

Low-Income Black Mothers Parenting Adolescents in the Mass Incarceration Era: The Long Reach of Criminalization

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Sinikka Elliott^a and Megan Reid^b

Abstract

Punitive and disciplinary forms of governance disproportionately target low-income Black Americans for surveillance and punishment, and research finds far-reaching consequences of such criminalization. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 46 low-income Black mothers of adolescents in urban neighborhoods, this article advances understanding of the long reach of criminalization by examining the intersection of two related areas of inquiry: the criminalization of Black youth and the institutional scrutiny and punitive treatment of Black mothers. Findings demonstrate that poor Black mothers calibrate their parenting strategies not only to fears that their children will be criminalized by mainstream institutions and the police, but also to concerns that they themselves will be criminalized as bad mothers who could lose their parenting rights. We develop the concept of “family criminalization” to explain the intertwining of Black mothers’ and children’s vulnerability to institutional surveillance and punishment. We argue that to fully grasp the causes and consequences of mass incarceration and its disproportionate impact on Black youth and adults, sociologists must be attuned to family dynamics and linkages as important to how criminalization unfolds in the lives of Black Americans.

Keywords

criminalization, mothering, racism, adolescence, mass incarceration

Punitive and disciplinary governance structures the everyday lives of low-income Black people in the United States (Alexander 2010; Desmond and Valdez 2012; Goffman 2009; Hancock 2004; Roberts 2002; Schram et al. 2009; Wacquant 2009), including children. Research shows that, compared to white¹ children, Black children experience disproportionate and more severe punishment from school authorities, law enforcement, and the criminal justice system and are marked in popular discourse as criminally-inclined and “at risk” for negative outcomes (Byfield 2014; Ferguson 2000; Jones 2010; Morris and

Perry 2016; Rios 2011; Shedd 2015; Skiba et al. 2011). Relatedly, studies find that Black mothers are deemed responsible for causing, and thus remedying, any challenges they and their children encounter, including criminal

^aUniversity of British Columbia

^bUniversity of Wisconsin-Madison

Corresponding Author:

Sinikka Elliott, University of British Columbia,
6303 NW Marine Drive, Vancouver, BC, Canada
V6T 1Z1

Email: sinikka.elliott@ubc.ca

justice involvement (Elliott and Reid 2016; Gurusami 2017, 2019). Long constructed as unfit mothers, Black women face heightened scrutiny and punitive treatment related to their parenting and children's actions in a variety of institutional contexts, making their motherhood status contested and precarious (Collins 2000; Roberts 2002; Schram et al. 2009; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

Analyzing in-depth interviews with 46 low-income urban Black mothers of teenage children, we introduce the concept of *family criminalization* to explain the intertwining of mothers' and children's vulnerability to institutional surveillance and punishment. We find that poor Black mothers calibrate their parenting strategies not only to fears that their children will be criminalized by mainstream institutions and the police, but fears that they themselves will be criminalized as bad mothers and even risk losing their parental rights. The findings advance sociological understanding of the criminalization of Black people in the United States by examining mothering at the intersection of two related but often separately examined social phenomena: the criminalization of Black childhood and the subordination of Black motherhood. Following three decades of mass incarceration disproportionately targeting low-income Black Americans (Alexander 2010; Pettit and Western 2004; Wacquant 2009), it is important to examine this intersection as a key component of the long reach of criminalization.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Over several decades, government initiatives such as the "war on crime" and "war on drugs," both of which came with increased street surveillance and prison sentences for non-violent crimes, have escalated the militarization of policing and the incarceration of people of color. These broad initiatives have been accompanied by "broken windows" or "quality-of-life" policing and criminal justice system responses in which punishments for minor crimes, such as loitering, are aggressively enforced under the idea that these behaviors

foster more severe crime (Kelling and Wilson 1982). Researchers have consistently found that this type of discretionary policing, including stop-and-frisk policing in New York City (Greene 1999), results in the disproportionate targeting and punishment of people of color and "creates a ubiquitous form of street-level criminalization in which mundane daily behaviors become subjected to intense police suspicion, interrogation, and intervention" (Stuart and Benezra 2018:175; see also Brayne 2014; Goffman 2009; Jones 2010, 2018; Rios 2011; Shedd 2015). This article will advance understanding of the consequences of the long reach of criminalization for Black families by bringing together research on the criminalization of youth of color, protective parenting in low-income urban neighborhoods, and marginalized motherhood.

