

Incarcerated Parents' Effect on Children's Education and Mental Health Explained by Agnew's  
Strain Theory

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**Abstract**

The current study observes parental incarceration and its effect on children. School concerns as well as mental health are considered in connection to Agnew's Strain Theory. The hypothesis was that children who report having a parent imprisoned will in turn report more instability in mental health and negativity about school. The expectation was supported after analyses were run using the Kentucky Youth Survey of 2001. The current study has provided continued evidence that when parents are absent due to confinement, their children will be more susceptible to difficulties and negativity.

Primary education institutions and high schools alike commonly face similar issues about uninvolved students in the classroom. Time and time again there are cases of young learners failing classes, receiving unsatisfactory grades, and completely dropping out of school. In addition to this, some of these same students become delinquent in the classroom and their surrounding community. It is important to investigate explanations behind certain student misconduct and draw conclusions on variables that may play a role. It can be assumed that

everyone has numerous influential persons in their early years of life, whether it is a teacher from elementary school, a friendly cashier at the supermarket, family members, or a childhood best friend. Although these people are important while children develop skills, most can agree that parental figures hold the greatest impact on the character someone portrays every day.

There is a common awareness that parents are not just their children's caregivers but also their educators. When parental figures are incarcerated for a criminal offense, it plays a substantial role on their children's existence (Andersen 2016). When referring to "incarceration" it varies from case to case, covering a wide span of individuals. This includes different factors such as the crime committed, time spent in confinement (one night to several years), and the frequency that a parent is in and out of the system during their child's adolescence. Lars Andersen (2016) suggests that families experience increased financial problems and emotional issues when a parent is incarcerated, likely to translate into a negative outcome for children in the household. He explains that children who experience parental incarceration have worse health, lower well-being, and more delinquency than children who do not experience parental incarceration (Andersen, 2016).

Agnew's adaptation of general strain theory can further explain this trend, as he identifies coping tactics to common life strain. He explored strain theory from a different perspective than past theorists by directly considering an individual's position in social class, expectations for the future, and associations with criminal others (Agnew et al., 1996). He directly focuses on the general idea that people who are poorly treated may get upset and engage in delinquent acts. In his theory he concentrates on the strained individual participating in criminal and noncriminal acts, which will be related to performance in schoolwork in the present study. Agnew (n.d.) addresses three major types of strain in his theory. These include the failure to achieve

positively valued stimuli, the loss of positively valued stimuli, and the presentation of negative stimuli. Unfortunately, when a parent is incarcerated, children will be introduced to all of these strains whether the cause is the actual parental absence or community influence.

The situations that the current study is focused on mostly correlates to the removal of positively valued stimuli strain (Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory, n.d.). The disjunction in one's life when a parent is incarcerated takes a toll on the child's aspirations and expectations. With the lack of encouragement from this confined parent, behavior may be changed and the child may be put in a situation that he/she did not expect. These ideas from Agnew's strain theory relate to child misconduct, as expectations for their parental role will be altered after the adult is locked away for a specific amount of time. Because of these difficult situations that children are put in, Agnew's theory (n.d.) suggests that the strain will result in delinquent acts, which is presented through school or home life.

Using Agnew's general strain theory (1996), the present study will test whether parental imprisonment directly results in a child's lack of interest in school and low mental health. Students' grades and overall outlook on education will be observed along with their individual mental state throughout daily life. Although most studies highlight teen alcohol and drug use related to parental incarceration, the current investigation will take a different approach by observing its affect on children's education. Both students with incarcerated parents and students with parents who have not been incarcerated will be compared. Agnew's theory (1996) describes how specific individuals cope with unexpected strain, in this case, a child responding to a parent being away from the home due to a criminal sentence. The results of this study will give insight to Agnew's theory in a different aspect than before. Since a large portion of his theory discusses criminalized coping, the existing evaluation will indicate that the theory does in

fact explain noncriminal coping as well such as falling grades and truancy. The current study will observe whether the absence of a parent results in a child to develop symptoms that would prominently affect the child's mental health. The current study will also determine whether parental imprisonment has an impact on young students' misbehavior, such as receiving failing grades, missing class, and negativity about education as whole. These factors may occur in result of the other, such as anxiety consequential of a slipping GPA. The current expectation is that children who have parents in criminal confinement will have an added amount of mental health issues as well as increased negativity and difficulty in school.

