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Running Head: FAMILIAL EXPERIENCES

“There’s no manual for this”

A Multi-Case Study Exploring Familial Experiences of Maternal Incarceration

by

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THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of Social Work in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

Master of Social Work

Wilfrid Laurier University

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## Abstract

Women are the fastest growing prison population in the world (ICPR, 2017). This holds true in the Canadian context, where 70% of federally incarcerated women are mothers to children under 18 (Sapers, 2015). Inevitably, the carceral experience is inherently familial: the experiences of criminalized women cannot be extricated from that of their families, and the experiences of children and caregivers cannot be extricated from that of the criminalized mother and other family members. Yet, there is a great deal that we do not know about incarceration and family life—particularly from the perspectives of caregivers, mothers, and children themselves. This multi-case study explores three families’ co-constructed narratives of life before, during, and after a mother’s federal incarceration. Utilizing collaborative family interviews as well as within-case and cross-case analyses, this research illuminates the varying roles family members assume as they mother and are mothered in the context of incarceration. Without a map or manual, incarcerated women, their children, and kinship caregivers transition between three roles: the navigator, the gatekeeper, and the peacemaker. Evident across families and generations, these themes point to the ways in which families are not only shaped by crime, but by the criminal justice system itself.

Keywords: Criminalization, Maternal Incarceration, Children and Families, Ecological Theory, Institutional Critique, Institutional Violence, Case Study, Social Work, Family Social Work

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“There’s no manual for this”

## A Multi-Case Study Exploring Familial Experiences of Maternal Incarceration

### **Introduction**

#### **Background**

Women are the fastest growing prison population in the world (Codd, 2008; ICPR, 2017). This global trend is evident in the Canadian context as well; the number and proportion of women admitted to custody in provincial, territorial, and federal carceral institutions has increased over the course of the last two decades in Canada (Hotton Mahony, 2011). In fact, the Office of the Correctional Investigator reports that the number of federally incarcerated women in Canada has increased by more than 50% between 2005 and 2015 (Sapers, 2015). Therefore, as of 2015, women represented 4.6% of the federally-sentenced population in Canada—up from 2.9% in 2005 (Sapers, 2015).

The category of federally-sentenced women presented by national data is not homogenous. In fact, racialized women are disproportionately represented in Canadian correctional statistics. As of 2015, Indigenous women accounted for 35.5% of all women in federal custody across Canada (Sapers, 2015). The largest concentration of Indigenous women inmates being in the Prairies. For example, at Edmonton’s Institution for Women 56% of the inmate population identified as Aboriginal (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2013). In Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Indigenous women represented 85% of women’s admissions to federal custody in 2008/2009 (NWAC, 2015). Likewise, the number of incarcerated black women is on the rise: increasing by 54% between 2002 and 2010, and again by 28% in the following two years (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2014). However, unlike the Western

concentration of Indigenous inmates, 78% of federally incarcerated women of colour are in Ontario's Grand Valley Institution (GVI) for women (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2014). Undoubtedly, minority populations have disproportionately borne the brunt of the contemporary Canadian carceral climate.

While incredibly diverse, over 70% of federally incarcerated women have something in common: they are mothers to children under the age of 18 (Sapers, 2015). Consequently, the nationwide escalation in the incarceration of women has produced inevitable, yet relatively unexplored, repercussions for Canadian children and families.

### **Literature Review**

**Criminalized Women.** Much of the demographic data collected by the Correctional Service Canada (CSC) reports on offenders' "rehabilitative needs" (Hotton Mahony, 2011, p. 35). That which is collected, analyzed, and published for public use focuses entirely on the individual, and in particular, their pathology and risk factors. Best stated by Casey (2018): "those working directly with women in criminal justice contexts too often demonstrate myopic attention to mental health needs while lacking a full appreciation of the holistic impact of incarceration on all aspects of women's lives" (p. 127). As such, very little system or nation-wide data is available on the families of incarcerated women, particularly regarding family makeup or caregiver roles.

While academics have taken interest in women offenders and feminist criminology, "relatively few studies in the field of criminal justice and corrections focus on women offenders' experiences as mothers" (Celinska & Siegel, 2010, p. 448). The overwhelmingly individualistic quality of carceral data and institutional research, as well as scholarship's focus on pathology and criminogenic factors (even from a feminist perspective) has produced literature that can largely

be divided into two categories. The first, pathways research, which aims to understand and capture how women come to be incarcerated—their pathways to prison. The second, resiliency or outcome-focused research, focuses on women’s pathways out of prison, in particular how they “succeed” (typically measured via non-recidivism) following imprisonment. The following paragraphs provide a brief review of pathways and a resiliency-focused feminist carceral research. I also introduce a third stream of scholarship, that which is oriented toward institutional and systemic change, rather than reform.

There is a significant body of research that argues carceral policy and practices are largely androcentric, and therefore, that women’s experiences of crime and incarceration are not adequately captured or addressed by the dominant approach. Feminist scholarship aimed to assert a gender-specific lens to analyze the incarceration of women: “In an effort to rectify the male biases in the field of criminology, feminist criminologists developed the notion of the victimization-criminalization continuum to explain women's law breaking” (Comack, 2006; Faith, 1993; Gilfus, 1992; in Pollack, 2012, p. 104). Best summarized in Daly’s wondering: “What lies in the ‘black box’ between one’s experiences of victimization as a child and criminal activities as an adult?” (Daly, 1998, p. 136-137). Armed with this contextually-bound perspective, scholars then attempted to “draw out the connections between women’s victimization experiences and their lawbreaking activities” (Comack, 2014, p. 28). As such, pathways research typically explores topics such as poverty, unemployment, single-parenthood, as well as histories of abuse and trauma.

By focusing on *why* women commit crimes, this feminist approach to criminology “distinguished women’s ‘pathways’ to crime as different from those of men” (Pollack, 2012, p.

104). Pathways research was criticized for its focus on gender in the fashion of second-wave feminism, as women were often presented as a homogenous category according to sex—not accounting for issues of racial or class-based discrimination. Still, Pollack (2012) and Comack (2014) both affirm the value of pathways research in its shedding light on criminalized women's experiences by locating women's crimes "in a broader social context" (Comack, 2014, p. 28), refuting work that "located the source of women's problems in individual pathologies" (Comack, 2014, p. 30).

Informed by pathways research, prison activists and scholars "argued for change in women's prisons that would empower inmates, helping them overcome the multiple victimization most prisoners have endured" (Snider, 2014, p. 285). Balfour explains that "feminist reformers invoked the language of empowerment as a way of recognizing women's power to make choices" (Balfour, 2014, p. 169). However, this discourse, when employed by "politicians and correctional officials... translates empowerment to mean that incarcerated women are responsible for their own self-governance and requires them to manage their risk to themselves" (Balfour, 2014, p. 169). As a result, women are "responsibilized" in the criminal justice system (Balfour, 2014, p.169; Hannah-Moffat, 2000, p. 34). Hannah-Moffat explains that "CSC sees empowerment as linked to individual responsibility, not structural relations of power" (2000, p.34). As such, reformed or women-centred correctional praxis "is about responsabilizing the prisoner and not empowering" as defined by those who envisioned change in writing *Creating Choices*, the 1990 report by the Task Force on Federally Incarcerated Women (Hannah-Moffat, 2000, p.34).

The morphing of empowerment into responsabilization has produced another significant body of literature: that which focuses on the individual, in terms of risk and resilience, in the correctional system. Responsibilization insists the individual is capable of overcoming challenges presented to them, primarily through choice and personal transformation. When the individual, rather than the structural, becomes the sole locus of change, actors (such as criminalized women) who do not conform to societal expectations of behaviour and success, are often categorized as deviant, dysfunctional, or exceptional. For example, Garrow & Hasenfeld (2017) explain that individuals are typically examined for “moral and psychological deficiencies” (p. 497) or exceptionalities, like resilience (p. 494). In examining these “exceptional” qualities or individuals, correctional science and policy aim to promote these characteristics and behaviours amongst others (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2017, p. 494). Davis (2014) locates this correctional pattern in social work, asserting that “advocates of resiliency typically attempt, through internal changes of the individual or the strengthening of some environmental support, to allow the person to withstand some negative force” (p. 5). However, he also asks the social work community: “Are we spending too much of our energy on charting and applauding the ability of individuals, families, and groups to successfully sustain societal abuse, hardship, and injustice?” (Davis, 2014, p. 5).

While resilience often bears a positive association, drawing on feelings of hope, optimism, and faith in people, Davis (2014), Pollack (2012), Hannah-Moffat & Shaw (2000) reminds us this rhetoric “should by no means be used as a way to rationalize current criminal action policies” (Arditti, 2005, p. 258). These authors draw attention to a third orientation in feminist criminology, one that shifts towards a systemic and institutional focus.

Pollack appraises the previous two categories of criminological research, explaining that “epistemically, criminalized women are (un)known through the rhetoric of correctional science which leaves little if any room for self-definitions and conversations about racialization, poverty, the role of violence against women, and the violence of the state” (Pollack, 2012, p. 111). She goes on to suggest that this un-knowing is strategic, citing Davis: “All the psychologizing is simply a stand-in for political analysis, a distraction, a way to discredit and dissipate a well-earned rage... What’s needed, surely, is not purging, but protest, not rehabilitation, but radical change” (Davis, 2011, p. 12-13; in Pollack, 2012, p. 111). Hannah-Moffat takes a similar stance, arguing that “within a prison setting the accomplishment of real empowerment is particularly problematic” as prisons are “sites of repression” deliberately designed to “limit individual expression of autonomy, control, and choice” (Hannah-Moffat, 2000, p.34). Ultimately, authors in this third category urge feminist researchers to reorient “our focus to institutions, structures, ideologies, and practices of punishment that normalize prison as a response to social inequalities” (Pollack, 2012, p.110). In doing so, we produce scholarship which “exposes the violence of imprisonment” (Pollack, 2012, p.110) as a system.

**Children of Incarcerated Women.** Experiencing the incarceration of a parent has been established as an adverse childhood experience (ACE), conditions which cause trauma or stress and result in negative health and quality of life outcomes (Arditti & Savla, 2013; Gjelsvik, Dumont, Nunn, & Rosen, 2014). The American Psychiatric Association (APA) defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster” (APA, 2019). However, narrowing the origin of trauma to an event—whether natural, accidental, or criminal in nature—is exclusionary. This perspective focuses on a physical threat to life, ignoring the

potential for psychological or emotional danger to impact an individual in similarly devastating ways. In her work on children impacted by the carceral system, Arditti advocates for “a more expansive definition of child trauma” which “acknowledges not just the threat that parental incarceration holds for psychologically wounding a child but also the complex and sometimes prolonged disruptions to children’s relationships and beliefs about the world the stem from the imprisonment of a parent” (2012, p. 182). Interestingly, in their Canadian research, Hannem and Leonardi (2015) note that, while families affected by incarceration report more distress than the general population—scoring closer to clinical populations—this trauma is not necessarily associated singularly with the “initial trauma of crime in the family” (p. 18). They explain that this initial trauma “may be subsequently compounded by a range of experiences and consequences—many of which are directly related to the criminal justice process and system” (Hannem & Leonardi, 2015, p. 18). The correlation between the incarceration of a parent and risk factors or adverse outcomes for children has been thoroughly documented and examined by scholars, primarily out of the United States.

Braman and Wood (2003) write, “a cascade of risks for children follows from criminal justice system that ignores family needs” (p.182). Existing literature tends to focus on adverse emotional and psychological reactions to the incarceration of a parent, as well as attachment and developmental issues (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Codd, 2008; Travis & Waul, 2003). A significant portion of the research on children of incarcerated parents in the United States has “focused mostly on a number of specific intergenerational effects of parental incarceration on children, namely delinquency, education, mental health, family resources, parent-child relationships, and social psychological problems” (Foster & Hagan, 2015, p. 139). Similar to

much of the published material on women in prison, this body of research is primarily criminogenic and pathologically focused.

An exception to this, Arditti's (2005) work on disenfranchised grief in the context of maternal incarceration offers an ecologically-situated, non-pathologizing perspective on health outcomes for children of incarcerated parents. Arditti explains that incarceration "represents the social death of a loved one" which can provoke "a profound sense of loss" amongst family members (Arditti, 2005, p. 253). This sense of loss can be expressed in the form of disenfranchised grief, which she defines as "occurring when persons experience a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (Arditti, 2005, p. 253). This grief is, according to Arditti, grounded in the "shame-based nature of disenfranchisement" (2005, p. 254). In the case of Hannem & Leonardi's 2015 Canadian study, shame and perceived stigma were prevalent themes within the participants' responses, underscoring the relevance of Arditti's assertion. The authors found that 44.2% of respondents reported feeling "somewhat ashamed" and 31% were "very ashamed" of the offence committed by or the incarceration of their loved one (Hannem & Leonardi, 2015, p. 15). Similarly, 40.4% of respondents reported feeling "very stigmatized" and that 38.6% felt "somewhat stigmatized" by their family member's incarceration (Hannem & Leonardi, 2015, p. 15). Ultimately, the sudden and ambiguous loss of a parent to the carceral system is a complex process to navigate, especially for children. The incarcerated individual, while not deceased, is absent from the lives of family members due to circumstances which often prevent mourning or empathetic support. Braman and Wood explain, "caregivers often describe children as being in a state of extended uncertainty" when their parental figure is incarcerated (2003, p. 182). Similar to the shift away

from conceptualizations that pathologize, individualize, and responsabilize criminalized women, research such as Arditti's helps scholarship move towards locating the child within the family and in context—rather than a viewing the child as a subject of risk or resilience.

**Substitute Caregivers & Kinship Arrangements.** As children are “far more likely to live with their mother rather than their father prior to incarceration” (Mumola, 2000 in Krisberg & Temin, 2001, p. 1) maternal incarceration has unique impacts on family structure and caregiving arrangements. For context, in the United States, a child whose mother enters the criminal justice system is “more than five times more likely to enter the foster care system than those whose male parent is incarcerated” (Krisberg & Temin, 2001, p. 1). With childcare proving to be a significant consideration in the study of incarcerated women, research on families affected by incarceration has gathered that a burgeoning number of grandparents have taken on caring responsibilities for children (Codd, 2008). Researchers interested in kinship care have found that most children reside with grandparents (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993) through an informal arrangement between the parent and the caregiver (Ruiz, 2002). While non-relative caregivers make the pro-active choice to foster a child, this is often not the case for kinship arrangements; these happen “in the midst of a family crisis” with little warning (Phillips & Bloom, 2001, p. 66). While non-relative caregivers typically have the financial and social support of an organization or governmental services in taking on a foster child, this is often not the case for kinship caregivers. In addition to the social and economic constraints faced by senior populations, “there is no systematic response to help them and the children in their care adjust to this major disruption in their lives” (Phillips & Bloom, 2001, p. 66).

Between 1970 and 1997, The United States Bureau of the Census reported a 77% increase in the number of households maintained by grandparents in America (Ruiz, 2002, p. 188). Although Braman (2007) claims that national statistics such as this “fail to capture a significant portion of the influence that incarceration has on nonnuclear familial structures” (p. 93). Additionally, he asserts that the available statistical data also fails “to capture the meaning of family life and its dissolution for family members” (Braman, 2007, p. 93), arguing that “incarceration reaches more deeply into the substance of family and community life than standard accounts of criminal sanctions suggest” (Braman & Wood, 2003, p. 159). In their 2003 work, Braman and Wood powerfully claim that incarceration has a “corrosive effect on family structure” (p. 170).

While Canadian research on the “meaning of family life and its dissolution” (Braman, 2007, p. 93) for populations affected by incarceration is limited, Hannem & Leonardi’s (2015) report for the Canadian Families and Corrections Network (CFCN) notes that “women are more likely to maintain a relationship with an incarcerated family member and to be involved in a ‘caring role’ which results in collateral victimization and hardships” (Hannem & Leonardi, 2015, p. 8). In the case of this CFCN project, these caring roles extend beyond that of kinship caregiving—to include those who visit, financially support, or provide housing to incarcerated loved ones. Still, in this Canada-wide survey, they found that families with an incarcerated loved one “experienced more distress on average than the general population” scoring closer to a clinical population (Hannem & Leonardi, 2015, p. 2).

**The Family Ecology: Secondary Prisonization.** Aiello & McCorkel (2017) argue that “family and friends of prisoners are directly implicated in the punishment process” as “prisoners’

social networks are not isolated from the coercive effects of the penal apparatus and, in fact, must acclimate to its norms, practices, and routine” (p.2). Comfort (2008) refers to this as secondary prisonization: the process through which the correctional system “interpolates the routines, relationships, emotions, appearance, and worldview of family members and friends” (Aiello & McCorkel, 2017, p.2). Along with their incarcerated loved one, family members—innocent children and caregivers, for example—must adapt to the carceral norms and structures to which the imprisoned are subject.

For instance, children in Aiello & McCorkel’s (2017) study embodied carceral norms and expectations through “(a) discipline of the body and (b) regulation of emotion” (p.8). They argue that prison institutionalizes children through the disciplining of their physical experiences, in their bodies and in the built carceral environment through “the imposition and regulation of narrow boundaries within which they can move, touch, socialize, and play” (p.9). These narrow boundaries also apply to their emotional experiences, forcing children to behave in a manner that is deemed acceptable by prison officials. Understandably, visiting a parent in an institution can amount to sensory overload for a child. Visiting youth are confronted by large steel doors with impenetrable locks; the smell of stale, still air and the claustrophobic feeling of being trapped indoors away from fresh, moving oxygen; as well as the hard, scrutinizing gaze of uniformed guards and the unnerving presence of intimidating search dogs. All of this, as children face the stark reality of their parents’ enforced separation—their unreachability. Still, children must exhibit control. They cannot act out. They cannot express disinhibited rage or sorrow. Instead, they are “forced to view themselves from the perspective of the jail” (Aiello & McCorkel, 2017,

p.17). As such, secondary prisonization occurs through institutionally demanded, strategically measured, self-imposed behaviour modification.

While children “encounter these demands in unique and developmentally consequential ways” (p.8), secondary prisonization is also demanded of individuals at all levels of the family ecology. Enroos (2011) frames this as “institutional interference” and “governing the family” (p. 12). Just as children must exhibit control over their physical and emotional experiences and/or performance, kinship caregivers and other loved ones must do the same. Moreover, the interactions between these caregiving adults, children, and their incarcerated mother are subject to penal supervision. Their relationships—whether maintained through phone calls, letter writing, or visits—are constantly surveilled and governed by institutional rules.

However, Turney and Wildeman’s (2015) study reports that families react to maternal incarceration differently; for some, the experience does not have a measurable negative impact on the family network. The heterogeneity in their research findings points to the importance of socioeconomic advantage and privilege in mediating families’ carceral experiences. Arditti (2015) interprets these findings in relation to “family functioning,” framing the effects of maternal incarceration as dependant on “the quality and stability of children’s caregiving” (p. 172). She explains that

Maternal incarceration might be more negative for more advantaged youth and their families, who might experience the most negative effects of maternal incarceration...

Maternal incarceration is less likely to occur in more advantaged families, and in turn, family members might react with shock and disbelief, and they might be unprepared to

deal with the host of changes and difficulties necessitated by maternal incarceration. However, the context of family life is different in the most disadvantaged families whereby maternal incarceration is most likely and, arguably, most expected.

(Arditti, 2015, p.173)

Ultimately, Turney and Wildeman's (2015) research, as well as Arditti's analysis, underscore the importance of using the family as a unit of study (rather than individuals). Arditti explains that a family process perspective "acknowledges the systemic interdependence and distinctive experiences among family members" as well as a "comprehensive understanding of what is happening within the family and children's proximal relationships" (Arditti, p.177). While secondary prisonization is deemed "unavoidable" by Aiello & McCorkel (2017, p.18), research points to the mediating role of families. Families are dynamic—that they are wildly unique, varying in resources, responsiveness, and resilience. As such, ecological researchers ask questions which aim to capture the mediating role of the family in the carceral experience. For instance, what makes some children and families more adaptable to the adverse conditions imposed by incarceration? How do they negotiate the process of maternal incarceration, resisting the ways in which prisonization seeps into the family ecology outside prison walls?

### **Rationale**

**A Family-Sized Gap.** Despite Arditti's urging to utilize an ecological perspective which situates the family as a mediating force in carceral research, a significant portion of criminological research, as well as correctional science and policy, focuses on the individual,

rather than the family system. Evidently, families' experiences largely remain on the periphery—beyond the fence, and outside the walls of prisons and those who study them.

Maternal incarceration has intergenerational impacts. It restructures caregiving within the family unit, resulting in social, emotional, economic, and physical changes that are documented in child-focused research on trauma, risk, and resilience. Still, there is scant attention paid to the experience of this impact from the perspectives of families themselves. An overwhelming number of studies ask the questions “what” and “why”: What crimes do women go to prison for? What kind of women go to prison? Why do women go to prison? Why do women re-offend? In contrast, very few seem to ask “how” questions: How are women's, children's, and caregivers' personal, familial, and social lives transformed by their interaction with the carceral system? Rather than focusing on pathways into prison or mapping outcomes following incarceration, Aiello & McCorkel (2018) argue that research is needed “that focuses on incarceration as a process” which mediates family relationships (p. 353). There is a great deal that we do not know about maternal incarceration and family life—particularly from the perspectives of mothers who have been incarcerated, and their children, and kinship caregivers through collaborative, family-centred, process-focused qualitative research. Canadian researcher, Dr. Knudsen, whose work focuses on children's experiences of parental incarceration, predicates her research on the argument that: (a) “there is a lack of attention to children's self-reported experiences” (2016, p. 52) and that data which “originates from interviews with children themselves is very limited” (2016, p.53), and (b) that there is “a clear need for Canadian data” (2016, p.52). This project aims to address both of these significant gaps in Canadian carceral research.

### **Research Question & Objectives**

This research project aims to gather families' perspectives on the question: How does maternal incarceration impact families with children under the age of 18 whom are placed formally or informally with kinship caregivers? In particular, this project is directed at answering the following subquestions:

1. How does maternal incarceration impact kinship caregiving, and in particular, how do familial caregivers absorb and adapt to the conditions imposed upon them by the justice system and changing family dynamics?
2. How do children experience the imprisonment of their mother? How do they navigate and make meaning of this change within the family unit?
3. How are women's familial lives transformed by their interaction with the carceral system as they mother in this context?

