Collateral Consequences: How Increased Incarceration Rates Transform Parenting and Partnership in Low-Income Boston Neighborhoods

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Collateral Consequences: How Increased Incarceration Rates Transform Parenting and Partnership in Low-Income Boston Neighborhoods

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to
The Department of Sociology

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Abstract

The War on Drugs and subsequent growth of the U.S. prison system has disproportionately affected low-income individuals living in inner-cities. Since the 1980's, men of color without a high school degree have been incarcerated at a higher rate than other groups in the U.S. Prior research has examined the outcomes of criminal offenders upon release, but less research has focused on the indirect effects of drugs and prison on women and families on the outside. This research utilizes 88 interviews of women in the Boston area who have had children by men who have served time. Findings suggest that the salience and legitimacy of the criminal label has waned over time. Additionally, women who grew up in neglectful or abusive homes may learn skills and knowledge that can benefit them as they enter motherhood. Finally, the dissertation concludes with a discussion of how mothers evaluate fathers and how they help ensure the best possible outcomes for their children.
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For Lester and Genevieve.
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Introduction

In July of 2016, presidential candidate Donald Trump gave a speech at the Republican National Convention promising to return the United States to a time of former glory. He bemoaned the loss of industry, failing infrastructure, and rising national debt that, he argued, has plagued the country during the leadership of the previous administration. More than anything, Trump identified rising crime as a national concern and, should he be elected, one of his most pressing priorities. He cited the growing homicide rate, spurred significantly by the city of Chicago, which had seen 2,000 murders since the beginning of the year. Trump promised that he would curb crime by investing more in policing agencies and by building a wall between the U.S. and Mexico that would reduce illegal border crossings as well as (what he believes to be) related destructive social forces. He stated in his speech that “[w]e are going to build a great border wall to stop illegal immigration, to stop the gangs and the violence, and to stop the drugs from pouring into our communities.”¹ Ultimately, his promises proved to be persuasive to voters, and Donald J. Trump was sworn in the following year as the 45th president of the United States.

President Trump’s pledge to ‘make America safe again’ is not unique in recent political history. The call to law and order is a reliable rhetorical device that has been marshaled consistently in presidential campaigns, often with considerable success. Candidate Nixon deployed the Southern Strategy, capitalizing on the resentment that white southerners had for gains made by minority Americans during the civil rights movement. He ran on a platform that

swore to reestablish security in the U.S., and as president, he identified drug use and drug sales as diseases plaguing inner-city America. He initiated the War on Drugs (Dufton, 2012), which continued through the Reagan administration, and could be characterized domestically by a punitive shift in sentencing policies for drug crimes. Addiction was no longer viewed as a medical illness worthy of rehabilitative resources, but instead as a crime against society and deserving of a severe, retributive response. What resulted from such legal changes was devastating for low-income, inner-city residents, and catastrophic for minority Americans.

Much has been written concerning the consequences of this punitive shift (Clear & Frost, 2015; Western & Wildeman, 2009; Pattillo, Western & Weiman, 2004; Garland 2001). Most notably, scholars have documented the growing number of individuals who were convicted of drug crimes and made to serve increasingly longer sentences (Western, 2006). Researchers have also documented how this new wave of mass incarceration disproportionately affects minority males with little formal schooling. This disparity is so pronounced that sociologist Bruce Western (2006) describes prison as a ‘common life event’ for black men without a college education.

Since the prison boom, researchers have primarily investigated how incarceration affects offenders in a variety of ways, including their physical and mental health, workforce participation, likelihood of reoffending and more (Hattery 2010; La Vigne, Solomon, Beckman & Dedel, 2006). More recently, social scientists have widened their focus to the collateral consequences of incarceration on family members (Comfort, 2016), but most of these studies utilize quantitative data to track measureable outcomes, such as relationship stability (Turney, 2015), health outcomes of non-incarcerated family (Wildeman, 2010; Foster & Hagan, 2009)
and children’s education (Haskins, 2017; Turney & Haskins, 2014). Qualitative studies on the indirect consequences of mass incarceration are few, and are mostly limited to how families maintain relationships with individuals in prison and at what cost (Comfort, 2008; Braman, 2004).

As a result, much about the collateral consequences of mass incarceration is yet unknown. The prison boom that followed the War on Drugs began more than twenty years ago, and for people in poor urban neighborhoods, an entire generation have now lived in the shadow of a criminal justice system that touches nearly everyone in their communities. But in what ways, and to what degree? I argue that crime and prison are so ubiquitous in the inner-city that it has fundamentally altered how individuals understand and assess one another. Crime and punishment are so common that they have become taken for granted in these neighborhoods, and even those who manage to avoid drugs and prison are nonetheless affected by their influence.

In this dissertation, I speak to women who have had children by men who served time. I find that living in communities fraught with drugs and prison not only affects their relationships, but on a more fundamental level, it also alters how these women understand and evaluate one another. Additionally, I argue that living in this reality, where adults are regularly lost to addiction or to prison, has resulted in women learning to fend for themselves at a young age. Together, these findings show how crime and punishment have indirectly but fundamentally transformed the lives of those on the outside. What follows in this chapter is a brief historical overview of how these structural changes have occurred, a literature review
documenting how structural changes affect inner-cities, a description of my methodology, and summary of the remainder of this dissertation.

**Historical Overview**

By the middle of the 20th century, the United States had experienced a profound social transformation. African Americans had moved to northern cities to find work, the civil rights movement was chipping away at segregation, and national discourse shifted towards discussions about gender and racial equality. Not everyone was supportive of such trends. Rising crime rates, which were growing faster in the North than the South, were used as justification for opposition to these shifting priorities. Rioting in Harlem and Rochester, and the visibility of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other activists, crystalized for many a sentiment that the crime problem was, at its core, a race problem (Alexander, 2012; Wacquant, 2002). Southern politicians marshalled this resentment amongst the white population with a call to law and order, promising to curb lawlessness and punish perpetrators of crime. Then-candidate Richard Nixon also espoused a law and order platform, which became the foundation for his 1968 campaign and ultimately helped push him to a presidential win after previous failed attempts.

While Nixon initiated the War on Drugs, it was President Reagan who made the war a defining institution of U.S. politics and society. Like Nixon, Reagan made promises to rid the country of its social ills, specifically those most associated with inner-city communities. He targeted drug use. Between 1980 and 1984, funding for anti-drug initiatives within the FBI increased from $8 million to $95 million, while anti-drug initiatives within the DEA increased from $33 million to $1,042 million in the same time period (Alexander, 2012). First Lady Nancy
Reagan adopted drug prevention as her personal pet project, urging the youth of America to ‘just say no’ to illicit substances. Her campaign gained traction across the country. By 1986, Time magazine declared crack cocaine as ‘the issue of the year.’ Throughout the 1980’s, other news outlets ran countless stories about the ‘drug scourge,’ (Alexander, 2012) and as a result, the state and federal legislators passed increasingly punitive responses to the ‘epidemic.’

The result was a dramatic increase in drug crime sentences. Crack cocaine was largely seen as a problem in poor, urban minority communities, and indeed, more and more people within these communities (disproportionately black and Hispanic young men) were arrested and forced to serve time. In 1986, Congress passed the federal Anti-Drug Act, which increased drug sentences and established mandatory minimums. Since 1980, drug arrests have more than tripled. The number of people serving time in jail or prison for a drug crime has grown by over a thousand percent in that time (Mauer & King, 2007). There are now over 2.2 million people serving time in American prisons and jails. Almost half a million of those individuals are incarcerated for drug crimes (see Figure 1 below from The Sentencing Project).²

Figure 1. Growth of prison and jail populations in the U.S. in 1980 and 2015.

It is worth questioning whether or not increasingly strict sentences were meant to curb drug use. Michelle Alexander (2012) points out that while the punitive turn against drug use was first introduced in the mid-1980’s, crack cocaine entered cities in 1982 and by 1985 its use was on the decline. Rather than serve to help communities plagued by substance abuse, she argues that drug policy changes were a means to control minority Americans and ultimately contributed to the decimation of inner-city families and neighborhoods.

Irrespective of the government’s intent, scholars overwhelmingly concur that the increased influence of the criminal justice system is one of a series of factors that has negatively
affected low-income urban communities. William Julius Wilson (1987) describes how the movement of manufacturing jobs away from cities fostered widespread unemployment. Drugs entered that economic vacuum (including but not limited to crack cocaine) and offered a means of financial security, but at the cost of addiction and violence, including a spike in the homicide rate of young black men (Fryer, Heaton, Levitt & Murphy, 2006). Police targeted those they believed to be likely drug dealers, fostering distrust from the people they are meant to protect. Inner-cities became isolated from mainstream society and families broken apart by substance abuse and prison. While there are success stories and opportunities for upward mobility, life in low-income urban neighborhoods is affected by shifting structural forces that have largely hindered the poor rather than helped them.

**Literature Review**

Researchers have long sought to document how communities respond to structural shifts. Sociologists as well as policy makers have tried to parse the myriad ways that macro-level changes affect urban neighborhoods. While it would be inaccurate to suggest that individuals possess no agency over their opinions, decisions, or behaviors, it is without dispute that the social structures that underpin all aspects of one’s life (from educational and occupational opportunities to community and public resources and more) create much of the scaffolding upon which individuals construct their lives. Social structures thus directly influence
the objective realities of individuals as well as cultural responses that manifest as a result of said realities.³

Urban sociological literature provides numerous examples of how communities respond to emerging social realities and constraints. The discipline saw a sea change with the 1987 publication of The Truly Disadvantaged by William Julius Wilson. Previous research, most notably the 1959 book Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty by Oscar Lewis, identifies culture as the cause of continued deprivation of the poor. Specifically, Lewis argues that people living in poverty have (mal)adapted to their environments such that their perspectives and behaviors inadvertently perpetuate their hardships. Wilson comes to a different conclusion. In his examination of the question concerning why the black urban poor have not seen more economic and social gains after school desegregation and the civil rights movement, Wilson identifies structural changes as the culprit. The decline in manufacturing jobs and the departure of middle class blacks from urban centers created areas of concentrated poverty where low-income blacks find little opportunity for escape. Wilson’s work launched a new wave of sociological research that examines how urban communities experience and respond to structural changes. What follows is a brief review of this literature.

**When Communities Are Isolated**

Sociologists have examined a number of phenomena that result when neighborhoods become isolated from the larger society. In the case of poor urban communities, isolation blocks individuals from paths of upward mobility. Living wage jobs move out of the city and

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³ To be clear, it is not solely the case that structure influences culture. The symbiotic relationship between culture and structure is complicated and intertwined, and a larger discussion of the topic is outside the purview of this dissertation.
chronic joblessness is left in its wake. William Julius Wilson (1996) examined the consequences of job loss in the inner-city. He describes inner-city black communities as significantly more challenged in the 1990’s than they had been in the 1960’s, mostly as a function of increased joblessness. Earlier decades saw those who dwelt in these communities as poor but largely-employed. Livable wage positions moved to the suburbs or to cheaper international labor markets, leaving only service sector positions available which pay little, offer irregular hours, and generally cater more towards women than men (Wilson makes the point that job loss has been particularly challenging for black men). Job loss has significant consequences aside from the loss of income. Wilson believe that jobs confer a sense of self-efficacy, or one’s ability to demonstrate their value to themselves as well as the community at large. Furthermore, Wilson argues that the frequency of joblessness has created a precipitous drop in social organization. Social networks weaken, participation in voluntary organizations lessens, and collective supervision and personal responsibility in neighborhood affairs dissipates.

What happened when employment opportunities are few? How do communities survive when resources are limited? There is an on-going debate among sociologists as to the degree to which the poor share resources with one another. On one end of the debate is Carol Stack (1974), whose research described how community members shared small surpluses and assisted their family and friends when necessary, fully expecting reciprocal aid should they need it. Edin and Lein (1997) also found that resource sharing was an important means by which the poor survived. They interviewed 379 white, black, and Hispanic single mothers in Chicago, Boston, San Antonio, and Charleston to learn how they provided for themselves and their families. Edin and Lein found that while some mothers worked and others relied more
heavily (but not exclusively) on welfare, the vast majority of women depended on assistance
from friends and family.

On the other end of the debate are those researchers who argue that resource sharing
is limited because the poor (specifically those who also identify as black or Latino) distrust one
another (Uslaner, 2002; Alesina & La Ferrara 2002; Patterson, 1999; Smith, 1997). Sandra
Susan Smith (2007), interviewed 105 black men and women in Michigan to understand
persistent joblessness. She found that employed individuals in these areas are concerned
about their reputations with their employers and are thus reluctant to help their jobless peers.
Conversely, job seekers ‘go it alone’ rather than ask for assistance, lest they be beholden to
others or fail to meet employer expectations. Overall, Smith argues that mutual support has
given way to debilitating individualism as people do not share resources that would help their
peers. More recently, Desmond (2012), studied resource sharing among recently evicted
individuals and found a system that was not as collaborative as was found by Stack but more
cooperative than was found by Smith. Desmond argues that the urban poor utilize disposable
ties, which are forged quickly and typically fall apart with similar speed. Friendships are made
hastily, resources are exchanged, and (often) the friendship falls apart in weeks or months.

In spite of limited job opportunities, people living in the inner-city find means of earning
money. Katherine Newman (2000) followed 300 residents of Harlem who were either job-
seekers or job-holders. Newman found that the urban poor were not lazy, nor were they
looking to exploit public assistance. Instead, they were working long, exhaustive hours and still
could not pull themselves out of poverty. Sudhir Venkatesh (2006) described how low-income
individuals living on the south side of Chicago need to rely on an underground economy
(‘hustling’) to make ends meet. Hustling is any off-the-books work, which may be legal or illegal, and may be an exchange of services or goods for money or for barter. Hustling is at times adaptive and maladaptive for the community; it helps support nearly all residents, but further isolates the community from the broader society.

One last area of research concerning isolated communities is that which began with Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street*. In 1999, Anderson explored a low-income, predominantly African American area of Philadelphia that was effectively isolated from the rest of the city. He found that residents adopted a ‘code’ in which they describe themselves as either ‘street’ or ‘decent.’ Those who are ‘street’ accept violence and criminal behavior as a means of garnering the respect that they cannot achieve through the normative, mainstream channels such as educational or occupational attainment. Since its publication, *Code of the Street* has been an influential work and has served as a lens that other researchers utilize when examining different populations, including females (Nowacki, 2012; Jones, 2009; Miller, 2008), suburban youth (Singer, 2014), as well as youth abroad (Brookman, Bennett, Hochstetler & Copes, 2011). Though *Code of the Street* continues to inform our understanding of life in the inner-city, new questions arise about the utility of the code in areas where mass incarceration has imposed the ‘criminal’ label on more and more individuals each year.

**When Drugs Enter the Community**

Beginning in the mid-1980’s and continuing into the following decade, crack cocaine penetrated inner-cities throughout the U.S. The consequences (direct or indirect) of the drug trade have been devastating, especially for minority men. Fryer, Heaton, Levitt and Murphy (2006) find a variety of negative social outcomes associated with the crack cocaine wave, most
notably a doubling of the homicide rate for young black men aged 14-17 and a thirty percent increase for black men aged 25 and older. Philippe Bourgois (2003) conducted an ethnographic study of East Harlem, where the drug trade was then booming. He describes how the drug trade functioned as a regular and reliable source of income to a community that had been largely unaffected by the economic growth of the 1990’s. Furthermore, dealing drugs conferred a level of respect that residents in East Harlem were not easily afforded in other aspects of their lives. Unfortunately, engagement in the drug trade also brought many negative consequences, including further marginalization from mainstream society.

The drug trade in the inner-city is often orchestrated by gangs, and researchers have investigated how gangs confer respect and money through violence (Duck, 2015; Duran, 2013; Hagehorn, 2008). Sudhir Venkatesh’s Gang Leader for a Day (2008) is an ethnographic study of the way the drug trade has affected the inner-city. Venkatesh spent seven years studying the Black Kings gang in the housing projects of the South Side of Chicago. Similar to East Harlem, official unemployment rates were very high in this area of the city in the 1990s and the drug trade filled the economic vacuum left vacant by legitimate job opportunities. Venkatesh found that contrary to his expectations, the gang was a highly orchestrated social hierarchy with strict protocols and severe consequences for transgressions. The author paints a community fraught with violence, wherein rules are maintained (even to the point of death) and loyalty is rewarded. People do what they feel they have to in order to survive outside mainstream

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4 For more information on the consequences of the crack cocaine epidemic, see https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/fhlm_crack_cocaine_0.pdf
5 Venkatesh’s role as ethnographer in this study is not without controversy, as he admits to participating in a physical assault
society. Venkatesh’s work is just one that has focused on gang activity (Duran, 2013; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2008).

When Incarceration Becomes Normal

The surge of crack cocaine into urban communities preceded a significant increase in the number of people incarcerated in the U.S. The incarceration rate in 1983 was 275 per 100,000 persons and rose to 686 per 100,000 by 2001 (Western, 2006). The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that the incarcerated population peaked in 2008 with 2.3 million in the U.S. in prison or in jail; by 2015 this number had declined slightly to 2.17 million (Kaeble & Glaze, 2015). The dramatic rise in the number of people incarcerated was largely a function of a punitive push against the drug epidemic, and truth in sentencing and three strikes laws resulted in massive increases in the number and the length of sentence for non-violent drug offenses. No subset of the U.S. population was more affected than minority men. Western finds that between 1980 and 2000 black men were six to eight times more likely to be incarcerated than their white counterparts, and that Hispanics were three times more likely than their white peers.

In that most people who serve time in prison are eventually released, more research has focused on prisoner reentry. Individuals released from prison face a host of challenges, including stable housing and employment (Brucker, 2006; Bushway, Stoll, & Weiman, 2007; Harding, Wyse, Dobson, & Morenoff, 2014; Travis 2005). They often return to neighborhoods with the same limitations and temptations as the ones they left, making recidivism a heightened concern (Kirk, 2012). In a study of men with outstanding warrants, Alice Goffman
(2009) found that men on the run adapted their lives so as not to be caught by the police and return to prison. Their self-imposed limitations kept them from looking for employment or visiting their baby’s mothers in the hospital, claiming (fairly or unfairly) that to do so would jeopardize their freedom. Conversely, Goffman discovered that women could use the precarious status of men to their own advantage, threatening to call the police as a means of controlling their partner’s behavior.

Importantly, prison does not just affect those individuals who are sent away. Roughly half of inmates in prison are also parents (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008) and research demonstrates that their children suffer a variety of negative outcomes. Having a parent in prison is associated with anti-social behaviors (Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012; Roettger & Swisher, 2011), depressed educational achievement (Bussell, 2013; Foster & Hagan, 2007), and a heightened risk of aggressive behaviors and the possibility of future criminal offending (Wildeman, 2010). Qualitative research has also looked at how families manage when a loved one is incarcerated (Comfort, 2008). Braman’s study of Washington, DC families of incarcerated men found that those on the outside faced financial strain, psychological stress and the perception of reflected stigma that kept them from reaching out to others for emotional support.

**When Families Fracture**

Changes in poor urban communities have not been limited to increased joblessness, crime and incarceration. Children are increasingly not being raised by two married, biologically related parents (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). The likelihood of not growing up in a ‘traditional’ family increases for disadvantaged groups; African American women and those without a high
school diploma are disproportionately likely to be single mothers (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). Much like children growing up with an incarcerated parent, kids who grow up in single parent homes are more likely to face challenges that their peers, including lower standardized test scores, behavioral problems, and early sexual activity (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2004). Edin and Kefalas (2005) sought to understand why unmarried women with limited financial resources were opting to become mothers. They found that young women believed that, while marriage was something to aspire to, motherhood was a biological imperative and should not be put off regardless of challenges ahead.

Researchers have also studied single fathers. Edin and Nelson (2013) found that contrary to conservative messaging, single dads do aspire to do right by their kids, but structural limitations and their own continued mistakes can thwart the best of intentions. Men describe how the mothers of their children expected more support (financial and otherwise) of men once they became fathers, and men could not live up to their partner’s heightened expectations. Anne Nurse (2002) interviewed and observed incarcerated fathers at a juvenile detention facility in California. She describes how time in prison served as a turning point in which fathers were able to reevaluate their lives and begin planning for positive changes (see also Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004). For most, however, incarceration had a deleterious effect on their ability to parent. Fathers cannot have the frequency and intimacy of paternal interactions that they had prior to detainment, and some fathers feel such shame or emotional detachment that they forbid family from visiting. All told, both quantitative and qualitative research show that children face hardships when they grow up without two parents.

What Remains to be Seen
Past research has shown the myriad ways that structural changes have affected individuals in low-income, urban areas. Loss of job opportunities increases the official unemployment rate and encourages the middle class to flee to more prosperous neighborhoods. Mainstream avenues for upward mobility are blocked, and people find alternative means for gaining both financial security and respect. The lack of stable employment contributes to the dwindling of the marriage market. Increased criminal justice intervention has separated men from their families and depressed their ability to actively parent even when not detained.

Though researchers have begun to investigate how criminalization and mass incarceration have affected individuals, much is still unknown. What has been studied largely focuses on those who are either incarcerated or are directly interacting with the criminal justice system. Works by Comfort (2016; 2008) and Braman (2004) illuminate how families and friends are affected when a single person is in prison, and while this information is valuable for our understanding the collateral consequences of incarceration, it does not adequately or accurately represent what it is like for inner-city residents. In poor, urban communities today, the number of people who cycle through prison is staggering. Researchers estimate that 44% of African American women and 32% of African American men have at least one family member who is currently incarcerated (Lee, McCormick, Hicken & Wildeman, 2015). As a result, many of the urban poor do not know one person who is incarcerated, but (sometimes) far more. Criminalization and mass incarceration are now ubiquitous in the inner-city and researchers must shift focus to the myriad indirect ways that these phenomena affect the lives and the perceptions of those on the outside.
In this dissertation, I look at the ways that partners have been affected by these structural changes. I focus my interviews on women who have had children by men who have served time in prison. My goal is to understand how the behaviors and perspectives of women have been altered by their relationships with incarcerated (or previously incarcerated) men, as well as how their lives have been affected by these larger structural changes that undergird life in poor, urban areas. I find that the pervasive penetration of the criminal justice system into these communities has fundamentally altered how women evaluate men and understand ‘criminality’. Furthermore, I find that the destabilizing nature of crime and punishment have had disruptive effects on positive and productive parenting, such that young women born into families fraught with drugs and prison were not given the care they might have otherwise been afforded. As such, women born into homes where drugs and crime were prevalent learned independence and adaptive skills which ultimately, and perhaps ironically, may aid them as they enter motherhood themselves.

Methodology

In order to understand how the increasing incarceration of men has affected women in urban communities, I set out to interview mothers who are or were partnered with men who either were or previously had been incarcerated. The formerly incarcerated partners of these women must have been the biological father to at least one of their children. All women were over the age of 18 and located within the Boston area. There were no restrictions on age
(other than the requirement that the interviewee not be a minor), race\(^6\), education-level, citizenship, or prior criminal background of the women in this study. I was not intending to offer payment in exchange for interviews, though ultimately I did offer financial compensation.

I focused my recruitment in the areas of Boston with the highest rates of prisoner reentry, believing that it would be these same neighborhoods where I would most likely find women who met the criteria above. Based on 2002 data from the Urban Institute, which collated information from the Massachusetts Departments of Correction, Youth and Family Services and the Suffolk County Sheriff’s Department, prisoner reentry in the City of Boston is centralized in the areas of Dorchester, Roxbury, Jamaica Plain and Mattapan (see Figure 2 below)\(^7\). It was in these areas where I allocated most of my time.

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\(^6\) Though much of the research on low-income communities has focused largely on individuals who identify as black (Wilson, 1987; Anderson, 1999; Venkatesh, 2008, and more), I did not control for race in my research. More than two thirds of my sample, however, identify as Black or African American.

\(^7\) From Brooks, Solomon, Keegan, Kohl & Lahue, 2005
When I began my research in late Spring of 2013, I was pursuing a different research agenda than the one I ultimately addressed. I initially wanted to examine the ‘added burden’ of mass incarceration on families. Specifically, I wanted to learn if mothers faced new challenges after the fathers of their children were incarcerated. Did his incarceration have an impact on their relationship, and how so? Do mothers need to find alternative sources of income? In what ways did their partners’ incarceration affect mothers’ parenting? Unfortunately, given my methodology, these questions were impossible to answer. Prison is not an intervention for which one can control. Instead, a prison sentence is often highly correlated with a host of other

Figure 2. Number of adult prisoners released in 2002 into Boston area by block group
factors (race, education, income, criminal behavior, etc.) that cannot be disentangled.