## **Background**

Recently there has been much research regarding rising issue in society today of parental incarceration and its effect on children. Research projects that in 1970, one-in-40 white children and one-in-seven black children reportedly had a parent who was imprisoned; by 1990 these number increased to 1-in-25 white children and one-in-four black children experiencing this strain (Miller & Barnes, 2015). Casey, Shlafer, and Masten (2015) report that within the last 20 years, the number of adults incarcerated in state and federal prisons in the United States has more than tripled. Studies show that because of this increased rate of adult imprisonment, nearly two million children are left at home with at least one parent absent (Casey, Shlafer, & Masten, 2015). Miller and Barnes (2015) estimate that at any given time, .08% of white children and 7% of black children have a parent who is incarcerated in this modern era. Much of the research found has a heavy focus on incarcerated fathers. Although paternal figures may be more commonly locked up, mothers often encounter sentencing as well.

### *Incarceration*

When someone is criminally involved in the justice system, it can take years for that person to pay back both financial and temporal debt. These reimbursements that criminals pay to society put their normal life on hold. Inmates are unable to return to their jobs or careers while serving their sentence, inevitably forcing families to struggle financially. Miller and Barnes (2015) found that incarceration of a parent results in economic instability and deprivation for those left behind. Two-thirds of their respondents reported increased economic problems following parental incarceration. Casey, Shlafer and Masten (2015) report that 54% of confined fathers in state prisons once provided primary financial support of their minor children prior to incarceration. Inmates are typically able to seek employment inside of penitentiaries to send money home to their families, but payment usually results from a minimal to illusive wage.

Convicts are also unable to liberally visit with loved ones while serving time. Depending on the security level of the institution, some facilities have strict visitation hours for specified amounts of time. In addition, many inmates are not sentenced to penitentiaries close to home, which makes it extremely difficult for relatives and friends to visit on a regular basis (Dennison et. al. 2014). Foster and Hagan (2016) report that inmates feel “powerlessness” with these limited social relationships while incarcerated. Almost 40% of fathers mentioned high phone call prices, as a major issue in maintaining regular conversation with loved ones. Extreme telephone costs and time restrictions prevent parents from having quality contact with children (Dennison et. al. 2014). Payment for working in prison may go towards calls as well, but marginal paychecks can only stretch so far, according to the Dennison et. al. (2014) research. Economic hardships and unstable living conditions can be intensified due to the absence of an adult from incarceration (Luther, 2015).

These many inconveniences make incarceration difficult for all parties involved. The research of Dennison et. al. (2014) demonstrates that many male inmates find it difficult to be involved as a father from prison. These reported outcomes are primarily the result of being locked up for a substantial amount of time. According to Porter and King, (2015) the absence of a father can also weaken children's attachment to their fathers. Dennison et. al. (2014) report that 63% of incarcerated men indicated that there were significant problems in maintaining a relationship with at least one of their children, where 46% reported having no contact with at least one child. Their research also indicated that 46.3% of father-child relationships changed in negative ways after the father experienced imprisonment (Dennison et. al. 2014). The lack of contact with paternal figures could be detrimental to a child's security; as the time invested in children is directly associated with child well-being (Porter & King, 2015).

Some research has been done in attempt to remove a negative stigma on fathers in confinement. Casey, Shalafer, and Masten (2015) report that 30% of men aspire to be a good father after they leave prison. It is critical to remember that prison sentences must be longer than one year, so this means that the absence in this particular research extends for a significant amount of time. Although these men may claim to have immense plans once outside of detention, it does not diminish the fact that they are unable to focus on their children while inside. One inmate in Dennison et. al. (2014, p.1102) interviewed reported he "believed that prison had made [him and his daughter] strangers." This research transmits with Agnew's adaption of the general strain theory (1996) that the removal of the positive support of fathers results in a strained child.

*Emotional Influence*

As sociology researchers, it is important to address the impending strain that will be placed on a child after a parental arrest. Dennison et. al. (2014) research indicates that 56% of their inmates believed that their incarceration had a negative impact on their children's lives; while 15% of the study were unsure of the affect on their children because of lack of contact. This shows that 71% of inmates in this study alone indicated some sort of negativity on loved ones in the result of an arrest (Dennison et. al. 2014). Recent research has shown evidence of these concepts, as Andersen (2016) reports that there could be cumulative disadvantages from experiencing paternal incarceration for longer periods and multiple sentencing. Dennison et. al. (2014) explain that each missed opportunity for parental involvement while incarcerated has consequences for children. Research has showed from interviews of school-aged children that many expressed anger and confusion over the loss of family dynamics in the household due to imprisonment (Porter & King, 2015). There is evidence that recognizes that over half of male inmates lived with their children prior to sentencing (Porter & King, 2015). Interestingly enough, Wildeman, Turney, & Yi (2016) present that mothers who share children with fathers in prison reported the lowest levels of engagement with their children themselves. This means that children with one parent incarcerated have a chance to experience neglect from the unrestricted parent as well. This absence of a father overall weakens children's attachment to their parents and limits supervision (Porter & King, 2015). This type of strain can lead to a variety of emotional apprehension for the child.