### **Methodology**

#### **Epistemology**

**Constructivism.** This research takes the form of a qualitative study, which is founded upon the principles of constructivism. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that a “central characteristic of all qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds” (p. 24). The constructed reality—or “the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24)—becomes the focus of the researcher, who seeks to “understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). Qualitative data collection and analysis methods allow the researcher to sift through the experiences and perspectives of participants, ultimately identifying recurring patterns or

themes in the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These recurring patterns and themes, then, become the study's findings; these findings are then subject to the interpretation of the researcher, who presents their "understanding of the participants' understanding of the phenomenon of interest" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25). In some qualitative research, findings seemingly emerge independently of the researcher—being intrinsic truths contained within the data. However, the role of constructivism in this research study extends beyond the families' collective narrative of a phenomena; it includes me, too. As the interviewer and observer, I take on the role of a research tool. Unlike a thermometer or a blood test, or some neutral technology aimed at data collection, I have values, beliefs, and biases. These can emerge through the questions I ask, how I ask them, and whom I direct them to, as well as how I interpret the families' responses. As such, this research is also a product of collaboration and co-construction between participating families and myself. In recognizing the role of co-construction in this project, it is vital that I am transparent about my motivation to pursue this work and the underlying assumptions I bring to the research relationship.

#### **Co-Construction: My Place in This Research.**

I am a white, middle class woman from a small, fairly conservative town in Southern Ontario. I was raised by both my parents in a stable, supportive home. My parents were public servants: mom was a teacher and dad was a police officer. Growing up in a position of socioeconomic privilege, I viewed crime as something that happened to *other* people, that was committed by *other* people. My only window into this world was through my dad, of whose work I had a simplified understanding: He caught bad guys and kept us safe. This perspective served as the foundation for a rigid, binary understanding of criminalization that was common in

my social world. It seemed that, for many adults in my life, perpetrators of violence or law breaking were simply perpetrators. They were bad guys. Whatever had happened to them, contextually or relationally, did not excuse their deviant or harmful behaviour. This perspective was further cemented by media influences throughout my life. What began with Scooby Doo and the gang of “meddling kids!” evolved into a love for CSI, Law & Order and true crime television, which then extended to documentaries about jail and prison life in America. From the time I was a child, I have been an avid consumer of criminalizing stories. As an adult, I have been a consumer of institutional violence.

As a young adult, I studied community development and population health as an undergraduate and graduate student. As I cultivated my scholarly voice, much of my work took on a systemic and critical institutional perspective. I spent years writing papers critiquing the Canadian government’s colonial (genocidal) eradication project, specifically in relation to Indian Residential Schools. As my work in this field transitioned from an intellectual, classroom-based exercise and into the messy, self-reflexive world of social work, I began to notice the everyday manifestations of this colonial paradigm in contemporary life. I had condemned the forced and violent removal, incarceration, and indoctrination of Indigenous children. I had vehemently implicated social workers—even well-meaning ones—as complicit actors in this history. As a social work student, I came to question my place within contemporary systems of exclusion, classification, control, surveillance, and population management. Would I, too, be a complicit agent of the state? Would I be an instrument of institutional violence? Pollack’s (2012) words sat uncomfortably in my gut: “without substantial reorientation of our gaze, those of us who research, advocate, support and agitate with and for criminalized women will safely occupy our

seats as penal spectators: analyzing, documenting, counting, and theorizing about the pain experienced by ‘others’” (Pollack, 2012, p.111).

As I located myself within these structures, I also began to locate “the bad guys” within wider systems. I began to interrogate the structural and relational factors that shaped and contextualized their formative experiences. Instead of viewing people singularly as criminals, I shifted my perspective to consider how people become criminalized in the eyes of the public, state, institutions, and themselves. Rather than the inherent, all-encompassing identity of being a criminal, I wondered how and why this identity was socially ascribed to them. In my Walls to Bridges class at GVI (<http://wallstobridges.ca>), I learned about “the traditional divide between ‘criminal’ and ‘victim,’ which suggests that an individual or group can have only one identity” (Chan & Chun, 2014, p.33). I came to appreciate the “multiple identities” people claim, which—in turn—allows for the “contextualizing, but not condoning or excusing” of perceived criminal activity (Chan & Chunn, 2014, p.34). By making space for complexity—for viewing people as victim and criminal, as both heroine and perpetrator—I came to appreciate the messy, imperfect humanity of people I had wrongfully understood as *the other* in my childhood. I learned to direct my critical research and writing at the contemporary manifestations of the colonial institutional paradigm I abhorred in my undergrad and previous master’s degree, centring my work on carceral issues and the family. As Pollack (2012) writes, “reorienting [my] focus to institutions, structures, ideologies, and practices of punishment that normalize prison as a response to social inequalities exposes the violence of imprisonment” (p.110).

Nichols’ (2014) work unpacks and explores the connections I made between my previous anti-colonial studies and newfound passion for prison abolitionism. He asserts that incarceration

and colonialism are inextricably linked, explaining that carceral expansion is not an inevitable product of social and economic transformation (i.e., neoliberalism) (Nichols, 2014). Rather “it was (and is) a political choice adopted from within a range of possible responses” (Nichols, 2014, p.441). For instance, if we are to believe that prisons exist and expand only to make communities safer, research proves they are a widespread failure (Nichols, 2014). However,

Once we see that this is not the case—once we realize that such policies are first and foremost devised to maintain a system of state violence, racialized hierarchy, and, as I will argue, continuous colonial reterritorialization—then we must confront how effective and successful they truly are. (Nichols, 2014, p.442)

In what Nichols (2014) calls “bringing forward this political circuit of violence and legitimation” (p.442) critical prison studies demand “an analysis of the colonial function of the carceral form in the here and now” (p.454). Through the lens of anti-colonial research, I not only began to question the inevitability of prisons—but I came to recognize the inevitable, inextricable connection shared by the Canadian colonial project and contemporary carceral culture. This served as a jumping-off point for my journey towards abolitionism.

Ultimately, I cannot claim objectivity as a person or social work researcher; I come to this research with an anti-colonial, feminist, critical institutional lens. Additionally, my personal and professional commitment to the Canadian Association of Social Worker’s Code of Ethics informs my research. As a social worker, I value the inherent dignity and worth of human beings; furthermore, I am committed to addressing injustice and social problems. These professional obligations place me in conflict with the realities of Canadian carceral policy, institutions, and procedures—a system which is often undignified and unjust. As a social worker, the professional

is political. A constructivist approach takes into account my political, ethical, and social values—shedding light on them and their role in the research to produce valid, valuable results. The findings presented in this paper are, therefore, not only collaboratively constructed by families who have experienced the incarceration of a mother—but also co-constructed by me, as a woman, social worker, and researcher. While focused on the experiences of families affected by the justice system, this paper is also imbued with my rage, my protest, and my sorrow.

### **Theoretical Approach**

Theory is embedded within throughout this research project; socio-ecological theory informs this research methodology and design, while the analysis utilizes a critical institutional perspective.

**Socio-Ecological Theory.** The carceral experience is inherently familial: women's experiences cannot be extricated from their families and family life, and the experiences of children and caregivers' cannot be extricated from those of their mother and other family members. The carceral experience impacts every level of the family's ecology. Codd (2008) urges researchers interested in the imprisonment of women "to recognize the many aspects of the relationships of female prisoners, and consider the collateral consequences of imprisonment in this context" (p. 139). She is clear in underscoring the importance of families and children as participants in the women's carceral experiences; she claims that "the 'little people's voices' are often totally silent or silenced, even in the research literature ostensibly assessing the impact of imprisonment on young people" (Codd, 2008, p. 64). In adopting a socio-ecological approach, this research project recognizes children as an important source of knowledge about their own lives, while acknowledging that "their experiences are constantly shaped and influenced by those

around them” (Akesson, 2011, p. 24). Utilizing the family as a unit of analysis, this research draws on data from multiple sources, including siblings and caregivers. Parke & Clarke-Stewart explain that a family systems’ perspective

Alerts us to the interdependence among these various family subsystems. When a parent is incarcerated, the loss of that parent has implications for the remaining parent in a two-parent family as well as for extended family members, such as grandparents. This perspective is helpful in understanding how families adapt to the temporary or permanent loss of a parent through incarceration. (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003, p.195)

This dynamic, intergenerational approach to understanding the phenomenon of maternal incarceration acknowledges and attempts to capture how families co-construct their experiences of coping with maternal incarceration.

Additionally, this research extends beyond the family ecology, acknowledging the social spheres in which families are embedded. This includes the “community, the nation-state, and higher order systems” such as the criminal justice system (Akesson & Denov, 2017, p. 141). Foster and Hagan (2015) underscore the importance of including “higher order systems” (Akesson & Denov, 2017, p. 141) in the field of carceral work. In their research, they supplement the family systems approach with “an integrated and systemic social exclusion perspective” (Foster & Hagan, 2015, p. 136). This perspective recognizes the “overlapping institutional policy domains from which the children of incarcerated parents are systemically excluded” as “products of deliberate policy choices [which] are social reproduced in intergenerational, interinstitutional (i.e., across multiple realms such as housing, schools, and

labour markets) and intersectional (i.e., contingent on racial/ethnic and gender domains) ways” (Foster & Hagan, 2015, p. 136).

The difference between an ecological, family-focused approach and that of a socio-ecological paradigm is, in my opinion, best illustrated in the analysis of resilience research in the carceral field. Garrow & Hasenfeld (2017) explain that “much of the research focuses on individual-level risk and protective factors in coping with environmental adversities” or a person’s ecology (p. 494). Consequently, “both the policy and the practice implications of such research are to promote personal transformation via individual-level intervention modalities rather than to inform structural changes” (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2017, p. 494). While environmental characteristics are understood as having an impact—protective or otherwise—on families, in much of the ecological canon the locus of change is *within* the family, as a functional or dysfunctional system. Consequently, this research is often “steered away from studying the structural conditions that lead to and maintain conditions of oppression, exploitation, and inequality. Instead, it medicalizes or otherwise individualizes what are reality social problems requiring social-structural remedies” (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2017, p.497-498). A socio-ecological approach embeds a critical, systemic perspective into ecological theory.

In the case of this research, socio-ecological theory, particularly its focus on social exclusion, acknowledges the intersectional forces of oppression that disproportionately impact families interacting with the criminal justice system. By adopting this perspective, this research acknowledges that—while helpful in the immediate-term, individual contexts—it is not enough to bolster resilience through ad-hoc interventions. Arditti powerfully explains: “social work professionals must serve to change the odds against families impacted by criminal justice

policies and attend to the interplay of political, economic, social, and racial climates that influence the shaping of these policies” (2005, p. 258). Ultimately, in layering ecological theory within a critical social perspective, this research project situates the family within multiple, interlocking, interactive systems; it acknowledges both power and oppression by viewing the family in context, rather than in isolation.

**Critical Institutional Analysis: Powerlessness as Punishment.** Institutional violence is defined as “all practices of humiliation, degradation, neglect, and abuse inflicted upon institutional residents, regardless of intention or circumstance” (Rossiter & Rinaldi, 2019, p.3).

Authors Rossiter and Rinaldi explain that

Often, it is these extreme and shocking instances of violence that capture the public imagination and media focus, in particular sexual and other forms of brutal physical abuse...However, to focus solely on extreme instances of violence is to miss the fertile groundwork laid by more routine, mundane forms of daily violence. (2019, p.2)

Moreover, it is not only actions of extreme or everyday violence that amount to institutional violence. In fact, “institutions themselves are inherently violent in form” as “practices of incarceration are in and of themselves violent, and necessarily produce further violence” (Rossiter & Rinaldi, 2019, p.3). Likewise, Pollack (2012) argues that “prisons are inherently violent” (p.108). She explains that “their primary purpose is the infliction of pain and exclusion” and that it is paradoxical to “assume that prisons can be spaces of trust and healing” (Pollack, 2012, p.108). In this research, critical institutional analysis points to the ways in which families are not only shaped by crime, but by the criminal justice system itself.

This is primarily achieved by exposing the conditions to which these families have been subject and aiming to understand their remarkable coping techniques in the face of these challenges. If prison is viewed as it was intended—as a warehouse for people deemed unmanageable until they are made manageable in the eyes of the state—the purpose embedded within contemporary carceral policies is revealed. For mothers who are incarcerated, their unreachability, their distance, their inability to intervene in the lives of their children are intrinsically linked to punishment. Their powerlessness *is* punishment. Their powerlessness *is* state violence. However, this punishment and pain is not borne independently, but is inadvertently placed upon children and kinship caregivers as well.

Ultimately, the carceral system is not built to support, but punish women. In transforming the mothering relationship, children and families are subject to processes of state intervention, exclusion, surveillance, and governance too. Rather than utilizing this research as a framework or map for families to become adept navigators, mindful gatekeepers, or empathetic peacemakers in the context of maternal incarceration, I employ a critical institutional perspective. This approach frames these roles as undue burdens placed upon already marginalized populations, through measured—and violent—institutional and systemic practices. As the theoretical foundation of this research, this stance reminds us that children and caregivers are not inevitably or neutrally made to be navigators, gatekeepers, or peacemakers. Their resistance and exceptional resilience emerges in the context of a powerful, purposeful system of exclusion and oppression. These coping techniques form a survival system necessitated by an institution that is designed to punish. It is this system, particularly its strategic narrowing of the mothering relationship, that is at the crux of this analysis. Hannah-Moffat (1995) says that scholars’ “advocacy of women-

centred prisons fails to challenge the use of prisons” (p.148). In shining light on the challenges the system forces upon children and caregivers—criminalized only by association—as well as the women who mother in the context of this oppression, this research serves to challenge the effectiveness and social good of prisons.

### **Research Design**

**From Proposal to Project.** The design originally proposed for this project was not that of a multi-case study. Rather, I had planned to collect qualitative data from a sample size of six to nine families, producing a suitable sample size for thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). However, as this project progressed it became clear that a qualitative research project with a representative sample size was unrealistic and not necessarily the only suitable research design for my project. Through my outreach efforts, I came to understand that organizations supporting women and families with post-incarceration life are very hard to access. For the most part, these organizations do not have a prominent presence in the community; halfway houses rarely advertise their presence in Southern Ontario neighbourhoods. The individuals who utilize their services are (rightfully) protected by confidentiality measures; the policies governing these organizations, as well as the staff within them, are purposefully protective. When I was able to connect with organizations supporting criminalized women and their families, I was confronted with the realities of staff turnover or staff being stretched too thin to take on a student’s initiative. As such, my initial attempts to connect with community gatekeepers via email or telephone were met mostly with rejection.

My outreach efforts culminated in two meetings with experts in this field: a women’s halfway house director, and a re-entry support programming coordinator. These interviews

proved invaluable for my research process. Both experts believed the content of the project aligned with their organizations' work and filled gaps in provider/funder knowledge. They were also able to shed light on why I had struggled to access organizations for whom this research may have benefit. They presented potential logistical challenges in recruiting for this project. First, they reflected on the number of women within their service who would meet the research criteria (having children, having children who were placed in kinship care); and second, whether families meeting criteria were geographically available and willing to participate in the interviews. Given the sparsity of women's carceral services in Ontario, many women lived at a distance from their families. As such, a collaborative family interview would require both time and financial investment on the part of families. Furthermore, they expressed concerns about whether previously incarcerated women would be willing to ask this of their families. They warned me that for many families affected by incarceration, conflict, resentment, and trauma may be the prevailing family narrative. The threat of "opening old wounds" or deepening family conflict would likely discourage some participants. Together we worked through potential barriers to participation amongst their clients, including issues of parole violations or limiting conditions, length of warrant expiry, child welfare and mandatory reporting, and other concerns previously-incarcerated mothers may have in speaking with a social worker. While I had hoped to recruit my entire sample from these organizations, I was met with the reality that this was an unrealistic expectation, albeit not impossible.

Through the assistance of these experts and their organizations, I was able to recruit three families for the project (described in more detail in the recruitment section). I was faced with the options of (a) extending my recruitment timeline to search for three more families, with no

guarantee that the issues I had previously faced would be alleviated; or (b) adapt my methodological approach, embracing the specificity of these families and their contextual experience through the case model. With the guidance of my committee, I shifted my methodology to that of the case study. In researching the case study approach and multi-case study designs, I came to embrace the contextually driven presentation of bounded systems, learning this format is well suited to my focus on families in the context of maternal incarceration.

**Multi-Case Study.** The fundamental goal of case study research is “to conduct an in-depth analysis of an issue, within its context with a view to understand the issue from the perspective of participants” (Merriam, 2009; Simons, 2009; Stake, 2006; & Yin, 2014 as cited in Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017, p.8). Yin (2003, 2014), whose work is seminal in case research, argues that researchers should use a case study method when:

- (a) the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions;
- (b) you cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study;
- (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study;
- (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context.

(Baxter & Jack, 2008, p.545)

Exploratory in nature, this research asks how maternal incarceration affects families. By focusing on the experience of adaptation and collective meaning making in this context, this research project meets Yin’s first criteria. Likewise, this research meets the second criteria in its focus on past events and experiences. The interviews for this project were collaborative in design,

involving as many members of the family as wishing to participate, and conducted in the community. This necessitated that the mother be previously-incarcerated, and therefore available to participate in the family interview (to which incarceration would prove a formidable barrier). As participating families had already experienced the incarceration and re-entry of a mother at the time of our meeting, I could not have influenced their behaviour in the past. Finally, the contextual conditions outlined by Yin in circumstances (c) and (d) are particularly relevant to this research project. Eisenhardt & Graebner (2007) emphasize the importance of Yin's final two conditions, explaining that "while laboratory experiments isolate the phenomena from their context, case studies emphasize the rich, real-world context in which the phenomena occur" (p. 25). Therefore, the contextual nature of the case study approach complements socio-ecological theory, as it is grounded in the participants' lived experiences as families who mother and are mothered within the Canadian carceral system. Socio-ecological theory situates the individual within their family system, and that family within higher order systems. These spheres of influence are not peripheral to the research, but intrinsic. Likewise, the case study approach embraces the contextual experiences of families as "relevant to the phenomenon under study" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p.545) by grounding individuals in higher order systems, recognizing the role of contextual circumstances in shaping perspectives and experiences.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that case study requires a bounded system, as this design demands that "the unit of analysis, not the topic of investigation characterizes the case study" (p.38). Creswell (2013) explains that "the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases)" using "detailed, in-depth data collection... and reports a case description and case-based themes" (Creswell, 2013, p. 97 as cited in Merriam & Tisdell,

2016, p. 40). In my initial proposal, I did not use Creswell's or Merriam and Tisdell's language of a bounded system or a case. Instead, I emphasized my focus on the family and family system as a unit of analysis. Despite semantic differences, my family-focused proposal readily translated into case study language, as the family is a system which is "intrinsically bounded" (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 39).

In multiple case studies, there are two analytical stages. The first, or "within-case analysis" in which "each case is first treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 234). During this phase, the researcher delves into the case data to "learn as much as possible about the contextual variables that might have a bearing on the case" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 234). This is followed by a "cross-case analysis" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 234) in which the researcher begins to conceptualize these case-specific themes in relationship with data collected from other cases. In weaving the individual threads from single cases into a braid or web, the researcher builds theory that is borne from and applicable to multiple cases. This web then becomes an exercise in theory-building.

Once the analysis of each case is completed, cross-case analysis begins. A qualitative, inductive, multicase study seeks to build abstractions across cases.

Although the particular details of the specific cases may vary, the researcher attempts to build a general explanation that fits all the individual cases.

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 234)

Eisenhardt & Graebner (2007) explain that "when using theory building from cases as a research strategy, researchers also must take the added step of justifying why the research question is better addressed by theory-building rather than theory-testing research" (p. 26). They

explain that, in contrast to theory-testing research (in which a hypothesis has been previously formed or substantiated in another setting), “theory-building research using cases typically answers research questions that address ‘how’ and ‘why’ in unexplored research areas particularly well” (Edmondson & McManus, 2007 in Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27). This echoes Yin’s first criteria for case-study appropriate research, which is that “the focus of the study is to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545).

Given the dearth in accessible, child and family-centred data pertaining to families impacted by the incarceration of a mother at Grand Valley Institute, it would be difficult to approach this topic from the perspective of theory testing. Frankly, I do not know how or why maternal incarceration transforms families. In fact, there is a lack of causal theories regarding maternal incarceration, particularly those that are sufficiently defined in order to be operationalized and testable. As such, I believe it is paramount that previously-incarcerated women and their families are able to collaboratively construct and conceptualize about this phenomenon based on their lived experiences. In exploring this topic from the perspective of children, caregivers, and previously-incarcerated mothers, this research acts as a starting point; it represents the unearthing, connecting, and amplifying of what “insiders” understand the “how” and “why” of maternal incarceration to be.

Finally, in transitioning to a multiple case study format that incorporates theory building, I grappled with questions regarding generalizability. I wondered: Why should anyone care what themes or overarching theories emerge from a small sample of three families? How can this learning be relevant to or representative of other experiences and contexts? In making connections and developing theory relevant to the three cases presented here, it is not my

intention to argue that all previously-incarcerated mothers and families experiences reflect those within this study. Rather, this multiple case analysis draws upon contextually-bound, collaboratively constructed narratives to forge connections between three families' experiences.

Qualitative research, and case studies in particular, are often described as a "collection of 'anecdotal stories'" and thereby dismissed as "unscientific and unreliable" (McAleese & Kilty, 2019, p. 822). This is especially ironic in the context of carceral research, in which "cases" form the basis of criminal investigation, prosecution, and precedent setting. McAleese and Kilty draw on this double standard, explaining that the value of "experiential research and personal stories are simultaneously mobilized and rejected by political actors, government experts, and the courts who take up, reject, and accept stories as evidence" (McAleese & Kilty, 2019, p. 825). McAleese and Kilty's (2019) paper "Stories Matter: reaffirming the Value of Qualitative Research" is highly influential in the methodological stance of this research project. In making the case for storytelling research, the authors make two recommendations: the first is complexity, "namely, to avoid reducing stories to tropes and taking up stories without a better understanding of the broader context within which they are situated" (McAleese & Kilty, 2019, p. 835) and the second is layering. While qualitative studies typically have small sample sizes or cases, they agree that "taken together the stories generated through these projects repeatedly highlight the same key points" or overall narrative, and "therefore contribute to a more complex and credible understanding of the problem" (McAleese & Kilty, 2019, p. 836). As such, McAleese and Kilty's techniques of "layering" (2019, p. 836) and complexity are employed to strengthen this research.