Furthermore, I soon learned that women often did not know the incarceration history of their baby’s fathers and that romantic relationships could dissolve quickly, making it difficult for women to know what if any effect prison had on their partnership.

I shifted my research questions to those that focused less on the relationship women had with incarcerated partners and more on how the larger forces of crime and punishment have affected non-incarcerated mothers. I began research by reaching out to community organizations that might afford me the opportunity to get to know the women whom they served. They suggested I contact the tenant task forces of various public housing facilities in the area, criminal justice community action organizations, outreach coordinators at community centers, and outreach coordinators at neighborhood health centers.

I pursued each of these avenues, though ultimately most proved to be ineffectual in finding women to interview. One executive director of a community organization on motherhood said that she did not allow researchers to attend or volunteer at group meetings. An outreach coordinator at a community center tried to connect me with two members of their ‘Street Workers’ team (individuals who interact directly with the community) but neither responded to my requests for a meeting. In most cases, the tenant task forces of housing projects did not return my calls or meet with me when I made unscheduled visits to offices. One individual, who was a member of a housing co-op board in Roxbury, allowed me to attend several meetings of her women’s group, wherein I was able to introduce myself and describe my research. I was able to meet two women to interview through this group, and three more in similar meetings.
I soon learned that finding women through indirect connections was not the most efficient model for gathering data, so I sought to discover ways of integrating myself directly into the communities I hoped to study. I had previously worked as a GED teacher and thought that reviving this role might offer me the ability to meet more women and provide a service to them as well. From August to November of 2013, I volunteered three days a week as a GED teacher at two different locations (one in a community center in Roxbury and another in a high school in Dorchester). While this was a rewarding endeavor and did produce some results (I conducted two more interviews), I found that I rarely met individuals outside of the handful I taught, and only several of them met my research criteria.

Though initially reluctant, I realized that I would have much greater success with a research model that financially compensated my interviewees. After receiving IRB approval for this change, I began posting flyers at bus stops, court houses, local restaurants, libraries, community colleges, and public housing buildings. I offered $25 in gift cards for each interview and had a $10 referral gift card for each successful referral I received. This recruitment method proved much more efficient and, over the course of the next six months, my interview total increased to 88. (Paid interviews began in April, 2014 and continued through September of that year). Each interview was done in-person at locations suggested by the interviewee, including their homes, restaurants, shelters, waiting rooms, rehabilitation facilities, and (on nice days) outside. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 45 minutes to three hours.

Though I used an interview guide, I tried to make my questions as open-ended as possible. I asked each woman about their early lives, who they grew up with, how they would describe their family, and what their childhood neighborhood was like. I asked about school,
first loves, and dreams about their future. The majority of questions were about their baby’s fathers, parenting, and the women’s views on crime and prison. Some women spoke at length about the story of their lives and needed little directing. Others were less loquacious. Many women referenced traumatic early life events that were difficult for them to describe and for me to hear. Four women witnessed a homicide. More than a dozen mentioned sexual assault and one detailed how her mother would rent out her six-year-old daughter in exchange for heroin. Interviews were often emotional and draining for women as well as myself. I scheduled no more than two interviews a day and no more than a dozen a week. I began transcribing in summer of 2014 and listened to each recording at least twice. I coded interviews using Atlas.ti software.

Ultimately I interviewed 94 individuals for this study, though six were not included amongst my data. Three of these six were ‘expert interviews’ in which I sought insight from professionals who work directly with my target community; one expert works at a neighborhood organization for mothers, and two were probation officers in Dorchester. Two women opted out of the study during/after their interviews (one because she found the experience too taxing, the other because she was uncomfortable with the level of disclosure). A sixth interview was excluded because the interviewee disclosed that she was not sober at the time of our meeting. The remaining 88 interviewees have the following characteristics:

**Sample Characteristics** (see Figures 3-5 below)

Average age: 40.13 years-old at the time of the interview

Age range of interviewees: 20 – 64 years old
Average number of children: 2.24

Range number of children: 1 – 5 children

Average number of baby’s fathers: 1.81

Average age of mother at the birth of first child: 19.71
Racial composition:

- 59 of 88 identified as African American
- 12 of 88 identified as Latino/Hispanic
- 7 of 88 identified as white
- 10 of 88 identified as mixed race or other

Figure 4. Self-identified race of interviewee
Average number of years of education: 12

Educational composition:

29 of 88 dropped out of high school and received no additional education

8 of 88 graduated from high school and received no addition education

14 of 88 had dropped out of high school and later received a GED

30 of 88 had some form of additional education (such as taking courses at a community college)

5 of 88 had graduated from a four-year college

2 of 88 had a graduate school degree
Overview of the remaining chapters

The goal of this dissertation is to describe the behaviors, opportunities, and worldviews of women who share a child with (currently or formerly) incarcerated men in poor urban neighborhoods. In Chapter 2, I extend the research of sociologist Elijah Anderson. Anderson argued in his 1999 book *Code of the Street* that low-income urban communities bracket themselves into two distinct groups: street and decent. In the nearly twenty years since the publication of *Code of the Street*, mass incarceration has soared, due mostly to harsher sentencing of young minority males for drug crimes. I argue that as criminalization and incarceration have become omnipresent in the inner-city, the distinction between ‘street’ and ‘decent’ has blurred in the eyes of the women. All women possess counter-examples of individuals who have committed crimes but are otherwise good. Furthermore, constant exposure to drugs and awareness of limited economic opportunities delegitimizes the stigma of the ‘criminal’ label. Women do not ostracize men with prison records; so long as criminal behavior remains part of the past, women are willing to forgive former offenders.

In Chapter 3, I begin by addressing a lingering question that follows from Edin and Kefalas’ *Promises I Can Keep*. These authors show that young urban women put off marriage but not motherhood, feeling the latter is a biological imperative. While this work addresses why young, low-income women enter motherhood, questions remain about how women manage this challenging role. I show that in poor communities, addiction and incarceration have had a destabilizing effect on the parent/child relationship. Some women in my study grew up with one or both parents lost to drugs or prison. As a result of growing up without adequate parental care, these women were forced to learn the emotional and practical...
skills needed to fend for themselves. I describe the effects that absentee and abusive parenting had on women and discuss how women responded to those hardships. For some, this parental deprivation functioned to teach women important lessons about how to be a mother and how to navigate the system. I argue that while young women in the inner-city may lack for material resources, they have knowledge and skills that can be utilized as they enter motherhood.

In Chapter 4, I describe how the mothers in my study think about parenting. Specifically, I address how women assess the fathers of their children, given (per Chapter 2) that a criminal past is not inherently a marker of paternal quality. I find that while there is a range of responses to questions about fatherhood, most women believe that time and attention are what their children need most from their dads. Financial support from fathers is also necessary, to a greater or lesser degree, but insufficient; many women were forgiving of fathers who could not provide much materially if they were able to provide support and care to their children. In this chapter I also explain some of the choices these women face in their role as mothers, including what they tell their children about their fathers and how much effort they put into ensuring that their kids maintain their paternal connections. I also describe what hopes these women have for their own children, who may face similar choices as they did. Lastly, I conclude my dissertation with suggestions for future sociological research and a discussion about the importance of understanding the pervasive effects that crime and punishment have had on inner-city communities, as these effects will continue to be felt generation after generation.
Chapter 2: Neither Street nor Decent

In his seminal study, sociologist Elijah Anderson argued that residents in inner-city communities adopt one of two diametrically opposed moral positions: that of being ‘street’ or of being ‘decent.’ Put simply, decent individuals espouse ‘traditional’ values of family, responsibility and legally condoned upward mobility. Individuals who identified as street stand opposed to their decent neighbors and are recognized by their amoral behaviors: they are not gainfully or legally employed, they are indifferent to their parenting roles and do not take full responsibility of their children, and they use or sell drugs and engage in other criminal acts. While a person may shift from one label to the other over time, these categories are largely discrete. Decent individuals try to maintain their moral status and keep discernable boundaries between themselves and their street peers.

I argue that in poor urban communities today, these boundaries are no longer discrete. The broad and pervasive penetration of the criminal justice system into these communities has led to a more nuanced and fluid understanding of what it means to be “good” in the inner-city. I push back on Anderson’s street/decent dichotomy by arguing that the ubiquity of drugs and mass incarceration has complicated this distinction, and that boundaries between street and decent are much more fluid today. As women witness loving fathers, devoted partners and dedicated friends revolve through prisons, they develop a less bifurcated understanding of being both criminal and good. Furthermore, some of these women have themselves traversed the line between being street and decent and are thus aware of the fluidity between these categories. As a result, the ‘sticky’ stigma associated with having a loved one behind bars has significantly diminished.
In this chapter, I begin with a brief literature review by highlighting Anderson’s *Code of the Street*, as well as other works that describe a stigmatization of the criminal ‘other.’ I then describe the landscape of inner-cities today by noting recent demographic trends, showing that while gains have been made in employment and education, prison rates have risen dramatically, due primarily to the War on Drugs. It is my position that the ubiquity of criminalization and mass incarceration have altered how women view and evaluate men, and the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to describing ways in which these macro-level shifts have manifest in changing perceptions of what it is to be criminal.

**Understanding the Literature**

*Anderson’s Code of the Street*

Published in 1999, Anderson’s *Code of the Street* reports his observations from a four-year ethnography of poor neighborhoods in and around Philadelphia. The 1990’s saw the devastation of crack cocaine in American inner-cities and a resulting proliferation of violence. Many residents in these neighborhoods increasingly believed that mainstream (middle/upper class and white) communities were cordoned off from their own, and that they had no means of achieving the traditional American Dream. Those inner-city families who remained committed to their traditional values labeled themselves as ‘decent.’ In these decent families, gender roles were distinct and delineated: fathers were heads of their households who provided the family with income and strict enforcement of familial rules. Mothers raised their children, kept up the home and obeyed their husbands. Decent parents were typically married.
Decent children attended school, obeyed their parents and avoided those peers who did not adopt similar modes of conduct.

The ‘street’ code is a counter-cultural manifestation, set in opposition to being ‘decent.’

Anderson contends that some individuals recognized that they were functionally prohibited from achieving milestones laid out by mainstream society: specifically, that they were unable to gain full time, lucrative employment that would allow them to acquire material assets and support their own families. As a result, people adopted an alternative code of conduct for their environment that could afford them the respect that mainstream society could not. Street individuals may be violent, crass, and criminal. Anderson makes clear that individuals who engage in criminal activities indisputably fall within the street category. He writes “[a]t the extreme of the street-oriented group are those who make up the criminal element. People in this class are profound casualties of the social and economic system, and they tend to embrace the street code whole-heartedly... many pride themselves on living the “thug Life,” actively defying not simply the wider social conventions but the law itself” (pg 36). Anderson continues by saying that those in the extreme end of the street group emulate, among others, drug dealers, as they “confront the system and stand up for themselves.” This subset of the street population find themselves in desperate situations and are willing to exploit others for gain. Due to their destructive behavior, Anderson claims that decent individuals will try to avoid those who are street. He writes “[p]eople who fit the conception of street are often considered to be lowlife or “bad people,” especially by the “decent people,” and they are generally seen as incapable of being anything but a bad influence on the community and a bother to their neighbors” (pg 46).
This dichotomy of decent and street behaviors is seen clearly through men. Anderson writes at length about the ‘Decent Daddy.’ The Decent Daddy prioritizes his family above all else. When not working long hours to support his spouse and children, he will be at home rather than with his friends at the bar or on the corner. He is protective of his wife and daughters and takes an active role in raising his sons so that they adopt similar patterns of behavior. He does not tolerate drug use, violence or criminal conduct, and condemns those who do. Decent men are widely recognized as such and become paragons in their communities. Men who adopt a street code also aspire to having a reputation of respect in their communities, but for them, respect is found in other ways. Where masculinity cannot be demonstrated with a regular paycheck, men may engage in acts of violence to establish themselves within their social hierarchies. They may participate in risky and illegal behaviors in order to earn the kinds of money they cannot achieve from the employment opportunities available to them. They might bolster their sense of virility by producing children, even when they do not have the means to support them.

For decent daddies, the distinction they see between themselves and their street counterparts is a moral one; it would be a source of disappointment or shame if they or a member of their families faltered in their decency. Though he does not explicitly name it as such, Anderson suggests that there is a stigma attached to those individuals who defy traditional American norms of decency. He is not the only researcher to identify this phenomenon. In Doing Time on the Outside, Donald Braman (2004) examines the perspectives and experiences of families of incarcerated individuals in the Washington DC area. Braman interviewed 28 families over a four-year period to understand the myriad ways that prison
impacts not just inmates, but those who support them. One of his most significant findings is that even in communities where incarceration is disproportionately common, there still exists stigma with having a loved one behind bars. This stigma had social, psychological, and (potentially) economic consequences on families.

Common amongst those he interviewed, Braman found that the families of the incarcerated feared judgment by those around them. They worried that they would be viewed differently if their peers learned of their loved one’s transgression. Unsurprisingly, Braman learned that many of the family members would either remain silent about where the incarcerated person was or lie about the crime that sent the person to prison. Frequently, family members would withdraw from friends and coworkers in order to maintain their privacy and retain their reputation and respect. They felt as though the stigma associated with their loved one’s incarceration was ‘sticky’ and would harm them as well. As a result, these individuals cut themselves off from their social networks at a time when they most needed them. Braman’s interviewees described falling into deep depressions and having no one they felt comfortable talking to. They experienced severe stress that affected all aspects of their life, including time at home, work, church and other social settings. Fear of judgment was not solely associated with the individual who was incarcerated; many family members worried that stigma was transferable and that peers would think that they, too, were criminal. The criminal label is so troubling that many would accept the consequences of silence and isolation rather than the threat of exposure.

The women in my study tell stories that call into question the present-day relevance of Anderson’s and Braman’s findings. These women did not bifurcate the men in their lives as
either ‘street’ or ‘decent.’ These women, nearly all of whom are focused on providing the best for their children, often did not see their offending partners as immoral or unworthy. To the contrary, many women held positive views of men that seemed to have no correlation between their criminal status and their value as fathers or boyfriends. These women also did not hide or obfuscate the status of their partners for fear of stigma, as Braman found. Generally speaking, they were forthright about their partner’s pasts, and even though they did not approve of criminal action, they did not see such behavior as a marker of someone to be avoided.

**Critique of the Code**

The aforementioned *Code of the Street* was largely hailed as an insightful and illuminative investigation of life in the inner-city. Anderson’s research coincided with the rise of the 1980’s - 1990’s drug epidemic that also heralded a rise in violent crime. Anderson’s ethnographic study portrayed how a society bereft of certain institutional structures (such as stable and lucrative employment, capable and invested policing forces, etc.) fosters its own set of behavioral norms. While largely lauded in sociological circles, Loic Wacquant (2002) criticized the work on several fronts. Wacquant argued that Anderson adopted the terms ‘street’ and ‘decent’ as folk concepts (emanating from the people he studied) and treated them as a dichotomous moral distinction with no discussion as to the social/structural pathways that influence the direction individuals travel. Furthermore, Wacquant argued that Anderson was unclear as to the nature and the origin of the ‘code,’ resulting in a work that is more descriptive than theoretically informative. Lastly, Wacquant accused Anderson of adopting a moral position as relates to the people he studied, saying that Anderson argued that ‘decent’ means
good and ‘street’ means bad. Anderson (2002) offered a lengthy retort to Wacquant’s critiques, largely arguing that his descriptions and moral pronouncements are not his own but those espoused by the people he observed, and that his work does address the influence (or lack thereof) that social structures have on individuals within these communities.

Critiques of Anderson’s work notwithstanding, his *Code of the Street* remains foundational to sociological understandings of the range of attitudes and behaviors that grow from an environment that stands askew of the idealized American neighborhood. In places that lack the security of law enforcement and faith in an educational and economic system that would ensure upward mobility, people can adopt alternative behaviors that yield desired outcomes. In Philadelphia in the 1990’s, violent tendencies and criminal conduct may have served as currency for those who did not (or were unable) to espouse more mainstream behaviors. For myself, I do not share Wacquant’s concerns over Anderson’s use of terms; irrespective of their origin and moral position, they provide a valuable lens into how individuals in these communities understood themselves and those around them. I do, however, argue that since the time of his research, the distinction between ‘street’ and ‘decent’ has blurred. This blurring is likely caused by the increased influence of the criminal justice system and the rise of mass incarceration.

**Understanding the Landscape of the Inner-City**

Perhaps the most universal reason why the women I interviewed did not view criminal behavior as morally reprehensible is because crime and incarceration have become normalized in the inner-city. Sociologists have long examined the repercussions of deindustrialization and
policy changes on urban minorities. Jobs and the middle class fled the inner-city, leaving neighborhoods of cumulative disadvantage in their wake. This disadvantage took the form of increasing high school dropout rates and lack of education, joblessness, and crime. In order to understand the landscape of the inner-city today, I will give a short overview of the social forces that helped pave the way for crime to become a normalized occurrence. Specifically, I will begin with a brief description of trends in education and employment in these communities, followed by a discussion of the rising prison rate caused by the War on Drugs.

**Education**

Failure to graduate from school is associated with a host of negative outcomes that can affect individuals over the course of their lives. In 2012, the average annual income for Americans aged 18 to 67 who had not completed high school was near $25,000, almost half of what individuals with at least a high school or equivalency degree (GED) made in that time ($46,000 annually).\(^{15}\) For those without a high school degree, this amounts to approximately $670,000 of lost revenue in one’s lifetime. Relatedly, those without a high school degree are more likely to be unemployed than their more educated counterparts (U.S. Department of Labor), more likely to rely on welfare and experience higher rates of criminal activity (Levin & Belfield, 2007).

Though the outcomes for those who do not finish high school are negative, Americans on the whole have seen a decrease in the dropout rate. According to the National Center for

Education Statistics (NCES), in 2015 the status dropout rate\textsuperscript{16} for 16 to 24-year-olds in the U.S. was at a fifteen year low of 5.9%. The decrease in dropout rate was seen amongst all races, genders and income levels: from 2000 to 2015, the dropout rate for white youth reduced from 6.9 to 4.6%, for black youth from 13.1 to 6.5%, and Hispanic youth from 27.8 to 9.2%.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{status_dropout_rates}
\caption{Status high school dropout rate of 16- to 24-year-olds by race, 1990-2015}
\end{figure}

While the overall dropout rate is shrinking across all groups, it is important to note that low-income families have and continue to suffer disproportionately higher dropout rates (see Figure 6 above). The NCES reports that while in 2013 the dropout rate for 16 to 24-year-olds from families in the highest quartile for annual income was 3.2%, the dropout rate for individuals from the lowest income quartile was more than three times as high, at 10.7\%.\textsuperscript{17} The NCES also calculated the percentage of 16 to 24-year-old high school dropouts by labor market status, finding that in 2013 more than 58% were unemployed or not in the labor force. In 2000,

\textsuperscript{16} The status dropout rate represents “who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a GED certificate)”. \url{https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=16}

\textsuperscript{17} \url{https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016117rev.pdf} pg 59
just over 43% of 16 to 24-year-old dropouts were unemployed or not in the workforce. Thus, overall the high school dropout rate has trended in a positive direction in that more Americans are finishing high school or receiving their equivalency diplomas than ever before. Unfortunately, even with these improvements, low-income, minority communities continue to have the highest drop out rates.

**Employment**

For many decades, the proportion of employed black and Hispanic Americans in the U.S. has paled in comparison to those of their white counterparts. The Bureau of Labor Statistics calculates that in 2016 the overall unemployment rate was 4.9%: 4.3% for whites, 5.8% for Hispanics and 8.4% for blacks.\(^{18}\) For all groups, the unemployment rate\(^{19}\) rose significantly amidst national recessions and has largely tapered during years of growth. Figure 7 below\(^{20}\) (which includes data from the first three quarters of 2017) shows this trend over the last several decades.


\(^{19}\) The unemployment rate, however, does not directly measure the number of employed individuals and may not be the best metric for understanding joblessness in the inner-city. By definition, the unemployment rate counts people who do not currently have a job but are able to work and have been looking for a job within the last four weeks. In areas where the local economy is persistently depressed, individuals who want to work may have given up on the possibility of finding gainful employment and stopped actively searching, and by doing so would not be included in the official unemployment rate. Furthermore, Bruce Western (2006) has demonstrated that the traditional means of calculating the unemployment rate exclude institutionalized individuals who would not qualify as looking for work. Western argues that the surging incarcerate rate of the 1990’s distorts the accuracy of the official unemployment rate, effectively hiding the true proportion of people who are not in the labor force.

\(^{20}\) [https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cps_charts.pdf](https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cps_charts.pdf)
The Bureau of Labor Statistics also examined the correlation between employment and educational status. Figure 8 below shows that educational attainment is inversely correlated with the unemployment rate, meaning that the less education one has, the more likely he is to be unemployed.
Like the high school dropout rate, the unemployment rate has been trending in a positive direction since the economic recession in 2008. Nonetheless, blacks, Hispanics, and those with the least education continue to have the highest unemployment rates. It is in the intersection of these demographics that the criminal justice system has made the greatest impact in the everyday lives of individuals.

**War on Drugs & Prison**

While there have been improvements in educational attainment and employment for all Americans, including those in the inner-city, there have been downward trends as well. Beginning in the mid-1980’s, crack cocaine entered U.S. cities. Being relatively cheap and widely available, crack cocaine had its greatest impact in poor minority communities where it served as a source of stable, though dangerous, income (Venkatesh, 2008; Jacobs, 1999; Bourgois, 1996). The crack cocaine epidemic is associated with a host of devastating social outcomes, including a doubling of the homicide rate for black male youth aged 14 to 17 in the decade between the mid-1980’s and the mid-1990’s, as well as a marked increase in children sent to foster care during that time.21 Hartley and Miller (2010) found that 85% of people arrested for the use or distribution of crack cocaine were black.

The incarceration rate in the U.S. surged after the criminal justice system mobilized in response to this drug epidemic. Lawmakers responded to the influx of crack cocaine, and the associated violence, with a host of new sentencing laws for possession and distribution of

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21 See Fryer, Heaton, Levitt and Murphy, 2006, for a thorough examination of the variety of impacts of crack cocaine beginning in the 1980’s. http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/fhlm_crack_cocaine_0.pdf
narcotics. These new sentencing guidelines were part of the government’s War on Drugs\textsuperscript{22}, which (arguably) abandoned the goal of offender rehabilitation and instead adopted a more punitive position on those charged with drug crimes. Soon drug offenders would outnumber other types of inmates in state and federal prisons, a trend that survives today, despite the fact that many individuals charged with drug crimes are non-violent offenders. Three strikes and truth-in-sentencing laws have only exacerbated this trend. As figure 9 below shows, as of 2014 almost half of all inmates are serving time for a drug offense.\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{us_prison_population_by_offense.png}
\caption{U.S. Prison population by offense in 2014, by number of convictions and percentage of convictions}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{22} The War on Drugs began prior to the 1980’s to combat drugs entering the U.S. from Central and South America, but later became synonymous with a punitive shift in domestic sentencing laws.

This War on Drugs had devastating consequences, felt most acutely by minority men.

The table below was created by the Prison Policy Institute using Bureau of Justice Statistics data from 2016 (see table 1, italics not part of original). While the white population accounts for just over 62% of the total U.S. population, it only accounts for a third of the prison population. For black and Hispanics, however, the trend is reversed: though these groups only account for 13.2% and 17.4% of the total population respectively, together they make up more than half of the prison population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of incarcerated population by race in 2016</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. population</td>
<td>62.1%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jail incarceration</td>
<td>47.4%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>State &amp; federal incarceration</strong></td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life sentence</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life without parole sentence</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
<td>56.4%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death row population</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.

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Not only is the prison population more likely to be black or Hispanic, it is more likely to be poor.\textsuperscript{25} Table 2 below looks at the income of those who have not been incarcerated compared to those who have. Both men and women who are incarcerated made substantially less income prior to incarceration than those who had never been.

Average income in 2014 for 27- to 42-year-olds by gender, race and incarceration status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Incarcerated people (prior to incarceration)</th>
<th>Non-incarcerated people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>$19,650</td>
<td>$13,890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>$17,625</td>
<td>$12,735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>$19,740</td>
<td>$11,820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>$21,975</td>
<td>$15,480</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{25} Rabuy & Kopf, 2015: https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/income.html

Additionally, well over half of incarcerated men aged 27 to 42 made under $22,500 annually, while well over half of non-incarcerated men of the same age made more than $37,500 (see figure 10).
In addition to being poor, the group of individuals who eventually go to prison are disproportionately under-educated compared to the general population. Bruce Western’s (2006) research on the growth of mass incarceration finds that between 1980 and 2008, the incarceration rate for black men who have dropped out of high school was over 35% (Western & Pettit, 2010). Figure 11 below breaks down the incarceration rate of black, white, and Hispanic men aged 20 to 39. By 2010, men of all races saw a significant increase in their incarceration rate that was inversely correlated with their educational attainment. For no group was this trend more pronounced than for black men under 40 without a high school degree, as by 2010, one third had spent some time in prison.

