

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## CRIMINOLOGY

# System management and compensatory parenting: Educational involvement after maternal incarceration

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## Abstract

Research has demonstrated that paternal incarceration is associated with lower levels of educational involvement among fathers and primary caregivers, but little is known regarding caregiver educational involvement when mothers have been incarcerated. In this study, we present the first analysis of variation in school- and home-based educational involvement by maternal incarceration history, pairing survey and interview data to connect macro-level group differences with micro-level narratives of mothers' involvement in their children's education. Our survey data demonstrate that children of ever-incarcerated mothers experience increased school-based educational involvement by their primary caregivers, regardless of whether the caregiver is the mother herself. Our interview data point to compensatory parenting as a key motivating factor in educational involvement, wherein a caregiver endeavors to “make up for” the child's history of maternal incarceration. Findings add to the literature demonstrating maternal incarceration as a distinct experience from both paternal incarceration and material disadvantage alone, and they

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suggest the need to explore the role of schools as potential points of productive institutional involvement for mothers with an incarceration history.

#### KEYWORDS

children, education, incarceration, mothers

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Mass incarceration in the United States has led to wide-ranging social, economic, and health consequences, not only for incarcerated individuals but also for their families and communities (Kirk & Wakefield, 2018; Travis et al., 2015). By 2012, nearly 7 percent of all U.S. children and more than 13 percent of Black children had lived with a parent who was incarcerated at some point since the child's birth (Murphey & Cooper, 2015), exposing them to the wide array of stressors associated with parental incarceration (Geller et al., 2011; Poehlmann, 2005). A growing literature has further documented associations between parental incarceration and a range of adverse outcomes for children (Turney, 2014; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2011), including for academic performance and schooling experiences (Haskins, 2014; Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017; Jacobsen, 2019), the focus of the present study.

Research on parental incarceration and schooling has largely limited analyses to fathers with a history of incarceration (Haskins, 2014; Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017), arguably a logical focus given that more than 92 percent of incarcerated adults in the United States are men (Carson, 2020). On average, formerly incarcerated fathers are less involved in their children's education than they were before incarceration, both for school-based activities, such as communicating with teachers and attending school events, and for home-based activities, such as assisting with homework (Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017). Haskins and Jacobsen (2017) found evidence supporting *system avoidance* (Brayne, 2014; Goffman, 2009) as a likely explanatory factor—a tendency for individuals who have been involved in the criminal justice system to subsequently avoid interaction with surveilling institutions (e.g., places of employment, hospitals, and schools) that could lead to further criminal justice contact.

Although fathers account for most incarcerated parents, greater than 80 percent of incarcerated women are mothers (Sawyer & Bertram, 2018), and recent research has suggested that maternal incarceration may be a distinct social experience from paternal incarceration (Hairston, 2009; Wildeman & Turney, 2014). Maternal incarceration entails a more dramatic disruption in childcare as mothers are more likely than fathers to be their children's primary caregivers both before (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008) and after incarceration (Western & Smith, 2018). Most

children with incarcerated fathers thus remain living with their mothers, whereas children of incarcerated mothers typically transition to living with other kinship caregivers, most commonly grandparents (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Hairston, 2009). System avoidance is likely to be limited among custodial formerly incarcerated mothers or kinship caregivers of a child with a maternal incarceration history because avoiding schools may increase the likelihood of Child Protective Services (CPS) intervention, a risk already elevated among families with a history of incarceration (Berger et al., 2016), especially among Black families (Fong, 2020; Roberts, 2012).

In place of system avoidance, research has found that low-income (although not necessarily formerly incarcerated) women may instead carefully curate their interactions with surveilling institutions, intending to demonstrate that they are fit parents in hopes of avoiding CPS involvement (Fong, 2019). For both custodial mothers and kinship caregivers, a maternal incarceration history may increase efforts to curate system involvement further, both to defend one's parenting rights in the face of a heightened risk of state intervention (Gibson, 2002; Garcia-Hallett, 2022; Gurusami, 2019; Hanlon et al., 2007) and in response to internalized norms of motherhood that are violated by incarceration. These efforts may include increased involvement in children's education, particularly in school settings.

In this study, we begin by using data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study<sup>1</sup> to quantitatively examine the hypothesis that a maternal incarceration history is associated with increased educational involvement by the child's primary caregiver (typically the custodial mother or another close family member). We then expand on our quantitative findings using qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 42 formerly incarcerated mothers, considering variation by race and ethnicity, to offer a nuanced mixed-methods portrait of how prior maternal incarceration influences subsequent caregiver involvement in children's education.

## 2 | BACKGROUND

The benefits for children of parental involvement in education are well documented (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Jeynes, 2005; Machen et al., 2005; Tan et al., 2020). Parental involvement is associated with increased academic achievement, whether measured as grade-point average (GPA) or test scores (Castro et al., 2015; Fan & Chen, 2001), and with more positive academic attitudes and behaviors (Jeynes, 2007). The positive association between parental involvement and child academic outcomes has been demonstrated to hold across sex and race (Jeynes, 2007), as well as across socioeconomic backgrounds (Tan et al., 2020).

The parental involvement activities considered in the literature have typically fallen into two categories, differentiated based on whether the activity entails interaction with the school versus taking place at home or within the family (e.g., Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017). *School-based involvement* includes direct engagement with teachers or administrators, such as attending parent-teacher meetings, as well as activities such as participating in school governance or volunteering. *Home-based involvement*, in contrast, describes a range of education-related parenting activities that do not entail direct engagement with the school. These activities may include educational assistance or enrichment, such as helping with homework and reading together, or subtler behaviors, such as discussing school, holding high standards for academic performance, and emphasizing the importance of education.

<sup>1</sup> The "Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study" was called the "Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study" until January 2023.

School-based involvement may require strategic negotiation for parents in disadvantaged families given the relationship between schools and CPS. School personnel are legally defined as mandatory reporters of child abuse and neglect (Greco et al., 2017), creating a dual role for teachers and other staff members as simultaneous educators and government surveillants of child and parent behavior (Münger & Markström, 2019; Zellman, 1990). Although this arrangement may seem logical in principle, the number of children investigated by CPS belies any notion that such interventions effectively target only those who are truly at risk: Greater than one third of American children, and more than half of Black American children, will be investigated by CPS at some point before they turn 18 years old (H. Kim et al., 2016). Most investigations do not ultimately affirm abuse or neglect, yet the investigation itself brings a heightened level of surveillance into families' daily lives, backed by the threat of children being removed from the home.<sup>2</sup> Research has found that professionals who report children to CPS typically do not intend to have the child removed from the home but rather to connect families with social services. The result, however, is often the opposite: Individuals and families become less institutionally engaged, coming to view social services as coercive, threatening institutions with potential risks far outweighing their benefits (Fong, 2020).

A history of incarceration weaves yet an additional layer of risk into engagement with "surveilling institutions"—not only schools, but any institution in which formal records are kept, such as healthcare, banks, or employment opportunities (Brayne, 2014). That fathers with a criminal record are less likely to participate in school-based activities than similarly disadvantaged fathers without an incarceration record may be understood in part as a defensive reaction to engagement with any institution that has the potential to increase the risk of further criminal justice system involvement (Brayne, 2014; Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017). Fathers' postincarceration engagement with children is also lower overall, however, reflecting declines in relationship quality between parents (Geller, 2013; Perry & Bright, 2012; Turney & Wildeman, 2013), as well as the financial burdens of unemployment and unwieldy child support debt (Haney, 2018; McKay et al., 2019).

## 2.1 | System Management After Maternal Incarceration

Whether formerly incarcerated mothers behave similarly to formerly incarcerated fathers with respect to child educational involvement is unknown. Research on system avoidance among individuals with a history of criminal justice involvement has not explicitly considered the differential effects between women and men (Brayne, 2014), and research on parental school involvement after incarceration has focused on paternal incarceration only (Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017). What is well documented is that ever-incarcerated mothers and fathers assume much different parenting roles on average. Before incarceration, approximately 70 percent of incarcerated mothers considered themselves to be their children's primary caregivers compared with only 25 percent of incarcerated fathers (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), and mothers are significantly more likely than fathers to reside with their children after reentry (Geller, 2013; Western & Smith, 2018). The norm of parenting responsibilities falling disproportionately on mothers may incentivize formerly incarcerated mothers to find ways of engaging, managing, and challenging social systems that formerly incarcerated fathers may avoid.

<sup>2</sup> In 2018, less than 17 percent of CPS investigations resulted in substantiated maltreatment (Stedt, 2018).

For example, disengaging from schools after incarceration will more frequently be a viable option for fathers because they are not typically their children's primary caregivers, and because parental involvement in education has been historically viewed as a mother's role (S. won Kim & Hill, 2015). In contrast, formerly incarcerated mothers more commonly remain their children's primary caregivers, and primary caregivers cannot fully disengage from schools if they want to retain custody. Fong (2019) documented deliberate impression management efforts surrounding CPS contact among low-income (although not necessarily formerly incarcerated) mothers, who recognize that system avoidance may sound alarms among concerned professionals. Mothers recognized the need to limit the information they provided to professionals with mandatory reporting obligations, for example, and to avoid publicly disciplining their children in ways that they believed might not align with CPS standards (Fong, 2019).

We refer to such efforts to strategically curate interactions with CPS to safeguard one's parenting rights as "system management." This concept stands in contrast to system avoidance in two critical ways: First, it implies deliberate negotiation of surveilling institutions rather than complete avoidance of them; second, whereas the criminal justice system is the focal system being resisted in research on system avoidance (Brayne, 2014), the focal system being resisted by disadvantaged or formerly incarcerated mothers is commonly CPS (Fong, 2019; Roberts, 2012). Although findings on system management among disadvantaged but not necessarily incarcerated mothers offer a starting point for study of educational involvement among ever-incarcerated mothers, system management can be expected to vary with increased threat from surveilling institutions. Because an incarceration history substantially raises the likelihood of CPS involvement relative to material disadvantage alone (Berger et al., 2016; Roberts, 2012), system management efforts among similarly disadvantaged ever- versus never-incarcerated mothers may consequently differ.