## Methods

**Recruitment & Sampling.** I focused recruitment efforts on previously-incarcerated mothers. This necessitated purposive sampling given the unique inclusion criteria. In order to participate:

- Participating women must have been previously incarcerated in a federal institution, which requires a sentence of two years or more;
- Participating women must identify as a mother to children;
- Participating children must have been a minor at the time of their mother's incarceration, and placed in the custody of a family member through a formal or informal kinship caregiving arrangement;
- Participating kinship caregivers must have acted as substitute caregiver to the mother's children, whether in a primary, secondary, or occasional role.

These criteria do not exclude participants based on gender, sexuality, or family composition. This research project embraces the many manifestations of family which, regardless of biological, sexual, or gender-based differences, is a bounded unit of analysis. Therefore, participating mothers may be biological parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, single parents, or parents with a range of custody arrangements.

I began the recruitment process by reaching out via telephone and email to organizations in Southern Ontario that provide re-entry support, health and wellness support, and housing services. These included Elizabeth Fry Societies and John Howard Societies, the Salvation Army, YWCA and associated services, halfway houses, public health services, as well as children and family service organizations. Approving organizations agreed to place posters in public waiting

rooms or distribute them via email to staff and service users. These posters read: “Families have to change and adapt when moms go to prison. Often, other family members take on caregiving roles. Are you and your family members interested in coming together to share your family’s story of maternal incarceration?” (Appendix i, p.118). My efforts to connect with organizations in Hamilton, Kitchener, Waterloo, and Brantford were mostly successful, as I was able to leverage personal and professional connections within local resources and organizations. However, outside of these regions that were familiar to me, I struggled to gain any traction amongst organizations.

Despite the cooperation and partnership offered by organizations in my communities, the posters yielded no response from potential participants. At this time, I reached out to two individuals employed in the field in hopes that these experts may be able to shed light on the challenges I had been facing. These two meetings proved to be invaluable, as I came to learn of the barriers formerly-incarcerated women may have to participating in the project. From their perspective, previously-incarcerated women’s concerns regarding probation and parole, child protective services, and intra-familial conflict would amount to significant deterrents. Likewise, I was encouraged to consider how my identity as a person of socioeconomic and racial privilege, in the academic community, without lived experience in the criminal justice system amplified the gravity of my request that these women to trust me with their stories and their families. As an outsider—and a visibly privileged one at that—I had little currency in this highly protective community. Both individuals asked me for a card that would enable them or potential participants to connect with me, but I did not have one - I carried only a colourful, and slightly onerous 8.5 by 11 inch poster. As I had already received ethics approval for my recruitment

poster and felt that I did not have time to re-approach the REB to clear business cards, I simply shrunk the posters - transferring the same content, in identical format onto the smaller business cards. These mini-posters proved extraordinarily helpful to my recruitment efforts.

My first expert interview resulted in an invitation to a women's halfway house meeting. During the house meeting, I engaged in the group's activities and conversations (and snacks), getting to know the women present. Then, I presented my research in hopes of recruiting participants from the house. While the majority of women present did not meet criteria, to my surprise - they took business cards. Some women took multiple cards, others snapped photographs of them to share with others via text message and on social media groups within their community. Upon reflection, I believe these mini-posters to be a more accessible and comfortable format for recruitment. Rather than manually taking down the contact information advertised on a poster in a public place or taking a flyer from an administrator's desk, women were able to discretely take a business card to share or follow-up with me in a more private setting. Likewise, these were easier to carry and pass on amongst personal contacts.

The second expert interview resulted in an online introduction to a PhD student whose work—while focused on different subject matter—was in collaboration with previously-incarcerated women in Southern Ontario. She also shared my poster via email and social media. Though these expert interviews were initially quite disheartening, they became the foundation for successful snowball or “network sampling” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.98). Ultimately, I was contacted via email by three previously-incarcerated women. In all three cases, these moms had come to hear about the project online through social media sites (specifically Facebook and Tumblr) and through direct exchanges with their personal contacts. Rather than recruiting

through traditional channels, such as gatekeeping organizations and publicly distributed posters, word of mouth and social media proved most effective.

**Data Collection.** Informed by Akesson's research methodology, this research project utilizes collaborative family interviews (CFIs) (Akesson, 2011; Akesson, 2014) in which children, their mothers, and their kinship caregivers are invited to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences through a semi-structured, collaborative interview with the family unit. CFIs are process-focused, allowing for the exploration of how questions rather than collecting what, where, and when oriented data. This aligns with Parke & Clarke-Stewart's (2003) work which urges researchers to move beyond "simple descriptions of differences in children to explanations of processes in the individual, family, context, and culture" (p.220-221). This methodological recommendation also parallels that of Aiello & McCorkel (2018), who assert that imprisonment be studied as process - one that is negotiated and constructed by families.

In order to facilitate the co-construction of data in case studies, Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills (2017) recommend the use of observation, interviews, and focus groups. CFIs combine these recommended formats. In preparing the data collection and analysis components of this thesis, I came across Merriam's case study methodology, in Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills' (2017) article. They explain that her approach "maintains a constructivist approach to case study research, whereby the researcher assumes that reality is constructed intersubjectively through meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially" (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017, n.p.). As Merriam's focus on intersubjectively constructed experiences echoed the principles of Akesson's collaborative family interviews, I sought out her work as a framework for this qualitative multi-case study. The following data collection and analysis

processes were largely adapted from Merriam & Tisdell's text *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (2016).

For the purposes of privacy and accessibility for participants, I travelled to the family home identified as suitable for the interview by my point of contact (which was, in all three cases, the mothers who were previously-incarcerated). In some cases this was an individual's apartment, for others it was a relative's house; this choice was entirely left to the family. As to not impose, I also presented the option of booking a room at a public library, community centre, or whatever local space the family felt comfortable in, should they elect not to host a home-based interview.

Upon my arrival at the family homes, I introduced myself and presented the family with a summary of my research. I outlined my interest in the subject and the objectives of the project, then I answered any questions the family posed. Upon assent by the group, information and consent forms were distributed and reviewed (Appendix ii, p.119-122). The collaborative family interviews were audio recorded with the permission of participants. These recordings were transferred to a password protected computer file and deleted from the original recording device. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and then sent them to the families via email to review and retain a copy. In total, the CFI recordings were 227 minutes long and the transcripts amounted to 195 pages of single-spaced typed data.

**Data Analysis.** Transcripts of the collaborative family interviews were analyzed according to Merriam & Tisdell's (2016) two stage model of "within-case analysis" and "cross-case analysis" (p.234). Each transcript was anonymized and identifying information was altered or deleted; participant names were replaced with pseudonyms (which participants had the option

of choosing) and locations were replaced with [CITY]. I began by coding the first transcript line-by-line, identifying themes at an explicit level, typically in the form of topics discussed by participants. During my second reading of the first family's transcript, I made notes in the margins at a more interpretive level. I kept a list of codes from my first transcript, and moved on to the second. I repeated this process with the second and third transcripts - first coding with explicit, topic-based identifiers, and then with more interpretive questions or thoughts about the data.

I reviewed the compiled list of codes, highlighting those that were prominent in all three cases. Then, I went back to my research question: How does maternal incarceration impact families with children under the age of 18 whom are placed formally or informally with kinship caregivers? In order to conceptualize the themes I had identified into a comprehensive answer to this question, I began organizing the codes in various groupings. First, I separated them according to generation (child, mother, caregiver) and then according to timeline (before, during, and after incarceration). However, I found many of the codes crossed these organizational groupings. In my frustration, I realized I was falling into the “what” and “when” trap - attempting to conceptualize the research according to these outcome-oriented questions, rather than what I had premised my research on: a process-focused, or “how” approach. Instead of taking the codes and attempting to place them into pre-ordained organizational categories—like before, during, and after incarceration—I grouped the codes amongst themselves according to what was related (rather than what was neat or convenient). This resulted in three groupings: navigation, gatekeeping, and peacemaking.

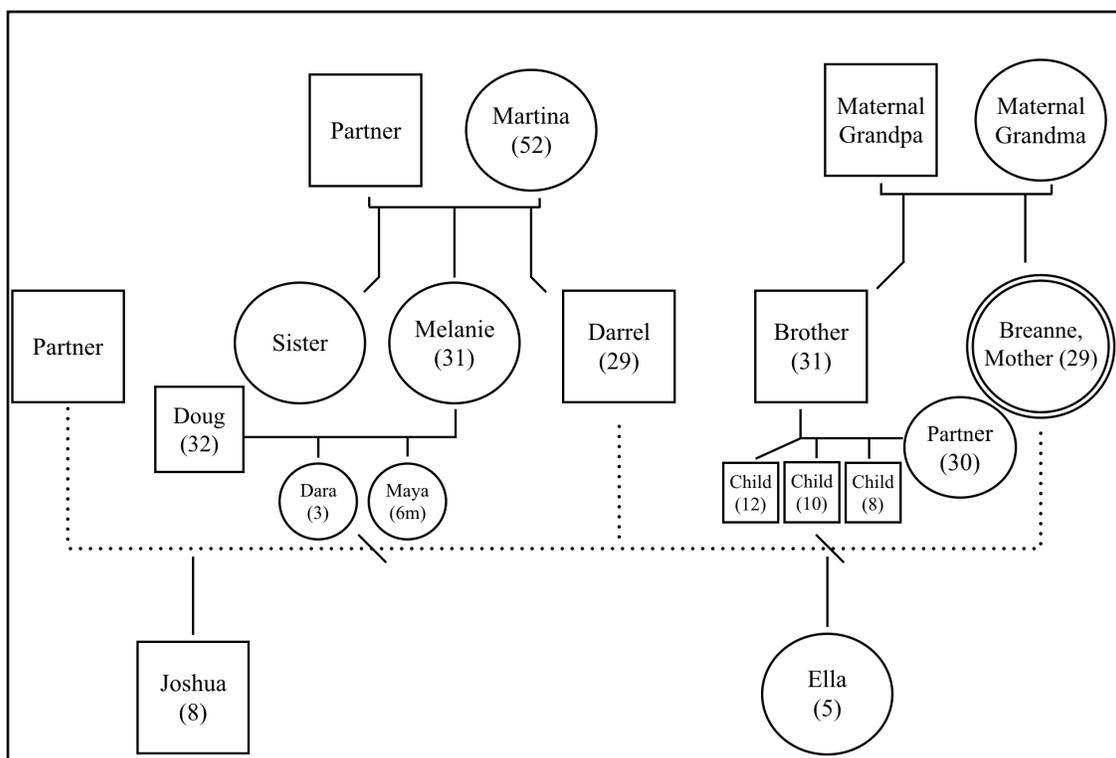
**Family Vignettes**

The following vignettes aim to paint a picture of the Hart, Fulton, Wilson family units, summarizing events related to the family’s carceral experience, as well as caregiving relationships within and between the family unit to contextualize the findings presented in this thesis. Names, ages, places, and any identifying information have been altered to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants. In some cases, the nature or timeline of relationships has been altered as well. However, the region for which this research is specific—Southern Ontario, and particularly, that of Grand Valley Institute for Women—remains unchanged.

**The Hart Family**

**Figure 1: Hart Family Genogram.**

*Squares signify men. Circles signify women. Ages are in brackets. Dotted lines represent non-marital partnerships, while solid lines indicate marriage. A single backslash [ \ ] through a line connecting two individuals indicates separation. A double forward slash [ / ] indicates divorce.*



**Vignette.** Breanne (29) and I corresponded by email until we met in her hometown during the summer of 2019 to complete a CFI with her family. Prior to our meeting, she had explained her two children's caregiving arrangements. Her son Joshua, who was not biologically related to the Harts, was 8 years old and living with Breanne's older brother. Due to distance and family commitments, he and his caregivers wouldn't be joining us for the interview. Her daughter Ella, a five year-old firecracker and Darrel Hart's (29) only biological child, was in the care of Darrel's sister, Melanie (31) and occasionally, Melanie's mother Martina (52).

Breanne, Melanie, Martina, Ella, and myself gathered at Melanie's house to conduct the CFI. It was a sweltering day and the sun shone through the large window into the living room where we sat. The house was humming with activity. Ella was excited for her upcoming birthday, practically bouncing off the walls. She played with the toys scattered on the floor in the centre of the living room while cartoons played on the television. Martina and Breanne sat comfortably beside one another on one side of the family's sectional, while Melanie and I sat on the other. Melanie gently held and rocked her infant throughout our meeting, all while trying to manage the family's tiny dog - who desperately wanted to sit next to or on top of me. In the midst of our CFI, Melanie's partner Doug came home. Shortly thereafter Martina had to unexpectedly depart. Despite the comings, goings, and flurry of activity in the Hart house, everyone seemed calm and easy going—like this pace of life was their normal.

In contrast, I was practically shaking with nerves. It was my first interview, and I worried about my ability to coordinate a comfortable, psychologically safe, and naturally flowing conversation while still gathering the data I sought out. On one hand, I was eager to facilitate a meaningful, significant conversation about some difficult and messy subject matter. On the other,

I had made a commitment to strategically avoid re-traumatizing participants. I knew this conversation would be a delicate, deliberate dance. Despite my reservations, we quickly built a comfortable rapport—within minutes the room was abound with laughter. I felt welcome in their space and it appeared that the family was eager to teach me about the harsh realities of the justice system, child protection system, and kinship caregiving. With three strong female voices and a kiddo full of personality, time seemed to fly by; our CFI ran an hour and ten minutes, and was abundant in enthusiastic cross-talk.

I came to learn that Breanne was enmeshed in the Hart family from a young age. Throughout middle school and into her high school years, she dated Darrel Hart on-and-off; the two remained friendly during those “off” times. Darrel’s older sister, Melanie, was friends with Breanne’s older brother. Their parents were friendly with one another also. In their early adulthood, Breanne and Darrel came into contact with the justice system due to their substance use. Breanne had been to jail several times on drug-related charges; her addiction to opioids never being successfully addressed through short-term incarceration at the provincial level. Likewise, Darrel struggled to stay out of jail. To his family, it seemed as though he spent more time inside than out; they described him as being institutionalized.

Breanne became pregnant with Ella while she and Darrel were simultaneously out of jail and living in their small, Southwestern Ontario town. However, both Breanne and Darrel were arrested and charged with drug-related offences shortly thereafter. Pregnant with Ella and awaiting trial, Breanne delivered her daughter while out on bail. Sentenced to provincial jail, Breanne made the decision to temporarily place six-month old Ella in the care of her sister-in-law Melanie. At the time, Melanie was single and had no children of her own. But she soon

became pregnant. When Breanne was released from provincial jail, her daughter remained in the care of Melanie—her access titrated by the expecting caregiver. Months later, Melanie gave birth to her biological daughter, Ella's cousin Dara (3). Melanie—a single mother and primary caregiver to both her biological daughter and niece—relied on her mom, Martina for support. As Grandma to both girls, Martina was increasingly present in the Hart family home. Melanie soon found additional support in her boyfriend, and then common-law partner, Doug (32).

During periods of stability, Ella's time would often be split between Melanie and Breanne. When this was impossible, visits ranged in duration, location, and supervision (at the discretion of local child protective services). Eventually, Breanne awarded Melanie custody of Ella outside of court; Breanne agreed to this arrangement to reduce the presence of child protective services in her daughter's life. Still, Breanne was involved her daughter's care and home life, the sisters-in-law having established a flexible pattern of caregiving and co-parenting.

While Breanne's physical presence in Ella's life was often in flux, Melanie and Martina tried to maintain her place as Mother in Ella's life. As the girls grew into toddlers this became increasingly difficult. Melanie's biological daughter Dara would refer to Melanie as Mommy. Whereas Ella often referred to the three women in her life as Mommy: her biological mom, Breanne; her aunt and primary caregiver, Melanie; as well as her grandmother and secondary caregiver, Martina.

At the time of Breanne's arrest resulting in federal incarceration, Melanie was caring for Ella. She had been expecting Breanne to be back at the house that evening—this was just an informal playdate—Ella was meant to go home with Breanne. The sisters-in-law had not planned for Ella to have an extended stay with Melanie. But Breanne didn't show. Hours later, Melanie

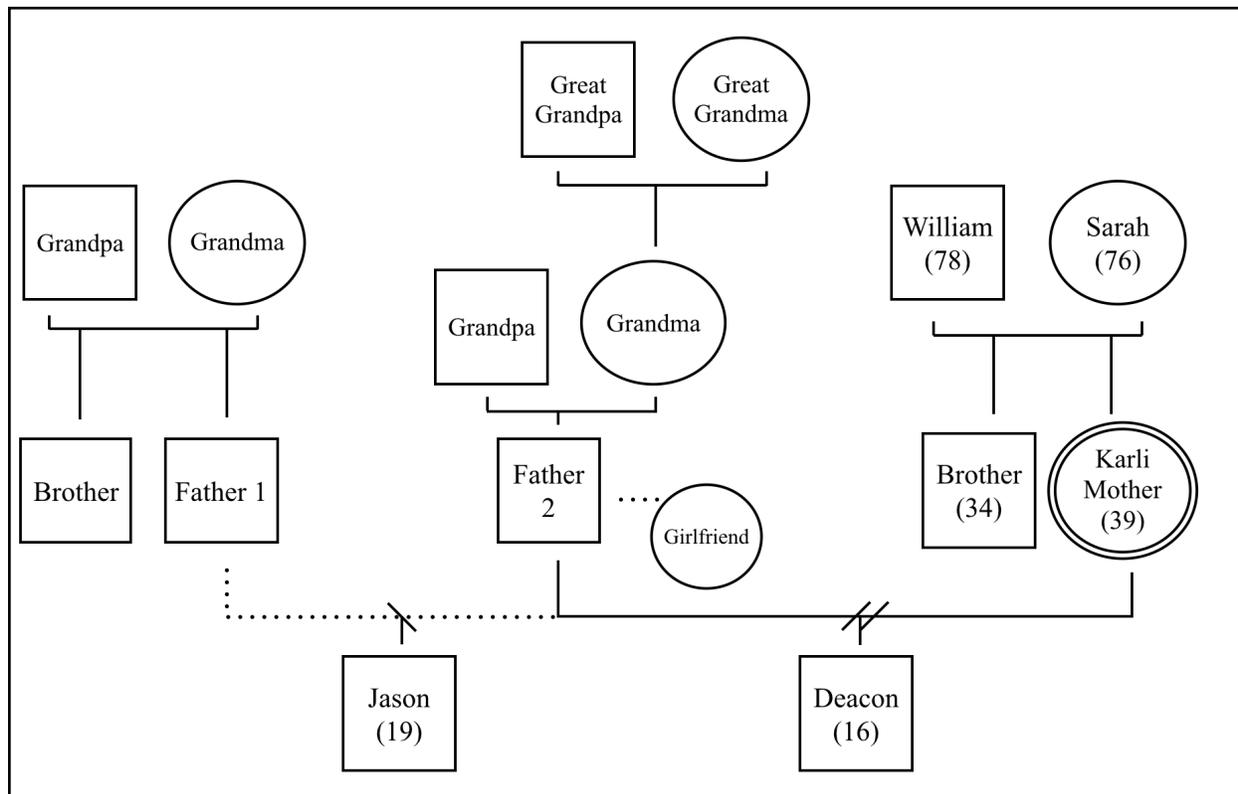
received a phone call from Breanne's family explaining that she had been arrested and would not be picking up her daughter that evening. In the past, Breanne had been incarcerated provincially, for short periods of time, and would soon be able to assume some measure of caregiving responsibilities in tandem with Melanie. However, this arrest resulted in federal time. As such, it was unlikely that the sisters-in-law would be able to maintain their previously negotiated co-parenting arrangement, which relied on a fairly short term carceral period. Ella remained in Melanie's custody (as per the kinship arrangement), and following her conviction Breanne was moved from the local jail to be incarcerated at GVI.

During Breanne's nearly two-year incarceration, she had limited contact with her daughter. Upon her release, Breanne's access to Ella was again titrated by Melanie, who was pregnant with her second biological child at the time. Following Breanne's release from GVI, Melanie gave birth to Maya (6 months), adding another little girl to the family. Over a series of months, the sisters-in-law were able to collaboratively etch out a new co-parenting pattern, but not without emotional strife and family conflict. At the time of this research, Breanne had fairly regular and relatively flexible access to her daughter Ella through Melanie.

### **The Wilson Family**

#### **Figure 2: Wilson Family Genogram.**

*Squares signify men. Circles signify women. Ages are in brackets. Dotted lines represent non-marital partnerships, while solid lines indicate marriage. A single backslash [\] through a line connecting two individuals indicates separation. A double forward slash [//] indicates divorce.*



**Vignette.** Karli Wilson (39) and I corresponded by email in the final weeks of summer 2019 after she reached out to me regarding this research project. She explained that she had two nearly-grown children: Jason Walker (19) and Deacon Wilson (16). As children, both Jason and Deacon were placed with their paternal families in multi-generational homes. Karli's parents, whom she lived with, William (78) and Sarah (76) Christian, were secondary caregivers to the boys, having occasional access to them. While Karli was eager to discuss her family's story of maternal incarceration, her children seemed more skeptical; I was prepared for neither of them to attend the family's CFI. However, when I arrived at the Christian's large suburban home in the GTA, both boys were standing on the stairwell waiting to greet me (the youngest with arms firmly crossed and making minimal eye contact). Karli ushered me in and introduced me to her parents, who—upon first impression—seemed formal, but gentle and soft-spoken. Karli's mom

Sarah had set aside space for us in the family's formal dining room, where a pitcher of lemon water and matching cups awaited our arrival. I sat at the head of the table, noticing there was no background noise and the house was silent. It was darkened and cooled by the drawn blinds.