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Figure 11. Percentage of population by education and race in 1972 and 2010

As the preceding data undeniably demonstrates, in areas that are poor, under-educated and possessing sizable black and/or Hispanic populations, crime and prison sentences are regular occurrences. For individuals living in these communities, mass incarceration is not an abstraction, but a common reality in the daily lives of its residents.

The women I interviewed live in communities where mass incarceration is a common phenomenon. Most have been touched by the criminal justice system in a variety of ways and through a variety of people: in addition to having a partner who had been incarcerated, most also had other family or friends who had been to prison as well. Some of the women themselves had been incarcerated. Most recalled being aware of the influence of the criminal
justice system from when they were very young, either by visiting a family member who was incarcerated or watching the police arrest someone they know.

It is this broad and sustained exposure to criminal offenders that is the basis of my argument in this chapter: that for the people living in low-income urban communities, the understanding of who is ‘decent’ and who is ‘street’ has blurred significantly from when Anderson examined areas of Philadelphia in the 1990’s. The criminal label no longer carries the associated ‘street’ stigma. I argue that the blurring of the street/decent dichotomy has occurred for the following reasons: exposure to drugs; ‘decent’ criminals; insufficient alternatives; and (what I call) the ‘Robin Hood’ effect. Furthermore, many of the women I met believed in redemption and were reluctant to pronounce judgements on others. For the rest of this chapter, I describe how the changing realities of life in the inner-city have affected the ways that women understand crime and criminals.

**Understanding Perspectives on Crime and Criminals**

*Exposure to Drugs and Drug Users*

“But I also feel like, in urban communities, who hasn’t dealt in drugs? You know what I mean? It’s not like people who deal in drugs are bad people.” Asha, 30-year-old mother of two.

For the majority of women I met, exposure to drugs was common. Threaded through nearly everyone’s biography is some reference to drugs, from the seemingly innocuous (occasional, recreational drug use with no obvious long-term ramifications) to the almost unspeakably tragic. One woman described the delicate dance of walking across her kitchen floor as a child, careful to dodge the needles strewn across the floor that her family used to
inject heroin (she would eventually lose both her parents to AIDS). Another recalled that when her mother would run low on funds to pay her dealer, she would make up the difference by loaning out her very young daughter for sexual favors. Still another said that the home in which she was raised was a ‘shooting gallery,’ which she explains was a communal area for drug users to meet with their dealers, purchase and use heroin.

Many of the women I met stated that they were first exposed to drugs by someone in their family. No other story better illustrated the pervasive devastation of drugs than that of the White family. Over the course of the summer of 2014, I was able to interview all five living White sisters, now aged between 42 and 50, and four of their daughters. In the 1980’s, an uncle of the White sisters began shuttling cocaine from New York to Boston and recruited his five nieces to help with delivery and sales. He told them that because they were female and they were young, they would be functionally immune to arrest. The sisters tell me that their uncle became well known in their neighborhood and quite successful; one sister described how there would be a million dollars in cash stored in their family freezer. Generally speaking, the sisters describe this as a fun time in their lives: they felt important and had a certain amount of vicarious notoriety. Their uncle frequently gave them presents and allowed them unfettered access to the narcotics he sold. Looking back, however, each of the five sisters paid dearly for their involvement. Each would suffer addiction for decades. Two would admit to being incarcerated, one would lose her home and live in shelters for years, and another would lose her children to foster care.

Given the prolific nature of drugs and drug offenders in inner-city communities, it is no surprise that the women I interviewed did not adopt a uniform position on those charged with
such crimes. Drug users and drug dealers were not ‘other’ but instead were family and friends, and sometimes themselves. Blanket condemnation works best in abstractions; it is far easier to write off people or situations when there are not personal relationships involved. Because nearly everyone in these communities knows someone (and often knows someone well) who has been incarcerated for a drug crime, people are aware that extenuating circumstances exist and that even those who are imprisoned are still moral human beings. Additionally, given the number of individuals from these neighborhoods who eventually serve time for a drug charge, the decision to distance oneself from everyone who serves a prison sentence would mean avoiding a significant proportion of the one’s community. The quote by Asha at the beginning of this section is echoed by many women in my study; nearly every woman I met had experience with drug users and drug use. In the following chapter, I describe the experiences of women who endured childhood abuse or neglect, which was almost always a function of a having a parent who was involved in drugs. While few women support dealing or abusing drugs, most understand that such actions are commonplace in their communities and they do not judge the person based on the behavior.

**Direct and Positive Exposure to ‘Decent’ Criminals**

The previous section demonstrates that mass incarceration, as a response to the influx of drugs, has disproportionately affected the inner-city. Women living in the inner-city have regular exposure to drug offenders and, in part, this constant exposure has weakened the association between being a criminal and being ‘street.’ Additionally, I argue that women do not bifurcate their communities into ‘street’ or ‘decent’ because most have had direct exposure
to a criminal offender who, aside from committing a criminal offense, otherwise embodies a ‘decent’ moral code. To best illustrate this point, I describe the story of Kia in detail.

Kia is a 20-year-old Latina mother of one. I met Kia at a local community college, where she and her cousin Terry are taking courses in the hopes of eventually becoming radiology technicians. Graduation is still a long way off; she and her cousin are both single mothers to infant children, struggling to balance their educations and hopes for upward mobility with the challenges of raising kids. Kia and Terry have done everything together for as long as they can remember: they grew up in the same neighborhood, hung out together, dated boys together, finished high school together. Both happened to become pregnant within weeks of one another. They are each other’s most vital source of support. The time they can spend together at school is therapeutic for them, as they live in shelters on opposite sides of Boston, so they no longer see much of each other. On this day, I had not intended to interview Kia; it was Terry who contacted me to participate in the study. Kia, not wanting to lose time with her cousin, tagged along.

Kia has that magical combination of charm and candor that make her instantly likeable. It probably does not hurt that she is startlingly beautiful, a fact which has resulted in years of constant male attention and may be one of the reasons Terry is one of the only good relationships she has with another female. Sadly, counted amongst those women Kia does not have a strong relationship with is her own mother. Her parents were young when they had her: her mother was 16-years-old and her father was 17. Even then, the relationship between her parents was challenging, as her mother was angry with her father’s dangerous lifestyle and suspected infidelity. During her pregnancy with Kia, her mother was stabbed in an altercation
between Kia’s father and rival drug dealers. In spite of the emotional challenges and physical dangers, her parents maintained a turbulent on-again, off-again relationship that resulted in two more children interspersed between long months apart when her mother would kick her father out of the house (though to be fair, Kia concedes, sometimes his absence was due to his periodic stints in and out of prison.) Even now, Kia believes her parents love one another and hope to eventually make a relationship work.

Kia says that her mother has always been very hard on her. Kia has two younger brothers, ages 19 and 10, and notes that their mother dotes on her “mommy’s boys” but treats her daughter differently. Kia says “she’s not active in my life. She never was. I lived with her, but she was just there, in the house.” Kia cannot say exactly why they were never close, only that it began when she was young. As early as age six, her parents would fight and her mother would tell her father to leave and take “his” daughter with him. Her mother took an ambivalent stance on raising her: while she let Kia live with her, she did not provide for much. Kia recalls snowy winters in Boston in which she would walk to school in a thin jacket and ballet flats because her mother would not buy her warmer clothing. In her teen years, Kia took it upon herself to earn money by adopting her father’s habit of dealing drugs, which only strained her relationship with her mother more. She says that her mother “sees me as my dad, just a girl version.” Kia left home a year and a half ago after learning she was pregnant. She had hoped her relationship with her mother would change once she gave birth, but it did not. Kia reports that her mother wants little to do with her granddaughter.

Kia’s relationship with her father is very different. She says of him “I love my dad. He’s always in and out of jail, but... he’s my guy, I don’t know how to explain it. He stepped... he’s
just... he’s there for me.” Growing up, her father would be missing for months at a time. Kia says he was transparent with his wife and kids about his illegal activities, and his absences were due to extended time in the streets or serving time for getting caught (often his family would not know which). Nevertheless, he would always return with money (if he had spent his time away dealing drugs). He would give Kia’s mother a handful of cash and tell her to go shopping, which always made her mother happy. Though he continues to engage in illegal behavior, he actively talks to his children about making better decisions and not following in his footsteps. These lessons were appreciated but largely ignored; both Kia and her 19-year-old brother have ‘been in the street’, dealing drugs and engaging in the occasional acts of violence. Nevertheless, both Kia and her brother maintain a strong attachment to their father and respect his guidance.

Kia’s relationship with her parents exemplifies a more nuanced and complicated understanding of being ‘street’ and ‘decent.’ While Kia’s mother may not fit well within the boundaries of Anderson’s conception of a ‘decent’ mother, she has never been an active participant in criminal activity nor has she served time in prison, and she expressed strong ambivalence to her partner’s criminal conduct (though would happily accept ill-gotten financial gain). Kia’s mother was distant and cold with her daughter, but by Kia’s own admission, her mother is doting and engaged with her younger brothers. Kia’s mother fits far closer to the ‘decent’ category than her father, who was actively engaged in criminal activity and frequently absent from the home. In spite of this, Kia is far more attached to her father than her mother. She speaks of him fondly and candidly, not bothering to gloss over his history as a drug dealer. Kia does not feel ashamed of her father, of his behavior or of their relationship, even though
she has now shunned her own past as a drug dealer and is working hard to model positive behavior for her daughter. What matters to Kia is that her father, in spite of his ‘street’ behaviors, has always been emotionally supportive in ways that her mother has not. This emotional connection overrides any blanket judgment that might be levied against her father.

In many ways, Kia’s story mirrors those of most of the women I interviewed, who also do not espouse the ‘street’ and ‘decent’ dichotomy. There are decent individuals, who work legitimate jobs, avoid criminal activity and keep a close and controlling eye on their children, who are nonetheless not viewed with the same affection or respect as those who might otherwise be deemed as street. Close relationships are far too complicated for categorical distinctions. Nearly all the women I interviewed had early memories of someone who had gone to prison, and often those individuals were family members. Though many of the women I met lived (or tried to live) decent lives, as involved mothers and positive role models, they still had the experience of loving someone who engages in behavior that would otherwise be viewed as negative. Earlier I mentioned the White family, wherein five of the sisters had participated in the family business of dealing drugs. In my interviews with their daughters, I learned that in spite the difficulties they had growing up with mothers who struggled with addiction and incarceration, the daughters were proud of their mothers regardless. All five mothers are now sober and trying to do right by their families. For their part, the daughters have forgiven their mothers for their previous absences. They believe that while their mothers are not perfect, they love them still and are grateful for the relationship they currently have.

In this section, I argued that personal relationships with criminal offenders blurs the boundaries between street and decent. Nearly everyone I met loves someone who has
committed a crime. On its face, this claim seems obvious; in that I only interviewed women who have had children by men who have been incarcerated, my sample might seem biased in favor of positive associations of people who have been to prison. Further examine shows that this is not the case. While some women are still in relationships with their baby’s fathers, others are not. Moreover, some women have very negative views of their baby’s fathers. Cora, who will be introduced in Chapter 4, describes the father of her children as “the worst kid’s father in the world.” Based on her feelings toward her former partner, Cora would be justified in harboring unforgiving and bitter sentiments towards criminal offenders. But Cora, like almost everyone I interviewed, has more than one person in her life who has spent time in prison. Currently her son is incarcerated on an assault charge.

In sum, the women I met see the positive attributes and actions of others and not just the problematic pieces. This fact was true even for those from ‘decent’ families; Valerie, who will also be introduced in Chapter 4, did not have family members who had been to prison and has a very contentious relationship with her baby’s father, who owes her $50,000 in back child support. And yet, even for Valerie, she has others in her life who have bridged the gap between being criminal and decent. I contend that most women assess the emotional connection they have with others as a stronger indicator of moral value than street behaviors. A loving, involved and interested father who has served time is typically more desirable than an uninvolved one with no prison record. For many of the women I met, their past experience has shown them that it is very possible for criminals to be decent.

*Insufficient Alternatives*
In the previous section I argued that decency is often assessed as a function of how the person has conducted himself in the past and not solely a function of one’s criminal record, in that sometimes, good men commit crimes. The women I met were tolerant of criminal records for other reasons as well. In this section I argue that women were disinclined to wholly condemn criminals because they were aware of the limitations of the environment in which they live. Asha, quoted earlier in the section on the ubiquity of drugs and drug dealers, is keenly aware of the economic realities of her community. Though she encourages others to find legitimate means of work, she tolerates (and accepts the economic rewards of) some criminal activity to support oneself financially.

Asha is a 30-year-old African American mother of two: a rather rambunctious nine-year-old boy and a shy, curious four-year-old girl. Both circle around us as I interview their mother in their family home, currently housing three generations of their family. Asha’s mother is cooking dinner for everyone in the kitchen while Asha tries to remain engaged with her children as we talk, answering their questions and encouraging them to play with their educational toys. Asha and her family live on a main thoroughfare on the south side of the city, and while Asha loves the vibrancy of the community, it is not a particularly safe street for kids to play outside. She was raised by her mother and stepfather, who have been together since she was in elementary school. Her mother and biological father separated when she was two. Asha admits that she and her father have never had much of a relationship; he would only appear periodically during her childhood and often she had no idea where he was. He had three children, all by different women, and was periodically incarcerated. Asha was recently informed that his cancer has returned and the prognosis suggests he will not live out the year.
She regrets, abstractly, that she is not terribly moved by this news. She does not anticipate visiting him before he passes.

In many ways, Asha exemplifies a decent mother. She was raised in a stable home to parents (mother and stepfather) who were very involved in her upbringing and kept street life at bay. Asha graduated from high school and was awarded a partial scholarship to attend college and earn a two-year associate’s degree. In spite of this opportunity, her dream was to become an aesthetician, so she moved out of her family home and began working full time at the age of 18 to put herself through beauty school. She maintained full time employment for the following seven and a half years, only returning home less than two years ago when she lost her job. Asha considers herself to be socially conservative: she did not date much in high school and waited until the age of 21 to have her first child. She values hard work and independence; she was embarrassed to move back in with her parents and hopes her stay is temporary. She is by far the most religious person in her family, which puts her somewhat at odds with her gay half-sister. She encourages her parents and half-sister to attend weekly services with her.

Though Asha has consistently adopted the tenants of decency for the whole of her life, she does not require them of her partner. Asha met Brian when she was 18 and he was 23. She would sit outside during her lunch break in the summer, and one day a young man chatted with her and asked her out. Asha declined. Brian, however, was persistent in his courtship, always coming to visit and occasionally writing her poems. After several months, Asha relented. They were together for three years before they had their son. Asha knew Brian was a drug dealer; he had a revolving set of expensive cars and was always flush with cash, though he never seemed to be working. Asha admits that his behavior did not bother her very much; to
the contrary, it meant that he would never ask her for money and could provide for her if she
needed it. She says:

“I always felt like I had a good 9-5 job, I could take care of me, but I didn’t want to take
care of no guy. With him, I didn’t have to take care of him. He would work during the
day and be home at night, he didn’t really work with the drug addicts let’s say, [he
worked] more with the people who sell to the addicts. I’m not going to say it was big
stuff, but it wasn’t small quantities. I didn’t have to be involved, half the time I didn’t
know what was going on. With that and the consistency and the income, it just drew
me to him. And when I got pregnant, there wasn’t a thought about how I’d live my life.
It was like ‘well, he’s a good drug dealer, and I got the smarts and the brains, we’ll be
able to make this work.’”

Unfortunately, things did not turn out as well as Asha had hoped. Brian was arrested by
the police when their son was one-year-old and sentenced to six and a half years in prison.
Upon completion of his sentence, Brian was deported to his native Haiti. Though they are no
longer romantically linked, Asha still cares for Brian and sends him any spare money she can.

Like many of the women I interviewed, Asha’s feelings about Brian’s criminal activity
were ambivalent. She did not approve of his choices outright and did not become directly
involved with his crimes. On occasion, she would encourage him to look for legitimate work.
Brian would retort that there were no realistic alternatives that could afford him the
compensation he felt he needed or deserved, and Asha would acquiesce to his reasoning. She
recalls telling him “I was like ‘don’t do this anymore, you don’t have to be doing this anymore.’
And he was like ‘please! With your little bit of money or whatever, how do you think we’re
going to be able to keep this apartment (his apartment) or your cars or whatever? I’m not
living off your chips!’ I was like ‘well, okay.’” While she may have preferred for Brian not to
deal drugs, she did not condemn his choices or shun him for his street behaviors. For Asha and
many others, the line between street and decent is not so clear. For Asha, reality in the inner-city is that the drug trade is a lucrative and readily available means for people to make a livable wage, not simply a last resort for the morally bankrupt.

*The Robin Hood Effect*

As discussed in depth, the women I interviewed did not adopt a uniformly negative view of crime (especially drug crimes) that would condemn their perpetrators as morally ‘other.’ This is partially a function of knowing offenders as individuals and appreciating the limited opportunities available in their communities. It is also because women mediate their judgments of criminal behavior based on how the gains of those behaviors are used. Put more simply, if the offender does good with his ill-gotten earnings, then his behavior (if not justified) is tolerated and appreciated. I refer to this as the Robin Hood Effect.

Both Kia and Asha comment on how their partners used the money they earned from dealing drugs, defending the men for prioritizing family. Asha credits Brian’s willingness to provide for her and their son, even when his generosity extended to other women he was seeing. She says of him that “he took care of me, and probably two or three other women for all I know. Although he had this money, he wasn’t a greedy person, he was still doing regular things just to survive. He was paying rent, which back then was like $1,100, and buying us the things we need. I didn’t realize how much he did help me until he was locked up. I was like ‘oh my gosh, I gotta buy Pampers, I gotta go buy kids clothes,’ where before he took care of those things.” While Asha did have reservations over Brian’s chosen method of earning income, she readily accepted his financial assistance and appreciated how he spent his money.
Kia felt similarly. Though she notes the similarity in the actions of her father and her ex-partner, who were both drug dealers, she views them very differently. She explains the distinction here: “[T]here’s two different types of hood dudes: there’s one who’s in the streets doing what they do, and there’s another who’s doing it but for their family. It’s like [my father]. He does what he does, sells drugs or whatever, but he takes care of [his family]. [And then there are those guys] who are selfish, only take care of their own needs... the man who takes care of his family, that’s the good hood dude. The other kind, let’s call them ‘wangsters’. He wants to get money, but he’s doing it for liquor, he’s doing it for weed.” Kia is no longer in a relationship with the father of her daughter; she left him because she did not see him making the positive changes she thought necessary to deserve a role in their daughter’s life. For Kia, the act of dealing drugs was not inherently problematic or without honor; it was how one took care of one’s family that matters. Kia has never been ashamed of her father. She proudly proclaims that he is a ‘street boss’ and described how in high school she would regularly get into physical altercations to defend him.

While most women I spoke to did not claim to support illegal activities like drug dealing, what was common was a sense of ambivalence. Most women report that at some point they encouraged their partners to abandon their criminal actions. Their pleas, however, were less a function of moral judgment over those behaviors so much as they were a reflection of the fear that the men would be caught and taken away, leaving women to raise their children alone. Nonetheless, while the women did wish their partners could find legitimate work, no one reported that they declined any financial support from their partners. In some cases, the women explicitly did not ask where the money came from, in the hopes of maintaining
plausible denyability or emotional distance from these events (this selective ignorance is addressed later in this chapter). In other cases, the women were well aware of the origins of the support they received. For these women, like Asha, money was money and they were grateful for whatever assistance they could get.

**Glass Houses**

Another reason women did not judge criminal activity as universally negative is that some women engaged in such behaviors themselves. Based on my conversations with women, it was not always obvious who had histories of criminality. As an example, I reference again the White family, in which one of the mothers gave me what I thought was a thorough and candid accounting of her major life events. Later, when interviewing her daughter, I learned that her mother had actually spent seven years in a federal women’s prison for drug trafficking. It is quite possible that this type of omission was not unique amongst my interviewees and that others also served time in prison but did not disclose it to me. In light of this possibility, I find that stigma may be the motivating factor for women in this group. In this situation, it would not be the ‘sticky’ stigma addressed in Braman’s work that is associated with having a loved one commit crimes, but a stigma based on fear of judgment for their own actions: they may have felt embarrassed about their own criminal behaviors and avoided describing them to me. I do not have criminal records for the women I interviewed, so I do not know the relative frequency of women being less than completely transparent about their own involvement in crime.

That being said, others were quite candid about their pasts. Like Kia, some admitted to dealing drugs to earn money. Others committed crimes for the thrill; one woman described
how she and her friends would shoplift as teenagers to see how much they could take without getting caught. Some women suffered unbearable tragedy and coped by using (and soon abusing) drugs, only to find themselves incarcerated when they were attempting to ease their psychological pain. Occasionally love and naïveté were the motivating factors: one woman allowed herself to become an accessory after the fact because she loved her husband and wanted to help him after he was arrested. Still other women committed crimes because they did not judge such actions as morally problematic. When interviewing another of the White sisters in her home, her teenage son walked through the kitchen, smoking marijuana. She apologized for his behavior and seemed embarrassed by it, but said she felt ambivalent about judging him because of her past with drugs.

Sociologist Patrick Sharkey has written extensively on how some communities have remained stable over time. Sharkey demonstrates that contrary to the belief that America is a nation of endless opportunity and upward mobility, people on the extreme ends of the economic and social scales often spend their whole lives there. This was especially true for racial minorities. In his article “Intergenerational Transmission of Context” (2018), Sharkey shows that 70% of poor black children will live their whole lives in poor neighborhoods, compared to 40% of whites. Many will see whole generations live in the same communities that lack economic and educational resources. In essence, the argument I am making here extends from the argument Sharkey is making: as families remain stuck in perennially under-resourced areas, they will likely continue to fall prey to the same corrosive behaviors as the previous generations. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the women I interviewed took a more lenient view of crime and criminal offenders: some have committed crimes themselves,
have seen their parents commit crimes, and bear reluctant witness to their children moving in that trajectory as well. How can one condemn in others what many do themselves? To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that criminality is intergenerational, just that when the social contexts in which people live remain constant, individual response to that environment is likely to remain constant as well. If dealing drugs is and remains the only viable mechanism to earn a livable wage in the inner-city, people will continue to sell drugs. The women I interviewed understood the challenges of making ends meet in their communities. At times, some have made choices they would not have made, had other opportunities been available to them. As a result, they are reluctant to attack others for similar actions.

*Domestic Violence*

Throughout this chapter I have shown that the women in my study do not bifurcate men as ‘decent’ or ‘street’, but instead understand that life in the inner-city complicates an absolute moral framework for behavior. Committing crimes, and serving time, do not serve as markers of moral failing. Given the lack of educational and occupational opportunities in these communities, many women were tolerant and accepting of men who commit ‘victimless’ crime (for example, dealing narcotics) to support themselves financially. But what about cases in which the women are the victims of the crime? Are women who are harmed by men as tolerant of crime and criminal offenders?

Domestic violence was a fairly common occurrence amongst the women I met, with more than a quarter (26) of my interviewees stating that they had been physically abused by their partners. In seven of these cases, the reason their boyfriends had spent time in prison
was as a result of the domestic abuse charges women filed against them. It would be entirely reasonable to assume that among the women in my study, victims of domestic violence might harbor lingering negative views of men who served time, especially those with a history of abuse charges. After all, it would be these women more so than anyone who have suffered most from the criminal offenders they knew, as they have endured physical and psychological wounds that some continue to suffer to this day. What I found when speaking to victims of domestic violence was a wide range of responses, both to their perpetrators and those in general with criminal histories.

Some of the women adopted a hopeful perspective, believing in rehabilitation and redemption. Cindy is a white 35-year-old mother of three who grew up in a stable two-parent family in an affluent suburb of Boston. Though she describes her relationship with her parents now as open and supportive, in her teens she rebelled against their strict rules and moved out at the age of 18. Cindy worked as a cashier at a local bodega where she met Jose, the man who would become the father of her two eldest children. Jose was twelve years her senior and spoke no English (they communicated in her limited Spanish) but he won her over with his gentle demeanor. Cindy was shocked when the violence began more than a year into their relationship, just before the birth of their daughter. She remembers Jose’s jealous explosions, how he would scream at her for speaking with other men. Her would become angry and hit her in full view of others. Hard slaps turned into closed fisted punches to the face.