Gurusami's (2019) research on "decarceral motherwork," for example, delineates the multifaceted strategies that formerly incarcerated Black mothers use to balance being good parents with being effective guardians of their parenting rights when under threat of state intervention. Strategies include trauma-related behaviors such as "hypervigilant motherwork," wherein mothers go to extreme lengths to avoid exposing their children to a range of anticipated dangers. When necessary, hypervigilance converts to "crisis motherwork," temporarily abandoning all other obligations to fend off an immediate situational threat of CPS intervention (Gurusami, 2019). Relative to similarly disadvantaged mothers without an incarceration history, formerly incarcerated custodial mothers may be even more actively involved in institutional settings such as schools, increasing system management to meet the elevated risk of CPS involvement that follows a maternal incarceration history (e.g., Garcia-Hallett, 2022). This behavior may be particularly heightened among Black formerly incarcerated mothers and kinship caregivers given the racialized threat of CPS intervention (Roberts, 2012). Formerly incarcerated mothers may also be more actively involved in educational activities at home as CPS-involved families experience home visits in addition to surveillance in institutional settings, blurring the boundaries between public and private space.

Mothers with a history of incarceration also differ from disadvantaged but never-incarcerated mothers in having already experienced separation from their children. Although children of incarcerated mothers with no alternative caregivers will be placed in foster care, 90 percent of incarcerated mothers rely on caregiving arrangements outside of the foster care system during their incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), leaving open the possibility of continued alternative caregiving after reentry. Nearly one third of incarcerated mothers had such caregiving arrangements even before their incarceration, typically placing children in the care of grandparents, the children's fathers, or other relatives (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Both when a mother

is at risk of incarceration and after her release, the decision not to be a custodial parent is often articulated by mothers as an act of maternal sacrifice: a deliberate effort to fend off CPS and prioritize stability for children despite the emotional desire for custodial motherhood (Garcia, 2016; Hayes, 2008; Michalsen, 2011). Entrusting children to alternative stable caregivers can thus be understood as a form of system management itself.

Research on kinship caregivers of children whose mothers are incarcerated has suggested similar interpretations of their role as a last line of defense between the children in their care and CPS intervention (Gibson, 2002; Pebley & Rudkin, 1999). Such caregivers are on average low-income themselves and describe in interviews the added financial and emotional burden of caregiving (Hairston, 2009). At the same time, they emphasize their unwillingness to allow the child in their care to enter the foster care system (Pebley & Rudkin, 1999), which they view as “impersonal, culturally insensitive, and/or irreversible” (Hanlon et al., 2007, p. 5). Kinship caregivers may thus have similar incentives as custodial mothers for engaging in system management in institutional settings such as schools.

## 2.2 | Compensatory Parenting After Maternal Incarceration

In contrast to parenting decisions aimed at managing CPS involvement, research has suggested that formerly incarcerated mothers may also approach parenthood differently after reentry (Arditti & Few, 2006; Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019; Garcia, 2016; Michalsen, 2011). Whereas disadvantaged mothers often understand themselves as good parents who have nothing to hide despite adverse circumstances (Edin & Kefalas, 2011), the experience of incarceration is commonly associated with narratives of shame and self-doubt regarding parenting (Arditti & Few, 2006; Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019; Michalsen, 2011). Research on formerly incarcerated mothers and crime desistance has suggested that children can be an incentive for mothers to “go straight,” out of both love for their children and a sense of purpose derived from parenting (Kreager et al., 2010; Michalsen, 2011). Formerly incarcerated custodial mothers may thus have increased emotional incentives to be involved in caregiving, including in their children’s schools.

The focus on motherhood in qualitative accounts of life after reentry (Arditti & Few, 2006; Ferraro & Moe, 2003) follows a long line of scholarship on the centrality of motherhood to women’s identity (McMahon, 1995). Cultural norms of “intensive motherhood”—a sense that mothering should be “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive” (Hays, 1996, p. 8)—shape the experience of motherhood across socioeconomic and racial backgrounds (Elliott et al., 2015; Hays, 1996), and complicate the experience of maternal incarceration (Bloom & Brown, 2011; Ferraro & Moe, 2003). Incarceration violates ideal norms of motherhood by separating mothers from their children, physically during their incarceration, and then custodially or with lingering legal threat even afterward. Interviews with currently and formerly incarcerated mothers demonstrate the consistency with which guilt over the impact of incarceration on their children is a central motivating theme, along with a desire to give children “better lives” than the mothers had themselves (Allen et al., 2010; Bloom & Brown, 2011). We refer to caregiving efforts aimed at compensating for a history of perceived parenting shortcomings—including a criminal record—as “compensatory parenting.”

Unlike system management, which is focused on defending parenting rights against surveilling institutions, compensatory parenting is child-focused—not out of fear of state intervention but out of an emotional desire to take particularly good care of a child who has had a difficult past.



Whereas system management can thus be expected to vary with attributes that increase threat from surveilling institutions, such as race (Kim et al., 2016; Roberts, 2012), compensatory parenting is expected to be a consistent motivation across caregiver demographics, fueled by a caregiver's emotional attachment to a child and motivation to compensate for past hardship. Compensatory parenting is not limited to biological parents, nor to those with a history of incarceration, but instead can extend to anyone in a parenting role whose caregiving approach is motivated by a need to make up for difficult childhood experiences. For example, most kinship caregivers of children with incarcerated mothers are grandmothers (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), and interview data reveal they often evoke themes of compensatory parenting, describing their grandchildren as having "been through enough as it is" and a sense of responsibility to ensure that the children are not "damaged or tarnished" as a result (Gibson, 2002, p. 39). For custodial grandmothers with regrets about how they parented their own children, raising a grandchild can also be an opportunity to redefine their motherhood, providing a second chance to "do it right" (Burton & DeVries, 1992). Kinship caregivers may thus have similar emotional incentives to custodial mothers for engaging in their caregiver role in institutional settings such as schools.

### 3 | CURRENT STUDY

In this study, we present the first analysis of variation in school- and home-based educational involvement by maternal incarceration, pairing survey and interview data on respondents from comparable demographic and geographic backgrounds. This combination of methodological approaches allows us to narratively link macro-level group differences by maternal incarceration history with micro-level insight into how formerly incarcerated mothers describe their engagement in their children's education.

We begin by testing the hypothesis that *maternal incarceration is associated with increased educational involvement* in a contemporary urban sample of primary caregivers, potentially both in schools and at home. Whereas research on maternal incarceration and caregiving has typically focused on either formerly incarcerated mothers or nonmaternal caregivers of children whose mothers have been incarcerated, both groups have been found to report similar incentives for engaging in system management and compensatory parenting. We therefore expect that *formerly incarcerated custodial mothers and nonmaternal caregivers of children whose mothers have been incarcerated will operate similarly with respect to educational involvement*.

To gain insight into the micro-level processes influencing educational involvement by caregivers of children with a maternal incarceration history, we then draw on in-depth interviews with 42 formerly incarcerated mothers. What we refer to here as "system management" has been highlighted as a factor in how disadvantaged mothers interact with surveilling institutions, although how system management approaches may differ by maternal incarceration history is not known. Similarly, what we refer to as "compensatory parenting" is supported by literature on formerly incarcerated mothers' caregiving, but little is known about compensatory parenting in educational involvement. We ask whether and how formerly incarcerated mothers draw on these two constructs to describe their involvement in their children's education, examine potential variation by race, and offer insight into the breadth of educational involvement activities described by the mothers interviewed, many of which fall outside the range of activities captured in our survey measures.

## 4 | DATA

### 4.1 | Survey Sample

We draw our quantitative data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW) Study, a longitudinal sample of 4,898 children born between 1998 and 2000 in U.S. cities with populations greater than 200,000. The FFCW oversampled unmarried mothers, with approximately 75 percent of parents unmarried at the time of the first survey interview. Mothers and fathers were interviewed shortly after their children's births (Y0) and again when the children reached ages 1 (Y1), 3 (Y3), 5 (Y5), 9 (Y9), and 15 (Y15). Given our focus on elementary-age children, we use data from Y9 and preceding waves as Y9 was the first time point at which the full FFCW sample was in school and the educational involvement measures used in this analysis were available. By Y9, 76 percent of mothers and 59 percent of fathers were still participating in the study, and an additional interview was conducted with the children's primary caregivers (PCGs; 77 percent response rate), of whom 92 percent were biological mothers. Our analytical sample of  $N = 3,334$  included respondents with valid PCG interview data on school- or home-based educational involvement (children not attending school were excluded).<sup>3</sup> As nonresponse is expected to be disproportionately high among foster parents and biological parents who had their parenting rights terminated, our study may generalize only to the majority of children of incarcerated mothers whose primary caregiver is either a biological parent or another relative.

#### 4.1.1 | Outcome variables

The Y9 FFCW survey fielded 10 items intended to capture ways in which the PCG interacted with the child's school in the past year. These included six questions on meeting attendance (back-to-school nights, parent-teacher association [PTA] meetings, teacher meetings, counselor meetings, principal meetings, and informational workshops); two questions on school event attendance (events in which the child participated and events in which the child did not participate); one question on volunteering or committee work; and one question on classroom visitation. Responses ranged from 0 = Not in this/last school year to 2 = More than once. Following Haskins and Jacobsen (2017), we use as our outcome variable a composite measure of school-based involvement calculated as the mean of all ten survey items.

The Y9 FFCW survey fielded four items intended to capture home-based educational activities that the PCG engaged in with the child, including reading books, discussing current events, helping with homework, and ensuring that school assignments are completed. Whereas many of the school-based activities described above are expected to happen only a few times per year, these home-based activities may be daily or weekly practice, and so PCGs are asked to report the frequency of these activities during the past month (responses range from 1 = Not in past month to 5 = Every day). We use as our outcome variable a composite measure of home-based involvement calculated as the mean of all four items. More information on our outcome variables, including the wording of all relevant survey items, is included in table A1 in appendix A.

<sup>3</sup> Compared with the larger study, mothers in our analytic sample are more likely to be Black (50 percent vs. 48 percent of mothers) and less likely to be Hispanic (25 percent vs. 27 percent of mothers), but they are similar in terms of education (36 percent have some postsecondary education) and whether they were married to the father at the child's birth (23 percent).