While Karli and I connected with ease and enthusiasm, there was a palpable nervous energy amongst her parents and sons. At first, I sensed this was a product of skepticism, for the boys' perhaps even a protective or distancing stance. As the CFI unfolded, I slowly built rapport with the boys. First with Jason, the eldest. His personable, outgoing demeanour seemed to take after Karli; he led with sharp-edged humour, interjecting sly remarks and jokes as his mother told stories. Karli's youngest, Deacon, took longer to open up. However, once he decided to speak, I was taken aback by the maturity he displayed in his storytelling. While Jason took a more light-hearted and humorous stance, Deacon displayed a profound depth of feeling and utilized an almost philosophical tone. Over the course of our hour long CFI, Karli's parents said very little - her mom barely speaking at all. At the time, I sensed some discomfort and awkwardness. I wondered if it was a product of her parents' position of privilege or distance from criminalization and socioeconomic challenges. I thought maybe they were not comfortable talking about this experience, especially with a stranger. On the other hand, maybe their silence was a purposeful choice - I thought they could be taking the stance of listeners (and perhaps, learners, like me). I was also aware of the possibility that this silence was a product of hurt, resentment, and ongoing tension regarding the family's experiences.

Amidst the varying degrees of comfort and curiosity around the dining room table, Karli began the CFI with a brief, frank narrative outlining crucial background information. She explained that she was adopted as an infant by her parents, William and Sarah Christian, an

upper-middle class couple in their late-30s. The couple went on to adopt a second child, Karli's younger brother, whom she remembers as the "perfect child" a few years later. At the age of 12, Karli began using opiates. At the time, she—nor her adoptive parents—were aware that she'd been born with neonatal abstinence syndrome or that her birth family struggled with substance use issues. That year, she was charged with her first criminal offence. In response, the Christians transitioned their daughter back into foster care. She lived in a group home 85 km away from their home until aging out of the system, and eventually returning to the GTA on her own. Over the next decade, Karli experienced numerous socioeconomic challenges and significant traumas. Her addiction deepened and she engaged in crimes of survival to get by, relying on theft and prostitution to meet her needs.

Karli became pregnant with her eldest son at the age of 20; she transitioned onto methadone for the health of her baby. While Karli and Jason's dad ended their relationship, Jason was raised in his paternal grandparents' home: the Walkers. Jason remembered having a close, caring relationship with his uncle; who eventually moved out of the home to live with a partner. Jason's father resided in the family home on and off, coming and going over the years. Jason remembered his relationship with his dad as a violent one, reporting repeated physical and verbal abuse. While Jason remained in contact with the Christians, the Walkers refused to grant him the opportunity to spend time with his maternal family unsupervised. As such, time spent with his maternal grandparents—and thereby his half-brother—was limited, and always supervised by a paternal family member.

Three years after Jason's birth, Karli and her now ex-husband had Deacon. From the time of his infancy, Deacon also lived with his paternal extended family: the Wilsons. They lived in a

multi-generational household including his great grandmother, great grandfather, grandfather, grandmother, as well as his father and his father's partner. Deacon's great grandmother and grandmother were his primary caregivers, his father having a less active role in parenting within the household. As a child, Deacon reportedly experienced profound neglect by his paternal family members. He described to me how he struggled to meet developmental milestones and master basic skills. He and his mother described his clothes were often old and ill-fitting, his belly empty, and his room littered with cigarette butts. Like Jason, Deacon's access to his maternal family was limited by his paternal family. However, he was occasionally able to stay with and vacation alongside his maternal grandparents unsupervised.

Throughout the boys' childhoods, Karli recalled being criminally charged 30 times. She served short sentences at the provincial level, never receiving institutional support or programming for her addiction or mental health concerns. However, Karli was eventually arrested on a charge that could result in federal time. While her lawyer felt she could have these charges reduced or dropped, Karli chose to plead up: she asked the judge for a sentence of two years and two days. The judge granted Karli's request, and she was transferred to GVI for her two-year sentence. While incarcerated, Karli voluntarily participated in available parenting programs and achieved sobriety.

At the time of Karli's release, she was eager to gain custody of her children. However, Jason (a teenager at the time) elected not to return to his mother's care. He recalled the strong attachment he felt towards his friends, as well as the logistical challenges of moving cities and schools. Deacon, on the other hand, was eager to return to his maternal family's care. Deacon's father was willing to grant Karli custody of their son, but required a significant amount of

financial compensation in exchange. Mobilizing personal relationships and relying on family support, Karli was able to pay Deacon's father an agreed-upon sum. Within five days of her release from prison, Deacon was living alongside Karli and her parents in the Christian (maternal) family home.

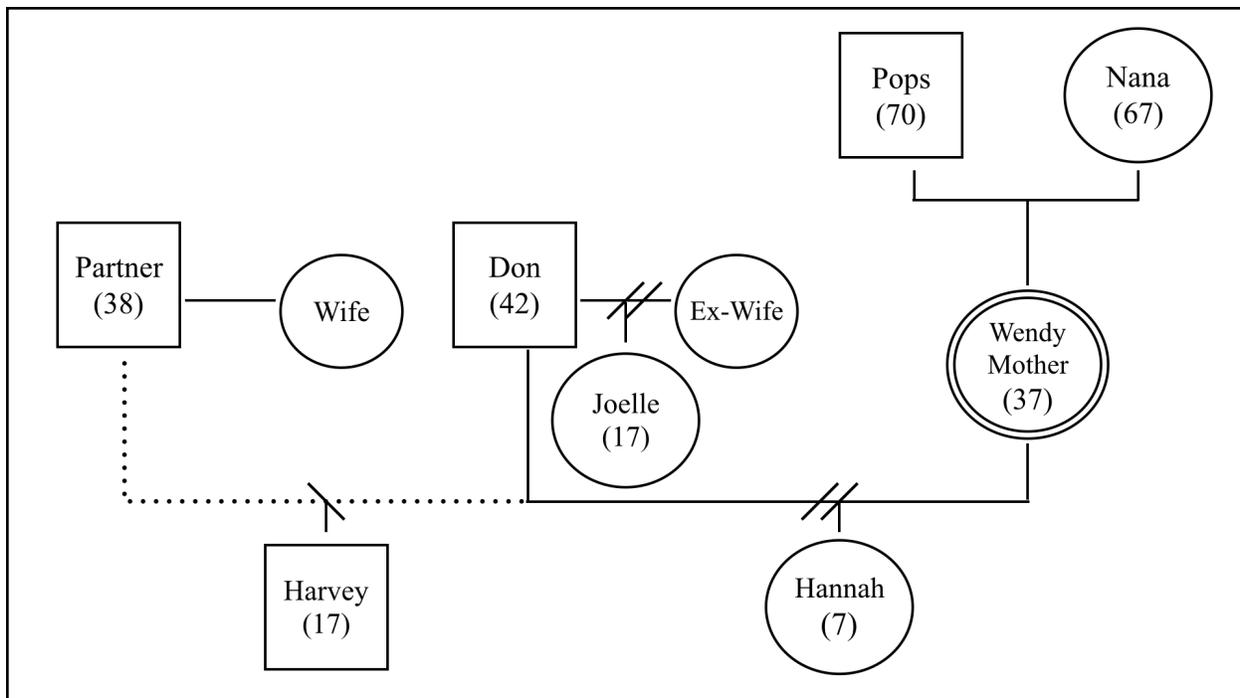
Then Karli's relapsed, using substances and temporarily losing her grip on hard fought-for sobriety. As a result, Deacon was relocated back to the Wilson (paternal) family home. Karli was able to regain sobriety and once again sought out a relationship with her children. She was concerned about Deacon's health and safety in his paternal family's care; this concern peaked one day when she picked up Deacon and her ex-husband was under the influence of a substance. That day, Karli removed her son from the Wilson's home—packing his things and taking him to her parents' home. The police became involved in the custodial dispute, but ultimately withdrew their presence and Deacon remained with the Christians from then on.

At the time of the family's interview, Deacon, Karli and her parents were living together in the Christian family home—where we met for the CFI. Jason, an adult now, lived in the city where he had grown up with the Walkers. He made the trip to his maternal family home to participate in this project.

### **The Fulton Family**

#### **Figure 3: Fulton Family Genogram.**

*Squares signify men. Circles signify women. Ages are in brackets. Dotted lines represent non-marital partnerships, while solid lines indicate marriage. A single backslash [ \ ] through a line connecting two individuals indicates separation. A double forward slash [ / / ] indicates divorce.*



**Vignette.** Wendy and I first met in the fall of 2019. After a few emails back-and-forth, we met for coffee to discuss this project, as well as the possibility of her children participating in a CFI. During this first meeting, Wendy and I mostly discussed my knowledge of the criminal justice system - in particular, what I knew about incarceration and GVI. It seemed as though Wendy was testing me, trying to grasp my position and perspective within this system, while getting to know me and my work. I shared many of my experiences as a Walls to Bridges student, particularly the structural and institutional absurdities/injustices I had noticed or learned about during my brief visits inside GVI. We connected with ease, sharing roaring laughter as well as rage and indignation. After getting to know one another, Wendy agreed to include her teenage son in a CFI; she considered broaching the topic of including her young daughter, along with her ex-partner, too.

A few weeks later, I met with Wendy and her son (her ex-partner and daughter did not attend). We gathered at her sparse, but cozy apartment, telling stories over cheese, salsa, and tortilla chips. I had expected Harvey to be skeptical, protective, and even closed-off to me (being a teenage boy). Instead, he seemed joyful, personable, and humorous—especially towards his mom. Their affection for one another was immediately evident. They often erupted in boisterous laughter, while sharing equally tender, openly emotional moments of vulnerability. They readily proclaimed their love and gratitude for one another, something I thought uncommon amongst teenage boys. It seemed they were both overflowing with stories to tell me, sharing an eagerness and infectious enthusiasm. Despite being three fast talkers, our CFI ran longer than expected—nearly an hour and forty minutes.

At the time of our interview, Wendy was 37 years old and had two biological children as well as a stepdaughter. Her son, Harvey (17), who had joined us, was living with his stepfather - Wendy's ex-partner, Don Fulton (42) at the family's home in the GTA. Don was not Harvey's biological father, but remained his legal guardian. Don's daughter, Joelle (17), resided in the family home part-time as per the custody arrangement between Don and Joelle's biological mother. Joelle (17) and Harvey (17) had been step-siblings since they were toddlers, growing up alongside one another. When the two children were ten, Don and Wendy had a daughter together, now seven-year-old Hannah.

Harvey explained that Don owned his own business and worked in the neighbourhood. As Wendy commuted to-and-from her job outside the city, working long hours at a large corporation, Don was often the chauffeur of the family. He would drive the children back and forth between school, extra-curricular activities, or their biological parents' homes. Wendy

remembered how she prepared dinner for the family nightly and was responsible for cleaning the Fulton home, describing herself as the “home-maker”. While Don and Wendy’s relationship had not been one of a romantic partnership since Hannah’s birth, the two remained in the same household and were committed to co-parenting their children. They were actively involved in their children’s lives, regularly attending or coaching extracurricular activities for Harvey, Joelle, and Hannah.

Juggling the children’s various activities, living arrangements, a home business, and a corporate career, Wendy’s arrest and subsequent incarceration was unexpected and brought the family’s routine to a screeching halt. Harvey was staying with his biological father at the time and continued to do so during the initial months of his mother’s incarceration, until eventually returning to live at the Fulton family home with Don. Despite describing Don as being “like Super Dad” during Harvey’s childhood, their relationship shifted when Wendy went to prison - it became explosive and wrought with conflict. Over the course of Wendy’s three-year sentence, child protective services and family court became involved with the family. A year into Wendy’s time at GVI, her parents—known as Nana (67) and Pops (70) to the children—moved into the Fulton home. Their ability to live independently was financially compromised, Wendy’s mother was becoming increasingly less physically capable, and her father proved a helpful addition to the newly single-parented household.

Upon her release, Wendy lived in proximity to her children but elected to find housing independent of Don and her parents. With the help of supportive organizations, she began establishing herself in a new community nearby. At the time of this interview, Don retained legal custody of Wendy’s children: Harvey and Hannah. Nana and Pops also remained in the Fulton

household. Harvey travelled by bus to visit with his mother on a regular basis, and the two talked via text message or telephone regularly.

### **Findings & Discussion**

When mothers are removed from their families and their ability to mother their children is strategically narrowed, kinship caregivers and children are forced to adapt and their familial life is transformed. Across the three families in this multi-case study, three themes—in the form of roles or duties—emerged to describe the transformations within the family system. Maternal incarceration necessitated that incarcerated women, their children, and their children's kinship caregivers take on the role of: (1) navigators, (2) gatekeepers, and (3) peacemakers. Rather than distinct categories or identities, family members at all stages of the lifespan transition in-and-out-of or perform the role of the navigator, gatekeeper, and/or peacemaker simultaneously.

The quotations presented in the following section were transcribed verbatim, however some have been shortened using ellipses (...) for clarity; most often, this was used when there was crosstalk that obscured the relevant content. Crosstalk is abundant in CFIs; this format takes that of a focus group, but adds the complication of the participants being related (and therefore, somewhat more likely to interject rather than wait their turn). Additionally, CFIs are aimed to capture the co-construction of a phenomena. The collaborative nature of this process results in a non-linear transcript that jumps from speaker to speaker. Therefore, the ellipses are meant to improve the readability of the excerpts.

While Word programs offer transcribers the option of numbering interviews line-by-line, Apple software does not. Therefore, quotations are referred to first by their family name, followed by CFI (I.e., Name CFI) and then the paragraph number (xx-xx), for instance: (Hart

CFI, 1160-1162). Each paragraph constitutes the un-interrupted speech of a participant. If another participant were to interrupt the person speaking, that interjection would prompt a new paragraph. For an example of this formatting, see the long excerpts (over 40 words) included in this paper.

Finally, in order to assist the reader in understanding the role of participating family members, I have used the signifiers of “PC” to indicate a primary caregiver and “SC” to indicate a secondary caregiver; these are in brackets following the individual’s name. I have also included the age of each child in brackets upon their first mentioning, but not throughout the text. There are several characters in each family’s story— and, in turn, their collective one as families who have been affected by maternal incarceration and kinship caregiving—still, I have elected to use a narrative style in presenting this study’s findings. While I could have utilized numbers, letters, or a combination thereof to identify each participant, I felt it was more important that their humanity be communicated— rather than reduced or erased—in the transcript excerpts. As such, the family genograms found on pages 38, 43, and 48 may prove helpful as you navigate these results.

### **Theme 1: Navigators**

HARVEY: I still want to be this family and that’s what we lost. As a family, when mom left, our family left. We no longer-

INTERVIEWER: The definition of family changed?

HARVEY: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

HARVEY: Cause we used to be - we used to be the family, right?

(Fulton CFI, 1453-1457)

**Children.** The imprisonment of a mother figure—regardless of the consistency or nature of her presence in the everyday lives of her children—forces children to make meaning of this phenomenon and the subsequent changes within the family system. It causes a shift, physically and/or symbolically, within the family ecosystem.

*Navigating Identity: Who is Mom?* For the Hart Family, the title “Mother” became flexible—applying to multiple women within the family network. Breanne’s children, Ella (5) and Joshua (8), had experienced the inconsistent presence of their biological mother in their lives from a very young age. In Ella’s case, Melanie (PC) had acted as her primary caregiver since the infant was six-and-a-half months old. Melanie (PC) recalled: “I always referred to myself as auntie, but once she started talking and going to daycare and everything— she sees “mommy mommy mommy”... And like, so that’s when the whole mommy thing...came into play” (Hart CFI, 88-91). Ella’s paternal grandmother Martina (SC) added that Dara, Melanie’s biological child, was calling Melanie “mommy”(Hart CFI, 97) and Melanie (PC) remembers Ella referring to Dara as her sister (Hart CFI, 98). Breanne added a similar anecdote regarding Joshua, who was living with his maternal uncle’s family of five: “for the longest time, they would correct him and be like ‘I’m your aunt, I’m your uncle’...but they found that because the other three kids were calling them mom and dad he felt excluded. (Hart CFI, 101-103). In time, Breanne’s brother and sister-in-law relented to being called mom and dad by their nephew.

While Ella and her brother began referring to their kinship caregivers as their parents, neither seemed to wholly substitute these figures for their biological parents according to a nuclear family model. Rather than replacing mom, it seems they gained additional mother figures

in their lives. From the time she was a toddler, Ella referred to Melanie (PC) and Martina (SC) as mom; still, her behaviour communicated the significance of Breanne, her biological mother, to her caregivers:

MELANIE (PC): And even that picture you sent, uh ELLA, of you - I think you're holding a rose or something, in a garden or something?

BREANNE: Okay, yeah, yeah.

MELANIE (PC): ELLA literally rolled that up and took it everywhere - in the pool with her - everywhere with her... and it was just mangled by the end of summer...like, "This is BREANNE!" Like, "Do you know?"...She just rolled it up and kept it with her.

INTERVIEWER: Which is interesting, because even though at the time she didn't—

MELANIE (PC): She didn't—

INTERVIEWER: necessarily call you "mom," she knew it was important.

(Hart CFI, 470-479)

Aside from that photo, Ella had no direct communication or visits with Breanne for nearly two years. Still, Breanne recalled the first time she was able to see or speak to Ella following her incarceration, remembering: "She goes, 'I know who that is! That's my mom.'" (Hart CFI, 484). Despite the Hart family caregivers' attempts to remain aunt, uncle, and grandma to Breanne's young children, Ella and Joshua forged unique definitions of parenthood. In their biological mother's absence, they adapted their understanding of family to account for other caregivers in their lives. While only toddlers, they became navigators—charting new territory as the landscape of their family transformed.

For Ella and Joshua, the question “Who is mom?” is matter-of-fact: Who—amongst their multiple caregivers—is mom? In the case of the Fulton family, Wendy’s children were much older than Breanne’s. Still, her son, Harvey (17), was forced to negotiate his own understanding of his mother—as his parent, and as a person—once she was convicted of a crime and incarcerated. A few months following her conditional release from prison, Wendy sent a message to Harvey: “Tell me what you really think of me” (Fulton CFI, 598). During our collaborative family interview, Harvey recalled his response saying:

I know a lot of people would be like ‘Well you went to prison, you changed’ you know? ‘I think you’re a bad person’ or ‘I love you, you’re not a bad person you just made a mistake’ that kind of thing. But my perception of my mother hasn’t changed. Because I knew her before, I knew her during, and I knew her after. She is still the same person... I don’t perceive her as a bad person or a criminal, or anything like that. She made a mistake. (Fulton CFI, 598-601)

As a teenager, Harvey was subject to various influences about crime, prison, and criminalized people. During our interview, he reflected on messaging from television, movies, and from public discourse. He was also subject to private discourse regarding incarceration, as many individuals in his life encouraged him to share or omit the news of his mother’s incarceration with peers and teachers. Over the course of our conversation, he readily connected these private and public influences to the issue of stigmatization and stereotypes regarding incarceration. In fact, an anti-crime advocacy group visited his school during his mom’s period of incarceration; unknowingly, they used her story in their school-wide presentation. Harvey

recalled that day, saying “I recognized it the moment it went on the screen. It didn’t even have her name up. I broke down, I had to leave” (Fulton CFI, 798). Years later, recalling this experience seemed to provoke a physical and emotional change in Harvey; his face drained of colour. A few shades paler, he put his hands to his face: “That one hit me. It hit me when I saw it...I think that was the first time I had really broken down” (Fulton CFI, 802-804). As a teenager, Harvey was forced to become a navigator: negotiating this barrage of messaging regarding incarceration in the context of his relationship with his mom. At times, he was forced to manage this navigating process publicly, in front of peers and teachers. Ultimately, Harvey was able to carve out his own understanding of “Who is mom?”—not as a “bad person or a criminal” (Fulton CFI, 601) but his human, fallible mother— the person he had always known. Someone who, in his eyes, had not changed as consequence of her criminalization and incarceration.

In the case of the Wilson family, Karli’s eldest son Jason (19) was forced to navigate similar identity related issues, specifically regarding substance use. Throughout the Wilsons’ CFI, intergenerational addiction issues and their impact on the family were frankly discussed; like his mom, Jason struggled with substance use issues. In the opening moments of our collaborative family interview, Karli and Jason spoke synchronously. When discussing addiction, Karli remarked: “It’s not just a ‘Hey, why don’t you stop doing that?’” (Wilson CFI, 39). Then, both she and Jason replied, “It’s a disease” simultaneously (Wilson CFI, 39-40). In this statement Jason outwardly demonstrated his understanding of addiction as a disease, however later conversation revealed the complexity underlying this issue. When discussing Jason and Deacon’s (16) separate custody arrangements, Karli mentioned the option of Jason’s paternal grandparents

taking custody of Deacon (who was not biologically related to them) as well, thereby keeping the boys together. Under his breath, Jason remarked: “Then DEACON would turn out just like me” (Wilson CFI, 528). Karli’s soft reply, “there’s nothing wrong with you, baby” (Wilson CFI, 529), hinted at Jason’s struggle to navigate his identity in the context of intergenerational substance use and criminalization. While Jason had not been incarcerated, it seemed as though the criminalization of his mother’s substance use had come to inform his own sense of identity, worthiness, and self-esteem. Through this interaction and Jason’s portrayal of self, the contagious quality of criminalization became evident within their family eco-system.

*Navigating Grief & Love: What is This Feeling?*

DEACON: ‘Now I live with my mom. What are these new things? Uh, how is this?

What is this feeling?’ And then-

KARLI: What was this feeling?

DEACON: I don’t know, it’s just like, I hadn’t understood what like care felt like and like being nurtured and not being alone.

(Wilson CFI, 383-385)

Each family discussed their children’s navigation of the countless emotional experiences they faced as a result of their mothers’ incarceration. Ella, only five, did not directly communicate her experiences. Rather, Melanie (PC) and Martina (SC) described her seemingly unpredictable emotional outbursts. Melanie (PC) explained, “Cause she gets, like angry...She gets all red in the face” (Hart CFI, 497-499). Martina (SC) added “She’ll turn red. She’ll clench her teeth. She’ll go like this with her fists. And she’s mad... You know because she gets very, all

of a sudden, upset, like really upset and where she can't control her temper" (Hart CFI, 500-502). Melanie (SC) noted that "It can be anything too!" (Hart CFI, 503). Ella's family relied on this external expression of anger to communicate her internal experience. While she could not verbalize how she navigated these feelings—whether grief, love, both, or neither—her caregivers felt these emotional outbursts were an indicator of how maternal incarceration impacted Ella. Ella's externalizing behaviour occurred in my presence, during charged moments within our CFI.