For nine years, the abuse continued. Cindy and Jose now had two children and were living together. Initially, she stayed with Jose because she loved him; later, she stayed because she believed, much to his insistence, that children are better off living with two parents. The
violence, however, only escalated over the years. On various occasions she would call the police, though his brief stints in jail did not derail their relationship nor did it curb his behavior.

Early on Jose would refrain from hitting Cindy in front of their kids, but eventually this last remaining restraint gave way as well. One night he beat her so badly that she pretended to be dead so he would stop. As he already was on probation at the time, his new offense landed him nine years in prison. Cindy has since left Jose and is now married with a third child.

Though she is grateful to have a husband who treats her well and has no criminal record, she does not condemn those who do. When asked if she would disapprove of her daughter dating someone with a criminal history, she said:

“It depends on what the charges were. I mean, was he in jail because he accidentally, you know, you know, he had a DUI and he accidentally killed a guy, like you know it was an accident, or was it child rape? You know, it’s just like a lot of... it depends on the situation totally. And if it has to do with like that [child rape] I’d say ‘stay the hell away from that person’ just because I’m sure people can be rehabilitated but you don’t want to; it just depends on the situation. I don’t think just because you’re incarcerated you’re a bad person, even if you murder somebody... not everybody who’s incarcerated has committed a crime, a lot of people are falsely accused... it’s not the end-all be-all, it’s not like you’re tarnished. Even with my kids’ father, you know, there are, I’m sure there are people who used to be abusive and now they are not and now they are rehabilitated.

Seemingly on the other end of the spectrum is Alicia, who I met in an inpatient rehabilitation facility where she is in treatment for a litany of drugs, including heroin and cocaine. Twenty-six-year-old Alicia is a Puerto Rican mother of five. She moved to Boston in 2003 to live with her mother and younger siblings. Drug use, limited English, and general disinterest in her studies led Alicia to drop out of high school in the 10th grade. Father to all her children is Javier, who she met while she was still in school but did not begin a relationship with
until she was 21 and he was 18. Prior to becoming pregnant, Javier did not show signs of violence, though they fought frequently once their first had arrived. She says that during some of the fights she would call the police and they would take him away, though she would always end up taking him back. She describes the cycle:

At the beginning of the relationship, he started getting violent, but he’s say ‘I’m not going to do it no more’, he’s doing it unconsciously. Then he stops for a while and starts again, and every time it’s getting worse. I don’t think he’s going to change; I put him in jail, I do everything I can do til he understands that that’s not right.

Alicia is currently seven months clean and is hoping to get her children out of foster care. She is not actively thinking about another romantic relationship, but when speculating about the type of partner she eventually wants, she says the following:

I want a responsible one, not another one in the street. (I ask if she would be with a man with a criminal record). I don’t know, that’s really hard. I think it all depends; everyone deserves a second chance. If this guy has a criminal background but is doing everything good, it all depends on their background. They could have a background as a sex offender, it depends on what kind of offense they have... [E]verybody makes mistakes. If [their criminal history is] domestic violence, then hell no. I think if they like to hit, they like to hit. I don’t think that’s a good idea.

It is clear that Alicia is wary of men with a history of domestic abuse and would be reluctant to let a violent man back into her life. In spite of this wariness, however, Alicia believes in second chances. She is willing to weigh a man’s present against his past, assessing if the good of the former outweighs the bad of the latter. Alicia believes that “everybody makes mistakes.” In this way, Alicia is like most of the women in my study. Though she does put some conditions on future partners, being unlikely to date someone with a history of physical
aggression, she does not view a criminal record as an indicator of a bad person or a marker for someone to be avoided. While Cindy and Alicia differ in the degree to which they might forgive people who have committed certain types of crimes, both are willing to look beyond one’s past.

I highlight the stories of domestic abuse survivors, because more so than nearly anyone, they would be justified in avoiding any future relationship that might seem threatening or instable. Nonetheless, both Cindy and Alicia have suffered directly at the hands of their perpetrators and yet, as demonstrated in various ways throughout this chapter, they do not subscribe to the street/decent dichotomy.

**The Past is The Past**

An important point to clarify about women’s position on men with criminal records: though most are accepting that men have committed crimes and/or been incarcerated, it is clear that women expect this behavior to be indisputably in the past. Women do not want to endure the omnipresent instability of interacting with a man who might be caught and sentenced at any time, nor do they want to introduce more risk into a home they share with their children or wrangle, once again, with a man who is incarcerated. Implicit in the answers women give for accepting men with records are themes of change and redemption: they talk about how everyone makes mistakes and is capable of turning their lives around. Francesca, who will be discussed in the next chapter, describes how she found out that her baby’s father had a record:

One day we went out to eat and he brought a package, and he was like ‘read this’ and it was like he went to jail for 12 years. And when I read it, it was like... I don’t really look at
peoples’ past, because I already had someone who was in jail, and I told him I wouldn’t look at him as his past, his past was his past, what counts is from now forward. If you did what you did and made your mistake, and can’t fix that, why shouldn’t I overlook that? Why would I be like ‘oh, you’ve been in jail for 12 years and you’re good for nothing,’ like, that’s not who I am. You did your time, you paid your time.

Francesca articulated what most women suggested: so long as problematic behavior remains firmly situated in the past and men have the ability to start over, they will not be penalized for what they have already done and paid for. Many women say they will draw the line if a partner finds himself back in prison:

If he goes back to jail again, I tell him I’m not doing it again. Not only would I suffer, but our son would suffer. In his mind, his decisions aren’t selfish, it’s him doing what he has to to survive. I tell him to do things the right way, because his next step is jail. No one wants to be there and be with someone who’s a jailbird, that’s not fun. I don’t want to live like that. He knows it bothers me, and it bothers him too, but it’s just his mentality.

Similarly, Asha, highlighted earlier in this chapter, has had enough. Her experience of being with someone who was incarcerated was so taxing that she feels as though she served his sentence with him. She refuses to have that experience again.

I did a 6 ½ year bid. I could tell you more about the system than anybody else who’s about to go in. I could tell you about the calls, I could tell you about the bathrooms, I could tell you about the guards. I don’t want to take another jail call, I don’t want to send another canteen. It’s too much stress and too much money.

This exception for the past was nearly ubiquitous: so long as he was not guilty of any crimes against children, women were almost universally willing to forgive offenses that occurred previously. What they were not willing to tolerate is dealing with the stress and instability of a man who continues to partake in that behavior.
Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell

The caveat to the above position, that women will only tolerate men who have moved on from their criminal behaviors, is that some men have not. When confronted with the hard truth, as Kia was when her baby’s father admitted that he would not give up selling drugs, women may be forced to make a decision they would prefer not to make. If they know definitively that their partner is engaged in criminal behavior, their choice to stay is a tacit acceptance of that behavior. This can make it more difficult for them to argue against criminal actions later. Also, as mentioned in the section on the Robin Hood Effect, women may be benefiting from the illicit doings of their partners. While they still do not want the risk of being with someone who might be sent to prison, they may be torn about confronting this reality and possibly ending a relationship with someone that they and their children love.

How do women manage this conundrum? For some, they simply do not ask. Women may opt for intentional ignorance so as to avoid the question, even when there is ample evidence to suggest an obvious conclusion. Kia, for example, said she immediately knew her boyfriend was a drug dealer when she saw that he had a second cell phone. Kia was engaged in similar behavior herself, so was not bothered by it. For others, they may suspect criminal activity but they do not outrightly confirm it. Josie, a 26-year-old Puerto Rican mother of one, said she figured it out after her boyfriend kept referencing “dumb” and “stupid” things he had done before. She recalls how she pieced together his criminal past from their conversations:

[A]nd then like sly comments, so like ‘yeah, that’s how it is, that’s what I had to go through too, it’s not easy.’ You know, so a lot of things kind of came out, a lot of things made sense, so ‘oh, that’s why you don’t go to school much, because this is your first year in high school, you haven’t even been to high school, you did everything through DYS [Department of Youth Services, the juvenile detention program in Massachusetts], I see why you’re so...’ you see what I’m saying?
Josie was savvy to this kind of talk. While she was never criminally involved, both of Josie’s brothers have spent time in DYS or prison. For her, incarceration was a regular milestone in the lives of many young men. She says:

My brothers went through the same thing. So I was kinda like; it’s so weird, like, but to me, that’s normal. It’s like ‘you’re a guy? You got locked up? Okay, keep on moving.’ I just thought that was normal. I thought that every boy had to become a man by going to jail or DYS or going to court, that’s what I thought. I just seen it all the time, I never thought anything else.

Other women saw evidence of criminal activity, but did not make the connection immediately. They saw extra phones, strangers coming to the house and slipping away to talk to their baby’s fathers alone, late night calls and unexplained absences. Some women, especially those not raised in high crime communities, had no awareness of the meaning of these activities until their partners were arrested or admitted their crimes. Others did know what these things meant, but tried to remain ignorant if they could. Francesca admits that she knew the father of her third and fourth children was running the streets; his illegal activities help purchase diapers and clothing for the kids. That said, she had managed to convince herself that his engagement was minor and sporadic until the day when he left her waiting in the passenger seat of his car while he committed a robbery. Reality struck her hard and she temporarily separated from him, but she loved him very much and soon they were back together.

The selective ignorance many women adopt is understandable given their reality. No woman approved of criminal behavior outright, knowing full well the consequences that being caught can have on offenders and their families. Additionally, most do not approve of engaging
in such actions irrespective of consequences: a few women argued that there should be no governmental sanctions against what someone chooses to do with their own bodies (i.e. use drugs), but no one thought criminal activity was a good thing. That said, their feelings on crime are complicated for all the aforementioned reasons, as there are not many other opportunities for employment and sometimes the women benefit from crime. In this way, women are put in an impossible situation of having to accept their partner’s behaviors even when they are conflicted about them. As a result, in the case of the criminal activities of their partners, sometimes it is easier not to know.

**Conclusion**

I began this chapter by reviewing one of the great American ethnographies written in the last 30 years. Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street* vividly illustrates what has happened to an urban neighborhood in a vacuum where the institutional structures of the larger society do not penetrate. In the 1990’s in areas of Philadelphia, residents could not rely on employment with a livable wage or timely and reliable protection from policing agencies. While some individuals maintained their allegiances to traditional behaviors and beliefs purported by society at large, others adopted an alternative set of values, and with them an alternative mode of conduct that included violence and criminality. Anderson dubbed these groups ‘decent’ and ‘street’ respectively, borrowing terms the locals used themselves.

Anderson’s work is an invaluable and unforgettable portrayal of life in urban Philadelphia, but much has changed in the years since its publication. In some ways, changes have been for the better; more people are completing high school and the unemployment rate
is lower than it had been in the 1990’s. Sadly, in other ways, inner-cities have only gotten more fractured. Prison populations mushroomed in the wake of the War on Drugs and have pillaged low-income minority communities ever since.

I argue that the proliferation of criminalization and mass incarceration has been so profound in poor communities that it has fundamentally altered how residents assess themselves and their peers. Time in prison is so common that it no longer serves as a definitive marker for being ‘street,’ in that having a criminal past longer serves as a definitive marker for being morally suspect. I have demonstrated that the women in my study take a much more nuanced stance concerning their assessment of partners in prison. They have adapted their views in light of certain perceived realities: that there are few legal, reasonably well-paying employment opportunities in the city; that many people who spend time in prison are good people; that some individuals use illicit earnings toward good ends; and that they may be reluctant to condemn others for mistakes they have also committed. These new realities have changed the context of life in the inner-city and the relative weights women assigned to characteristics of partnerable men.

Put more simply, I argue that the War on Drugs and the rise of mass incarceration have altered how inner-city women evaluate male partners. Prior to the 1980’s, time in prison was not a typical life event. Fewer men were incarcerated and those who had been were more likely to have been convicted of a violent crime. As such, I argue that the ‘criminal’ label had more salience and impact then than it does in low-income communities today. Anderson demonstrates that in the 1990’s in Philadelphia, those who are ‘street’ could be easily differentiated from their ‘decent’ counterparts. This is no longer the case. Crime has
penetrated such a breadth of families in the inner-city that nearly all the women I met, many of whom would squarely fit into Anderson’s description of ‘decent,’ had at least one close family relation who been arrested, convicted, and incarcerated. The spread of mass incarceration has both diluted the proportion of men without criminal records in their communities and personalized the experience of prison. As a result, for the women I met, knowing someone in prison is regular experience. Criminals are not ‘other’, but fathers and brothers and boyfriends. Criminal acts are not universally deviant; sometimes they are the necessary result of a lack of economic opportunities, the desire to support family, or simply the normative behaviors of people in their communities that are unduly penalized by a system that treats them unfairly.

While Anderson’s *Code of the Street* is, and will remain, an illuminative and seminal study of how people understand themselves and their peers in isolated and under-resourced neighborhoods, I argue that the growth and infiltration of the criminal justice system has disrupted that understanding.
Chapter 3: Hidden Resources

In the previous chapter, I explained why women in inner-cities do not adopt a binary moral position on those with criminal records. All the women I interviewed have partnered with a man who did, or would later, go to prison. Nearly none of them viewed a prison record as a definitive marker of moral corruption or a signal for them to stay away. Even women who were hurt by their partners still say that they accept that people make mistakes and can change.

This open-mindedness aside, these women have a challenging road ahead of them as they raise their children. Most are unmarried. At the birth of their first child, the average age of these women was under 20-years-old. Only a few had full time employment; the rest relied on governmental or familial support. Most have had unstable relationships with their partners, as relationships fail or men are sent away to prison. By all accounts, these women lack the resources traditionally associated with raising children: two married parents, a stable home, steady parental income, access to safe schools, etc.

Past research has sought to understand why young, poor women are opting for motherhood before marriage. In *Promises I Can Keep*, Edin and Kefalas (2005) interviewed young mothers to understand their motivations for wanting to have children, given their seemingly precarious positions. The researchers found that young women were willing to postpone marriage, but not motherhood. These women felt that marriage can be delayed, but becoming a parent was a biological imperative. They fully understood that they faced significant financial challenges going forward, though for them, motherhood gives their lives meaning. Getting married is a luxury that they aspire to reach, but that can be postponed until
they find the right person and reach a level of stability and security. Having children is not a luxury that can wait. It is what gives these young women hope for their futures, as it is a chance at a fresh start and signals the beginning of a new, mature role for themselves.

The work of Edin and Kefalas was a milestone in our understanding of the aspirations of young urban mothers. Their research helps us understand the hopes and desires these individuals have as they embark into motherhood. Motives aside, however, questions still remain. How do young, low-income mothers manage this challenging new role? Wanting children and possessing (or learning) the skills and knowledge necessary to raise them are very different things. By and large, the women I met lacked financial stability and relationship security, the absence of which would seemingly make motherhood very difficult. Additionally, many women did not have two consistent parental figures throughout their childhoods that could serve as models for parenthood. And yet, the majority of the women I met were making things work. Over the course of my interviews, many of which were in women’s homes, I witnessed countless acts of successful parenting: mothers helping kids with homework; getting them dressed and ready for school; preparing meals and afterschool snacks; reconciling arguments with siblings, etc. This is not to say that they were perfect mothers or that anyone can ensure that their children will face no hardships, but overall these women were demonstrating clear competence and care in raising their children.

How were women with limited material resources able to function successfully as mothers? After careful observation and reflection, I noticed that while the women I met may

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27 Sadly, some of the older children of the women I met had fallen on hard times. Some had dropped out of high school and gotten involved with drug dealing or gangs. A few had already spent time in juvenile detention or prison.
have lacked for some types of physical security, they possessed other unique skills that may prove beneficial in their new role. In essence, the challenges they faced in their early lives afford them knowledge and skills necessary to serve as mothers. For many of the women I met, most of their lives have been lived with limited material possessions. They have learned to adapt to rampant instability in their families and the larger environments. Many have had to grow up early in neighborhoods that did not afford them much room for the innocence and ignorance of youth. The majority of women did not grow up with married parents who lived and stayed together the whole of their childhoods. In some cases, women had to raise themselves or younger family members, as both parents were absent or indifferent to them.

In this chapter, I argue that the women I interviewed faced significant challenges in their early lives, much of it as an indirect effect of the cocaine epidemic, War on Drugs and mass incarceration. Many women were raised in homes where one or both parents were lost to drugs or prison. Most grew up in neighborhoods where crime and violence were a regular occurrence. Some were unable or uninterested in attending school, which seemed like a pointless pursuit when there was no opportunity for upward mobility and more immediate needs to be met. In spite of these impediments, I argue that the women I met possess advantages that benefit them as they enter motherhood. Perhaps counterintuitively, I contend that these advantages emanate from the disadvantages they experienced as children. Put another way, the women I interviewed endured a variety of different kinds of insecurity. That insecurity came in the form of inadequate parenting, insufficient education, and environmental turmoil. I argue that by adapting to these different types insecurities, the women I met acquired the resilience, knowledge, and psychological resources necessary to function as
mothers. In other words, early life deprivation inadvertently bolsters women’s confidence in their own mothering skills.

To demonstrate this, I begin this chapter with a brief review of Promises I Can Keep, as well as research emanating from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Research Study. I then describe the various kinds of instability women in my study often face, focusing first on familial instability and the different forms it can take. I highlight the stories of how some women have responded to that familial instability: namely, by learning to raise themselves and others. I also discuss neighborhood and educational instability and argue how early neglect can result in a knowledge about how to navigate the system in order to find necessary resources. I argue that this self-reliance and subsequent caretaking for themselves and others may inadvertently assist women as they take on the mantle of motherhood.

Literature on Relationships and Family Stability

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, in Promises I Can Keep, Edin and Kefalas sought to understand the surge in the rate of unwed teenage pregnancy in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, specifically among urban women. They interviewed 162 single mothers living in Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey. One of the most significant findings was that for young, poor women, marriage could wait but motherhood could not. For them, motherhood was a biological imperative, not a choice. While not all of the women were thrilled to learn that they would soon become mothers, they understood that they had a moral contract (a ‘promise’) that now took precedence in their lives. Edin and Kefalas were able to
demonstrate that these low-income women were devoted to their children, the responsibilities
of motherhood and the hope of providing a better future for themselves and their families.

In spite of this hope, however, low-income single mothers face significant challenges as
they try to raise their children. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Research Study
(FFCWS) has yielded very fruitful information on single parents. FFCWS researchers followed
the births of 5,000 children born between 1998 and 2000. The parents of the children in the
study were all unmarried at the time of the child’s birth. Five waves of data were collected on
these families, including information on the mother, father, care-givers, educators, and the
children themselves in the fifth wave of data collection (when the child was nine years of age).
The findings from this study are wide-ranging and on-going, but some of the major takeaways
are the following: compared to their married counterparts, unmarried parents are more likely
to be young, to be poor, to have children by multiple partners, to not have lived with both
biological parents in their childhoods, to suffer substance abuse and to have been
incarcerated.28

Instability

The early childhood characteristics identified amongst the families in the FFCWS data
largely mirrors the stories of the women I met, who also suffered various forms of instability
throughout their early lives. Most common was familial instability, which took the form of
neglectful or abusive parenting and often was due to one or both parents lost to drug addiction
or prison. In the following sections, I will discuss how women experienced this lack of

consistent and supportive parenting, and how this unfortunate reality may have proved
edifying as women entered motherhood.

**Instability in Families**

Of the women I interviewed, 19 (or 21%) stated that they were raised by two married,
biologically related parents (not including stepparents). This percentage is significantly below
the national average, though the data typically focus on children under the age of 18. In 2014,
Pew reported that 46% of American children aged 18 years and younger were being raised by
two heterosexual parents in their first marriage. This percentage has only grown over time, as
they report that in 1980 61% of children were raised in such home, which in turn was a drop of
12 percentage points from 73% in 1960.\(^{29}\) In my study, the average age of all participants was
just over 40-years-old, meaning the majority of women were born in the 1970’s. Thus, the
women in my study were disproportionately likely to be raised in non-traditional families
compared to their peers, as well as compared to young people today. Furthermore, the
average age of the women in my study who were raised in traditional families was over 45 at
the time of the interview, five years older than the average for the sample. Four of these
participants were full sisters and were raised together in the same home. Overall, the women I
spoke to were disproportionately raised in single parent homes or with a non-parental family
member.

\(^{29}\) http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/22/less-than-half-of-u-s-kids-today-live-in-a-traditional-family/
Missing Fathers

The most common type of family instability found among the women in my study was the absence of biological fathers. More than half the women I met were not raised with both biological parents in the home for the duration of their childhoods (in some cases, one parent would occasionally float in, only to leave shortly thereafter). For the vast majority of women without two parents at home, the missing party was the father. Most of the women I spoke to were born of parents who were never married to one another (46 of 88 women). These women tended to be slightly younger than the average in my study: 35-years-old to 40-years-old, respectively. Of those women with married parents, six had parents who eventually would divorce. Thirteen women had fathers who died before the women had reached the age of majority. Four of these women lost their fathers to unnatural causes: three died as victims of homicide and one died from a drug overdose. Seventeen women stated that their fathers were alive (or they believed them to be), but they had no, or virtually no, relationship. These women were not raised with their father in the home, and typically do not recall a time when their parents were still romantically involved. In some cases, they saw their father on very rare occasions when he might stop by to visit; in other cases, some of the women I spoke to never knew who their biological fathers were.

Growing up without having a relationship with a biological father was a reality many of these women had no choice but to acclimate to, and responses to that absence varied greatly. Some were very affected by the absence: Kia, referenced in the previous chapter, is very close to her father and the relationship endures despite his on-again off-again relationship with Kia’s mother and his frequent stints in prison. Though Kia has adapted to the inconsistency of his
presence, she feels that her little brother has not. Kia says that since their father has become less available, her little brother has become involved with a gang and transitioned from petty crimes to violent behaviors. Her father always told his children to stay away from the streets, though he regularly sold drugs himself. Apparently, her father thought that verbal instruction was sufficient to keep his kids on the right side of the law. He was wrong.

[My] father thought that telling [us] to stay away from the streets was enough [to keep us away]. But he was still doing him, and my brother was trying to figure out what he was doing. So my brother’s been in the street. He’s been arrested for knives, he’s been shot. He’s out now, but he’s been locked up a couple of times and he’s always in trouble. It’s too late for [him], he’s 19.

In our interview, Kia presents herself as the embodiment of confidence and strength, projecting the attitude that little about life in the inner-city surprises or scares her. Yet when she speaks of her little brother and envisions where his trajectory is leading him, she falters and cries. She believes that if her father were more present, her brother would not be gravitating towards this new, dangerous lifestyle.

While responses varied, the direct negative impact of paternal absence described by Kia was in the minority. Most women I interviewed expressed sentiments that ranged from latent anger to indifference. Jessica’s relationship with her father falls within this range. Jessica is a 26-year-old mother of three children: a daughter who is five-years-old and two sons, aged three and 18 months. Her parents, who never married, were born in Puerto Rico and moved to Boston when she was an infant, though she cannot remember a time when they were still together. Jessica has one full sibling, a sister, and nine half siblings (eight on her father’s side and one on her mother’s). Growing up, Jessica was raised by her mother and her stepfather, who she came to see as her sole father figure. He was the only man who played any role in
caring for her as a child. Unfortunately, her mother and stepfather divorced after several years of marriage, and her stepfather was later incarcerated on a drug charge. Upon finishing his sentence, Jessica’s stepfather was promptly deported back to the Dominican Republic. Neither she nor her siblings have seen him since (though they do speak on the phone), and this has been very hard on the children in the family. Jessica has been planning a trip to the Dominican Republic to see him for years, saving money where she can, but has not been able to make it yet. She hopes she will find a way in the next few years.

Jessica lives in a shelter with her three children just outside the city, but visits her mother’s apartment often. It is there that I met with her and her two youngest children. She and her mother are very close; on this day Jessica’s mother is at a doctor’s appointment, but more often than not functions as a second mother, caring for her grandchildren at every available opportunity. Jessica is clearly very dedicated to her family; she dotes on her children, focusing on them anytime one enters the room with a question or to show off a drawing. It is unfortunate that this affinity does not extend to her biological father. Jessica tells me that her father could have a relationship with his children, but has chosen not to. Sitting at her mother’s kitchen table, Jessica points north and tells me that her biological father lives only up the street from here, but she rarely sees him. In addition to the sister she was raised with, Jessica has seven additional half-siblings by her father, but they were not raised together and have not become close. Jessica says of her relationship with her father:

Um, I’m close I guess, he never really gave me a reason not to, but he knows his position, like he wasn’t really there for everything while my other dad was there. He [stepdad] used to take me to school, used to take me to modeling class, while he [biological dad] was just up there making kids. You can see he has more kids than my mother. So he was just there. Then we stopped talking for months, then we’d talk and we’d stop… that’s just the way it goes. I’m grown now, though, so it doesn’t even faze
me anymore. Some people, it faze them, I know a lot of people who are like ‘oh, my dad wasn’t there’ and they’re like 20-something. But if he wasn’t there, then why even have that thing towards it? I don’t care. Some people have remorse, like toward their dad not being there. My mom raised me well. I had my first kid when I was 20-something. So that shows you something. I didn’t need my dad. Some girls will be like ‘well I had my kid because my dad wasn’t there’ but your mom’s doing real the right way, there shouldn’t be a [indistinct] to know what it’s like to not have a dad. Because I didn’t have a dad. I don’t know, I just go with it.

