Mothers of Inmates:
“Always Being There” in an Era of Mass Incarceration

by

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Mothers of Inmates is, of course, dedicated to my own mother – a woman who envisions, prays for, and works towards a world that supports and protects all mothers in the loving of their children. Mom, I have been shaped by your unconquerable admiration, fascination, and faith in the human species. You are the fairest, most forgiving, most inclusive person I will ever meet, and through this you have taught me to love myself and all others. Out of my gratitude for everything you and my Universe has provided me, I promise to keep humanity at the center of my work for the rest of my life. Thank you for always being on my side, for your absolute confidence in my abilities and my intentions, and for always, always being there.

Mom: Hello?

Kaitlin: Hi, Mom. It’s just me calling. I’m plugging in my new tape recorder through the cordless phone to see if it works.

Mom: That’s a smart idea.

Kaitlin: Great, well now we know this will work for my phone interview tomorrow.

Mom: Well, I want you know that I love you and that I’m really, really proud of you.

Kaitlin: Oh, thanks mom! I love you too!

Mom: Bye, Sweetie.¹

¹ Transcribed from a phone recording – June 17th, 2008.
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## BIBLIOGRAPHY
Introduction

This project is about mothers of the incarcerated, women who have been largely overlooked by academia and by society at large. In discussing the struggles and successes of mothers who want to retain an active presence in the lives of their imprisoned sons and daughters, I hope to bring attention to a population of women who feel systematically ignored by social services, public institutions, and the judicial system and ridiculed and blamed by the media and popular discourse.

This project is about human connection, love, and perseverance. It’s about re-recognizing the humanity contained within prison cells and acknowledging their loved ones on the outside. It’s about mothers who affirm the human worth of their children through their supportive, loving parenting. It’s the story of two very different women, both mothers of incarcerated sons, who wish to share their families’ stories with me and my readers.

This project is also about the political, cultural, and historical contexts in which mothers of inmates are operating. While my work is not explicitly about the prison-industrial complex or the judicial system, these structures shape the realities of the families I am writing about. To gain a better understanding, it is important to analytically explore the popular language, concepts, and stereotypes encircling those involved with American justice system as they actively shape the experience of inmates and their families.
We are living in an era of mass incarceration. With over 2.3 million people in prison, more than one percent of Americans are behind bars (U.S. Bureau of Justice 2009). In fact, the U.S. confines more prisoners than every single country in the world combined, considering 25 percent of the world’s inmates are Americans. Incarceration rates are increasing at an unprecedented pace; between 1980 and 1997 there was a 573 percent increase in imprisonment of men and 294 percent increase of women (Richie 2002). Accordingly, the government is spending more on corrections than ever before. It is estimated that 69 million dollars was spent in 2006 alone – seven times more than in 1980 when just nine million was allotted (U.S. Bureau of Justice 2009). As Hagan and Dinovitzer point out, “This growth in spending on prisons is almost certainly related to a decline in growth in other areas. California built about a prison a year, every year, for the past two decades, while in the same period it only added one university” (1999: 130). Accordingly, the state currently employs more correctional officers than it does social workers (Wacquant 2002).

Even a basic examination of who gets arrested and for what illuminates horrifying trends. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice, on the whole, crime rates have “steadily declined” since 1972. Since 1994, violent crime rates have been consistently decreasing and firearm-related crime has “plummeted” since 1993 with only a slight increase in 2005. In fact, drug-related crimes are the only offense that have been increasing in the last thirty years (U.S. Bureau of Justice 2009). Sixty percent of federal prisoners are held on drug-related charges, a nine-fold increase since 1980 (Blumstein and Beck 1999). Under the counter-intuition of the United
States “justice” system, less people are committing hard crimes, yet more people are getting arrested and are receiving longer sentences. Blumstein and Beck explain:

In most instances police have gotten no better at solving crimes, and as stats show, most crime rates have declined since the 1970s. What this means, simply, is that *imprisonment is becoming an increasingly popular punishment and sentence length is increasing*. . . For offences other than drugs, approximately 40 percent of the growth in incarceration in state prisons is accounted for by increases in decisions to incarcerate and approximately 60 percent of the growth by increases in time served by those sent to prison [added emphasis]. (1999: 41)

Despite the fact that Americans are committing less theft and violence than in the past, they are still significantly more likely to be imprisoned. The United States Bureau of Justice reports that in 2008 jails were at 94.8 percent capacity and currently populations are growing at an average of 2.2 percent per year (2009). Incarceration is becoming an increasingly popular choice; on average, the American citizen has an almost two percent chance of serving time behind bars in his lifetime.

The intense racial disparities in incarceration rates are impossible to overlook. Almost two-thirds of women in prison are minorities (Richie 2002). Over one half of black men ages 18 to 35 are “under some type of correctional supervision” and one out of ten are currently behind bars (Braman 2004). In contrast, two percent of white men are behind bars (Comfort 2007). On the whole, an African American man is five to seven times more likely to serve time that are whites (Comfort 2007). In July of 2008 it was reported that 42.5 percent of inmates were white, while 57.5 percent are men and women of color - categorized as either “black/African American”, “Hispanic/Latino”, “Other,” or “Two or more races” (U.S. Bureau of Justice 2009). In certain regions a staggering portion of the adult population are put in jail. David Braman calculates that if current trends remain in Washington D.C., 75 percent of the
city’s African American males will serve time behind bars at least once in their lifetime (2002).

These statistics reveal an unprecedented phenomenon with unknowable consequences. Imprisonment rates are increasing at such dramatic paces and with such gender, economic, and racial disparities that it is virtually impossible to predict the political, social, and cultural repercussions this will have on American life. Academics, theorists, and activists are just beginning to shed light on the impacts of mass incarceration. With such a far reaching, complex phenomenon it is difficult to even determine which questions to ask, however I hope illuminate a population of people so often overlooked in the discussion of mass incarceration in the United States – the mothers of incarcerated people.

I do not see the prison system as rehabilitative or just; it is a deeply racist and classist system that harms communities rather than protects them. As the data shows, it is America’s most vulnerable who are disproportionately put behind bars, and it seems to me that the real danger to society does not come from those who commit petty theft and small drug deals, but rather from a state that wages its monopoly of violence against its least advantaged citizens. I question modes of thought that relies on binaries for answering complex questions. “Guilty” and “innocent”, “victim” and “offender” - totalizing titles used to categorically distinguish between society’s “good” and “bad” - serve to prevent real, rehabilitative justice. When we use the absolute labels of right and wrong, we fail to ask the most meaningful questions about crime: Why did this happen? And what can be done to prevent it in the future? To ask
“who” is essential, clearly, but perhaps to ask “why” is the more constructive, rehabilitative response. The binary of white and black often does not tell the whole story, and I firmly believe that many of the answers we are seeking in criminal justice lie in the gray areas.

I wanted to conduct research that would explore a gray area, to look at a segment of society that is deeply affected by the burgeoning trend of mass imprisonment but that has previously been invisible. While throughout the last two decades academics and activists have done an admirable job examining the wide social forces such as issues of racism and the prison-industrial complex that have contributed to the lockup of so many, certain particularities have been overlooked (e.g. Miller 1996; Mauer 1999; Davis 2003; Gilmore 2007). Initially, in the spring of 2008, I wanted to research the lives of incarcerated mothers. I found a tremendous wealth of research on this subject (e.g. Beckerman 1989; Myers et al. 1999; Maritone 2005). Because the issue of where to place the dependent children of these mothers becomes a logistical and financial obstacle for the state, this dilemma has been examined for years, mostly in the fields of law and criminology, but also within sociology, public health, and psychology. Essentially, I could not find an unexplored realm in this area. In the midst of this research, prompted by Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s chapter on activist mothers in Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California (2007), I realized that I had not come across a single publication discussing the plight of parents with incarcerated children. I found thousands of articles on the lives of the children, husbands, and wives of prisoners, but none about parents.
And after months of research, having read dozens and dozens of articles about inmates and their families, a multitude of books about crime, parenting, and incarceration, and scanning hundreds of bibliographies, I have yet to find a single publication solely and specifically about the parents of inmates.

In recent years there has been an increasing amount of scholarship discussing the experiences of the families of prisoners. Very little of it, however, addresses parents. Social workers, psychologists, criminologists, sociologists and others writing about relatives of prison inmates usually only include spouses and children in their view of the family (e.g. Bakker and Morris 1978; Travis and Waul 2004; Light and Campbell 2006). Even articles specifically about prisoners’ families such as Creasie Finney Hairston’s “Family Ties During Imprisonment: Important to Whom and For What?” (1991) fails to mention the existence of parents of prisoners. The only ethnographically-based article that I am aware of that includes mothers and fathers of inmates in its discussion is “Problems of Prisoner’s Families: The Hidden Costs of Imprisonment” by Kathleen J. Ferraro written in 1983. Interestingly, none of the subsequent scholarship which cite her article address this aspect of her research and instead solely focus on spouses and children. However, “Who Are Prisoners’ Families?”, by Ian Paylor and David Smith, published in the Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law in 1994, sheds light on the scholarly neglect of parents of inmates. Paylor and Smith advocate for broadening the definition of inmate families to include parents, grandparents, and siblings. They write:

There has been a long-standing emphasis in research and policy in this field on the social consequences of imprisonment for prisoners’ partners and children. Necessarily, this focus entails the neglect of relatives of prisoners who have no partners or children. In reflects a view of what “family life”
means which is arguably outmoded for the population as a whole and is
certainly inappropriate for the prison population. It both excludes a majority
of prisoners and their relatives from consideration and tends to restrict
thinking about the impact of imprisonment on kin relationships solely to its
consequences for those who are left behind . . . (Paylor and Smith 1994: 131)

The authors go on to remark that many researchers and writers do in fact
acknowledge this gap in the discussion of prisoner families, yet they fail to actually
incorporate them into the discussion. I too have observed this in my own research.
“Even when researchers notice the limitation, they have tended to do so in passing, or
to treat it as an obstacle to be overcome before the important work can begin,” Paylor
and Smith write (1994: 133).

To my knowledge, there has been no anthropological ethnographic
scholarship on the mothers on inmates to date. Two of the more popularly cited
contemporary prison ethnographies, Megan Comfort’s Doing Time Together: Love
and Family in the Shadow (2007) and Lori B. Girshick’s Soledad Women: The Wives
of Prisoners Speak Out (1996) focus only on wives of prisoners. And as Comfort
reminds her readers, it is necessary to avoid conflating research on wives of prisoners
with other relatives because the role and performance of a heterosexual partner is
quite different than that of a maternal figure (2007: 8).

In his essay “The Curious Eclipse of Prison in the Age of Mass Incarceration”
(2002), sociologist Loïc Wacquant asserts that academic prison research declined,
unfortunately, in the 1980s when incarceration rates were beginning to rapidly rise.
“The ethnography of the prison thus went into eclipse at the very moment when it was
most urgently needed on both scientific and political grounds,” he writes [original
emphasis] (Wacquant 2002: 385). He argues that anthropologists tend to focus their
gaze on non-American sites, meaning that prison issues have been overlooked “in spite of the glaring carceral exceptionalism of the United States.” (Wacquant 2002, 387). I agree with Wacquant that European, especially British, academics have conducted much more in depth ethnographic research around the prison system than their American counterparts. While these works are partially useful, they are not fully applicable to the uniqueness of the American situation as these nations incarcerate much smaller portions of their populations. My highest hope is that my project illuminates the necessity of ethnographic research in this field.

Many of the key texts frequently cited in both academic and activist discourse critiquing the American justice system argue that the prison-industrial complex is the root cause of mass incarceration and rely upon economic arguments in their analyses (e.g. Mauer 1999; Davis 2003; Gilmore 2007). While there is some debate about its original inception, activist journalist Eric Schlosser brought the term “prison-industrial complex” into popular consciousness with his 1998 article published in the Atlantic Monthly. Citing President Eisenhower’s phrasing of the “Military Industrial Complex”, he describes:

Three decades after the war on crime began, the United States has developed a prison-industrial complex—a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need. The prison-industrial complex is not a conspiracy, guiding the nation’s criminal-justice policy behind closed doors. It is a confluence of special interests that has given prison construction in the United States a seemingly unstoppable momentum. (Schlosser 1998: 52)

Schlosser continues, “The prison-industrial complex is not only a set of interest groups and institutions. It is also a state of mind” (1998: 52). In her incredibly influential work Are Prisons Obsolete? (2003) prison activist and scholar Angela
Davis argues that the rapid rise in imprisonment can be attributed to the emergence of private companies that have “developed major stakes” in and profit from the prison industry (2003:87). “It was during the decade of the 1980s that corporate ties to the punishment system became more extensive and entrenched than ever before,” she writes (Davis 2003: 89). And it was this monetary interest that contributed to the “frenzied drive to build more and more prisons” (Davis 2003: 91). While I am in agreement that the state profits tremendously from the lockup of so many, I believe that we must move past the terms and restrictions of this neo-Marxist critique as it is more a criticism of capitalism than of anything else. We must frame mass incarceration as a human rights issue with symbolic significance that negatively impacts offenders and non-offenders alike, and to do this we must look closely and the humans involved.

Wacquant calls the prison industrial complex a “vague, catch-all notion that hides more than it reveals” and in many ways I agree with him (2002: 385). While the statistics I recalled are essential in demonstrating the enormity of mass incarceration in the United States, I believe that numbers, for the most part, obscure more than they illuminate. Ethnographic research in this field can better articulate the realities of the American prison system and those impacted by it. Upon embarking on this project I wanted to focus on several individuals whose stories would relay a more nuanced and personal perspective on the American prison system. In taking a qualitative, anthropological approach with my work, I hope to give a face (or several faces) to the 2.3 million inmates and their families. Allison and Susan, the two women who contributed to the bulk of my ethnographic research, cannot speak to the experience
of every mother of every inmate, but they can certainly represent their families and themselves.

**Methodology and Positionality**

Throughout *Mothers of Inmates* I seek to understand and analyze a wide array of perspectives on the topic of mothers of incarcerated children. In taking an interdisciplinary approach I cite economists, journalists, sociologists, social workers, legal scholars, historians, anthropologists, and popular authors. As there is an unfortunate lack in ethnographic work on or discussing prisons, I also look to journalistic articles, online discussion boards, internet chat rooms, popular crime books, and so forth. Although many prison theorists have done an admirable job at discussing the enormity of the state of incarceration in the United States, this scholarship does not necessarily help contextualize the personal stories I want to tell. Instead, I look to more popular avenues of discourse such as popular literature, television, and internet sites in order to ascertain contemporary narratives about both motherhood and criminality. Thus, *Mothers of Inmates* is informed by both previous academic work and public outlets. For instance, in *Chapter III*, I will look at the portrayal of the mother of infamous killer Charles Manson on the website of a crime show television network. I believe this type of analysis is important, as these popular narratives inform society’s broad conceptions of prisoners and their families and shape the context that mothers of prisoners are operating within.
During my initial research I came across a dynamic and diverse web community, Prison Talk Online. This active online forum, with over 180,000 registered members, seeks to provide logistical and emotional support to people navigating the complexities and obscurities of the prison system. Prison Talk has a tremendously wide range of discussion forums with titles ranging from “The Drug War”, “Loving a Violent Offender”, “Recidivism and Re-Entry” to lighter topics such as “Cooking & Recipes”. There are forums for each American state and for international regions such as “Africa and the Middle East Prison Forums” and one for Caribbean nations. The site’s welcome page describes the network as a “Global Communications, Support & Information Nexus for Inmates’ Families and Friends”.

It reads:

The Prison Talk Online web community was conceived in a prison cell, designed in a halfway house, and funded by donations from families of ex-offenders, to bring those with an interest in the prisoner support community a forum in which their issues and concerns may be addressed by others in similar circumstances and beliefs. Inside the PTO web community you will be able to find support from others who are dealing with, or have been down the same dark road you may currently find yourself, information resources & tools to aid your in achieving your goals, and most importantly, a place to communicate and share your stories. There is no worse feeling than that of being alone and helpless. This applies to the families of those who are incarcerated just as much as it does to those behind the walls. PTO’s goal is to bridge the communication barrier that exists in and around the criminal “justice” system today and bring everyone in the prisoner support community closer together to effect change in policy, prisoner rights, sentencing and so much more. Please come in and join us!

I found myself saddened and captivated by the forum “Parents with Children in Prison: For the parents of prisoners” and it was one of the initial inspirations for this project. This online network creates a space for these parents to express their fears,
anger, confusion, and triumphs as they and their children negotiate the complicated, opaque, and nonsensical court and prison systems.

In order to pursue ethnographic research I sought interviewees on the Prison Talk forum. Aware of the deeply personal, emotional, and potentially legally fraught natures of these conversations, I was initially very hesitant. Although it is an open forum, available for anyone online to read without a password or username, I understood that this was a space, founded upon ideas of commonality, where its users felt safe. I am not a mother of a prisoner, I am not even a mother; I was an outsider and I knew this. On May 29th I posted this on the forum:

Hello all!
I wanted to introduce myself. My name is Kaitlin and I'm a 20 year old college student in Connecticut. I found this forum because I am doing research for my senior thesis.

I knew that I wanted my senior thesis to be about the prison system, because it is a system that I think is deeply flawed and that many of the struggles of inmates and their families are not discussed openly in society. When I started my research I found this forum and started reading this thread for parents with incarcerated children. I was deeply touched and read stories from moms and dads who were confused, scared, and didn’t know where to turn to for help, but I also saw this forum as a really unique and supportive community, full of love and prayer.

I know that I am an outsider in this forum and I wanted to announce myself. I understand that this is a safe space and if you would like to me leave I understand completely and would gladly do so.

This summer I am in California and looking for mothers who would like to meet me and share their experiences. I understand that this is a private and emotional thing. I can promise you confidentiality and sensitivity. All my interviews would be completely anonymous and if I published any of your words I would get your approval first. I understand that I am an outsider, but I would really like to get to know this community and to understand your struggles and your successes. I want to shed light on your very specific experiences and to bring wider understanding and support. I also want to write about support groups that help mothers with children in prison, so if you would like to pass any information along to me in that regard I was greatly,
greatly appreciate it.

Please contact me if you are in California and are interested in talking with me. I'd also love to email with you if you are in a different state. Please let me know if this post is over-stepping boundaries - I want to respect this space.

Kindly,
Kaitlin

Within less than ten minutes, four women had responded to my post – all with great enthusiasm and gratitude. I was appreciative and astounded by the trust these women showed me, and for the first time I felt confident in my research topic. The first woman responded by writing:

I like the fact that you have chosen to understand so feel free to [private message] me with any questions. If we have to tell our stories one person at a time so be it, because that is one more person who's working with us, everyone matters.
GOD bless

Another wrote:

I think this needs to get out in the publics eye. Thank you for picking this as your subject. Susan

As an anthropologist, my highest goal is to tell the stories of those who wish to have their voices heard, for those who are overlooked to be acknowledged. I was thrilled that I had stumbled across a group of mothers who desired just this. At the same time, however, I became worried. I was concerned that I might be offering false hopes or making promises I could not keep. While yes, I did “want to shed light on [their] very specific experiences, to bring wider understanding and support”, I am simply an undergraduate and this is my first lengthy anthropological work. I could not guarantee

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2 This quote and all others from online message boards are un-edited and contain the author’s original punctuation, grammar, and spelling.
to create tangible change, I could only promise to write about their experiences in the
most ethical, humane, and accurate way I knew how.

One Michigan woman posted this in response to my outreach letter:

If you wanna fly me in from Michigan to have lunch, I think I can work you
into my busy <yawn> schedule! Naturally, I'll have to stay at only the best
hotel in Beverly Hills....
Sorry, Kait -- I couldn't resist. I have no will power! There! I said it!

Her post caused me to think about how I had represented myself in my initial
introduction. In attempt to portray myself accurately, I explained that I was young, a
resident of both California and Connecticut, and an honors college student. This
mother’s response illuminates the way in which she, and perhaps others, perceived
my class and position. She associated California with the one of wealthiest zip-codes
in America, Beverly Hills, and on the basis of my self-description as a college student
she assumed I was a person of financial resources. Her joking made me more aware
that because we were initially communicating only online, my self-description and
representation mattered a great deal, as other markers of class, attitude, intention, and
so forth were not visible or audible.

Approximately twelve mothers and one father contacted me during this time,
however none led to in depth interviews. These respondents only felt comfortable
communicating electronically at this time. For instance, one mother from Kansas
explained to me that her seven year old daughter does not know that her older brother
is imprisoned and was afraid she might overhear our conversation if we were to speak
on the phone. Mostly, these Prison Talk users emailed me brief paragraphs describing
their sons’ and one daughter’s offences and sentences. While my first instinct was to
think, “But I want to know her story”, what I quickly realized was for these mothers,
their sons’ experiences were their stories. They were inseparable. Their sons’ suffering were their suffering.

Due to a delay with Wesleyan’s human subjects research approval process, it was several months after my initial posting on Prison Talk before I began my interviews. When I was given the go-ahead, I posted the identical recruitment letter that I had posted in May in order to introduce myself to any new users. Once again I received responses within minutes but this time with an extremely different tone. I woke up the next morning to a flood of angry and skeptical emails in my inbox from mothers from the forum. Underneath my post, one mother, in all capital letters wrote that there was NO WAY IN HELL I WOULD USE HER SON’S PAIN TO GET AN ‘A’ ON A PAPER. Many followed with similar responses. A handful of times it was suggested that I was a reporter looking for inside stories and quotes for an investigative report; one suggested I was writing for the New York Times. Someone speculated that I was conducting espionage for a District Attorney. Mostly, I was told that I could never understand the pain of these women and that all efforts would be fruitless. Anxious, defensive, and a little discouraged I tried my best to re-articulate my project, promise anonymity and privacy with all my interviews, and ease fears. This time, I was constructed as a self-interested and perhaps malicious outsider, not to be trusted. Asking my own mother, a constant source of support through this project, she advised, “Just keep reinstating your intention, Kaitlin.”

3 Most unfortunately, the Prison Talk forum server crashed and all web interactions from June 1st through the end of July were lost; this included these communications.
These negative responses were closer to what I had been expecting the first time I posted, however after the surprisingly supportive responses I initially received, I was taken aback. It seemed that any and every ethical question I had pondered hypothetically in my anthropology courses were confronting me: *Who was I to be asking deeply personal questions of strangers? Could I promise accurate and sensitive representation? In an online forum, how could they be sure I was who I said I was? And, at the end of the day - or on April 14th, 2009 - wouldn’t my ultimate goal be for my paper to receive an ‘A’?*

I attempted to write a calm and compassionate response. I wrote that these women were very right in a lot of respects – that I am an academic and have an interest in the outcome of my paper. I expressed that their concerns about anthropology were ones that I also had a lot of days. I attempted to refrain from passive-aggressiveness and explained that if I were looking for an easy ‘A’, then this topic was a foolish one for me to choose, and that if I were a spy or *New York Times* reporter I would not have announced my presence as an outsider since anyone with internet access can read the forum. I listed sample questions I was anticipating on asking such as, “What does motherly love mean to you?” and “What do you wish people knew about inmates and their families?” Many users expressed appreciation for this clarification, electronically “thanking” me with a thumbs-up symbol. Articulating some of my research questions eased fears and helped me to reiterate that I was not looking to write an exposé that ridiculed or blamed them for their situations.

This dialogue produced around forty posts and it truly saddens me that these conversations were lost due to technological failure. These women’s responses
challenged me and my beliefs about the meaningfulness and usefulness of ethnography and academia. As I was questioned I came to realize that I do believe in the importance of this work and this topic and that I was willing to have uncomfortable conversations in order to reach the mothers who felt they wanted to have their voices heard. As I wrote in my initial recruitment post, I was willing to cease my research on Prison Talk if that was requested of me. Although many women seemed skeptical of me and perhaps at times angry, notably not one user asked me to stop reading or posting on their forum.

Retrospectively, the dichotomous types of responses I received make sense, particularly in terms of authority. In some ways I could be read as embodying less authority – I was a novice at Prison Talk, I am young, and I am female. Many told me that I was a “sweet girl” and they would be happy to help me with my “school report”. But on the other hand, my initial introduction was full of class markers. I am from Southern California, receiving a Bachelors degree from a four year college in Connecticut. Given my scholarly intentions I was perceived as an authority. I was aware that this was going to come across in my introduction as I attempted to be honest and upfront in my self-description.

What is very clear to me now is that the dual responses to my identical postings were immensely informative in my ethnographic process. I believe they simultaneously reflect the fears mothers of prisoners have about how they are portrayed in society, but that some also a want to have their lives and stories heard and sensitively represented. As one poster wrote:

Kaitlin thank you...as parents we find that “outsiders” usually are not only unwilling to view our plight, but would rather ignore or joke about the subject in
most unkind ways. We are all grateful for the opportunity to share with those who don't know, perhaps your thesis will open some tightly closed eyes. Thank you for your interest.

As the mothers of prisoners, amongst each other, write about the immense lack of societal understanding or support, there is a very understandable fear of “outsiders”, especially of any institutional professionals. These are women who feel they have suffered terrible consequences of an inhumane and pervasive prison system. They feel manipulated, mislead, and misrepresented by lawyers, probation officers, and the media. For instance, one interview explained to me:

It always kills me when I see the mothers on the news or even the families. They’re human too. A lot of times they’re all lumped into the same group you know, “You raised the child, you must be a horrible person too.” I really wish they would learn. And I think, reading [the responses to your online] threads and whatnot and the way people were reacting – we’re very cautious about what we say because we’re afraid it’s going to backlash on us that we were awful parents. But we weren’t. We did the best we could.

These families, for the most part, feel damaged and forgotten by America’s systems and it is only reasonable that they perceived me, an academic operating from a university, as someone who may reproduce or take advantage of their pain.