The Criminalization of Youth of Color

Children of color experience disproportionate targeting for surveillance and punitive punishment, or criminalization, in their neighborhoods and schools (Ferguson 2000; Jones 2010; Perry and Morris 2014; Rios 2011; Shedd 2015). Studies find that authority figures respond to Black youths' behavior more punitively than identical behavior of non-racialized children, stemming from the controlling image of Black children as dangerous troublemakers with malicious intent (Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda 2015; Ferguson 2000; Rios 2011). Controlling images are caricatures of subordinated groups that justify unequal treatment and outcomes on the basis of subordinated group members' undesirable traits and behaviors (Collins 1986, 2000). Controlling images inform attitudes directed at and potentially internalized by subordinated groups (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009; Dow 2015; Harris-Perry 2011) and "are key in maintaining intersecting oppressions" (Collins 2000:69).

One controlling image of Black boys (Goff et al. 2014) and girls (Epstein, Blake, and González 2017) is that they are less innocent and more adult-like than white children of the

same age. This “adultification” of Black children—informing the widely-disseminated myth of the “super-predator” in the 1990s (Byfield 2014)—influences how authority figures treat Black youth (Crenshaw et al. 2015; Ferguson 2000) and is evident in growing racial disparities in youth arrests and sentencing. Black youth are over twice as likely to have been arrested as white youth (Gase et al. 2016; Rovner 2016). Among arrested juveniles, Black youth are less likely to have their cases diverted pre-trial, less likely to receive probation, and more likely to be committed to a juvenile facility than white youth (Stevens and Morash 2015). In addition, over the past few decades, schools have become highly punitive institutions, especially for minority students (Perry and Morris 2014; Shedd 2015). Irwin, Davidson, and Hall-Sanchez (2013), building on the work of Wacquant (2000), argue that the harsh and retributive style of disciplining in schools serves to criminalize children of color and funnel them into the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Research finds that Black boys and girls are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school, and disproportionately more likely to be referred to law enforcement or arrested at school, than white boys and girls (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights 2014; see also Ferguson 2000; Perry and Morris 2014; Shedd 2015; Skiba et al. 2011).

In summary, punitive surveillance and treatment pervades the lives of low-income urban youth of color. Rios (2011) found that low-income Black and Latino boys in California were subject to symbolic and material criminalization in their everyday lives at school and out in public, a phenomenon he calls the “youth control complex.” Flores (2016) found that wraparound services designed to provide support to Latina girls leaving a juvenile detention center had the effect of further surveilling and punishing them, calling this “wraparound incarceration.” Shedd (2015) identifies the surveillance of Black children as they travel to and from school, in combination with surveillance and

punishment in school, as part of the “universal carceral apparatus.” The concept of family criminalization contributes to this body of work on the ubiquitous and far-reaching criminalization of youth by revealing how it reaches not only into public institutions such as schools and law enforcement but also into family relationships.

Parenting in Low-Income Urban Neighborhoods

Researchers have found that parents living in low-income urban neighborhoods undertake multiple protective carework strategies to try to prevent their children’s exposure to crime and violence (Elliott and Aseltine 2013). These strategies generally fall into three related types of “preventative family management” (Furstenberg et al. 1999) that involve constant oversight of children’s environments (Jarrett and Jefferson 2003). One strategy involves warning children and telling cautionary tales about the dangers they may face, such as talking to children about the risk of violence in their neighborhoods (Furstenberg et al. 1999) or using *consejos*—the passing of conventional wisdom down from older to younger family members—to try to protect children from violence from afar (Hershberg 2017). Second, parents physically shelter children from exposure to violence and crime by keeping them close to or inside the home (Elliott 2012; Elliott and Aseltine 2013; Furstenberg et al. 1999; Jarrett and Jefferson 2003; Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012). Third, parents limit children’s socializing, both with peers and other community members (Chan Tack and Small 2017; Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012). For example, Rosenblatt and DeLuca (2012) found that low-income parents taught their children to “mind their own business” to reduce the chance of conflict with drug dealers or other exposure to neighborhood violence.