For example, Ella regularly expressed her emotional state through grunts, cries, laughter, or interjections. While not commenting directly on the subject matter, the escalation in her emotional state and ensuing outbursts, were—in her own way—commentary, too. For instance, Breanne was telling me about the supportive services and extracurricular activities her children were enrolled in with their caregivers; she acknowledged how incredibly busy her children's caregivers were coordinating these obligations using an almost apologetic tone. From just outside the room, Ella yelled (Hart CFI, 568). We ignored this outburst and continued our conversation. Seconds later, Ella produced another vocalization (Hart CFI, 572). This time, Melanie (PC) responded, "Yeah, what's wrong babe? Hello? Are you just making sounds?" (Hart CFI, 579). Although Ella responded promptly—"Yes" (Hart CFI, 580)—she then interjected again, this time saying "Stop talking!" (Hart CFI, 584). At this time, I engaged Ella directly. When I asked her how she was feeling, she quite clearly stated "Mad!" (Hart CFI, 608). Wondering if Ella felt left out of our conversation, I encouraged her to draw with me and tell me about her favourite colours; in seconds her anger turned to laughter.

While only one example, there are several instances in the Hart family CFI where Ella's emotional vocalizations—not words, often sounds—occur as the family discusses particularly complex relationships or experiences. Like in this excerpt, for example, where Ella's crosstalk is significant in its timing and tone:

BREANNE: Yeah! And because I couldn't really see or talk to my kids, I kind of tried to forget about them.

[21:41-21:42 ELLA cries out "Uh Oh"]

BREANNE: Cause it was easier to get my time done, pretending that they weren't—didn't exist, than to think about them every single day.

(Hart CFI, 374-375)

Transcribed as "ELLA cries out," instances such as this occur 30 times within the family's hour-long CFI. It is not my intention to psychoanalyze the content of Ella's cries or make meaning of outbursts according to my own clinical lens. Rather, I believe it is important to note how the family understands and makes meaning of these cries. Both Melanie (PC) and Martina (SC) described Ella as smart (Hart CFI, 481; Hart CFI, 490), and used these emotional outbursts as proof of this intelligence. For Ella's moms, the child's behaviour during the CFI indicated her own understanding—at some level, perhaps emotionally or relatively—and participation in the family's narrative. For the Harts, these grunts and cries were evidence of her emotional participation in this process; they were signs of navigating behaviour—just as important as insightful reflection or expression—only appropriate to Ella's age and developmental ability.

Over a decade older than Ella, Karli's son Deacon also struggled to verbalize his emotional experience in relation to his mom's substance use and incarceration. Karli encouraged him, "It's OK if you're angry, cause you know you can always say that stuff" (Wilson CFI, 80). Deacon took a few moments to reply, explaining "I am trying to think of a word for it..." (Wilson CFI, 81). His mom prompted, "Upset? Turmoil?" (Wilson CFI, 84) and he quickly responded "No, worse than upset. Upset is an understatement" (Wilson CFI, 85). While not screaming or crying, his struggle to adequately capture or contain his emotional experience linguistically is evidence of navigating behaviour. In real time, Deacon is demonstrating the overwhelmingly complex emotional terrain of maternal incarceration from the perspective of a child.

Also a teenager, Harvey touched on the intensity of his emotional experiences during his mom's incarceration. He explained that "I have this like, defence mechanism. That I've always had since I was kid...to just push everything off to the side" (Fulton CFI, 107). Compartmentalizing his emotions regarding his mom's incarceration, Harvey noticed that "it never really bothered me, until I—like—it really got to me...when I get angry, or I get really happy, or really sad—like it has to be a bottled up emotion of just everything" (Fulton CFI, 107). He noticed this pattern of defence or bottling behaviour, sharing with me the moment in which his biological father told him of his mother's arrest. Harvey remembered, "I kind of just sat there, completely emotionless. And my dad was like 'It's OK to cry' and I'm like 'I'm OK. Can I go play minecraft?'" (Fulton CFI, 159). Critical of his reaction in hindsight, he wondered

How did I not react to that?... My mom was my person. She still is... If I needed anything, I went to my mom. I just got told my mom's going to prison and I'm just there like 'Man, I could really go for some Minecraft right now' like I'm—'you know, I've got an urge in my stomach to really just go down and play minecraft.' It was really weird! I still remember that.

(Fulton CFI,161)

Even years after this incident, Harvey was struggling to understand this reaction; he was genuinely confused. For both Deacon and Harvey, their mothers' incarceration was the source of emotional pain that could not be defined by "upset" or captured by their everyday vocabulary. Across all three families, these emotional experiences were palpable. Still, families struggled to talk about them—as though there are not words to adequately describe the depth of this grief or its presentation in their behaviour.

While Harvey struggled to understand and communicate his experiences, he openly discussed the challenges he faced in navigating them within the context of the Fulton family system. In particular, he spoke of how every member of his family was simultaneously bearing the emotional experience of Wendy's incarceration: "It affected our entire family life" (Fulton CFI, 107). Harvey explained that family members "can't really give you their full support because they're also grieving" using the example: "if I go to JOELLE...I couldn't get the support I needed because she would feel the same way. We'd have the same problems—not knowing what to do" (Fulton CFI, 235-243). He learned to navigate this terrain by being the "calm-headed, level one" (Fulton CFI, 261) in the presence of his siblings:

HANNAH cried. JOELLE cried. But I like, when I cried, I cried to myself. You know? I would be in my own room, midnight, something like that. Everyone's asleep, it would be—you know—silent. It would just be tears going down my face, you know?

(Fulton CFI, 261)

Evidently, Harvey, Deacon, and Ella all struggled to navigate their emotional experience of their mom's incarceration. This navigation occurred at an internal level, as well as an interpersonal one.

*Navigating the Parenting Vacuum.* In the case of the Wilsons and Fultons, the topic of substitute parenting in the context of their mothers' incarceration was emotionally charged. During the Wilson's collaborative family interview, I attempted to draw a theme out of several stories that were shared, reflecting back to the boys: "It sounds like both of you had tough, like, like, parenting relationships—substitute caregivers in your lives" (Wilson CFI, 284). Halfway through this sentence, I changed my vocabulary from "parenting relationships" to "substitute caregivers" based on Deacon and Jason's visible reaction to the the implication that their kinship caregivers acted as parents. Their body language cued me. This word didn't seem to fit. Following up, I clarified, "Do you feel like you were parented? Is that an appropriate word to use?" (Wilson CFI, 287). They responded:

DEACON: No.

JASON: I mean, I think I parented myself to be completely honest.

INTERVIEWER: Right, so neither of you would say that you were parented?

DEACON: No, I mean, you can say you parented yourself. I just don't think I had

anything.

(Wilson CFI, 287-291)

When speaking with Harvey—whose interview followed the Wilsons—I adjusted my language. This time, I asked Harvey about his “primary caregiver” (Fulton CFI, 51). To my surprise, I received similar opposition to this concept.

HARVEY: Can I opt in for myself? [laughter]

INTERVIEWER: Yes. You absolutely can. You’re your own caregiver?

HARVEY: I pretty much take care of myself.

(Fulton CFI, 56-58)

However, it was not just the teenage boys who raised this concept of self-parenting Wendy, Harvey’s mom, re-iterated this several times throughout the collaborative family interview. She validated Harvey’s experience of a parenting vacuum in her absence. She said, “he wasn’t getting the type of support that...” and Harvey finished the sentence: “That I needed” (Fulton CFI, 296-297). He clarified, “I had almost no support” and Wendy asserted “that you should have been getting” (Fulton CFI, 297-298). Later in the interview, Harvey proclaimed: “I’ve been an adult since I was like 14. I’ve been a kid, but I’ve had to deal with myself like an adult” (Fulton CFI, 1162). Wendy, reflecting on this, leaned toward me and commented that “He doesn’t trust people to take care of him” (Fulton CFI, 1163). Harvey punctuated the conversation with a cool, bitter sounding laugh, remarking “No. Not a goddamn chance” (Fulton CFI, 1164).

While Harvey felt he parented himself in his mother's absence, Wendy added to this—suggesting that Harvey also parented his youngest sister, Hannah (7).

WENDY: It shouldn't have been the 14 and 15 year old kid to take responsibility and job to raise his sister which he was tasked with.

HARVEY: I am still tasked with.

(Fulton CFI, 1206-1207)

Moreover, Wendy considered Hannah's development and personality, sharing that "Sometimes I wonder if her independence comes from necessity... because [dad's] not around" (Fulton CFI, 1201-1204). As a single-parent and business owner, Harvey explained that Don was often home late from work and the children were expected to feed themselves. Harvey shared several anecdotes about Hannah's self-sufficiency and stubborn independence, including the now seven year-old's inventive microwave hot dog sandwich technique. I prompted him to reflect on how his modelling independent behaviour within his sibling relationship may have impacted his sister's development. He noted that Hannah had, in fact, identified him as one of her caregivers in the past. Taking on Hannah's perspective, he explained "[older siblings] try and help but the younger kids eventually realize, they're like 'Oh, why isn't dad here helping me? Why is it HARVEY? Why is it JOELLE? Why is it older brother or sister helping me?'" (Fulton CFI, 1306). He continued, "'I know they have their thing to do, so I'm gonna try to do what they're doing - but I'm gonna try to do it for myself' or I think that's what HANNAH finally figured out" (Fulton CFI, 1308).

Hooper (2007) defines parentification as “a disturbance in generational boundaries” featuring “a functional and/or emotional role reversal” in which a child takes on a caring role (p. 323). While often discussed as a vertical role reversal—in which the child becomes the parent’s emotional or physical caretaker—parentification also applies to sibling relationships, having a more horizontal quality (Hooper, 2007). Hooper considers the impact of a heightened generational disturbance, or “destructive parentification,” in which this role reversal results in “an imbalance among family members’ roles and behaviors, a lack of boundaries between family subsystems, and an excessive level of caretaking (emotional and/or instrumental)” as the child attempts to “maintain the family system” (Jurkovic, 1997 in Hooper, 2007, p. 324). I referenced my recruitment materials, reading “Families have to change and adapt when mom goes to prison. Often, other family members take on caregiving roles” (Appendix i, p. 118). I reflected, “when I first wrote that, I think I imagined it was going to be, like, other adults” (Fulton CFI, 1291). Harvey immediately jumped in: “Mmm, no” (Fulton CFI, 1292). I tried to clarify, prompting: “But it seems like that’s... that’s not what I’m getting” (Fulton CFI, 1293-1295). Harvey was clear in his conceptualizing this phenomenon:

HARVEY: It’s not. It’s us.

MOM: Mhmm.

HARVEY: We pick up the slack.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

HARVEY: A hundred percent. It’s always the older ones, and then even if it’s not the

older ones picking up the slack, the younger ones are adapting massively.

(Fulton CFI, 1296-1300)

Whether acting as caregivers to themselves or siblings, both the Wilson and Fulton children described the impact of their mothers' absence and the subsequent parenting vacuum they experienced. In their study on children and families of incarcerated women, Celinska & Siegel (2010) also encountered generational boundary disturbances. In their work, they defined this as "role reversal" or "the extreme form of role redefinition" (Celinska & Siegel, 2010, p. 462). For Deacon and Jason, as well as Harvey and Hannah, maternal incarceration forced children to become navigators as they re-negotiated their roles amongst substitute caregivers and siblings.

### **Previously-Incarcerated Moms.**

*Navigating Motherhood Behind Bars.* Celinska and Siegel's research revealed that "incarcerated women feel 'enormous grief' about time lost with their children" and that "women prisoners' primary concern [is] centred on the effects of separation and incarceration on their children's lives and psychological development" (Celinska & Siegel, 2010, p. 449). Similar themes echoed throughout my interviews with previously-incarcerated women. For example, Wendy emphasized the length of time her incarceration had kept her from providing physical affection to her youngest child. She recalled, "so I went in July, and I didn't get a hug from my kids or to see them in a touch-visit until April" (Fulton CFI, 832). By the time Wendy was able to access her daughter through open visitation at GVI, she was nearly four years old; Wendy said "she was three days past three when I was arrested" (Fulton CFI, 835). Much of the data I

collected regarding mothering in GVI was focused on impediments to mother-child connection that were imposed by the system. Celinska & Siegal's work also uncovered this theme. Their data demonstrated that "incarcerated mothers had to find ways to cope with their diminished capacity to provide active mothering" (Celinska & Siegel, 2010, p. 461)

INTERVIEWER: Right, it's like you - when you're in prison, your ability to intervene becomes...

HARVEY: Almost nothing.

WENDY: Almost nothing!

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. So you're parenting from a distance in a way that's hands-off.

WENDY: Yeah!

(Fulton CFI, 302-307)

Both Breanne and Wendy struggled to navigate mothering while incarcerated, given their limited ability to meaningfully connect with and actively parent their children. Breanne expressed frustration regarding the institutional and economic barriers she encountered in maintaining a relationship with her children while incarcerated. Faced with these roadblocks, I asked her if she thought about "being a mother when you're at GVI, did that— just that part of your life—be on pause?" (Hart CFI, 373). She agreed and explained:

BREANNE: Yeah! And because I couldn't really see or talk to my kids, I kind of tried to forget about them.

[21:41-21:42 ELLA cries out "Uh Oh"]

BREANNE: Cause it was easier to get my time done, pretending that they weren't -

didn't exist, than to think about them every single day.

INTERVIEWER: Makes it tolerable, right?

BREANNE: Yeah.

MARTINA (SC): Yeah. It's hard.

BREANNE: It's the only way I would have been able to get through that.

(Hart CFI, 373-379)

Wendy re-iterated this sentiment, remembering that “sometimes talking to each other was harder than not... We would talk here and there, but I knew that things weren't happening for him and my frustration would come out, sometimes, when he was on the phone with me” (Fulton CFI, 319). She recalled wishing she could communicate to him that “I am meeting opposition and I'm not getting the support that I need, which isn't getting the support that you need” (Fulton CFI, 321). Ultimately, she explained: “I felt that the only position I had was to ask him to be more adult than he was and ask him to fend for himself” (Fulton CFI, 336). But she understood that at his age, Harvey was “going back to Minecraft to drown everything out” (Fulton CFI, 338). With growing frustration seeming to come between them, Wendy and her son “ended up in a situation where we weren't really talking a whole lot” (Fulton CFI, 338). Like Breanne had said, Wendy and Harvey's new-found silence and distance in their relationship was, in some ways, more tolerable than these painful, difficult conversations. In this way, the carceral experience extends beyond the incarcerated individual to govern the mother-child relationship. These changes fundamentally transform how and to what extent women mother their children from behind bars.

Additionally, Wendy struggled with the impact of the carceral environment's lack of privacy on her mothering relationships. For example, she remembered how phone calls and family visits were never one-on-one and completely private. In the case of visiting time at GVI, adult family members and multiple children were present. She would try to have meaningful conversation with her son, while also engaging her young daughter in games. She remembered, "trying to divide my time between a ten-and-a-half year age gap was really really challenging" (Fulton CFI, 338). Still, Wendy explained that this less-than-ideal balancing act was the best she could manage:

I couldn't make the choice between only having one kid come to this visit, because I didn't know if there was gonna be an opportunity to see my other kid the next week, or if I was gonna have to wait another three months. And then I go six months without seeing one! (Fulton CFI, 344)

Wendy's tough decisions and creative adaptations amount to a form of resistance, one that is necessitated by the carceral environment. As the institution directly and indirectly mediates family relationships, parenting practices are fundamentally transformed. In addition to the women's tangible experiences of parenting from a "hands-off" (Fulton CFI, 306) position, these institutionally designed changes to the family system impacted women's internal experiences, particularly in relation to their identities as moms and criminalized people.

*Navigating Identity in the Context of Incarceration: "Bad Moms"*. When discussing how her children assigned the titles of mom and dad to multiple family members, Breanne responded calmly: "And I'm OK with that because, they're being their mom and dad. Where am

I? Not there” (Hart CFI, 108). In each of the three cases presented, previously-incarcerated moms grappled with concepts of guilt and shame, selfishness, as well as morality; their carceral experiences seemed to bear great weight on their mothering identities.

In Karli’s case, she believes that postpartum depression contributed to her substance use and consequently, her struggle to care for eldest son, Jason. She explained that “everybody thought I was just acting out, and now [postpartum depression’s] such a common thing, but back then it was me being ‘me’—acting out and not listening and being a bad mom” (Wilson CFI, 229). Even still, Karli acknowledged her role in the family’s experiences; her suspected mental health challenges did not absolve her of accountability. She explained to me, “I feel bad. And all of this is my fault. It is. My actions. You know?” (Wilson CFI, 714). While displaying transparent accountability on multiple occasions during our conversation, Karli simultaneously grappled with issues of criminalization and stigmatization. In particular, she problematized the criminalization of her substance use, as well as the enmeshing of this behaviour with her identity as a mom. She took issue with the social condemnation of her behaviour, given the neglect, cruelty, and abuse Deacon and Jason were exposed to through their kinship caregiving relationships.

KARLI: I might be a bad mom for my actions but I don’t tell my kids they’re worthless and “you’re a piece of shit” and “you’re not gonna be anything” ...It’s the exact opposite and I have undo—to this day—I have to undo things because words hurt.  
(Wilson CFI, 281-283)

KARLI: And I'm—because I'm, I'm a drug addict—I'm a bad parent? ... Even clean... even when the police came when he was twelve and a half. They used it against me, “Oh so you do drugs?” I said “No, I've been clean since 2009 but yes I was a drug addict, absolutely, and now I'm not.”

(Wilson CFI, 342-346)

KARLI: I mean, you can only say sorry so many times. My parents... know that I'm clean. And know that I love them. And my kids know that. So anything else, and all of this stuff and the Grandmothers still fighting with me—whoever—I don't give a shit. I know I'm a good mom. And I have teenagers! [Laughs] And I've made it through!

(Wilson CFI, 618)

KARLI: If I would have people, like, people helping me be a mom, not being, like hating me cause I'm an addict...I made mistakes — absolutely. But instead of punishing me, I needed guidance

(Wilson CFI, 223-229)

In these excerpts, Karli demonstrates her navigation of two identities: that of a criminalized person, and that of a mother. In particular, she problematizes the way that these two identities are placed in opposition to one another. She suggests these are not binaries - that women can be both; that she can be a former “drug addict” (Wilson CFI, 346) and a “good mom” (Wilson CFI, 618).

While Karli did not explicitly use the language of shame or stigma, Wendy addressed these issues and their impact on identity directly. She explained that shame will inevitably:

Hold back everything else because then you are embarrassed and you are scared and you are, um, providing judgment but also everything that you're hearing is perceived as a judgment and it will shut you down and it will create this bubble of depression that will eat you alive. (Wilson CFI, 1495)

For Wendy, the key to navigating this shame was grounding her identity in her sense of self prior to incarceration. She explained that “It’s remembering who you’ve been leading up until that point. Accepting that you’ve had circumstances that led you to this point. Everybody has troubles, everybody has mistakes” (Fulton CFI, 1495). For Wendy, saying that “I did good before this. I have meaning. I have purpose. I’ve been important. I’ve been a good caregiver. I’ve been a lot of really positive things” was of great importance (Fulton CFI, 1495). It seemed Wendy was able to navigate her identity as a mom by separating her actions or behaviour—whether mistakes, troubles, or accidents—from her mothering relationships. Karli seemed to do the same, at once saying “I might be a bad mom for my actions” (Wilson CFI, 281) while also re-iterating that “I know as a mother, no matter what, that these boys know I love them and that I would do anything for them” (Wilson CFI, 572). Again, this is evidence of women’s abilities to maintain a positive mothering identity while criminalized.

Again, Celinska & Siegal’s (2010) work parallels the perspectives and experiences of the previously-incarcerated participants in this study. Their research claims that “establishing and maintaining a maternal identity” are “dominant challenges with which women in prison must cope” (Celinska & Siegel, 2010, p.464). For Karli, Breanne, and Wendy, the topic of identity—as a criminalized woman and as a mother—was particular salient.

*Navigating kinship caregiving dynamics.*

BREANNE: It's not fair to them for me to just get out and take them back. Like I've been gone for so long, like that's not fair. You know?

(Hart CFI, 988)

KARLI: And just everything was new and I was sober and I was getting to start over, and then you know - it it sucked, because I'm missing one of my kids... So you know, you have the guilt and the "Am I allowed to be happy?"

(Wilson CFI, 269-271)

Across cases, moms discussed the complexities of family members acting as primary caregivers to their children. Breanne and I engaged in an in-depth discussion of the logistical and emotional process of placing Ella and Joshua with family members. Breanne explained that she had the choice to place Ella with her maternal family—Breanne's brother and sister-in-law, who were caring for her son Joshua, as well as three of their own children—or with her paternal aunt, Melanie (PC). As Ella and her brother have different fathers, this would mean separating Ella from her paternal family: "I knew that if I let ELLA go with my family, that [Melanie and Martina] would never get to see her" (Hart CFI, 275). Moreover, Ella had formed significant relationships with Melanie (PC) and Martina (SC), who often babysat her from the time she was an infant. Evidently, Ella's paternal family felt similarly bonded to the child; at the mention of Ella being placed outside the family's reach, Martina remarked "Oh god, I would have died" (Hart CFI, 276). Additionally, Ella's paternal family is Indigenous, but Breanne's side of the family is not. She communicated with me the importance of Ella's Indigeneity in her kinship caregiving decisions, remembering that she "wanted ELLA to grow up knowing her background"

and “with her culture” (Hart CFI, 277). Although Breanne had “decided to have them separate” she “wasn’t expecting it to be years” of cyclical incarceration (Hart CFI, 277). She explained, “I thought that I was gonna you know—smarten up and get them both back... It—it sucks that they’re not growing up together in the same house” (Hart CFI, 279-281). As a mother, making kinship caregiving decisions was a formidable challenge; Breanne had to consider several physical and emotional factors within the family eco-system when making these placements.