Miller and Barnes (2015) report that children are more likely to experience a variety of negative outcomes such as impaired bonding and attachment, separation anxiety, acute traumatic stress reactions, and developmental regression while a parent is incarcerated. Porter and King (2015) suggest that parents' time invested in children is associated with child well-being.

Research prior to Miller and Barnes (2015) supports this awareness and reports that children who experience parental incarceration are more likely to suffer from low self-esteem and feelings of loneliness and isolation. Separations due to parent incarceration are found to positively associate with a range of antisocial behaviors beginning at age fourteen (Swisher & Shaw-Smith, 2015). Dennison et. al. (2014) explain that fathers in prison reported being concerned with their children facing issues such as behavioral problems and emotional difficulties of growing up without a father figure. Swisher and Shaw-Smith (2015) report that among females, paternal incarceration significantly associates with a 3.5% higher incidence of depression if transpired between the ages of six and twelve. The removal of positive stimuli (parents) in the developing child is a confusing and emotionally damaging process, especially in the first decade of life. It is important to address these factors and discover what kind of behavior is proceeding in result of the strain.

The absence of a parent is traumatizing for a young child, especially if they do not understand why. Porter and King (2015) explain that parental incarceration is an “ambiguous loss” to children due to the common lack of family communication to the child regarding the prolonged absence. In regards to older children, Swisher and Shaw-Smith (2015) report that the unique challenges of adolescents make this parental absence extremely difficult due to new influences, behaviors, and experiences that become available to the developing juvenile. The excessive amount of strain that is placed on children for these reasons are typically relieved through misbehavior from the adolescent, specifically in the classroom.

### *Student Success*

Aside from mental health, parental incarceration has also been associated as a factor regarding numerous academic concerns amongst children. Lars Andersen (2016) reports that

there are substantial differences in educational outcomes between children who experience paternal incarceration and children who do not. Miller and Barnes (2015) demonstrate that research supports this topic as a negative link to several results among children incorporating grade failure, low G.P.A., and overall academic underperformance as outcomes to parent imprisonment. Also, Kate Luther (2015) explains that incarceration of a parent contributes to negative educational outcomes: such as fewer years of completed education, school dropout, and suspension rates.

As frequency and duration of paternal incarceration increase, so does exam failure among teens with incarcerated parents (Andersen, 2016). Research suggests that these students typically fail around twice as many exams as the children who do not experience any parental incarceration (Andersen, 2016). Miller and Barnes (2015) justify that children who experience parental incarceration tend to have lower IQs and unsatisfactory standardized test scores than children who are not introduced to this familiarity. Prior research suggests that having just one parent locked up can put a heavy strain on children, whatever the detailed circumstances may be. These contrasting inconveniences include the duration of the sentence, whether it is the mother or the father locked up, the type of crime committed by the parent, how many kids they have together, etc. (Miller & Barnes, 2015).

Matters become serious when students start slipping in school and these relaxed studies could lead to permanent consequences if the problem is not addressed soon enough. Miller and Barnes (2015) report that the extended periods of parental imprisonment relates to lower child educational attainment. This study has also shown evidence of incarceration being linked to a greater likelihood and incidence of truancy-a key predictor of academic failure (Miller & Barnes

2015). The high school drop out rate for children with incarcerated parents increases as frequency and duration of parent sentencing escalates (Andersen 2016).

Miller and Barnes (2015) research suggests that parental incarceration increases the likelihood of school disciplinary issues as well. These children are more likely to report suspension, expulsion, and fighting in school according to Miller and Barnes (2015). There is an increased risk for school suspension among the children of the incarcerated, and a greater number of disciplinary school conferences in result of behavior (Miller & Barnes, 2015). Some prior research to back this includes Swisher and Shaw-Smith (2015) when indicated that parental incarceration likely has a causal effect on child aggression and externalizing behavior. Wakefield and Wildeman (2011) report that adolescents with an incarcerated parent have higher rates of delinquency and aggression than youth without an incarcerated parent.