For a long time I have considered myself a “prison activist”. I advocate for increased fairness, transparency and sensitivity in America’s criminal justice system. In high school I worked on several death penalty abolition projects and worked to educate my school and local community on the racism and cruelty so entwined in that practice. In college, through activist clubs and independent research, I became aware of the prison-industrial complex, the obvious racism and classism in our sentencing practices, and I want this to change. I think imprisonment should be a final option in
sentencing practices, not the first. Currently, I am a mentor at Connecticut Juvenile Training School, a detention center in Middletown, Connecticut.

I was born into a family that provided me with significant financial and cultural capital and mobility; I am a white college-educated woman. None of my close family members have gone through the criminal system or have spent time in prison. Given my background, I think the first assumption would be that prisoners’ lives and the experiences of their families are completely unrelated to me. Considering my demographic is one of the least represented in prison, this is partially true. But when we look at the facts that America’s prison population has quadrupled since 1970, that more than one in one-hundred (2.3 million) adults are currently behind bars, and that 47 million people have permanent criminal records, it becomes clear that the prison system is relevant to my life simply by the fact that I am an American citizen.

**Susan and Allison**

In my online research I engaged with perhaps fifteen mothers and one father of incarcerated individuals. Most of these communications were online, via message boards, private messaging, and emailing. After seeing my recruitment letter online, six women expressed interest in the process, however only two participated in in-depth interviews. I emailed with Allison and Susan and spoke with them on the phone several times before our full-length interviews.⁴ Our interviews lasted over an hour and were tape-recorded. I later transcribed our conversations and, with their consent,  

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⁴ Their names and the names of their sons have been changed.
they are quoted throughout my thesis. My interviewees signed consent forms in which explained that I would be quoting from the interviews in my final work, that names would be changed, that there was no financial compensation for their participation, and that they were in no way obligated to answer any question they felt uncomfortable with.

Susan is a Presbyterian minister in Pennsylvania and a divorced mother of three sons. Her eldest, Adam has been incarcerated since 2005 and is expected to be released in 2015. He is charged with conspiracy for child pornography. She explains:

He was charged with conspiracy. Conspiracy is one of those charges that you cannot defend yourself against because if you – conspiracy essentially says you didn’t do the crime, you just knew about it. And then the prosecutor says, “Well if you were friends with these people and you didn’t know about it, we’ll charge you with Willful Blindness and you’re guilty anyway.” So no matter what you do you’re guilty. Once you’re charged with conspiracy there’s no hope. There’s no way to defend yourself against the charge of conspiracy. So that was like a new revelation to me that in this country you could be charged with a crime where there is no hope of winning the case. The person who was guilty was Adam’s childhood friend who we had known since he was two years old and so of course he knew him, of course he was with him a lot, but Adam did not know the extent of what this other boy was doing. . . There were three checks that had exchanged hands between my son and this other kid. There was no way to say what those checks were for. They were not large amounts of money; they were small. And the other child is charged with child pornography.

Susan has a Masters in theology and says she relies on both her education and her faith to cope with Adam’s imprisonment. She told me, “I believe Adam will have opportunities to be the kind and accepting and gracious person that he is. And that’s part of my faith too. I don’t think God sent him there, but I think God will use him there. And the rituals of my faith are comforting and supporting.” On the helpfulness

5 The transcripts of my full-length interviews are found in the Appendix A and Appendix B.
of her education she said, “I think my education in psychology and pastoral care has
helped me think about what Adam needs and have orchestrated the family.”

Susan was quick to send me a private message after my second recruitment
posting when other users were questioning my intentions and posted on the forum
advocating for my project. She told me over the phone, “I just thought, ‘This poor
girl. What are they doing to her and why?’ when they were attacking you.”. Susan
was very open to the interview process and quite comfortable with me tape recording
our conversations and the consent form, as she explained to me she used a similar
method in research for her Masters dissertation.

Allison, a resident of Massachusetts and a former nurse, is the mother of two
sons and one daughter. Her middle son Seth has been in prison for two and a half
years. His father was arrested seventeen years ago and the family has had very little
contact with him since. She explains Seth’s arrest:

I don’t tell many people this, but our story’s very different. Seth came to me
and told me that he thought he was turning into his father [tearfully]. Seth had
come to me one night. I had just gone to bed and he came in and he says, “I
think I have a problem. I think I’m turning into my father.” You know which
is like, “No, no. You’re nothing like your father, you never have been, you
don’t even have his personality.” He straight out told me what he had done
and my first thing was okay we’re going to get help and I asked him, “Do you
want help for this?” And he says, “Yeah I need help. I need to get away.” And
so we had gone down to a mental health hospital which didn’t do emergency
intake and they immediately called the police and he was arrested that night
and he has not been out since.

I did not ask Allison or any of the other parents I communicated with about the
charges against their children, although many offered this information to me. I do not
know what Seth was charged with, but I do not believe that this detracts from the
poignancy of Allison’s interview, as this project is more about motherhood than it is about criminality.

Allison explained to me that most difficult aspect of her son’s imprisonment is his lack of access to the mental health services she feels he needs:

Now that I see with Seth, I am seeing that there really isn’t any help in the prison system at all even though they claim there is. I mean, he was court ordered to do programs that we had already had set up for him at County and these programs are not even available to him at the prison where he is . . . it just doesn’t make sense at all.

Although she finds Seth’s imprisonment an extremely painful ordeal she finds that their relationship has actually improved since his arrest:

But since he’s been arrested, he has started opening up and he does talk to me, talk openly, which he was always kind of an introvert anyway. So being able to talk and talk openly the best that we can over the phone or even in the visiting room, we’ve actually gotten closer.

She finds support in a therapist, the Prison Talk forums, and her youngest son.

Summary

In Chapter I, I explore American concepts of “good” motherhood. By providing a brief historical overview of this concept I contextualize current cultural narratives surrounding proper motherhood. I argue that mothers hold a unique position in society as they are assumed to be the best caregivers for their children. As motherhood is conflated with womanhood, mothers are expected to be nurturing, protective, and domestic. I assert that the tropes of needing to “always be there” for one’s child and “unconditional love” are both characteristic and imperative in the performance of proper motherhood and women who fail to do this are typically labeled bad mothers. Women posting on the Prison Talk forum for parents express
feelings of unity and sameness based on their common identity as mothers. Reiterating their unconditional love for their imprisoned children is a common theme on the forum.

In *Chapter II* I discuss some of the ways current prison practices make “always being there” an arduous task for mothers and families of inmates. Prisons are heavily guarded facilities and the flow of information and bodies is tightly regulated. Simply staying in touch with a son or daughter is emotionally and financially taxing. I discuss the main financial burdens such as lawyer bills, phone bills, and travel distances - considerable costs which drain the resources of typically already disenfranchised families. I extend this by taking an analytical look at the costs to prisoners’ communities. In doing so, I hope to show that the notion of the “isolated prisoner” is a myth and that there are many unintended negative consequences to mass incarceration. Finally, I examine the place of mothers of imprisoned people within the context of the guilty/innocent binary, concluding that mothers are typically seen as neither fully innocent nor fully guilty and are read as ambiguous bodies in society.

Throughout *Chapter III*, I take a critical look at mother blame and categories of victimhood in the discourses about incarceration and criminality. It is important to examine the history of mother blame in America as well as its current state because this shapes the context in which inmates’ mothers are operating. As articulated in *Chapter I*, mothers are typically seen as the most influential and important figure in a child’s life, and thus they are seen as the root cause of criminality. The media as well as the fields of psychology, social work, and criminology often correlate criminality
with improper parenting. I am interested in popular representations of families of
prisoners as I see these as contributing to their fears of stigmatization. I discuss the
incessant quest to blame mothers for the misdeeds of their children and why this is a
misguided approach to crime analysis.

Finally, in Chapter IV, I refer to imprisonment as a form of social and civic
death. For too long these deaths have gone unnoticed. I assert that this is indicative of
the way prisoners are not popularly conceived as fully human. By examining
imprisonment through the perspective of the loving mother, I hope to shed light on a
population of people who are largely ignored in society. I argue that we must re-
define prisoners as human and accordingly, treat them as such.

In sum, as I illuminate the hardships that mothers of inmates must face upon
the incarceration of their children, I demonstrate that mass incarceration does not
simply impact criminals. The punitive, “tough on crime” mentality prevalent in
America is only logical if one adheres to a strict binary framework – good/bad,
innocent/guilty, insider/outsider. When we see that the prison system has massive
unintended consequences, causing great damage to families and communities, then
we can begin to take a different approach to sentencing practices. I decided to narrow
my discussion of families of inmates to mothers not only because of lack of previous
research, but also because I feel mothers illuminate some of the oft-ignored
complexities of incarceration. I hope my inquiry illuminates one of the many ways in
which our system of imprisonment does not simply apply to “criminals” but that it
negatively impacts the lives of all Americans.
Chapter I - “Always Being There”: Historical and Contemporary Understandings of Motherly Love in America

Emotions are both public and private, psychological and political. They are both historically and socially constructed and yet organically manifested. The case of motherly love perfectly illustrates this phenomenon. “Emotions are both personal, deeply private events and public ideological constructs, as the rhetoric of mother love, and its absence, illustrates,” writes anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992: 412). In my initial research of the Prison Talk Online forum for parents of prisoners I was struck by the reoccurring term “motherly love”, a shared concept that allows moms communicating online to feel united. The assumption that all mothers have something in common due to their indestructible feelings of love for their children reoccurs in many of the online discussions and certainly appeared throughout my interviews. In my research I wanted to understand what this term means. I have come to realize that I cannot understand or articulate what a mother feels for her child, but I can describe how this is articulated and performed. Similarly, the mothers I conversed with resisted defining the emotion(s) of motherly love, and instead explained the methods in which they perform this emotion; “always being there” and their willingness to “talk about anything” with their children are the key ways in which they fulfill their roles as loving mothers. In this way, we see that mothering can be analyzed as a series of actions rather than sentiments, although certainly to be a mother is often an emotional role. “Emotions, then, are wrongly seen as necessarily passive or involuntary responses to the word. Rather, they are ways in which we engage actively and even construct the world,” philosopher Allison Jaggar says.
Their motherly love is the motivation behind the actions they take and it is these actions that I hope to describe.

Anthropologists describe motherhood as a performance of socially, culturally, and historically constructed norms, rejecting the explanation that motherly love is biologically based. “Mother love is anything other than natural and instead represents a matrix of images, meanings, sentiments, and practices that are everywhere socially and culturally produced,” states Scheper-Hughes (1992: 341). The notion that the definition of a “good” mother is both culturally subjective and constructed, challenges our core beliefs about this familial role. After all, motherly love is said to be inherent and indestructible. It is undeniable that the relationship between birthmother and her child is based in biological realities; they were once literally connected, and I believe that it is often difficult for people to be analytical about a relationship that appears so biological and fundamental. As feminist philosopher Elisabeth Badinter writes, “To be told that mother love is not an innate impulse but a free choice, a gift that can be given and withdrawn at will, confronts each of us with the fearsome possibility that we might have been born into a voice of indifference,” (1980: ix). Mother-child relationships, however, are not consistent across space and time. Badinter writes:

Motherlove is a human feeling. And, like any feeling, it is uncertain, fragile, and imperfect. Contract to many assumptions, it is not a deeply rooted given in women’s natures. When we observe the historical changes in maternal behavior, we notice that interest in and devotion to the child are sometimes in evidence, sometimes not. (1980: xxiii)

Not only is motherhood cultural, but it is also political as mothers are seen as the main transmitters of national and civic values. They are charged with the responsibility of raising productive, law-abiding citizens and are often blamed when
Thus, motherhood is a cultural and political apparatus, as well as an emotional, familial role.

Gender is central to the concept of motherhood; universally women have historically been the primary caretakers for children (Ortner 1974). Anthropologists have argued that the female sex has become conflated with motherhood based upon assumptions that, due to their physical ability to bear children, women are best suited for this role. For instance, Nancy Chodorow contends, “That this [mother] relationship continues with the natural mother in most societies stems from the fact that women lactate. For convenience, and not because of biological necessity, this has usually meant that mothers, and females in general, tend to take care of all babies” (2001: 82). Hence, she argues that because women both birth and nurse babies, they are seen as naturally suited to be mothers. She suggests, however, that this is an idea based in inaccurate biological assumptions and that men are just as physically, mentally, and emotionally equipped to raise children. Rather, motherhood is socially constructed as a purely female role. Anthropologist Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo points out, “...biology becomes significant only as it is interpreted by human actors and associated with characteristic modes of action” (1974: 23). So it is not a universal fact that women are in fact better equipped to raise children, but rather due to their physical reproductive capabilities, they are interpreted as such.

To frame the role of motherhood as both socially produced and utilitarian goes against our popular narratives, considering that one of the main tropes about motherly

\[\text{\textsuperscript{6}}\text{ For an in depth discussion of mother-blame in America, please refer to Chapter III.}\]
love is that it is an unmatched, innate, and indestructible sentiment. Feminist theorists argue that if society can frame domestic motherhood as natural, then this role becomes indisputable; the domestic realm becomes “natural” for women and cannot be questioned or reexamined. For instance, sociologist Carol Smart explains:

Motherhood is not a natural condition. It is an institution that *presents* itself as a natural outcome of biologically given gender differences, as a natural consequences of (hetero)sexual activity, and as a natural manifestation of an innate female characteristic, namely the maternal instinct . . . Motherhood is still largely treated as a given and as a self-evident fact rather than as the possible outcome of specific social processes that have a historical and cultural location which can be mapped. (1996: 37)

To view the role of motherhood as a social construct is not to deny the reality, importance, or genuine emotion around this role, but rather this allows us to look analytically and constructively at the norms that surround it.

In this chapter I will explore past and present notions of “good” motherhood and motherly love in the United States. American mothers have specific cultural expectations that influence the way they perform the role of motherhood and I see these as informing the ways in which they relate to their incarcerated children. I take a look at Yvette, a woman who terminated her adoption of a toddler, reasoning that her lack of innate motherly love for the boy made her an improper mother as well as the ensuing criticism of her. Throughout my research, mothers cited that “always being there” is the most important method of performing unconditional love for their children. This is particularly poignant in the case of moms of prisoners, as the incarceration system makes this nearly impossible. It is important to understand this notion of “always being there” for one’s child as it helps illuminate how and why
mothers endure and overcome the significant emotional, financial and physical stresses that come with loving an inmate.

A Brief History of Motherhood in the America

In early nineteenth century America, the dominant gender ideology was the “cult of true womanhood”, which deemed women pure, pious, and domestic. Previously, from the 1620s until the 1700s, fathers had been primarily in charge of the family unit as women were seen as “emotionally inconsistent and physically and intellectually inferior” (Eyer 1996: 36). In this era women’s bodies were seen as “saturated with evil lust”, and as children were the literal manifestation of this tainted desire, patriarchy took precedence (Silva 1996). However, as narratives shifted and women were viewed as holier and less sinful than men, mothers were placed in charge of the upbringing and religious education of their children. As Elizabeth Hall, nineteenth century evangelist told American mothers, “The destiny of a redeemed world is put into your hands” (quoted in Lewis 1997: 54).

This message became powerful as it developed in tandem with the notion that children’s ethical characters were shaped in the early years of their lives. Historian Jan Lewis explains, “Why, in the nineteenth century, was this responsibility shifted to women? Much of the answer lies in the growing belief that the work of moral education had to begin even earlier, for the child’s character was formed in the early years, while it was still in the mothers care” (1997: 43). As personality and morals were seen as firmly established early in one’s life, mothers were responsible for the religious education and ethical development of their children - two concepts that were
deeply intertwined. An 1833 issue of *Mothers Magazine* read, “It is the province of the mother to cultivate the affections, to form and guard the moral habits of the child, for the first ten years of its life, and to all intents and purposes the character of the man or women is substantially laid as early as that period of life” (quoted in Lewis: 55).

Of course connected to the aspiration of raising good Christians is the idea fostering good citizens. By instilling the fundamentals of Christianity, it was assumed that children, especially sons, would have the necessary foundation for being productive, hard-working, well-behaved citizens. Bandinter explains:

> There was a new awareness that the mother’s function went beyond the biological to the moral; it was her duty to raise a good Christian and a good citizen, a person who would benefit himself and society. What was new was that the mother was now considered the person in the best possible position to take on these tasks. It was “nature”, they said, that assigned her these duties. (1980: 205)

Thus the mother became both a religious and political tool, as she was seen as the transmitter for social values, particularly ones that would benefit the state. Moreover, it was her supposed gendered attributes that best suited her for this role.

This new emphasis on the importance of motherhood resulted in the cultural belief that a good mother should be consistently present, both emotionally and physically, in the life of her child. “Beginning at the 18th century, a new image of the ideal mother began to emerge, and the features would be molded into increasingly accentuated forms over the next two centuries. The era of the ‘proofs of love’ had begun. The baby and the child would become the center of the mother’s attention. The woman would agree to sacrifice herself…” Bandinter writes (1980: 169). Not only does “always being there” supposedly reinforce the foundational character of
children, but it proves a mother’s inherent love for her child. Omnipresence would demonstrate that the child was her first priority and become symbolic of her unconditional love.

As the notion that maternal love was inherent and indestructible developed in the nineteenth century, constant attention to the child became an imperative. Badinter explains that remaining in the home and performing acts of domesticity became a requirement for good mothers. “Maternal fondling, freedom of the body, and clean linens are proofs of a new love for the baby. In order to provide all of this, the mother had to dedicate her life to her child. The ‘woman’ disappeared behind the ‘good mother’, whose responsibilities extended further and further” (Badinter 1980: 173). Hence, domesticity became conflated with the performance of good motherhood – both female realms. In other words, motherhood and womanliness were now inextricable.

Contemporary Understandings of Motherhood

Throughout the twentieth century and into the present, mothers are still seen as the most influential force in the lives of their children. When large numbers of middle class women entered the work force during World War II, social scientists, psychologists, and social commentators warned that the absence of mothers in the home would produce maladjusted children. “Always being there” was the best way to ensure proper childhood development. During this time theories of attachment became incredibly popular with child psychologists, pediatricians, and popular authors. Based in the notion that an infant would become afraid and thus traumatized
at the absence of her mother, the narrative developed that constant attention from the mother was imperative (Eyer 1996). Peggy Cooper Davis, scholar of family law and ethics, describes this phenomenon:

Psychological parent theorists traced the developmental harms of separation from infancy through adulthood, arguing that at each phase of growth, separations impaired the child’s successful accomplishment of age-appropriate developmental tasks by removing the context of security and uninterrupted support out of which the child might comfortably take developmental initiatives. In describing the hypothesized harms of separation in infancy, psychological parent theorists seemed to take the concept of “uninterrupted support” quite literally. (1999: 260)

These ideas were taken to an extreme and are used to justify relegating women to the domestic sphere. A “good” mother had to be omnipresent for her child, otherwise she was jeopardizing his or her psychological development. Hence, “always being there” became a moral imperative.

It is important to recognize that the cultural demand of “always being there” as the defining action of good motherhood sets up any woman who cannot feasibly do this for perceived failure. For instance, in “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture”, Patricia Hill Collins writes, “. . . the assumption that motherhood and economic dependency on men are linked and that to be a ‘good’ mother, one must stay home, making motherhood a full-time ‘occupation’, is un-characteristic of African-American families” (1994: 4). Thus, this definition of “good” mothering systematically leaves out many African American mothers as well as other minorities and women lacking financial capital. If the conception of good motherhood includes always being there, this means that any working mother will be perceived as instantly failing in her duties. Furthermore, it cannot be ignored that notions of good parenting are clearly classed and racialized. For instance, a white mother may be looked down
upon for “choosing” to work outside the home, while a black mother might be labeled “welfare queen” for being a stay-at-home mom. Also, the trope of always being there and its significance is not consistent across economic classes; sending a child to an elite boarding school is applauded, sending a working class toddler to daycare is not.

_A “Bad” Mother in Popular Conscience: Representation and Response_

“Why after waiting years for a baby, I gave my adopted son back”, an article that appeared in the _Daily Mail_ on November 14th, 2008, offers interesting insights into Western popular conceptions of proper motherhood. In 2007, after multiple attempts to conceive a biological child, a 39 year old British woman named Yvette adopted a two year old boy, Ben. Two weeks after he arrived at her home, in conjunction with social service workers, it was decided that it was best to terminate the adoption and return the toddler to foster care. In the interview Yvette explains that the reason for this was that she did not bond immediately with her new son. This defied her expectations of motherhood because of her inability to feel instant love towards him, a necessary component of motherhood. In essence, she felt she was ill-equipped to be this boy’s mother. In the interview she is quoted:

_I have a very strong memory of looking at him in the first couple of days that he was with us, and thinking: “He didn’t come from me.” I felt no bond with him whatsoever. I loved him in the abstract, but not inside. Clearly I hadn’t expected this to happen, or I wouldn't have spent two years struggling to reach that point._ (quoted in Knight 2008)

The article goes on to articulate that Yvette went through the motions of being a good mother. She fed and clothed him. Each night she kissed him on the forehead as she tucked him into his bed in his well-decorated nursery. She would say “I love you” to
Ben, but she never felt it was genuine. She says she cared for him “perfectly well” in
the physical sense, “going through the motions”, but lacked a feeling of bond and
innate love. Smart’s work sheds light on Yvette’s response:

Thus the good mother was no longer simply the one who fed and cleansed
properly, she would be inadequate if she failed to love properly and to express
this love in the correct fashion. (1996: 47)

From this one can gather that Yvette felt that tending to his physical needs was not
enough; a good mother loves her child innately. This lack of motherly love lead her to
determine that she was an unfit mother for her newly adopted son.

Two weeks into the adoption, during a standard check-in with a social service
worker, Yvette broke down crying and confessed her self-doubts. The article
describes the proceeding events:

Matters came to a head just two weeks after Ben arrived, when a health visitor
arrived for a routine check. “She instantly knew something was wrong,”
Yvette says. “We started talking and I burst into floods of tears. It all came
flooding out.” Events moved rapidly: Yvette was referred the same day to a
doctor, then a social worker, who said she should not be left alone with Ben.
(Knight 2008)

Although Yvette was fulfilling the boy’s physical needs, her lack of loving emotions
were interpreted as making her an unfit and even dangerous mother, as she was
advised not to be left alone with the Ben. Furthermore, the social worker’s reactions
and recommendation that Yvette consult a doctor illustrates the way “bad”
motherhood is pathologized. She was seen as sick and in need of professional help
because she did not feel a significant bond with her new son. This is demonstrative of
the way motherly love is framed as innate and natural; a woman who does not
instantly love her new child is sick and must be counseled. Schepers-Hughes’ work
speaks to this phenomenon:
The hegemonic biomedical model of maternal bonding makes the experience of alternative maternal emotions seem unnatural, indeed almost criminal . . . The “failure to bond” carries a heavy clinical judgment. It implies that the neonate may be at serious risk. No doubt a great many women work very hard to conform to the emotional expectations defined in the bonding script. (1992: 409)

In this way, maternal nature in women is framed as inherent and omnipresent; lack suggests disorder and abomination.

This article sparked fierce responses from the public. 172 people left comments on the online article. Over and over again people from all over Europe and the United States expressed contempt for Yvette, calling her both selfish and immature. “Marie, USA” wrote:

She appears to be too self centered to be a good parent. Oh poor her. It is all about her. That does not make a good parent.

Similarly, “Fiona, Belfast” commented:

I feel so sorry for this little boy, he will probably be emotionally scared for life following this rejection and although only 2 years old i am sure he will always remember it. How selfish for this lady not to even give it time to bond with the child, i know i sound judgemental, but she sounds like a spoiled brat that has wanted to give a child a human being back like a pair of unwanted shoes! Also why didn’t the adoption process pick this up in their interviews she must have been a very good actress.

On the same day, “Damyanti, Europe” wrote:

What a horrible, horrible, selfish woman you are. I am usually extremely empathic person, but I don’t feel an ounce of sympathy for you. What you did to that child and your husband is monstrous beyond words, there is no excuse. What you need is psychiatrist.

This online dialogue is representative of the Western conceptions of “good” and “bad” motherhood. Yvette is said to be a bad mother because she is selfish, and she is said to be selfish because she did not feel love for her adopted child. Hence, selfishness and bad motherhood are conflated. A “good” mother is selfless, devoted,
and eternally loving and thus Yvette, unable to feel constant and innate love for the boy, is labeled as unfit to be a parent. This can be traced back to the nineteenth century movement when “not to love one’s child had become an inexplicable crime. A mother was loving – or she was not a real mother” (Badinter 1980: 178).

Indestructible and unquestionable love is not just quality of motherhood; it is the definition of motherhood.

This article is relevant to my project for several reasons. Firstly, this case illustrates the popular conception that unconditional love is a pre-requisite for good parenting. Both the social service agency’s and online commenters’ reactions to Yvette’s self-described inability to bond with her newly adopted son is indicative of the way “bad” motherhood and lack of motherly love are pathologized as unnatural. Finally, the responses of the online commenters exemplify the way proper motherhood is connected to selflessness, while bad motherhood is framed as selfish, immature, and short-sighted. “Indeed, in the minds of the authors of maternal advice literature, sin and selfishness are usually considered one and the same,” Lewis explains (1997: 54). While some may read Yvette’s forfeit of her newly acquired motherhood as responsible, and others view it as self-serving, conceptions of “good” motherhood are surely at the center of this debate.

**Prison Talk: Motherhood, Unconditional Love, and Always Being There**

In the thousands of pages of Prison Talk’s “Parents with Children in Prison” message board, there are very few fathers who post. Echoed again and again on these
online sites are sentiments that a mother’s love and role is unique and specific. For
instance, one poster writes:

Yes, I definately understand the anger, bitterness hatred and disappointment
you are going through. There is no love as strong as a Mother’s love for her
offspring.

In response a woman writes:

I think we all here can relate though to all the feelings you expressed. There
are some things we cannot change but many we can. And we can all help each
other through our difficult times, there is a wonderful feeling having a
reciprocal relationship where we can all be here for each other.