These decisions did not stop when Breanne transitioned out of prison and into the community. At this juncture, she and her family had to consider the future of their kinship caregiving arrangements. Amidst Ella’s game of Peek-A-Boo, I asked Breanne if she foresaw any changes in Ella’s placement with Melanie (PC):

BREANNE: I feel like um-

ELLA: A-BOO!

BREANNE: It would almost be like selfish of me-

ELLA: A-BOO!

BREANNE: to take CHILD A back because it’s-

ELLA: BOO-BOO-BOO-BOO-BOO-BOO-BOO!

BREANNE: What she’s known for so long. And it’s not about me, it’s not about-

MELANIE. It’s about what ELLA wants.

(Hart CFI, 933-939)

Breanne and Melanie (PC) agreed that Ella would remain in the custody of her Aunt and be raised alongside her “sisters” as this was in the child’s best interests. However, Breanne’s son, Joshua—who had been placed with her brother and sister-in-law—would likely return to her custody. Breanne explained that Joshua, who was older than Ella, had a more difficult time with her incarceration. He had developed separation anxiety, exhibited challenging behavioural issues, and struggled in school. As such, Breanne and her brother discussed transitioning her son to a shared custody arrangement between Breanne and his biological father in the future. In Breanne’s case, her children’s differing needs dictated how she navigated kinship caregiving arrangements.

Likewise, Karli also navigated the complex relationships of kinship caregiving networks to best support her children. During her incarceration, Deacon was technically in the custody of his father. However, Deacon’s dad lived with his own parents and several extended family members. In this multi-generational household, Deacon’s paternal grandmothers and great grandmother were his primary caregivers. Similarly, Karli’s eldest—Jason—lived with his paternal grandmother and grandfather, only once staying with his dad. In both cases, the boys’ fathers had limited involvement. Deacon would go days without seeing his father, who lived in the basement. Jason remembered: “the contact I had with my dad were fist fights” (Wilson CFI, 829). Following Karli’s release, Jason decided to remain in the custody of his grandparents. As a “friend-oriented” (Wilson CFI, 265) teenager, the prospect of moving cities and schools was a deterrent. Deacon’s caregiving arrangement following Karli’s release, on the other hand, was very unique and required negotiation amongst opposing parties. Specifically, Deacon’s father agreed to transfer custody of his son to Karli in exchange for \$16,000.00. Ultimately, Karli and

her loved ones were able to pool ten thousand dollars together and Deacon came to live with his maternal family. In transitioning to his mom's care, Deacon felt "it was a completely different world" (Wilson CFI, 417). Although the kinship caregiving dynamics in Deacon's placement were unconventional, his mom's commitment to navigating this complex terrain resulted in his liberation.

INTERVIEWER: When mom was free and healthy, you became-

DEACON: A person!

(Wilson CFI, 423-424)

### **Kinship Caregivers.**

*Navigating the System.* In taking on the custody of children whose mothers are incarcerated, kinship caregivers come into contact with the criminal justice system and often times, the child protection system as well. While not criminalized themselves, kinship caregivers are forced to navigate these systems as a family member and primary caregiver.

BREANNE: And then all of a sudden they're thrown this child who is hurting and now has separation anxiety and-

MARTINA (SC): Yeah.

BREANNE: And behavioural problems in school and can't express emotions and-

MARTINA (SC): Yep.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

BREANNE: They have all these issues, and then the parents are like, well "Where do I

go? What do I do first?"

MARTINA (SC): Yeah

(Hart CFI, 643-649)

Breanne's children required several support services, which their caregivers diligently navigated to ensure their well-being. For example, Melanie (PC) and Martina (SC) coordinated childcare for Dara and Maya, Melanie's biological children, to enable Ella and a caregiver's attendance in community-based programs for child development. Martina (SC) went on to assure that "MELANIE is gonna take her to counselling if she needs it... Medications, worked up, or you know—she could be—you don't know" (Hart CFI, 494-496). Additionally, both Ella and her brother required speech pathology services, which their caregivers obtained for them. This led us to discuss the funding and guidance provided to foster families, in light of the lack of institutional or governmental support for kinship caregivers.

MARTINA (SC): there's lots of resources for people that are in foster care, but... if they are with the family you don't have the same resources

MELANIE (PC): No

INTERVIEWER: The family is just kind of expected to like pick up slack?

MARTINA (SC): Yes... But I prefer them to be with family anyways.

(Hart CFI, 676-681)

Breanne acknowledged the burden placed on kinship caregivers in having to navigate resources, suggesting that this might be remedied by a service in which "the government

connects [caregivers] with supportive services and community agencies” or has a “counselling service for children whose parents are incarcerated” (Hart CFI, 650). For Melanie (PC) and Martina (SC), navigating the criminal justice system and related supports was made doubly difficult, as Ella’s dad was also in-and-out of prison. Breanne suggested that it was likely frustrating for her children’s caregivers, as they were not “just dealing with it with me” but with Melanie’s (PC) “brother too” (Hart CFI, 1220).

INTERVIEWER: It’s your-

BREANNE: Getting both sides, right? Like... He would come back and be in the picture for a little bit, and then-

MELANIE (PC): Like-

BREANNE: Gone!

INTERVIEWER: You’re navigating two systems too—like with female and male, provincial and federal, on both sides! Like that’s—that’s a whole lot to kind of weave through. It’s not easy to navigate, for sure.

(Hart CFI, 1221-1228)

While struggling to navigate the criminal justice system and related supports were a paramount challenge for the Harts, Karli’s parents—the Christians—struggled to navigate two kinship caregiving networks. Their grandsons were placed in different homes, with different families. For the Christians, these ecosystems were complex and wrought with conflict. As occasional or secondary caregivers to Deacon and Jason, the boys’ maternal grandparents felt they could do very little to support or even gain access to their grandchildren.

WILLIAM (SC): But basically we've felt our hands were tied quite often.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

WILLIAM (SC): Because legally, we had no way that we could just take both boys because...Because their fathers, ah, they—as they were—had legal-

INTERVIEWER: Right.

WILLIAM (SC): First rights.

(Wilson CFI, 954-960)

Without guardianship, the Christian's had no legally or institutionally coordinated pathway to connect with their grandchildren. It became their responsibility to navigate these changes in the family's ecosystem, negotiating two separate (and often oppositional) kinship caregiving arrangements.

### *Navigating Substitute Caregiving.*

MELANIE (PC): I was like, 'What about me?' Like, "look at what I've done for you—look what I've done for our kid!"

(Hart CFI, 764)

For the Harts and Fultons, age and ability were constraining factors in navigating the role of substitute caregiving. In both cases, the maternal grandparents took on secondary or occasional caregiving roles. Karli's father William explained, "of course, age is a limiting factor for us too. Imagine having teenagers when we're now in our seventies" (Wilson CFI, 963). While Wendy's parents lived in the same home as her children, they remained secondary caregivers as

her ex-partner Don held the primary parenting role in the household. During our CFI, she and her son discussed her parents' capacity to act as caregivers to her children given their age and, in particular, her mom's physical ability to play an active parenting role.

The Hart case was unique as Ella was placed with her Aunt, for whom age was not identified as a limiting factor. Although Melanie (PC) did not have the same age-related issues in navigating substitute caregiving as grandparent caregivers, this role presented several logistical and emotional challenges nonetheless. Melanie (PC) transparently discussed her initial concerns when Breanne was released from prison. Unsure of what this transition might bring, she remembered how she “just didn't want, like, [BREANNE] coming out and... demanding to me, feeling superior than me, telling me...” (Hart CFI, 804). She explained that

It's like a lot of stress and tension and you just, like, you feel like your life is getting interrupted... That's how I saw it... like “you're interrupting our whole life and routine and because of you—because of your wants”

(Hart CFI, 1139-1141).

Melanie (PC) had two biological children over the course of Breanne's carceral experience; the first pregnancy occurring only months after securing custody of Ella. In fact, for a length of time Melanie (PC) was “taking care of both of those two on [her] own” without the help of a partner (Hart CFI, 49). As a kinship caregiver, routine and family support had been paramount.

Breanne's release was an interruption: it forced Melanie (PC) to navigate new territory and the logistical challenges that came alongside it. In remembering this time, she clarified: “I wasn't trying to be selfish - I'm just protecting this little person” (Hart CFI, 806).

Moreover, there were internal and emotional considerations Melanie (PC) had to navigate as well. As Melanie (PC) had cared for Ella from the time she was six-and-a-half months old, the prospect of losing the child to her biological mom was frightening. She explained that “I’m close with ELLA. Like, I love her, like she’s my child” (Hart CFI, 806). She said that having raised a child from infancy, “your brain says ‘well now, like, I’m so attached’” (Hart CFI, 1104).

MELANIE (PC): That’s a scary thing, like, is she gonna forget about me?

[42:46 MELANIE (PC) becomes tearful]...

INTERVIEWER: There’s a fear.

MELANIE (PC): [Tearful] Yeah

[42:42 MELANIE (PC) cries]

(Hart CFI, 804-812)

Clearly, motherhood as a substitute caregiver was a cherished role for Melanie—one she feared losing. After airing the worries she experienced during that transition period, Melanie (PC) explained that she had “to put that aside too” (Hart CFI, 1141). She said, “I can’t just not let BREANNE see her ever” (Hart CFI, 1141). Despite having become attached and protective, Melanie (PC) ultimately knew that involving Breanne in Ella’s life was important. For Melanie (PC), navigating substitute caregiving meant shouldering the weight of her own fears and love for Ella throughout Breanne’s carceral journey and re-integration.

## **Theme 2: Gatekeepers**

Across the three families featured in this case study, navigating kinship caregiving arrangements in the context of maternal incarceration seemed to result in behaviour that fell into

two categories: that of gatekeeping, and that of peacemaking. Oxford's Lexico defines a gatekeeper as "a person or thing that controls access to something" (Oxford University Press, 2019). Children, mothers affected by incarceration, as well as kinship caregivers, take on the role of a gatekeeper as they broker access to emotions, to information, and even to people.

### **Children.**

*Gatekeeping to Titrate Exposure.* Early in the Wilson CFI, Jason and Deacon's maternal grandfather William (SC) told a story from the boys' childhoods. When Karli had not been seen by the family in some time, the grandparents packed the children into the family car and drove into the city, telling them "We're looking for Mommy" (Wilson CFI, 59). When they happened upon Karli, she was nearly unrecognizable—completely emaciated by substance use.

Unexpectedly, this story illuminated Karli's sons' gatekeeping behaviour as children. Shocked by the story, Karli said "You didn't tell me that!" (Wilson CFI, 60) and "Why don't you tell me these things?" (Wilson CFI, 64). Jason replied, "You don't wanna hear these things" (Wilson CFI, 66). Not only did Jason act as a gatekeeper to his mom, sparing Karli stories such as this, he also acted as a gatekeeper for himself. In hearing this story from William's (SC) perspective, I wondered how the boys—who were young at the time—remembered it:

INTERVIEWER: So do you have memories of that experience?

DEACON: No.

JASON: I try not to remember stuff like that.

(Wilson CFI, 76-79)

While Deacon did not have memories of this particular experience, Jason chose to keep these memories and “stuff like that” at a cognitive and emotional distance. Jason’s tone and body language made clear that this presented a stopping point; Jason had drawn the gates and would not delve further into this topic. I sensed further exposure would be irresponsible in the context of an interview (rather than a clinical environment), and I did not probe any further in an effort to maintain psychological safety.

Later in the Wilson CFI, Deacon also reflected on his gatekeeping behaviour as a child. He conceptualized it as a protective mechanism in the context of his volatile kinship caregiving arrangement. He explained that he “feared if I ever did say that I wanted to go to my mom’s or I wanted to stay there, that there would be heavy consequences and there’d be punishment” (Wilson CFI, 127). In order to protect himself from this, he remembers: “I was almost trying to be brainwashed, in a way, to take my mom out of my life” (Wilson CFI, 127). For Deacon, drawing the gates on his feelings about his mom and her caregiving was protective — it saved him from potential punishment at the hands of his kinship caregivers.

### **Previously-Incarcerated Moms.**

*Protective Gatekeeping: Limiting Child Knowledge.* While Karli’s sons were older and acted as gatekeepers towards their mom and for themselves, Breanne and Wendy had younger children for whom they felt the need to gate-keep information. For instance, Harvey shared with me that his younger sister Hannah, to his knowledge, had never been “officially told” that “mom was in prison” (Fulton CFI, 113). Wendy explained that Hannah had been told that her mom was at school “because I had lessons to learn” (Fulton CFI, 133). Hannah’s parents made this

decision based on her knowledge of school and its positive association with friends, activities, and learning:

I would tell her about my volleyball. I had courses. I went to school. I did things. I would tell her I spent time with my friends. I would tell her I was cooking and stuff like that, and it made her feel at ease because she felt she could relate to that.

(Fulton CFI, 136)

Wendy made it clear she did not want Hannah to believe her mother was “in a sad place” (Fulton CFI, 127). The family decided that they would eventually share information regarding Wendy’s imprisonment with Hannah, once she was the “right age” and Wendy was “prepared to talk to her about it” (Fulton CFI, 116).

Much like Hannah, Ella’s caregivers worried about her ability to understand her mom’s imprisonment. In fact, in travelling to the Hart family for the collaborative family interview, Breanne warned me that her daughter may not be able to contribute to the conversation at all. The adults in Ella’s life were not certain of what she knew about the arrangement between her biological mom and caregivers, or what she knew about their experiences in connection with the criminal justice system. Both Hannah and Ella were strategically shielded from their mother’s carceral experiences, either deliberately or through omission.

### **Kinship Caregivers.**

Melanie (PC) and Martina (SC) also acted as gatekeepers for Ella, they agreed with Breanne’s stance on Ella’s ambiguous understanding of her mom’s, as well as the family’s, carceral experiences. Martina (SC) explained: “we wanted to do it when she’s a little older, that

way she'll understand who-is-who and what-is-what and - and she'll understand better than her being this little" (Hart CFI,141). Melanie (PC) expressed her motivation in protecting Ella from this information at her age, saying "I just don't want her... to be hurt by it" (Hart CFI, 137-139). In fact, Melanie (PC) acted not only as a gatekeeper of information, but also a physical gatekeeper throughout Breanne's incarceration and community re-entry.

***Gatekeeping for Protection: You Shall not Pass.*** While at GVI, Breanne "went 20 months without seeing or talking to ELLA" (Hart CFI, 37). I clarified, "you had no correspondence at all when you were in?" (Hart CFI, 47). Ella's moms explained:

BREANNE: No, MELANIE was pretty upset with me.

MELANIE (PC): Yeah, like after time and time again of going through, I was like super upset with BREANNE. Like cause every time I was like "no this time it's gonna be different, like she's gonna—you know—she's gonna take ELLA back home"

(Hart CFI, 48-49)

Melanie (PC) referred to the cyclical nature of Breanne and Darrel's carceral experiences a number of times: "cause it was like, they're coming—they're going...she's done this, she's used to this routine. Taking away, she's back to the routine of...of seeing kids taken away" (Hart CFI, 78-80). In her frustration and distrust of Ella's biological parents, Melanie (PC) completely halted access to their daughter. While incarcerated, Breanne would draw her daughter pictures. Upon receiving them through the mail, Melanie (PC) would "never write BREANNE back" and noted that "I still have them all" (Hart CFI, 418-420). When Breanne was released, this gatekeeping pattern continued. Breanne explained:

BREANNE: Before I went in the last time we actually went to court cause they had kinship... In order for CAS to get out of the picture, I had to give them deemed custody.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

BREANNE: So, I did that, and we actually had a visitation agreement...when I got out, I was upset cause she wasn't letting me talk to ELLA and I was like "Well you have to! Like, we have this visitation blah blah blah" and like—it was mostly, just like—me, about myself, and my own feelings. You know what I mean?

(Hart CFI, 723-725)

Melanie (PC) transparently discussed her gatekeeping behaviour during this transition period, explaining that "back when she first got out... It's like 'I don't believe you'... I was on the fence with her" (Hart CFI, 158-160). Melanie's (PC) trepidations were eased as Breanne remained sober and out of prison, adhering to her parole conditions. Breanne remembered,

After like I completed rehab and I was at the halfway house... I think that she...like eventually seen that I was doing well, so then, I just kind of earned the trust back... and then it just started to get a little bit better.

(Hart CFI, 725-727)

Melanie (PC) reiterated that softening of her gatekeeping behaviour, explaining that "now that like you know, she's like proving herself...It's like this is the first time she's actually like proving it... And now it's like everything's going the way it should have been five years ago" (Hart CFI, 158-166). Melanie's (PC) protective gatekeeping was collaboratively

constructed as positive, protective behaviour in the Hart family's narrative. For Jason and Deacon, their paternal grandparents' gatekeeping behaviours proved more harmful.

DEACON: Protective, not protecting.

(Wilson CFI, 359)

INTERVIEWER: What's the difference for you?

DEACON: Um, they wanted to be protective and it was more in the sheltering way, it was "Oh no you can't do this, we're just trying to keep you safe" but I was never safe... It was more just a limiting sort of protection.

(Wilson CFI, 363-366)

***Gatekeeping or Isolating?*** Deacon remembered his time with his paternal grandparents as lonely. In describing his home life, he said "I felt isolated from the whole outside world" (Wilson CFI, 135). Deacon's grandparents limited his socializing, television consumption, and did not allow him to attend extracurricular activities or sports. He reflected on his time in their care, saying "I was just going to school as this child, trapped in a house, without information of the outside world like every other kid did" (Wilson CFI, 138). Acting as gatekeepers to the "outside world" (Wilson CFI, 138), Deacon believes his grandparents hindered his development. Karli recalled his limited verbal skills and high separation anxiety as a child. In particular, she recalled the struggle she had in convincing Deacon to play with other children rather than his mom, "cause he was super attached" (Wilson CFI, 409). Despite the detrimental impact of this gatekeeping behaviour, Deacon felt that his caregivers' motives were "to keep me far away from learning too much and... and getting access with my mom" (Wilson

CFI, 140-142). In order to visit his mom at GVI, Deacon relied on his maternal grandparents. He said, “I don’t believe that the whole house had knowledge that that’s where I was going... Because they wouldn’t allow me... Yeah they wouldn’t allow me to see her” (Wilson CFI, 144-146). He re-iterated that their gatekeeping served to limit his knowledge of and relationship with his mom: “the whole point was ‘the less I know about my mom, and the less she’s in my life and present, the longer I’ll stay with them’” (Wilson CFI, 146).

Likewise, Jason’s paternal grandparents took a similar stance, prohibiting his contact with Karli during her incarceration. Karli “pled up” to serve federal time in hopes of receiving the support she needed to address her substance use. In making the decision to serve more time, she asked Jason’s grandmother to “promise me that she would bring him to see me” (Wilson CFI, 159). Jason jumped in, telling me: “Never. She didn’t - not once” (Wilson CFI, 160). Jason’s paternal grandparents did not allow him to speak with his mother via telephone unless supervised - requiring that they talk only using speakerphone in their presence. Adapting to these restrictions, Karli told me that she wrote her sons letters each day. While Jason “got some of them... But after they were already open” (Wilson CFI, 62-64), Deacon received none. As the boys’ paternal grandparents did not participate in the collaborative family interview, their gatekeeping behaviour can only be pieced together via the stories told from the perspectives of Karli, Deacon, and Jason. In the eyes of those affected by these protective gatekeepers, this behaviour was not just detrimental - but negligent and abusive. Deacon, in particular, felt incredibly isolated; he experienced gatekeeping as harmful to his emotional and social development.

In discussing the Wilson family's experience of kinship caregivers as gatekeepers, the family expressed their desire for change in the form of advocacy and intervention.

KARLI: Somebody needs to be in the middle and advocate for the kids. Not the caregivers.

(Wilson CFI, 630)

JASON: Yeah, there should be a second party.

(Wilson CFI, 650)

KARLI: There should be somebody in whatever institution that is that person—so if it's a social worker, a CYW, whatever—they should be the one coordinating. "OK, so this child - JASON - he's gonna visit." He is going to. Not might. "He is going to have a visit with his mother KARLI, it's gonna happen on this date. If transportation is needed, we can coordinate that. This is not an option, this is what's happening."

(Wilson CFI, 651)

INTERVIEWER: Like how CAS would coordinate in the community?

JASON: Yes, yes.

KARLI: Exactly.

(Wilson CFI, 654-656)

DEACON: Maybe the ability to have that person that can set up phone calls that cannot be avoided...Letters that will be delivered.

KARLI: Right!

DEACON: Just, something to make sure things happen. Because I'm sure there's other situations similar to ours.

MOM: Oh there's so many! There was just so many.

(Wilson CFI, 695-700)

Deacon added that if planned contacts between children and mothers do not occur, advocates should be asking "why didn't it go through?" (Wilson CFI, 711). In his opinion, there should be checks in place to ensure gatekeeping behaviour has not extended to the point of harmful isolation or neglect. This prompted me to consider the impact caregiver gatekeeping had on Jason and Deacon, and their perspective on the issue as a systemic (rather than family-based) issue. I asked, "Did you guys feel like you were invisible to the system? Like you weren't—was anyone looking out for you? Do you feel like anyone saw you?" (Wilson CFI, 721).

DEACON: I really feel like it was just so much trust was put out there and it was kind of just "Oh well, if they're not being delivered - that sucks!" "Oh you're not getting phone calls? Too bad!"

INTERVIEWER: Right, so they just trusted the caregivers.

DEACON: Yeah. It's just - you're putting a lot of trust in that and sometimes that trust is misused.

MOM: Mhmm.

DEACON: And that's-

JASON: That's how I always felt—the wrong person...

(Wilson CFI, 725-730)

By removing Karli from their lives and producing a parenting vacuum, the carceral system exposed the boys to harm within their changing family ecosystem. Without oversight or an advocate aimed at facilitating healthy kinship caregiving arrangements, Jason and Deacon felt let down - like they had slipped through the cracks of the child protection system.

For the Fultons, caregiver gatekeeping behaviour posed a logistical barrier to maintaining mother-child relationships in the context of incarceration. When Wendy was initially incarcerated, she saw her children nearly every other week. However, these visits “disintegrated” due to Harvey’s stepfather, Don’s (PC) “issue” (Fulton CFI, 269-270). When Don (PC) refused to bring the children to visit their mother and months passed, Wendy requested that her teenage son be able to visit her without an adult escort. This request was denied. Again, caregiver gatekeeping went without intervention. This caregiver power went unchecked and unchallenged. Whether positively protected or an emotionally-fuelled abuse of power, Wendy and Harvey felt this occurred to the detriment of the mother-child relationship.