### *Community Influence*

When determining factors to explain circumstances like the ones focused in the current study, it is important to not only look at the victim involved but also the surrounding environment he/she is placed. Unfortunately, real-life situations and prior research has seemed to put a negative stigma on children with parents who are in confinement. Dennison et. al. (2014) explain that fathers in prison reported worrying of their children facing issues in their community as a consequence of their parent's imprisonment. These agitated strains include academic problems, shaming, and being bullied (Dennison et. al. 2014). There is evidence of teacher stigmatization upon these students as well. Even if it is not intentional, teachers often hold lower academic expectations for these types of students (Miller & Barnes, 2015). These students face stigmatization within the school environment from people they are supposed to

trust the most, and the unfortunate reality is that occasionally teachers contribute to the unwanted stigma that these children are trying to avoid (Miller and Barnes, 2015).

Porter and King (2015) focus on negative stigma placed on families among the entire community. After a father is incarcerated, research finds that these affected families struggle with stereotypes that accompany sentencing (Porter & King, 2015). Studies reveals that fear of arrest from those with a history of incarceration may cause parents to disengage from the family (Porter & King, 2015). Recently, research has determined that children who feel lesser due to the lack of finances, pressure on educational success, and negative social stigma have a higher chance of being in economic turmoil as adults (Foster & Hagan, 2016). The current study will focus on these many factors and determine the association between parental incarceration and emotional development of children in the classroom and community.

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

The current study will utilize the research completed by Wilcox and Clayton (2001), which incorporated a survey of students in grades 6 through 12. The samples provided were all assumed to be residents of the state of Kentucky, being that the surveys were presented to Kentucky middle schools and high schools. IRB approval and parental consent were obtained before the survey was presented, and student consent was given at the time the questionnaire was offered (Wilcox & Clayton, 2001). The surveys were entirely anonymous. All students enrolled in these grade levels that attended school the day the survey was distributed in spring of 1996 were included in the sample (Wilcox & Clayton, 2001). The total sample size collected included approximately 26,000 students from 22 different schools (Wilcox & Clayton, 2001). The Kentucky Youth Survey was intended to discover the relationship of delinquent behaviors among

adolescents including drug and alcohol use (Wilcox & Clayton, 2001). The survey also examines family background, attitudes toward school, involvement in school violence, and behaviors within the community (Wilcox & Clayton, 2001). The current study will focus on parental incarceration and its effect on the mental health and academic achievement of children.

### Measurement of Variables

#### *Independent Variable - Parental Incarceration*

In order to measure parental incarceration among the students in the study, the Kentucky Youth Survey used the question “parent spent time in jail or prison.” The response choices were 1=yes and 2=no. Since there is only one question that pertains to parents being incarcerated (mean=0.110), the study exclusively utilized this independent variable and recoded the responses to 0=no and 1=yes, with a standard deviation of 0.314 (see Table 1). For percentage results for both answer choices, see Appendix A.

#### *Dependent Variable – Mental Health*

After specifying students who have parents who are or have history of being incarcerated, I will observe their overall mental health. The Kentucky Youth Survey asks approximately 20 contemporary questions regarding emotional stability ranging from “during the past week, I was bothered by things that usually don’t bother me” to “during the past week, I could not get ‘going.’” The current study utilizes 16 of these inquiries. These variables have possible answers of 1=rarely or none of the time, 2=some or little of the time, 3=occasionally or moderate amount of time, and 4= most or all of time. These mental health questions were recoded and collapsed to one section to make this overall study easier to analyze. The index ranges from 0-48 for this specific variable, while 0=no mental health issues and 48=many issues (see Table 1). The mean number of this set is 10.85 and the standard deviation is 9.654.

### *Academic Success*

After specifying students who have parents who are or have been incarcerated, I will observe their academic success thus far. The Kentucky Youth Survey asks one question regarding grades among students: “describe usual grades in English class this year.” It was assumed in the study that each participant was enrolled in an English class at that time, so it seemed to be the most suitable study of academic success (Wilcox & Clayton, 2001). The possible answers included 1=mostly A’s, 2=mostly B’s, 3=mostly C’s, 4=mostly D’s, 5=mostly E’s/F’s, or 6=I do not have English class this year. This question regarding grades were recoded 0=F, 1=D, 2=C, 3=B, 4=A. The original “6=do not have English” was recoded to a missing variable. The mean for English grades was 2.901 and the standard deviation was 1.087 (see Table 1). For percentage results for each answer choice, see Appendix B.