Highlighted within this body of work is parents’ concerns that peer relationships or even conversations with neighbors may expose their children to gangs and violence, and that intensive oversight and monitoring of

children is necessary for their protection. Relatedly, studies find that parents of color across the socioeconomic spectrum undertake racial socialization to teach their children about and protect them from everyday racism (McHale et al. 2006), including by police and other authority figures (Dow 2016; Rendón 2014). Fears of children's criminalization may thus additionally inform protective parenting practices. There is also evidence that individuals' formal contact with the criminal justice system (e.g., through arrest, incarceration, probation, or parole) reverberates through families. Research documents the "collateral consequences" of criminal justice system contact on loved ones (Comfort 2008; Kirk and Wakefield 2018), including how parental incarceration is related to parenting (Gurusami 2017, 2019; Turney and Wildeman 2013) and to child outcomes (Haskins, Amorim, and Mingo 2018). We expand this area of inquiry by analyzing how Black mothers perceive, experience, and navigate their children's criminalization, and the collateral consequences of child criminal justice system contact (or the threat of it) for Black mothers.

Marginalized Parents and Social Control

A corpus of work over the past two decades documents the primary responsibility parents, especially mothers, carry for their children's behavior and development (Blair-Loy 2003; Elliott and Bowen 2018; Elliott and Reid 2016; Hays 1996; Kaplan 1997; Kurz 2002; Lareau 2011). In her study of Black teen pregnancy, Kaplan (1997:82) argues that a crucial element of what she calls "the motherhood mandate" is that "mothers should be able to exert control over their [children's] behavior." Kaplan found that mothers of teen moms expressed a sense that they would be judged as moral failures for not adequately passing on moral values to their children. While all mothers may fear and feel the judgmental glare of others, Black mothers must also contend with the ways they and their children are mutually imbricated in systems of surveillance and

punitive social control (Gurusami 2017, 2019; Roberts 2002).

Black mothers' vulnerability to punishment is rooted in racialized, classed, and gendered controlling images of Black motherhood as neglectful and dependent on the state (i.e., "the welfare queen"), aggressive and domineering (i.e., "the Black matriarch"), and superstrong (i.e., "the strong Black woman"). These images bolster and reproduce the widespread notion that Black mothers' individual decisions and behaviors are solely responsible for their children's outcomes (Dow 2015; Elliott and Reid 2016; Gurusami 2019; Soss et al. 2011; Windsor, Dunlap, and Golub 2011). In political and popular discourse, Black mothers have been blamed for transferring deviant attitudes to their children, resulting in successive generations of poverty and delinquency (Collins 2000; Elliott, Brenton, and Powell 2018; Hancock 2004; Roberts 2002).

Controlling images have real consequences for mothers' interactions with state systems. Drawing on experimental and administrative data, Schram and colleagues (2009) found that welfare caseworkers apply the harshest sanctions to Black, relative to white or Latina, clients. In a landmark study of the U.S. child welfare system, Roberts (2002) found that Black mothers are disproportionately targeted for surveillance and intervention—including removing children from their care—due to racialized gendered assessments of their parenting. Consequently, Black children are disproportionately represented in the foster care system (Reich 2005). School personnel may also judge parental involvement in children's schooling differently by race and class (Dumais, Kessinger, and Ghosh 2012; Lareau and Horvat 1999). Dumais and colleagues (2012) found that when college-educated Black parents made special requests, teachers more negatively evaluated their children, an effect that did not emerge among white parents and students. These studies demonstrate how intersecting raced, classed, and gendered axes of inequality and oppression (Collins 2000) underlie unequal and punitive

treatment of Black mothers (Yi and Wildeman 2018).