Whether or not Jessica had greater need for her father when she was younger, she does not need him now. For her, the time for him to commit to his role as father has passed. She had a loving surrogate in the form of her stepfather, a relationship she still cherishes and works hard to maintain. Having spoken at length with Jessica, I believe her when she describes her indifference to her father. She seems to have accepted his decision to be absent and does not grieve his loss or retain hope that he will change his mind. I mention her sincerity because while most women adopted a position to their absent fathers that was similar to Jessica’s, some women may be projecting an indifference they have not entirely internalized.

Toni, a 26-year-old African American mother of a three-year-old daughter, is one such example. Toni is one of the daughters of the White family discussed in the previous chapter. In their youth, her mother and aunts had all dealt drugs for their uncle, resulting in years of drug addiction and for three of them, incarceration. Toni’s mother was one of those who went to prison. Because her father was also incarcerated at the time, Toni had to spend several years in foster care. In spite of the significant challenges in her early life, Toni is a success story, accomplishing in one generation what most people from her old neighborhood could not. She moved frequently between different family members’ and foster care homes but still managed to graduate high school and go on to college. Toni was accepted at several schools, but opted
for a college out of state, where she earned a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice in order to pursue a career in corrections. She has only had one serious relationship in her life, which lasted for nearly a decade and resulted in the birth of her daughter. Toni is quick to point out the irony: in spite of her academic and professional interests, she stayed in a committed relationship with a man who dealt drugs. It was for their daughter’s sake that she finally ended things with her boyfriend. She admits that she still loves him, but she only wants to surround herself and her child with positive influences. While her ex-boyfriend is no longer selling drugs, he is not regularly or legitimately employed, and Toni feels it is important that her partner is actively pursuing personal and professional success.

I interviewed Toni at a high-end coffee shop near where she works as a university administrator. She meets me at the subway station and walks me to the cafe. I am catching her during her lunch hour; she is dressed in a fitted gray pantsuit with heels and has several IDs hanging from a lanyard around her neck. Toni greets me with smiles and warmth; she has heard of me through her cousins and is looking forward to our interview. She jokes about how I have been more connected with her family than she has been lately. Before we arrive at the coffee shop, we pass an older man on the street; Toni greets him briefly but exchanges no more than a few sentences and continues walking. I notice that almost immediately, her affect has changed. Her sunny disposition is immediately gone and she spends a good portion of our discussion staring at her coffee and quietly crying in her chair. Her responses grow more stilted as she goes on. I tried to address her obvious distress, but she initially assures me that it is “nothing” and that I should proceed with my questions. Eventually I end the interview early, as she seems to have only gotten more upset as time passed. On the way out of the shop, she
confides in me that the man who she greeted on the way in is her biological father. They have virtually no relationship. He lives not far from her work, so she runs into him about once or twice a year, but these accidental encounters are all that remains of their relationship. She tells me that he never was a regular figure in her life, and that she has largely accepted his absence but harbors some resentment over what it has done to her other siblings. Now, when she runs into him, she tries to “kill him with kindness,” though she admits that she is not interested in forging a stronger tie. She tells me that “we owe each other nothing.”

Toni is a remarkable woman. Devoted to her daughter and lauded by her aunts and cousins, she is a model of hard work and resilience. She does not want to feel anything for her father, be it anger or grief or love. And yet seeing and speaking but a few words to him, she is left in tears. Most of the women in my study who had absent fathers referenced some degree of apathy, and for those like Jessica, they may no longer feel residual animosity for the loss. For others, like Toni, there may still be lingering pain. Regardless of where they fell on this range, all the women in this position have had to acclimate to a life that does not include their biological fathers and they have had to manage their emotional needs in spite of this familial deficit. They have been forced to deal with this absence on their own, either by fostering internal strength and psychological distance between themselves and their fathers, or by actively finding surrogates to replace what was not there. I argue that while it can be difficult and unfair to grow up without a father, the skill of being or creating your own family can be utilized as women enter motherhood. The women I met already know that it is very possible to raise a child without the regular financial and emotional support of a man; after all, nearly half of their mothers have had to do it. Furthermore, they are tragically aware that, though less
than ideal, children are capable of coping without a father. For the women in my study, growing up without a dad provides them with the knowledge and skill to face motherhood on their own.

**Missing Parents**

Having one parent missing through much of childhood can be very difficult; having both parents absent can be devastating. For some of the women in my study, neither their biological mother nor their father was regularly involved in their lives. When no adult is providing regular parental care, children suffer from neglect, a form of child maltreatment. Neglect is defined as “the failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision to the degree that the child’s health, safety, and well-being are threatened with harm.”

Approximately half of all calls placed to Child Protective Services nationwide are attributed to child neglect (Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, & Bolger, 2004). The consequences of neglect can be severe, as research shows that neglected children are more likely to suffer from anxiety, esteem issues, oppositional behavior, and problematic relationships (Glaser & Prior, 2002). Additional research shows that victims of child maltreatment experience challenges into adulthood, including sexual promiscuity and substance abuse (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002).

The women in my study who suffered childhood neglect could almost always attribute it to drugs in some capacity: their mothers and fathers were either too distracted with getting high or incarcerated for use or distribution. Some women were fortunate and taken in by other

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30 [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/define.pdf#page=2&view=Types of abuse](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/define.pdf#page=2&view=Types of abuse)
family members. Toni mentioned that at various times, her maternal grandmother housed and
cared for all 13 of her grandchildren; one of Toni’s cousins later told me that she believed the
strain of raising so many grandchildren was the cause of their grandmother’s premature death.
Other neglected kids had teachers or neighbors intervene; they reported these children to
protective services and ultimately most were sent to foster care. The most heartbreaking
cases, however, were of those women whose neglect was never noticed nor remedied.

Such was the case for Donna, referenced in the last chapter as the women who was
born in a shooting gallery. Donna is a 50-year-old African American woman born and raised on
the south side of Boston. Her childhood was plagued with danger and chaos. Her earliest
memories are of watching adults, including her mother, inject heroin. “My mother was a
prostitute. My father was a pimp. I was born in a shooting gallery. I never knew drugs and
alcohol and men and stuff was wrong, it’s the way I grew up. The cops kicked in the door so
many times, I have to take meds to go to sleep.” Donna is the middle child of three girls, all of
whom had different fathers. Her father, uncles, and many of the adults she knew had spent
time in prison. Her stepdad, father to her younger sister, raped her as a child. Donna too
began to use drugs as a means to psychologically escape from her reality. She did not finish
high school and, like her mother, sold sex to help pay for her addiction. Donna now has a 23-
year-old son, currently in prison for murder, and a 17-year-old daughter who is being raised by
an aunt. Both have different fathers.

Donna describes all her past romantic relationships as being dysfunctional and
sometimes very abusive. Donna met the father of her first child, Jamal, when they both were
coming out of rehab. Unfortunately, neither she nor Jamal were able to remain drug-free for
long, and were soon using together. Though their relationship was thankfully short, Jamal was a manipulative partner who encouraged her to continue working as a prostitute, as he was financially dependent on Donna to provide narcotics and basic necessities. Jamal was not interested in being a father and was rarely available for her or their son. Eventually Jamal ended the relationship and she has not had contact since. Donna’s relationship with Scoop, the father of her daughter, was more fraught. Donna began her relationship with Scoop because he was a drug dealer and gave her regular access to his supply. Not long after their relationship began, Scoop took the role of Donna’s pimp and became violent when she did not earn the amounts of money he expected. Donna describes how one time Scoop became so uncontrollably irate that she was sure he would kill her. Despite nearly constant physical and emotional abuse, Donna stayed in the relationship for three years. They have one daughter together, but she has never forgiven her father for his treatment of Donna. Their daughter refuses to acknowledge Scoop or attempt any type of relationship with him.

Donna’s philosophy concerning her relationship with men stems from a childhood where she believed she did not deserve much from a partner. In those rare moments when her mother paid any attention to her, she told Donna that she would never amount to anything. Her grandmother told her that it was God’s will for women to obey men. Upon reflecting over her past partners, Donna says “I don’t know what a relationship is. For me, a relationship is a hostage situation with these men.” She states that she would look for men with troubled pasts, because they were ‘safe’: “He knew who I was, what I did, and he still loved me. He knew I shot dope, he knew everything. I don’t have to worry about him or men like him leaving me because of my past and who I was and be embarrassed. I’m a good girl, I get money, I take care of
them.” Furthermore, she liked men who had come out of prison, because like her they knew what it was to have to start life anew. She would care for men who accepted her, providing for them emotionally and financially, until they would leave her. She believes that men end relationships with her when she is no longer of value to them. Donna is currently single.

Donna’s story is profoundly tragic. She was raised in a dysfunctional environment where adults would either ignore her or abuse her. She came to believe that she deserved little and had to compensate people for their time and attention. She had no model for a healthy relationship and gravitated to men similar to her father. She has a high tolerance for abuse and, at least in her younger years, would opt to be with a man who took from her and put her down rather than no man at all. Donna is not the only neglected woman I met who has had unhealthy relationships with men. Another woman described how she had ‘abandonment issues’ and would do everything in her power to ensure that her then-boyfriend stayed with her. Like Donna, she too followed her parents’ trajectory and spent years addicted to narcotics. Yet another woman, Francesca (who will be discussed in detail later in this chapter), was so frequently neglected that neighbors called the Department of Youth and Family services on her behalf. As an adult, she cannot seem to give up on a romantic relationship that has been painful and destructive for her. While it is impossible to say that their issues of self-esteem, substance abuse, and unhealthy relationships is causally related to the neglect these women suffered in their youth, their experiences mirror the research. Childhood neglect is a form of family instability with devastating consequences throughout the life course.
Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Abuse

Neglect is not the only form of childhood maltreatment that the women I met experienced. The more common type of maltreatment they mentioned were varying types of abuse. Like neglect, abuse can result in a host of negative outcomes throughout childhood that can permeate into adulthood, including: impaired cognitive functioning, emotional difficulties such as depression and low self-esteem, and behavioral problems that can result in juvenile delinquency and adult criminality. For the women in my study, child abuse was more common than neglect, but no less consequential for its victims.

Raya is a 57-year-old African American mother of two. She grew up in rural Maryland and had limited access to her biological father, who moved to Boston when Raya was two-years-old (he now lives in the Bahamas as a retired farmer; over the years they have built a tenuous relationship and they occasionally speak by phone). Given that he left Maryland when she was very young, Raya did not know the identity of her father until she was in her late teens; until that point, she believed she shared the same father as her other siblings. Raya grew up with her mother and two younger half-brothers. When Raya was ten, her mother married Jerry, and they remained married until his death eight years ago. Though he was incarcerated repeatedly while she grew up, Raya thinks of Jerry as the only parental figure in her life and continues to mourn his loss.

Raya’s mother had a challenging upbringing. She spent some of her early years in foster care and, while she had siblings, they were not close. Raya says of her mother “[m]y mom and

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31 For a brief overview of the consequences of abuse and neglect, see https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/long_term_consequences.pdf
her siblings were physically abusive to each other. There was no close relationship. I never saw my mother hug or kiss my stepfather, or with her kids.” Raya’s relationship with her mother has been troubled for as long as she can remember. She recalls how her mother would hit her and her brothers. On chilly nights in a drafty home, her mother would cover herself in an electric blanket and force her children to sleep in the cold. She would encourage her sons to steal and promised not to identify them to the police so long as she received part of the haul. She also praised her sons when they got into physical altercations and seemed to encourage violent behavior. Raya’s middle brother was routinely picked up for assault and by the age of 16 he was charged with homicide, for which he would spend the bulk of his early years in prison. After being sentenced, Raya’s mother refused to visit her incarcerated son. She said to Raya “I didn’t put him in there, I don’t have to do nothing for him.” Raya says that her mother would use her children when necessary and abandon them when they were no longer of value.

In spite of years of emotional and physical abuse, Raya’s relationship with her mother did not irreparably break until Raya was 15. Raya’s mother worked at the local poultry distributor, the largest employer in the town where they lived. Most work was entry level and consisted of grueling, mindless hours on one’s feet. Her mother sought a promotion and used what little leverage she thought she had. One evening she invited her boss to have dinner with her family, and encouraged him to bring his son, who was then in his late teens or early twenties. After dinner Raya’s mother told her daughter to spend time alone with her boss’s son, getting to know him. Raya describes how her mother pressured her to engage in sexual activity with her boss’s son, at one point interrupting their encounter to scold Raya for not sufficiently encouraging the young man. Though she could not articulate it at the time, she
soon realized that her mother sought to purchase her promotion through her daughter’s
virginity. Years later, Raya confronted her mother about the incident, but her mother denied
that the encounter occurred at all.

This betrayal was traumatizing for Raya. She found comfort in the attentions of a 21-
year-old named Raul, whom she met during the summers when she visited her father in
Boston. By the time she turned 17, she was living with Raul and pregnant with their daughter.
Unfortunately, Raya’s relationship with Raul proved to be as abusive as her relationship with
her mother; Raul began hitting her. Raya describes herself at this point as someone with no
self-esteem, no high school diploma and nowhere else to go. Raul’s bad behavior continued to
escalate and soon he was serving time in prison for selling drugs. In spite of everything, Raya
remained committed to Raul and they were married just prior to the birth of their son. She
admits now that she would have likely stayed with Raul indefinitely, as her primary motivation
was providing a stable environment for her children. This commitment was put to the ultimate
test when Raya’s daughter, then a pre-teen, confessed that Raul had molested her when she
was an adolescent. Having grown up with a sexually exploitative and sadistic mother, Raya was
heartbroken over her daughter’s abuse and committed to getting her away from her abuser.
Raya promptly removed her children from the home, divorced her husband and cut off all
contact. No one in Raya’s family has been in touch with Raul since.

Raya’s familial instability manifested in every possible form. She was emotionally and
physically abused by her mother, ultimately forced into a sexual relationship she did not want
to have. Until the emergence of her stepfather, she would go through long periods of parental
neglect. Both of her brothers would end up spending time in prison. She managed to avoid
incarceration and any type of substance abuse but spent years with a man who beat her. At first glance, it would seem that Raya is at a significant disadvantage as a mother. She grew up in poverty, barely knew her biological father, was insulted and beaten regularly, witnessed criminal behavior in her home, had close family members become incarcerated, and entered adulthood with no models of healthy relationships and nearly no self-esteem. And for years, she stayed with her abusive husband. In the time since, however, she has broken off that relationship, received her GED, graduated from college, found a partner who is supportive and good to her children, and found full time employment at a non-profit organization that works with young, under-resourced parents. She is extremely close to her daughter, speaking to her every day. Though it was not immediate, Raya took the lessons she learned as a child and used them as a guide for how she would and would not behave as a mother. When she learned her daughter had been sexually assaulted, something switched in her mind; she feared she had become something akin to her own mother. Knowing the consequences of having such a mother firsthand, Raya altered every aspect of her life to protect her daughter. Responses to instability will be discussed later in this chapter, but Raya’s story highlights how in an unexpected way, the challenges she overcame in her youth helped inform her own decisions about mothering. Raya learned what she would not tolerate, who she should stay away from, and how she would not treat her children based on what she had endured in her youth. While I certainly do not want to suggest that all abused or neglected children ultimately benefit from their childhood trauma, I do recognize that having survived such challenges can give women a strength, resilience and wisdom that they can deploy as they raise their own kids.
Raising Oneself

The previous descriptions of women raised in homes with absent or abusive homes parents a bleak picture. These are stories of children forced to grow up in conditions that no one should have to endure. The question then arises: how then did these women manage through their childhoods? Who took over when their parents did not or could not play their required roles? The answer is that for some women, they had to forgo the normative stages of childhood and learn to raise themselves. With no other adult present (or adequately present in some cases) there was simply no other option. Shani is one such woman. She is a 32-year-old African American Boston native. She lives with her two young children, a five-year-old boy and a two-year-old girl, and her boyfriend, who is the father of both kids. Shani was raised by her mother and maternal aunt. Her parents separated when she was very young and she cannot remember them being together. She recalls her father coming by their home to visit occasionally, though he lived with the mother of his youngest children. Shani never had much of a chance to become close to her half-siblings, as her father had a relationship with her mother’s sister (resulting in one of her half-sisters) and he was absent from her life for a time. Shani is her mother’s only child, and described herself as a “spoiled crybaby” in that her mother gave her anything she wanted.

While Shani may have been gifted with any material possession she wished, things were not always idyllic at home. Shani’s mother was gainfully employed her whole life, but managed to hide a drug addiction that began prior to Shani’s birth. Shani describes her childhood as a predominantly happy one until her mother’s addiction grew worse.
Then things got crazy. My mom started doing drugs for some years. She got clean, but by then I was out of the house. [She had been doing drugs] forever, actually, she just always knew how to keep a job. But she’s been clean for the last 10 years... I always knew she partied a lot, always had a lot of people around, like when I was 3. You see smoke, smell funny, you figured it out when you grow up in this neighborhood. And she’s not the kind of person who would keep stuff from me. She was more of a sister or friend than a mother. I could have friends come over and she wasn’t that strict. She’s still like that. She’s a fun girl. Right now my daughter is having an eating problem, she’s too heavy, but my mother doesn’t know how to keep boundaries, she’s just too nice.

Shani’s mother was in a series of relationships over the years, but none of these men felt like a paternal surrogate or role model. When asked if she viewed any of these men as stepfathers, Shani replied:

[They] never went into that role. They didn’t have anything to do with me. I never really liked her boyfriends, anyway. Sometimes they were abusive toward her, or getting high. Kids tend to think their fathers are heroes. I’d be nice, but they weren’t my father.

Given the drug use and the frequent rotation of her mother’s boyfriends in and out of the house, Shani was compelled to leave home early. Both of Shani’s parents had graduated from high school, but Shani dropped out in the 8th grade because she could not focus on academics, stating that “[I] was always worried about what [my mother] was doing.” By the time Shani was 14-years-old, she was working at coffee shops and temp agencies, and by 16 she had moved out of her mother’s house and into the home of her then-boyfriend, who she began dating at the age of 12. Shani’s mother knew that her daughter had begun dating in middle school and did not approve of her daughter’s new relationships, but ultimately her mother’s words carried little weight, as Shani was left alone enough to allow her to maintain any relationships she chose.
The relative absence of Shani’s mother during her childhood resulted in Shani making the types of adult decisions that most young people are not required to make. By her own admission, Shani “grew up very quick.” Her father was only periodically present in Shani’s life and was not actively engaged in the day-to-day parenting of his daughter. Shani’s mother was a financial provider (she managed to retain her job as a legal secretary and office administrator throughout her addiction) but ultimately was too distracted with her own challenges to pay much attention to Shani. As a result, Shani had to become her own mother-figure to weather the neglect she felt at home. The influence of her early years has had a direct effect on how Shani chooses to raise her two children. Though she admits to occasionally partaking of recreational marijuana, she has stayed away from the harder drugs that took over her mother’s life for many years.

Additionally, Shani approaches her primary relationship differently now that she is a mother. She and the father of her two children, Ernest, were together for four years prior to her becoming pregnant. Before the birth of their first child, Shani notes that neither she nor Ernest were faithful to each other. Upon realizing she was pregnant, Shani’s perspective on herself and Ernest changed rapidly. Ernest was incarcerated shortly after Shani became pregnant, and Shani admits that had she not been pregnant at the time, she would have left Ernest for another partner. Instead, she realized that her priorities must immediately change and that she had to “straighten up.” Ernest ended up serving 18 months on a drug charge, but Shani remained committed to the relationship because it was important to her that her children be raised in a two-parent family. She says “[t]hat’s why I fight for our relationship so hard. I do
love [Ernest], but I want my kids to have that fatherly love in the house. I don’t want them to go through that, and I don’t want them to say ‘y’all didn’t try to make it work.’”

Shani had some very challenging years in her childhood. While she lived with her mother, who was able to care for her financially, her mother was not able to provide the maternal observation and care Shani needed. Shani’s mother’s addiction became all-consuming enough that she paid Shani little attention, and her father had opted out of his paternal role long ago. As a result, Shani learned at an early age how to raise herself. Shani is not alone in this experience. For some like Shani, it was drug addiction that robbed women of the parental figures they needed early in life. One women, a Puerto Rican mother of five, was raised in a family plagued by addiction: she said of her grandmother’s 12 children, only one was not an addict. She, along with many of her cousins, lived with their grandmother, though she was often forced to tend to herself. Living with family members other than one’s parents was a common theme amongst the women I met, as more than 20 referenced living at some point with a grandparent, aunt, or older sibling. Some had to find work early; one woman admitted that she dealt drugs at the age of 14 because her mother was lost to her own addiction and her father was killed in an attempted robbery when she was very young. Some women simply had mothers who were too busy raising other children or too young to manage the responsibility. For these reasons, raising oneself was a lesson that some women had to learn while they were still children themselves.
Raising Others

It is a heavy burden to be forced to raise oneself at an early age; for individuals with younger family members or those who are unable to care for themselves, sometimes children are required to raise others as well. Francesca is one heartbreaking example. Francesca is a 31-year-old African American mother of five. Until the age of nine she lived with her mother and younger brother outside of the city, but then moved in to her grandmother’s apartment in a housing project on the south side of the city. Her family had long lived in this public housing facility; her uncle was shot to death in the hallway outside the unit where her grandmother still lives. Francesca is aware that she has at least 12 siblings though has only met nine of them personally. One sibling, her younger brother, has the same parents; the other siblings are half-siblings. Francesca’s home life was chaotic, as she describes a childhood in which her mother was largely absent and suffered from both drug and alcohol addiction. Francesca describes her mother as very selfish, solely focused on getting high or appeasing a series of boyfriends, some of whom would beat her severely.

Francesca’s father was not around either; he was married to another woman when he had an affair with her mother, so for years her father did not recognize Francesca or her brother as his children, lest he threaten the security of his marriage. Eventually a DNA test confirmed that he is the biological father to Francesca and her brother. Francesca has half-siblings but has no relationship with them, as they resent what she and her brother represent. Francesca’s father is still married to his wife, who was unwilling to take in the children of her husband’s infidelity. As a result, Francesca and her brother were often left alone. She said that home was:
Very dysfunctional. From what I can remember, my mother was always busy. She was always gone. She was an alcoholic, she used to do drugs, she used to be gone. I used to bounce from house to house; everybody had us... anybody who said ‘yeah’ she’d drop us off and leave us. And she’d be gone for weeks and weeks. She kept a nice house, but we didn’t have no electricity or things like that. No food in the house, no water. I remember we used to have to go outside and take the soap in the rain and wash up. She probably didn’t want us to do that...

It was neighbors who saw Francesca and her brother without parental supervision and called the Department of Youth Services. Rather than go into foster care, their grandmother offered to have them move in with her. Their grandmother tried her best but often could not monitor two young children as frequently as they needed to be. Their mother would live with them occasionally, bringing a rotating cache of boyfriends with her. Francesca recalls that one of them molested her, but she cannot remember which and no longer trusts her memory. Her teen years were a very difficult time, and in spite of it all, she tried her hardest to look out for her little brother as well. They have always been close; she describes their bond as one forged from a sense of shared survival. She tried to offer him guidance and emotional support where she could, though being very young herself, was not well equipped to function as a surrogate parent. She was behind in school because she had never attended regularly; she eventually dropped out when she was 15-years-old because she was pregnant. It was then that her focus had to turn solely towards herself, and her brother gravitated towards the streets. He is currently incarcerated on a home invasion charge. Francesca says that he has been in and out of prison since “he was old enough to go.” She remains close with him and is burdened with constant worry and guilt over how his life has gone.
Though she feels she was ultimately unsuccessful, Francesca was put in a position where for many years she was forced to raise herself and her brother. She had to help him figure out how to do very basic acts of self-care, including bathing, in a home without regular running water or electricity. Francesca is perhaps an extreme case of someone raising themselves and others, though she was not the only person I met who was required to fill this role. Leila, who I will describe in greater detail later in this chapter, had a brother who sustained a gunshot wound that would make him permanently paralyzed. Leila’s mother, as a result of her son’s injury and the loss of her second husband, fell into a depression so deep that she rarely left her apartment for months at a time. Leila became her brother’s primary care-giver and provided regular assistance to her mother, doing all the grocery shopping and other chores that required someone to interact with the outside world. Other women who grew up with older relatives also reported that as grandmothers and great-aunts aged, the provider role switched and the child often took care of the adult in small but meaningful ways.