#### 4.1.2 | Explanatory variable

Our key explanatory variable is a binary indicator of whether the mother had experienced incarceration by the Y9 survey. Mothers and fathers in the FFCW are asked in multiple survey items across multiple waves about their own and the other parent's incarceration history, both directly (e.g., "Did you ever spend time in an adult correctional institution?") and indirectly (e.g., when asked why she and the child were separated, mother responds that she was incarcerated). At Y9, nonparental PCGs were also asked about parental incarceration. Mothers were coded as having been incarcerated if the mother, father, or PCG reported maternal incarceration, either directly or indirectly. By Y9, 10 percent of mothers had experienced at least one episode of incarceration.

Research in the FFCW data on child outcomes of parental incarceration has often excluded incarceration before the time the child turned 1 year old to address concerns about time ordering (e.g., Turney & Wildeman, 2015, 2018; Wildeman & Turney, 2014). In contrast, the outcome in this study is caregiver behavior, which may be influenced by maternal incarceration even before the birth of the focal FFCW child. Although we lack data on number of episodes and duration of incarceration, the likelihood of future contact with both the criminal justice system (Huebner et al., 2010) and CPS (Berger et al., 2016; Roberts, 2012) is higher for ever-incarcerated versus never-incarcerated women. Such contact, or awareness of the increased risk of such contact, has the potential to have an ongoing impact on caregiving dynamics. Furthermore, for 68 percent of ever-incarcerated mothers in the FFCW, the focal FFCW child is not their firstborn, and episodes of maternal incarceration that impacted the mother's relationship with her older children have the potential to alter maternal behaviors or caregiving arrangements for later-born children. Our measure of maternal incarceration thus captures any reported incarceration before the Y9 survey, including before the focal child's birth.

#### 4.1.3 | Control variables

We control for a list of correlates of maternal incarceration and educational involvement, comprising mother, father, and child characteristics. We capture socioeconomic correlates of maternal incarceration both at the individual level (PCG income-to-poverty ratio, number of children in household) and at the school and neighborhood levels (school racial and socioeconomic composition, mother's neighborhood disadvantage), and also control for maternal depression, behavioral correlates of maternal incarceration (substance abuse, impulsivity), family structure (mother and father married or cohabiting at Y0, mother repartnered by Y9, grandparent involvement), paternal incarceration history, and parental citizenship status. Child characteristics include sex at Y0 and race/ethnicity (self-reports at Y15). To capture threat of CPS intervention, we include measures of PCG-reported CPS contact.

To differentiate between maternal and nonmaternal PCG involvement, we control for whether the mother is the PCG (lives with child at least half time). Among children of incarcerated mothers in the FFCW data, 72 percent had their biological mother as their PCG at the year 9 survey; 15 percent had their biological father as their PCG (58 percent of whom have an incarceration history themselves), and the remaining 13 percent were living with another relative, including grandparents, aunts, or uncles. For additional details on the relationship between nonpaternal PCGs and the focal child at wave 9, see table A2. Given the structure of the FFCW survey, we emphasize that

the child's PCG at year 9 may or may not have been the child's caregiver during any given episode of maternal incarceration.

Finally, we include a set of dummy variables for the 20 sample cities. Coding of all covariates is detailed in table A3.

Only three of our variables are missing more than 5 percent of observations. These variables include the prevalence of free or reduced-price lunch in the child's school (10 percent), CPS involvement (12 percent), and whether the father was a U.S. citizen (15 percent). We address missing data using multiple imputation with chained equations (20 imputed data sets). Descriptive statistics for all variables used in our analyses are presented in table 1.

## 4.2 | Interview Procedures and Sample

The qualitative data for this study are drawn from in-depth interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019 with 42 formerly incarcerated mothers in St. Louis, Missouri. Participants were eligible if they were older than 18 years old, identified as a woman, and had ever been incarcerated.

After gaining university institutional review board (IRB) approval for the study protocol, the second author and a trained graduate research assistant recruited participants from four residential and nonresidential nonprofit programs that serve formerly incarcerated women. Recruitment spanned 9 months and involved posting flyers at reentry program offices, promoting the study at recovery group open meetings geared toward formerly incarcerated women, and reaching additional interviewees through snowball sampling. Of the 68 prospective participants who expressed interest in participation, 50 women (73.5 percent) ultimately enrolled following a protocol of written informed consent. Recruitment eased after reaching the target of 50 interviews. Of the 50 women interviewed, 42 identified as mothers, and therefore, the analysis in this article is restricted to 42 participants. Demographic data on the interview sample are presented in table 2.

The median interview length of our sample was 61 minutes, and the mean was 65 minutes. Interviews ranged from 22 minutes to 176 minutes, with two thirds of the interviews lasting between 40 and 105 minutes. Even the shorter interviews yielded rich and meaningful data: For example, Samira, Francine, and Bernice all completed interviews that lasted less than 40 minutes but are all quoted in this article because their interviews delved into themes relevant to our analysis. Participants chose the location of their interviews, which were either conducted in women's homes, on-site at a reentry program facility, or at a privatized "third space" like McDonald's or Panera Bread. Encrypted digital recordings were deleted after transcription, and all remaining interview data, including transcripts and demographic characteristics, were de-identified and stored in password-protected, secure locations.

Because the two members of the interview team were White, female identified, and never incarcerated, we continually reflected on our positionality *vis-à-vis* the study participants before, during, and after data collection. We sought to establish rapport as empathetic outsiders (Martin, 2018). Our goal was to lend a listening ear and treat interviewees as experts in their own lives. For instance, when the PhD student interviewer asked Darla, a White woman around her own age, about motherhood, Darla interjected, "Do you have children?" When the interviewer responded, "No," Darla took a moment to explain what she would understand "[once] you did have a child." Even in a case when their demographic characteristics were similar, the difference in motherhood status seemed to energize Darla to share her perspectives.

TABLE 1 Means and Frequencies for Select Variables by Maternal Incarceration History in the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Year 9

Variables	Full Sample		Mother Never Incarcerated		Mother Ever Incarcerated		Mean Difference (Ever – Never)
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	Diff
Parental Educational Involvement at Y9							
School-based (z-scores)	.000	1.000	–.002	.991	.019	1.077	.021
Home-based (z-scores)	.000	1.000	.009	.990	–.080	1.079	–.089
Parental Incarceration History by Y9							
Mother ever incarcerated	.105	.307	.000	.000	1.000	.000	1.000
Father ever incarcerated	.509	.500	.482	.500	.738	.440	.256***
Social Demographic Characteristics							
Mother and father married at Y0	.235	.424	.252	.434	.088	.284	–.163***
Mother and father cohabiting at Y0	.360	.480	.351	.477	.442	.497	.091***
Mother repartnered by Y9	.215	.411	.204	.403	.308	.462	.103***
Child Non-Hispanic Black (Ref: Non-Hispanic White/other)	.491	.500	.486	.500	.536	.499	.050
Child Hispanic (Ref: Non-Hispanic White/other)	.255	.436	.260	.439	.211	.408	–.049*
Child female	.519	.500	.515	.500	.547	.498	.032
Mother U.S. citizen at Y1	.907	.290	.900	.300	.966	.182	.066***
Father U.S. citizen at Y1	.899	.301	.895	.307	.934	.248	.040*
Mother postsecondary education by Y0	.355	.479	.374	.484	.191	.394	–.184***
Father postsecondary education by Y0	.310	.462	.321	.467	.208	.406	–.114***

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Variables	Full Sample		Mother Never Incarcerated		Mother Ever Incarcerated		Mean Difference (Ever – Never) Diff
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Mother household income-to-poverty ratio at Y9 (–4.9 to 41.2)	1.977	2.344	2.075	2.421	1.140	1.254	–.934***
Children in mother’s household at Y9 (0 to 8)	2.649	1.335	2.686	1.307	2.332	1.518	–.354***
Grandparent involvement at Y9	.593	.491	.595	.491	.581	.494	–.014
School >60% Black	.332	.471	.332	.471	.330	.471	–.001
School >60% Hispanic	.176	.381	.175	.380	.182	.387	.007
School >60% free or reduced-price lunch	.603	.489	.596	.491	.664	.473	.068*
Mother neighborhood disadvantage (z-scores)	.007	.894	–.009	.897	.140	.852	.149**
Maternal Traits and Behaviors							
Mother impulsivity (1 to 4)	2.026	.630	1.999	.613	2.262	.716	.263***
Mother substance use problem by Y9	.112	.315	.077	.267	.402	.491	.324***
Mother depression at Y9	.182	.386	.169	.375	.291	.455	.122***
Parenting Status Instability							
Child protective services contact by Y9	.165	.371	.142	.349	.359	.480	.217***
Mother is not primary caregiver at Y9	.074	.261	.050	.217	.279	.449	.230***
N	3,334		2,983		351		

Note. Adapted from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Results based on the first of 20 multiply imputed data sets. Twenty sample cities not shown. Y0 = birth, Y1 = age-one follow-up survey, Y9 = age-nine follow-up survey, M = mean, SD = standard deviation, Diff = difference. Mean comparisons are independent samples *t*-tests between ever-incarcerated and never-incarcerated groups.

\*\*\**p* < .001; \*\**p* < .01; \**p* < .05 (two-tailed).

TABLE 2 Frequencies for Select Variables in Interview Sample ( $N = 42$ )

Variables	<i>N</i>	%	Variables	<i>N</i>	%
<b>Age</b>			<b>Number of Times Incarcerated</b>		
26–29	4	9.5	1	14	33.3
30–39	15	35.7	2–3	8	19.0
40–49	5	11.9	4–6	6	14.3
50–59	8	19.0	7+	14	33.3
60+	10	23.8			
<b>Race</b>			<b>Years Since Last Incarceration</b>		
Black	24	57.1	<1 Year	17	40.5
White	16	38.1	1–5 Years	7	16.7
Other	2	4.8	6–10 Years	8	19.0
			11+ Years	10	23.8
<b>Marital Status</b>			<b>Children's Custody During Maternal Incarceration</b>		
Single	25	59.5	Grandparent(s)	21	50.0
Married	4	9.5	Father	7	16.7
Divorced or separated	8	19.0	Aunt	3	7.1
Widowed	5	11.9	Foster or adoptive family	3	7.1
			Other	2	4.8
			No response	6	14.3
<b>Educational Attainment</b>			<b>Ever Experienced CPS Contact</b>		
Some high school	13	30.9	Yes	12	28.6
High school or GED	16	38.1	No	26	61.9
Some college	8	19.0	Unknown	4	9.5
Professional certificate	3	7.1			
2-year associate degree	1	2.4			
4-year bachelor's degree	1	2.4			
<b>Number of Children</b>			<b>Ever Experienced Loss of Custody Through CPS</b>		
1	14	33.3	Yes	9	21.4
2	7	16.7	No	28	66.7
3	11	26.2	Unknown	5	11.9
4+	10	23.8			
<b>Children &lt;18 now</b>			<b>Ever Participated in Substance Treatment Program</b>		
Yes	24	57.1	Yes	37	88.1
No	18	42.9	No	5	11.9

Note. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding. "Other" race includes Native American and biracial (unspecified).