### **Theme 3: Peacemakers**

Gatekeeping behaviour can be described as a brokering role, wherein contact between separated parties is negotiated, barred, or allowed. However, it seemed that amongst the cases presented, there were family members who made an effort to step beyond the gate, extending a connection to support the mother-child relationship. Rather than keeping the gate or acting as

barrier, these individuals actively sought out peace and connection. They were makers. Utilizing different techniques, children, moms, and kinship caregivers alike took on this role.

INTERVIEWER: So, what helped you maintain a relationship when mom was not caring for you? When mom wasn't out, or?

(Wilson CFI, 510)

JASON: Support system around us.

(Wilson CFI, 514)

### **Children.**

*Peacemaking as Compromise.* Remembering how difficult it was to navigate visits at GVI with two children who were a decade apart in age, Wendy expressed frustration with her inability to meaningfully and privately connect with her son. I asked Harvey: "How was that for you? That, like balancing the two kids, mothering two kids at the same time in that space? How'd you receive that?" (Fulton CFI, 348). He did concede that it was "difficult" but also communicated the value in those visits: "Even if it was, um, go fish. Cause HANNAH could play that. They had like, they had like little cards and I would play with HANNAH and it would be fun there, right?" (Fulton CFI, 348-349). As Wendy navigated motherhood behind bars, Harvey acted as a peacemaker, facilitating connection amongst visiting family members however possible (even if it meant playing go-fish as a teenager). Unable to meet with his mom privately, Harvey embraced the role he could play in integrating his younger sister into their family visits. In this instance, Harvey acts as a peacemaker between his incarcerated mom and his sister.

*Peacemaking Through Communication.* Harvey also acted as a peacemaker between himself and his mom, deepening their connection and resolving family conflict through descriptive communication. He remembered: “when I had—had to talk about something really serious. I would shut down, I wouldn’t say much” (Fulton CFI, 517). Harvey explained, “The cat crossed the road. That’s what I used to say, right? The cat crossed the road” (Fulton CFI, 521). But, he noted the flaw in this communication style:

HARVEY: If I say “a cat crossed the road” you’re going to be like, “OK, well what colour was the cat?”

INTERVIEWER: “Which cat?” “What road?”

WENDY: Yeah.

HARVEY: Or “I don’t understand. Why are you talking about a cat that crossed the road?”

WENDY: Yeah.

HARVEY: “That doesn’t make any sense”

WENDY: You’re allowing me to make up the rest of the story with no details.

HARVEY: Exactly!... Whereas now, I give you the entire story.

(Fulton CFI, 538-547)

I clarified: “And so now, when you’re talking about your emotional experience or, um, what’s going on at home, you use that cat metaphor?” (Fulton CFI, 534). Both agreed, explaining that this communication technique proved especially useful during Wendy’s incarceration. For

instance, on occasion, Harvey and his stepfather would disagree about how a series of events unfolded in Wendy's absence. Harvey's stepfather would recount challenges at home while on the telephone with Wendy at GVI, particularly regarding her son's behaviour:

WENDY: I'm over here so I don't get to see it and I'm losing context and facts and things like that along the way.

HARVEY: Oh that's his favourite thing to do.

WENDY: What's that?

HARVEY: His goddamn favourite thing to do

MOM: Tell stories?...He takes the truth and weaves it into something you wouldn't even imagine.

(Fulton CFI, 397-403)

Rather than "shutting down" (Fulton CFI, 517) during times of conflict, Harvey would remember "that it was the black cat that crossed the dark road at night, you know, pouncing over the yellow line because it thought it was a fence" (Fulton CFI, 523). In other words, Harvey would provide his mother with additional details, including the context, setting, and descriptive words. Through this black cat metaphor for descriptive communication, Harvey learned to mobilize language in his role as a peacemaker within the family system.

For Harvey, acting as a peacemaker during intense family conflict was essential in preserving their family. When I asked Harvey to about maintaining the mother-child relationship in the context of incarceration, he explained:

You gotta keep that relationship because when she does come back, because she will - it doesn't matter how many years. It could be one year, five years, twenty five - it doesn't matter. She'll eventually come back. You still want that family to be that close knit family...And I know that we still have that.

(Fulton CFI, 1463-1469)

At the end of our CFI, Harvey and Wendy shared a tender moment which punctuated the significance of the connection Harvey had fought so hard to maintain. For Harvey, peacemaking meant mediating, negotiating, and thoughtful, descriptive communication. But it also meant the survival of the mother-child relationship:

INTERVIEWER: Do you guys have anything else you want to say before we stop the recording. Any questions for me, or anything like that?

HARVEY: I love my mom.

INTERVIEWER: You love your mom.

[1:38 Mom begins to cry]

(Fulton CFI, 1593-1595)

### **Previously-Incarcerated Moms.**

*Peacemaking in Times of Strife: Diplomacy.* Breanne began peacemaking before she served federal time, making choices for her children that enabled family connections and support. She explained,

BREANNE: Um, so I had the choice um whether to put ELLA with kinship with my son, or to keep, um her with MATERNAL FAMILY. And I knew that if I let ELLA go with my family, that they would never get to see her.

MARTINA (SC): Oh god, I would have died.

BREANNE: And, I knew too that she wouldn't be able to grow up with her culture. And we're not Indigenous—we don't have any of that. And I wanted ELLA to grow up knowing her background. Um, because, my son was going out to [redacted location] and they said they would take ELLA too. But, [Melanie and Martina] would have never gotten to see her. So, I thought that, um, I would sign kinship to them. That way, they'd get to see ELLA and ELLA would be able to grow up with - with her culture. That's why, I decided to have them separate.

(Hart CFI, 275-277)

Furthermore, Breanne made the difficult decision to place her daughter with her sister-in-law permanently in an effort to remove Child Protective Services from their lives. Breanne told me, “before I went in the last time we actually went to court cause they had kinship and um in order for CAS to get out of the picture, I had to give them deemed custody... So, I did that” (Hart CFI, 723-725). For Breanne, peacemaking meant putting her own feelings aside in order to focus on what was best for her children. Rather than gatekeeping—acting as a barrier to the kinship relationship—Breanne's decisions actively sought and secured connection for her children and their caregivers.

In Karli's case, she acted a peacemaker amongst her children and their former caregivers, with whom tensions were high. She recalled the time that she took Deacon "against his will" to see his Great Grandmother (PC), because "she missed him... her baby" (Wilson CFI, 467). Although conditions in Deacon's caregivers' home were described as neglectful, and even abusive, she could see that "when we, I, took him [out of the paternal caregivers' home] it was almost like I was hurting her" (Wilson CFI, 467). While returning to his father's home was somewhat "traumatic for DEACON" she "knew it had to happen" (Wilson CFI, 467). Even with their faults, this opportunity for connection was a gift from Karli to her son's former caregivers. She explained that although it was a difficult experience for Deacon, "now I'm glad it did, because she has severe dementia and she doesn't remember" (Wilson CFI, 467). Despite conflict within the family ecosystem, Karli attempted to make peace amongst her son and his former caregivers through their visit. Like an olive branch, this final visit was a symbol of peacemaking. Ultimately, as peacemaking moms, both Breanne and Karli made an effort to connect their families amongst opposed and even high-conflict caregivers.

***The Proof is in the Peacemaking: Accountability, Healing, and Growth.*** Following her incarceration, Breanne approached peacemaking with Melanie with patience, claiming "it's been working up to it" (Hart CFI, 745). This peacemaking process amongst Ella's moms was hard fought for and emotionally charged. Melanie (PC) reflected, "I feel like me and BREANNE we're... in a good spot, since like her completing her time, serving her time...Going to the halfway house and then being out of the halfway house...she's done...so well for herself" (Hart CFI, 151-157). Upon her initial release, Melanie (PC) was skeptical of Breanne's wellness; she described herself as "on the fence with her" (Hart CFI, 160). Later in our interview, she

remembered the arguments they would engage in, “she’d message me and then we’d bicker and then we’d not talk or I’d block her or...like yeah ‘I’m not talking to her she’s crazy’... ‘she thinks this or that’” (Hart CFI, 887-891). Melanie (PC) went so far as to defy the visitation agreement they had agreed upon prior to Breanne’s incarceration. However, she felt their relationship improved “once we just like started like communicating our - like our...selfishness out of the - once that’s out of the way, like, it’s come together” (Hart CFI, 898-900). Breanne echoed Melanie’s (PC) assessment of this time in their life, adding that her successful re-entry and sobriety were also key factors in establishing peace amongst Ella’s moms. Breanne remembered,

After like I completed rehab and I was at the halfway house and [Melanie’s] seen that I was out for like four months and that I was actually being able to afford to come home and I was seeing [my son] and doing good... then it just started to get a little bit better. Um, because we kind of had to talk.

(Hart CFI, 725-727)

Melanie (PC) agreed: “Cause like, I feel confident in like—I know BREANNE is doing good” (Hart CFI, 748). Breanne quietly remarked, “I did a lot of growing up in prison and rehab. A lot of growing up...I’m able to see things in a different perspective” (Hart CFI, 756-758). When Breanne shared this, Melanie assured me that comments such as these make her “feel a lot better” (Hart CFI, 759). I clarified: “So hearing her say that she has this kind of awareness now of self, or awareness of what happened, and why it happened, and how, and change, and all of that...that’s made a really big difference for you? (Hart CFI, 767-769). Her enthusiasm was

palpable, as she responded “Oh yeah!” (Hart CFI, 770). For the Hart family, Breanne’s internal work was essential in peacemaking within the family system; her personal growth enabled their trust to flourish.

Finally, Breanne’s peacemaking efforts were also external—requiring active measures to ensure ongoing connection with her children. Although Breanne lived hours away from her biological children and their caregivers, she visited them biweekly (Hart CFI, 875). This, given the economic challenges parolees face (Johnson, 2014), was an act of peacemaking which required dedication, commitment, and thoughtful planning in order to foster and maintain connection with her children.

***Peacemaking Difficult Emotions: Non-Judgment & Validation.*** For Karli, peacemaking efforts involved validating her children’s challenging experiences. Early in our CFI, I asked her children: “What does family feel like at that time for you? If you had, had to pick a word—was it, what was that?” (Wilson CFI, 79). Karli jumped in: “It’s OK if you’re angry, cause you know you can always say that stuff” (Wilson CFI, 80). When her son struggled to find a word to describe his emotional experience, she offered a few: “Upset? Turmoil?” (Wilson CFI, 84). Throughout the interview, Karli did not shy away from the conflicting, messy feelings her children may have towards her, her substance use, and incarceration. Once more she re-iterated, “It’s OK to be mad at me. It’s OK to be angry at some of the shit I’ve done. Because I would be angry—I am angry at my mom... so it is OK for them to be mad” (Wilson CFI, 572-576). As a peacemaking mom, Karli acted with measured neutrality and non-judgment. She encouraged her children to communicate their feelings and she openly validated the emotional pain associated

with them. Additionally, she encouraged her children to communicate their difficult experiences within their kinship placements; the family did not hide away from the ugly experiences of neglect and abuse the boys survived. Even in the face of this pain, she validated the physical, tangible hurt these experienced caused her children. Rather than trying to keep her children from these difficult emotions (gatekeeping), Karli was active in the facilitation, exploration, and discussion of these experiences. She was an emotional peacemaker.

### **Kinship Caregivers.**

*The Visionaries.* In my first two CFIs, with the Harts and the Wilsons, I sensed a likeness in tone or attitude in each family's secondary caregivers, who—in both cases—happened to be grandparents. Rather than the intensely protective stance that other primary caregivers took, it seemed as though this older generation was more apologetic in their stance on family dynamics. For instance, Martina (SC), Ella's paternal grandma and secondary caregiver, consistently voiced her desire for the family to "get back together" (Hart CFI, 53). She actively contributed to the kinship care provided for Ella in attempts to facilitate this vision for her family. She explained, "I wanted to help. You know? And, I wanted everything to get back together. Like with with ELLA being with BREANNE—being—you know, and everything. I wanted all that to come together somehow (Hart CFI, 53). After Martina (SC) had left, her daughter Melanie (PC) explained: "My mom is so supportive of everything. So, like she's never... Like she's been mad at MOM, but she's not gonna go and scream in her face or anything, or say bad things to her" (Hart CFI, 1258). While Melanie's (PC) kinship caregiving style was more rooted in gatekeeping, Martina's (SC) contrasted this; she transparently wished for a repaired connection between Breanne, Ella, and Melanie (PC). As a peacekeeper, she envisioned and worked towards this goal.

*The go-betweens.* In the Wilson's case, Jason and Deacon's maternal grandparents' peacemaking efforts were often directed at the boys' relationship as siblings, as they were placed in separate homes. William and Sarah would take the boys to the family cottage, and once, on vacation to Florida, Karli explained,

They were the go between - between, for the kids. So I - when I was gone...Doing my thing, being a selfish addict, they brought the kids together...So they went out of their way to make sure the boys saw each other... As mad—as much as they were mad at me.  
(Wilson CFI, 35-39)

I asked Karli's parents what their motivation was in doing this, and William's words echoed Martina's (SC), in the Hart family case. He simply said, "well we were trying to keep the boys together" (Wilson CFI, 445).

While Karli's parents were unable to access Jason to facilitate visits with his mother at GVI, they were able to bring Deacon to the facility bi-weekly (though these visits likely occurred without the explicit knowledge of his kinship caregivers). This covert peacemaking behaviour was crucial in maintaining the mother-child connection, and in Karli's opinion, her successful sobriety and re-entry. During our interview, Karli proclaimed: "if my parents hadn't of done that, I never would have got clean" (Wilson CFI, 159). She explained that "the more you try to integrate kids safely into an addict—especially a mother—um, it stops them. In a sense of like, when he was coming every two weeks it made me work harder" (Wilson CFI, 221). Karli's personal experience is validated by empirical research, which indicates that "visits between prisoners and their families and children are indeed consistently associated with benefits for

prisoners, such as reduction in violence during incarceration and reduced recidivism and prison readmission after release” (Schafer, 1994; Bales and Mears, 2008; Derkzen et al., 2009 as cited in Knudsen, 2016).

Although Wendy’s parents were not present in our collaborative family interview, Wendy’s perspective on her parents’ involvement in her children’s lives and mother-child relationship echoed many of Karli’s sentiments. For example, when Wendy’s co-parenting relationship with Harvey’s stepfather began to disintegrate and visits with her children decreased, Harvey’s maternal grandfather began facilitating them by escorting the children to GVI. In this way, her father—a secondary caregiver in the kinship network—became a conduit for connection. Amidst conflict between Wendy and her partner/the children’s primary caregiver, her father was a peacemaker, actively pursuing and supporting the mother-child connection.

Ultimately, peacemaking behaviour took on a variety of forms amongst children, incarcerated moms, and kinship caregivers. But in each case, the pursuit of a continued mother-child relationship was necessitated by the state enforced separation inherent in maternal incarceration. I asked the Wilson family if they would “agree with the importance then of—of family support network being on the same page or being cooperative with one another?” (Wilson CFI, 990). Karli’s father responded: “Yeah, there should be some proper dialogue between, sorting out what’s best for the children” (Wilson CFI, 991). Across cases, peacemaking endeavours—in whatever form families creatively embodied—were an essential component of “sorting out what’s best for the children” (Wilson CFI, 991) in the eyes of family members.

## Conclusions

### Summary of Findings

When a mother is imprisoned, she, her children, nor her family members receive a manual for caregiving in the context of maternal incarceration and kinship networks. As such, families touched by the carceral system are forced to navigate this minefield without specialized tools or support. They become navigators of internal experiences, institutional experiences, and relational experiences. As families navigate the carceral experience, they take on the opposing attributes - those of the gatekeeper as well as the peacemaker. Few participants' perspectives were firmly rooted in one navigation style; rather, most caregivers, moms, and children transitioned in and out of these contrasting roles. In the gatekeeper role, families brokered access to information and knowledge, emotional experiences, or to relationships. This gatekeeping behaviour being interpreted as positive and protective, or negative. Alternatively, as peacemakers, family members actively sought-out, forged, and meaningfully invested in the mother-child relationship.

These themes, or roles, can also be understood from a linguistic perspective. The nouns—*gate* and *peace*—offer contrasting imagery: a gate enforces separation, while peace is a state of harmony or connection. Likewise, the verbs in each word shed light on the differences between these roles: *keeping* refers to a state of maintaining or protecting, while *making* is an active process of forming or creating something. In keeping gates or making peace, families navigating the experience of maternal incarceration moderate the mother-child relationship.

**Figure 4: Thematic Conclusions Chart**

This chart summarizes the sub-themes identified for navigators, gatekeepers, and peacemakers according to generation within the kinship caregiving network.

	<b>CHILDREN</b>	<b>MOTHERS</b>	<b>CAREGIVERS</b>
<b>NAVIGATORS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Navigating their mom’s criminalization</li> <li>- Love in the context of criminalization</li> <li>- Disenfranchised grief</li> <li>- The parenting vacuum and parentification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Changes in motherhood and mothering</li> <li>- Criminalized identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Navigating the system</li> <li>- Changes in caregiving, substitute mothering</li> </ul>
<b>GATE KEEPERS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Titrating exposure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limiting child knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Protective gatekeeping</li> <li>- Gatekeeping as “protection” or isolation</li> </ul>
<b>PEACE KEEPERS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Amongst siblings</li> <li>- Amongst mother, substitute caregivers, and self</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In organizing kinship caregiving arrangements</li> <li>- Through accountability &amp; healing</li> <li>- Peacekeeping as non-judgment and validation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The visionaries</li> <li>- The go-betweens</li> </ul>

**Institutional Violence**

Aiello and McCorkel explain that “one of the most immediate ways that carceral facilities intervene in family relationships is through decisions regarding access, specifically by setting the

terms and conditions through which family members are able to see, talk, and touch their loved ones” (2018, p.366). Plainly, incarceration imposes parental powerlessness swiftly and purposefully. Celinska & Siegal (2010) explain that these interventions (or punishments) are often achieved through seemingly banal regulations:

- Stringent, inconvenient, or inaccessible visiting hours;
- Rigid rules for visitation, including dress-related and behavioural standards;
- The relatively small number of women’s correctional facilities, which increases the likelihood of an insurmountable distance between families and their incarcerated loved one;
- Costly phone calls;
- As well as the cost of and rules surrounding sending packages or letters in and out of prisons.

Each of these barriers to the mother-child relationship were also raised by participants in this multi-case study. I argue that these are not just banal regulations. They are not merely neutral institutional measures. They are everyday violence, exacted on criminalized women and their families through purposeful institutional design. To illustrate this, I have selected relevant excerpts from the first CFI, which includes Breanne, Ella, along with her daughter’s caregivers and myself as an example. For instance, Breanne explained why she and her family members were unable to manage visits with her two children during her incarceration at GVI:

You come and it’s a two hour visit. So you’re literally driving like three hours to go there, to sit with a bunch of other inmates and their families in this little, like this area, with a young child that doesn’t want to be quiet and sit...For a two hour visit, then put

her back in the car and drive back three hours.

(Hart CFI, 327)

While the prison does have the option of extended visits, there are several barriers to accessing these as well:

BREANNE: They do have the options of seventy-two hour overnights...But, you have to do four visits first.

MARTINA (SC): Oh

INTERVIEWER: OK, so four visits of two hours

MARTINA (SC): Before you can do that-

INTERVIEWER: at GVI. OK.

BREANNE: Before you're eligible for that, and like, when your other family members are caring for your kid and then they have their own, like my brother and my sister-in-law, they have to bring their own children, plus my son. Where do they find the time to drive from [redacted location] to Kitchener, four times? And then, they have to come into the visit and sleep there for those 3 days so that I can visit with my son.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, OK.

BREANNE: And who wants to do that?...And then they have the family days there, but you already have to do the four visits to be eligible... So that, that doesn't happen either.

MARTINA (SC): No.

INTERVIEWER: So it's almost like it's not really accessible for little kids, is what you're saying, right?

BREANNE: No it's not.

(Hart CFI, 329-350).

Due to these barriers, Breanne was limited to telephone and written contact with her children. She described how policies surrounding these secondary methods of communication were punitive as well:

BREANNE: And he can't call me—I have to call him.

INTERVIEWER: Mhmm

BREANNE: But then it's eleven cents a minute call. So, and they take thirty percent of your wages to pay for room and board, you pay fourteen dollars a month for cable.

INTERVIEWER: Mhmm

BREANNE: Like it's ridiculous. You make five dollars and eighty cents a day. That's it. So you can work an eight hour day, but you're only making five dollars and eighty cents and then we're gonna take thirty percent...So, then, that doesn't leave you any room for your phone card, for stamps, for envelopes, for all of that stuff.

(Hart CFI, 1080-1086)

These excerpts from Breanne's CFI can be interpreted as individual difficulties or unfortunate circumstances for Breanne and her family to overcome. They can be seen as neutral policies, occurring within a neutral system of state justice. Alternatively, they can be viewed as a system of oppression—one that is purposefully enacted and maintained through carceral policy at the federal and institutional level. I argue that Breanne and her family were not forced to navigate these challenges associated with her incarceration simply because of their economic

status, distance from the prison, or some other working of fate. In fact, they were forced to become navigators because this is how the system is designed. Breanne, in my first collaborative family interview, presented this in the form of lived knowledge:

BREANNE: Don't set expectations. Cause then you're gonna be let down....don't make plans, just go with it...Just go with it and deal with it as it comes. Cause...you can't do anything.

INTERVIEWER: Right, and I would say, like you were saying before, with the system—you can make all the plans you want

BREANNE: You're gonna get let down.

INTERVIEWER: It's like it doesn't really work to support you.

MOM: No.