Thus, the understanding that mothers of prisoners have a shared experience and thus
commonality allow them to be a self-defined and distinguishable group. United by
their identity of loving mothers, these women have developed an online community
where they turn to for advice, support, and the comforting notion that they are not
alone in their experiences. Examining their self-description, it is clear that these
women see motherhood, rather than parenthood, as their identity and common link.

Parents communicating on the forum often express that they feel quite alone
and isolated in their daily lives and that other mothers of inmates are the only people
who can truly understand their pain, struggles, and successes. To be a prisoner’s
mother is to occupy an ambiguous position in society; while it is assumed that a
mother must love her child without exception, it is also true that to be a relative of a
criminal is to be stigmatized. This conflict of expectations facilitates the online bond
between family members of prisoners as they must negotiate this very unique
predicament. A new forum member posted:

I have never been on this forum before and I found this thread today, of all
threads to find. I can’t get focused back on work. How beautiful and how true,
how a mom feels when her son is in prison. And how deep our love is for
them unconditionally. That even when the rest of the world loses faith in them, a mother and the Lord never gives up on them...no matter how much it hurts, we never lose our faith in them. It brought me to tears again.

This woman’s post illuminates the tensions in the role of mothering a prisoner. Love for her son is supposed to be constant, and yet, as per his conviction, he is now stigmatized in greater society. The parent message board on Prison Talk has become a self-run support group for mothers of prisoners. The website provides a sanctuary where its users it can speak openly about their children and their crimes without fear of judgment or blame. Whether a parent feels her child is innocent or guilty, whether her sentence is several weeks or a lifetime, most users are welcomed enthusiastically and unconditionally. Much of the empathy is attributed to assumption that moms of inmates experience a similar grief due to the incarceration of their children.

Mothers overwhelmingly outnumber fathers on the Prison Talk forum for parents on inmates. Out of the twenty or so most frequent posters, I have come across only one self-identified father. Some users openly wonder about this trend. For instance, one woman who wrote, “AND HOW CAN DADS GIVE UP SO MUCH SOONER THAN MOMS ON THEIR KIDS? HELP ME UNDERSTAND.” In response, another mom posted:

Men are a different breed. They do not have the patience with children that women have. That is the reason God made Mothers. Mothers love their children unconditionally. They accept them and love them even when they make mistakes.

Her reply illuminates the way in which gender is seen as an integral quality of a mother. She is inherently, the narrative goes, more loving and maternal and thus better fit to be the primary caregiver.
In an interview with Allison she explained to me that there are significantly more women visiting and her son’s all-male prison than there are men. When I asked her why she thinks this is she replied:

I think we’re more nurturing, I really do. I think we’re more nurturing and more apt to lend a hand, because as far as visiting where he is now, this one’s like the quietest. Really, there are not many visitors at all, but it is mostly women, young women, all visiting their boyfriends and what not.

Allison also suggested that perhaps women are more common on Prison Talk because they are more willing to reach out for help and to articulate their emotions.

In America, mothers are seen as integral to the family unit and child development, while fathers are typically framed as desirable, but not necessary. As Peggy Cooper Davis points out in her essay “A Reflection on Three Verbs: To Father, To Mother, To Parent,” “Mothering is understood to involve omnipresent nature, while fathering is understood as no more than impregnation” (1999: 250). To mother is to nurture, to father is to conceive. To mother is a lifelong role with irrevocable responsibilities, to father is simply to spawn. In her ethnography *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (1992), anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes explains the American standard for motherly love:

. . . “always being there” starts at the moment of birth, and perhaps even before. To not be present, or to not desire to be present if the mother must be away, is pathologized. Any good mother, the discourse goes, would want to be with her child as much as possible. (1992: 410)

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7 This is not imply that the presence of a father is not highly favored in our society. The nuclear family firmly remains the ideal; the best mother is one who is married to the father of her child. This is enunciated by the rhetoric that attributes American racial disparities to the “missing black father” in African American communities. This being said, however, the “good” father is not required to be omnipresent in the life of child nor is he expected to be emotionally available and supportive. See Silverstein and Auerbach (1999).
For mothers, omnipresence is not simply seen as necessary, but it is also framed as natural and innate. In keeping with popular understanding of good mothers, many of these women express that their role means being dependable and consistent for their children.

Besides exceptional cases, prisoners are a population society rarely rallied behind. These mothers are aware that they are often the only individual advocating on behalf of their child. The unique consistency and perseverance of mothers in maintaining relationships with inmates is what distinguishes their role from others.

“Always being there” is the largest theme I heard from mothers striving to maintain an active role in the lives of their imprisoned children. When I asked Susan what her biggest success in being Adam’s mother is, she tearfully stated:

My biggest success? [long pause] I’ve always been a very persistent, persevering kind of person and it’s that strength that has kind of come to the floor in this, saying to everybody around, “We’ll get through this, we’ll get through this, we’ll get through this.” I think my education in psychology and pastoral care has helped me think about what Adam needs and have orchestrated the family saying, “He needs visits. It doesn’t matter what you do when you’re there, it doesn’t matter what you say, but he needs to see your face.” So I guess using some of my stubbornness, which is not usually a gift, persistence – the positive slant on that – and the ability to understand through all the craziness that the most important thing I had to do was to be consistently present for my son. It didn’t matter really what happened or what I said, it was just showing up and being absolutely dependable.

To be as present as possible, through the bars, is Susan’s way of showing love for Adam. Furthermore, she provides love for her son by “orchestrating” her family and ensuring their presence in his life.

When I asked Allison what kept her strong in the face of Seth’s incarceration she answered, “ . . . I got angry for five minutes, brushed myself off, put myself through school, and got a job and supported the kids and what not and kept a roof
over their heads. I’m surprised I didn’t lose my mind when Seth got arrested.” Up against tremendous emotional and financial challenges, Allison persisted in being the primary caretaker and mother of her children. Susan had a very similar response. She explained, “Well, you don’t really have a choice. You don’t have a choice. I have the other kids, I have my job to do, and I have to be there for Adam. Giving up is not an option.”

Unconditional love is a constant theme in the dialogue on Prison Talk for many mothers who post. When these parents write about the love for their children, they are very aware that they are loving someone who is not well-regarded or respected in society. Their love, they say, transcends the stigmatizing title of “inmate”. One mother wrote:

My son has been in a maximum security facility for 15 years now, serving a natural life without parole sentence. He was wrongfully convicted, and I know for sure that he is innocent. I have wondered if I would feel differently if he were guilty of something. Probably not—a mother’s love is unconditional. So either way, we mothers grieve, and pray, and hope.

Echoing these sentiments, another posted:

I feel the same as all mothers do my heart hurts, my eyes are red from crying, my head hurts from trying to figure out what happened. All I know is I love him no matter what he has done. After all a mother’s love is unconditional.

Once again, these mothers reiterate unconditional love for their children, implying that the (supposed) criminality of their sons or daughters has no sway over their emotions. This contrasts greatly with the American justice system, which shames and punishes in accordance to the “severity” of the accused offenses.

8 It is possible that the extent of a person’s criminality and/or severity of his or her crime does impact a mother’s sentiments, however this answer to this question lies outside the scope of my research. As of yet, this is a virtually unexplored area in academia. [Footnote continues on next page.] I will say,
In their familial moments of crisis, many moms reiterate that love for their children is constant. While within this love, many express anger and resentment, however, they say, love triumphs. Allison echoed these sentiments in our conversation:

Kaitlin: A word or phrase that keeps coming up when I look at these forums and with the mothers who have privately messaged me - they kind of talk about a concept of “motherly love.” And I was wondering if this is a concept you think about? And has it changed or stayed the same when you think about your son in prison and what you’ve been through and what he’s been through?

Allison: [Tearfully] No it hasn’t changed. I’m proud of him. You know, even though he’s in jail. I’m proud of the fact that he knew he had a problem and I’m terribly disappointed in the system for not taking care of him.

Similarly, Susan describes her love for Adam, as well as her two others sons as innate and constant. She said, “. . . when I first had children I knew that no matter what I would love them, I would not ever turn my back on my child . . .”

Susan and Allison both articulated that unlike the prison system, as mothers, they are able to see their sons in a more nuanced, complete way. Their perspectives transcend the punitive logic that relies on the dichotomous and totalizing categories of “innocent” and “guilty”. For instance, Allison’s story is one in which she attempted to get mental health help for her son Seth, and yet he was arrested at the facility for admitting to committing a crime during the intake process. We discussed the situation of his arrest and incarceration:

Allison: . . . Seth had come to me one night. I had just gone to bed and he came in and says, “I think I have a problem. I think I’m turning into my father [who has also served time in prison].” You know which is like, “No, no. You’re nothing like your father, you have never been, you don’t even have his

however, that on the Prison Talk forum mothers seem to be equally as supportive of one another regardless of guilt or innocence of their children or the severity of their crimes.
personality.” He straight out told me what he had done and my first thing was okay we’re going to get help and I asked him, “Do you want help for this?” And he says, “Yeah, I need help. I need to get away.” And so we had gone down to a mental health hospital which didn’t do emergency intake and they immediately called the police and he was arrested that night and he has not been out since. . . .

Kaitlin: I can see how you both did the right thing and how hard that is that it didn’t work out at all and that it was used against you.

Allison: Yeah, it was totally used against us . . . I was hoping that in the wrong he would get the help he needed, not punish him and that didn’t work out so well.

Allison does not argue that her son is “innocent” but instead that he deserves rehabilitation rather than punishment. Seth is now in isolation in his jail cell twenty-one hours a day and has no access to the professional help his family feels he needs. His mom explained that unless he is on medication, he is not allowed to access to a counselor. Seth’s case illuminates several of the ways in which the binary of innocent/guilty or good/bad is both inaccurate and detrimental for many “offenders”. While it is possible Seth technically and legally “committed a crime”, he was seeking rehabilitation and counseling but instead the justice system locked him behind bars and explicitly denied him access to mental health services.

Similarly, Susan described the ways in which her motherly love also helped her to gain clarity with Adam’s arrest for conspiracy for child pornography. I asked her:

Kaitlin: A concept I’m interested in - of the moms I’ve spoken with many have used this term over and over - is “motherly love”. Those two words keep coming up in pair and I’m wondering if this is a concept you think about and if your personal definition of motherly love has changed or stayed the same with Adam’s imprisonment?

Susan: Mine has stayed the same . . . This situation really did test me because initially I wasn’t really sure if Adam was guilty or not guilty. I just didn’t
know. The voices of the government were screaming that this is the most awful person in all the world. They told us that Interpol has been looking for him which was a total lie, that he was a world-wide criminal. . . At first my motherly love said, “This couldn’t be.” But then I said, “Well of course it’s possible, everyone sins and maybe I’m completely mistaken about my son.” But then over the course of months trying to sort out what Adam was telling me, what the attorney was saying, what the prosecutor was saying, and then what I knew in my own heart and my own observation and trying to bring that all together. The government was so ridiculous it became fairly easy to see that they were lying.

Like Allison, Susan feels that she was able to better understand the complexities of Adam’s situation than the court system was. Not once in our interviews did she use the word “guilty”, and I think she sees his situation as far more complex. As she said, “I think he also knows that [our family] respects him, not blindly, we are not blind to what all that has happened. But when he says, ‘Mom I did this but not that,’ then absolutely. The evidence shows and I believe him.”

Per their close relationship with their children, mothers of inmates are able to transcend totalizing labels that obscure the complexity of those operating in the court and prison system. I assert that this ability to look past and complicate the binaries that the justice system relies on allows mothers to keep loving their incarcerated sons and daughters despite great societal pressure to do just the opposite.

Being able to “talk about anything” is reoccurring a goal that these mothers shared with me, as it is one way for demonstrating the unconditional love for their incarcerated sons and daughters. After describing how costly visits to her son’s prison are, Susan concluded, “. . . .but I think it’s really important that he knows that his family is behind him.”9 In response I asked:

9 A more in depth look at the financial costs of maintaining relationships with inmates will be discussed in Chapter II.
Kaitlin: Yeah, absolutely. And what are those visits like? I guess what I’m wondering is – how has your relationship changed with him, or has it changed with him being in prison? And the dynamic between you two?

Susan: It begun to change before all this happened in that Adam begun to grow up. He was no longer the rebellious teenager. He has recently finished college and had a very nice girlfriend and would come home for very nice visits and talk, but not really heart-to-heart stuff. I think during this time, which for all of us was extremely difficult, Adam really shared kind of his inner-self. And we also; you can’t not share with that the devastation of this is like, as family. There’s been a lot deeper sharing. I think Adam probably appreciates his family more than he did. Part of that is just this age, but part of that is knowing that we’ll always be there for him.

Allison had a very similar experience with her son; she also feels that she grown closer with Seth throughout the difficulties of his incarceration. When I asked her if their mother-son relation has changed at all, she replied:

. . . since he’s been arrested, he has started opening up and he does talk to me, talk openly, which he was always kind of an introvert anyway, so be able to talk and talk openly the best that we can over the phone or even in the visiting room, we’ve actually gotten closer.

Later, she explained to me that knowing that her son can speak openly with her is a source of motherly pride for her. For instance:

Allison: We understand each other and I think that in the end this actually made us a bit closer.

Kaitlin: Having him in prison made you closer?

Allison: Well, having him know he could come to me and tell me what was going on.

She spoke of valuing the twice-monthly visits she has with her son Seth because they provide her an opportunity to check in with him. Outsiders are not allowed to make calls directly to prisoners and mail service is often slow and censored so these are her best opportunities. She explains: “And you know, I will always start the conversation asking if he’s okay and if he needs to talk with me about anything.”
For mothers, the performance of “always being there” as a display of unconditional love, becomes very painful, emotional, and complex upon incarceration of their children. It means enduring disappointment, a cruel and unintelligible prison system, and widespread discrimination and stigmatization, and yet they preserve in maintaining their mother-child relationships. The women I have interviewed and many on the Prison Talk online forum speak of “motherly love” and “always being there” as inextricably linked phenomena – to be a good mother is to be present for one’s child. It is especially important to understand this concept of motherhood, as the prison system makes “being there” (i.e. staying in communication, loving physical gestures) practically impossible. For women negotiating the mothering of imprisoned sons and daughters, always being there requires significant navigation. Parents are not allowed to call the prison to speak directly to their children, visiting hours are strictly limited and monitored, and most facilities have strict rules on what can be mailed to inmates. In the following chapter I explore how mothers overcome these barriers and their struggles and successes in parenting an inmate. Not all women intend on maintaining an active role in the lives of their incarcerated sons or daughters, however I am interested in understanding the plights of the ones who do.
“For the inmate and his or her family, a variety of collateral consequences are set in motion when he or she is sent off to prison.” – Marc Mauer

**Locating the Family in the Crisis of Incarceration**

The United States “justice” system operates around dichotomous categorizations of citizens and their actions. As, supposedly, all Americans are “innocent until proven guilty”, it is then assumed that all individuals in prison are “bad” and outsiders are “good”; the guilty are punished accordingly while the innocent are entitled to freedoms and liberties. The suggestion here is that the “innocent” outside the barbed wire fences of the penitentiary are in fact safer, as the dangerous are confined within. Imprisonment, the logic goes, is not just neutral but in fact *beneficial* to all “good” Americans. This reasoning only holds true if the prisoner is seen as an isolated individual, without ties to kin or community groups. As David Braman points out:

> By conceptually stripping offenders of all their social relations, we are able to affix blame and mete out punishment. The isolated offender is a useful fiction in that regard, but a fiction that has come to so thoroughly dominate our analysis of what our criminal laws should and can do that we are blind to its limitations. (2004: 63)

The “isolated offender” is not only a “useful fiction” but a necessary one in upholding the logic of the American imprisonment system. However, this is a falsehood. Convicts are not isolated individuals, rather their lives are deeply and significantly intertwined – emotionally, financially, and communally – with many others. My
research on mothers of prison inmates illuminates this phenomenon. In this chapter I will show that mothers (as well as other family members) are also punished when their children are convicted of crimes. The stories of their struggles and successes illuminate the ways in which the “innocent” are also punished by mass incarceration and the “tough on crime” approach to justice. I hope to complicate contemporary discussions of “innocence” and “guilt” by articulating some of the ways in which mothers of prisoners are taxed financially and emotionally by the sentencing of their sons and daughters and are thus also punished by a system supposedly protecting non-offenders.

The mothers of prisoners, as well as the broader family group, have been systematically overlooked by America’s judicial system and in the discourse that critiques it. Overwhelmingly so, the literature that examines the effects of incarceration on “outsiders” neglects to include parents in their discussion. For instance, Bakker, Morris, and Janues write, “Little is being done to help one of the most neglected groups in this country today – the wives and children of male inmates” (1978: 143). Similarly, Creassie Finney Hairston’s study “Family Ties During Imprisonment: Important to Whom and For What?” (1991) does not include parents in her definition of “family”. Academic literature typically portrays the wives and children of prisoners as left vulnerable by the husband’s incarceration, as he is assumed to be the breadwinner (e.g. Gaudin 1993; Western and McLanahan 2000; Seymour and Hairston 2001). This loss of primary income, it is assumed, has negative consequences on his family members, and thus the wife and child are seen as victims. The scope of this analysis is short-sighted and only partially accurate for two reasons.
Firstly, this approach fails to acknowledge that prisoners, like all Americans, are in actuality part of much larger, more complex, and interdependent kinship groups and community systems than of simply nuclear family structures. Secondly, this is a materialist perspective that poses costs to families as simply financial. In reality, the imprisonment of a family member is not only financially draining, but it is an emotionally, psychologically, and logistically challenging experience resulting in much deeper consequences. Furthermore, as I will discuss, mass incarceration has profound negative impacts on the communities in which these prisoners are taken from as social capital and other vital resources are depleted, and this too has been neglected in most current discourse.

Much of the academic literature discussing the plights of prisoners’ families focuses on the resultant single mother in the wake of her husband’s arrest. This research is often based in both sexist and racist assumptions, prompted by the ideology that the nuclear family, one that revolves around an adult male, is the best for mothers and their children. Accordingly, David Braman writes, “When academics talk about families, they often talk about the harm that comes from familial disintegration. Many lament the lack of dedication to family they see in high rates of unwed mothers, absent fathers, and divorce. These debates take on a special tone when black families are subject” (2004: 89). Indeed, much of scholarship is quite concerned about the loss of a father figure upon incarceration particularly in African American families (e.g. Balthazar and King 2001; Tripp 2001; Waldoff 2008). Once again, this is based in a misogynistic and racist discourse that argues racial and economic disparities systemic in the United States can be blamed on “the missing
black father” and the assumption that African American women are unfit mothers.

This overemphasis in the literature on families of prisoners is not inclusive or constructive.

Most of the research discussing the plights of inmates’ families is not anthropological, however some of the researchers whose methodology included ethnographic interviews suggested that participants were overwhelmed by the attention and intentions of the study. As the authors of one of the only parent-centered research studies write:

Most of the interviews turned into “therapy sessions,” with the respondents indicating that the interview situation was “the only time anyone paid attention” to them. These respondents broke down and cried, and in other ways expressed their feelings. Many appeared overcome by the attention they received in the situation and the concern for their problems. (Ferraro et al. 1983: 578)

Similarly, Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest’s study also explained that participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share their stories with researchers (2003). They described, “Interviewer field notes revealed that many participants seemed surprised that anyone was remotely interested in talking with them about their situations and responded positively to what they perceived as a sympathetic ear in an otherwise hostile social climate, [the prison visiting room]” (Arditti et al. 2003: 201). I interpret these emotional responses as indicative of the way parents of prisoners feel invisible and forgotten about. I encountered this in my own fieldwork. For instance, after I posted my recruitment letter on the Prison Talk online forum, one woman wrote to me, “I like the fact that you have chosen to understand . . . If we have to tell our stories one person at a time so be it, because that is one more person who’s working with us, everyone matters.” Mothers of inmates are fully aware, more than so
than anyone else, of their systematic neglect. Many were eager to share with me their stories and shed light on a community they feel has been wholly overlooked.

Recently, several voices have been advocating for a more holistic and inclusive analysis of those affected by unprecedentedly high imprisonment rates; this means positioning the family members within the conversation of the consequences of our carceral methods. Jeremy Travis calls these “invisible punishments”, as “laws operate largely beyond public view, yet have very serious adverse consequences” (2002: 18). Those suffering invisible punishments contrast with prisoners whom he calls “visible embodiments of society’s decision to punish criminals” (Travis 2002: 16). As prison and parole sentences are quantifiable, he argues, they are more visible and open to examination. In contrast, the invisible punishments of the inmates’ loved ones are not as obvious and therefore less easily scrutinized. Travis writes:

As the nation debates the wisdom of a fourfold increase of incarceration over the past generation, one impact is clear – prisoners separate people from their families. Every individual sent to prison leaves behind a network of family relationships. Prisoners are the children, parents, siblings, and kin of untold numbers of individuals who are affected in different ways when family members are arrested, removed, incarcerated, and ultimately returned home from prison. Little is known about imprisonment’s impact on these family networks. (2002: ix)

This is very much true, and this is why I firmly believe that in-depth, ethnographic research of immediate and extended family members of inmates is vital if we are trying to truly understand the extent to which mass incarceration is impacting American life. Prison sentencing theoretically serves to quantify punishment. It is an experience with a clear beginning and end that is meted out according to the supposed severity of the crime. What I will show however, is this is fictional. The punishment of imprisonment does not just last the sentencing time, it may last a lifetime.
Furthermore, it is not only the convict who receives this sentence – mothers, their families, and their communities are also harmed in the process.

**The Emotional and Familial Costs of Always Being There**

“For me, John’s sentence was the end of the world I had known. I struggled to find a group to stand on. My entire family narrative had been broken and swept away.” – Rachel King

Families are thrown into crisis upon the incarceration of a loved one. It is an intensely emotional process. The mothers I have communicated with described feelings of depression, anxiety, guilt, sadness, anger, and fear. Mothers writing on Prison Talk often discuss their emotional states. One woman writes:

The hurt is deep. And I’m grieving for the loss of the boy who was so sweet, so kind, so compassionate. And it feels like I’m losing more -- like a huge chunk of my heart is missing -- yanno? My beloved parents have both died in the last couple of years, too and this loss I feel now is like when my darling dad died. It's an ache that runs through my entire body.

Many mothers describe their emotions about the imprisonment of their children as grief, almost like mourning. Rachel King, a mother of a young man sentenced to death, has compiled stories of families of death row inmates in *Capital Consequences* (2005). She writes of her own son’s sentencing, “We had all unwillingly joined a new category of spiritual, emotional, and psychological distress. We were isolated from one another, and there were no support groups for us to join . . . For me, John’s sentence was the end of the world I had known. I struggle to find a group to stand on. My entire family narrative had been broken and swept away” (King 2005: 3).

Certainly, the lock-up of a family member is like a certain death, as it completely alters family dynamics.
A very common theme amongst mothers of prisoners is that they frequently do not tell their extended families about the arrest of their sons and daughters. In Braman’s study of Washington D.C. families he found, “. . . most told no one outside of the immediate family about their relative’s incarceration and the troubles they faced. Indeed, many were even hiding the incarceration for extended family members” (2004: 156). “My extended family does not live nearby and they do not really know because they would not be supportive and I don’t want the grief. I have enough difficulties without that,” Susan told me. Allison said that she has in fact stopped speaking to her daughter as a result of Seth’s incarceration. Reiterated repeatedly is the fear of judgment and stigmatization from extended family members and others in their social networks. Incarceration places tremendous stress on the family unit and often alters interpersonal dynamics between the members on the outside.

A surprising amount of mothers report declining health in the aftermath of their children’s incarceration. Ferraro et al. also found this, reporting that one-third of the wives and mothers participating in their study noted recent medical and health problems (1983). Furthermore, their health conditions seemed to worsen as time elapsed. Allison’s story provides a striking example. She receives disability payments because she is sick and can no longer work. We discussed:

Allison: . . . I’m surprised I didn’t lose my mind when Seth got arrested.

Kaitlin: Yes, you should be proud of yourself.

Chapter III features a much more in depth discussion of silence and feelings of stigmatization.

I suggest that this is very much connected to fears of being seen as a “bad” mother in Chapter III.
Allison: I caught myself but unfortunately it took a toll on my body and I have not worked for twenty months. My body gave up, but my mind didn’t.

Kaitlin: You said twenty months, that’s about two years. Did that coincide with when your son went to prison?

Allison: Yup. It was five months after he went to prison, I got sick. And one mis-diagnosing doctor after another couldn’t figure out what was going on with me. The only thing that they all agree on is that it’s stress related.

I interpret these physical illnesses as a profound and tangible manifestation of the stresses of having a son or daughter in jail. Many women report loss of sleep and ability to concentrate and profound depression. Not only does this take a toll on one’s body, but it interferes with other responsibilities such as job performance, duties at home, and the like. This stress can be debilitating and affects many areas of life.

The Financial Costs of Always Being There

“Incarceration acts like a hidden tax, one that is placed disproportionately on poor and minority families . . .”

- David Braman

Financially supporting a convict is an expensive endeavor that places extreme stress on families and communities of already limited resources. In Arditti’s, Lambert-Shute’s, and Joest’s research they found that two-thirds of families of inmates they interviewed were financially “much worse of” or “somewhat worse off” since the incarceration of their loved ones (2003: 199). Additionally, “most were disadvantaged economically before the incarceration,” they report. Similarly in “Problems of Prisoner’s Families: The Hidden Costs of Imprisonment”, Ferraro et al. explain that families of prisoners report financial costs are the biggest stress upon the arrests of their loved ones. Ninety-two percent of spouses of prisoners felt that their financial strain was a “moderate to severe problem” after imprisonment and 47 percent of
parents “experienced moderate to severe financial problems as a direct result of arrest and confinement” (Ferraro et al. 1983: 584). In this section I will discuss some of the most significant costs to relatives of prisoners as well as their short- and long-term effects.