Furthermore, we were sensitive to power dynamics as university-affiliated researchers offering a financial incentive to participants. We viewed transparency and informed consent as paramount. We continually reminded participants that they could skip any question, including sensitive topics, and several participants did so—especially those who opted to meet in public or semipublic locations. In a handful of cases, we observed nonverbal cues of discomfort and proactively changed the subject. When one prospective participant (who is not counted in our sample size) terminated

the interview after just 25 minutes, we took it as a signal that our procedure of ongoing informed consent was effective. She was compensated in full for her participation. Furthermore, as narrative criminologists have demonstrated (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012), we were mindful that our interviewees may have framed their responses as a form of impression management in light of our identities. We also, however, view our interviewees as the only true experts and interpreters of their experiences of incarceration and surveilled motherhood, and we implicitly trust their reflections on their lives. Finally, we acknowledge that our identities, especially as White interviewers, produced blind spots, which we sought to confront through engagement with literature on racial and class differences in state surveillance of mothers and, later, in collaboration as an author team.

Interview topics included housing, employment, family reunification, and experiences of release from prison, but the semistructured and conversational nature of the interviews meant that participants raised many topics on their own. The semistructured interview guide did not ask explicitly about mothers' involvement in their children's education; instead, it asked mothers to describe their involvement in their children's lives overall. Half (12 of 24) of the mothers whose children were younger than age 18 at the time of the interview spontaneously discussed their children's education, as did one third (6 of 18) of the mothers with children who were older than 18 at the time of the interview. As mothers were not directly asked about educational involvement, we do not interpret the percentage of mothers who did not spontaneously raise this subject as reflecting a lack of care about their children's education.

Likewise, mothers typically raised the topics of CPS and custody unprompted. Of the mothers interviewed, 36 of 42 (85.7 percent) described their experiences losing custody of their children either temporarily while in jail or prison or permanently to adoption. Nine mothers (21.4 percent) in the sample experienced loss of custody because of CPS intervention, whereas 12 of 42 mothers (28.6 percent) experienced CPS contact at some point. Thirty out of 42 mothers (71.4 percent) reported that a relative had guardianship or custody during their incarceration. This person was most often a grandparent (21 out of 42, or 50 percent), 19 of whom were grandmothers and 2 of whom were both grandparents. For 16.7 percent ( $n = 7$ ) of mothers, children lived with their fathers. At the time of the interview, 15 of the 42 mothers in the sample (35.7 percent) described not being the primary custodial guardian of at least one of their children. The extent to which discussions of custody and CPS were woven into women's narratives were not part of the initial interview guide, but given how central custody was to women's experiences of incarceration and reentry, we later began asking about this directly, leading to a total of 40.5 percent of interviewees discussing the role of CPS in their lives. This approach provided an understanding of what mothers viewed as important at the time of the interview and avoided constraining discussions of education-related behavior within preexisting categories of educational involvement, including the constructs operationalized in the FFCW data.

Mirroring the FFCW sample, timing of incarceration relative to having children was not an eligibility criterion. The 18 mothers (42.9 percent) whose children were older than the age of 18 at the time of the interview were asked to describe their children's caregiving arrangements during their incarceration and after reentry. To determine whether mothers were incarcerated while their children were minors, interviews concluded with a questionnaire that asked: "How many times have you been incarcerated?" "What was your time served?" "How many months have you been home from jail or prison?" During the interviews, however, many of the women interviewed were clearly interpreting "incarceration" and "time served" to mean only extended episodes of incarceration rather than jail or prison incarceration of any duration. For example, when Iris, a Black mother of three, was asked whether she had been incarcerated, she responded unequivocally, "No, I've not been incarcerated," but she then clarified "I have been locked up before, like



**TABLE 3** Comparative percentages on select variables, FFCW Survey Sample and St. Louis Interview Sample

Variables	St. Louis Interview Sample	Future of Families Survey Sample	
	Formerly Incarcerated Mothers (%)	Formerly Incarcerated Mothers (%)	Full Analytic Sample (%)
Percent Black/African American	57	56	51
Percent non-Hispanic White	38	23	22
Percent Other race/ethnicity	5	21	27
Median age	40	32	33
Percent high school completion	69	53	67
Median number of children	2.5	3	3
Not primary caregiver	36	28	7
N	42	351	3,334

*Note.* For Future of Families survey respondents, median number of children includes only biological children living in the mother's household.

2 weeks, 3 weeks.” The varying interpretations of “incarceration” among interview respondents emphasizes the methodological importance of explicitly asking about “any time” spent in jail or prison, as per the wording in the FFCW survey.

Based on the items in the interview questionnaire, all mothers whose children were older than 18 at the time of the interview had also been incarcerated while their children were minors, with the sole exception of one mother whose responses to the questionnaire items were ambiguous. We retained that mother in our overall sample description, but given the ambiguities in the timing of her incarceration, we do not draw quotes from her interview in our qualitative results.

### 4.3 | Comparison of Survey and Interview Samples

Comparative demographics of our interview and survey samples are presented in table 3. The age range was similar between our interview sample (range 26–66 years, median 40.5) and survey sample (range 23–56 years, median 33). In addition, the city of St. Louis had a population of greater than 200,000 when the FFCW children were born and thus would have been part of the original FFCW sampling frame (Reichman et al., 2001). Our survey sample had fewer non-Hispanic White respondents and more Hispanic respondents versus our interview sample, whereas the percentage of Black respondents was approximately equal among formerly incarcerated mothers in the two samples. The mothers in our interview sample were slightly older than the formerly incarcerated mothers in our survey sample (mean age 40 vs. 34), and the high school graduation rate in our interview sample was aligned with the full survey analytic sample but was substantially higher than that among formerly incarcerated mothers in the survey data. The median number of children was similar (2.5 in the interview sample vs. 3 in the survey sample), and approximately one third of mothers in both samples were not their children's PCG.

Although many of the mothers interviewed discussed the contexts in which kinship caregiving arrangements were established for their children and the effectiveness of those arrangements, a limitation of our interview sample relative to our survey sample is that it includes only women who were themselves formerly incarcerated. Our qualitative data therefore speak directly to the

majority (72 percent) of FFCW children with ever-incarcerated mothers for whom the mother herself remains the child's PCG at Y9, but only address educational involvement among nonmaternal PCGs as perceived by formerly incarcerated interviewees.

## 5 | METHODOLOGY

### 5.1 | Analytic Approach: Survey Sample

We estimate the conditional association between each of our two measures of educational involvement and an indicator for a mother having an incarceration history using the ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression equation:

$$y_i = \alpha + \beta_M M_i + \beta_I I_i + \beta_S S_i + \beta_C C_i + \beta_P P_i + \beta_{MP} (M_i * P_i) + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

wherein  $i$  denotes an individual respondent and  $y$  is a measure of educational involvement, either school based or home based. The indicator of maternal incarceration for each individual  $i$  is denoted by  $M$ . In our full model,  $I$  is an indicator for paternal incarceration and  $S$  denotes our sociodemographic controls at the parent, child, household, school, and neighborhood levels, including our indicators for geographic location (20 sample cities).  $C$  is PCG reports of CPS contact. Because we hypothesize that a PCG will be more involved in schools when the child has an ever-incarcerated mother regardless of whether the PCG is the biological mother herself, we run nested models 1 through 4 regressing maternal incarceration on educational involvement for all PCGs; in model 5.1, we introduce  $P$  denoting whether the PCG is the child's biological mother, and in model 5.2, we test a second specification of our full model in which we interact maternal incarceration with the indicator for whether the PCG is the child's biological mother.

Although the FFCW sample focuses specifically on disadvantaged families, in which mothers are disproportionately likely to experience incarceration, statistical power remains an ongoing challenge in quantitative research on maternal incarceration given the relatively small percentage of mothers who are ever incarcerated. We interpret all coefficients at standard thresholds of statistical significance ( $p < .05$ ) but remain cautious regarding our interpretation of statistical nonsignificance on substantively large associations for small subgroups. Limited statistical power given the rarity of maternal incarceration also constrains the ability to detect differences in comparative subgroup analyses such as by race, but we report on supplemental models, including interactions between race and maternal incarceration history, and on models run separately by race.

To better understand the micro-level processes influencing educational involvement among PCGs of children whose mothers have been incarcerated, we then pair our quantitative results with findings from our qualitative interview sample.

### 5.2 | Analytic Approach: Interview Sample

Data analysis was conducted on more than 1,100 pages of interview transcripts and interview field notes. Following an abductive theoretical approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), we first identified emergent themes. Based on the "flexible coding" process outlined by Deterding and Waters (2021), coding was divided into two stages. Stage 1 codes were coded by a graduate research

assistant and included broad topics identified by the second author and research assistant in a collaborative discussion after both had reviewed the interview transcripts independently. These topics included motherhood, children's schooling, housing, healthcare, and employment. This approach allowed for subsequent coding tailored to the purposes of specific analytical inquiries.

When it was time to analyze data relevant to this article, the second author coded for variation in a separate second round. Stage 2 codes included more detailed "action" phrases such as taking children to school, helping children with homework, worrying about foster care, maintaining joint custody, taking parenting classes, taking children to the doctor, and describing mothering style. This process allowed us to locate deviant cases for each code, ensuring that our coding scheme did not privilege high levels of school involvement or vice versa. Using the qualitative software program NVivo, the second author identified the codes relevant for each sentence. Coding was conducted solely by the second author because IRB protections limited data access. Subsequent de-identified analyses were collaborative, with the first and second author together identifying emergent patterns across the data, and the second and fourth author collaborating to assess racial variation in these patterns. Big-picture analyses were conducted as a team through discussions that led to revisits of the data, where the second author and a research assistant counted patterns across the sample to adjudicate questions about proposed mechanisms.