**Neighborhood Insecurity**

Familial instability, which was often a result of parental absence due to drugs or prison, was a common stressor identified by the women in my study. Unfortunately, it is hardly the only type of challenge that many women faced while growing up. Most of the women I interviewed were born in, and continue to inhabit, neighborhoods fraught with drugs, violence and crime. They spoke of constant and visible police presence, dilapidated and abandoned buildings, broken windows and barred doors. Many have seen drug deals occur in real time and saw the violent altercations that would sometimes result. Some, like Donna, regularly saw
adults inject drugs and engage in acts of prostitution. A few women have born witness to horrific acts of violence and even death. Kia and her brother saw someone bleed to death on the street outside their home. One of the White sisters describes seeing someone pushed from a high-floored window and die on the sidewalk below. In this section, I refer to this type of regular, traumatic exposure to crime and violence as ‘neighborhood insecurity.’ Most of the women I met experienced some form of it in the communities where they grew up.

Mara is one such women, who continues to manage the lingering psychological consequences of witnessing an act of violence in her youth. Mara is a 26-year-old African American mother of a developmentally disabled son. I had previously interviewed Mara’s mother, whose relationship with Mara’s father ended after repeated domestic abuse. Mara was raised in Boston in the 1990’s by her mother, spending the occasional summer in Alabama with her father until his death when she was 13. While time with her father in the South was generally tranquil and a bit boring, growing up in Boston was quite the opposite. Mara recalls that shootings were a regular occurrence in her childhood. When she was 15, she and her mother lived on the second floor of a home that was across the street from a nightclub. She recalls the following:

There was a club across the street from where we lived. There was a driveway with a car, a black car, and he was driving in the parking lot and drove up to another car and started shooting. And I’d seen this from my window. I was like ‘oh my god, what do I do’ and my mom’s like ‘close the shades, call the police!’ It was really scary. It was about midnight on the weekend. I was too young to be going to the clubs then, so I was just watching out the window and I just so happened to look and they were just shooting. I seen it all.

Mara would soon learn that the murder victim was the boyfriend of a close friend, who happened to be pregnant at the time. Mara described this incident as the scariest event of her
life, and the subsequent trauma, from witnessing the event and later caring for her friend, as one of the most painful experiences she can remember.

In the same summer as the shooting, Mara started dating. She met her first boyfriend, Dre, at the age of 15 and they dated for three years before she became pregnant. Dre was gang-affiliated and had a long history of violence, though she says that he rarely directed his aggression towards her. Shortly after the birth of their son, Dre was charged in the death of another young man and found guilty of capital murder. Mara recalls hearing the judge sentence him to 109 years in prison; she said she nearly passed out in the courtroom. While she loved Dre and had previously harbored hopes of spending her life with him, she changed her mind after sentencing. She soon realized there was no point in maintaining a relationship with someone who she would rarely see and could not build a life with, and moreover, her son suffers from autism and she wanted a partner who could help raise him. Mara soon began dating other people. At the time of our meeting, Mara was seeing a man named Keon, but tragically he was both physically and verbally abusive to her.

I met Mara for our interview in a local restaurant in the heart of the city. It was a warm, busy lunch hour at the small pizzeria where we chatted, so we found a booth far from the counter for privacy. Within ten minutes of our interview beginning, Mara’s phone rang. It was Keon asking where she was and who she was with. She told him about that she was being interviewed about motherhood, but Keon did not believe her and kept calling. Over the next hour, Keon had called 12 times and asked to speak with me as well. He did not believe I was the person I claimed to be, so Keon surprised us both by showing up at the restaurant unexpectedly, convinced he would find her in the company of another man. In spite of finding
her innocent of any inappropriate behavior, Keon threatened to beat her for causing him to worry. I was struck by how little Mara seemed perturbed by the encounter; nothing about her demeanor suggested she felt afraid or threatened. When I asked her how she was doing, she shrugged and let me know that she was used to his abuse. She confessed that she sometimes wonders why she stays in the relationship. Her best guess was that she has been surrounded by violence and abuse her whole life and was used to it.

Leila, referenced earlier in this chapter, is also accustomed to regular exposure to violence. Leila is a 26-year-old Puerto Rican mother of twins. She is still in a relationship with the father of her children, who has been incarcerated for five of a 15 year homicide sentence. Leila is unique amongst the women I met, in that she is convinced that her boyfriend was falsely charged and will soon be granted a successful appeal. We met in her mother’s home, located in a public housing complex on the south side of the city. This housing complex is comprised of a series of low-rise brick buildings interspersed with several small but well-maintained playgrounds and a community center with children’s drawings posted in the windows. Leila came to be interviewed along with her mother, as both women have had children by men who have been incarcerated. Unfortunately, Leila’s mother suffers from debilitating bouts of depression, and on this day is too overwhelmed to speak with me.

Much of this depression is as a result of the tragedy that befell her son, Leila’s middle brother. Poochie, now 21-years-old, lost the use of his legs, as well as significant brain functioning, after being nearly fatally shot almost two years prior. Leila walks me to the window of her mother’s second floor apartment, pointing to a street corner no more than 50 yards away. “That’s where it happened” she tells me. In August of 2012, Poochie was hanging
out at that corner when a car pulled up and two men exited the vehicle, shot him, and drove away. Leila was not there during the incident, and over the last two years she has done her best to learn more about the perpetrators and the reason behind the crime. She believes that her brother ran afoul of one of the local gangs. She is very confident that the perpetrators lived, and continue to live, in the same public housing complex as her mother. No one was ever charged and Poochie claims he did not recognize the identity of any of the shooters. Leila now lives further north in her own apartment and tries to avoid the area when she can. She is convinced that witnesses have opted to remain silent on her brother’s attack and she no longer feels safe there.

Since the incident, Leila’s mother has difficulty leaving the house and caring for herself. Leila splits her time at her mother’s apartment and tending to Poochie. The violence that afflicted her family has required Leila to not only care for herself and her twins, but her mother and brother as well. Currently she is waiting for her boyfriend to be released from prison so they can move to a safer neighborhood. Like Leila, Mara also wants to escape the city. She fears that violence to which she was exposed has affected her deeply, and she longs for the tranquil and boring summer days in Alabama. Experiencing this type of neighborhood insecurity has been lastingly painful for many of the women I met, and has informed many of them about the types of communities they hope to raise their children in and how protective they are about what their kids see and hear in their neighborhoods.

**Educational Hurdles**
Many women in my study did not stay in school. Almost half of the women in my study (42 of 88) left school before receiving a high school diploma, though 14 have since received their GED. For some, school was viewed as pointless or peripheral to their other concerns.

Susan, a 37-year-old mother of three, describes school as a waste of her time. She says:

([H]igh school was a joke. A lot of kids just... I just walked the halls, drinking, smoking cigarettes in the bathroom, it was a joke. Health ed teacher was out one day, we had a, I can’t think of it, a substitute. Teacher came back, she had no plants, all us students throw everything out the window. That poor lady had nothing left, it was just chaotic. Funny though, not now, I feel bad. But funny then, we were 14. This was Southie High, Harvard on a Hill, all you had to do was show up and you’d pass. And I failed! I wouldn’t even show up. But I got my GED the same year I was supposed to graduate.

Susan is not alone in her description of the value of school. A 32-year-old mother of three described it this way: “I hated school. Sometimes I liked it, I was a special ed student too. I went to separate schools as my siblings. I dropped out in the 9th grade, because I didn’t like it. My parents didn’t say anything.” Shani, whose mother suffered a drug addiction and could not provide much maternal care, left school in the 8th grade because no one at home was monitoring her attendance or seemed to care if she graduated. Other women lost interest or got too far behind because they had to move from school to school. For many women, becoming pregnant was the reason they dropped out. Leila left school in the 10th grade when she realized she was pregnant with twins. Jessica, who was introduced earlier in this chapter, also left school in the 10th grade upon learning of her pregnancy, though had fallen behind prior to this and at 20-years-old was four years older than most others in her grade.

Francesca, who had raised herself and her little brother when her parents neglected her, has a similar story to others who left school early. For her, it was a combination of a variety of factors: she moved frequently and was behind several grade levels, was absent from
class regularly and could not keep up with school work, and eventually dropped out after
becoming pregnant at 15. Overall, Francesca never had much of a chance to form a strong
attachment to school, it was just another task she had to manage on top of an already strained
childhood. While many of the women who dropped out cited getting pregnant as the
proximate cause, most seemed weakly attached to school prior to that. Unfortunately, I did not
have the opportunity or foresight to probe more on this idea, but my impression was that some
women, like Susan, viewed education as unrelated to their everyday concerns. This is not to
say that they did not value education, but instead that their perception of the utility of a high
school diploma did not outweigh the costs of its attainment. In other words, they viewed a
high school diploma as a good and admirable thing but it is time consuming to pursue and may
not be worth the effort.

Utilizing Resources

I have thus far shown how many of the women in my study have experienced significant
challenges growing up. Fathers could be inconsistent or scarce. Drugs sometimes took
mothers away from their children as well. Neglect or abuse forced children to become adults
before their time. In addition, many came from difficult and dangerous neighborhoods, where
violence was not uncommon and the ability to pursue one’s education was more of a luxury
than an expectation. Given the breadth and staggering degree of these challenges, it is almost
hard to imagine how women from these environments and raised in these homes can rise to
the occasion and commit to thoughtfully and carefully raising children. And yet, many do just
that. The women I met are, for the most part, loving, attentive, and devoted mothers. While it
is true that they lacked for much growing up, including stable homes, two parent families, safe neighborhoods and schools, they also learned much growing up as they did. In this section, I show the various ways the women I met utilize the lessons and skills they learned in childhood in their new role as mothers.

It takes a village

One of the lessons most women learn growing up is that it is easier raising children with help from others. This is also the central finding of Carol Stack’s classic text, *All Our Kin*. Published in 1974, Carol Stack sought to understand how families in poor, mostly black communities made ends meet. She spent several years living in The Flats, a poverty stricken area within a large Midwestern city. The Flats resembles neighborhoods similar to those where my interviewees live. Income is low, unemployment is high, and many women bear their first child out of wedlock. What Stack learned was that individuals in The Flats ‘swapped’ resources, meaning that they shared what they had, giving to those who fell on especially hard times with the expectation of reciprocity later. Stack describes a communal society that has developed a system of mutual support to ensure individual survival. This system of exchange extends to child-rearing as well; Stack reported that one in five children was being raised (at least temporarily) by someone other than their mothers (most often another family member).

The women in my study similarly understand that to survive in their communities, mothers need assistance. This was a consistent theme amongst the women I met: having children stay with grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and cousins. Often the stays were temporary, ranging from a day to a few years at most. Very frequently I would hear from the
grandmothers in my study who have taken an active role in raising their grandchildren; they remember the strain they faced as young mothers and do not want their daughters to suffer the same challenges, so they help in any way they can with raising their grandchildren. Raya, mentioned earlier as a victim of sexual and emotional abuse from her mother, has had her daughter and grandson move back in with her so she can care for her family and help keep her daughter’s costs down. Moving back in with parents after kids were born was fairly common: Asha has returned with her two children to her mother’s home and Josie, introduced in the previous chapter, lives with her son and baby’s father in his mother’s home.

The lesson that raising children requires as much help as possible also extends to how some women feel about their baby’s fathers. For some of the women who did not have their own fathers in their lives, they work extra hard to make sure that their kids do not suffer the same fate. Shani was very clear that both she and Ernest were unfaithful to each other early in their relationship. She admits that she had every intention of leaving him until she learned she was pregnant. Shani knew first-hand the challenges of unstable parenting and for her two children, she is trying to make the relationship work. Francesca, who has five children by three men, is living with the father of her youngest child, though admits she does not love him. She is emotionally committed to the father of her third and fourth children, though he is incarcerated. She stays in her current relationship, not because she has romantic feelings for him, but because she wants an accessible father figure for her children. Francesca had suffered profound neglect as a child and believes her brother suffered dearly without a man at home. She is doing what she can to have a stable male figure present for all her children, irrespective of her feelings for him.
Cutting out the Negativity

In some cases, the lessons learned in early childhood inform women not only about who to include in their child’s upbringing, but who to exclude as well. This is especially true for survivors of abuse. As mentioned previously, Raya suffered emotional, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of her mother. Her first marriage was highly dysfunctional, though she stayed in it for the sake of her children. Upon hearing that her husband was molesting her daughter, she immediately left him and prevented him from having contact with her or their kids again. Raya asked her daughter to move in with her, not solely to help her daughter save money and have Raya help with parenting; Raya admits that part of her motivation was to keep her daughter away from the father of her grandson. He has abused Raya’s daughter in the past and Raya wants to do whatever she can to protect her daughter from a fate she knows too well.

Women need not be suffering abuse at the hands of their boyfriends to believe they deserve better. Kia bonded with her baby’s father when they used to sell drugs together. Everything changed when she got pregnant with their daughter. Kia realized she and their daughter deserved more than having parents cycle in and out of prison, as her father had. She stopped selling drugs, got her GED and enrolled in courses at the local community college. She had assumed her boyfriend would make positive changes as well, as he had always been ‘her ride.’ When he made it clear that he would not be giving up the street life, she left him. Toni, one of the White daughters, was in a four-year college out of state while her boyfriend was incarcerated for dealing drugs. She wanted better for him and encouraged him to find legal employment, but she loved him and tolerated his behavior. Like Kia, her stance changed at the birth of their daughter. She broke up with her daughter’s father and is currently single. While
she is not actively looking for a new relationship, she says that finding someone who is secure and upwardly mobile is important for her. In many ways, women who jettison negative influences are very similar to those who cultivate resource networks: both are examples of women creating the best possible environments for their children. Women have learned early on that positive parental figures in childhood are vital, and they make use of those lessons in motherhood.

**Navigating the System**

One way in which early life lessons can be enacted later is through a knowledge of available resources. Ramona, a 20-year-old African American mother to an infant daughter, learned this lesson well. Ramona comes from a large family: she is the 6th of 10 children to her mother, though the only child to her father. Ramona never met her father and has never had any contact with him, but believes he lives in New York. Ramona and her family moved frequently throughout the greater Boston area, but her most recent home was on the two lower floors of a triple decker home that her mother rented for her and her siblings (different siblings would live there at different times, and Ramona admits that she has never been close with any of them.) Her mother made ends meet with government assistance and by dealing drugs from her home. Ramona’s mother had a “complicated” relationship with Ramona’s extended family, which was one of the reasons they were constantly moving. Another reason was that Ramona’s mother was constantly on the run from the law, as she was a known drug dealer with a series of fraud charges.
Ramona’s relationship with her mother has been turbulent for as long as she can remember. Ramona describes her mother as irresponsible and immature, likely due to the fact that she had just turned 15 when she gave birth to her first child. Her mother would discuss things with her children that Ramona found to be inappropriate to address with one’s children, including very candid conversations about sex and drug use. Ramona’s mother did not take her maternal responsibilities seriously and after their frequent moves to different homes, she did not bother to reenroll her minor children in the local school system. Ramona, who enjoys learning, had to repeatedly enroll herself in school every time they moved, though ultimately found the strain at home to be too challenging and she dropped out of school in the 10th grade (she is currently working on completing her GED requirements). Ramona’s mother would disappear for months at a time, leaving her children in the care of her boyfriend, who was the father of her youngest four children. Ramona thinks of this man, whom she refers to as her ‘stepfather,’ as the only real parental figure she has had.

Ramona is still committed to Jay, the father of her infant daughter. She started dating Jay two years ago, when she was still living at home. Initially she was not interested in his advances, but his persistence eventually won her over. Jay came from a stable, two-parent family and was still in school when they met, but he also hung around “the wrong crowd” and got into fights. He began to spend a lot of his time partying with his friends, where they would drink and smoke marijuana. At 17, Jay was incarcerated with the Division of Youth Services for an assault and battery charge. This was a difficult time for Ramona, who (in large part as a reaction to her family) does not drink, smoke, or use any drugs. She describes Jay’s incarceration as a challenging time for their relationship: “[i]t was rocky, I don’t know, it wasn’t
so good, because I don’t like someone who parties all the time.” Nonetheless, her time with Jay
was a considerable step up from her time at home, as he was a far more positive influence than
her family. She says “I was exposed to being treated bad, but he didn’t treat me bad. You can’t
stop things people do. I wasn’t abused or mistreated. He went to jail, but not for long.”

I interviewed Ramona in a shelter for young mothers, where Ramona had been staying
for the previous five months. She found this housing on her own; Jay was incarcerated when
she first applied and men are not allowed to live in her current residence. She is currently
unemployed and has bad credit (her mother and siblings had taken out credit cards in her name
and Ramona is still in the long process of rectifying the problem) but makes ends meet by
receiving assistance through WIC, which provides financial assistance to mothers of small
children. Ramona has no intentions of returning to her mother’s home, where her mother
badgered her for money and where her daughter would witness maladaptive behaviors, so she
is actively looking for a home where she, Jay, and their daughter can live together. She helped
Jay find employment at Lady Footlocker after his release and is grateful for the in-kind
assistance he provides in the form of diapers and shoes. Ramona maintains her academic
ambitions and aspires to graduate from a four-year college.

Ramona is a very capable young mother. She had to fend for herself for as long as she
can remember, as she did not know her father and her mother was either entirely absent or,
when present, a manipulative figure who did not seem to care about Ramona’s best interests.
As a result of growing up with her mother and siblings, Ramona learned lessons she carries with
her into adulthood. She has stayed away from alcohol and drugs. She knows what types of
influences to keep away from her daughter. Perhaps most impressively, the lack of parenting
she experienced has forced her to learn how to find housing, enroll in school, apply for a job and receive public assistance. Though she has few financial resources and only a stepfather as familial support, she has an awareness of available resources and the knowledge necessary to navigate the system. She has and will continue to utilize this knowledge as she plans her future with Jay and their daughter.

**Getting Out**

Of all aspects of their lives that women have control over, least among this list is the communities where they live. Most women have some control over who they allow in their, and their kids’, lives. If they have family or friends, they can extend their networks to help create a system of mutual support for their children. They can cut out those individuals who are parasitic, abusive, or otherwise destructive. Those with the knowledge of external resources can navigate the system so as to access as much assistance as they can to help make ends meet. Most, however, do not have the ability to change their larger environments. As discussed earlier, many women live in communities fraught with violence and visible crime. Some have born witness to egregious acts of aggression and a few carry memories of seeing death in real time. Women would like their children safeguarded from the neighborhoods in which they live, but economic limitations make this difficult to do.

Some women move to shelters outside of the city. Mara spends summers in Alabama with her father’s family. Her parents did not get along, but her mother insisted that Mara leave the city as much as possible to prevent prolonged exposure to the violence she saw in Boston. Now Mara lives in a shelter more than 30 minutes outside of the city. Kia and her cousin Terry
also live in shelters outside of the city, though in opposite directions from one another. While they both appreciate the reprieve from their stressful environments, it is difficult to see one another, and many of the resources (including the community college they both attend) require them to spend hours a day on public transportation. Shani is desperate to find a new place for her and her mother. Her mother still lives in the housing project where Shani’s brother was near fatally shot, and the perpetrators, though never arrested, still live in the neighboring blocks. Unfortunately, Shani has not been able to find alternative public housing for her and her mother yet. In that way, her story is similar to most: though they would like to raise their children in safer environments and keep them from seeing the violence and drug use that they saw as children, there are not enough feasible opportunities to leave.

Women also understand that moving to a safer area would mean a better school system for their children, which they would also like to provide but cannot given their current financial limitations. They regularly complained about the quality of the schools they attended. The final school Jessica attended before dropping out had a daycare on premises, earning it the moniker of the ‘pregnancy school.’ This is certainly a valuable resource, allowing mothers to take classes while their young children are being watched, though Jessica felt that this school was seen as a last ditch effort and she could not take it seriously. Others described regularly missing classes and either receiving no penalty or being transferred to another school. The mothers I met cared about their children’s educations, even when they did not finish school themselves. Francesca, who dropped out at 15, proudly displays report cards on her refrigerator. In the following chapter, I will discuss what mothers dream for their children and
what they hope to instill. While they all hope to keep their children in safe environments and in quality schools, it is not a dream that many can currently achieve.

**Conclusion**

I began this chapter by reviewing the seminal book *Promises I Can Keep*, which demonstrated the motives that young women had in becoming mothers; namely, they viewed motherhood was a moral contract, the fulfillment of their biological destiny, and in raising children they start anew and give their lives meaning. This conclusion is found among the women I met as well, who for the most part viewed motherhood as sacrosanct. That said, the question arises: how are young women, most of whom are unmarried and with few financial resources, able to function as mothers? My thesis of this chapter is that new and evolving changes in the inner-city, specifically the on-going devastation of addiction and the growth of mass incarceration, has had lasting consequences for parenting. These phenomena have extracted adults from their homes and increased family instability. Women in my study were likely to grow up without the constant presence of their biological fathers. Some had absent mothers as well. They grew up in neighborhoods plagued with violence. Some had little faith in the value of formal education or were unable to graduate because of more pressing needs.

In spite of all these handicaps, the women I met were loving mothers. While they may lack for material assets, their pasts provide them with lessons and perspectives upon which they can draw in their role as mothers. From their hardships come knowledge and skills. Women understood the value and necessity of creating a network of support. Some relied on family for housing and childcare. Some, who themselves grew up without stable parenting,
work to maintain their primary relationships so their children have a consistent paternal presence. Some, who had to raise themselves, know how to access public resources for themselves and their children. Some who were raised in areas of violence or crime seek a means to move their children away, though few have the means to do so.

I argue that for some low-income mothers, they possess hidden resources that may be adapted and applied as they raise their children. It is important to clarify, however, that not everyone who faced difficult challenges in their youth is able to reap benefits from it later. Donna, the women born in a shooting gallery, now lives in a group home. Her son is incarcerated and her daughter was raised in foster care. Donna spent many years as a heroin addict herself, self-medicating from decades of abuse. Tragically, Donna has never fully recovered from the myriad forms of trauma she experienced earlier in life and thus has not had the means to marshal those experiences into lessons for her own children. Ultimately, those who can take hardships from the past and turn them into advantages for the future are both strong and lucky. Not everyone has the ability to leave an abuser or the time and savvy to explore the complicated system of accessing public assistance. That said, the women I met are not without skills. They carry with them a deep understanding of what it means to grow up in families like theirs, in environments like theirs. They have had generations of their families living in similar contexts and they know their terrain. While there is much about their external environments they cannot control, they use what they know to ensure their children the best possible upbringing they can provide.
Chapter 4: Partners and Parenting

Throughout this dissertation, I have explored the ways that shifting structural realities in the inner-city have changed the landscape for those who live there. The War on Drugs and mass incarceration have altered women’s’ perceptions as well as the way the engage with their environments. In my previous chapters, I sought to make two major substantive points. The first was that women in low-income, urban neighborhoods do not believe that criminal activities function to identify those men who are morally questionable. My second major point was to show that women who grew up in neighborhoods and in families that have been disproportionately affected by criminalization and incarceration have been required to adapt to challenges in their childhood, and as a result may have acquired knowledge and skills that helped them embrace their role as mothers.

In my final substantive chapter, I seek to elucidate some of the ways women think about parenting, given the aforementioned changes in their communities. I begin by examining the literature on fatherhood, comparing that to how the women in my study understand the role of fathers. I have already demonstrated that a criminal record does not serve as a marker for moral character. What, then, does define a good father? What characteristics, priorities or behaviors matter to mothers as they think about the fathers of their children? Next, I discuss what women want for their children. Finally, I end with a description of the ways women try to ensure that their children achieve those goals and the protective actions mothers take to help their kids succeed.
Fragile Family Fathers

One of the best sources of data on unwed parents in the U.S. is the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Research Study, described in Chapter 2. Amongst other topics, the Fragile Families study examined the nature of the relationship between biological parents and, specifically, what role unmarried fathers have throughout their child’s early years. According to the results, researchers found that the majority of fathers in the Fragile Families sub-sample (N of approximately 2000) were in a relationship with the mothers of their children at the time of birth. Four out of five parents reported that they were in a romantic relationship at the time of birth, and nearly half of parents were co-habitating.\(^{32}\) Half of the mothers in this sample believed the likelihood was good that they would eventually marry their partners. However, this was typically not the case. By the time the focal child in the study had turned five-years-old, only 16% of mothers had married their partners, 18% were co-habitating, and more than 60% of women stated that they were no longer in a romantic relationship with their baby’s fathers. Of those women who were not romantically involved with their partners at year five, half were in a new relationship. These data demonstrate that in spite of their best intentions and their hopes at the time of the child’s birth, most of these unmarried parents were not able to maintain their relationship into the child’s toddlerhood.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, as romantic relationships broke down, so too did the mother’s assessment of the father’s involvement with their child. Five years after birth, two thirds of mothers reported that the father saw their child within the last month. Among those relationships that were no longer romantic (which was more than 60%), less than half (43%) of

mothers reported that their child saw his/her father in the last month. Women were also asked to report on the relationship quality they had with the fathers of their children at the five year mark. Amongst all women in the sample, one third described their relationship as ‘excellent/very good,’ 17% described it as ‘good,’ more than one third said their relationship was ‘fair/poor,’ and the remaining 14% said it was ‘other’ (likely meaning non-existent). The women who were still in a relationship with their partners were much more likely to report that their relationship was very good and that the fathers of their children saw them regularly. This finding highlights the importance of the parental relationship towards the success of the father/child relationship: while some unmarried fathers are certainly capable of maintaining a strong and consistent bond with their child after separating from their child’s mother, in practice this bond often suffers after the breakup between the parents.

