, not of our own making. I call it the Prison Wives Club. HAHA
You will find that there is not a lot of help out there for us. There are groups such as al anon, AA, narconon, etc., There are groups for families of soldiers, but nothing for us. But DS (Daily Strength) is one way to help ourselves and each other.

I am also sort of “counseling" an old family friend. It's different because he is a guy, and his fiancé is in trouble now. Maybe my therapist was right years ago, she said I should be a therapist. This situation demands that we learn to be strong and help others learn even in little ways how to be stronger and get through it. Keep coming on here. We are all in the same boat.

Ihatewisconson goes on to talk about the lack of emotion and psychological support from institutions. Ihatewisconson writes:

I would like to see groups that we could go talk, like we do on here, only like AA meetings. We desperately need that. What that stupid justice system and other agencies does not care about or realize is that ultimately we end up having to get help from the county or the state, which costs them money. They do nothing to help us. They give (prisoners) free housing, medical, food, and we have to fight to get anything.

It was apparent in my findings that the stigma attached to being a family member of an incarcerated person caused psychological pain and feelings of isolation for many users. In an effort to combat the psychological toll of isolation, users counseled each other. By doing so, they were able to compensate for the lack of psychological support and to cope with the isolation. Users were well aware of the lack of resources available to help them. They feel abandoned by the criminal justice system and that they are being unjustly punished. There is a demand for support organizations and groups, but one can imagine that organizing such might take more time than a person in this situation would have to spare. A myriad of duties such as raising children, interacting with lawyers and the criminal justice system and performing all the task in order to “make ends meet” fill their day.
Additional parental work

Another major theme that I found on both discussion boards was the work of facilitating a bond between the incarcerated parent and his/her child or children. Mothers often explicitly discussed the additional financial resources that they had to provide, as well as the extra work they had to take on in their partner’s absence. They also, more subtly, discussed the work of keeping their children bonded to their parent in prison. I found this additional parental role important in exploring further because it demonstrates the nuances of how complex and all-encompassing the task of parenting with a partner in prison can be. It demonstrates just one of many ways that parents navigate the already difficult task of parenting a child alone, while simultaneously being an intermediary between the incarcerated parent and child. I would like to use this concept of extra parental duties to describe the additional work that partners (of whom were all mothers with husbands or boyfriends in prison in my findings) perform on a recurring basis.

Pisontalk.com user “deb” posts about the burden of maintaining the bond between other parent and child. Deb asks the question, “What can we do to help keep the parent/child bond strong?” There are over a 100 responses to deb’s question. To summarize, most respondents felt that while it was difficult to maintain this bond, but it was important and necessary work. Many children only know their parents after they became incarcerated, and have bonded through phone calls, letters, photos, and supervised visits. Some incarcerated parents have only met their babies and children through glass. Parents worried about lack of bonding based on the fact that there is often no physical contact is allowed. Pisontalk.com user NotSoPatiently points out that from
the child’s perspective his father is not able to fulfill the role of a parent, he/she write, “his dad is just another person he sees now and then”.

The parent left to raise the child is maintains the bond with the incarnated parent in a variety of creative ways. For example, Prisontalk.com user izaellahbian had a voice recording of her husband’s voice put into a teddy bear so that her child would be familiar with the father’s voice. Some parents suggested sending report cards, drawings, having the parent read a book to the child over the phone before bed, and frequent visits. However, the frequent visits are often a severe financial burden for these families. On top of this, I recorded that at least 5 users mentioned how their partners had been transferred to a different prison and were now further from home.

Based on my findings, keeping the bond between father and child strong while the father is prison is a difficult and time-consuming task for these already overstrained mothers.

This research demonstrates just how detrimental removing parents from their families and communities can be. Not only does it put a financial strain on the loved ones but it also has lasting effects on the family member’s emotional wellbeing. These negative effects of incarceration are only exasperated by the additional labor that parents face when trying to keep their partners bonded with their children.