Penitentiaries, particularly long-term facilities, are almost always built in rural areas, far away from the urban centers where most prisoner populations are drawn from (Gilmore 2007). This in itself leads to considerable transportation costs if relatives are to visit the facility. Since inmates are obviously restricted from leaving the prison grounds, onsite visitation is necessary for person-to-person relations. “Most state and federal facilities are located long distances from the urban neighborhoods where [families of incarcerated people] live, making visiting logistically and economically difficult if not impossible,” Beth E. Richie writes (2002: 140). She also points out that there are rarely public transportation options to these locales, meaning that visitors must have a car, a luxury that is simply unavailable to much of the urban poor. My interviewees described the financial costs of visiting their sons and daughter in prison. Susan said:

And [Adam’s] brothers go occasionally to visit and I know his dad goes once a month to visit. It’s very difficult; it’s very expensive. I figure it costs me about 100 dollars each time I go to visit by the time I drive, pay the tolls.

Allison’s experience is similar:

I do go out and visit him every month. It was every week before gas prices went up, because it’s over one hundred miles one way. So gas prices are the other reason why we don’t see him, well I see him every other week. His younger brother sees him every week, but I don’t, so he actually does have visitation every week.
Her trip to Seth’s penitentiary is a six hour drive roundtrip. Not only does this journey require significant funds but also time that may not be available to working individuals or mothers who have other young children and other responsibilities at home. From Allison’s statement it can be inferred that she would visit Seth more frequently if it were less financially taxing, thus a strain of resources is preventing her from spending the amount of time she would like to with her son. In Braman’s essay based on three years of ethnographic research, “Families and Incarceration” (2002), he writes about Lilly, the mother of Anthony who has been imprisoned for ten years, since he was eighteen. She lives in Washington D.C., yet her son is imprisoned in Ohio. Her transportation costs to visit him range from 150 to 200 dollars, which is a third of her 530 dollar per month income (Braman 2002: 121).

Gasoline and public transportation fees are not the only costs associated with visiting a prison inmate. If a mother has young children, she may need to pay for childcare. If the facility is far from her hometown, she will have to pay for overnight lodging (Hairston 2004). Food during visitation, which comes from vending machines, is extremely expensive and is something that many visitors find aggravating (Comfort 2008). “They have vending machines so I usually buy him a soda and a pizza in a vending machine which is a total rip-off in price – it’s ridiculous,” Susan told me. Hence, a simple act of motherly love, such as buying a son a meal, is made unreasonably expensive on prison property.

As visits are often overwhelmingly time-consuming and difficult for families of inmates, mothers often choose to communicate with their children over phone. Outsiders are not allowed to directly contact inmates, thus their children must call
them from the prison facility. These calls are all collect and are charged to the recipient. This system produces massive amounts of income for both the state and the prison system. Comfort explains, “These service contracts, which are negotiated by the Department of Corrections authorities on a state-by-state basis, render a commission of up to 65 percent of the revenue from prisoners’ calls to the Department of Corrections” (2008: 89). Taxes on telephone calls from prisoners generated 21 million dollars for New York state and 35 million for California in 1997 alone. Her study found that phone costs range from 25 to 300 dollars a month per family. In our interview Allison said that in the past it cost her 35 dollars for a ten minute phone call with her son. “The phone call itself was about four dollars or something but it was all the other surcharges that were tacked on because it was a collect call and it was forwarded to someplace in Texas, and back and forth. That has changed, there were a lot of complaints about that,” she said. She said that now a twenty minute phone call from her son costs her around four dollars. In Braman’s research he reports that twenty percent of his interviewee Lilly’s 530 dollar monthly income goes to phone bills due to collect calls from her imprisoned son (2002).

In addition to visiting costs, most basic amenities are not free to prisoners. Because many inmates are not allowed to hold prison jobs nor do they have access to savings from before their incarceration, their families must provide them with spending cash. For instance, both Seth’s mom and his grandmother send him money each month. Allison explained his costs:

They’re not even offered a cup of coffee without having to pay. Everything he gets has to pay for - other than he gets three meals a day and a cot to sleep on – everything else. He told me that just a cup of coffee, and it’s really horrible coffee, in the morning with break. He has to buy his own coffee, food stuff,
and his own envelopes, own TV obviously. . . I don’t understand it. I don’t question it. I don’t want to know.

In her anthropological ethnography of the visiting room at San Quentin California State Prison, Comfort includes a list of goods prisoners can purchase. They include items such as a spoon for twenty cents, soap for one dollar, and an aspirin tablets for 1.55 dollars (2008: Appendix 4). Even basic amenities such as eating utensils and hygienic products must be bought. Susan described Adam’s expenses and the strain they put upon his family:

In prison they provide you with nothing, no toothbrush, no clothes, no nothing, so we had to pay for it initially when he went to Federal. We had to buy his toothbrush and shoes and comb. And I send him 200 dollars a month, which is not a lot of money, but I have two other children.

These expenses are typically financed by the families of inmates because there is very little opportunity for income behind bars. While some prisoners do have work opportunities, they are paid a mere fraction of minimum wage, as there are no regulations regarding labor standards in jails. Allison said her son has been trying to get a job for years, but he has been continually denied because he is not a long-term inmate.

Communication costs are only part of the financial burden of mothering an inmate; there are less obvious costs that can be even more significant. When I asked Susan, “I’m curious to know about the financial burdens of having a son in jail – like you mentioned travel and I know that phone bills can be extremely expensive. What are some of the other burdens that I might now know of? Some things that aren’t obvious?” She answered:

Well [Adam’s] lawyers agreed to become public defenders when they realized that we have no means, but the public defender’s lawyers – they did not pay for
the computer forensics. So that basically took my whole retirement. I spent my retirement on his defense and then he didn't go to trial. But they proved that he was innocent, although he couldn't take the risk of going to trial. But I gave that freely knowing that I would not get anything back except for my son.

Susan added later, “I did not have to give him my retirement, but it would have been a horrible thing not to support your child.” Adam plead guilty for conspiracy charges and thus did not stand trial, meaning the court system never even looked at the forensics work Susan paid for. As a result of pleading guilty he was sentenced to ten years in prison; if he had not done this he would have been imprisoned for the rest of his life, as the other man who he was charged with abetting received a life sentence.

The fact that Susan spent her retirement savings in effort to help her arrested son will undoubtedly have profound consequences on hers and her family’s life. This is an enormous tax of resources and will most likely mean that she will have to work much longer and harder in her life and has less overall capital to provide to her two other children.

When I asked Allison her feelings around Seth’s release, she revealed:

I'm very apprehensive about it. I'm very, very apprehensive about it because I really – I don’t tell it straight to his face – but I hope that he does do the entire time and doesn’t have the parole because he will have to be on a monitor and I will have to pay for it because he obviously doesn’t have a job. And hello, I’m disabled so I can’t afford the four or five hundred dollars a month they want for him to be on a monitor. In my opinion, if the state wants you on a monitor they should have to pay for it.

If Seth becomes eligible for parole he will only be released from prison if he pays for an ankle bracelet that allows the state to monitor his movements. As Allison explains, this would place an unbearable financial strain on her family, as she is on disability for illness and can no longer work.
All of these financial costs tremendously tax the resources of families of prisoners. While the mothers I interviewed cannot know the long-term consequences of these burdens, it is reasonable to assume that these will cause a huge amount of stress to their livelihoods and the lives of their other family members. Their families’ resources will disproportionately go to one individual, and as Allison and Susan’s cases illuminate, these expenses are not investments that will yield a profit. Families may spend their savings on legal services that turn out to be useless or on a loved one who was wrongfully accused to begin with. Upon arrest, the state unquestioningly thrusts these enormous costs upon prisoners and their families. Arrest does not just impact the accused; it has lasting negative consequences on the livelihood of their entire families.

It must be remembered that the arrested individual may have previously provided income for his or her family. “. . .over two-thirds of the incarcerated population are gainfully employed prior to arrest. Even though family members sent to prison make, on average, poverty wages, the median household income is still lowered by the elimination of these wages,” Braman writes (2004: 155). These are extremely important points. Firstly, the families of convicts suffer financially when a member is arrested because they lose both the immediate and future income they can provide for the family. Secondly, it is vital to recognize that the majority of prisoners are poor pre-incarceration.

As discussed, the financial burdens of imprisonment do not just fall on the shoulders of the convict, but onto his family and his extended networks as well. This
loss of significant capital does not only have immediate impact but will reverberate into future generations. Braman writes on this point:

More subtle than the immediate and direct material effects of incarceration, but perhaps more serious, is the cumulative impact these effects can have on familial wealth across generations. By depleting the savings of offenders’ families, incarceration inhibits capital accumulation and reduces the ability of parents to pass wealth on to their children and grandchildren. (2004: 15)

In this way, mass incarceration will exacerbate the growing divide between the wealthy and the poor in America. Because the urban poor are significantly more likely to serve jail time than others, particular segments of society will suffer more than others. These populations are already vulnerable, with little opportunity to accumulate social and financial capital. Once again, under the mantra of “protecting the innocent”, the United States’ growing trend of relentless incarceration is not protecting our citizens, but rather intensifying the struggles of our most vulnerable populations. If prison time continues to be our first choice of punishment, we will have entire populations of people stripped of their financial capital left with very few avenues to escape poverty. The accused and their current and their future family members will suffer unfairly. If we are looking for ways to “clean up the streets”, reduce violence and drug use, and end cycles of poverty, mass incarceration is a useless and detrimental approach. In essence, it is the poorest segments of America who bear the brunt of mass incarceration while it is the state that benefits from it.

Costs to the Prisoner

It is not simply the parents who are financially taxed by an individual’s arrest; the individual suffers greatly himself. Even short prison sentences are incredibly
disruptive and damaging experiences. Incarceration breaks most normal networks – employment, community, and the like – which are necessary for community reentry post-incarceration. Anyone who has served jail time, guilty or innocent, will face both civil and social sanctions against him. “In this brave new world, punishment for the original offense is no longer enough; one’s debt to society is never paid,” writes Travis (2002: 19). He lists many of the barriers, written into America’s legislation that make it nearly impossible for an ex-inmate to transcend the stigmatizing category of “offender”. Ex-convicts upon release, the very people who need it most, are excluded from welfare benefits. For instance, anyone with a former drug conviction is barred from receiving federally funded public assistance and food stamps for the rest of his or her life. Furthermore, any drug or sex offender will never be eligible for public housing (Travis 2002). “Taken together, the recent enactments, many of them passed by Congress, chip away at critical ingredients of the support systems of poor people in this country,” Travis writes (2002: 18).

One of the starkest examples of the how our current practices deliberately bar the “guilty” from self-betterment are the restrictions placed on education. For instance, the Higher Education Act of 1998 restricts anyone with a drug offense from receiving government financial aid for college (Travis 2002). On this theme, Susan spoke of the lack of education opportunities open to her incarcerated son. We had this discussion:

Kaitlin: So now he’s going to pursue a Masters?

Susan: Yes. He’s always loved education. The prison system made that extraordinarily difficult because they are not allowed to use the computer. Even if it’s not on the internet, they’re not allowed to use the computer. At all the colleges now distance education requires a computer so that’s why we
finally ended up with an Australian [university] because I guess they’re a big, barren country and they still have correspondence. And it’s a fully accredited program so he can do this Masters degree in math – he loves math – through correspondence.

Kaitlin: I see. And where did you hear about this program? Where did you learn about it?

Susan: We pretty much search over 200 universities . . . It’s taken us a whole year to find the program.

Kaitlin: That sounds logistically complicated but I’m glad you found that.

Susan has a Masters degree herself; she has considerable social capital and yet it still took her an entire year of determined searching to find Adam an avenue for attaining education in prison. If he did not have this access to the outside surely enrolling in this program would have been impossible. By barring inmates from using computers, even in the case of education, prisons deliberately prevent people from pursuing important opportunities that will improve their lives post-incarceration. With examples such as this, it is impossible to see the prison system as rehabilitative; instead it is a punitive system that strips offenders of the most vital forms of capital and chances for success later in life.

Susan’s son Adam was a college graduate and business owner at the time of his arrest. His personal financial losses are quite significant. She explained to me:

And they took everything of my son’s. He had a home. He had a car. He had a business. And they took that and totally wiped him out, so he has nothing at all. Not one penny. So financially, it has been devastating. And the federal government creates that; no matter how much or how little you have, they take that. . . Every person who deals with the federal government loses everything, whether you are innocent or guilty, they take every single thing you have.

Susan understands that not only are her and Adam’s savings depleted, but because of his sentencing and imprisonment, his abilities to re-establish himself post-
incarceration have been significantly limited. When I asked her what her thoughts are about his release in 2015, we had this discussion:

Susan: Well it will be wonderful and I know that for him it will be very difficult. I know, because of my [ministerial] training that any change is difficult. He does not understand that, that’s okay. I know it will be a very difficult adjustment. The world has changed and by 2015 the world will have changed dramatically and his college education, which he had just finished, will be outdated. He will have this horrible tag around his neck called “felon and sex offender”. I don’t doubt that he will get back to work and earn a living because he’s always been self-employed and he’s always done well. And he will get out and be self-employed and he will do well, but I think emotionally it’s very difficult.

Kaitlin: What are some of the hardest parts? I know that’s a huge question and you could say “everything”, but what are some of the hardest aspects of having Adam in jail?

Susan: Well, I think the hardest part is knowing that he is deprived of his prime years of life. That for sure is the most difficult part - that when he should be launching career and having girlfriends and getting married, he’s sitting in a jail. That is without a doubt the most difficult part of all of this.

Adam has lost both valuable financial and social capital. His savings are depleted, and as his mom points out, his college education, a considerable time and monetary investment, will be less relevant. In addition, as he is charged with conspiring with a child pornographer, he will be a registered sex offender for the rest of his life.

Undoubtedly, this is a stigmatizing title that will hinder his abilities to reestablish himself as a community member and an employee. Prison has not just stripped him and his family of their financial savings, but the time he is serving will deprive him of his “prime years of life”.

Whether rightfully or wrongfully convicted, sentenced, and locked up, individuals with criminal records have a significantly harder time finding employment after serving time due to stigmatization and company policies that bar felons from
being hired. Travis’ research shows that employers are actually becoming *stricter* in this regard (2002). Of these new trends he writes, “One’s criminal past became both more public and more exclusionary, limiting the universe of available work” (Travis 2002: 22). From this, one can conclude that ex-convicts may continue to be reliant upon their families for financial support ever after imprisonment. “The recent wave of restrictions creates a formidable set of obstacles to former offenders who want to gain a foothold in modern society,” Travis explains (2002: 24). The arrest of a family member does not just bring about immediate expenses such as lawyer bills, but it will mostly likely have a lasting negative impact on the financial stability of the entire family. Arrest does not just punish the offender – his whole family suffers. Potential financial ruin is just one of the many invisible punishments placed onto innocent Americans in our system of mass incarceration.

**Costs to Prisoners’ Communities**

“I truly think that people do not understand the cost to the families, especially to the prisoners who have children. You know, you see the little children in the visiting room and it is a huge wear on our society.” – Susan

As alluded to, families are not the only groups suffering the consequences of the American prison industrial complex. Incarceration numbers have recently risen at such an unprecedented pace that it is not fully possible to predict the long-term consequences this will have on communities. “. . . the economic effects of incarceration cannot be separated from its social effects and the repercussions of incarceration reach more deeply into the substance of family and community life than standard accounts of criminal law suggest,” Braman suggests (2004: 98). In some
pockets of America, vast majorities of their populations will be legally processed in
the system. For instance, if current trends continue, 75 percent of African American
men in Washington D.C. will be imprisoned at least once in their lifetime (Braman
2002). “. . . the broader social impact of mass incarceration reverberates through
communities and our society as a whole . . . As a result, incarceration is producing
deep social transformations in the families and communities of prisoners – families
and communities, it should be noted, that are disproportionately poor, urban, and
African-American,” writes Braman (2002: 118). When someone is locked behind
bars, he is literally restricted from making any positive contributions to his family or
community. Rather than being a “productive” citizen, he becomes dependent upon his
familial network and scant government resources. As Travis points out, “Arguably,
the aggregate effect of this constellation of punishments on the social capital of poor
communities could be quite extensive, and with long-lasting consequences for the
vitality of families, labor markets, and civic life” (2002: 27).

It is impossible to ignore the racial disparities in arrests and sentencing
practices in the U.S.. As statistics show, black males are imprisoned at shockingly
high rates. In fact, fifty percent of African American males are “under some type of
correctional supervision” and ten percent are currently behind bars (Braman 2004: 3).
Blacks and Latinos, for instance, constitute four out of every five drug offenders in
state penitentiaries (Mauer 2002). Drug dealing and usage, however, is
disproportionately a white issue. A 1992 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse
revealed that 8.7 million white people use drugs monthly versus 1.6 million black
individuals (Braman 2002). “The war on drugs essentially is a war on black men,
America’s favorite bogeymen,” says Braman (2002: 132). This is particularly significant because, as earlier discussed, drug offenses result in specific sanctions including loss of public housing rights and government financial aid for college. Drug offenders are not simply punished with jail time; current laws sentence convicts to a life of disenfranchisement with little opportunity for self-betterment. Immense disparities in sentencing and arrests will inevitably worsen preexisting racial inequalities in the United States. As discussed, to be arrested and charged with a crime has enormous financial costs. If trends continue, minority populations, particularly Black and Hispanic communities will suffer the most from loss of cultural, social, and financial capital.

Communities across the nation are also suffering because correctional budgets have been drastically increasing while funding in other areas have been cut. In 2006 alone, almost seventy million dollars were allotted. In the 1990s, California built nine prisons but only one university (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999). “Corrections costs have been the fastest growing segment of state budgets, and this has meant that virtually all other aspects of spending, including funds for education and social welfare, have been affected in order to accommodate prison expansion,” explain Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind (2002: 11). Wacquant points out that expenditures for public health, social welfare, and education, the very institutions that are instrumental in poverty relief, have been “compressed” while budgets for police, courts, and corrections have increased (2002). These trends are deeply disturbing. If we are to protect vulnerable communities, ones with the least capital and with the most violence, mass incarceration must be re-evaluated. Mauer and Chesney-Lind point out:
But the problem is much greater than this if we are still working under the presumption that the criminal justice system is the best or most appropriate venue in which to address behavior that threatens public safety. Rather than investigating the circumstances of families or communities that enhance social solidarity and communicate shared values, a criminal justice-centered policy applies to a reactive, and increasingly punitive, approach to the resolution of social conflict. (2002: 11)

Indeed, mass incarceration is worsening the problems of poor American families, not helping. This punitive approach is not preventive and is instead contributing the conditions that lead to poverty, there by making many communities less safe for current and future generations.

**Overcoming Opacity: Staying Connected Through the Prison Walls**

“I’m not intentionally wounding myself anymore. I’m not trying to call the prison, and you know, be a mother. I found out that you just don’t do those things.” – Susan

It is well-documented that prisoners who stay in contact with outsiders fare better post-incarceration (Arditti et al. 2003; Travis and Waul 2004; Hairston 2004). Friends and family members can provide emotional and financial support as well as opportunities for networking and reentry after jail. Loved ones on the outside help prisoners maintain community ties and offer “encouragement during the difficult transition from prison to home” upon release (Travis and Waul 2004: 10). Travis and Waul report, “Each study found that in terms of recidivism, inmates with close ties to family or friends fared better upon release than those who did not have contact with friends and family” (2004: 11). Hairston’s research found that preserving family ties during imprisonment has three important benefits – the family unit is maintained, it enhances the well-being of the family members on the outside, and the post-release
experience tends to be more successful (1991). Despite these established facts, as I will discuss, correctional facilities make staying in touch with and visiting an inmate an expensive and at times degrading experience.

Christian, Mellow, and Thomas assert that maintaining ties to a family throughout imprisonment is both emotionally and financially costly in “Social and Economic Implications of Family Connections to Prisoners” (2006). They suggest that recent research evaluating the importance of maintaining ties throughout imprisonment focuses too much on the benefits to prisoners and does not take into account the enormous tax this places onto their families. “Research highlighted these potential benefits to the prisoners stemming from familial contact, with scant attention to benefits, and more importantly potential costs, to the family to keep up such a relationship,” they argue (Christian et al. 2006: 443). They assert that the “norms of reciprocity may be out of balance”; the prisoner’s capital is strengthened while the family’s is weakened due to immense emotional, time, and financial costs (Christian et al. 2006: 444). Their analysis is based in a zero-sum, materialist framework. Rather than fully examining the emotional “pay-offs” mothers may get from staying in touch with their sons and daughters, Christian et al. write from an economic perspective. This logic may imply that mothers are irrational for maintaining relations with their incarcerated children. I assert that this is a problematic and insubstantial method of analysis for this situation. As Comfort points out, “This ‘damage assessment’ perspective obstructs examination of people’s relationships to the prison in their full range and complexity by reducing inquiries to negative-positive accounting” (2008: 11). Her research on wives of prisoners in a
California state prison sheds light on this phenomenon, as she argues that women take pleasure in performing their roles of committed wives and therein lies the payoff. The mothers I spoke with have undoubtedly make great sacrifices, motivated by their unconditional love, to perform the role of motherhood in their children’s lives. While it is necessary to understand the economic and logistically costs of loving an inmate, it is important to remember the immense emotional dimension. Allison and Susan told both me that they love their children unconditionally are proud to be part of their lives.

Prisons, by definition, are intended to keep certain people in, and in this process keep others out. Via metal handcuffs, steal bars, cinderblock walls, armed guards, and barbed wire fences penitentiaries isolate the “bad” from the “good”. More so than any other space, prisons serve explicitly to separate categories of people, including mothers and their imprisoned children, as we are told they provide the dual purpose of protecting the innocent and punishing the guilty. Social theorist Erving Goffman calls prisons “total institutions”. He writes, “A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (Goffman 1962: 18) Total institutions are sequestered worlds unto themselves and have strict definitions of insiders and outsiders. A “total institution”, opacity is a fundamental feature of penitentiaries.

The opacity of prisons creates tremendous stress and anxiety in the lives of inmates’ loved ones. Outsiders are not allowed to call and speak directly to prisoners
and rarely are they able to contact administrators. Several sociological studies have revealed that the notion of not knowing the conditions or status of the inmate is one of the largest stressors in having an incarcerated family member (Hairston 1991).

Ferraro and others explain:

One of the greatest areas of emotional pain for the spouses of inmates was the uncertainty of not knowing what was happening to the inmate while imprisoned. Most prisons are dangerous places, with ever-present possibilities for fighting, extortion, or sexual assault . . . In most cases, the uncertainty was intertwined with questions about the rules and policies of the facility . . . (1983: 585)

These researchers report that second to financial strain, inmates’ wives largest source of pain was the obscurity of their husbands’ situations, with 83 percent citing “uncertainty about inmate treatment” as a significant factor of stress in their lives. Similarly, 74 percent of parents interviewed said that uncertainty about inmate treatment was a “major problem” and 66 percent said that obtaining information from prison staff was stressful (Ferraro et al. 1983: 584). Parents explained that the inability to gain sufficient information about their children “led to an emotional state of uncertainty concerning the treatment and care of the inmate, and produced emotional stress” (Ferraro et al. 1983: 579).

Opacity is not a by-product of prison structure, but rather an intentional feature. Near-complete seclusion from the outside world is meant to be a punishment to those who have committed crimes. For mothers who show their unconditional love by “always being there” for their children, the impenetrability of prisons makes this nearly impossible. For instance, I started my interview with Allison by asking how Seth was doing lately. She answered:
As far as I can tell he’s doing okay. I don’t know. He doesn’t tell me much of anything. I know he’s looking pale . . . He used to be outside all the time. And he tells me it’s not worth going outside for just an hour, it’s better to stay in the cell and stay out of trouble. So you know, he keeps a good front up for me, but you know, I’m always on edge thinking about him.

The combination of not being able to check on the status of their children and knowing that prisoners are often physically and mentally dangerous places causes moms great emotional stress.

Mothers and other loved ones of prisoners on the outside must navigate tremendous physical, logistical, and emotional barriers in maintaining their relationships with them. A theoretically simple sign of affection such as sending a book to an inmate easily becomes an expensive and confusing chore as there are very strict regulations about what materials can be sent. The rules are often arbitrary and counterintuitive. Not only do prisons tend to be unclear about standards regarding mail and communications, but these restrictions vary greatly from prison to prison and are subject to change at any time (Hairston 2004). Susan described her experiences with mailing restrictions at Adam’s facility:

Early on we made so many mistakes. When he was first arrested I sent him a book off my bookshelf and I stuffed a twenty-dollar bill in it and mailed it off the first night he was arrested. And now I know that’s a totally stupid thing to do. You can’t send money, you can’t have books, hardcover books. I’m not intentionally wounding myself anymore. I’m not trying to call the prison, and you know, be a mother. I found out you just don’t do those things.

There is a steep learning curve for families new to the regulations of the prison system. As these rules are not made explicit in advance, mothers like Susan must endure a frustrating process of trial-and-error in attempting to stay in touch with their children. As Susan’s quote perfectly reveals, correctional facilities make typical methods of demonstrating motherly love nearly impossible. Sending a book of her
shelf was clearly a performance of her love for Adam, but as she quickly learned, “being a mother” to an inmate requires significant navigation and know-how.