**Doing the Best They Can**

In an in-depth narrative analysis, Kathryn Edin and Timothy Nelson addressed similar questions about fatherhood as those in the Fragile Families study. Published in 2013, *Doing the Best I Can* by Edin and Nelson sought to append Edin and Kefalas’ earlier examination on motherhood. *Doing the Best I Can* follows the lives of 110 unmarried fathers in the low-income area of Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey. The authors wanted to investigate the common, conservative narrative that unmarried fathers were aimless, lazy and indifferent to the children they produce and the women they abandoned. Their findings show a more sympathetic, though admittedly still rather grim, understanding of fatherhood in these communities. On the whole, men were excited at the news that they would be fathers, eager for the opportunity to
redeem themselves and contribute to a society within which they do not have much control. Most men aspire to be active fathers, hoping to remain involved in their kid’s lives and partaking in the small joys of parenting. Unfortunately, many men are unable to fulfill this goal. Relationships with their baby’s mothers are often tenuous and, as a result, brief. New mothers have increased needs from their baby’s fathers, in the form of money and time, and most men are unable to attain this growing obligation. Furthermore, men still succumb to the problematic, immature behaviors they engaged in during their youth. As a result, in spite of their best intentions, many low-income fathers ultimately fail to play the role they had hoped to play.

The aforementioned research on fatherhood helps frame how most women in my study understand what a good dad is. Like past research suggests, the relationship between the parents seems to influence, but not dictate, the relationship between the father and child. One limitation of my study, however, is that there is considerable variation in the ages of the women in my sample, and thus considerable variation in the ages of their children and the length of time that fathers may or may not have been active in their children’s lives. The Fragile Families study demonstrates that most parents are in a romantic relationship at the time of the child’s birth but not by the time the child turns five. As such, it would be reasonable to extrapolate that on average, the relationship children have with their fathers continues to decrease over time.\(^{33}\) The younger women in my sample were often still romantically attached

\(^{33}\) Since data does not exist on the strength of relationships between unmarried fathers and children through adulthood, it is very possible that these relationships may actually revive after the child reaches the age of majority and has less material need from his/her father. Further research is needed to draw conclusions in either direction.
to their partners or on a ‘break’ while he was incarcerated, while the older women in my study often had been long out of touch with the fathers of their children and were not aware of the types of relationships their children (now in their thirties and forties) had with their fathers. Furthermore, when asked for details on levels of father involvement, some of my older participants could no longer recall how frequently their children’s fathers would see their kids in the early years. Because of this variation by age, I will not discuss women’s subjective views on the involvement of the fathers of their children, but rather will discuss what role women feel fathers should play.

Assessing Fatherhood

**Absent Fathers are Bad Fathers**

In *Doing the Best I Can*, men identified Ward Cleaver (the fictional tv show father on Leave it to Beaver) as the ideal father. As a model, Ward Cleaver provided for his family financially, guided his sons through moral quandaries, taught them life lessons and handy skills, and spent time with them, listening to them talk about their day and what they learned at school. The ideal father, then, offers both material and emotional support and is always available whenever his children need him. The women in my study felt much the same way, though for them, ideal fatherhood was largely an abstract concept. None of them described the fathers of their children in such universally positive terms. Most of their baby’s fathers would be exempt from the ideal model by virtue of having been incarcerated – not because good fathers cannot have criminal records, but because their ideal notion of a father would not be separated from his children for any notable length of time.
While none of the women could say their past or present partners were ever ideal fathers, more than a few would define them on the opposite extreme. Women had the most ire for those partners who played no role in their children’s lives, be it financial, emotional, or as a playmate or occasional source of entertainment. Some women had partners who never recognized that they were the fathers of the child the woman was carrying. Others separated from the woman before the baby was born and either never acknowledged the child or was only involved for a brief period after the birth. Sharon was born and raised in Texas and lived a sheltered early life. She describes herself at that time as painfully naïve. She moved to Boston as a teenager and when she was 19 she met 16-year-old Chip, though she did not know then that he was three years her junior. Sharon was enthralled by Chip’s confidence and swagger, and they soon started seeing one another. Chip was running the streets, though at the time Sharon had no understanding of what that meant or what consequences would result. Five months after knowing one another, Sharon was pregnant. Chip had no desire to become a father at sixteen, so requested that Sharon get an abortion. By the time she went to the doctor to explore that option, she was told that she was too far along in her pregnancy. Sharon recalls that Chip did not attend the birth but did visit after Sharon and baby Nicole were released from the hospital. He dropped off two boxes of diapers and disappeared for the next twenty years. Nicole would ask about her father as she grew up, and Sharon “told it like it was” and said that Chip “didn’t want to be bothered” with being a father. Sharon would hear throughout the years about Chip being incarcerated for robbery and assault. Recently Chip reemerged, seemingly to reconnect with his daughter, though Nicole told her mother that Chip reached out to ask her for money. Neither Sharon nor Nicole want anything to do with Chip.
Others abdicate their role as fathers when they are no longer in a sexual relationship with the mothers. It is not always clear how this shift in roles occurs; sometimes couples drift apart and either the mother or the father will find themselves in a new relationship, and sometimes with new children. When new romantic relationships happen, it is not uncommon that many connections to the prior relationship, including kids, fall to the wayside as well. This was not an infrequent source of resentment and anger on the part of mothers, who witnessed their baby’s fathers jettison their responsibilities after starting over with a new partner. Cora described her relationship with Shawn as great when they first started dating over fifteen years ago. She knew he was dealing drugs, but he spent time with her and had money to spend on gifts and nights out. They have two children together, but in the last decade of their on and off relationship, he has had four more children with other women. Cora is very hurt and frustrated that Shawn has forgotten about her and their two children. Their son, now fifteen, is in custody with the Division of Youth Services, which functions as juvenile detention in Massachusetts. Cora and her daughter are homeless. She now says of Shawn that “I have the worst kids’ father in the world.”

*Necessary but not Sufficient – Fathers as Financial Providers*

In past generations in the U.S., men, in their roles as husband and father, were the breadwinners for their families. They were the primary source of financial security, while their wives stayed home, taking care of the children. This marriage model has changed significantly over the last half century, as more women joined the workforce and divorce has become more common. For many American families, women are also expected to be a source of financial
support for their children. This trend is only more prominent in low-income communities, where marriage is less common and employment opportunities are fewer. The financial obligation of the unmarried father to his children is more ambiguous. Most mothers and fathers do expect that men should contribute something, but the degree of that monetary or in-kind support is highly debated. In *Doing the Best I Can*, Edin and Nelson highlight this discrepancy, giving voice to fathers who feel as though they are pressed too much for money and not afforded the additional rights associated with fatherhood (which will be discussed later in this chapter). Their baby’s mothers, on the other hand, expected that men should understand that children come with expenses, and that fathers must share in the costs and not just reap the rewards.

Among the women in my study, nearly everyone believed that fathers should contribute something to help raise their children, but there was significant variation on the question of how much is necessary. Only one woman I interviewed received monthly financial support from her baby’s father. Most received sporadic, in-kind assistance in the form of the occasional box of diapers or bottle of formula. Some of the women I spoke to believed their baby’s fathers were doing what they could to provide and, though they may have wished it was more, were understanding of the situation. Forty-year-old Marie’s perspective mirrored that of other women with the same sentiment: a mother of five by five men, she describes none of her baby’s fathers as ‘good providers,’ but was generally forgiving, saying that “[t]hey always did what they could when they were out of prison.” None of these fathers helped with food or rent, but did provide clothing or shoes when they were able. These in-kind forms of assistance were nearly always material items for the child; fathers rarely paid for the regular incidentals
associated with parenting such as doctor’s visits, field trips, etc. Marie relied heavily on familial support and disability she received for one of her sons to cover the bulk of parenting expenses. She estimates that she covered more than 75% of the cost of raising her children and would have liked more help from their fathers, though money does not seem to have been a source of considerable conflict or stress.

Not all women were so understanding. Forty-three-year-old Valerie is an African-American mother of a 17-year-old boy. She is the daughter of a bricklayer and a nurse who have been married for fifty years. Her parents raised her and her three siblings to be religious, stable, responsible, and gainfully employed individuals. Valerie spent most of her early life in the suburbs south of Boston, but on the weekends would go with her friends to clubs in the city. It was at a club where she met Leo. For two years she was with Leo on and off. She attributes her tolerance of Leo to her naiveté and her low self-esteem; signs of his drug use were rampant, but when he told her that burglars had stolen all her jewelry in spite of there being no signs of a break-in, Valerie believed him. He was incarcerated for possession while she was pregnant and has spent short stints in prison since. After the birth of their son, Valerie learned that Leo had little interest in parenting. Even when he was working, he would not provide any financial assistance to Valerie. Eventually she sued him for child support and says he owes her over $50,000 in back pay, though she does not waste her energy trying to track him down. They have not spoken in more than a decade. Two other women I interviewed said that they considered suing over back child support but ultimately opted against it. Both women argued that their baby’s fathers did not have the money to give and that no one benefited from them spending more time in prison.
Money is a basic necessity to raising a child in our society, though in some instances, the women I met did not want to push their baby’s fathers to providing more for fear of how that money would be acquired. The Fragile Families study asked fathers about their sources of income. More than three in four men worked a ‘regular job’ in the week prior to being interviewed.\(^{34}\) Of those that worked, more than a quarter earned some of that income from the underground economy, which includes either off-the-books work or illegal activity. In Chapter 2, I referenced how women were sometimes tolerant of certain kinds of illegal activity because some men would funnel ill-gotten gains towards their partners and children. This form of support could produce internal conflict for the women in my study. Those that needed it would accept the funds and not ask for details on its source. Others would try to manage as much as possible on their own, lest they risk encouraging their baby’s fathers into more illegal activity. Such was the case of 31-year-old China, an African American mother of one. China has been in a turbulent relationship with David for 12 years, and in spite of frequent infidelities and him fathering a child by another woman during their relationship (which China discovered when the other woman mailed China a copy of her ultrasound), she remains “head over heels” in love with him and hopes they can find a way for their relationship to work out. In 2003 he was incarcerated for armed robbery and has been in and out of prison ever since. China is desperate to help David stay out of prison, but she is fully aware that he reverts back to a life of crime anytime he feels the desire or the need for money. As a result, China tries her best not to pressure him for financial support, lest he risk reincarceration. Even if they do not stay

\(^{34}\) https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/sites/fragilefamilies/files/researchbrief3.pdf
together romantically, she would rather he remain free and have regular access to his two
children than behind bars, where he cannot be an engaged father in any capacity.

_Good Fathers Must Be Available_

In spite of the importance of money in helping raise children, the women I met did not seem to prioritize financial assistance as the most important aspect of fatherhood. Many women stated that their baby’s fathers were ‘not good’ in spite of giving regular in-kind assistance, while others said that their baby’s fathers were ‘good’ or ‘pretty good’ even when he could provide little material support. What, then, was the most important part of fatherhood for the women I interviewed? Most women suggested that time and attention was most critical for their children. Edin and Nelson identified that the paternal model for parenting has shifted, and as men are being asked to play more of a role than simply that of breadwinner, fathers are also expecting those additional aspects as well. In other words, the fathers they interviewed wanted to be there to play with their children, get them ready for school, and experience the other minor joys of watching a person grow up.

The women I met also expected fathers to be there for these moments as well. Twenty-five-year-old African American mother of one Nataly has many hopes for herself and her family. Both her mother and father were incarcerated when she was an infant (her father later a victim of a homicide in 1996), so Nataly and her brother were raised by a devoted foster mother who eventually adopted them. Nataly’s foster mother was a strict disciplinarian who did not afford her foster children much pity and expected them to reach their potential. Nataly admits that it was not always easy in her foster mother’s home, but she grew to appreciate holding herself to
a high standard. Nataly attended a charter school for high school and was admitted to several colleges across the East Coast. Unfortunately, she could not afford her first choice. She eventually settled on a school out of state but found that she did not like it at all and returned to Boston after a year. It was then that she met Theo, who was nothing like the young men she grew up with. Theo took her on coffee dates and to museums, which aligned well with Nataly’s self-described ‘geeky’ nature. She did not realize at the time that he was in the streets. Theo was in and out of prison fairly regularly over the three years of their relationship. He has been out for the last month.

Nataly and Theo have a four-month old son. Nataly inherited her foster mother’s home after she passed away earlier this year, and Theo lives with his father on the other side of the city. Still, Theo is with Nataly and their son as much as he can be. Nataly is understanding, though frustrated, with Theo’s inability to get a legitimate job. She says:

He definitely needs to be able to get a job and support his family in legal ways, legal ways. That whole street and hustling thing, it’s all good when you’re young and dumb. Now it’s not good. I can’t teach my son how to be a man; he needs his father. He has other role models, like uncles, but his father is the one he’ll look up to most.

Though Nataly is disappointed by Theo’s inability to find legitimate work, she still describes him as a ‘great’ and ‘loving’ father. She says:

His [son’s] interests are above everything else. But with all his flaws, he’s there for his son: he changes diapers, reading, cooking... he tries to be the best him he can be... He’s a very loving father. He has the things I don’t have that makes us complete... [Theo] spends a lots of time with his son. He makes bottles in the middle of the night. He does a lot more than many guys do. He wants to be the man he didn’t have.

Nataly is not alone in her views. Many of the other women in my study also put a high premium on the intangibles of fatherhood. Forty-two-year-old mother of five, Charol, is
currently waiting for the father of two of her sons to be released from prison. When asked about how he was as a father, she said this:

Oh, he was fun. He was a good dad. He was like a little kid himself. He relived his childhood through them. He wasn’t abusive, he took care of what he had to. He took the time. When he was out in the street, whatever, but when he was home his attention was on the kids. He’d get them up and get them ready for day care, or picking them up from day care, or getting dinner ready or playing video games with them. He was available for them. If I was at work or school, he’d be with them.

Other mothers echoed the views of both Nataly and Charol, who seemed to weigh time and attention as the primary factors in assessing how good their baby’s fathers were as dads. It is worth noting that both Nataly and Charol had fathers who were heavily involved in crime; both men spent long years in prison and died prematurely because of their criminal affiliations. Nataly and Charol knew what it was like to lack paternal involvement throughout childhood and it is very possible that their valuation of their baby’s fathers time and attention emanates from their own sense of loss. Other women who prioritized the softer side of fatherhood saw what paternal absence did to their own children. Valerie, introduced earlier in this chapter, recalls the heartbreak of hearing her son ask why his father was never around. In spite of how much money he owed her, Valerie was so desperate for Leo to spend time with his son that she would pay him to do it. Leo was not interested in the exchange and their son, now 17, has yet to spend more than a few consecutive hours with his father.

Again, it is important to reiterate that mothers were not indifferent to fathers who did not contribute financially to raising their children. Most women wanted both time and material support from the fathers of their children, and the most ire was spent on those fathers were lacked on both counts. That being said, the women I interviewed seemed to understand that it
could be difficult for men with criminal records to get a job. This reality did not excuse those men who preferred the quick money and the late nights of the hustle, but in some cases the social realities of a criminal record did seem to soften, but not excuse, women’s perspectives on financial support.

**Are There Good Dads in Prison?**

In the previous discussion, I showed that good fathers are available for their children and that mothers are quick to condemn those dads who abdicate their responsibilities. Given these positions, it would seem to be impossible for a good dad to be incarcerated. Time in prison is time that fathers cannot engage with the daily routines of parenthood. Furthermore, if incarcerated fathers want to see their children while they are detained, another adult must take on the responsibility of ensuring that the children are able to get to visitation. Based on my interviews, it is the mothers who usually takes on the burden of these visits, which can be taxing in a variety ways. Being incarcerated also means that men are not working (legally or illegally) and are not helping provide materially for their kids. Being incarcerated not only stops money from coming into the home, but it can result in money going out. While prisons meet

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Mothers described how sometimes their loved ones were sentenced to prisons that were far away, and arranging travel could be tedious or impossible. Some described how, upon arriving at the prison at a designated visiting time, a section of the prison might be on lockdown and visitation was spontaneously cancelled. Others talked about inconsistent and detailed rules for visitors, including restrictions on clothing; women complained that corrections officers could decide that a given outfit was inappropriate and not let the person into the facility. These are just several of the many stories I heard about the physical and psychological difficulties of visiting someone in prison.
the basic needs\textsuperscript{36} of their inmates, any additional amenities must be purchased with money placed in a prisoner’s canteen. If an inmate wants to call home to talk to his children, these calls are either placed collect or utilize a prison-specific prepaid phone card. These costs can escalate quickly, and many of the mothers I interviewed complained about how much these expenses were draining their already limited funds. All told, not only are fathers not financially assisting their families while they are incarcerated, they often are a monetary drain while they are away.

In spite of the myriad costs that incarceration has on the families of inmates, women had a range of views on how well incarcerated men functioned as fathers. Some women were angry that their baby’s fathers engaged in childish or selfish behavior that landed them in prison. Others were resentful that they were now burdened with more work and less assistance with parenting. Jessica, who was referenced earlier for her nearly non-existent relationship with her father, is extremely frustrated with Alphonso, the father of her two eldest children. She was unhappy throughout their relationship; she repeatedly asked Alphonso to stop running the streets with his gang-affiliated friends, but he would not. Now he is incarcerated on an assault charge. His original sentence has been extended because Alphonso has gotten into altercations inside prison and has been placed in solitary confinement on more than one occasion. Jessica cannot understand why Alphonso would jeopardize his release, knowing that by doing so, he is opting to stay away from her and their kids. She thinks he is not

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{36} Even this is disputed among the women I interviewed. Women told stories of how their loved ones were denied basic and necessary health care or sufficient food while in prison.}
prioritizing his familial obligations and she does not have kind things to say about him as a father.

Other women, however, are not quite so condemning in their assessment of their partners as dads. To be clear, no one claimed that their baby’s fathers were good dads while they were behind bars, but when asked to describe how their partner/ex-partner functioned as a parent, some women responded by describing how great the men were when they were out. For example, Josie, mentioned in Chapter 2, has nothing but praise for Anthony, father to their young son. She describes how attentive he is, how eagerly he plays with his son and teaches him lessons, how well he contributes to their home by cooking and cleaning. When I interviewed Josie, Anthony had been released just three months prior after serving a four-year sentence. He has missed the bulk of his son’s life while in prison. Nevertheless, Josie is proud and grateful for how actively her boyfriend is taking on these new obligations. Similarly, Nataly is pleased with how much Theo is trying to be a good dad. More data is required to make a definitive statement, but from what I can ascertain, the differing assessments of how good fathers are tend to hinge upon the quality of the relationship the mother currently has with the father. Women who are unhappy are quick to describe the ways that the fathers have failed, citing incarceration as one of many examples, while women who are happy with the fathers of their children tend to bypass the question and highlight how much the dads are trying to do better.

The Motherhood Burden
One of the primary reasons women repeatedly told me that they hoped their baby’s fathers would spend time with their children was because, on the whole, the bulk of day-to-day parenting landed on the shoulders of the mothers. Nearly all the mothers I met were the primary caretakers of their children.\textsuperscript{37} In some cases, such as when the mothers were themselves incarcerated or in full time drug rehabilitation facilities, children were temporarily placed with family members or, in rarer instances, foster care. Generally speaking, such instances were temporary and children were eventually returned to the care of their mothers. Fathers, on the other hand, rarely had full custody. At various times, women reported that they cohabitated with their partners and shared some parenting responsibilities. Rarely did cohabitation last the eighteen years until the child had reached majority. Among the women in my study who married their baby’s fathers, most marriages ended in separation or had significant periods wherein the father was incarcerated and away from the family. Thus, in the vast majority of situations, mothers spent far more time parenting than fathers did.

With the onus of parenting responsibilities comes some important choices that mothers have to make. Many women were confronted with the inevitable “where is my father?” query. This question is not an easy one to answer. Mothers were torn between competing values of honesty and protectiveness. Should they choose to educate their children (setting their fathers up as cautionary tales) or help retain their children’s innocence in neighborhoods where the subjective state of childhood does not last long? Even when honesty is judged the better option, how honest should one be, and when do mothers start doling out the vivid details of

\textsuperscript{37} That most of the women in my study were primary caregivers of their kids may be a function of sampling; recruitment materials stated that I was looking for women who had children by men who had been incarcerated.
their father’s past? To complicate matters, what should mothers do when the stories the
fathers tell contradict their own? Or when their own feelings may risk contaminating what
their child believes of their father?

Mora has struggled with these questions for many years. At 64, she is the oldest woman
I interviewed. She was the youngest of four, raised by her maternal grandmother in South
Carolina until the age of nine. She describes this time of her life as ‘normal’ and ‘innocent.’
When she was nine her mother married a man from Springfield, Massachusetts and brought
her children to New England. Mora’s life quickly took a turn for the worse. Her mother was
cruel and mercenary. When Mora was a pre-teen, she told her mother that her stepfather was
molesting her and her mother said that Mora was no longer welcome at home. Later, after her
mother realized she could get financial support from welfare by having her daughter live with
her, Mora’s mother brought her back, but never believed Mora about the molestation nor
interceded with her husband. Mora spent as much time as possible away from home and
subsequently grew up very early; by the time she was 14, Mora was pregnant.

When Mora was 15 she caught the attention of 18-year-old Jerry, a young man in her
neighborhood. He was an aspiring marine and expressed a willingness to marry her, taking her
off her mother’s hands and effectively adopting her infant daughter. Mora says now she had
no idea what she was doing, but her mother was eager to be rid of her and pressured her into
marriage. The next several years were of the worst in Mora’s life. She would have four more
pregnancies (including a set of twins) but of the six daughters she brought into the world, only
two are still alive. Her eldest, Tina, was the only child not fathered by Jerry. One night when
Tina was still a toddler, Mora left her in the care of Jerry. Mora returned home to find that Tina
was not breathing. Jerry had a history of abuse and Mora was convinced that he killed her. An investigation did not find conclusive evidence and Jerry was honorably discharged from the marines. For Mora, the loss was devastating and shook her to her core. After years of abuse from her mother, stepfather, and husband, she could not take it any longer. She grabbed her daughters and moved away to Boston. She never heard from her husband again, though through channels she learned that he spent years in prison and died of natural causes 15 years ago.

For years, Mora struggled with what she should tell her daughters. She believes that many of the tragedies of her life could have been avoided had her mother been loving and open with her. If her mother had told Mora about sex and men, Mora would have learned about pregnancy and what she should and should not have tolerated from a spouse. Had she known those things, and had she a safe place to go when things turned abusive, she would still have another living child today. When her daughters were teenagers, she told them the following:

There was a reason why everything happens. So I told them because I don’t want them to go through what I went through. If you get pregnant, you don’t have to marry that person. If you want to have an abortion, it’s your decision, I’m not going to make it for you. I’m a mother, I want to be a grandmother, so I’m not going to tell you to get an abortion. If you get pregnant and feel like you wanna have that baby, go have that baby because I’m 100% behind you, because I’m your mother. My mother told me boys would get me in trouble, but she never explained the trouble. She got me wondering, how could they get me in trouble? She should have told me about the birds and the bees. Tell me the truth, my life will go a lot easier. Because I found that if you tell one lie, you have to tell two to get out of the first lie you told.

Mora says in later years she was also candid with her daughters about their father. She told them about how their older sister died and why she never made any attempt to
communicate with their dad. She also was brutally honest about how her years of abuse and grief ultimately resulted in her addiction to crack cocaine (she is now more than twenty years sober). Her daughters were both deeply affected by the challenges their mother experienced and took her stories to heart; while one is happily married to a loving man and devoted father and has given Mora a grandson to spoil, the other daughter swore to stay away from men and never marry. Now 47-years-old, she never did.