Overall, the respondents make it clear that there is little financial support and no emotional support for the families of the imprisoned. These support group users must make a choice to stay with their imprisoned partners and deal with the stigma of being associated with a “prisoner” from family members and friends. Discussion board users
on both sites would like to see more emotional support resources made available to families of prisoners.
CHAPTER 5. – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main quantitative findings of this study showed that race was not a factor in determining the family involvedness of inmates. The main qualitative findings of this study showed that the major obstacles that family members of inmates face are the lack of emotional support and social acceptance. Considering that family involvedness levels are not significant when looking at race, we can infer from the research that those facing the incarceration of a family member experience the same degree of loss of support when that family member is removed and imprisoned, regardless of race. While the loss of support may be equal in terms of race, these hardships are not endured equally among the population. As my research points out, non-whites have higher rates of incarceration and therefore non-white families may suffer from the issues that discussion board users described in higher numbers than whites.

The most important implication of my research is that black families are suffering from the incarceration of their loved ones on top of the injustice created by the prison industrial complex. As previously mentioned, racial minorities are disproportionally imprisoned (Harrison and Sabol 2012), which implies that their families are also disproportionately affected by imprisonment. My research adds to this work in that it shows that losing a family member to the prison industrial complex leaves a hole in the affected family and that the size of that hole isn’t determined by race. My research also adds to the existing body of work by showing what it looks like to be “affected by imprisonment”.
Since race was not explicitly stated on the discussion boards, this assumption about hardship being more prevalent among non-whites may be incorrect, and therefore, I think it’s one that merits future research. A study to directly measure the suffering of families with race as a variable would be illuminating in exploring whether levels of suffering are equal among whites and non-whites. My research gives a preliminary understanding of the family involvedness of inmates and the experiences of family members, which I think adequately addresses the concern of hardship, but alone is not enough to explain how race might impact experienced hardship directly.

My research echoes previous research in that it shows that parents are highly involved with their families before incarceration and leave a void behind them after incarceration. While this discovery is not new, my regression analysis uses unique variables and an index of family involvedness to reach the same conclusion as those before me have. My qualitative research also adds to this by explaining what that void looks like for family members left behind. My findings confirm that the void tends to take the shape of financial hardship, emotional distress, and stigmas for the prison spouse/partner/family member. It also means working harder in the form of performing emotional work to ensure that children maintain a relationship with their incarcerated parent(s). In the end, this equates to more labor for parents who are stretched thin as discussion board users deb and NotSoPatiently previously illustrated.

The prison industrial complex is clearly not achieving reduced crime and peace for communities. It, in fact, causes more chaos and anguish than progress and needs to be reevaluated for what it really is – a profit driven complex that exploits those who are too
preoccupied with poverty and injustice to address the problems, which it exacerbates. The prison industrial complex is one of the most aggressive attacks on human freedom in our country today. The attack is targeted against people of color, making this a new version of slavery and racial inequality. While this attack may be the greatest source of inequality in the U.S., my research shows that the hardship on inmate’s families is severe regardless of the race of the inmate. I hope that my work has in some small way contributed to the existing research that exposes these truths and supports a reimagining of punishment and incarceration. The ultimate goal of my research is to broaden the discourse for alternatives that do less harm to fragile communities. It is also my hope that this research has helped to forward the cause of rethinking the functionality of the prison industrial complex in the United States.

Next Steps

The call to abolish the prison system based solely on its ineffectiveness is not enough. We must recognize that the prison system’s end goal is to organize and control delinquents in a society, and that it is actually quite effective in doing this, as Foucault (1975) points out. Power is continually exercised on society in the form of discipline, and I have merely tried to expose some of the side effects of this strategy through understanding the hardships of individuals. The next steps will be to uncover the hidden ways that the prison industrial complex has become a part of our daily lives and to publicly question its function in society. It’s my belief that doing so will lead to a willingness of society to reevaluate the entire concept of punishment at a policy level and
begin the dialog of prison abolition. As I have pointed out here, the punishment extends far beyond the individual criminal. Imprisonment hurts families, communities and has lasting intergenerational effects that continue to do harm longer than any prison sentence could.
References


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