(Hart CFI, 1024-1032)

Upon first impression, we may look at families impacted by incarceration and see resilience. We may laude families for their adept navigation of interlocking carceral and child protection systems as they employ gatekeeping or peacemaking techniques with agility. After all, their ability to endure is remarkable. However, it is vital that these coping techniques are seen for what they are: a survival system. Through navigating, gatekeeping, and peacekeeping families embody resistance. They push back against the mediating and governing power of penal institutions in shaping—or erasing—the mother-child connection. This resistance and resilience occurs in the context of intentionally designed, enforced parental powerlessness. Ultimately, the institutional violence embedded within the construct of prisons punishes women. Ecological

theory reminds us that in punishing women with children, maternal incarceration also punishes children and families. In elevating and celebrating the survival systems families have forged, while simultaneously grounding these stories of coping in grief, rage, and hardship, this research serves to question the ethics of a justice system based on punishment. It problematizes the social good of institutional violence. In turn, I wonder if justice can be untangled from punishment, not just in theory - but in practice. Can we seek-out and achieve justice without exacting violence?

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Practice**

At a practice level, these findings indicate that clinicians' interventions should promote the family unit and facilitate supported, healthy connection between mothers and their children during periods of incarceration. Specifically, one participant suggested that parenting programs already delivered at GVI incorporate family members, and in particular, children. By combining visits with directed programming, mothers would be offered the opportunity to interact with their children in an environment modulated by supportive professionals as they apply their learning. While this clinical implication comes directly from the participants in this study, it is also echoed in Knudsen's article on the pathologizing of children of prisoners (2016). She explains that while visits were "widely praised" by children in her dissertation study, Poehlmann's work indicated that "visiting with an incarcerated mother" in "non-'child-friendly' visitation environments" was actually "associated with insecure attachment in children, and queried whether visits activated the child's attachment system but did not allow them to receive the comfort, support, and reassurance they needed to deactivate it" (Poehlmann, 2005 in Knudsen, 2016, p.366). Still, Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, and Shear (2010) concluded that "research shows positive outcomes

for children when the visit occurred as part of a supportive intervention” (Poehlmann et al., 2010 in Knudsen, 2016, p.366). Knudsen identifies these supportive interventions as “programs that teach parenting inside the prison and that provide assistance at the point of reunification” (Knudsen, 2016, p.367). Supported family programming for incarcerated moms and their children is, therefore, both evidence-informed and recommended by individuals—parents and children, alike—with lived experience in the carceral system.

Within the constraints of existing programming or community-based service delivery, practitioners can incorporate family-based perspectives and theory into their work with criminalized women, their children, and their families. In doing so, practitioners can take steps to move away from the system’s individualized, pathologized model of case conceptualization and correctional planning to see people in the context of their families and socioeconomic realities.

Furthermore, as I reached out to organizations supporting children and families in areas surrounding Hamilton, Brantford, and Kitchener in the early stages of this project, I was occasionally met with messaging such as “we do not support families like that here.” Given the shame and stigma children and families report feeling in relation to the incarceration of a parental figure, I wonder how many children go unsupported, whether in schools or in community programs. While an integrative, family-focused approach to supporting those affected by incarceration may be far off, we can still integrate principles of this research into individual work with children and caregivers outside of prison walls. In particular, children in this research project suggested that practitioners work towards enhancing pathways to their incarcerated parent. In some cases, this might mean facilitating telephone, email, or video conferencing; for others, subsidized transportation would make all the difference. Knudsen also

identifies the utility of clinical support directed at the “child’s caregivers on the ‘outside’” (2016, p.367). Social workers can be partners in children and caregivers’ journeys as they navigate the justice system, as well as its social and emotional terrain.

Additionally, the external presentation of emotional hardship— in particular, through behavioural issues—was a common thread within the collaborative family interviews. As a profession, we often tell parents that behaviour is communication and that behaviour has a practical or emotional function. Still, we often fall into the results-focused practice of addressing behaviour without acknowledging its emotional origins. As such, clinicians can use this research—particularly Harvey and Jason’s experiences—as a reminder that it is not enough to focus solely on cognitive or behavioural management in children of incarcerated parents. When we view these children as potential offenders from a risk perspective, we fail them and compound their trauma. As such, emotion-focused work which makes space for disenfranchised grief and attachment trauma may be a more appropriate clinical modality for this population. The children involved in this research were able to draw direct connections between their emotional experiences and external behaviour; if they can do this, we can too.

### **Implications for Research**

The opportunity for practitioners to introduce family-centred carceral programming presents researchers with a window to measure changes and evaluate interventions. In terms of my own research, I am interested in utilizing Emotion-Focused Family Therapy (EFFT) in supporting families coping with maternal incarceration. EFFT practitioners focus on parents and caregivers—given their inherent abilities and position to support children—rather than children, as points of intervention. In working alongside parents, this modality offers a non-pathologizing

approach to emotion and behaviour coaching. As children of incarcerated parents are typically deemed as at-risk and in need of direct intervention, EFFT presents an alternative pathway to supporting families affected by maternal incarceration. In my opinion, EFFT's therapeutic apology intervention—which involves radical responsibility and relationship repair—has the potential to positively impact families who have been affected by the incarceration of a parental figure. It is my goal to test this hypothesis in future research.

This study also presents implications for researchers outside of myself and my interest in EFFT. As a small scale multi-case study utilizing network sampling, this research project is very contextually bound. Although this methodology produced incredibly rich data, it also presented limitations to the rigour and generalizability of findings. As such, there are several opportunities for researchers to enhance and diversify this study's methodological components.

**Intersectional analysis & sample diversity: Race.** Within the three cases presented in this thesis, one child and her caregiver were Indigenous. However, this study was not designed to analyze the influence or impact of ethnicity— and in particular, Indigeneity—in the caregiving experience. While the family's testimony suggested that their Indigeneity was central to their experience, a more attuned, culturally specific, and culturally-crafted research project would better answer this question. Given the echoes of Canada's colonial history in its current carceral system, research by and with incarcerated Indigenous people in this field is essential. Likewise, national carceral data indicates that black women are disproportionately incarcerated in the federal system, specifically at GVI. Given the rise in their incarceration, research tailored to black women—aimed at hearing their voices and their unique experiences of oppression—is also necessary. Ultimately, there is an opportunity for researchers to partner with incarcerated women

of colour to produce studies in which ethnic and cultural experiences are methodologically accounted for and analyzed.

**Intersectional analysis & sample diversity: Class.** Similarly, this research methodology did not specifically address economic disparities or the role of resource constraints in shaping the experiences of kinship caregivers, children, or incarcerated mothers. Still, this topic was woven throughout the families' narratives. My impression is that economic inequity amongst families has a significant impact on the mother-child relationship in the context of federal incarceration. I argue that economic status affects the frequency, duration, method, and quality of mother-child interaction. If financial resources translate into increased access to children, researchers must not only measure its influence, but also ask whether parenting is a privilege to be afforded to the wealthy, or if it is a right of parents in prison regardless of financial resources. Given that an economic analysis was outside the scope of this thesis, financial inequality and its bearing on the mother-child relationship in the context of incarceration must be explored through a more focused analysis.

**Lifespan & longitudinal perspectives.** Additionally, this research project presents a snapshot in time. In meeting with these families for a single CFI, I have aimed to capture how these families collaboratively narrate their experience of maternal incarceration in 2019. As an exercise in social construction, this narrative can and will inevitably change along with their relationships, growth, and aging. As such, lifespan research, as well as longitudinal analyses present further research opportunities. Researchers may choose to ask: How much does developmental age impact the experience? Does meaning-making change over time, throughout the life-course?

### **Implications for Policy**

This research project further underscores advocates' claims that individual-focused, pathology-based carceral programs disproportionately punish incarcerated women, children, as well as their caregivers. At minimum, this research echoes calls to move towards a feminist, family-centred model that understands women relationally and contextually (as outlined in the Implications for Practice section). However, the 1990 Task Force on Federally Incarcerated Women's report *Creating Choices* was built upon similar sentiments. Still the prevailing carceral culture of "tough on crime" policies held strong. Ultimately, institutional and federal policy changes are predicated on shifts in perspective amongst those with power and influence. As such, this research serves as a call to reform, and then move beyond reform—toward a radical re-imagining of how justice is operationalized in our society. For example, in recognizing the impact prison has on the children of incarcerated women, policy-makers at both federal and institutional levels must, at minimum, aim to address this with the intent to mitigate harm. These reforms would affirm that children are not to be collateral damage in the carceral system's war on drugs/poverty/race. However, in order to move beyond reform, change-makers must question the utility and justness of a system rooted in punishment and exclusion. We must ask ourselves, is this system worth reforming, or are these families worth re-imagining a more just alternative?

### **Reflection: Implications for Self**

At the outset of this project, I received some push back from my family and friends. Working with criminalized women is a niche—one that not everyone was on board with, to say the least. In addition to their varied objections to this work, they did not understand the utility of this particular project. They would question the purpose of it, saying: "we already know prison is

bad.” This is the most profound ethical conundrum I have come up against during my two-year thesis journey. If questions were posed to me regarding my methodology, research design, or theoretical framework, I have plenty of answers. But “we already know prison is bad” really stumped me. How does a researcher— or indeed, a social worker—shoulder the indifference and apathy of others? It seems that we, as a society, have accepted that the justice system is harmful. We can agree, largely, that children’s social, emotional, developmental, and familial lives are negatively affected by the institutional punishment of their parents. However, in embarking on this project, it struck me that people—we, society—view this harm as justifiable. That somehow, somehow the suffering of children of criminalized women is a reasonable, inevitable by-product of the system. We justify the suffering of children as collateral damage.

As I moved through the thesis process, I noticed my beliefs—which are injected into the co-constructed narrative reported here—becoming increasingly political. I had begun this project with the lens of a clinician supporting children and families; I pictured myself in a supportive role in this field of social work. I am finishing it in a much more raw, uncertain place. I am left to wonder where and how my own work, whether research-based or clinical, will fit into the justice system pictured here. Over the course of this research, I have become acutely aware of the many well-meaning individuals working within the justice system, in community or carceral settings, who uphold a system founded upon exclusion and punishment in the name of the common good. I am reminded of the social workers who removed Indigenous children for (re)education in residential schools. I think of racialized people imprisoned in internment camps in times of war. I remember the eugenics movement and social workers’ role in the forced sterilization of people with “less desirable” genetic qualities. Where generations before me saw collateral damage—

which they deemed acceptable in the pursuit of a healthier, safer (whiter, more educated, respectable) society—I see an ethical transgression. I see a miscarriage of power. I see crimes against marginalized people. I see genocide and crimes against humanity. In collecting and examining the familial experiences of criminalized women and their loved ones, I have come to wonder whether generations after me will view mass incarceration in the same light. Will they look at us, right now, and see a human rights tragedy?

In Whitlock's reflection, titled *Long Shadow of Prison*, she boldly states that the journey towards prison abolitionism “takes us straight into the heart of the inhumanity inherent in declaring vast numbers of people to be expendable—overwhelmingly people of colour, poor people, women, youth, and people with mental illness” (Whitlock, 2010, p.28). As I near the end of my thesis work, I am not sure I have made it out of that heart of inhumanity. I am met with the reality that nothing has changed. I must shoulder the knowledge that as this project ends for me, it begins for women who have been sentenced to federal time: it is a lifelong project for criminalized women, their children and their families.

Now, I am faced with the question: Where do I go from here? Whitlock urges us to “begin to envision justice as the positive creation and strengthening of just relationships rather than as an endless series of increasingly harsh punishments for an ever-expanding list of crimes” (Whitlock, 2010, p.32). I do not have a definitive answer or plan for this positive creation of justice. I cannot foresee a future free from mass incarceration or a justice system without punitive penal conditions. I can only imagine possibility. I can hold space the possibility of real justice—of community-based and collective accountability, of humanity, and of change.

## Appendices

## Appendix i: Recruitment Poster



Families have to change and adapt when moms go to prison.

Often, other family members take on caregiving roles. Are you and your family members interested in coming together to share your family's story of maternal incarceration?

Please contact Lauren Hawthorne at [hawt7520@mylaurier.ca](mailto:hawt7520@mylaurier.ca) to learn more.

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This research project is funded by SSHRC CGS-M Award and has been approved by Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board (REB # 6096). Art kits used in family interviews will be gifted to participants as a token of appreciation.

## Appendix ii: Information and Consent Form



Lyle S. Hallman  
Faculty of Social Work  
KITCHENER | Waterloo | Brantford | Toronto

### FAMILY EXPERIENCES OF MATERNAL INCARCERATION

Research conducted by Lauren Hawthorne (MSW Candidate) under the supervision of Dr. Bree Akesson (Wilfrid Laurier University)

#### WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

Lauren Hawthorne from Wilfrid Laurier University is conducting the research under the supervision of Dr. Bree Akesson.

#### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

This project aims to help us understand the experiences of Southern Ontario families who have placed children in the care of family members (formally or informally) during the incarceration of a mother in federal prison.

#### WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are being asked to participate because your family has been affected by the incarceration of a mother in federal prison in Southern Ontario. I want to hear your family's story.

#### DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

It is your choice to be in this study. If you decide that you do not want to be in this study, you can stop being in the study at any time by ending the interview.

#### WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO? WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE? AND HOW LONG IT WILL LAST?

I will interview your family between 30 minutes to one hour, asking questions about your family's experience before, during, and after the incarceration of a mother. We will interview you in your home or at an alternative location that you suggest, these may include the local library or recreation centre. Alternative locations must allow for privacy (for example, meeting rooms or spaces separated by doors). After I have reviewed the family interview, I will follow up with the substitute caregiver (family member who cared for the children during incarceration) to discuss any remaining questions. This will take 30 minutes to one hour.

#### IS ANYTHING GOING TO BE RECORDED?

If you agree, I will audio-record the family interview and the follow-up interview. This is to make sure that I get all of your answers to the questions right. The recording is important because it gives me a chance to understand your story, listening to it multiple times and capturing your words as you've said them. You will be asked to indicate whether you agree to be recorded. You can choose not to be recorded. You can still be part of the study if you do not want to be recorded. Children will be encouraged to draw pictures during the family interview. If children agree, I will photocopy the original drawings and return them to the caregiver at the time of the follow-up interview. Audio recordings and photocopied drawings will not be labelled with your family's name, and will be kept in a safe, private location.

#### WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?

There are no physical or medical risks from your taking part in this study. However, in speaking about yourself and your family's experiences, some personal issues may come up that may make you sad or upset. If this happens, you can choose not to answer a question, or you can also stop the interview at any time.



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**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO YOU BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

Results from the study will teach us more about the experiences of families that experience maternal incarceration and therefore lead to ways that can further support families and improve child well-being in this context. Information from this study will be shared with others, so they can learn more about how children and families handle the imprisonment of a mom. This study will not directly help your family. Whether or not you decide to be part of this study will not impact any services you receive in the community.

**WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

No, there is no compensation for being a part of this study. But the art kits used in the family interview will be offered to the family as a gift of thanks.

**WILL INFORMATION ABOUT YOU BE CONFIDENTIAL?**

What you say during the interview may be shared with others. However, if something you say is shared with others, I will make sure that you will not be identified. Your name will not be associated with the information you give me. This means that who you are will remain anonymous. You can agree to be a part of the research as a whole, but not have your words used in the research reports. All electronic records kept will be password protected. All written records will be stored in a locked file cabinet.

**WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?**

You can ask questions at any time. If you have questions about the study after the interview, you can contact me (Lauren Hawthorne) at [hawt7520@mylaurier.ca](mailto:hawt7520@mylaurier.ca) or my supervisor, Dr. Bree Akesson, at [bakesson@wlu](mailto:bakesson@wlu) or +1 519 756 8228 x5345. If you have any questions about your participation in this research study, please contact the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board Chair, Jayne Kalmar, PhD, at (519) 884-1970 x3131 or [REBChair@wlu.ca](mailto:REBChair@wlu.ca).

**Adult Consent:** *By checking off this box, I understand that taking part in this study is my choice, and I voluntarily agree to be in the study described above.*

<input type="checkbox"/> Adult/Parent #1 agrees to participate	<input type="checkbox"/> Adult/Parent #3 agrees to participate
<input type="checkbox"/> Adult/Parent #2 agrees to participate	<input type="checkbox"/> Adult/Parent #4 agrees to participate

**Child Assent:** *I was present when the study was explained to my child. My child is willing to take part. My child can withdraw from the study or any part of the study at any time. In my opinion, my child(ren) is/are willing to participate.*

The Adult/Parent agrees for his/her child(ren) to participate

**Child Consent (4):** *By checking off this box, I understand that taking part in this study is my choice, and I voluntarily agree to be in the study described above.*

<input type="checkbox"/> Child #1 agrees to participate	<input type="checkbox"/> Child #4 agrees to participate
<input type="checkbox"/> Child #2 agrees to participate	<input type="checkbox"/> Child #5 agrees to participate
<input type="checkbox"/> Child #3 agrees to participate	<input type="checkbox"/> Child #6 agrees to participate

Name of person obtaining consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix iii: Child Assent Form



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**FAMILY EXPERIENCES OF MATERNAL INCARCERATION**  
**Child Assent & Consent Script**

[CHILD'S NAME], My name is Lauren. I am a University student and I study social work. I am here to learn from your family today. I talked to your [GUARDIAN: Mom/Grandparent, Aunt, etc.], [NAME]. They told me it would be okay with you if you join in on our family interview today. But before we start, I want to make sure that you understand what we will be doing and that it *really truly* is okay with you.

**Q: What do you know about what we are going to talk about today?**

- Give the child an opportunity to explain their understanding of the topic
- Supplement or confirm their understanding, ensuring the following are covered:
  1. I am a student learning about how families work together during *the incarceration of a mother* \* [use the child's terminology here to ensure fidelity and understanding].
  2. I am asking your family questions because you have special knowledge about this.

**Q: What do you know about how I will be learning from your family today?**

- Give the child an opportunity to explain their understanding of the family interview process
- Supplement or confirm their understanding, ensuring the following are covered:
  1. Your family will talk to me all together, we will talk as a group.
  2. You can say as much or as little as you would like - you can even just sit and watch, if that is what you feel comfortable doing.
  3. Some children choose to use pictures to tell their family's story, rather than their words. You can use the art kit here to draw pictures. I may ask you to draw me more pictures or tell me about the ones you've drawn.

**Q: What do you know about what I will do with the information your family shares with me today?**

- Give the child an opportunity to explain their understanding of the research process
- Supplement or confirm their understanding, ensuring the following are covered:
  1. I will make sure your names are not connected to what we've talked about. Instead of your real names, we are going to use make believe names.
  2. I will record our conversation today using audio - but not visual camera. This means your voice will be recorded, but your image will not be. I am doing this so that I will be able to go back and listen to what you've told me. But remember - I won't be able to see you.
  3. I will be talking to other families too. After I talk to six families, I will study *all* of their stories about working together during *mom's incarceration* \* [use the child's terminology here to ensure fidelity and understanding]. I will be looking for what is the same and what is different in each family's story. Then, I will write a report explaining what I've learned.

**Q: Do you have any questions about what we've talked about, [CHILD'S NAME]?**

Answer any outstanding questions using appropriate language, confirming child's understanding following explanation.



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Your [GUARDIAN: Mom/Grandparent, Aunt, etc.], [NAME] has said it is okay for you to join us. What do you think, is this something you'd like to do?

**If assent is given:**

- Your [GUARDIAN: Mom/Grandparent, Aunt, etc.] checked a box on my form here saying they understand what we are doing and want to be a part of it. Would you like to check a box too?  
\*Note: This is not necessary, as parent consent and child assent is sufficient. However, the opportunity to provide child consent is offered as a measure of inclusion in the research process.
- Thank you for joining us, [CHILD'S NAME]. If you decide you don't want to be a part of our family interview once we get started, that's okay too. You can decide to stop at any time.

**If dissent is given:**

No problem. Your [PARTICIPATING FAMILY MEMBERS] are going to share your family's story with me, but you don't have to say or do anything at all. Since it's okay with your [GUARDIAN: Mom/Grandparent, Aunt, etc.], you can sit with us while we talk.

## Appendix iv: Interview Guide



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### FAMILY EXPERIENCES OF MATERNAL INCARCERATION

Research conducted by Lauren Hawthorne (MSW Candidate) under the supervision of Dr. Bree Akesson (Wilfrid Laurier University)

Review demographic information collected, oral confirmation of the details provided regarding family composition, potential custody arrangements, period of incarceration, etc. Discuss how they, as a family, talk about mom's experience of incarceration (ensure fidelity for child's understanding and comfort).

#### **Interview Questions & Prompts:**

**1. What was family life like before [insert the family's preferred terminology for the period of maternal incarceration] (i.e., mom went to prison/was away in jail/was incarcerated/got in trouble)?**

##### ***Child prompts:***

- Where did you live?
- Who did you live with?
- Who took care of you?
- How did they take care of you?
- How did family feel?
- What did family look like?

##### ***Mother/Caregiver prompts:***

- What was the family's composition at this time?
- Who was the primary caregiver during this time?
- What did family roles look like during this time?

**2. How did family life change when [insert the family's preferred terminology for the period of maternal incarceration] (i.e., mom went to prison/was away in jail/was incarcerated/got in trouble)?**

##### ***Child prompts:***

- Did you move from where you lived before?
- Who did you live with?
- Who took care of you?
- How did they take care of you?
- How was this time different from before [Insert family's preferred terminology for the period of maternal incarceration]?
- How did family feel?
- What did family look like?

##### ***Caregiver prompts:***

- How did your role in the family shift upon [Insert family's preferred terminology for the period of maternal incarceration]?
- How did the distribution of child care duties shift upon [Insert family's preferred terminology for the period of maternal incarceration]?

##### ***Mother prompts:***

- What was your involvement/contact with your family during this time?
- How did you feel incarceration impacted your family life and role as a mother?



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**3. How did family life change after [insert the family's preferred terminology for the period of maternal incarceration] (i.e., mom went to prison/was away in jail/was incarcerated/ got in trouble)?**

***Child prompts:***

- Where did you live?
- Who did you live with?
- Who took care of you?
- How did they take care of you?
- How did family feel?
- What did family look like?

***Mother/Caregiver prompts:***

- What was the family's composition at this time?
- Who was the primary caregiver during this time?
- What did family roles look like during this time?

Offer the participants a chance to share any information or significant experiences they feel were not captured by the questions posed.

Offer the chance to ask any questions about the research, their information, etc.

Remind caregiver that they will be contacted for a follow-up interview in the coming weeks.

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