Mora is confident that her decision to be transparent with her children was the best parenting option she could make. She would not withhold information that could be vital to her daughters’ well-being, as her mother did. Furthermore, she was willing to risk the fallout of telling her daughters about the kind of man their father was, so they would know the truth and never compromise their safety or self-worth. She does not regret that neither daughter has lingering affection for their now-deceased father; as far as Mora is concerned, she owes nothing to the man who killed her first born.

Not everyone believes that transparency and candor are the best positions for mothers to adopt. Like Mora, 41-year-old Siri also had her first child at age 15 and was pressured by her family to marry the father, Lamar. Also like Mora, Siri was shocked when her young husband turned violent. He would regularly beat her, though was savvy enough to make sure he never bruised her in places that would be easily visible. He also controlled her and constantly insulted her to such a degree that she did not have the emotional strength to tell her family what was happening at home. Siri became pregnant again the year after giving birth to her son, and her husband Lamar made it very clear he was not interested in having a second child. Siri was raised in a very religious household and taught to believe that abortion was a sin, but Lamar’s
constant pressure wore her down. She went to the clinic to speak to a nurse, who told her she believed that Siri was too far along in her pregnancy for the procedure to be safe. It was that nurse who noticed that Siri showed physical and psychological characteristics of someone who was being abused. This acknowledgment planted the seed that eventually gave Siri the courage to tell her parents what was going on and file a restraining order against Lamar. Lamar violated that order repeatedly and was eventually sentenced to 12 years: three to serve and nine on probation.

When her husband was sentenced, she was in a position to decide what to tell her children. She described her thought process at the time:

But my mom always believed that you don’t take a kid from [their] parent. Okay. That’s how she was raised. So you know, I honored that because her mindset was ‘those kids didn’t ask to come here and for whatever reason the two of y’all are the parents, and I’m not saying you gotta be with him, but he hasn’t done anything to your kids.’ Which was true, he didn’t fight the kids, he didn’t molest the kids, the one thing I can say is he took care of his kids, it’s just him and I, there was that whatever that was. So when his mom would go visit him she’d take the kids. They asked all the time ‘where’s daddy’ blah blah blah. I said ‘the next time you see him, ask him, because I was also taught that you don’t badmouth a parent no matter how bad that parent is. And I still stand by that to this day. Because the reality is, it’s not rocket science, that child is going to figure it out one day, that if you ain’t about nothing, they gonna know you ain’t about nothing.

Siri’s choice to keep from her children details about her marriage would have lasting effects for many years. She admits that for most of his teen years, she had a very strained relationship with her son. He believed that she had been unfair to his father, that she had him incarcerated on false charges and that her decision prevented him from having the type of regular access to a father figure that he deserved. His anger emanated from information he was receiving from his father and his father’s family, who did not share Siri’s opinion that one should not badmouth the other parent. Lamar called Siri a ‘prostitute’ and accused her of being
jealous of him and trying to ruin his life. For a while, her son was so angry he would regularly yell at his mother for her cruelty. Siri’s brother could no longer endure hearing this misinformation being thrown around and showed Siri’s son photos of the injuries Lamar inflicted when he was still married to Siri. Her son broke down, apologizing for accusing her and believing his father. The relationship between Siri and her son has been a work in progress ever since.

The decision over what to tell a child about his/her father ultimately is framed in moral terms, specifically about the desire of mothers to protect their kids. The mothers I met all wanted their children to be kept safe, both physically and psychologically. Mothers like Mora believed that candor was educational and that children benefit from the wisdom, and the mistakes, of past generations. Mora specifically wanted to ensure that her daughters understood their own sexual biology, stayed away from abusive men, knew their rights if they were threatened or hurt and remembered that their mother would always be there should they need her. Mora was not alone in trying to protect her children through transparency. Another mother showed her son the scars his father left on her body, so he would know what his dad was capable of doing and to teach him that no love should result in physical trauma. Francesca, introduced in the previous chapter, made the tale of her boyfriend’s incarceration a teachable moment. When asked if she told her children about why their father was incarcerated, she said:

The older ones knew, but [the younger ones] asked as they got older. They thought I put him in prison, so I had to explain it to them and I told them everything. Daddy is in prison because he sold drugs. They deserve to know the truth. ‘[I]n the system, drugs is bad. Out in the streets, people like doing drugs.’ He was wrong for selling it, but had good intentions, that’s what he did to provide for his family. But in the end he got too greedy, he didn’t have to do all that. His parents paid for him to go to college, he was
going to [name of local community college], but he got greedy. He wanted more than a 9-5. He thought drugs would be the easy way out, so he did that and robbed people. It wasn’t like he was smart enough to save any of the money he made.

Other mothers try to protect their children’s innocence and their relationship with their fathers. Like Siri, some mothers decide that it is not their place to disclose the abusive or criminal behaviors of their baby’s fathers. One woman described her desire to ‘youthenize’ her children, by which she meant that she wanted her children to remain young as long as possible and avoid exposure to drugs, violence, and prison. Another hoped that because her children were young when their father was incarcerated, the issue may be avoided all together:

If [my son] asks, I’ll tell him. Otherwise I try to tell him things in the best possible way. Some people have those real grown kids who always wanna be in adult’s business; my son is far from that. He’s a kid, he does kid things. He was 4 when it happen, and dad was out when he was 7, so he probably didn’t think about it, and my daughter was a baby, so she probably doesn’t really remember. We never really talked about it. His family came to the kids’ birthday parties. He always called, so it wasn’t an issue. So if he doesn’t go back, there isn’t a need to mention it.

Many women referenced an ambivalence to taking children to see fathers in prison, fearing that it was both traumatizing and might risk normalizing incarceration in their kids’ eyes. Common sentiments were that visiting jail or prison was a ‘hassle’ and that the process of going through metal detectors and searches was invasive and embarrassing. One woman recalls the conversation she had when debating with her partner whether or not to take her children to prison. She said:

I’m not going to go through all the bullshit and the hassle, because even when children go up to visit, they still have to go through the same trial. They have to go through the metal detector, they have to have the wand over them. If you have a diaper bag or if you bring baby food in a Tupperware container or juice or something, everything had to get checked. I’m not going to go through all that and make them go through all that.
In this case, the mother sought to protect herself and her children from experiencing the ‘trial’ of institutionalization. This was a common theme among the women I met. Only one mother referenced that visiting prison with her child was a positive experience; she described how the corrections officers at the prison would try to make her son laugh. Most acknowledged that visiting prison was a very taxing experience, in terms of both time and travel money, and in some cases functionally prohibitive if the offender was sentenced to a facility that was too far away. Those women who did not or could not bring their children to visit their fathers in prison, perhaps inadvertently, risked maintaining what little connection kids may have with their fathers. Francesa described how not taking her daughter to see her father in prison ultimately cost him that relationship:

So it’s like difficult, I was like ‘why bring my daughter to a place that’s disgusting, she don’t even know you, she can’t hold you, she’s just looking at you for an hour. I can barely hear you,’ so I just stopped bringing her. And we just lost contact.

The final common mechanism by which families (not only mothers, but fathers and other relatives as well) sought to obfuscate some of the details about fathers is seen in what they told their kids about where their fathers were. Rather than telling children that their fathers were in prison, some parents opted to say that the dads were in ‘school.’ ‘School’ was a useful placeholder in that children already have a framework for what it is. Few seemed to question why the fathers were not allowed to leave the school at the end of the day or why there seemed to be only men studying there. By telling kids that their fathers were in school, parents were able to avoid an awkward, challenging conversation they may not have been prepared to have as well as insulate their kids from a harsh reality. If nothing else, using the concept of ‘school’ buys adults time to prepare themselves for a more candid conversation to
come later. As with all things, however, duplicity can have consequences. Asha recalls a conversation she had with her son when he was young. He was under the impression that men went away to school while mothers worked and earned money for the family. One day when they were out shopping, her son pointed out gifts that he expected his future girlfriend to buy him. Asha remembers being a little horrified by this interaction and made sure to tell her son that, contrary to what he believes, women do not work to be the providers for men.

**Hopes and Dreams**

As the previous discussion suggests, the mothers I interviewed are like mothers everywhere: they are loving women, trying to do what they think is best for their children. They are faced with significant challenges, navigating a unique and fraught terrain where they are often balancing the desire to maintain familial ties while protecting their children from possible sources of instability or trauma, all within a larger environment that mirrors the same challenging dynamic on a larger scale. More specifically, mothers not only are raising their children in families touched by the criminal justice system, but within communities that have been disproportionately affected by crime and criminal justice as well. Mothers know that their children are exposed to police altercations, drug use and violence on a regular basis, and most mothers can do little to realistically limit that exposure.

On the whole, mothers are doing their best to help increase the odds that their children avoid the traps that catch so many young people around them. Many moms are actively encouraging their children to excel in school. Toni, who knows firsthand the value of a college degree, has enrolled her daughter in a selective charter school. Francesca, who was unable to
finish high school, proudly posts report cards on her refrigerator. Kia and her cousin Terry are both taking courses at the local community college, in the hopes of improving their financial situations and modeling positive life decisions for their young children. Overall, the women I met hoped that their children would be able to succeed academically and find jobs that would keep them from falling into the cycle of drugs and crime that others were unable to escape.

Some mothers had the resources or the strength of conviction to get their kids out of the city and, when possible, into the care of good role models. Valerie, who was lucky enough to be raised by her mother and father in a safe suburb outside the city, asked her parents to raise her son in their home. She wanted her son to grow up with her father, a devout man who has lived a life of faith and sobriety. Mara had the good fortune of spending summers in Alabama when she was young, and is trying to negotiate with extended family so that her son can have the same opportunity. For now, she is trying to find stable public housing outside the city. Raya lives in Boston, but has invited her daughter and grandson to live with her, where she can watch over and help raise him. Those women who do not have the means of changing their children’s environments sometimes settle on removing or changing as many direct negative influences as possible. Mara describes how for the sake her son she has been trying to change her boyfriend:

Ever since I met him, he’s changed a lot. He used to sell drugs, but I told him ‘listen, you wanna be in a relationship with me? I’m 26-years-old. I’m looking for a house. I’m at the age where I’m looking for a husband. I’m not looking for no thugs or nothing, you see because I’m raising a son. If you wanna be around him, you gotta set a good example of how a man is. Even though you weren’t raised by a man, you were raised by your mother and she raised all 5 of y’all, one apartment, 3 bedrooms. So therefore, you have some sense of independence, so be a role model! He found himself a job, he got his GED, he’s got his ID, he’s about to go to driving school next month, he’s doing good, his anger is just whack. They say you can change people. I’m trying to change him. It’s not easy, but I’m trying to.
The mothers I met all had aspirations for their children and the trajectories their kids would follow. They had consistently strong opinions about what educational and occupational goals their children should set for themselves. There was more disparity, however, on how mothers planned to talk to their children, specifically their daughters, about what types of relationships they should pursue or avoid. Some mothers plan on being very direct. Shani anticipates giving her daughter the following advice:

Stay away from jailbirds and guys in the streets. That’s why I wanna move from this neighborhood, I don’t want them to do what they’re seeing. But I guess it doesn’t matter what neighborhood, it’s what you instill in them. But dad’s in jail, would you remember you stay away from guys like dad? Yah! Dad wasn’t always like your dad. He evolved into who he is today, so yeah, they should stay away from guys exactly like him. That’s why he tries to be better now. They should not date guys like I dated.

Most mothers, however, either claimed they are unsure what to advise their daughters about potential partners, or said they would reserve judgement about the men their daughters dated, even if he had a criminal record. In this way, mothers’ feelings about who their children partner with ultimately mirrors their feelings about their own partners: mothers understand that people change and that a criminal record does not indicate that someone is unworthy. Toni, who has high aspirations for her daughter, responded to the question over whether or not she would tell her daughter not to date someone with a criminal record:

No, because everyone’s personal situation is different. They could go to prison for driving without a license. Or for drugs. The law is the law, everyone is not the same, and everyone with a criminal record isn’t really a criminal.

Similarly, Alicia says she will trust her daughters’ decisions on what type of partners they will choose, but plans to encourage her daughters to ‘study’ their boyfriends in order to really
know their character. Ramona warns that a woman cannot really know a man until she has spent considerable time with him, though also says she would try to stop her daughter from dating a man who ran the streets, saying: “I feel like that would be wrong, because that’s going to hurt her, but I don’t want her to be hurt going through situations like that. That’s a hard question, I don’t know to answer that.”

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described how women think about partners and parenting in communities that suffer the impact of criminalization and mass incarceration. I showed that nearly everyone in my study agreed that a good father is required to give their children time and attention. Men could be forgiven a variety of failings, but paternal absence is not one of them. Women did want financial assistance with raising their kids, though in some cases mothers were willing to be lenient if their baby’s fathers spent adequate time with their children, or if financial support would require the father to return to risky behaviors. In spite of hard realities of life in the inner-city, mothers wanted the best for their children and encouraged them in school. Mothers also understood that negative influences could harm their kids, so they did what they could to either remove their children from dangerous environments and individuals or introduce them to positive role models. Finally, while women hoped their daughters would succeed in every way, many were reluctant to say that their kids should avoid partners with criminal histories, as mothers know that having a record does not serve as a measure of the quality of a person.
Conclusion

Past research has long investigated how low-income communities respond to macro-level changes in society. Sociologists have studied the ways in which the urban poor adapt to loss of employment opportunities and the ways in which economic instability has contributed to concentrated poverty, the growth of an underground economy, and perspectives of parenting and partnership. More recently, researchers have sought to understand the ramifications of mass incarceration, which began to escalate in the 1990’s following the War on Drugs. Thus far, most of that research is quantitative and focuses largely on the inmates themselves. Less is known about how mass incarceration affects those on the outside, specifically as it relates to the indirect ways that crime and criminal justice have changed how people understand and interact with others. In this dissertation, I argued that urban communities have been disproportionately affected by the War on Drugs and subsequent rise of mass incarceration to such a degree that it has altered how women perceive and assess partners, how women grew up, and how they engage in their role as mothers. In spite of these societal changes, however, women still want fathers to be active in their kids’ lives and mothers do what they can to ensure that their children succeed even though the challenges are many.

In Chapter 2, Neither Street Nor Decent, I reviewed Elijah Anderson’s seminal work *Code of the Street*. He described how residents in a low-income black neighborhood in Philadelphia categorize one another in terms of being ‘decent’ (those adhering to mainstream beliefs and behaviors) or ‘street’ (those who have adopted a new code of conduct that includes violence and criminal behavior). I argue that the distinction between these two categories has blurred as a result of the influx of drugs and prison. Women living in these communities have had
continuous exposure to criminal offenders. Many have a loved one who sold drugs, joined a gang, and went to prison. As a result, women do not view everyone with a criminal record as morally bankrupt. Instead, they are more nuanced in their judgment. They adopt a more sympathetic view for a variety of reasons: they understand the limited economic opportunities in the inner-city; they may benefit financially from their partner’s criminal activity; or they may engage in similar behaviors themselves. Women believed in redemption, acknowledging that we all make mistakes and should be afforded forgiveness and the opportunity to change.

In Chapter 3, Hidden Resources, I highlight the stories of women who grew up with few parental resources. The commonality of drugs and prison in their communities meant that for some women in my study, one or both parents were uninvolved or absent from their children’s lives. Growing up with neglectful parents often meant that young women were forced to learn to raise themselves, and in some cases, raise younger siblings as well. As unfair and difficult as such an upbringing may be, learning how to be a mother at a young age may have had its advantages. While Edin and Kefalas’ *Promises I Can Keep* demonstrated that young women felt a biological imperative to have children, questions remain about how women with few resources and limited formal education are able to rise to the challenge. I argue that women growing up in homes where they could not rely on their parents may have been inadvertently prepared to enter motherhood themselves. By learning psychological and practical skills at an early age, they have developed hidden resources that assist them as they raise their own children.

In Chapter 4, Partners and Parenting, I discuss how women assess fatherhood and what aspirations they have for their children. Women believe that it is vital for fathers to spend time
with their kids. The women I met often grew up without the regular presence of their own dads and know firsthand the pain of having an absentee father. Women also expected financial support for their children, though on the whole women were tolerant of men with limited funds if they gave their children adequate attention and care. While some mothers were willing to take any monetary support they could get, others did not want financial assistance from fathers if it came at the cost of illegal activity, as that could risk another prison sentence which would keep fathers from being a regular fixture in their kids’ lives. With respect to their hopes, mothers in the inner-city are like mothers everywhere: they want the best for their children. They encourage their children in school and pray that their kids are able to avoid the pitfalls that plague their neighborhoods. While mothers do what they can to help ensure that their kids are safe and well cared for, women do not to teach their children to dismiss everyone with a criminal history. As argued earlier, a criminal record does not delineate between those who are good and those who are not.

**Importance of Findings**

My research yields several important discoveries about realities in poor, urban communities. First and foremost, it is hard to underestimate the reach of the criminal justice system into low-income neighborhoods. Everyone I interviewed who was born or raised in Boston had some early exposure to incarceration. Most were under the age of 15 when they first learned of a family member or friend who was sent to prison. All of my interviewees could name at least three individuals who they knew had been incarcerated, and some could name several dozens. Prison time is so pervasive that it has fundamentally altered how women
evaluate offenders and, more generally, how much faith and trust they have in the criminal justice system.

I have demonstrated that women in these communities are more tolerant of those with a criminal record than past scholarship would lead us to expect. In some ways, this growing tolerance is a positive thing: men (and presumably also women) who have been to prison may find forgiveness and acceptance in their communities after release. They need not worry that they will suffer as social outcasts or that their past will prevent them from finding a partner and having children. They are not dismissed as ‘street’ but instead are viewed as redeemable. Similarly, contrary to Braman’s (2008) findings, the families of the incarcerated need not isolate themselves for fear of a ‘sticky’ stigma. Whatever blanket judgement was made against a criminal offender rarely reflected on family. Non-incarcerated individuals could talk about visiting family in prison or seek emotional support from friends.

Nonetheless, in other ways, this growing tolerance of a criminal record is problematic. On an individual level, women who are accepting of partners who have been to prison must also accept some degree of risk. They know that the formerly incarcerated will have difficulty finding legitimate work and that any future financial support may come from illicit sources. They also know that their partners could return to prison, and if women choose to have children with former inmates, women may end up parenting alone. On a broader level, changing attitudes toward prison may be emblematic of a distrust or delegitimization of the criminal justice system in low-income communities. Women do not automatically accept the label of ‘criminal’ as valid. Instead, it is a judgment made by people from outside their communities who do not understand the limitations of life in poor neighborhoods. This distrust
of the criminal justice system may have serious consequences in poor communities, as people may no longer believe that any part of the legal system serves them. They could be unlikely to cooperate with police or report crime. They may also feel that other social institutions, like public education, do not adequately support their needs, making it is a waste of time to go to school. Overall, the perception that the criminal label is invalid could be reflective of how separated poor urban communities are from the larger society.

Another important finding of my research is the degree to which addiction and incarceration is fracturing families. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing data demonstrate that single parent families are a common phenomenon, especially in poor communities. While researchers have known for decades that kids are increasingly likely to grow up in a home with one biological parent, it is less well known that when it comes to the day-to-day engagement of parenting, some children functionally grow up without any parents at all. Some of the women in my study were left to fend for themselves from a very early age. One parent may be ‘running the street’ and cycling in and out of the prison system, while another may be lost to drugs.

While in almost every case the women in my study grew up in a home with at least one adult, the degree of parenting they received varied significantly. Women who grew up without regular supervision were unlikely to finish school and often had children at a young age. The impact of an isolated upbringing is an important question for researchers and policy makers to examine.

Finally, it is important to understand that while women largely accept that more and more men are going to prison, this fact has not affected their aspirations for their own children. Women know that practical limitations in their communities may push some toward criminal
behavior. They realize that job opportunities are few and that the hustle is a means for quick cash. They know that a prison sentence is not inherently reflective of moral failing. Nevertheless, despite their clear-eyed assessment of the realities in poor communities, it is not the case that women are indifferent to the paths their children take. It is just the opposite. Women may tolerate (former) criminals, but that does not mean they are tolerant of crime. Mothers in low-income communities are no less committed to the success of their children than are parents everywhere. They want their kids to do well in school, get good jobs, and live happy, stable lives. They hope their kids avoid the trap of crime and prison that derail so many of their peers. Poor urban mothers want their children to have better lives than they did.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Sociologists can expand on my findings in a variety of significant ways. One way would be to replicate this study with a different population. I did not limit my sample based on demographic information: the women I interviewed varied on race, age, education, employment, number of children, relationship status, criminal history, etc. There might be reason to believe that different populations of women may have different attitudes about relationships and parenting. For example, women who were still partnered with their baby’s fathers were more likely to describe the men as good dads compared to those women who had separated from their partners. It is possible that the break up between parents has colored how women assess men. Additionally, some of the women in my study had been separated from their baby’s fathers for so long that they could no longer recall details about their relationship or how they felt about his parental engagement. Further research should focus on
women who are still partnered with incarcerated men as compared to women who decided to parent alone.

Additionally, it would be valuable to replicate this study in another location. All my interviews were conducted with women living in the Boston area. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Boston may offer more material assistance (in the form of housing, health care, etc.) than other urban areas across the country. Specifically, social services and public assistance may be more abundant here than in other major cities. In Chapter 3, I argued that women wanted financial support from their baby’s fathers, but that time and attention were what mothers most needed for their kids. Few women pursued legal recourse for lost child support, and some women were reluctant to ask for or accept financial support, fearing that the money came from illegal activities. I do not have data on varying rates of public support across the country, but if Boston is more generous than other areas, it is possible that women in other cities may be more concerned with receiving support from the fathers of their children.

Another suggestion for future research would be to expand on my theory about parenting skills from Chapter 3. I argued that women who faced abandonment in childhood may have acquired knowledge or skills they could use when they become mothers. Many women grew up in a single parent family and know from personal experience that it is possible (though perhaps not ideal) to raise kids without a partner. Additionally, some women learned practical skills at a young age, such as how to find affordable housing and how to enroll in school. Future researchers should continue to explore the ways that experiences in childhood affect individuals as they become parents in order to understand how lessons in youth are enacted in adulthood. One means to do this would be to conduct a longitudinal study of
children who had inconsistent or neglectful parenting to see how they make decisions when they are older.

A final suggestion for research would be to examine what challenges women face when their baby’s fathers leave for prison and investigate how women make decisions after the loss of financial assistance and paternal childcare. These questions were part of my original research agenda and, while they remain an important area of study, they were impossible to address with the methodology I chose. Understanding how individuals weigh their choices and react to challenges in real time is difficult to do through interviews, most of which occur long after the relevant life events. Instead, it would be better to conduct an ethnographic study of women who are in a relationship with their baby’s father and observe the process by which his incarceration affects her and their children. Researchers could examine under what conditions women choose (or choose not to) stay in these relationships, when and how women talk to their kids about where their father is, how women provide for their children, etc. Researchers might also investigate how the father’s relationship with his children changes over time, from both the perspective of the dad and of the kids.

Final Thoughts

The findings of my dissertation paint a bleak portrait of life in the inner-city. For the women in my study, growing up in poor, urban neighborhoods meant regular exposure to drugs and violence. By the time they enter their teen years, most women have seen at least one family member or friend go to prison. Incarceration is so common for men in these communities that women have come to expect it. In a multitude of cases, while men are in
prison, women are required to do the bulk of childrearing on their own. Children born to incarcerated or addicted parents may have little room to experience childhood. While all mothers hope their children lead happier, safer lives than they did, some of the women in my study have already seen their kids fall victim to the lure of the streets. Both Raya and Donna have sons who are currently incarcerated on homicide charges. Cora’s son is in a juvenile detention facility for assault. Charol has seen several sons cycle in and out of prison for dealing drugs.

In spite of these profound challenges, life in the inner-city is not hopeless. While the White sisters suffered decades of hardship following their years as drug runners, their daughters have had productive, happy, upwardly mobile lives. Two of the four daughters attended college and one graduated with a bachelor’s degree. Each is employed. While all four had children with previously incarcerated men, none of these women have a substance abuse or criminal history. Throughout my months of interviews and observations, I can say that nearly all the mothers I met are doing everything they can to help their children, like the White daughters, live positive lives. These mothers are attentive and supportive. They push their children in school. They try to ensure that their kids have the healthiest environment possible so that they can avoid the negative influence of the street. With hard work and a good dose of luck, some mothers will succeed. Unfortunately, given the pervasive reach of the criminal justice system into their communities, success is unreliable and difficult to achieve. Lawmakers must alter policing and sentencing policy so that the pursuit of law and order does not condemn future generations in the inner-city.
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