Mothers explained to me that not knowing what was happening inside their child’s prison compounded with a lack of method for direct communication with prison officials or their sons created a lot of anxiety and pain. Prison Talk contains specific forums for each prison and most of the discussion within these forums pertains to understanding the rules for visitation and communications. For instance, a mother on the Valley State Prison for Women forum reminded readers that an inmate may keep up to ten photographs in her cell, but that Polaroid format photos are not allowed. Mothers and other loved ones provide comfort for each other by being optimistic and providing advice. One poster wrote:

Good morning all,
Well, after 11 weeks of waiting, I have been disapproved for a visit. The officer wouldn't tell me why (not that I expected her to tell me) but that I would have to wait for the letter to come in the mail. Does anyone know why you would be disapproved? I was approved to visit him at county in record time. He is in a special needs yard - do they have different standards for that yard?
Thanks guys - having a down day today.

A woman who signs all her posts “FAITHFULLY LOVING MY HUSBAND”, responded:

Sorry to hear that babe!! Unfortunately there are many reasons applications get denied...tickets, record, etc. Hopefully it is just a misunderstanding. Keep us posted and Good luck sweetie!!

Offering advice and tips for navigating visits and communications with their imprisoned children is a very practical way in which mothers online can help each other. When I asked Susan how Prison Talk had been useful to her, she responded, “... I found on there helpful stuff about people’s experiences like what happens
before your first hearing, your second hearing, and what does it mean to plead, and information about the various prisons, what they could buy.” “Unless family members . . . have a lot of savvy about how to navigate bureaucratic systems and are connected with prison family support groups, they most likely have limited knowledge of correction systems’ policies and procedures,” Hairston found (2004: 272). This process is often intimidating and frustrating, particularly in the beginning, and veteran mothers who have become experts in negotiating these situations and are often comforting to parents seeking advice.

The prison system does not only have strict guidelines about what materials may enter in the gates, but the entrance of outsiders is also highly regulated. As with all prison policies, rules surrounding visitation are arbitrary, ever-changing, and inconsistently enforced. For mothers visiting their children behind bars, navigating security and the entrance process is a constant source of concern and disappointment. “For many families and friends of prisoners, the visit to a prison is a highly charged and anxiety-producing exercise in humility, intimidation, and frustration” (Hairston 2004: 274). In fact, many women explained to me that this is how mothers of prisoners can be most helpful to each other – discussing strategies for gaining both physical and emotional entrance into their children’s prisons. As this is no simple task, sharing tips is a common way for parents of prisoners to help each other stay involved in their children’s lives. One mother I interviewed told me that she uses a chat room to discuss individual guards and their particularities, as it is not uncommon for visitors to be refused entrance by security for minor issues such as late arrival or improper attire at her son’s prison. She said:
There’s a little chat group from the prison where my son is, a little group of women type . . . because there’s this one person who’s really nasty, really ugly and they say, “Oh she’s on duty this weekend.” So you know this is not the weekend to wear a sweater and a blouse because she will make you strip down.

The online support group on Prison Talk provides a forum for mothers to come together, share their knowledge, as resist against the nonsensical and oppressive visitor policies at their children’s prisons.

Despite that fact that prisoners have much lower recidivism rates if they have regular contact with friends and family on the outside, prisons make this an exceptionally painstaking process. As mail is highly regulated and censored, visits are both costly and stressful, and phone calls are unreasonably expensive, performing simple acts of motherly love such as sending a birthday card are tiresome tasks. Institutionally, correctional facilities make maintaining these vital links almost unfeasible, despite the benefits to families, communities, and the prisoner herself. Essentially, “always being there” for an inmate is made nearly impossible.

**Prison Visiting Rooms as Liminal Spaces, Visitors as Ambiguous Bodies**

When “non-guilty” civilians enter prison grounds they are transgressing a binary; the “good” have ventured into a torrid zone, a realm solely for the convicted, a place that supposedly no decent person should ever want to visit. When families visit their loved ones in prison, they do so in a visiting room, a space where the guilty and the innocent mingle. Binaries are transgressed, identities are temporarily suspended, supposed opposites come together; the visiting room is the ultimate liminal space.

Anthropologist Keith Carter suggests:
Every prisoner is entitled to domestic visits. They all take place in an area analogous to the no-mans land between warring armies – a semi-public, semi-private area, a place where East meets West, or the outside is allowed to enter the inside of the prison. (1996: 107)

Carter’s ideas reflect the way in which prison visitation can be seen as a time when two opposite categories - the supposed good/innocent and bad/guilty - come together. Rather than simply looking at this as a juxtaposition of two groups, I assert the identity of the visitor, as “innocent”, is temporally suspended. She is now guilty by association, and she is now treated as such.

Comfort’s ethnography of wives of San Quentin California State Prison inmates is useful in understanding visiting areas as liminal spaces (2008). She writes, “Through their peculiar status as ‘quasi inmates,’ these women dwell in the juxtaposition of two ostensibly separate worlds . . . both captive and free, and thus is a status marked by profound ambivalence” (Comfort 2008: 16). Because our society sees prisoners and non-prisoners as two dichotomous groups, for an outsider to enter the prison gates is seen as a transgressive act. Accordingly, visitors are treated with suspicion by prison staff.

Visits to correctional facilities are often very tense and disappointing experiences. Visiting rooms are typically described as crowded, inhospitable spaces which foster “rituals of debasement and the persistent denial of prestige” (Comfort 2008: 43). Comfort explains that arcane and arbitrary guest regulations make visiting an embarrassing, awkward, and anxiety-producing experience. For instance, at San Quentin Prison, metal detectors are so sensitive that they can detect wires in bras and women are often asked to remove their bras in line and either throw them in the trash or rip the wire out. Makeup is not allowed. She cites a dress code sign that reminds
visitors “genitals must be covered”, a condescending and superfluous announcement that seems to presume indecency on the part of women who visit penitentiaries. Guards are often belittling to visitors. Visits can be especially challenging for mothers because strollers are not allowed, baby wipes must be in a brand new unopened container, and only two translucent feeding bottles are allowed (Comfort 2008).

Not only are many prison visiting regulations intricate and seemingly pointless, they are subject to change at any time. Sadly, this means that mothers who have traveled long distances to visit their sons and daughters are often turned away upon arrival. Handwritten signs are often posted last minute with new regulations and visitors are given little to no explanation of the abrupt changes. Comfort explains how these “policies” are used to maintain unequal power between guards and relatives of inmates:

As with the imposition of agonizingly long and uncertain waits, sudden and arcane policy alterations deny visitors autonomy by blocking their ability to comprehend and thus to predict, contest, or remedy the conditions affecting them at prison. Similarly, by failing to provide sufficient amenities to cover visitors’ physical and hygienic needs and by withholding elementary advice and using designs of “secrecy” to engender feelings of apprehension and powerlessness, official mark those forced to wait in the corridor as disgraced beings. (2008: 50)

Thus, Comfort suggests that arbitrary and inarguable visiting policies are implemented as a means of reducing the status of visitors and reinforcing power hierarchies intrinsic to penitentiaries. While I am sure this is at least partially true, I assert that the degrading treatment and strict restrictions on visitors’ dress and the on the items they bring into the facility are also because visitors are seen as guilty by association. They are transgressing a supposedly fixed border meant to divide two dichotomous groups – innocent and guilty. Through the active maintenance of their
familial ties to their sons and daughters, they theoretically implicate themselves, evoking suspicion and mistrust.

Erving Goffman describes “persons who are normal but who special situation has made them intimately privy to the secret life of the stigmatized individual and sympathetic with it” as “the wise” (1963: 28). This is a useful definition for examining the perceptions of mothers and other relatives of inmates. He proposes that one type of wise person is an “individual who is related through the social structure to a stigmatized individual – a relationship that leads the wider society to treat both individuals in some respects as one” (Goffman 1963: 30). He continues that these people, such as relatives of inmates, “are obliged to share some of the discredit of the stigmatized person to whom they are related” (Goffman 1963: 30). As prisoners are one of the most stigmatized populations in America, supposedly so evil and abnormal they are to be locked away and kept out of sight, their relatives too are stigmatized. Goffman writes that relatives of the stigmatized have two choices – they may either walk away or maintain relations and “acquire a little of the disease twice-removed” (1963: 30). In this way, mothers of prisoners are guilty by association, particularly mothers who actively maintain a presence in their children’s lives.

Comfort’s research sheds light on the stigmatization specific to relatives of inmates. Interestingly, volunteers at the prison are not made to endure the same humiliating and degrading processes that inmates’ families and friends are. For example, most are not metal detected. “Unless there is a specific problem, most people typically move through the prison gates within ten minutes of their arrival,” she observes (Comfort 2008: 64). I too have been struck by this with my experiences
tutoring at Connecticut Juvenile Training School. I quickly pass through a metal
detector without questioning and am always surprised when I am permitted to walk
around the premise unescorted. This contrasts greatly with the juvenile inmates who
must be escorted by a guard at all time. I attribute this to my status as a white female
and especially as a tutor from Wesleyan University. The intense scrutiny of prisoners’
guests in comparison to the volunteers demonstrates how relatives of inmates are
treated with suspicion. “The assignation of extra ‘security’ measures solely to the
families, lover, and friends, however, suggests the extension of the convict body to the
visitor body, which then becomes a permissible subject for punishment and the
extraction of retribution” (Comfort 2008: 64).

The liminality of visiting spaces at correctional facilities illustrates the
ambiguous position of prisoners’ relatives. They are neither innocent, nor guilty. They
have not been charged with a crime, however, vis-à-vis their association and affection
for an inmate, they are seen as suspicious. Similar to Goffman’s description of “wise
people”, relatives of prisoners are also often stigmatized. Although mothers are
subject to degrading treatment, many make the long and expensive journey to visits
their sons and daughters, as “always being there” is symbolic of their devotion and
unconditional love. They, just as in the very beginning, are sustaining and enhancing
the life of their children contained within the walls; just like throughout pregnancy,
these loving mothers are their children’s lifelines, their access to the outside world.
CHAPTER III - Mother Blame: Contested Categories of Victimhood

“From responsibility to guilt there is only one step...”
– Elisabeth Badinter

There is not a specific hurt that goes with having a family member in prison neither child or spouse. It is a little different for a parent to this extent. A parent blames themselves for the problems of the child. I don’t think I have ever seen a parent that does not do that. Even if they don’t have to go to prison but do stupid things on the outside, we all still blame our parenting skills for causing the problem. If we don’t do it out loud, then we do it silently. One thing we must all remember. None of us are perfect. We are not perfect parents nor are we perfect people. We make mistakes yes. But, one thing we cannot do is blame ourselves for mistakes that our child has made. That child made his or her own choices. They decided to take the action that put them there.

These words were written by a mother who frequently posts on the “Parents with Children in Prison” forum on Prison Talk Online. In my initial online research I was immediately struck by how central the topics of guilt and parental blame are on the forum. Over and over again I read parents’ discussions of the guilt they feel for their adult children’s crimes that lead to their imprisonment. In response, other parents in the community attempt to contextualize and reframe their situations by pointing out the autonomy of their sons and daughters. In effort to lessen the self-blame that many of the moms expressed, they remind each other not to conflate categories of relatedness with responsibility and blame. For instance, two mothers of imprisoned young men had this online exchange:
C: . . . I often wonder what I could have done differently to prevent my son from being involved. Or, why did my son have so much trouble fitting in with the non-trouble makers. I try not to blame myself, but it is hard. Maybe if I didn’t work so much, none of this would have happened. Maybe there were signs, and I didn’t notice or avoided them. I just don’t know. I just want my baby home with me. He is only 17 years old.

B: . . . Oh, how I can relate to your feelings. 12 years ago, I went through the very same identical things. I blamed myself, I was angry, I blamed everyone for that situation . . . Even tho, he is only 17 years old, he has responsibility for the things he has done. You did not do those things. You did not cause him to do them. This was a decision that he made all by himself.

C: Thanks! I needed to hear that again . . . Your words are so supportive and kind. I hope I will be as strong as you are. I don’t know what I would do without you and the other PTO members.

I believe that one of the foremost reasons the Prison Talk forum is so vital for mothers grappling with the imprisonment of their children is because it is a space of very little blame or judgment. Unlike many American cultural narratives which do the reverse, these mothers continually support each other by pointing out the agency of their children and helping to mitigate self-blaming.

Two of the more prominent themes I have encountered while conversing with mothers of prisoners are fears of stigmatization due to the imprisonment of their children and the tendency to blame themselves for children’s involvement in the justice system. I assert that these ideas work in tandem and are mutually influential. I believe the fear of stigmatization is at least partially due to the fact that we have a long legacy of blaming mothers for their adult children’s behavior, especially when centered around criminality. In order to understand mothers’ seemingly omnipresent emotions of blame and guilt upon the imprisonment of their children, we must examine the cultural narratives of incessant mother blaming in American culture. In this section I will examine the scholarly and popular narratives that blame mothers for
high crime rates in America and explain why this is a misguided, inadequate form of analysis.

As discussed in Chapter I, mothers are said to be responsible for the moral development of their children. Historically, the dominant narrative has been that mothers, as women, are naturally both more domestic and ethical than men and are thus responsible for the education and socialization of their children. As mothers are seen as the most influential figure in their children’s lives, they are also portrayed as most accountable, particularly in instances of misbehavior and abnormality. This is very applicable to crime, as women have been given the responsibility of “taming” their children, especially sons. “It is the function of women to teach men how to be human,” writes anthropologist Ashley Mantagu in The Natural Superiority of Women (1954) (quoted in Feldstein 1997: 135). This narrative is based in the assumption that males are naturally less moral and it is female nature that best prepares them for civic and social life. Motherhood historian Jan Lewis explains:

At the sociological level, the doctrine of maternal influence said that the feminine principle of love was necessary in order to temper the selfishness evident in an increasingly individualistic age. At a psychological level, it insisted that men, to some extent, ought to be feminized; it was the responsibility of mothers to implant in their sons, in particular, an affectionate heart. (199: 57)

Ever-present motherly love supposedly “tames” children, thus misbehavior, even from adults, is frequently blamed on inadequate mothering.

As mothers and their assumed omnicompetence are given the responsibility of shaping the religious, political, and moral characters of their children, they are quickly blamed for any downfalls. Badinter theorizes:
At the same time, as the public image of the tasks of motherhood grew ever more exalted, any woman who could not or did not know how to perform them perfectly was condemned. From responsibility to guilty there is only one step, quickly passed over when the child has the slightest problem. Henceforth it would be the mother who would be called to account for any and all deviations from the ideal. (1980: 2006)

It seems that as time goes by women are seen as increasingly influential in their children’s lives are frequently blamed more when something goes wrong.

Professional fields, particularly psychology, have had a tendency to blame mothers for “corrupt” adults. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, in For Her Own Good: 150 Years of Experts’ Advice to Women (1979), explain that as psychology gained cultural legitimacy it became incredibly influential in many aspects of life, including the familial realm:

The great achievement of early psychology (and this applies to an extent, right up to the present) was not to transform philosophy into biology, but the reverse: to transmute biology into a kind of generalized philosophy . . . At roughly the same time, psychologists acquired laboratories and gained the authority to speak on anything related to the human condition – period. The laboratory bench metamorphosed itself into the speakers’ podium, from which the psychologist could hold forth on sexuality, criminology, ethnic differences in intelligence, child raising … (1979: 160).

Thus, the field of psychology seized upon the biological relation between a child and her mother, and through ideas such as the “bonding theory”12 which said infants must be with their mothers as much as possible. Relying upon this logic, the discipline propagated philosophies in which women and children both fared better if relegated to the domestic realm. Hereby developed the oversimplified myth that the child, inside the home with his mother, was protected from outside influences, and thus any

12 More in depth explanations of the “bonding theory” and other maternal philosophies are presented in Chapter I.
defect in his development could be attributed to her. “The theory was solid, the home was sacred; it was the woman who failed,” Ehrenreich and English write (1979: 226).

By the 1950s the American paradigm of mother blaming was fully established. For instance, over two million men were barred from enlisting in the military due to failing psychological tests; and these failures were often attributed to improper rearing (Ehrenreich and English 1979). Betty Friedan explains, “It was suddenly discovered that the mother could be blamed for almost everything,” including alcoholism, suicidal tendencies, schizophrenia, anxiety and deafness (quoted in Ehrenreich and English 1979: 235). This persists today where women are not only blamed for the criminality of their children but for significantly smaller issues ranging from attention difficulties to obesity. Mothers, or rather “bad” mothers, are not only blamed for personal issues, but have historically been seen as the root cause of a broad range of social phenomena such as communism, homosexuality, and juvenile delinquency (Feldstein 1997).

**The Academic and Cultural Quests to Implicate Mothers**

Academics and popular figures alike display a tendency towards faulting the mother for the misdeeds of her children. Eyer cites an extreme example in her work *Motherguilt: How Our Culture Blames Mothers for What’s Wrong With Society* (1996). In a PBS special, Bill Moyer asked T. Berry Brazelton, a popular 1980’s child psychologist and author, “Does the first year [of a child’s life] really make a difference?” Brazelton responded, “It does. The child gets a sense of being important . . . and if he doesn’t have that through infancy, it’s hard to put it in later. And these
kids that never get it will become difficult in school, they’ll never succeed in school, they’ll make everybody angry; they’ll become delinquents later and eventually they’ll become terrorists” (quoted in Eyer 1996: 6). While Brazelton’s assertions that “negligent” mothers breed terrorists serve as a severe instance of mother blaming, it must be remembered that he was a best-selling author, known as the “Dr. Spock of his generation.” While perhaps not typically this incendiary, the narrative that mothers are fully influential in the moral development of their children persists today.

Professors of nursing and self-declared feminist academics Debra Jackson and Judy Mannix (2004) have conducted fascinating and important scholarship of the phenomenon of mother blaming in the field of medicine and beyond. They define mother blaming as “a serious, pervasive problem, and a term that describes mothers being held responsible for the actions, behavior, health, and well being of their (even adult) children” (2004: 150). They remark, “. . . any psychopathology of childhood has been put firmly on the shoulders of the mother . . . at the same time ignoring similar contributions by the father” (Jackson and Mannix 2004: 150). Mannix and Jackson explain academia’s tendency to implicate mothers for the problems of their children:

An analysis of nine clinical journals published in 1970, 1976, and 1982 found a very strong theme of mother blaming. From the 125 articles which comprised the sample, the authors identified 72 psychopathologies that were attributed to mothers, which included problems as varied as arson, fetishism, frigidity, incest, incontinence, schizophrenia, sibling jealousy, transexualism, tantrums, and ulcerative colitis. None of the articles represented the mothers in only positive terms . . . the father’s possible contribution to the problem is never considered [added emphasis]. (2004: 155)

As society views women as the most influential force in the children’s lives, they are quickly blamed when something goes amiss. Because moms are seen as omnipotent,
they are held responsible for any type of “failure”. Illustrated by this aggregate analysis of medical journals, professional fields often pinpoint mothers as the root causes of many social ills, including criminality. It is no wonder then that mothers almost always feel blame and guilt upon the incarceration of their children, as popular and professional voices are quick to attribute societal phenomenon such as rising crime and imprisonment rates to failing mothers and the declining family structure.

This popular narrative seems to be a fundamental assumption serving as the basis for much social science. As Eyer writes:

The saviors of the family who devote themselves to the august endeavor of social science research seem to expect that mothers cause most of the problems of family life. They investigate “single-mother” families, “employed-mother families”, “adolescent-mother” families, “welfare-mother” families, and the mothers of divorced or “disrupted” families – searching methodically for the damage these mothers cause to their children by having deviate from the Ozzie-and-Harriet ideal. But even the hearth angel does not escape their accusations – she, apparently, is the cause of everything from cognitive deficits in her preschoolers to every imaginable sort of psychopathology. (1996: 106)

Mothers, whether working, single, too young, too old, or too poor, seem to always be held responsible for society’s ills. For instance economist Jennifer Hunt’s article, “Do Teen Births Keep American Crime High?” (2006), printed in University of Chicago’s The Journal of Law and Economics, blames teen mothers for high rates of violence in the U.S.. “Children of teenagers experience more difficult childhoods than other children and may be more likely subsequently to be victims or perpetrators,” she writes of her initial hypothetical assumptions (Hunt 2006: 533). She continues, “I find that assault rates are increased by an increase in the proportion of young adults who were born to a teenage mother” (Hunt 2006: 533). It must be noted that her research
does not in any way consider the age or role of fathers, instead she chooses to focus on and subsequently blame “improper” mothers. Hunt explains her reasoning:

The United States has also had higher teen birth rates than other developed countries. The children of young mothers are more likely to grow up in poverty, more likely to be unwanted, more likely to live with only one parent, more likely to live in unstable families, and more likely to experience harsh punishment from parents. It seems likely that these characteristics would make them more likely to commit crimes. (2006: 533)

Not only then does Hunt assume young mothers are bad mothers but furthermore she asserts that bad mothering breeds criminals. In correlating teenage motherhood with criminality and offering no real analysis or evidence to why young mothers are bad mothers, she reproduces scholarship that reinforces the paradigm of mother-blame. Rather than placing teen mothers in context, examining their socioeconomic environment, or including outside factors in her analysis, she simply blames young women, especially “unfit” mothers as the cause for crime, violence, and incarceration. Furthermore, Hunt makes absolutely no mention of the role or responsibilities of fathers. As she concludes her work she writes, “Owing to the very high level of teen births in the United States, this variable fully explains the high relative level of assault rates in 1988” [added emphasis] (Hunt 2006, 557). Can young motherhood fully explain American crime trends? With her ahistorical, apolitical approach that completely ignores all other cultural, political, and economic factors influencing crime rates, Hunt blames the young American mother and her supposed lack of parenting skills as the main reason for high crime and imprisonment rates in the United States. In this analysis men have no responsibility or sway, political policies have no influence, and economic conditions are irrelevant; the bad mother, on her own, supposedly explains America’s exceptionally high rates of violence.
For centuries psychologists and others have attempted to explain why criminals commit crimes when the majority of society is relatively law-abiding. By examining psychological texts from the late nineteenth century until the present, I hope to illuminate how this discipline is especially persistent in correlating “bad” motherhood with criminality. For instance, in *Crime: Its Causes and Remedy*, published in 1889, L. Gordon Rylands explains that most first convictions are “traceable” to “bad company”, followed by “drink”, “poverty” and other personality defects (1889:16). He elaborates:

This is a result which cannot surprise any one who knows anything of the life of the children of the poor in large towns. Uncared for by their parents, and even encouraged to prowl about the street for the purpose of begging . . . they are thrown, at an age when their character is not yet formed and their nature plastic, into constant companionship with other unfortunates . . . (Rylands 1889: 18)

This suggests that poverty and bad parenting, here inextricable, are the cause of lawlessness. Rather than blaming poverty, or moreover, examining the causes of destitution and its particularities, Rylands suggests that negligent parenting is the determining factor of delinquency and criminality. Throughout the twentieth century and presently, this trend continues as parents, particularly disenfranchised parents, are seen as the underlying cause of criminals’ behavior.

In *Origins of Crime: A New Evaluation of the Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study*, published in 1969, William and Joan McCord attempt to categorize parents, particularly mothers, as having distinct parenting styles that will then in turn predict a child’s chance of committing a crime. They believe that there are “three personality types of loving” – “loving”, “overprotective”, and “non-loving”, and within these five subgroups – “warm”, “passive”, “absent”, “cruel”, and “neglecting” (McCord and
McCord 1969: 113). McCord and McCord explain that mothers have more influence over the criminality of their sons based on their findings that “passive” mothers are more likely to raise delinquent boys than are “passive” fathers. The researchers conclude:

Maternal rejection appeared to be more criminogenic than paternal rejection . . . From this analysis, one can see that maternal attitudes were of primary importance in the genesis of crime. If the mother was loving, her sons had only a small chance of becoming criminal – regardless of the father’s attitude (McCord and McCord 1969: 108)

Once again, mothers are seen as more blame-worthy than are fathers. The “bad” mother is both pathologized and seen as detrimentally influential on the trajectory of her child’s life. Essentially, this theory asserts that breaking the law is much more related to parenting than it is to individual personality differences or any societal forces or situational factors. Keeping this fundamental assumption in mind, it is easy to see how this model attributes blame solely to poor parenting.

The 1998 text book *Psychology of Criminal Conduct*, written by D. A. Andrews and James Bonta details hundreds of possible quantities scales to predict and explain criminality such as IQ level and “Megagree’s Algebra of Aggression”.

On the topic of parental influence the authors write:

Our view is that it is the family environmental that is pivotal to the trajectory of a persistent offender. A family environment characterized by emotional neglect, inconsistent supervision and harsh disciplining . . . By the time the child enter school, aggressive and “wild” behavior is well established and accounts for the early age onset for persistent delinquents. The trajectory continues: teachers find it difficult to manage the child and the parents have less and less control over the child as he or she becomes older. (Andrews and Bonta 1998: 207)

Andrews’ and Bonta’s philosophy relays the cultural narrative that poor parenting sets a child on an irreversible path of lawlessness. Parents are seen as responsible for
“taming” their children – a process that if not embarked upon early on, supposedly provokes life-altering consequences. While unlike their predecessors, they do not pinpoint mothers, they do contend that parenting is an omnipotent source of a child’s moral and civic development. Bonta and Andrews continue:

Foremost is the need to rank order the developmental predictors of crime. Heredity, neuropsychological deficits, temperament and moral reasoning are probably not as important as family socialization experiences, but we would like to be more specific. (Andrews and Bonta 1998, 208)

Clad in a pictorial cover of an angry looking man holding a mask over his face, this textbook illuminates our society’s quest to understand criminal determinants and to quantify the influence of the family. However, as Andrew and Bonta point out, psychologists cannot exactly explain how or why “bad” parents contribute to the illicit nature of their children, but that they certainly do and that this trumps all other influences.