In this context, marginalized mothers may strategize to mitigate their vulnerability to state sanctions (Fong 2018; Gurusami 2017, 2019; Levine 2013). Fong (2018) found that fear of having their children taken from their custody led low-income mothers to carefully undertake strategies of selective visibility in their interactions with systems that might report them to Child Protective Services (see also Brayne 2014). Low-income urban parents may also use the carceral state as a strategy to protect their children from committing or being the victim of crime and violence (Richardson, Johnson, and St. Vil 2014; Rios 2011). Richardson and colleagues (2014:508) found that impoverished African American parents in New York City who had few supportive parenting resources “turned to formal resources of social control, primarily the juvenile justice system.” Juvenile confinement as a parenting strategy of last resort speaks to the extensive role of the criminal justice system in the lives of low-income urban families of color (see also Jones 2010). Given that mothers are broadly held accountable for controlling children’s behaviors, and that marginalized mothers may face state sanctions themselves, we would expect the criminal justice system and criminalization to be evident in low-income Black mothers’ discussions of their parenting *and* this would be related not only to their children’s safety and autonomy but also their own.

In what follows, we detail the protective carework strategies undertaken by 46 low-income Black mothers of adolescents: telling cautionary tales, sheltering, and complying with institutional sanctions. These strategies are similar to those used by low-income parents in disadvantaged neighborhoods to protect their children from neighborhood crime and violence. Our contribution is to show how these strategies are also tied to mothers’ fears for their children’s criminalization, as well as their own, based on controlling images of Black youth and mothers. The findings advance understanding of the long reach of

criminalization and mass incarceration in low-income Black families by demonstrating how children’s and mothers’ criminalization are mutually imbricated through what we call family criminalization. Family criminalization encompasses the ways mothers grapple with and feel a deep sense of accountability for protecting their children from criminalization, and how mothers too face criminal justice threats and sanctions through their parenting role. As a whole, family criminalization underscores family linkages in how carceral surveillance and punishment unfold in the lives of Black Americans.

METHODS

We took an innovative methodological approach and analyzed data collected for two separate but parallel projects focused on the experiences of urban low-income Black mothers of adolescent children. Both authors had previously analyzed their data separately for other papers, and upon Megan Reid reading Sinikka Elliott’s draft of a paper before journal submission, we realized both projects were similar with regard to sample and interview topics. We compared our prior analyses and discovered that the data from both projects were also similar with regard to mothers sharing deep concern about and experiences of their children being criminalized in everyday life and discussing strategies they deployed to protect their children.

Our data come from in-depth interviews conducted with 46 urban low-income Black mothers of adolescents. Qualitative methods are best suited for investigating how and why people behave the way they do, as well as the processes and mechanisms that underlie social behavior (Luker 2008). In-depth interviews, in particular, are well-suited to understanding people’s worldviews and explanations for their decision-making and the strategies they undertake in their social contexts (Esterberg 2002). This method is ideal for centering how mothers perceive their parenting contexts and their experiences and decisions therein.

New York Study

The New York project was composed of a longitudinal quantitative panel study of 136 low-income Black cohabiting stepfamilies, and a qualitative substudy with 15 of those families. This article's analysis draws on the longitudinal qualitative data collected from 15 mothers over two waves. To be eligible for study inclusion, participants had to be low income (below 200 percent of the federal poverty line when considering both partners' incomes), identify as Black (one mother and three focal children identified as both Black and Hispanic), and live in a low-income neighborhood of New York City. All mothers had to be the residential custodial parent of at least one adolescent focal child between ages 11 and 17. To protect the confidentiality of participants, in addition to the National Development and Research Institutes IRB approval, Reid obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to guard against being compelled to release any information about project participants. Participants gave verbal and written consent and received \$40 for participating in an interview.

Project field staff members experienced in working with low-income Black residents of New York City recruited study participants. They used existing networks of research study participants, field informants, street recruiting, snowball sampling, and social services agency contacts to recruit potential participants. Participants in the qualitative substudy lived in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. Families in the substudy were selected on the basis of the diversity of their characteristics and their willingness to participate. The qualitative sample includes families that varied by adult age, child age, child gender, adult educational attainment, and adult length of cohabitation and past relationship experience.

