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Exploring the Factors Influencing Family Members' Connections to Incarcerated Individuals

As the nation's incarceration rates reached their peak, researchers, scholars, and policy makers began to highlight several gaps in our understanding of and approach to studying incarceration. The role of prisoners' families has taken on added significance as scholars have highlighted the geographic concentration of incarceration and release, making some neighborhoods and communities particularly vulnerable to the challenges of reintegrating large numbers of former prisoners.

Along with geographic concentration, there is extreme racial disparity in which families and communities face the difficulties stemming from incarceration and subsequent prisoner reentry to communities. In New Jersey, 63% of adult, male inmates are black, and 18% are Hispanic. Nationwide, 7% of black children have an incarcerated parent, making the study of prisoners' families a crucial part of understanding the justice system's impact on diverse racial and ethnic groups.

Policy focused at understanding the barriers to preserving family ties to prisoners, addressing problems families face as they maintain connections, and strengthening ties that exist are crucial, particularly given evidence that the children of prisoners are at increased risk for delinquency and incarceration themselves. Strong family connections may decrease the likelihood of recidivism, facilitate the process of prisoner reentry into the family and communities, and may thereby decrease the likelihood of prisoner's children becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

The proposed study will examine how prisoners' connections to family members change over time by looking at five domains that could explain the family's attachments to the prisoner: (a) prisoner's relationship with the family prior to the incarceration, (b) prisoner's efforts to improve or rehabilitate himself while incarcerated, (c) strain incarceration has placed on the family, (d) economic resources available to the family to maintain the prisoner, and (e) family's social support system.

Life history calendars will form the basis of in-depth open ended interview questions. Data will then be coded to identify the patterns and themes that emerge as most salient in influencing prisoner's connections to family members. By looking at both the prisoner and the family, the study will identify the interaction between them and how the incarceration impacts the family's life, as well as how events in the family's life outside of the prison impact their connection to the prisoner. The project will also be used to access the feasibility of using life history calendars as a data collection tool for conducting large scale, quantitative research on families' relationships to prisoners.