### *Attendance*

In order to measure attendance amongst students in the survey, the Kentucky Youth Survey asked the question “have you missed a class at school” with possible answers of 1=ever happened, or 2=never happened. This was recoded to 0=never happened and 1=ever happened. Also, the question “have you cut school entirely” was asked, with responses of 1=past month 2=past year 3=ever in my life, or 4=never. This variable was recoded to 0=never happened and 1=ever happened. The final question that was asked about missing school was “during the past week, I skipped school” with possible answers of 1=rarely or none of the time, 2=some or little of the time, 3=occasionally or moderate amount of time, and 4=most or all of time. These weekly attendance answers were recoded 0=never happened and 1=ever happened. After recoding, these variables were collapsed to one section making the index range 0-3 in regards to

missing class, with 0=never and 3=often. The mean for the frequency of missing class was 0.867 while the standard deviation was 0.969 (see Table 1).

### *Attitude Towards Education*

To measure student's attitudes about education, the Kentucky Youth Survey asked five questions including "I care a lot about what my teachers think of me (mean=0.765), getting an education is important to me (mean=0.937), I look forward to coming to school each morning (mean=0.492), I would quit school now if I could (mean=0.108), and most of my classes are a waste of time (mean=0.197)." The possible responses to these questions include, 1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=disagree, and 4=strongly disagree. Variables "would quit now" and "most classes are a waste of time" were simplified to 0=no and 1=yes to infer whether or not students agreed with the questions. The other responses were reverse recoded 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, and 4=strongly agree. Eventually these were recoded again to 0=no and 1=yes in order to specify their feelings on the matter and to remain in line with the other group, as seen on Table 1. This set is unique because they are dependent dichotomous variables, so this is a logistic regression rather than the linear regression in the other variables. The logistic regression interpretations are based on odds instead of going the variables going up or down by units.

### *Control Variables*

Finally, the three control variables included sex, age, and race. The sex of a student could be identified by 1=male and 2=female. This variable was recoded 0=female and 1=male. Students could write in their own age (mean=14.112), which ranged from 10-21 years old. The race of the participants (mean=0.838) were recoded and determined by 0=non-white and 1=white.

## Results

Two types of analyses were conducted in the current study to determine the plausible effects of parental incarceration on children's mental health and education habits. The first evaluation was the bivariate, which used a correlation coefficient-Pearson's  $r$ -to determine the effect that parental incarceration has on each of the dependent variables (see Table 2). Pearson's  $r$  measures the strength of the relationship and determines if the correlation is statistically significant. Because of these factors, the current study began with this bivariate analysis in testing the consequences of parental incarceration on children's mental health and education habits. It is useful to observe the effect of parental incarceration on the dependents at the bivariate level before moving on to the multivariate evaluation. Table 2 utilizes Pearson's  $r$  to exhibit these bivariate relationships between variables. This information is valuable to the current study in order to test the hypothesis that parental incarceration has a negative effect on the child.

As Table 2 demonstrates, parental incarceration is significantly related to seven of the eight outcome variables considered in this study. Parent incarceration is significant and positively related to overall mental health disturbances (0.132), frequency of missing school (0.150), wanting to quit school (0.114), and thinking that school is a waste of time (0.102) among respondents. This indicates that those who reported to have had a parent in jail or prison also reported higher levels of mental health issues, missing class, and also increased negative thoughts towards education, compared to those who did not report having an incarcerated parent. Additionally, parental incarceration is found to be significant and negatively correlated to English grade success (-0.158), caring what teachers think (-0.097), and thinking that education is important (-0.098) among respondents. This indicates that those who reported to have had a

parent in jail or prison compared to those who have not also reported lower rates of English grades and decreased consideration for education. The findings in Table 2 offer support for Agnew's Strain Theory with the evidence that locked up parents influence children's stimuli on the bivariate level.

The second set of analyses ran was on the multivariate level in the forms of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) and logistic regression. While OLS regression (aka linear) is one of the most popular statistical techniques used in social sciences, logistic is just a little bit different and more complex in the way it is run and what it measures. Both regressions identify the strength of relationships and statistical significance between observed variables. Table 3 uses OLS regression to clarify the effect of parental incarceration on mental health, academic success, and attendance in school; controlling for age, sex, and race. Also, Table 3 utilizes logistic regression (†) to determine the relationship of parental incarceration and the five factors that include respondents' feelings about school; controlling for age, sex, and race. The appropriate type of regression coefficients (Coeff.) and standard errors (S.E) are reported for each association. All eight of the outcome variables' relationships with parental incarceration rates were significant in this multivariate analysis, unlike the bivariate where only seven were significant.