An abductive approach centers the importance of doubt and surprises, looking for unanticipated findings in light of the literature (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Qualitative analysis was conducted independently of the quantitative analysis, and based on studies of formerly incarcerated populations' system avoidance, we did not anticipate the full extent of women's involvement in their children's schooling. In contrast, we did anticipate the interconnected nature of incarceration and foster care and the greater concern about CPS involvement among mothers of color (Roberts, 2012), although we did not expect that concerns regarding CPS would be so prevalent among women who had never experienced CPS contact. We anticipated that system management motivated by the threat of CPS would be a primary mechanism narrated by mothers in our sample, but instead we found compensatory parenting to be the prevalent mechanism. True to the abductive approach, these surprises informed our inquiry and our interpretation of the data.

## 6 | RESULTS

### 6.1 | Survey Sample

As per the literature, descriptive statistics (table 1) demonstrate that children of ever- versus never-incarcerated mothers in our sample experience many additional dimensions of disadvantage. They are disproportionately living in poverty and in disadvantaged neighborhoods; they go to schools with more disadvantaged peers; their parents have lower levels of education, are less likely to be U.S. citizens, and are less likely to have been married at the time of the child's birth; and their mother is more likely to report substance abuse. Nearly one third of children of ever-incarcerated mothers are living with a PCG who is not their biological mother compared with only 5 percent of children of never-incarcerated mothers. PCGs of children with ever-incarcerated mothers are less involved in the activities captured in our measure of home-based educational involvement—but perhaps surprisingly, we find no difference by maternal incarceration in PCGs' school-based educational involvement.

Our multivariate analysis regressing school-based educational involvement on maternal incarceration reveals a suppression effect (table 4). Although PCGs of children with ever-incarcerated

TABLE 4 Linear Regression Coefficients (Standard Errors in Parentheses) for Select Variables: School-Based PCG Educational Involvement Regressed on Maternal Incarceration

Variables	Model 1 Bivariate	Model 2 + Paternal Incarceration	Model 3 + Sociodemo- graphics	Model 4 + Maternal Traits & Behaviors	Model 5.1 + CPS contact & PCG status	Model 5.2 + Interaction
Mother ever incarcerated	.021(.060)	.061(.061)	.100(.062)	.122+ (.066)	.138(.067)*	.117+ (.071)
Father ever incarcerated		-.155(.035)***	-.119(.040)**	-.119(.040)**	-.118(.040)**	-.117(.040)**
Female			.039(.034)	.041(.034)	.040(.034)	.039(.034)
Race (ref: Non-Hispanic White/Other)						
Non-Hispanic Black			.122(.053)*	.117(.053)*	.116(.053)*	.114(.053)*
Hispanic			.017(.062)	.019(.062)	.016(.062)	.015(.062)
CPS contact by Y9					.008(.054)	.006(.054)
PCG is not bio mother at Y9					-.157(.075)*	-.194(.080)*
Mother incarcerated X						.168
PCG not bio mother at Y9						(.150)
Constant	-.002(.018)	.073(.025)**	-.289(.123)*	-.161(.140)	-.146(.140)	-.148(.140)

Note. Adapted from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study, N = 3,334 in all models. Models 4 through 7 include controls for 20 sample cities (not shown). Results combined across 20 multiply imputed data sets. Full list of covariates detailed in table A3 in appendix A.

\*\*\*p < .001; \*\*p < .01; \*p < .05 (two-tailed).

mothers do not differ in their level of school-based educational involvement from the average PCG in the FFCW sample (model 1), children with ever-incarcerated mothers are far more disadvantaged than the FFCW average. Net of controls for such disadvantage—including paternal incarceration (model 2), our battery of sociodemographic factors (model 3), maternal traits and behaviors (model 4), history of CPS involvement and being raised by someone other than a biological mother (model 5.1)—maternal incarceration is associated with increased school-based PCG involvement by one seventh of a standard deviation. The direction of the association is notable: Whereas paternal incarceration is associated with fathers and PCGs being *less* involved in schools (Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017), maternal incarceration is associated with both maternal and nonmaternal PCGs being *more* involved in schools.

The interaction between maternal incarceration and having a PCG other than the child's biological mother was not statistically significant, potentially affirming our hypothesis that maternal incarceration is similarly associated with increased school-based involvement regardless of whether the PCG is the child's biological mother. Significance, however, must be interpreted cautiously in this case because of the large magnitude of the coefficient and concerns about statistical power. Having a nonmaternal PCG is associated with one fifth of a standard deviation lower school-based involvement—but by magnitude alone, our nonsignificant interaction term suggests that the penalty to caregiver involvement associated with being a nonmaternal PCG may not apply if the child's mother has an incarceration history.

Although research has found little evidence that maternal incarceration is associated with increased child behavioral problems (Wildeman & Turney, 2014), our findings for school-based PCG educational involvement could still reflect increased disciplinary action against children of incarcerated mothers. To investigate this possibility, we ran supplemental models controlling for measures of child behavioral problems and school disciplinary record, but neither had a significant or substantively meaningful effect on the association between maternal incarceration and PCG school involvement. We additionally ran our full model (model 5.1) separately using as our outcome each of the 10 items captured in our summary measure of school-based involvement to determine whether our findings reflect discipline-related activities. Although there was substantial variation in the magnitude of the associations between maternal incarceration and our 10 school involvement outcomes separately, the coefficients remained positive in all cases. The associations that reached significance at minimally the  $p < .1$  level included meeting with a school counselor or a principal—which could plausibly be discipline related—but also attending an event in which the child was participating, volunteering or serving on a committee, and attending a health or safety workshop, which are not obviously discipline related.

The results of our multivariate analysis predicting home-based educational involvement (table 5) differ markedly from the results for school-based educational involvement. There is no association between maternal incarceration and home-based educational involvement observed in even the bivariate case (Model 1), and the magnitude of the association is attenuated to a substantively negligible 1.5 percent of a standard deviation in our full model (model 5.1). The interaction between maternal incarceration and having a PCG other than the child's biological mother (model 5.2) is again nonsignificant. In supplemental models separately regressing each of the four survey items captured in our summary measure of home-based school involvement on maternal incarceration, the associations between maternal incarceration and the four outcomes were consistently nonsignificant, with or without the inclusion of our control variables.

Results of supplemental analyses testing for variation in our findings by race yielded no statistically significant differences, when modeled either as interaction terms or as separate subgroup analyses by race. Although the lack of statistically significant differences was anticipated given

TABLE 5 Linear Regression Coefficients (Standard Errors in Parentheses) for Select Variables: Home-Based PCG Educational Involvement Regressed on Maternal Incarceration

Variables	Model 1 Bivariate	Model 2 + Paternal Incarceration	Model 3 + Socio- demographics	Model 4 + Maternal Traits & Behaviors	Model 5.1 + CPS contact & PCG status	Model 5.2 + Interaction
Mother ever incarcerated	-.089(.060)	-.100(.061)	-.075(.062)	-.021(.065)	.018(.064)	.014(.065)
Father ever incarcerated		.042(.035)	.026(.041)	.028(.042)	.035(.042)	.035(.042)
Female			-.078(.034)*	-.077(.034)*	-.077(.034)*	-.077(.034)*
Race (ref: Non-Hispanic White/Other)						
Non-Hispanic Black			.130(.054)*	.121(.054)*	.118(.053)*	.117(.054)*
Hispanic			-.050(.061)	-.051(.061)	-.058(.061)	-.058(.061)
CPS contact by Y9					-.086(.051)	-.086+ (.051)
PCG is not bio mother at Y9					-.237(.082)*	-.243(.088)**
Mother incarcerated X						.027
PCG not bio mother at Y9						(.168)
Constant	.009(.018)	-.011(.025)	-.504(.129)***	-.380(.140)**	-.363(.140)*	-.379(.140)**

Note. Adapted from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study. N = 3,334 in all models. Models 4 through 7 include controls for 20 sample cities (not shown). Results combined across 20 multiply imputed data sets. Full list of covariates detailed in table A3 in appendix A.

\*\*\*p < .001; \*\*p < .01; \*p < .05 (two-tailed).



limited statistical power, we note that by coefficient magnitudes alone, all results remained consistent in direction: In no case did we observe a negative association between maternal incarceration and PCG involvement.

In sum, our quantitative findings lend support to our hypothesis that maternal incarceration is associated with increased PCG educational involvement in schools but also suggest that maternal incarceration is not clearly associated with the forms of home-based PCG educational involvement captured in the FFCW survey measures. To qualitatively investigate the micro-level social and emotional processes motivating these average group differences, we turn to findings from our interview sample.

## 6.2 | Interview Sample

Consistent with the literature, CPS contact was a dominant force in the lives of the women interviewed (Andersen & Wildeman, 2014; Berger et al., 2016; Paik, 2021). Mothers in our sample—especially Black mothers—described taking active steps toward managing CPS surveillance and involvement, including placing children in the custody of comparatively more-resourced relatives. Mothers were also aware of the role of schools, along with healthcare and other surveilling interactions, as potential points of CPS involvement (Fong, 2019, 2020; Greco et al., 2017).

Although CPS and educational involvement were common themes separately, however, none of the mothers in our sample cited involvement in their children's schools as a tactic for CPS management, and none cited CPS management as a motivating factor when describing their involvement in their children's education. Although the lack of explicit connection between educational involvement and CPS involvement does not negate the likelihood that formerly incarcerated mothers actively engage in system management in schools, our interview data suggest that educational involvement among formerly incarcerated mothers was more strongly linked with conceptions of compensatory parenting, mothers' hopes of social mobility for their children, and their sense of self-worth as parents. Our interview data also suggest a range of ways in which mothers engage in their children's education that fall outside the scope of the survey items in the FFCW data, suggesting the need for a more open-ended understanding of what educational involvement may look like for formerly incarcerated mothers.