Outside the academy, media and popular culture are just as eager to look at the parents of offenders for causes and explanations. In Richard T. Pienciak’s book Mama’s Boy: The true story of a serial killer and his mother (1996), the author makes seemingly unfounded suggestions that Carolyn Napoletano was partially responsible for her son Eric’s brutal rape, torture, and murder of his young wife. She is depicted as being overly-protective in her mothering, unfriendly to her neighbors (citing the fact that she often steals their newspapers), and bigoted towards racial minorities; all of which are suggested to contribute to her son’s criminal demeanor. Pienciak writes:

. . . Carolyn dedicated her life to making things right for her only child. She would do virtually anything to protect and defend him; her subterfuge knew no bounds. Eric was all Carolyn had. She could never let go . . . (1996: 41)
Yet in the next paragraph, the author writes:

She hates blacks and Latinos – the women Eric fell in love with. Worse, just as Eric reaches the vulnerable age of puberty, Carolyn practically gave him away. (Pienciak 1996: 41)

Carolyn is portrayed as being simultaneously over-bearing and negligent – two attributes that supposedly lead Eric to murder his wife. While it is feasible that his mother could have embraced these two roles at different times in his life, the fact that they are both viewed as contributing factors to Eric’s criminal disposition is contradictory and unsubstantial. Penciak’s viewpoint is made clear within his dedication of Mama’s Boy:

To My Mother and Father, For always being there to nurture and support, and because this tragedy demonstrates the important role that caring and loving parents play in a child’s development [added emphasis]. (1996: i)

While in Penciak’s view, a child’s development is dependent upon nurturing parents, they must not be overly supportive, otherwise they might permit brutal criminality. This trope is constantly repeated in popular examinations of the families of criminals. It is often suggested that negligent parents raise brutally insensitive children and over-protective parents raise demanding, self-centered children and that both these dispositions are conducive to crime. Improper parenting is seen not only as unfortunate, but also as disastrously dangerous.

The website of the TruTv crime channel whose slogan is “Not reality. Actuality” contains a section called “Crime Library” which features five sub-sections: “Serial Killers”, “Notorious Murders”, “Criminal Minds”, “Terrorists and Spies”, and “Gangsters.” Within the “Serial Killers: Most Notorious” part, there are twenty-eight short chapters written about the life of Charles Manson. In “Charles Manson and the
Manson Family”, Marilyn Bardsley suggests that his childhood set him on a life trajectory of mass murder. She explains that Manson was an “illegitimate and unplanned child” and describes his mother, Kathleen, as “a promiscuous sixteen-year-old who drank too much and got in a lot of trouble.” Explaining that Manson’s family life, or rather lack of family life, led to constant turmoil, Bardsley suggests that the start of his criminal life, petty theft, can be blamed on his search for “consistency and permanency” in his life. The web-author elaborates:

Charlie never knew his father and never had a real father figure. His mother was the kind that children are taken away from and placed in foster homes . . . When Kathleen was released from jail, she was not responsible enough to take care of him, preferring her life of promiscuity and hard drinking to any kind of normal lifestyle. There was no continuity in his life: he was always being foisted on someone new; he moved from one dingy rooming house to another; there were only transitory friendships that he made on the streets. (Bardsley 2008)

Bardsley implies that Manson’s family life, determined his future as a criminal. Due to the absence of a father figure, his mother held all responsibility in his upbringing. Kathleen, however, does not fit the profile for appropriate motherhood; she was single, young, and supposedly sexually promiscuous. Bardsley suggests that she failed as a mother and thus Manson’s development as a person was severely hindered, ultimately causing him to become one of America’s most notorious killers. Once again, the mother is specifically pinpointed as the cause of criminality.

Undoubtedly, there is a difference between the dispositions and psychologies of a mass murderer and a small-scale drug dealer, and I understand that many of the examples I cited refer to the former. I assert, however, that in popular imagination all prisoners in one-and-the-same; a convict is a convict. And so our narratives of criminality, psychosis, and poor parenting become blurred and overlapping. The trend
of mother-blaming is not only present in the discourse surrounding “serious” offenders, but around all prisoners whether guilty or innocent. Our society looks to scapgoat mothers in many circumstances and this undoubtedly influences their guilt and fears of stigmatization upon incarceration of their children.

The tendency for psychologists, criminologists, and the media to blame parents is extremely problematic and short-sighted. Firstly, these theorists avoid explaining the conditions of “good” parenthood. At any rate “good” parenting is clearly culturally-based, with criteria differing between all cultural groups. Moreover, this perspective completely disregards the statistical trends and demographics of prisoners and makes no attempt to explain the disproportionate number of racial minorities and poor people behind bars. America has more inmates than every nation in the world combined; does this suggest that the U.S. has an unmatchable number of bad mothers? Does the fact that the number of prisoners has increased fourfold since 1970 suggest a sudden spike in inadequate parenting? While it is understandable to assume that childhood conditions may influence one’s potential criminality, these theories fail to engage the political and cultural contexts in which these individuals are operating. Psychology and criminology may address those who are likely to commit abnormal criminal acts, however these fields do not examine who is arrested and for what crimes. Concentrated police patrolling of certain urban areas, increased legislation such as California’s 3-strikes laws, tougher mandatory minimum sentencing, and growing economic disparities in our post-industrial economy explain who gets arrested and why much more so than does differing parenting styles. As Richie reminds her reader, “This precipitous increase [in incarceration] can be
attributed to enhanced law enforcement strategies, formal changes in arrest protocols, rigid sentencing policies, as well as actual changes in patterns in crime. Attention to the impact of mass incarceration requires that we look beyond the debates about causation. . .” (2004: 137). While this trend of parent-blaming may seem tempting, it fails to look at the ways in which the state and those in power have created an anti-poor and racist justice system and how these determine who gets locked up and for what crimes. Our individualistic assumptions are inhibiting us from examining the social structures that lead to crime and arrest; instead we mistakenly focus on the individual, or at broadest, the family. While individual and familial factors surely influence one’s life trajectory, the systemic must not be overlooked in favor or a much simpler model. Until, as a nation, we look at the economic and societal causes of criminality and imprisonment our crime rates will not dwindle. To simply blame parents is to relieve the state of its responsibility to protect its citizens and to rehabilitate its offenders.

An Example of Contemporary Mother Blame

The torture and murder of seven year old Nixzmary Brown and the ensuing public reactions and legal charges offers a contemporary example of mother blaming in the United States. On January 11th, 2006 Nixzmary was beaten so badly by her stepfather Cesar Rodriguez that later that night, after reportedly moaning on the bathroom floor for hours, she was found dead. A New York Times article, “Murder Charges Detail Torture of 7-Year-Old”, reports that Rodriguez “maintained and improvised torture chamber of fetid mattresses, a soiled litter box and wooden chair
tied to a broken radiator. The biological children of Rodriguez, aged 6 and 18 months, were spared abused, but as far back as last summer, Nixzmary and three siblings, 5, 6 and 9 years old, were tied to the chair, gagged with duct tape and beaten with wood and fists” (Brick 2009). Although Nixzmary’s mother, Nixzaliz Santiago, did not take part in the physical beating of her daughter, she has been sentenced a longer prison term than Rodriguez who will serve a term of 29 years. In contrast, Santiago may be held up to 43 years “for her role in a case of abuse that horrified New Yorkers and prompted an overhaul of the city’s child welfare system,” reads the New York Times (Fahim 2008: A33). Justice Patricia M. DiMango publicly told Santiago:

You may not have delivered the fatal blow, but the jury found it was in your power to prevent the effects of it. Were it not for your failure to act, Nixzmary Brown would have probably not have died from that blow on that day. (quoted in Fahim 2008, A33)

Similarly, Nicole Dorce, a juror for this trial told the reporter that is was the girl’s mother who held a greater responsibility in Nixzmary’s death than was the stepfather. She said, “She was the mother. It’s her duty to protect her child. He killed her, and she allowed it” [added emphasis] (quoted in Fahim 2008, A33). Although she did not participate in the physical beating of her daughter, the mother is seen as guiltier than the stepfather for her “failure” to intervene. In effect, some guilt is removed from the stepfather, presumably because he is a) male and b) non-biologically related to her, meaning that he is exempt from the required “unconditional love” and absolute devotion that her mother is. In this case the stepfather, although he is in fact the murderer, is seen as less monstrous than the “ineffectual” mother. This is illustrative of the ways in which mothers are said to be fully and solely responsible for literal lives of their children. The jurors and judge of this case do not argue that Nizxmary
died because her stepfather was brutal abuser, but rather that her mother was “indifferent” and lacked a strong sense of “motherly love”

The title of an October 14th, 2008 New York Times article is also revelatory. “Jury Asked to Decide if Girl Died Because of Her Mother’s Indifference” (Newman 2008). This title suggests that Nixzmary did not die because of her stepfather’s severe beatings and torture, but rather because her mother’s supposed lack of motherly love. Once again, the assumption here is that Santiago not only should have put a stop to Rodriguez’s violence, but that she would have been able to. Effectively, this positions the mother as the ultimate criminal, indicating that supposed motherly indifference is in fact seen as a worse crime than physical child abuse. This title implies that Santiago is not a victim of an abusive husband but rather a willing observer in the death of her daughter.

As an outsider, I cannot comment on Santiago’s reported indifference to her daughter’s suffering. Perhaps this was so, or perhaps other factors such as her reported severe learning and mental disabilities or her fear of Rodriguez contributed to her “failure to act”. Nevertheless, what is illuminated by this case is that the “bad” mother is popularly and legally conceived as far worse and much guiltier than is the bad father. “Indifference” here was the ultimate crime, not child abuse. I assert that these categories and convictions are deeply gendered. As the juror’s comments above reveal, it was her duty because she was the mother. Supposed apathy to the beating and ultimate death of her child is framed and abhorrent and a crime against humanity. The outrage did not stem from the fact Rodriguez beat his seven year old step daughter to death, but rather that her mother did not intervene in time.
Contested Categories of Victimhood:

Glennys Howarth and Paul Rock have conducted interesting research on Aftermath, an organization “catering for a population of people who have been almost wholly ignored by criminologists and criminal justice agencies, the family of serious offenders” (2000: 59). This group catered towards families of people convicted of serious crimes such as rape and murder. It was both an emotional support group and as well as an activist coalition. They were a self-proclaimed “loving family network”. According to their mission, “Aftermath has sought to normalize the abnormal, rebuild self-respect, reduce alienation, and reassure the afflicted that there are others like them, that their responses and problems are not uncommon. It provides a network of those who have been there, who know the pain, and the guilt, and the relief of being listened to, believed and accepted” (Howarth and Rock 2000: 62).

Aftermath’s members define themselves as “victims” and strive to be regarded as such in society’s eyes. The chairman of Aftermath said, “We must continue our efforts if we are going to be the ‘forgotten victims’ and gain acknowledgement of our plight and of the trauma and unhappiness we are suffering through no fault of our own” (quoted in Howarth and Rock 2000: 71). As Rock and Howarth point out, “victim is a recognized and serviceable status” (2000: 72). In their assertions of victimhood, the members of Aftermath strove to gain support and acceptance by wider society. I believe their work helps to underscore the complexities of crime and

13 I was not able to locate Aftermath, so my assumption is that this organization is no longer operating.
illuminates a segment of the unintended “victims” of incarceration. Howarth and Rock attribute the formation of Aftermath to the phenomenon of parent-blame. They write:

These families may be very deeply affected by the repercussions of crime, and their plight documents the capacity of certain crimes to lay waste to a wide range of social worlds in ways hitherto neglected. More particularly, it can present the relation between crime, criminals, and families in a novel light. Criminologists have tended overwhelmingly to examine that relation for the part it plays in the genesis of crime, defining the family almost exclusively as a catalyst or impediment to criminality . . . Politicians, policy makers and would-be policy makers have done likewise. (Howarth and Rock 2000: 59)

To my understanding, the members of Aftermath did not see themselves of victims of their convicted family members, but rather of a society that attributes this to poor parenting, that offers them little-to-no support, and that continues to stigmatize them. As one member said, “We are the scum of society, and you get to know people in Aftermath, you will know that there couldn’t be a lovelier group . . . and I’m proud to be one of them, and the world looks on and things we’re scum and I find that really really sad” (quoted in Howarth and Rock 2000: 70). The coalition of Aftermath provides a space for members to redefine their humanity.

“Victim” is a contentious role, one which may evoke sympathy but can also reduce the person’s agency. Victimhood was not a self-description I encountered very much in my research. However, many did express feeling blamed by society for their son’s and daughter’s law-breaking and that they were either systematically overlooked and excluded or ridiculed and looked down upon. When I asked both Allison and Susan what they wish people knew about families of inmates, they had nearly identical responses. Both explained that they are not bad parents and they wished society recognized this. Allison said:
In all honesty, Seth’s case was a quiet case. But it always kills me when I see the mothers on the news or even the families. They’re human too. A lot of times they’re all lumped into the same group, you know, “You raised the child, you must be a horrible person.” . . . [Mothers of prisoners] are very cautious now about what we say because we’re afraid that it’s going to backlash on us – that we were awful parents. But we weren’t. We did the best we could and sometimes the kids just make the wrong choices and they end up where they are. It’s not our fault always, sometimes it is I’m sure.

Very similarly, Susan answered, “I wish they knew that mothers of inmates are not incompetent mothers. There’s nothing wrong with us.” The mothers I interviewed were very aware that society often attributes criminality to improper parenting. Mothers of prisoners frequently express being silent about their child’s imprisonment as they fear the stigmatization and blame often associated with this role.

With both popular and academic representations of the “bad” mother as the ultimate cause of crime in America, it is no wonder that mothers of prisoners feel stigmatized and blamed for their children’s conditions. Operating within these narratives, these women have a tendency to blame themselves and their parenting skills as the causes for their children’s convictions. Through support groups such as Aftermath and Prison Talk, families of inmates are able to form communities that are supportive and reaffirming and that strive to mitigate the guilt and blame they place on themselves.

**The Mother as the Ultimate Scapegoat:**

In Eyer’s book *Motherguilt: How Our Culture Blames Mothers for What’s Wrong With Society* (1996), she cites an article found in a mothers’ magazine, “What’s In Your Breast Milk”, as an example of popular mother blame. The article explains that certain foods like broccoli, garlic, and over-the-counter medications
contain unknown chemicals and pesticides that can taint breast milk and can be harmful for babies. Eyer points out that instead of advocating for systematic changes in our agricultural and environmental policies, the article begs mothers to be more careful in their food choices. Once again, the responsibility of raising a healthy American falls firmly on the shoulders of the mother, rather than on society at large. Responsibility, and thus blame, are concentrated mainly on the maternal figure, and the role (or non-role) of economic, political, and cultural institutions go unexamined. It seems that as a society, we are quicker to accuse mothers for their “failures” instead than we are in working towards a culture that is more supportive of this role. “It is easier to blame individual women for family problems with their children than it is to look at the ways social policy and community services can be reconfigured to support women and families,” Jackson and Mannix conclude (2004: 156). As illuminated by Eyer’s example of the breast milk article, motherhood is seen as a private, apolitical, isolated role that takes place within the home. Mothers are not expected or given the option of demanding political changes such as environmental health that would in fact help them in raising health children, but are rather expected to solitarily overcome political and cultural obstacles. It is her duty, the narrative goes, to be the “perfect” mom in all circumstances.

On a similar note, Ehrenreich and English point out the fact that as the notions developed that mothers were both omnipotent and fully responsible for the development of their children, social institutions did not develop to support them in this role. “The discovery of the child by adult male public figures, scientists, and experts of various kinds, was a step filled with humanistic promise . . . Now, with
public recognition of the special needs of children, the door was potentially open for public responsibility,” they write (Ehrenreich and English 1979: 195). The authors go on to list institutions such as free daycare and healthcare that could contribute to the wellbeing and healthy development of children. Ehrenreich and English continue, “But except for the expansion of the public school system in the early twentieth century, very little of this promise was realized . . . Any larger social interest in the child would be expressed by the emerging group of child-raising experts – and they of course had no material help to offer, but a stream of advice, warnings, instructions to be consumed by each woman in her isolation” (1979: 195). Thus, even if we are to entertain the notion that mothers are in fact solely responsible for the development of the moral character of their children, we must at least acknowledge the truth that not all mothers are equipped with the necessary resources for this role and that there is very little assistance for those women who are not. As a nation we turn our back on women, blaming the individual rather than taking an analytical, self-reflective look at our failure to protect American children.

While to understand the true root causes of violence, crime, and incarceration in America is perhaps an impossible task, and definitely outside the scope of Mothers of Inmates, the current practice of mother blaming is short-sighted, misogynistic, and unhelpful. Rather than looking at the causes and effects of racial and economic disparities in the United States, our war-prone tendencies, our valorization of weapons or our violent media, mothers are usually the first source attributed to as the cause of criminality. I believe that mothers are unfair scapegoats. While they certainly
play a key role in the lives of their child, to blame them for *every* instance of a child’s life path is a much oversimplified approach.
CHAPTER IV - Remembering Those We Have Lost: An Obituary for the Incarcerated

During a conference I attended at Yale University in the spring of 2008, professor of geography and prison activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore postulated, “Racism is who dies first.” A quick look at the facts around us - that Native Americans have the lowest life expectancy on the continent, that Latinos and African Americans of color are more likely to enroll in the military and to die in combat than their white counterparts, and that environmental toxins disproportionately harm communities of color, this seems like a very apt definition. But I would like to extend this. Not only do I ask who dies first but, as a nation, who do we mourn for? And whose death do we ignore?

I propose that imprisonment is both a civil and a social death. Serving time can be considered a civil death because many of the “liberties” which, as Americans, we hold as sacred and deem to be indicative of our humanity are revoked upon incarceration. On the outside, in the Land of the Free, we are told that our dignity comes from our autonomy, that our freedoms indicate our civility. It our post-September 11th world, it is the supposed uncivilized and undeveloped who lack democracy. “Fundamental” suffrage rights that fulfill the criteria we use to define who is human are stripped from prisoners. Vermont and Maine are the only two states that allow inmates to vote while in prison, meaning that on the last election four million Americans were excluded from casting ballots (Travis 2002). Furthermore, to be convicted of a felon is to be barred from voting for life. Currently, two percent of the adult population cannot vote because of prior convictions. “Given the vast
disparities in the criminal justice system, it is hardly surprising, but shocking
nevertheless, to find that an estimated thirteen percent of African-American males are
now disenfranchised [from voting].” Mauer laments (2002: 51). This has very real
consequences. In fact, Christopher Uggen’s and Jeff Manaza’s research found that
“[voter] disenfranchisement policies have affected the outcome of seven U.S. senate
races from 1970 to 1998 . . . In each case the Democratic candidate would have won
rather than the Republic victor” (Travis 2002: 53). Another example is that women in
prison are not provided access to abortion and despite Constitutional law have no
option but to carry their babies to term. This is quite significant considering that
between six and ten percent of women entering prison are pregnant (Richie 2004).
Furthermore, as explained in Chapter II, anyone with a former drug conviction is
barred from receiving federally funded public assistance, food stamps, and public
housing for the rest of his or her life (Travis 2002). To be imprisoned is to lose all
political clout and sway; it is a civic death.

To be incarcerated is also to suffer a social death as prisoners are barred from
almost all contact with the outside. Inmates lose connections with their families and
their communities. They are no longer recognized or remembered by broad society.
And this is the point. This is both the punishment and the supposed benefit to society
- prisoners no longer participate in social life. After conducting ethnographic
fieldwork in a Los Angeles penitentiary, Loïc Wacquant called prisons “safes for men
buried alive far away from society’s eyes, ears, and mind,” (Wacquant 2002: 373).
Here he evokes a metaphor of death. Similarly, Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest who
write about the tensions and challenges of visiting hours at prisons refer to the
prisoners’ parents as “survivor parents”, once again framing imprisonment as a form of social execution (Arditti et al. 2003).

In her autoethnographic account of her nephew’s death, Lisa Maria Cacho sheds light on representation of death and public grief. In “’You Just Don’t Know How Much He Meant’: Deviancy, death, and devaluation” (2007), Cacho compares media representations of her nephew Brandon’s death with major league baseball player Michael Darr.14 Brandon and two of his friends were killed in a car crash in which he was driving under the influence of alcohol. On that same week, Darr also had a fatal car accident while driving drunk. Cacho writes:

The detailed descriptions of these drunk-driving accidents provide us the short-cut ideological codes used for deciding which human lives are valuable and which ones are worthless. In effect, the articles written about Michael Darr evoke public sympathy and by representing his embodiment of straight, white masculinity as socially valuable and by depicting his friends’ and family’s grief as a universal experience while the article printed about Brandon, Vanvilay, and William Christopher activated racial anxieties over criminalized youth and young men of color. (2007: 187)

Darr was a White, male professional league baseball player and was very publicly mourned for in his home city of San Diego. Despite the fact that his death was also caused by driving under the influence, he continued to be celebrated. This is in great contrast to the public (non)reaction to Brandon and his friends, three jobless Latino young men.

Cacho asserts that public sympathy was either evoked or refused through the language used by the journalists covering the two incidents. She explains that the

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14 I use Brandon’s first name and Darr’s last name in my discussion because this is how Cacho refers to them. My assumption is that she did not intend to privilege Darr by formally calling him by his last name but rather uses Brandon’s first name because she was his aunt and had an intimate family relationship with him.
Latino young men’s deaths were “represented as not-losses and not-tragedies through the journalist’s performance of explicit non-caring” (Cacho 2007: 190). She compares the articles about Brandon’s accident with Darr’s:

In Hughes’ article, not only are first and second person pronouns and referents never used, such as “we”, “you”, “every one”, “our”, and “us”, but the terms employed to refer to Brandon and his friends detach them from their own connections to communities, friends, and families as if they were already merely another statistic: “the three had been drinking” and “three men died”. Readers were not encouraged to empathize with the car crash victims, nor with those who survived them. (Cacho 2007: 189)

In contrast, the articles lamenting the loss of Darr include quotes such as, “It is a terrible, terrible thing. Darr was married and was the father of two sons” (quoted in Cacho 2007: 189). Cacho argues that the journalists covering Darr claimed public sympathy by reminding readers of his surviving family members. In comparison, Brandon’s death was not placed within the context of family; the public was not asked to empathize. In order for one to be mourned for, the individual must be imagined and deemed worthy of this grief.

Prisoners are not typically imagined as family members. Loving mothers of inmates know that their sons and daughters are worth grieving for. Although society neglects to see the losses incurred upon the incarceration of an individual, mothers are deeply aware of the many deaths that take place. I believe that this is a large reason why mothers of prisoners feel alone in their grief; prisoners, most simply, are not publicly mourned for. Like Cacho’s nephew and his friends, prisoners are not placed in contexts; they are not imagined as being part of community and family networks, they are not imagined as human. Through their active loving and maintenance of their familial relationships, mothers reaffirm the humanity of their imprisoned children.
They prove to themselves and to broader society that prisoners are worth grieving for. And in this way, despite incredible losses, mothers refuse to see their sons and daughters as fully dead. And so they keep being mothers. Despite all the hurdles, they are always there for their children.

I believe examining mass incarceration through the lens of mothers illuminates the humanity of prisoners. And if we can see their humanity, perhaps we may grieve for them, as a nation, when they incur civic and social deaths. For too long, the tremendous loss of life suffered under our imprisonment practices has been overlooked. We must highlight the humanity of prisoners and then we must act accordingly. At a Martin Luther King Jr. celebration I attended in January of 2007, poet Sonia Sanchez told the crowd, “We only harm others when we fail to imagine them.” I think this is very true. And I think for too long we have failed to imagine prison inmates and their families. “I cannot but be struck by the hypervisibility of the issue of crime in US culture and politics and the total invisibility of punishment,” writes Loïc Wacquant (2002: 273).

Prisons and their inhabitants are hard to imagine. When I picture a correctional facility, I picture darkness. I imagine dimly lit cells, cold brick walls, and drab colors. When I attempt to visually conceive of the prison system as an institution, once again, I picture darkness. The images are blurred and bleak. With the exception of tutoring and mentorship work in a juvenile detention center in Connecticut, I have never even been to a jail; I am physically and literally an outsider looking in. Working on this project, I have attempted to research, discuss, and write
about a complex series of practices and buildings that are kept secret from the
majority of “innocent” citizens such as myself.  

Prisons are intentionally dark spaces, metaphorically and literally. They are
not meant to be permeated and they are not meant to be investigated. “What grabs
you immediately . . . is the total absence of natural light, which reinforces, to the
extent that it is even possible, the feeling of enclosure. You would think that you’re in
a tomb,” Wacquant writes about a Los Angeles penitentiary [original emphasis]
(2002: 373). Furthermore, correctional facilities are typically located in rural,
unpopulated spaces where they are easily hidden and forgotten about (Gilmore 2007).

In discussing these ideas with my own mother, she related to this phenomenon.

Having gone into Valley State Prison for Women, a maximum security penitentiary in
Chowchilla, California over eight times for her work with the Freedom to Choose
organization, she says people are often surprised to hear that she has spent time
within the walls. She told me:

I feel really special because when I tell people I’ve been in a maximum-
security prison, it’s the other people’s reactions that are like, “Wow, what’s it
like?” It’s kind of like telling someone you’ve been to the moon. There are
lots of different reactions but it’s pretty much always, “Wow you’ve done
something really different that I’ll never be able to do.” It’s like a lot of those
places, like homeless shelters, that people hear about that they don’t really
know about, they have become more of a concept than a reality.

15 I am aware that these thoughts reflect my privileged perspective. For many Americans, the prison
system is extremely relevant in their daily lives. Particularly in low-income and urban communities
where most prisoners are drawn from, prison may be more to imaginable. At the same time, however, I
feel it is necessary to point out that the academic literature and popular journalism on the realities of
the justice system and those contained within it is quite scarce and that for people without friends or
family members in prison, it is extremely difficult to find nuanced and sensitive documentation of
prisoners and their loved ones.
In response I asked her what she thinks the “concept” of the prison is and she responded:

It’s probably different for each person, but whatever it is, it’s far removed. They put prisons in the middle of nowhere. Chowchilla is in the middle of nowhere. No one’s going to drive by it, you can’t even see it by the freeway. You don’t even see the guards coming or going or delivery trucks or the people being transported.