Comparable to Table 2, parental incarceration had a positive effect on four outcome variable coefficients. As Table 3 indicates overall mental health disturbances (4.16), frequency of missing school (0.427), wanting to quit school (0.886†), and thinking that school is a waste of time (0.716†) among respondents were all significantly higher when compared to those with parents who have not been incarcerated, controlling for all other variables. Visiting the other side of the spectrum, Table 3 displays similar data corresponding with Table 2 in that there are four variable coefficients that negatively relate to the independent variable. As displayed in

Table 3, English grade success (-0.506), caring what teachers think (-0.630†), thinking that education is important (-0.932†), and looking forward to school (-.135†) among respondents were significantly lower when compared to those with parents who have not been incarcerated, controlling for all other variables.

Additionally, the adjusted  $R^2$  in linear regression indicates that parental incarceration explains 5.8% of mental health issues among their children, 8.2% of declining grade success, and almost 7% of declined frequency in school attendance. It can be observed that although these numbers do not seem incredibly substantial, it is important to still consider these factors when analyzing children in a school setting especially. In regards to the logistic regressions, the Nagelkerke  $R^2$  was run instead. The analyses included evidence that parental incarceration justifies 5.4% of kids who do not care what teachers think, 3.6% who think getting an education is important, 3.9% who look forward coming to school, 3.7% students who would quit school immediately, and finally 5.3% who think that school is a waste of time. These percentages are much lower, so it seems as though the internal reflections about school are not explained from parental incarceration as considerably as the physical aspects that negatively influence students. The results found in Table 3 further demonstrates that students who have incarcerated parents, when compared to those who are not, have more likelihood to experience mental wellbeing issues and problems in various school topics.

Some other noteworthy findings within this analysis included the variables of race and sex, which display additional evidence concerning this study. On the bivariate level, race and parental incarceration are significant and negatively related (-0.137). This infers that respondents who reported to be Caucasian had a lower frequency of also responding that they have had a parent incarcerated. This is an intriguing topic to explore, because of its popularity in

today's society. There is much evidence that minority presence is heavy in correctional institutions all over the nation. With this finding, the current study further supports previously announced conclusions in a minimal way. An important control variable on the multivariate level is sex, which has a significant relationship with each dependent variable observed in this study. Based on Table 3, it seems as though males have an inclination to respond with the "undesired" opinion on topics. With the exception of mental health (which is interesting in itself, because there is much research suggesting that females are often seen as more susceptible to admit internal problems than males), each dependent variable results in favor of females. For example, Table 3 displays that the odds of caring what teachers think decreases by .635 if the respondent is a male. This significant relationship between sex and the dependent variables is recurring and present on the entire table. Since the age range (10-21) was only a decade apart, the current study decided to steer away from observations since it is such a small group of ages.

The results of this study could certainly be extended into other research topics based on the control variables alone. Based on the previous findings, the hypothesis that children who have parents in criminal confinement will have increased mental health problems and educational difficulties is supported. This conclusion has been drawn based on the correlations and regressions implemented in Tables 2 and 3. Agnew's Strain Theory can be applied to the causation since each category examined demonstrates substantial evidence of strain for respondents in the absence of positive stimuli (parents in confinement).

## **Conclusion**

Although the hypothesis was supported in the current study, there remained strengths and weaknesses within the analysis as a whole. As far as weaknesses, secondary data was utilized instead of exclusive statistics from the researcher. There are disadvantages with this type of

research because of how often the current study had to do recoding and collapsing to line up with the ideas they wanted to explore. Also, questions and answers were arrayed in a seemingly unsystematic way, although it probably made sense at the time. In regards to this type of research it is difficult for the researcher to express his or her original ideas or theories since the data already exists. Variables are set and cannot be added or can only be modified to an extent. Another limitation on the study presented was that it took place on one day in Kentucky from schools in the same county. This could produce a problem due to the typically restricted diversity in that area. For example, a survey conducted in Cook County, IL would be more likely to be incredibly diverse and also have larger ratings of poverty and crime; as those factors are typically valid in a big city versus a small town county in Kentucky. It would be difficult to do a project solely on the basis of race since that area is historically primarily white. Restrictions like these deem why many researchers go the route of collecting their own data in addition to the motivation that they can express their own original ideas.