Reid conducted two waves (2012–13 and 2014–15) of qualitative interviews with each family member (both partners and the adolescent focal child, all interviewed separately) in

the family's home or a convenient location selected by the participants, such as a park, restaurant, or the interviewer's car. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 10 of the 15 mothers an average of 22 months after initial interviews. Mothers were asked about their relationships with their partner and the focal child, their parenting activities, and their day-to-day family life. Interviews ranged between 30 and 90 minutes and were digitally recorded. Recordings were transcribed and entered into ATLAS.ti software for analysis. In initial project coding, Reid met monthly with field staff, who were Black men and women living in low-income neighborhoods of New York City and were conducting the survey portion of the study, to ask for their perspectives and interpretations of emergent themes and codes. They also shared memos with Reid about themes based on their experiences in the field.

North Carolina Study

The North Carolina study was a qualitative interview study of 31 low-income Black single mothers residing in two mid-sized urban counties in North Carolina. As in the New York study, inclusion eligibility involved participants being low income, identifying as Black, and living in a low-income urban neighborhood. All mothers also had to be the residential custodial parent of at least one teenage child between ages 13 and 18 and, per the definition of "single" in the study criteria, had to be unmarried and parenting without a co-residential adult partner for at least three years prior to the interview (some were dating). The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at North Carolina State University. All participants provided written consent to participate in the study and were compensated \$30 for sharing their experiences.

Elliott and two graduate students conducted interviews in two separate rounds of data collection to elaborate and refine concepts identified in the first round (i.e., theoretical sampling) (Charmaz 2014). Sixteen mothers were interviewed in 2010 and an additional 15 mothers in 2012. In both rounds, mothers were recruited

through flyers posted in various targeted locations (e.g., Laundromats), at afterschool and community programs, and by referrals from participants in an unrelated research project Elliott was also working on. Targeted and word of mouth recruitment is ideal for hard to reach populations. All but two participants were residents of a mid-sized urban county and their teen children attended public schools in the county. Two participants lived in a contiguous county of a similar size. All mothers identified as single parents, but some mothers' networks included fathers who were actively participating in their children's lives, and some had non-cohabiting boyfriends.

Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and were digitally recorded. Most took place in participants' homes; others were in a convenient public place of the interviewee's choosing. The interviewing goal was to develop an understanding of mothers' lives from their perspectives and without homogenizing their experiences (Collins 2000; DeVault 1996). Each interview began by asking participants to describe their neighborhood, probing for their perceptions of safety, police presence, and social ties. The interview continued in this vein, asking broad questions and following up to construct detailed stories of the mothers' lives, with a particular focus on their parenting experiences.

Joint Analysis

The two samples share many commonalities and some differences. They are similar in terms of women's race, socioeconomic status, urban residence, marital status, and children's ages. However, they are in two different geographic locations, and one study recruited participants in cohabiting relationships, whereas the other was limited to participants who identified as single and did not have a co-residential partner. In prior separate coding before our joint analysis, we both found that mothers discussed surveillance or punitive social control in their communities, how criminalization might affect their children, and strategies to prevent their children from

getting in trouble at school or with police. Mothers also discussed concerns about the threat of neighborhood violence, and our analysis attends to how concerns about criminalization sometimes intersect with concerns about violence. To conduct joint analysis, we shared interview transcripts and codes, and we read each other's transcripts, coded, and memoed about similarities and differences. We then conducted additional analysis of all the transcripts focused on themes we identified in the transcript sharing and memoing processes. We used this two-person joint iterative coding and memoing process to assess the robustness and validity of our findings.

We used deductive and inductive techniques to analyze the interview transcripts (Bradley, Curry, and Devers 2007; Crabtree and Miller 1999; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2008). First, we conducted a deductive coding process focused on the topics of criminalization and mothers' strategies to address it, in which we identified common perceptions and tactics. Next, according to the principles of inductive grounded theory, we cycled back and forth between reading transcripts and developing additional conceptual frames and coding systems to further clarify these themes (Charmaz 2007, 2014; Strauss and Corbin 1990). We identified thematic codes by reading through the initial data codes using an open coding technique. We created and shared memos over email about common themes, and then moved to focused coding, using and expanding the most frequent codes to further sort the data (Charmaz 2007, 2014). Inductive coding revealed the theme of the extension of children's potential or actual criminalization to mothers themselves. All names used in the findings are pseudonyms.