### 6.2.1 | System management and kinship care

Following the literature on system avoidance and system management, 40.5 percent ( $n = 17$ ) of the women interviewed described taking active steps toward fending off CPS intervention (Fong, 2019, 2020; Gurusami, 2019; Roberts, 2012). Twelve mothers (28.6 percent) described having experienced CPS contact, 7 of whom were White (16.7 percent of the total sample) and 5 of whom were Black (11.9 percent of the total sample). Five additional mothers (11.9 percent), all self-identified as Black or biracial, described fearing CPS despite never having experienced contact. The most basic tactics included appearance management, such as this description from Gladys,<sup>4</sup> a Black mother of four, on the day she went to court to fight for custody: "Took my shower, put my clothes on. ... Everything was in place: my hair, my clothes." Some women, such as Francine, a White mother of three, described intentional system engagement in ways that they believed would help

<sup>4</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

demonstrate their commitment to parenting. “I go [to my treatment program] 4 days a week,” she explained. “It would be 3 days a week, but I go a fourth day for parenting classes. Just in case CPS tried to get on me about something, I would be like, ‘I already took parenting classes. I already did this. I already completed this many levels of treatment.’”

Mothers who were not their children’s PCGs were similarly direct about the role of kinship care in guarding against CPS intervention. As Iris, the Black mother of three introduced earlier, put it, “Thank God, never lost my children to any courts.” In the face of her ongoing struggle with addiction, transferring guardianship to relatives allowed Iris to parent as best she could without risking full loss of her children. “I was doing drugs,” she explained, “[but] they still love me, I still fed them, I still clothed them.” Gloria, a Black mother with one daughter, had a similar story: “I was out in the streets stealing, chasing dope,” she explained, and so Gloria’s daughter stayed with Gloria’s mother. It was “the best place she could have stayed,” Gloria said, “Cause they ain’t get her in the system or none of that. That would have been really heartbreaking.”

Kinship care may be a particularly important mechanism of system management for women facing repeated episodes of incarceration, such as Felicia, a biracial mother who reported having been incarcerated at least 20 times. “I was going in and out the penitentiary because I was still dealing with addiction,” she explained. “My oldest son, I had to leave him. I thank God he didn’t never go to CPS custody.” Her son lived with his uncle and great-grandmother. Robin, a Black mother, echoed Felicia’s relief at her successful avoidance of CPS: “I didn’t want them to get in the system,” Robin said. Despite her relationship with her children having been strained by her repeated incarceration, she feels that her children were “really blessed” to live with relatives “cause some kids get lost in the system. They just in the system and they have no contact [with parents].” The understanding of CPS as a threat rather than as a source of assistance to children and families was particularly prominent among mothers of color in the sample, given that 58.8 percent of mothers (10 out of 17) who mentioned CPS were Black, and 100.0 percent of mothers (5 out of 5) who had never experienced CPS contact but described steps taken to avoid it were Black or biracial. This empirical pattern echoes work by Fong (2019, 2020) and Roberts (2008) on distrust of CPS within communities of color.

But even though 40.5 percent of the mothers we interviewed ( $n = 17$ ) described active strategies for managing CPS involvement, engaging kinship care and curating their interactions with law enforcement, healthcare, and CPS itself, *none* of the women interviewed specifically mentioned CPS in connection with their investment in their children’s education, either at home or at school.

## 6.2.2 | Compensatory parenting and school-based educational involvement

Although schools likely function as a place of system management for formerly incarcerated mothers, our interview data suggest that the dominant factor in women’s narratives of their school-based educational involvement was the role of education in compensatory parenting. After separation from their children for months or years at a time, *all* of the women interviewed detailed their efforts to demonstrate themselves as engaged and responsible mothers who sought to take good care of their children. Out of that full sample, 31 percent ( $n = 13$ )—of whom 7 were Black (53.8 percent), 5 were White (38.4 percent), and 1 identified as “Other” race (7.7 percent)—cited at least one form of involvement in their children’s education as an important element of quality caregiving. Gladys explained it as follows: “I feed my kids, take them to school, to day care, I always took care of my babies. ... you know, what a mother’s supposed to do.”

Rather than school engagement being primarily oriented toward system management, it was more commonly portrayed as meeting an emotional need to effectively care for one's child and to demonstrate one's ability to "be a mother."

Proving oneself as a mother in the eyes of one's child and family was a repeated theme among all of the women interviewed, many of whom described building their relationships with their children as their top priority after reentry. Stacy, a 38-year-old White mother, explained that the hardest part about returning home from prison was "doing everything I can not to let my daughter down. Basically, the last few years I haven't been there. . . . I don't want to let her down." Shanay, a 28-year-old Black mother, shared a similar goal: "I'm trying to work on building our relationship back up from the time that I missed." Shanay said that her incarceration "kind of woke me up" in the sense of "knowing that I have responsibilities that I need to take care of. I have a 9-year-old son." From the bus ride home from prison, Robin described feeling "anxious" to "get my life together," with her first order of business being to "get these kids. It was time for me to stand up and be a woman, be a mother." Darlene, a White mother in her late 20s, likewise explained that she "can't keep beating myself up" for her substance abuse. Having faced the revolving door of the carceral system dozens of times, Darlene said she is now focused on being there for her daughter: "I have to just make the best out of it and try to make up for it, you know?"

School involvement was a recurring theme in interviewees' descriptions of what it meant to "stand up" as a mother, with high school graduation repeatedly cited as a key marker of maternal success. Iris, for example, linked her recovery with her children's educational achievements. "A lot of people say you can't quit [drugs] for things in your family and all that. Yes, you can," she asserted, describing with pride that despite their family's struggles, her son "managed to graduate from high school." Similarly, Robin's daughter graduated high school while she was in the custody of a relative. Although separated, Robin called it a "better situation" because "she went to school. She finished school." Beth, a 40-year-old White woman, had a similar barometer of educational success: "Both my children did graduate. So I'm very proud of that. They graduated from high school." For Gladys, the mark of her parenting success was that "all my kids [went to college]." Her pride swelled at what her children had achieved. "I think I did a good job with raising them without their father in the picture."

Eight women in the sample (19 percent) cited their own childhood as a reference point, expressing a sense that education was a key mechanism of social mobility and offered an opportunity to provide a better future for their children than what they themselves had experienced. When explaining her motivation for choosing neighborhoods that would give her children access to good schools, for example, Porsha, a Black mother, expressed this comparison directly: "I wanted them to be different from my growing up." Shanay, who had been home from prison for slightly more than a year at the time of our interview, likewise shared: "I want better for me and my son, for real," she urged. "I want that so bad." She said that her priorities were securing employment and making sure her son, who is 9 years old, gets a good education. "I'm real hard on him on school. I don't play about school," she insisted. "I want my baby to go to college, you know what I'm saying?" Shanay took great care to monitor her son's progress in school. "I want better for my son," she repeated.

Although we did observe more frequent discussion of CPS system management among Black women in our interview sample relative to women of other races, we did not observe evidence of racial variation in mothers' discussions of compensatory parenting, either more generally or with respect to educational involvement. This lack of racial variation is consistent with how compensatory parenting is expected to operate, given that whereas system management is oriented toward surveilling institutions, compensatory parenting is focused on caring for

one's child. As a mother's love for her child does not differ by race, it follows that narratives of compensatory parenting, and the frequency of caregiving behaviors that are motivated primarily by compensatory parenting, also would not differ by race.

### 6.2.3 | Additional forms of educational involvement

Whereas our survey findings demonstrated a difference in PCG school-based involvement by maternal incarceration history, we observed no difference by maternal incarceration history in our measure of home-based educational activities: discussing books or current events, helping with homework, and ensuring homework completion. Although the lack of differences in these behaviors by maternal incarceration history remains a finding of note, our interview data shed light on a broader range of educational support activities not captured in the FFCW survey. Twelve mothers we interviewed (28.6 percent) offered great detail on the home-based involvement they felt reflected their commitment to their children's education.

Although not falling within the traditional categories of either home-based or school-based educational activities, the starting point for educational involvement for many of the mothers interviewed was their effort to choose a good school for their child, including finding housing with access to quality schools. Porsha, for instance, described making her housing choices based on the schools that her children would attend: "I had them in neighborhoods like that—the type of schools they went to," Porsha expressed with pride. Although choosing neighborhoods around school quality is not unique to formerly incarcerated mothers, such strategizing is typically classed: Families prioritize schooling in their residential choices when they socioeconomically can (Lareau & Goyette, 2014). In contrast, several of the formerly incarcerated women interviewed described prioritizing school access in their residential choices despite extreme constraints on both socioeconomic resources and housing options. Francine, for example, moved to a residential reentry housing program that allowed her daughter to live with her, and she expressed how important it was that the reentry program offered transportation to school for her daughter. "They'll take them all the way to Illinois," she said, sounding relieved that her children could continue to attend their school across state lines. "If they don't want to switch schools, they don't have to."

Making sure that children got to school daily was another common form of educational involvement described by mothers. Cheryl, a Black mother of three, recalled seeing her 11-year-old son off to school on the day she was incarcerated: "The day I went to jail, I walked him to the bus stop. Put him on the bus for him to go to school." Similar to making residential choices around schooling, ensuring that a child gets to school every day may seem like minimal educational involvement—yet for women involved with the criminal justice system, the simple act of driving a child to school can reflect a heightened level of risk. For instance, Samira, a Black mother of two young children, had a felony warrant out for her arrest but was nonetheless committed to driving her 5-year-old daughter the 50-minute round-trip commute to her school daily. "Every time I'm driving, I'm live bait because if you get pulled over ... [the warrant] will pop up." Samira explained that she prioritized the continuity of her daughter's education at the risk of her arrest: "The school year almost over, so I just been trying to have her continue to go [rather than switching schools]." For Cheryl, Samira, and several other mothers, taking their children to school and picking them up at the end of the day represented an active investment in supporting their children's education.