A few strengths of the survey included that there were so many participants (26,000) as well as the vast amount and variety of variables (300). Because of this, the survey can be used for many different types of sociological observations, and be used as a learning tool for college students. Although it is a little messy, it teaches college students how certain details of a survey (when, where, who) and how the questions are presented can severely influence the results. This survey is useful for exactly what it is utilized for at McKendree, to research and analyze for a senior class end project. It touches all different subjects that just about anyone can research something that they are interested in pursuing as a career. Another advantage (that could also be seen as a disadvantage) to using this survey is that it is restricted to a specific age group, which is

verified because it was done at schools. Because of this, a researcher can more easily focus into a specific adolescent issue while using this survey.

If the current analyzer in this project were to pursue a career in sociologic researching, this topic would definitely remain a focus because there are so many factors that can go into it. Just to start, instead of simply looking at if a parent has history of going to jail or prison, it would be beneficial to observe the amount of time served, frequency of entering/dismissal, and even the type of crime convicted in order to narrow down which categories of criminals are disturbing family life more than others. As far as the theory presented in this paper, it would be beneficial to consider all three types of strain presented in Agnew's Strain Theory, and also where they are originally stemming from. After the current study, it was implied that although removal of positive stimuli is significant among children with incarcerated parents, it is not the only strain because all of them are present whether it be from family, peers, or the community. An extension of the study as it is now would be further exploring the elements of Agnew's theory and implementing it among the variables available to run analyses on. Also, the location (geographic and industrial) of the study would be expanded tremendously, especially because the people who would really have the outlying responses would not be the ones still pursuing the high school degree, but the drop out working at McDonalds across the street.

This interest stemmed from the belief that parental figures overall effect how children function in society, even after primary caregiving is complete. It is difficult to completely process because children put in so much trust to their parental figure and could actually be getting tainted with awful habits with no understanding until it is to late. Sitting at the same project a year later with the answers and knowledge learned, it has not only become fathomable but real life for this specific researcher. Based on personal experience of observing classmates,

relatives, friends, and media it seemed apparent that when a parent is locked away for a specific amount of time some portions of the family will fill that empty feeling with bad coping habits leading to legal or social troubles themselves. The hypothesis was based off of these social observations from a child to adult eye that proved that parental absence played a significantly negative role in the child's life. This is where I thought it would be attractive to begin an interest in this topic. After completing the literature review, I was confident that the hypothesis would be supported, because of the seemingly common sense of the relationship between the two and the backing of literature. Next, the analyses were run on a univariate, bivariate, and multivariate level. Each of these provided the study with a different set of answers and connections. They were beneficial all around in the success of the research. After my findings it has been established that each factor tested was negatively affected by the independent. As it was mentioned earlier, the hypothesis was widely formed on common understandings and observations that have now been proven by sociologic research. The theory tested in this study was introduced to a few new ideas. It heavily related to the research, but Agnew was taken on a new spin. As many of his published writings about his theory express criminalized coping behavior, the current study connected his strain theory with still negative coping, but not criminalized. For example, the neglect of schoolwork in result of a parent going to prison could be a coping behavior that has been certifiably deemed significant by this study. Although the current research could be connected to his theory in other ways, it stretched it to a new bar.

When observing the literature present in this study alone, the findings do add more strength and further support to the prior research; and it only provides a small portion of the published work on the topic as a whole. Overall, this project opened up doors and interests in a variety of ways. There are so many directions that just one coefficient or regression could be

taken, and this study adds some insight to that. It can be upsetting for some to think about how one factor that a child cannot even control would ultimately stipulate negative experiences down the road. With advancement in studies like these, it is plausible that researchers could pinpoint majority causation to specific childhood misbehavior and find ways to help them.

## References

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Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	Metric	Descriptive Statistics		
		Mean	S.D.	Range
<b>Independent</b>				
Parent spent time in jail/prison	(0=no, 1=yes)	0.110	0.314	0-1
<b>Dependent</b>				
Mental Health	(0=no mental health issues...48=many issues)	10.85	9.654	0-48
<i>Academic Success:</i>				
Usual grades in English class	(0=F, 1=D, 2=C, 3=B, 4=A)	2.901	1.087	0-4
<i>Attendance:</i>				
Missed/skipped school or class	(0=never...3=often)	0.867	0.969	0-3
<i>Attitude Towards Education:</i>				
Care what teachers think of me	(0=no, 1=yes)	.765	0.424	0-1
Getting an education is important	(0=no, 1=yes)	.937	0.243	0-1
Look forward to coming to school	(0=no, 1=yes)	.492	0.499	0-1
Would quit school now	(0=no, 1=yes)	.108	0.310	0-1
Most of classes are a waste of time	(0=no, 1=yes)	.197	0.397	0-1
<b>Control Variables</b>				
Age	(10=years...21=years)	14.112	1.976	10-21
Sex	(0=female, 1=male)	0.499	0.500	0-1
Race	(0=nonwhite, 1=white)	0.838	0.368	0-1