Our analysis of similar data collected for different projects in two different geographic regions of the United States revealed similar thematic codes, serving as a form of triangulation and adding credence to the validity of our findings. Nevertheless, we cannot make claims of population generalizability with these methods; rather, our goal is to theorize the mechanisms that informed the mothers' parenting

practices. The findings reflect our analysis of mothers' descriptions of the criminalization of their children in daily life, strategies they used to parent in this context, and processes underpinning their own collateral criminalization.

Positionality

Both authors are middle- to upper-middle-class white women—one is a mother, the other is not. A commitment to antiracist, intersectional, and feminist principles guides our research efforts, and we conducted this work with an awareness of the politics, dangers, and limitations of affluent white academics writing about the lives of low-income Black Americans. For example, white academics and policymakers have long participated in creating and perpetuating controlling images of Black people and their family lives (Sarkisian and Gerstel 2004), and such work often utilizes white racial framing (Feagin 2013) and “others” rather than centering the experiences of Black Americans. Our application of critical race feminist theory to the analysis privileges the participants' standpoints (Collins 2000; Few 2007) with the goal of highlighting everyday relations of power through lived experience (Smith 2005). As with all interpersonal interactions, the dynamics of our interviews, all conducted by middle-class white women, were shaped by broad social inequalities and power relations, and we understand that this shapes the data obtained and produces a situated knowledge (Haraway 1988). In our analysis, we examine the intersections of race, class, gender, place, and family while being mindful of the larger contested arena—including the context of controlling images—in which participants shared their stories with us and we, in turn, analyze and share their experiences with others.

FINDINGS

Family criminalization involves the ways wide-ranging fears and realities of criminalization permeate the lives of low-income urban Black mothers and children. By criminalization, we are referring to the targeting of

individuals for surveillance and punishment based on the presupposition that they are deviant. First, mothers saw criminalization as a severe threat to their children's lives that they themselves must try to mitigate. They expressed deep concerns about the unjust, ubiquitous, and high-stakes nature of criminalization, and their parenting practices were attuned to this reality. Second, mothers feared and sometimes faced loss of parenting autonomy and even parental rights due to their children's contact with mainstream institutions. Their narratives underscore the suspicion of their parenting and lack of support they experience from these institutions. We first discuss mothers' characterizations of the features of criminalization facing their children and then examine their descriptions of incorporating their understandings of this reality—sometimes ambivalently—into their parenting strategies.

Criminalization as Unjust, Ubiquitous, and High Stakes

Although neither study focused on the topic of criminalization, the need to protect children from it emerged as a highly salient analytic theme across the majority of interviews. Our analysis identifies three key features of criminalization that are consistent with past work in this area: mothers described criminalization as unjust, ubiquitous, and high stakes. These components of criminalization were not discrete and they overlapped in the mothers' narratives. Together, mothers said they posed a severe threat with which they must contend in their parenting, one way children's criminalization shaped family life.

Unjust. Overall, mothers described a broad social context in which their children faced unjust surveillance and punitive social control. They revealed that law enforcement and sometimes schools were not there to protect their children and might instead unfairly target and criminalize them. When explaining her concern for letting her 13-year-old daughter run errands on her own, Tanisha described a recent incident in which the police shot a

boy trespassing: “This boy just went into a house and the cops shot him in the house. It was right up the block.” Malaya, too, expressed doubts about the safety of her 16-year-old daughter Jayla amid heavy police presence in their New York neighborhood. She worried the police might accuse Jayla of something if she were simply nearby when police responded to an incident. In light of this concern, she said she advised Jayla to “keep moving” when out in public and not to stop and talk with anyone. Malaya said she avoided casual conversations with neighbors or people she saw on the street to limit her exposure to becoming guilty by perceived association. As she explained to Jayla: “I don’t know what that dude was doing five, eight hours ago, and I’m not going to want no cops to come to my home. I’m not going down for something that I don’t even know about.” Other mothers shared Malaya’s concern that their children could become victims of unjust criminalization in the context of heavy law enforcement surveillance in their neighborhoods.