Donna’s ideas reflect the ways in which the prison is viewed as a mythical place, an off-world which outsiders feel they have no access to or understanding of. The fact that the prison is more of a “concept” for people is perpetuated by their lack of access into and information about prisons. Importantly, as she points out, correctional facilities are literally very distant from most people’s lives and thus are not typically imagined.

Penitentiaries explicitly and purposefully prevent people and ideas from both entering and leaving the facility grounds. In the present era of mass incarceration, as sentencing practices become harsher so do the rules regulating the flow of information from them. Increasingly, academic researchers and popular journalists are barred from prisons and are denied access to their inmates. Wacquant asserts that lack of anthropological work on prisons can be attributed to policies that restrict all avenues of access to inmates. He writes:

With the jettisoning of the philosophy of rehabilitation and the turnaround towards the criminalization of poverty as a queer form of social policy aimed at containment of the lower classes and stigmatized ethnic groups, the doors of penitentiaries were gradually closed to social researchers and severe restrictions were imposed on the diffusion of inmate writings – which all but dried up with the extinction of government support by the time Reagan renewed his tenure at the White House. (Wacquant 2002: 384).
In California, restrictions banning journalists from conducting interviews with inmates were put into place at the same time as the three-strikes-law (Sussman 2002). Essentially, as the prison system becomes even larger, it becomes even more opaque. Wacquant writes, “By becoming simultaneously more bureaucratic and more porous to the influences of the political, juridical, and media fields, jails and penitentiaries have turned into opaque organizations that can be difficult and sometimes nearly impossible to penetrate” (2002: 386). In other words, as mass incarceration’s impact is deepening, it is simultaneously becoming more arduous to research and understand; as more and more people are being put behind bars, they are becoming more difficult to imagine.

The intense limits on media access to prison facilities serve the prison system’s interests; if the system is incomprehensible it is also inarguable. For instance, in Connecticut, in order for any journalist to have contact with an inmate, she must produce a written statement outlining “any perceived benefit to law enforcement agencies” (Sussman 2002, 265). Sussman writes, “Restrictions on press access to prisoners tend to be strictest where the resulting news stories could be of greatest public significance. In many states, in-person interviews with death row prisoners are either forbidden or more restricted than those of other inmates” (Sussamn 2002 266). It is no wonder that inmates are a very difficult population to evoke sympathy for. Not only are they enshrouded in stereotypical stigmatizations and mythical misrepresentations, but they are also barred from self-representation and have very opportunities to speak directly to the public about their experiences.
Most often, prisoners and their lives are literally unimaginable. Strict restrictions on media and academic access hinder any real public understanding. As Sussman writes:

It is far easier to barricade one’s fears behind walls of concrete, rolls of razor wire, and reams of clichés than to deal with the realities of criminal experience in our troubled society. But the people society has put of sight and out of mind continue to exist, and they are shaped – or warped – by the conditions to which we relegated them. (Sussman 2002, 276)

As I hope I have explained, to receive a prison sentence is to suffer civic and social deaths as well as to incur a myriad of other unacknowledged punishments. One in one hundred Americans will experience this ordeal and yet it remains deeply misunderstood and misrepresented. We must begin to imagine prisoners. Our failure to do so is harming Americans.
Conclusion

In many ways, this project stems from my frustrations. I am frustrated because I feel that we have come to a stand-still in our scholarly and activist critiques of the American justice system. In the past fifteen years academics have produced admirable scholarship illuminating the systemic factors of mass incarceration—racism, classism, and capitalism. I am in full agreement that these are key ideologies and practices contributing to our burgeoning imprisonment trends and that this is shameful. However, from discussions I have had with my peers, the conferences I have attended, and the critical literature I have read, I have gained a sense that we are trapped in a neo-Marxist critique of our sentencing practices.

One percent of Americans are locked up.

More than two million individuals are behind bars.

We can say these unimaginable numbers to each other repeatedly—and each time they will be astonishing—but I feel that it is time to take a different approach and to look closer. We must begin to look at the cultural beliefs that not only tolerate, but that enable and legislate mass incarceration in the United States. Politicians are constantly winning on “tough on crime” platforms, and moreover, voters are continually approving harsher sentencing protocols when measures appear on ballots. Our unmatchable high number of prisoners is not only a result of government and economic policies, but also of a cultural mindset that favors punishment over rehabilitation. We must look at the America’s societal narratives about crime and punishment and use these in our critiques of the system. We must begin to dismantle the prejudiced and inaccurate tropes that encircle the accused and their families. As so
many have already pointed out, the government and private sector have a financial
stake in mass incarceration. It is now time to take a critical look at the cultural beliefs
that permit this.

Throughout this project I have departed from the prison-industrial complex
paradigm, one that does not allow for nuanced analysis of those most impacted –
prisoners and their families. My intention has been to illuminate a segment of the
population that has been completely ignored by those examining the consequences of
mass imprisonment in America. I wanted to take a compassionate and intimate look at
several of the over two million families grappling with incarceration of a loved one.
My aspiration is to make the prisoner human again, and in turn, advocate for humane
treatment. If we can acknowledge the humanity of mothers of prisoners, then perhaps,
we can extend this to their sons and daughters, who have suffered civil and social
deaths, who are no longer treated as humans. By discussing the persistent, ceaseless
love mothers have for their imprisoned children, I hope to show that we, prisoner and
non-prisoner alike, are all sentient people operating within complex kinship and
community groups. When you hurt the inmate, you hurt his mother; we are a lot more
inextricable that the justice system acknowledges. For too long the mothers of
prisoners have too been served unnecessarily harsh sentences. In revealing their
struggles and successes, tears and triumphs, I hope to have articulated their humanity
and their children’s. If we are to frame mass incarceration as a human rights issue -
which I hope we will - we must listen to the stories of the humans harmed by these
practices.
As I reiterated throughout, the fundamental guilty/innocent binary is in no way accurate or constructive. Notably, never once in our conversations did Susan or Allison use “guilty” or “innocent” to describe their sons. My sense is that they feel their situations are much more nuanced and that these totalizing titles are inapplicable to their situations. Both these mothers advocate for taking a more personalized, sensitive approach to sentencing and imprisonment practices. Susan told me:

When I visit [Adam in prison] I look around the room and I am astounded. There are very nice people there and I know some of them did terrible things – and my son tells me that real criminals don’t get visitors – but there are enormous numbers in the prison system today who have not done anything wrong. Enormous numbers of immigrants whose only crime was trying to pick tomatoes for Americans and they are not scary people, they are not bad people. I know there are scary people, there are bad people, but to group all prisoners in one category is serious mistake. I wish that people knew that our criminal justice system does not rehabilitate. There is no positive value to the enormous amount of tax dollars spent on warehousing people. We could spend the same amount of money rehabilitating people and be a far better society.

Susan asserts that absolutist categories of innocence and guilt are leading to the improper lock up of many citizens. Similarly, Allison advocates for taking a more reflective, individualized approach to justice. She said:

I think the court system also needs to listen to the parents too. They need to listen to the parents of the accused because they think everybody is the same. We’re all different. We’re all human. We all have different needs and I think if it was a different situation, not a judge in the world would hurt Seth. You know, especially when he came for help.

As illustrated by this quote, Allison feels that as a mother she is better able to understand the complexities of Seth’s situation than is our current court system and that mandatory sentencing practices prevented her son from receiving the rehabilitation he needed. Allison and Susan want their children – and other mothers’ children – to be imagined as individuals and as fully human. This is the power in their
stories, and I believe this illustrates the potential meaningfulness of ethnographic and anthropological work in this field. We must work with the individuals most impacted by mass incarceration and begin to dismantle our mistaken binary so fundamental to justice in America.

The uniquely American nab-’em-quick-and-lock-’em-up-tight, “tough on crime” mentality is harming literally millions of families. If we are truly a nation that considers “family values” to be a top priority, we must take a critical look at our treatment of the accused and their families. If we are to change our compulsions to incarcerate, we must emphasize the humanity of offenders. I hope *Mothers of Prisoners*, through the lens of mothers and their unshakeable love for their children, helps to reestablish the prisoner as human – a human worth grieving for, worth advocating for, worth listening to. We must remind ourselves and each other that the brutality, deprivation, and dehumanization that takes place inside prisons is in opposition to our American ideals.

Prisons are designed to separate groups of people from each other. They intend to keep the “bad” in and the “good” out. As I have shown, not only are these categories fundamentally inaccurate, they are not possible to maintain. As evidenced by the tenacious ways mothers of inmates stay connected to their imprisoned sons and daughters, the barbed-wired fences and cinderblock walls *are* in some ways penetrable. Like mothers of incarcerated children, we must keep at it. We must transgress the carceral borders which are meant to keep us separated from each other. As theorists and philosophers, academics and activists, teachers and students, we must fight to bring our knowledge inside penitentiaries and we must learn from those
locked up and to help share their stories. We must listen and we must teach. We must form alliances, freely sharing our knowledge and expertise. Like mothers of imprisoned children, we must press on against the formidable obstacles that were established to keep us out. We must start being there.
Appendix A – Transcript of Allison’s Interview

Kaitlin: So I guess, just to kind of start off with I guess, how is your son doing these days?

Allison: As far as I can tell he’s doing okay. I don’t know. He doesn’t tell me much of anything. I know he’s looking pale because I just saw him on Sunday; I see him twice a month.

K: I see.

A: He looks very pale. He used to be outside all the time. And he tells me it’s not worth going outside for just an hour – it’s better to stay in the cell and to stay out of trouble. So, you know, he keeps a good front up for me. But you know, I’m always on edge thinking about him.

K: Of course, of course. So when did your son first get involved with the prison system?

A: It’ll be two years next week as a matter of fact, on the nineteenth of August.

K: Okay, and was this your first time kind of going through this process, um with a family member and . . .

A: No, no. His father was arrested I guess about 16 or 17 years ago.

K: Oh wow, okay. So this is something you’ve dealt with . . .

A: Yes, unfortunately yes.

K: Okay and can I ask, what was the trial experience like for you?

A: He tried out. Um, simply because we thought he would be able to get the help he was looking for. As a matter of fact we had counseling all set up for him and what not on the county side and the state decided to send him upstate. Unfortunately the judge sent him up state and he has not been able to get his counseling that we had already had set up for him. He has a counselor and a psychiatrist that he has a phone number for and they won’t even okay those numbers on his phone list. They won’t process it; they keep denying it.

K: So just to make sure I’m clear on this – you were trying to seek counseling instead of imprisonment and then that was denied to you?

A: Right. And the counselor said that even if he got prison time he would see him but he’s been denied any kind of counseling.
K: Oh, that’s really terrible. Okay, so during this process of trying to get him counseling. What type of support did you have? Did you have anyone to help you and your family out with this?

A: No. Like family help?

K: Right. Or even like legal help? I’m sure you were provided a lawyer, or did you use your own lawyer?

A: He was provided a lawyer, yes. He was provided a lawyer. I felt at the time, I was told at the time that the lawyer, even though he was a public defender, he was one of the best one for Seth’s case and for people like Seth. But in the end, I really don’t feel like he did anything even though I was constantly on the phone with him and badgering him. In the end we ended up having a few words back and forth because I was calling so often.

K: So was there any other legal support or any legal resources or any organizations to help you?

A: No, no.

K: So you were on your own. And I guess during this time, how did your other family and friends deal with this? Were people supportive or involved in this process?

A: My youngest son was really supportive. My mother was back-and-forth on it. She supports everybody. Just like I said - my youngest son. My daughter - not supportive of all. As a matter of fact, I have no contact with her at all.

K: And she’s the older one right?

A: The oldest, yes.

K: Your lack of contact with her now, is that a result of having your son in jail or was that already a rocky relationship?

A: No that was a result of Seth locked up.

K: Really? I am sorry to hear that. So, you did say that your son’s father had been arrested. Is he at all still in the picture to help out you and your son?

A: No, not at all. Not at all! As a matter of fact I told my other children I do not even want him to know Seth’s in the system. So, as far as I know, I don’t talk to him at all. My youngest son does keep in contact with his father.

K: Okay, and how old is your son?
A: My youngest son is 26.

K: Okay, so my next question is how do you stay in touch with Seth?

A: Yeah I stay in touch with him, mail him books, magazines, whatever he asks for. I am not able to help him out financially. My mom sends him a little bit of money every month. I do go out and visit him every month. It was every week before gas prices went up, because it’s over 100 miles one way, so gas prices are the other reason why we don’t see him. . . well I see him every other week. His younger brother sees him every week, but I don’t, so he actually does have visitation every weekend.

K: Okay. Just to step back a little bit. Because I don’t really know anything about the logistics, what are the regulations on what you can mail him?

A: I’m sure there’s restrictions. I think every jail he’s been in – he’s been in three, County, Concord, he wasn’t really allowed anything but letters in Concord. When he was in County he could have paperback books, newspapers. And now that he’s in the facility he is allowed hardcover books now, we mail him money, he was allowed to get his own TV, because he’s in a cell by himself 21 out of every 24 hours.

K: Wow. That’s a lot of isolation.

A: I think ever since he’s got his TV he’s isolating even more. Even in his room as a parent, he was always very proud of it. He even told me that he know he was going to lazier once he got this TV. He doesn’t even go into the rec room or associate.

K: Do you, is that something you’re concerned about?

A: The isolation I am, but then again I’m kind of happy he is in a cell by himself. I don’t have to worry about him physically being attacked. In the beginning I thought he wasn’t going to just let anybody, well that this was going to be his way of doing himself in. So I did have a counselor at County jail that I was contact in that watched over him and what not if he needed anything. But now he’s says say if he’s not on medication he’s not even allowed to talk to a counselor. They won’t come out and see him, so I don’t really feel he needs medication. He knows what he’s done. He’s come out right along and asked for help. But because he’s not on medication he’s not even offered any type of help, unless he’s on medication.

K: I see. That’s unfortunate. Has he had issues of physical safety in the prison?

A: No he hasn’t. It was more an issue of me thinking that he was going to have a problem, but he never did. In the beginning I thought, “Well he can be nothing but a smartass.” But people in the system told me he was handling it right. So he has never had a problem as far as I know.
K: That’s good. Okay so backing up a little bit. You mentioned that your mother sends him money. What does he use that money for? Does he buy goods in prison or is he saving it?

A: No, because they’re not even offered a cup of coffee without having to pay. Everything he gets he has to pay for other than – he gets three meals and a cot to sleep on. Everything else. He told me that just a cup of coffee, and it’s really horrible coffee in the morning with breakfast, he has to buy his own coffee, food stuff, his own envelopes, stamps, own TV obviously, and then all the accessories that went with the TV because they take the speakers out. I don’t understand it; I don’t question it – I don’t want to know. So he had to buy a headset and a stereo adapter and all this equipment for that. Everything he has to buy for himself.

K: Does he have a job at all? Is there any way for him to make money?

A: He has signed up. He was a little bit upset because everybody who signed up the last time the waiting list came out, everybody has either gotten the courses he wants or have gotten a job and he’s the only one who hasn’t. He feels it’s all because they are sentenced longer than he is. He has done two years and he has another two to four years to do. He says everybody else is over ten years.

K: I see, I see. So going back to the visits. You said you visit every other week, but you used to visit every week. What are those visits like? You have to drive very far?

A: Mhm. About an hour and a half, two hours drive. We try to keep it light, you know. We talk about whatever happened during the week, you know, or sometimes a comic strip, or did you see this on TV or that on TV? We always try to keep it very light. And you know I will always start the conversation asking if he’s okay and if he needs to talk with me about anything. He always says, “I’m fine, yeah.” And right from the very beginning he was the one that was keeping the rest of us together. It always kills me that he’s not getting anything that he asks for, but that’s the way it is and that’s the way it’s going to be.

K: Yeah, as a mother I can see how that must be really difficult. So how long are you allowed to visit for when you go and see him?

A: I will see him in the afternoon. It’s supposed to be from 1:00 to 3:30. They never even start calling anybody in until about 1:30, reason being I guess their lunchtime isn’t even over until 1:00. So I would say I usually get to see him for about an hour and a half where he is now. Every other place has been different.

K: So you and your son go. Is there anyone else that visits or is supportive of him, keeps in touch with him?

A: My mother. He does have a friend who wants to see him, but he’s not allowed to, he’s not even allowed to write him, but he does inquire about him all the time.
K: And what about phone calls? Is he able to call you?

A: He calls usually if he needs something, but the phone calls were ridiculously expensive when he went upstate, it was costing me 35 dollars a phone call.

K: Really, and how long was that for?

A: About a ten minute phone call. The phone call itself was about four dollars or something but it was all the other surcharges that were tacked on because it was a collect call and it was forwarded to someplace in Texas, and back and forth. That has changed. There have been a lot of complaints about that.

K: Yeah, I’ve been hearing about that. I’ve read a couple things in the newspaper about that.

A: Well that has changed. I think the last was about four dollars for a 20 minute phone call, so that has changed.

K: So that’s getting better, that’s good. Yeah that’s just criminal that they do that and charge that. That’s really, really terrible. So I guess, speaking of finances, what are the other financial burdens of having a son in jail that maybe aren’t obvious to me, that I wouldn’t think about? You mentioned the gas, mileage.

A: Just sending him money. It hasn’t been a real hard financial situation other than him being so far away.

K: So switching topics a little bit. I’m interested in your involvement with Prison Talk. How long have you been on the forum for?

A: My psychiatrist actually had me go on the forum about a year ago and I thought, “This is not for me at all” and one day I was just feeling really, really melancholy and I was just looking for things I might be able to help Seth with and I fell into it . I guess that was back to March of this year, so I would say since March I’ve really been reading it.

K: How has it been useful for you? What have you gained from it?

A: Knowing that there are other people out there that have the same problems. I just recently started going into the national forum, I used to just stay in the Massachusetts forum. I just started going and reading the first page of the forum I guess you call it. And it really has been useful you know. I found the parents group. I have found other resources that will be useful once Seth finally gets parole.

K: Like what?
A: There are places that sponsor you to go back to school. I can’t think of the name off the top of my head but there are places that will sponsor you to go to college. I guess they are pretty hard core in really keeping track of what you do, making sure you’re making proper lifestyle changes, getting back into the community, volunteer work while you’re in school, making sure you’re going to school, helping you out. In fact I even found out that he qualifies for disability. And I thought, I had never heard any of that before. Just different places I had found looking around the different forums.

K: How do you feel about his release? Are you nervous about it?

A: I’m very apprehensive about it. I’m very very apprehensive about it because I really - I don’t tell it straight to his face - but I hope that he does do the entire time and doesn’t have the parole because he will have to be on a monitor and I will have to pay for it because he obviously doesn’t have a job and hello, I’m disabled so I can’t afford the 4 or 500 dollars a month they want for him to be on a monitor. In my opinion, if the state wants you on a monitor, they should have to pay for it.

K: Right, absolutely. So I don’t think I understand. What does a “monitor” mean? Can I ask that?

A: An ankle bracelet. If he gets paroled he’ll have to on a monitor.

K: I see. So your family will be responsible for that. Wow, okay. So, to kind of back up to support groups. You said you use the Massachusetts forum. Are there other support networks you have? Or do you actually know personally any other mothers with prisoners?

A: No. This is actually the only support I have other than going to therapy itself and friendship these days. I don’t know of any other mothers, if I do I do not know about it. When he was at County, I did run into other people that I knew there visiting their boyfriends.

K: What’s been. . . this is a big question, but what’s been some of the hardest parts of having a son in jail?

A: [long pause]. Everything you know. He was my life, you know. Um . . . the hardest part really is knowing that he was asking for help when they arrested him. And he had gone and asked for help and this was their way of helping him – arresting him and sending him upstate. When his father was arrested his father talked about how he was going to get out and I really didn’t listen to him. I thought “You know, you did the crime, you pay the time. Shut your mouth.” And now that I see with Seth, I am seeing that there really isn’t any help in the prison system at all even though they claim there is. I mean, he was court ordered to do programs that we had already had set up for him at County and these programs are not even available to him at the prison where he’s at. They’re not available. If you’re an alcoholic you have all the
programs in the world, but if you’re anything other than that – there are no programs out there for these guys. And you know, how can you have a judge sentence you, tell you that in order for you to get paroled you need to do X, Y, and Z, and then you get sent to a jail and you request it and you’re told flat out, “That doesn’t exist here,” you know? You’re behind bars so you can’t exactly go out there and look and you know if you find someone outside, outside to help you out, then it’s denied. It just doesn’t make sense to me at all.

K: No. . .Has it gotten easier at all?

A: I’ve accepted it. Um, I don’t think it’s ever going to get easier. I’m always finding somebody that needs help just finding their way through the system and I help them through the system because I’ve been there.

K: Through Prison Talk?

A: Yeah through Prison Talk. I don’t think it gets any easier on the personal level, ever. You know you think it does and then something side-swipes you.

K: I can imagine. What keeps you strong through this? What keeps you going?

A: I’m a very strong person in the first place. I learned that from my husband . . . I got angry for five minutes, brushed myself off, put myself through school, and got a job and supported the kids and what not and kept a roof over their heads, and now the kids are all grown at what not. I’m surprised I didn’t lose my mind when Seth got arrested.

K: Yeah, you should be proud of yourself.

A: I caught myself but unfortunately it took a toll on my body and I have not worked for twenty months. My body gave up, my mind didn’t.

K: You said about twenty months, that’s about two years. Did that coincide with when your son went to prison?

A: Yup. It was five months after he went to prison, I got sick. And one miss-diagnosed doctor after another couldn’t figure out what was going on with me. The only thing they all agree on is that it’s stressed related.

K: I can imagine. What encourages you, is it connecting with other mothers? Is it your family?

A: Actually, right now this time around it’s my youngest son. He’s just a doll. Right now I’m staying at his house while he’s on vacation taking care of his dog and I told him that when he gets back he doesn’t have a dog anymore because I’ve felt better
than I have in the past two years just taking care of the dog every morning, having something to get up for.

K: Looking at Prison Talk, a lot of people talk about prayer and faith. Does faith play a role for in this situation or no?

A: Yeah it does. But I don’t think I’m, I’ve never been a church goer because I always felt the people who did that were kind of . . . I have my own way of praying. I do it on my own and it’s a personal thing. It’s not something I go out and ask people to do. And it has worked for me I guess because I’ve never really been able to go into a prayer circle. For me that’s kind of hypocritical; it only works when you want it to work and if it doesn’t work. You know what I’m saying?

K: I know exactly what you’re saying, that it is a personal thing for you. Absolutely. A word or a phrase that keeps coming up when I look at these forums and with the mothers who have private messaged me kind of talk about a concept of “motherly lov”. And I was wondering if this is a concept you think about? And has it changed or stayed the same when you think about your son in prison and what you’ve been through and what he’s been through?

A: No, it hasn’t changed. [Tearfully] I’m proud of him. You know even though he’s in jail. I’m proud of the fact that he knew he had a problem and I’m terribly, terribly disappointed in the system for not taking his, looking at it as being a mental health problem, putting him in the system where they’re actually making the mental health problem worse.

K: How has having Seth in jail changed your relationship with him? Has it changed things between the two of you?

A: Seth and I were always very close, but it was a quiet closeness. I mean if he needed anything – I should have known that something was going on because he just started popping up. You know, he’d just come over and he’d just watch TV with me, he wouldn’t say a word. He just felt comfortable being with me, but I should have known something was up. But since he’s been arrested, he has started opening up and he does talk to me, talk openly, which he was always kind of an introvert anyway. So being able to talk and talk openly the best that we can over the phone or even in the visiting room, we’ve actually gotten closer.

K: I mean, I can imagine when he’s communicating with you over the phone or in person he has to be careful about what he says right?

A: Yes, very. Once he sliced the palm of his hand and I didn’t even notice it until the end of the visit and I went, “What did you do?” He says, “I can’t tell you.” It just made me get kind of, “Come on, don’t be doing something stupid - we’ve gotten this far. And he says, “I needed to clean my razor blade and you know, what I did would’ve gotten me in trouble, so it was like I thought he had gotten in a fight or
something but it’s like, “I can’t talk to you about that.” We have codes, we’ve always had a way of communicating the two of us. I don’t know how I missed there was something going on I would say probably three months before he got arrested.

K: What’s been the biggest surprise for you in the process?

A: How corrupt the system really is. You know you hear about it, you just have no idea, but the system is very, very corrupt; it’s unbelievable. When he was at County, the sheriff of the county had this big picnic. It’s televised, it’s on the news. He’s hob-knobbing with the higher politicals in the county or even in the state. Now, I never thought anything of it, figured it was a way to get money and what not. Do you know he’s actually taking the money out of the food budget for the prison? And making the prisoners do the serving and the cooking? For two weeks the guys, you know Seth complained they were getting nothing but hotdogs and you know I was like, “Right Seth, that’s all they’re feeding you [sarcastically].” And he says, “No, they’re having this big picnic and that’s where all the food is going right now.” And I kind of put that in the back of my mind and then I went home and I’m watching the news and there it is – Sheriff Asher’s having his annual picnic and I went, “Oh my god.” You know and he’s looking for money and he’s taking money out of the political system and feeding politicals. And I just can’t believe how corrupt the system actually it.

K: Yeah, and how angry that must make you. I see, at least on the parent section of Prison Talk, there are a lot more mothers than fathers . . .

A: I think there are a lot more women than men on the whole because I think a lot more women look for help or a support system than men do.

K: So they’re just more public about it. When you go and visit Seth in prison, is there a pretty equal number of men and women?

A: More women.

K: Is it an all men’s prison probably?

A: Yup. When he was first in County it was coed and there were women in there and even there there were more women visiting the women.

K: Really, and why do you think that is?