Although mothers in the interview sample did not explicitly mention homework, they did describe monitoring their children's study skills and encouraging better habits, specifically focusing on grades, tracking exam dates, and talking to their children about the importance

of graduating from high school. Tommi Beth, a Black mother, beamed as she described her daughter's success: "She passed every test. ... She will graduate in May." Darlene likewise believed that her daughter "was raised well. She gets good grades. ... She's a good kid." Felicia worried about her 15-year-old son's academics, saying, "He's the type that[s] starting to lack off." In response, Felicia was laser focused: "My next big goal is to make sure my son [will] graduate." To accomplish this, she monitored his absences: seven so far this year, she recounted. "If I don't push him, it won't get done. ... And I don't care if I have to drag him there every day. [He's] going to graduate whether he like it or not. You don't have a choice—not in this household." These concrete examples of home-based school involvement highlight ways in which formerly incarcerated mothers may engage with their children's schooling that are not captured in our survey data.

In sum, although our interview data suggest that a substantial share of mothers in the sample were highly attuned to the threat of CPS, especially Black mothers, the reported motivations for involvement in children's education consistently drew on the theme of compensatory parenting—a finding that held across racial identities. These results highlight the importance of open-ended qualitative inquiry to identify mechanisms as they are narrated by the people they impact, both on their own and as a complement to our survey-based findings.

## 7 | DISCUSSION

Although the positive effects of parental involvement for educational outcomes have been documented for decades (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Jaynes, 2005; Machen et al., 2005; Tan et al., 2020), the basic elements of what it means to parent must be redefined when that parent is incarcerated (S. D. Phillips et al., 2006; S. Phillips & Dettlaff, 2009). This redefinition holds not only during correctional custody itself (Easterling et al., 2019) but also in the aftermath, when parenthood must be negotiated alongside the many other challenges of reentry (Geller et al., 2011; Gurusami, 2019; Haney, 2018; Michalsen, 2011). That negotiation process may be particularly challenging for mothers, who are disproportionately likely to be custodial parents before their incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), and whose parental identities are uniquely threatened by being labeled as "criminal" (Roberts, 2012). Whereas research has considered the question of how fathers' incarceration history affects involvement in children's education (Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017), little is known about educational involvement after a mother is incarcerated.

To that end, this study posed a set of research questions aimed at better understanding the relationship between maternal incarceration and involvement in children's education at home and at school. We began by asking whether a maternal incarceration history is associated with differences in school-based and home-based educational involvement in a large survey sample, net of a broad range of child, family, school, and neighborhood characteristics. We then drew on interviews with formerly incarcerated mothers from comparable demographic and geographic backgrounds to our survey sample to investigate how formerly incarcerated mothers describe and motivate their involvement in their children's education.

Our quantitative and qualitative approaches yield distinct but complementary findings. Results from our survey data suggest that relative to children of disadvantaged but never-incarcerated mothers, maternal incarceration is associated with increased school-based caregiver involvement. PCGs of children with a maternal incarceration history are involved in schools at approximately equivalent levels to the average PCG in the FFCW sample, despite the average PCG being substantially more advantaged than PCGs of children whose mothers have been incarcerated. The positive association between maternal incarceration and school-based educational involvement



does not extend beyond the school context as we observed no evidence of an association between maternal incarceration and our measure of home-based educational involvement in the FFCW data.

That a maternal incarceration history is associated with differential school-based educational involvement by PCGs emphasizes the need to think of maternal incarceration as a distinct social experience, both from paternal incarceration and from socioeconomic disadvantage alone. Maternal incarceration comes with the catalyzing emotional experience of separation from one's children, physically and potentially custodially, an unparalleled experience in the lives of many disadvantaged but never-incarcerated women. The logistics of such separation have far-reaching consequences for both mothers and their children, including shifting caregiving arrangements for mothers who were custodial parents before their incarceration (Hairston, 2009). The heightened risk of CPS intervention among formerly incarcerated mothers (Berger et al., 2016; Roberts, 2012) provides added incentive for using alternative caregiving arrangements unless the mother feels able to effectively fend off CPS involvement herself. Fong (2019), for example, described materially disadvantaged mothers doing their best to retain parenting rights despite adverse circumstances ranging from severe drug addiction to homelessness—circumstances that formerly incarcerated mothers in our interview data cite as reasons for placing their children in kinship care, believing CPS intervention to be a near certainty otherwise.

The role of kinship care as a mechanism of CPS system management for formerly incarcerated mothers is a finding that emerged in both our survey and our interview data. In research on formerly incarcerated mothers (Arditti & Few, 2006; Cooper-Sadlo et al., 2019; Michalsen, 2011) and on kinship caregivers of children whose mothers have been incarcerated (Burton & DeVries, 1992; Pebley & Rudkin, 1999), both groups have been found to report similar incentives for engaging in system management and compensatory parenting. We thus hypothesized that these shared incentives should lead to similar levels of caregiver educational involvement regardless of whether the caregiver is the biological mother, and we affirmed this hypothesis in the FFCW sample. Our interview data suggest that alternative caregiving arrangements are indeed conceptualized primarily as a form of system management, especially among Black mothers in the sample, although they are also described from a compensatory parenting perspective as providing children with more stable caregiving than the mother feels able to provide herself. That maternal and nonmaternal caregivers of children with an ever-incarcerated mother are similarly involved in schools may suggest that mothers and nonmaternal caregivers share a common understanding of what level of institutional engagement is necessary to avoid CPS system involvement, and the PCG role is negotiated based on the ability to maintain that level of engagement.

Although CPS involvement was a central concern for 40.5 percent of mothers in our interview sample, system management was notably absent from mothers' explanations of their interest and involvement in their children's education. Instead, involvement in schools was narrated as a child-focused activity, and an important element of what it means to "be a mother." Home-based educational activities were also described in terms of compensatory parenting, but schools were conceptualized as offering a unique opportunity to assert one's investment in motherhood and in one's children. School involvement fits within a normative framework of successful parenting and is visible to multiple parties with the ability to affirm parenting quality: children and other family members, teachers and other school staff, and fellow parents and community members. Formerly incarcerated mothers' descriptions of schools as institutions in which parenting can be validated stood in contrast with their understanding of the carceral system as an institution in which parenthood is stripped away (Easterling et al., 2019).



Importantly, the primary audience of school involvement was not the school itself but children first and foremost, along with the alternative caregivers with whom relationships had been strained by maternal incarceration. In addition to wanting to “make up for lost time” (Garcia-Hallett, 2022), mothers also understood their children as a source of pride and self-worth and viewed their children’s educational attainment as a barometer of their parenting, a finding that was consistent across race. In contrast to the literature on “intensive motherhood” (Hays, 1996), compensatory parenting had more straightforward measures of success: Mothers wanted their children to graduate from high school and to avoid following the mother’s path into the carceral system. Even when mothers lacked other resources, educational involvement was seen as a mechanism through which they could offer their children upward mobility.

Our survey data yielded no evidence of differences in our measure of home-based educational involvement by maternal incarceration history, but our interview data offered numerous examples of “home-based educational involvement” that would not have been captured in the four items included in the FFCW survey. Although mothers did not report engaging in the specific home-based educational activities queried in the FFCW—discussing books or current events with their child, helping their child with homework, or ensuring homework completion—formerly incarcerated mothers endeavored to support their children’s education at home in a range of ways. For example, mothers reported tracking exam dates, grades, and attendance, as well as discussing study habits and the importance of high school graduation, all of which are established forms of home-based educational involvement not included in our survey measure. Our interview data cannot demonstrate formerly incarcerated mothers to be more engaged in these types of home-based educational activities compared with similarly disadvantaged never-incarcerated mothers, but the null finding in our FFCW analysis of home-based involvement does not preclude that possibility.

Much of the research on maternal incarceration has focused on the experiences of minoritized mothers, but little comparative research has explored differences by race in parenting processes after maternal incarceration. Although our supplemental comparative analyses by race in the FFCW data were underpowered to detect differences at standard thresholds of statistical significance, our interview data yielded some intuition on where racial differences may be expected to emerge in motivations for educational involvement among mothers with an incarceration history. In keeping with the literature, Black mothers in our data were more likely than mothers of other racial groups to specifically discuss system management and concerns about CPS involvement, reflecting heightened risk of CPS involvement among Black families with a history of incarceration (Roberts, 2012)—but system management was not discussed by any mothers in our sample as a motivation for educational involvement in particular. In contrast, discussions of compensatory parenting, which were explicitly articulated as motivation for educational involvement, notably did *not* differ by race.

That finding merits further study in a larger survey sample and/or an interview sample specifically constructed to explore racial variation in caregiving experiences after maternal incarceration. Because compensatory parenting is rooted in an emotional desire to care for one’s child, however, caregiving behaviors motivated primarily by compensatory parenting may not be expected to vary by race. This finding illustrates a core difference between compensatory parenting and system management, which is a relationship between caregivers and surveilling institutions, and may vary by race given heightened surveillance of mothers of color (Roberts, 2012). It similarly differentiates compensatory parenting from intensive mothering, which is a relationship between mothers and norms of ideal motherhood that privilege wealth and Whiteness (Elliott et al., 2015). In is undoubtedly important to examine racial variation in experiences of incarceration and state

surveillance, yet recent theory has suggested that the overwhelming focus in the social sciences on outcomes in which minoritized persons experience disadvantage can itself reproduce racial stigma (Pattillo, 2021). Our findings on compensatory parenting emphasize that even within a racialized carceral system, emotional aspects of parenting that do not differ by race, such as wanting to take good care of one's child, are worthy of note in how they shape caregiving behaviors.

We note a few additional limitations to our study. First, although the FFCW data are a unique resource for studying intergenerational consequences of parental incarceration, the generalizability of our quantitative findings is likely limited by selection mechanisms inherent to the process of maternal incarceration itself. For the 10 percent of mothers who have no alternative caregivers available (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), incarceration will result in children entering the foster care system, dramatically increasing the likelihood that the mother's parental rights will be terminated (Halperin & Harris, 2004; Roberts, 2012). Because foster parents and ever-incarcerated mothers who have had their parenting rights terminated may be less likely to respond to a longitudinal survey on child well-being, our findings may be generalizable only to the majority of children of incarcerated mothers who are not placed the foster care system.