Some mothers also spoke about their children’s unjust treatment by school authorities. Adrianna said her sons faced harsh and unfair discipline because of gendered racism in the school system. Asked how her three children—11- and 14-year-old sons and a 17-year-old daughter—were doing at school, Adrianna replied:

Disciplinary actions are taken more severely upon my sons than more so my daughter, and I think they’re basically discriminated against. You know, I have a big fear for my sons living in this world period. Because the system is set up for them to fail. That’s my belief as a parent. . . . I’m very, very afraid for my children sending them off to school every morning. You don’t know what’s going to happen.

Sustained media references to Black boys as dangerous and threatening circulated nationally in the wake of the 1989 Central Park Five case, in which five Black and Latino teenage boys were found guilty of raping a white female jogger (they were exonerated in 2002)

(Byfield 2014). Nationwide, popular discourse linked youth and criminality to poor parental and neighborhood influences, suggesting that the “moral poverty” in which urban youth of color were being raised gave way to a deeply disturbed and dangerous “super-predator” (Byfield 2014). Much of the research on the school-to-prison pipeline focuses on boys, demonstrating that racist stereotypes about Black boys as less childlike and more criminally-inclined than their white peers lead to disproportionate harsh punishment, including referral to the criminal justice system (Ferguson 2000; Morris 2012). Recent work shows that Black girls, too, face disproportionate school discipline as they are also “adultified” by authority figures and are six times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than their white peers (Crenshaw et al. 2015), leading to their entrance into the criminal justice system (Morris 2016).

Some mothers discussed the injustice of criminalizing processes in terms of the broader racist social context. Theresa highlighted her understanding of how controlling images of the “thug” or “troublemaker” shape the way authority figures view Black boys like her 11- and 16-year-old sons: “When a Black male walk into the room, or walk around somewhere, it’s like an instant fear that, ‘Oh my god, he’s going to do something.’ And, it’s like they’re followed around. Just because he’s a Black male, you already assume that he’s trouble.” Theresa said Black girls faced the same level of surveillance: “I mean, there are some females that have faced that type of [racial profiling]. And it’s not fair. They’ve been followed around just because of the way they look.” Theresa pointed to the broad context in which Black youth are unjustly surveilled and presumed guilty, an aspect of criminalization confirmed by a body of research (e.g., Ferguson 2000; Goffman 2009; Jones 2010; Miller 2008; Rios 2011).

Ubiquitous. In talking about their concerns for their teenage children, mothers often focused on neighborhood violence and negative peer influences, consistent with previous studies about parents’ concerns in disadvantaged

neighborhoods (Furstenberg et al. 1999; Jarrett and Jefferson 2003; Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012). Yet examination of their narratives reveals their worries also had to do with how neighborhood violence and peer influences could expose their children to criminalization on the streets and in school. Although some mothers, particularly those in North Carolina, reported that an active police presence made them feel safer, mothers also spoke of how police could pose a threat to them and their children, revealing their perceptions of a complex relationship among neighborhood violence, policing, and their children's safety (see also Shedd 2015). Delia, for example, described a recent experience when 15 police officers responded to a fight between two people in her New York apartment building. Rather than say the police response made her feel safer, she said in these situations "cops can come in off the hook" with a mass display of force. She worried that this type of response would escalate violence: "that's when I'll be wary, because a lot of people rebel when they're young against the cops." Prior research has found that one response youth of color have to what Rios (2011:6) terms "ubiquitous criminalization" is to commit petty crimes or "act 'bad,'" which can serve to further criminalize them (see also Alexander 2010; Ferguson 2000). Delia said fights in her building made her feel unsafe, but a forceful police response could cause more conflict rather than diffuse it.