A: I think we’re more nurturing, I really do. I think we’re more nurturing and more apt to lend a hand, because as far as visiting where he is now, this one’s like the quietest. Really, there are not many visitors at all. But it is mostly women, young women, all visiting their boyfriends and what no.
K: So this is a question I meant to ask early, but I’ll ask it now. I was curious, this is also a big question, but what do you think your biggest success is as a mother and in this process?

A: My biggest success believe it or not is the fact that Seth did - before things got way out of hand - did recognize that he had a problem. I don’t tell many people this, but our story’s very different, Seth came to me and told me that he thought he was turning into his father [tearfully]. Seth had come to me one night, I had just gone to bed and he came in and he says, “I think I have a problem. I think I’m turning into my father.” You know which is like, “No, no. You’re nothing like your father. You never have been. You don’t even have his personality. He straight out told me what he had done and my first thing was okay we’re going to get help and I asked him, “Do you want help for this?” And he says, “Yeah I need help. I need to get away.” And so we had gone down to a mental health hospital which didn’t do emergency intake and they immediately called the police and he was arrested that night and he has not been out since. So, I think that would be the fact that I raised them to know this is wrong and we need to put an end to this vicious cycle that we have.

K: Yeah, and I can see how you both did the right thing and how hard that is that that didn’t work out at all and that that was used against you.

A: Yeah, it was totally used against us. I kind of knew that that was going to happen because I was a nurse and I knew about mandatory reporting and I think, “Maybe I’ve found another way to get somebody else to do it.” But I was hoping that in the wrong he would get the help he needed, not punish him and that didn’t work out so well. Now we understand each other and I think that end the end that actually made us a little bit closer too.

K: Having him in prison made you closer?

A: Well, having him know he could come to me and tell me what was going on.

K: Yeah, absolutely. What do you wish people knew about families and families of inmates?

A: [long pause]. In all honesty, Seth’s case was a quiet case. But it always kills me when I see the mothers on the news or even the families. They’re human too. A lot of times they’re all lumped into the same group, you know, “You raised the child, you must be a horrible person too.” I really wish they would learn - and I think, reading your threads and whatnot and the way people were reacting - we’re very cautious about what we say, because we’re afraid that it’s going to backlash on us that we awful parents. But we weren’t. We did the best we could and sometimes the kids just make the wrong choices and they end up where they are. It’s not our fault – always – sometimes it is I’m sure. But I think that the court system also needs to listen to the parents too, they need to listen to the parents of the accused because they think everybody is the same. We’re all different. We’re all human. We all have different
needs and I think if it was a different situation, not a judge in the world would hurt Seth. You know, especially when he came for help. They received a call that even his mother was there asking for help. “This mother’s turning her son in.” So none of that was taken into consideration, it was just, “Oh. He did it. Gotta follow the same guidelines.” They’re put in with the hardcore. And that’s all there is to it. I really think we need to be listened to a little bit more. I don’t think that’s going to happen in my life-time.

K: Yeah I agree. And I think that’s what’s so … what disturbs me so much about the prison system and the court system are the black and white verdicts of guilty and innocent. Because there’s so much gray are in life I think and I think that the system completely ignores that. And so it makes very false accusations all the time. So, just a couple more questions. I guess, you kind of talked about the corruption. But what’s been the most important lesson you’ve learned?

A: Just live and learn so, I think the biggest lesson I learned is that if I had known then what I know now I would have had Seth turned in and in one way or another I would have re-worded what the problem was and maybe gotten him the help. I think it’s probably all in the way it’s worded these days. You know we ask for help and the guy says, “Oh we don’t do emergency intakes but have a seat and someone will come down and talk with you.” Yeah, as he calls the police. You know and this is in a mental health facility. To me that was just wrong. I would have had Seth word things differently. I definitely would have not sat back and let them tell the police what had happened without a lawyer present. I even tried having things thrown out because he didn’t have a lawyer present and his lawyer said, “That’s not going to make any difference at all.” Because he knew what he was doing; he knew what he did was wrong. He made the statement and when the lawyer finally talked to him like one week later or two weeks later after he had been arrested he said, “He knew what he was doing when he did it so you can’t have anything thrown out.” I definitely think I would have worded things differently and would have gotten him the help that he desperately needs and was asking for that night.

K: Without a doubt. What’s one thing you’d like to make sure I know? Is there anything else that you didn’t cover that you want me to know about you and your son?

A: I can’t think of anything. Like I said, we’re very cautious now. You would have asked me ten years ago? I probably would have chewed your ear off just by talking to you. I don’t think anybody, well very few people know this about my son. None of my friends know that I know of. It’s just the people that needed to know, so, that’s how very cautious I have gotten. But as far as Seth personally, I don’t think you didn’t ask anything that I’d want you to know, but you know I really hope that your thesis opens a few eyes somewhere along the line and changes things.

K: Well, yeah, me too. And I just want to say that - especially given how you probably feel, or at least I feel, that others have violated your trust - I just wanted
again to say thank you for being so open for me and its’ really brave for you to talk about all this especially with another stranger like myself. And I also really hope, genuinely, that my thesis can open some eyes. I know just by talking to you I have learned a lot.

A: Well I’m glad. I wish you lots of luck with your thesis. Do you need anything else or can think of anything else? Keep in touch.

K: Okay, well thank you Allison. Thank you, thank you. And we’ll be in touch and I’ll let you know when I send the consent form. But please contact me if you have any questions or want to add anything or take anything back.
Appendix B – Transcript of Susan’s Interview

Kaitlin: How’s your son doing right now?

Susan: Oh, I think he’s doing fine. He’s settled in and he’s made some friends, in so much as you can in prison. And he called last night and said he got all his papers to enroll in the Masters degree program with the University of Australia. He was excited about that.

K: Let’s see. You said your son has been in prison about two and a half years? Is this your first major experience with the prison system?

S: Absolutely, yes.

K. And going back a little bit. I was wondering what the trial experience was like for you and your family.

S: There was actually not a trial. He ended up pleading guilty, not because he was guilty but because the alternative was the threat of life in prison and he didn’t want to take that chance. If he went to trial and was found guilty he would have spent the rest of his life in jail. And he wasn’t guilty and he isn’t guilty. But we had lost so many hearings and had been treated so horribly along the way that he wanted to choose an alternative that would allow him to still have a life someday and that was his decision to make and that was what he chose. Clearly, he was not going to get a fair trial.

K: And what is his projected sentence? How long is that for?

S: His sentence is ten years. So he should be out in 2015 I believe.

K: So you said when I talked to you on the phone a few days ago that his father was supportive. I was wondering if you could talk about his father’s role a little bit. And were there other people in your life who were supportive? Who was there?

S: It was really just immediate family. Adam has two younger brothers who are college-aged and were in college at the time. One has since graduated. And my former husband, we had been divorced for about ten years and I was the full custodian of the three boys, but he did assist greatly with assisting lawyers and sharing the visiting and shared some of the financial expense. It was just good that other issues were put aside and our son became a priority for the family.

K: How did your other children respond? Your other sons?

S: I think they were as shocked as we were and it’s very difficult for them because they understand that their brother is not guilty and yet was associated with people who are guilty. He was charged with conspiracy. Conspiracy is one of those charges
that you cannot defend yourself against because if you – conspiracy essentially says you didn’t do the crime, you just knew about it. And then the prosecutor says, “Well if you were friends with these people and you didn’t know about it, we’ll charge you with Willful Blindness and you’re guilty anyway.” So no matter what you do you’re guilty. Once you’re charged with conspiracy there’s no hope. There’s no way to defend yourself against the charge of conspiracy. So that was like a new revelation to me that in this country you could be charged with a crime where there is no hope of winning the case. The person who was guilty was Adam’s childhood friend who we had known since he was two years old and so of course he knew him, of course he was with him a lot, but Adam did not know the extent of what this other boy was doing. Apparently, if you know you’re guilty and if you don’t know - you’re guilty. There’s no hope really.

K: I had no idea about any of that.

S: The United States is the only country in the world where conspiracy is a crime. To know that someone is committing a crime is a crime and the sentence is supposed to be the same as the person who committed the crime. And the person who committed this crime will spend his life in jail, and if Adam had not plead guilty he would have as well. You can’t prove you spent your whole life with this buddy and didn’t know what he was doing.

K: Of course not.

S: There’s no way of proving that. There were three checks that had exchanged hands between my son and this other kid. There was no way to say what those checks were for. They were not large amounts of money; they were small. And the other child is charged with child pornography which is a hysterical thing in our country right now.

K: Yes, that is the new crime of fascination right now.

S: Yes. So even though my son isn’t charged with that he will have to be a registered sex offender. Even though the judge said, “We know you didn’t do this. We know you’re not a sex offender. We’re sorry but this is the penalty for what you did.”

K: Wow. That is pretty huge.

S: So the adjustment to that has been a hard thing for him to deal with. And also, beyond the loss of ten years of my son’s life, is the loss of the feelings about my country. Those have been extremely painful because I have always been very patriotic and thought America was the greatest country in the world - and to some extent still do - but having my eyes opened to the realities of the justice system has been deeply disturbing to me and that has been very painful.

K: I can imagine. So how do you channel that? Where does that pain go? Are there ways of coping with that?
S: Well probably not very well. It just resides unresolved in me. I think an election coming up gives me some hope that maybe there will be a change, but not a tremendous degree and I don’t have any illusion that anything will change for my son. Once you plead guilty, that is the end. There really is no alternative; there is nothing that can change in the future that would benefit him besides a Presidential pardon which is not going to happen for a child pornography conspiracy. So I guess I do hold out some hope that justice will come back to this country and my son seems to be coping well with the situation, much better than I am really. He is young and he’s finding positive ways to keep busy and so far at least in the prison where he is now where he is now, he hasn’t been hurt by anyone.

K: That’s good. Yeah that was one of my questions.

S: In the original setting he was – beaten up twice in Virginia.

K: So do you feel that he is in suitable conditions in prison right now?

S: Prison is not suitable for any human. No. I feel he is safe only because he’s learned you just kind of swallow everything and keep quiet and stay out of the lime light, but he’s sort of that way anyway. He’s a real studious, academic-type kid. He’s just as soon to read a book as anything else, so he’s getting a lot of reading done.

K: So now he’s going to pursue a Masters?

S: Yes. He’s always loved education. The prison system has made that extraordinarily difficult because they are not allowed to use the computer. Even if it’s not on the internet they’re not allowed to use the computer. At all the colleges now distance education requires a computer so that’s why we finally ended up in Australia because I guess they’re a big, barren country they still have correspondence. It’s a fully accredited program so he can do this Masters degree in math – he loves math - through correspondence.

K: I see. And where did you hear about this program? Where did you learn about it?

S: We pretty much searched over 200 universities, had long exchanges with admissions, and just by continuing to search over the internet we finally found that in Australia they really want American students and they are kind of in the transition phase. They’re going to computer learning, but they’re not there yet so they still have written exams. They send the material to me and I can print it and send the printed material to him. Then he will hand-write his assignments which is not uncommon in math, - because he’s not writing papers, he’s doing math stuff - and send it to Australia. It’s taken us a whole year to find a program.

K: That sounds logistically complicated but I’m glad you found that.
S: So at the moment he’s excited about getting that going.

K: So how do you stay in touch with Adam?

S: I go every other week to visit him and we can visit for a couple hours and I write him. I don’t really write him a letter everyday but I try to send him something almost everyday, clippings from the newspaper or a puzzle or something. And his brothers go occasionally to visit and I know his dad goes once a month to visit. It’s very difficult; it’s very expensive. I figure it costs me about $100 each time I go to visit by the time I drive, pay the tolls.

K: How far is it from you, this prison?

S: It’s about three hours one way.

K: Wow, that’s definitely significant especially with gas prices.

S: I go three hours. I visit with him for about three or four hours. They have vending machines so I usually buy him a soda and a pizza in a vending machine which is a total rip-off in price – it’s ridiculous. And then drive back, but I think it’s really important that he knows that his family is behind him.

K: Yeah, absolutely. And what are those visits like? I guess what I’m wondering is, how has your relationship changed with him, or has it changed with him being in prison – and the dynamic between you two?

S: It had begun to change before all this happened in that Adam begun to grow up. He was no longer the rebellious teenager. He had recently finished college and had a very nice girlfriend and would come home for very nice visits and talk, but not really heart-to-heart stuff. I think during this time which for all of us was extremely difficult, Adam really shared kind of his inner-self. And we also, you can’t not share with what the devastation of this is like, as family. There’s been a lot deeper sharing. I think Adam probably appreciates his family more than he did. Part of that is just his age but part of that is knowing that we’ll always be there for him. Part of the reason that he’s in the wrong situation is that he was hanging out with this kid who had no values. I think that telling him that years ago meant nothing and now he sees that that was not a good idea for him to be such close friends with someone who had no value system. But I think he also knows that we respect him and believe him, - not blindly, we are not blind to what all has happened - but when he says, “Mom I did this but not that,” then absolutely. The evidence shows and I believe him. I think he’s happy that he can be honest and still be loved.

K: Absolutely. Have your other friends been supportive or are they even involved in this? Or are they in aware? I know that’s a broad question because I’m sure you have lots of friends.
S: Well, we’ve been selective in who we told. I work in a church and at the time he was first arrested I was in the midst of accepting a new position and I had to tell the committee that was interviewing me about this because there was a possibility it would be in the headlines in the paper.

K: Right. Was this in the media? Was this case in the media spotlight at all?

S: The case was in the *New York Times*. My son has a different last name than I do so it was not easily put together. And in my new situation, nobody knew. I decided to tell the interviewing committee, which was a real risk. “Your new pastor’s son is being charged with child pornography!”

K: Yeah I would guess. And how did that go over?

S: They handled it very well. It did not deter them and they were supportive - not gushing, but supportive. In my new community I’ve been selective about who I tell. The people who I’ve decided to tell have been very supportive. I know that there are a whole lot of people out there who would not be. My extended family does not live near by and they do not really know because they would not be supportive and I don’t want the grief. I have enough difficulties without that.

K: Absolutely. That all makes sense. This is backtracking a little bit. But I’m curious to know about the financial burdens of having a son in jail – like you mentioned travel and I know that phone bills can be extremely expensive. What are some other burdens that I might not know of, some things that aren’t obvious?

S: Well his lawyers agreed to become public defenders when they realized that we really have no means, but the public defense lawyers – that did not pay for the computer forensics. So that basically took my whole retirement; I spent my retirement on my defense and then he didn’t go to trial. But they proved that he was innocent, although he couldn’t take the risk to going to trial. But I gave that freely knowing that I would not get anything back for it except perhaps my son. In prison they provide you with nothing - no toothbrush, no clothes, no nothing so we had to pay for initially when he went federal. We had to buy his toothbrush and shoes and his comb and I send him 200 dollars a month which is not a lot of money but I still have two other children. So yes, it’s been expensive. And they took everything of my sons. He had a home. He had a car. He had a business. And they took that and totally wiped him out – so he has nothing at all. Not one penny. So financially, it has been devastating. And the federal government creates that – no matter how much or how little you have, they take that. We kind of knew that going in. I did not have to give him my retirement, but it would have been a horrible thing to not support your child. Every person who deals with the federal government loses everything. Whether you are innocent or guilty, they take every single thing you have.
K: Wow, I did not know that. So let’s see. I guess my next question is, what are your thoughts about his release and what that will be like for you, and your family, and him?

S: Well it will be wonderful and I know that for him it will be difficult. I know, because of my training, that any change is difficult. He does not understand that, that’s okay. I know that it will be a very difficult adjustment. The world has changed and by 2015 the world will have changed dramatically and his college education, which he had just finished, will be outdated. He will have this horrible tag around his neck called “felon and sex offender”. I don’t doubt that he will get back to work and earn a living because he’s always been self-employed and he’s always done well. And he will get out and be self-employed and he will do well, but I think emotionally it’s going to be very difficult.

K: What are some of the hardest parts? I know that’s a huge question and you could say, “everything”, but what are some of the hardest aspects of having Adam in jail?

S: Well I think the hardest aspect is knowing he is deprived of his prime years of life. That is for sure the most difficult part that right when he should be launching his career and having girlfriends and getting married he’s sitting in a jail. That is without a doubt the most difficult part of all of this. And I think second is the injustice of it. You know, if he was a lifelong bank robber or murderer or something but he was just a silly college kid. He didn’t hurt anyone. There were no victims to his crime. And probably his biggest fault is that he trusted everyone.

K: What keeps you strong in all of this? Keeps you going?

S: Well you don’t have a choice really. You don’t have a choice. I have the other kids, I have my job to do and I have to be there for Adam. Giving up is not an option.

K: And can I ask? What role does your faith play in this?

S: For me that’s tremendously important. I think my faith teaches me that life is not fair and many many, many people throughout history have suffered unjustly. I believe in God’s providence, that God is with my son and will create him some positive experiences even in that situation which I think are happening. Last time I visited one of the prisoners sort of spoke to me. The prisoners are not allowed to speak to other visitors, they can only speak to prisoners, so he talked to my son, but he was really talking to me. Looking at my son he said to me, “Your son is truly a kind person. Your son is one of the only people here who loves everyone regardless of their race.” Prison is an extremely racist society, but my son has always been fascinated by other languages and other cultures. He was a world traveler so he wants to talk to everybody. It was a very nice thing that this man was saying about my son.

K: Absolutely. And what a good compliment to you as well.
S: I believe Adam will have opportunities to be the kind and accepting and gracious person that he is. And that’s part of my faith too. I don’t think God sent him there, but I think God will use him there. And the rituals of my faith are comforting and supporting.

K: What has your biggest success as a mother been in this situation?

S: My biggest success? [long pause] I’ve always been a very persistent, persevering kind of person and it’s that strength that’s kind of come to the floor in this, saying to everybody around, “We’ll get through this, we’ll get through this, we’ll get through this.” I think my education in psychology and pastoral care has helped me think about what Adam needs and have orchestrated the family saying, “He needs visits. It doesn’t matter what you do when you’re there, it doesn’t matter what you say but he needs to see your face.” So I guess using some of my stubbornness, which is not usually a gift, persistence – the positive slant on that – and the ability to understand through all the craziness that the most important thing I had to do was to be consistently present for my son. It didn’t matter really what happened or what I said, it was just showing up and being absolutely dependable.

K: A concept I’m interest in, of the moms I’ve spoken with many have used this term over and over again which is “motherly love”. Those two words keep coming up in pair and I’m wondering if this is a concept you think about and if your personal definition of motherly has changed or stayed the same with Adam’s imprisonment?

S: Mine has stayed the same. Again, probably because of my background in theology and psychology, when I first had children I knew that no matter what I would love them and I would not ever turn my back on my child, but I also knew that I would not tolerate just any behaviors from them. That my job was to be a guiding force and I think that kids test that all the way. This situation really did test me because initially I really wasn’t sure if Adam was guilty or not guilty. I just didn’t know. The voices of the government were screaming that this is the most awful person in all of the world. They told us that Interpol had been looking for him which was a total lie, that he was a world-wide criminal.

K: So they told you this to try to coerce something out of you?

S: Yes, because they are ugly. And at that point I didn’t know. I knew my son was a college kid. I knew he had been in China because his college roommate lived there. He was in Sweden because his girlfriend’s family was Swedish and they were there, he was with her family and the government was saying, “Oh he’s planting child pornography things all over the world and making millions of dollars and abusing 10,000 children.” You know, I was astounded. I could not believe that but I didn’t know, because I didn’t know. At first my motherly love said, “This couldn’t be.” But then I said well of course it’s possible, everyone sins and maybe I’m completely mistaken about my son, but then over the course of months trying to sort out what
Adam was telling me, what the attorney was saying, what the prosecutor was saying, and then what I knew in my own heart and my own observation and trying to bring that all together. The government was so ridiculous it became fairly easy to see they were lying and I think that Adam did not know, well none of us knew then, that being friends with a criminal was a crime. That’s not common knowledge so our learning curve went way up. Things we never intended to know – we have a whole legal vocabulary now we never intended to have.

K: Has there been a blessing in all of this? I don’t even know if that’s the right word to use.

S: Well, I don’t know. With one of the other mothers on Prison Talk I said, “I know my son’s alive, I know where he is.” And there are mothers whose sons are in Afghanistan and Iraq and don’t know if they’ll be alive tomorrow. There are moms whose sons are using drugs. None of my children have ever used drugs and not really because we told them not to, they just didn’t. It’s hard to call that a blessing, but my son is safe. It’s very difficult for me that he pleaded guilty when he is not guilty. My sense of justice is violated by that. I can see him doing what he did and it was his decision; it was his sole decision to make. That’s not something I really consider a blessing, but there are many worse scenarios people deal with in life.

K: What do you wish people knew about mothers and families of inmates?

S: I wish they knew that mothers of inmates are not incompetent mothers. There’s nothing wrong with us and there are a whole lot of inmates who are not criminals. When I visit I look around the room and I’m astounded. There are very nice people there and I know some of them did terrible things, and my son tells me that real criminals don’t get visitors, but there are enormous numbers in the prison system today who have not done anything wrong. Enormous numbers of immigrants whose only crime was trying to pick tomatoes for Americans and they are not scary people, they are not bad people. I know there are scary people, there are bad people, but to group all prisoners in one category is a serious mistake. I wish that people knew that our criminal justice system does not rehabilitate. There is no positive value to the enormous amount of tax dollars spent on warehousing people. We could spend that same amount of money rehabilitating people and be a far better society.

K: I completely agree. So I want to go back a little bit, this kind of strays from what we were talking about. You say you use Prison Talk mostly for researching new laws. I’m wondering how you came across that forum and how it’s been useful for you.

S: I think because my education, my first impulse is always to learn everything about what’s happening. The vocabulary of law is foreign to me and I spent long, long hours at night learning, learning, learning and I stumbled upon Prison Talk pretty early in the process and I found on there helpful stuff about people’s experiences like what happens before your first hearing, your second hearing, and what does it mean to plead, and information about the various prisons, what they could buy, what the
person you love there is experiencing. What is it like there at night? Early on, I was just starving for information and that was very helpful.

K: Did that help ease some of your anxieties?

S: I don’t know. It’s a mixed bag. It was helpful to understand some of the difficulties with the telephone system, the visiting system. Early on we made so many mistakes. When he was first arrested I sent him a book off my bookshelf and I stuffed a twenty dollar bill in it and mailed it off, the first night he was arrested. And now I know that’s a totally stupid thing to do [laughing]. You can’t send money, you can’t have books, hardcover books. I’m not intentionally wounding myself anymore. I’m not trying to call the prison, and you know, be a mother. I found out you just don’t do those things. Now I get a little weary of [Prison Talk]. It gets a little wining. I get frustrated of the low education; its so embarrassing, people can’t spell and write, but they do alert you when there’s a law before congress or when a place is locked down. There’s a little chat group from the prison where my son is, a little group of women and I don’t type on it because we try to protect him but I do read it and it’s hilarious to read their comments about the other prison guards, because there’s this one person who’s really nasty, really ugly and they say, “Oh she’s on duty this weekend.” So you know this is not the weekend to wear a sweater and a blouse because she will make you strip down.

K: So you said that you don’t write on it to protect your son. Do you feel that that forum could hurt him some how?

S: Oh yes. Occasionally I can’t hold back. Like when they were attacking you, I could not hold back. But I don’t often write. I think I’ve maybe put ten messages up there and I don’t ever say “my son”, I say “my friend” and I don’t identify. I do live in Pennsylvania and I think that’s on there, but I don’t identify where he is. But other prisoner’s families read that and the one thing you don’t do in prison – you don’t share personal information about yourself. You don’t tell the other prisoners where you live, who’s in your family, what your crime is and there are people who go on the internet and try to find out, so I don’t put anything about him on there.

K: Okay, that makes sense. So through the forum are you in touch with other mothers of prisoners?

S: There’s really only one other mother who I dialogue with in the private message section. Primarily because she private messaged me. I’ve forgotten why and my pastoral side just came out and I wrote a very supportive message and she keeps writing and I can’t really resist. That’s who I am; that’s my career. I don’t mind that. I have not identified myself or my son to her, but I have shared some things about my case because the situations have some things in common. I wouldn’t mind doing more of that, but then again I don’t really like a lot of the attitudes on the forum. I understand the dysfunctional families and if someone was open and wanted to sort
things through, I would help, but I’m not going to go out there and seek that. I do that every day, I don’t need more of that.

K: Right, that’s your job. So you would say your main support comes from your faith and immediate family in all of this? Have there been any organizations or other networks or support groups that have been helpful in attaining information? Or are you independent in that?

S: I’ve seen some groups on the internet but I have not attended any. I’m trying to think why. My profession always makes it difficult for me to be in a group, because I’m always leading groups. That’s probably a weakness on my part. I’d rather be the leader. In this situation I would have very much liked to have been able to be a participant, but I don’t know. I think it’s difficult when you know your son is innocent to be in a group with people who know their son is guilty.

K: Yes, there must be really different emotions around that. That makes sense. Okay well I’m out of formal questions for now. What would you like to make sure I know about your story and other peoples’ stories?

S: Well I think that it’s a wonderful thing that you’re doing. I really had not given much thought about the lives of the families of prisoners. When I was in college I took a course in criminal justice and wrote my paper on the relationship of people in poverty and people in crime and concluded: we should just give everyone a car and a gasoline credit card and we would have no more crime [laughing], which was probably very oversimplified. But I truly think that people don’t understand the cost to the families especially to the prisoners who have children. You know, you see the little children in the visiting room and it’s a huge wear on our society.

K: I agree. I was originally going to do my thesis on mothers in prison but there had been so much research done on that and I was really having difficulty in finding an aspect that hadn’t been explored. I felt like I would just be repeating stuff, and then as I started looking I realize there has been so little done on the families on the outside.

S: Well I appreciate what you’re doing and I think you’re doing a great job.

K: Thank you, thank you. Thank you so much for your openness with this. I really appreciate this and I admire your strength with all this. I learned a lot just from this conversation, so I really do appreciate it.

S: Thank you for caring about us.
Bibliography