N=26,687

Table 2. Zero-Order Correlations Among Study Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Parent Incarceration											
2. Mental Health	.132*										
3. Eng. Grades	-.158*	-.113*									
4. Miss School	.150*	.134*	-.226*								
5. Care	-.097*	-.096*	.234*	-.236*							
6. Important	-.098*	-.078*	.173*	-.222*	.241*						
7. Look fwd	-.012	-.107*	.115*	-.138*	.266*	.114*					
8. Quit School	.114*	-.124*	.220*	-.229*	.189*	.304*	.097*				
9. Waste Time	.102*	-.140	.204*	-.253*	.269*	.224*	.177*	.390*			
10. Age	.005	.118*	-.108*	.179*	-.093*	-.011	-.146*	-.017*	-.093*		
11. Sex	-.006	-.162*	-.200*	.122*	-.135*	-.081*	-.069*	-.082*	-.128*	.033*	
12. Race	-.137*	-.012	.110*	-.018	.067*	.026*	-.056*	.048*	.030*	.006	-.011

\*=p<.05

Table 3. OLS and Logistic Regression Models Examining the Effect of Parental Incarceration on Children's Mental Health and Education Habits

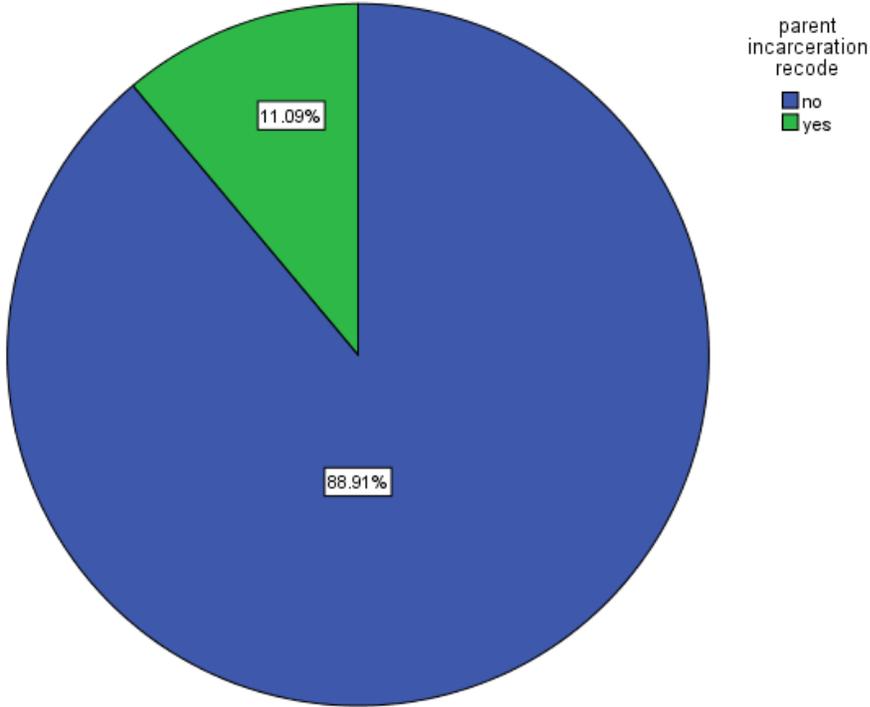
Independent/Controls	Mental Health		Academic Success		Attendance in School		Care What Teachers Think†		Think School is Important†		Look Forward to School†		Would Quit School Now†		Thinks School is a Waste of Time†	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Sex	-3.17*	.140	-.427*	.014	.225*	.020	-.635*	.031	-.687*	.057	-.267*	.026	.542*	.043	.649*	.034
Age	.598*	.036	-.055*	.003	.103*	.006	-.108*	.008	-.012	.014	-.149*	.007	.024*	.011	.118*	.008
Race	.230	.205	.252*	.019	.022	.028	.307*	.041	.097	.072	-.352*	.037	-.272*	.055	-.083	.045
Parental Incarceration	4.16*	.235	-.506*	.022	.427*	.028	-.630*	.046	-.932*	.068	-.135*	.043	.886*	.055	.716*	.048

\*p<.05

†= Logistic regression ran for dichotomous dependent variables

### Appendix A

#### Parent Spent Time in Jail/Prison



### Appendix B

#### English Grades