Second, both our survey and interview data depend on respondent self-reports, leaving response bias as a standing concern. The redundancy in reporting on incarceration in the FFCW supports the validity of these measures, as does the fact that our incarceration and educational involvement data correlate in the expected directions with other indicators of familial disadvantage. Response bias may be similarly problematic in our interviews if mothers emphasize compensatory parenting over system management because of concerns about social desirability in their interactions with the interviewer. The women interviewed openly discussed CPS system management outside the context of schooling, however, decreasing concerns that talking about system management was constrained by social desirability. In both of our data sources, self-reporting also provides only a general sense of the number and duration of the mother's episodes of incarceration, a challenge common to much of the U.S. survey data on criminal justice system involvement. As is emphasized in our interview data, women's incarceration is typically situated within a broader profile of disadvantage, including poverty, addiction, and family instability; although our survey data analysis demonstrated differences by incarceration history between mothers at similar levels of social disadvantage, disentangling a causal effect of incarceration from a causal effect of the social correlates of incarceration is beyond the scope of any associational quantitative or qualitative analysis.

Finally, although the mothers in our interview sample discussed the motivations for and success of nonmaternal caregiving arrangements, future qualitative research should directly investigate how nonmaternal caregivers of children with incarcerated mothers engage with schools. Nonmaternal PCGs are far more common among children of ever- versus never-incarcerated mothers: Whereas 95 percent of children of never-incarcerated mothers in our survey data had their biological mother as their PCG, nearly one third of children of ever-incarcerated mothers were living with a PCG other than their biological mother. The literature has suggested that similar to maternal PCGs, nonmaternal PCGs may be motivated by a desire to compensate for hardships experienced by the child in their care (Burton & DeVries, 1992; Gibson, 2002), and schools thus may be a unique institutional context in which involved caregiving can be publicly enacted and validated for nonmaternal PCGs. Data on the role of nonparental caregivers in schooling in our interview sample were limited because this topic was frequently emotionally upsetting for mothers to discuss: A woman named Bernice, for example, soured on the interview itself when asked to describe details of her children's experiences of caregiving during her incarceration: "How could you ask me something like that? ... We about done?" Mindful of our positionality as never-incarcerated researchers, we avoided pressing on sensitive subjects and

did not probe further in cases like this when we noticed a topic becoming sensitive. Our lack of qualitative data on the specifics of nonmaternal caregiver school involvement thus should not be taken as evidence of noninvolvement in education by nonmaternal primary caregivers but as a reason for future research to interview nonmaternal caregivers directly on this topic.

Caregiver educational involvement as a function of compensatory parenting after maternal incarceration is inextricably contextualized within a broader picture of childhood disadvantage for which caregivers feel the need to compensate. Such educational involvement does not negate the ongoing impact of that history of broader disadvantage, including the vast range of documented negative outcomes of incarceration for women and families (Roberts, 2012; Turney & Wildeman, 2015, 2018). The findings in this study do not address the question of how educational involvement after maternal incarceration influences child outcomes, and although the literature demonstrates educational involvement to have a positive influence on child educational performance (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Jaynes, 2005), educational involvement could well have a lesser overall effect on the outcomes of children of ever- versus never-incarcerated mothers as a result of factors such as differential treatment of caregivers in schools or differential child response to caregiver involvement (Calarco, 2020). Caregivers of children with an incarceration history could be more involved in education despite—or even because of—lower returns on their time investment in terms of child outcomes. How maternal incarceration history affects the association between caregiver educational involvement and child outcomes remains an important question for future research.

From a policy perspective, our findings suggest the potential for schools to play a unique role as points of institutional connection for mothers with a history of incarceration—an opportunity rendered particularly important by the relative dearth of programming for formerly incarcerated mothers, both during the period of incarceration and through reentry (Dallaire & Shlafer, 2018). Although noncustodial fathers tend to avoid surveilling systems such as schools after their incarceration (Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017), that custodial formerly incarcerated mothers see schools as a key setting in which to “stand up” and support their children offers an existing incentive structure through which to facilitate productive engagement. Programs fostering communication with school staff, offering training on effective modes of educational engagement with their children, and developing connections with fellow parents and the broader school community have the potential to build on formerly incarcerated mothers’ interest in involvement with their children’s schools. Existing efforts to train educators on best practices for working with children of incarcerated parents (e.g., Turney, 2019) might also be expanded to include training on facilitating engagement with caregivers of children whose mothers have been incarcerated.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

Given the established importance of parental involvement for children’s educational performance, this study considers one way in which the carceral state has transformed motherhood, with intergenerational implications. We found that maternal incarceration is associated with increased involvement in schools by children’s PCGs, regardless of whether the caregiver is the biological mother. This finding emphasizes the uniqueness of the experience of maternal incarceration for subsequent caregiver behavior and child experience, both compared with paternal incarceration and maternal disadvantage alone.

Whereas prior studies have considered the role of schools as surveilling institutions, our interview data suggest an additional role for schools as institutional contexts in which child-focused parenting can be deliberately enacted by women whose parenthood has been challenged by

the carceral state. Although formerly incarcerated mothers are acutely aware of the pressures and consequences of state surveillance and take active steps toward system management, their sensitivity to perceived prior shortcomings in the eyes of their children, families, and communities after a period of carceral separation was described as the more powerful motivator for their involvement in their children's education. The importance of compensatory parenting for mothers with a history of incarceration, and the role that educational involvement plays in compensatory parenting, offer insight for policy efforts aimed at facilitating productive relationships between schools and the families of children with formerly incarcerated mothers.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE A1 Home-Based and School-based Parental Educational Involvement Measures

<b>Home-Based Educational Involvement</b>	
Now I would like to ask you some questions about things you may do with child. Please tell me how often you did this with child in the past month. These things might be done together anywhere, they don't have to be done at home. In the past month, how often did you . . .	(1) Not once in past month (2) 1-2 times in the past month (3) once a week (4) several times a week (5) every day
Read book with child or talk with him/her about books he/she reads?	
Talk with child about current events, like things going on in the news?	
Check to make sure the child has completed his/her homework?	
Help child with homework or school assignments?	
<b>School-Based Educational Involvement</b>	
Now, I would like to ask you about some school-related activities that you may or may not have done in the last year. Since the beginning of this/last school year have you . . .	(0) Not in this/last school year (1) Once in this/last school year (2) More than once
Attended an open house or back-to-school night?	
Attended a meeting of a PTA, PTO, or parent-teacher organization?	
Gone to a regularly scheduled parent-teacher conference with child's teacher?	
Attended a school or class event, such as a play, sports event, or science fair, in which your child participated?	
Attended a school or class event, such as a play, sports event, or science fair, in which your child did not participate?	
Volunteered at the school or served on a committee?	
Met with a school counselor?	
Visited or sat in on child's classroom?	
Had a conference with child's school principal?	
Gone to a workshop or meeting about health, nutrition, or safety issues?	

Note. Adapted from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Survey, Year 9 Primary Caregiver Survey.

TABLE A2 Nonmaternal Caregiver at Year 9 by Maternal Incarceration Status

Variable	Percentage of		
	Full Sample	Mother Never Incarcerated Subsample	Mother Ever Incarcerated Subsample
Biological father	50.00	47.30	54.08
Maternal grandparent	23.98	25.68	21.43
Paternal grandparent	9.35	11.49	6.12
Maternal aunt or uncle	9.35	8.78	10.20
Other relative	4.47	3.38	6.12
Nonrelative foster parent	2.44	2.70	2.04
Unknown	.41	.68	.00
N	246	148	98

Note. Adapted from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Results based on the first of 20 multiply imputed data sets. Twenty sample cities not shown. Y9 = age-nine follow-up survey.

**TABLE A3** Description of Control Variables

Control Variable	Description
<b>Controls for Paternal Incarceration</b>	
Father incarceration by Y9	Father or mother reports that father ever spent time in prison or jail by Y9 (0 = no, 1 = yes)
<b>Controls for Sociodemographic Characteristics</b>	
Mother and father married at Y0	Mother married to father at Y0 (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Mother and father cohabiting at Y0	Mother cohabiting with father at Y0 (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Mother repartnered by Y9	Mother married to or cohabiting with new partner at Y9 (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Mother citizenship status	At Y1, mother reports she is a US citizen (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Father citizenship status	At Y1, father reports he is a US citizen (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Mother postsecondary education	At Y0, mother reports at least some postsecondary education (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Father postsecondary education	At Y0, father reports at least some postsecondary education (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Mother household income-to-poverty ratio at Y9	Household income to poverty ratio based on thresholds designated by Census Bureau
Number of children in mother's household at Y9	Number of children younger than age 18 in mother's household
Child Non-Hispanic Black	Self-reported at Y15; dummy variable (reference = Non-Hispanic White/Other race)
Child Hispanic	Self-reported at Y15; dummy variable (reference = Non-Hispanic White/Other race)
Child's sex	Recorded at Y0; 0 = male, 1 = female
School >60% Black at Y9	School majority Black (0 = 60% or less, 1 = more than 60%); National Center for Education Statistics
School >60% Hispanic at Y9	School majority Hispanic (0 = 60% or less, 1 = more than 60%); National Center for Education Statistics
School >60% free or reduced-price lunch at Y9	School majority free or reduced-price lunch (0 = 60% or less, 1 = more than 60%); National Center for Education Statistics
Mother neighborhood disadvantage at Y9	Standardized mean composite of mother's residential census tract variables (poverty, education, female-headed households, public assistance, unemployment)
<b>Controls for Maternal Traits and Behaviors</b>	
Mother depression at Y9	Based on self-reports to Composite International Diagnostic Interview-Short Form; liberal definition (0 = no depression, 1 = depression)
Mother substance use problem by Y9	Mother or father reported at any wave that mother's drinking or drug use interferes with daily activities or personal relationships (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Mother impulsivity	Based on six self-reported items at Y3 (alpha = 0.99); higher values = more impulsivity

(Continues)

TABLE A3 (Continued)

Control Variable	Description
<b>Controls for CPS Contact and PCG Status</b>	
Nonmaternal primary caregiver at Y9	Mothers were considered PCG if they lived with child at least half the time (0 = mother, 1 = else)
Child protective services contact by Y9	Primary caregiver contacted by CPS about abuse or neglect since child's birth (0 = no, 1 = yes)
Grandparent involvement at Y9	Child lives with grandparent or sees grandparent once a week or more (0 = no, 1 = yes)

Note. Adapted from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Y0 = baseline survey (child's birth), Y1 = Year 1 survey, Y3 = Year 3 survey, Y9 = Year 9 survey, Y15 = Year 15 survey. Dummy variables for 20 sample cities not shown.

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