Discussing the possibility of their own children being involved in neighborhood fights, mothers directly and indirectly expressed fears that this could result in police involvement. Concerned about her 13-year-old son's "temper," Christina encouraged him to stay inside and to avoid peers in their North Carolina neighborhood who might try to provoke a fight. "I tell him, 'If you got to fight, you don't need to play with them. Come in the house. You've got everything you need in the house.'" Christina overtly focused on worries about her son's peers, yet, as she was talking, she looked out the window and observed the arrival of police in response to a fight. Christina said, "Oh my god, what is the police doing? Let me check on my girls real

quick." [Talking to people outside her apartment]: "What the police comin' up there for?" [Person outside]: "They just got through fightin' at the bus stop." [Christina to interviewer]: "That's what them cops coming over there for. Them kids is terrible. See, that's the stuff I'm telling you about, like—it's terrible." Christina's reaction to the arrival of the police pointed to her related concern that fighting could draw police and that her son might end up in law enforcement crosshairs. As we will examine, Christina discussed various strategies she was contemplating to teach her son about the seriousness of the criminal justice system in order to save him from prison. She explained, "Because if you don't do it now, when they get [older] . . . they're going to jail . . . and there's nothing you can do about it." Hence, even as mothers directly centered their concerns for their children's safety around peers and neighborhood violence, they indirectly revealed that, in their heavily surveilled communities, children getting caught up in the criminal justice system was a ubiquitous threat.

Further underscoring the ubiquity of the criminal justice system, in interviews with mothers who did not express concerns about their children's behaviors, the possibility of criminalization still framed their narratives. When asked how her 17- and 15-year-old sons were doing, Sydney replied that things were going well, adding: "Nothing drastic. No police calls." Similarly, Yashonda described her 17- and 13-year-old daughters as respectful kids who made decent grades at their magnet schools. She concluded: "I'm not going to say they're not going to have their share of maybe issues, but nothing drastic. I don't think that I'll ever have to get either one of them out of jail." Mothers evoked the specter of police, prison, and punishment in talking about children who were, by their accounts, flourishing, revealing the ubiquity of the system and the omnipresence of their fears about this outcome.

High stakes. Mothers stressed the high-stakes consequences of contact with the criminal justice system to their children. Once in

the system, many emphasized, one's life could be ruined. Sonya said she emphasizes to her 15- and 13-year-old daughters, "Everything is not about fighting and arguing and, you know, you don't have to prove to nobody that you can fight. Really. I don't need you to be doing that because once you do it, it's over. It really is. You go to jail, you have a record, it's going to be hard." As Sonya's description of her warning underscores, mothers' worries about fighting included fears of children getting caught up in a high-stakes criminalizing system. Research shows that controlling images of "violent girls" underlie authority figures' punitive responses to girls of color and rising female incarceration rates (e.g., Jones 2010; Miller 2008). Marielle said she fervently hopes her 16-year-old son continues to "make the right decisions" to avoid getting a "criminal record." She explained, "I hope he just do right. Don't be in trouble, get a criminal record. Once you get one of them, it's messed up." Studies find that authority figures, such as teachers and police officers, subject criminally-labeled youth to heightened surveillance and punitiveness that serves to further criminalize them as they transition to adulthood (Flores 2016; Rios 2011; Shedd 2015). Once an adult, a criminal record can impose lifelong disadvantages, saddling individuals with criminal-justice debt and legally barring them from employment, housing, and welfare benefits (Alexander 2010; Brayne 2014; Pager 2007; Soss et al. 2011). Black families and communities may also impose silence, shame, and judgment around criminally-labeled individuals in an effort to distance Blackness from criminality, further cementing their "second-class status" (Alexander 2010).

Overall, mothers described the ubiquitous and high-stakes presence of the criminal justice system and, directly or indirectly, detailed how controlling images of youth of color disproportionately exposed their children to criminalization. Mothers' awareness of their children's heightened racialized exposure to criminalization forms part of what we term family criminalization.

Parenting in the Context of the Criminalization of Youth

Mothers used three sometimes overlapping strategies as they sought to keep their children safe from criminalization: telling cautionary tales, sheltering, and complying with institutional sanctions. These strategies were remarkably consistent across the two research sites and are in line with previous literature on protective parenting in low-income urban neighborhoods. We extend this prior work to show that mothers described using these strategies not just to protect their children from neighborhood violence and crime but also from criminalization because, as described earlier, mothers saw these as linked threats. Moreover, consistent with the gendered racialized controlling images of Black motherhood, mothers perceived and experienced the surrounding punitive institutions as implicitly and explicitly casting them as solely responsible for their children's well-being, while simultaneously constraining their parenting autonomy. This is consistent with research that finds that controlling images of Black motherhood shape the way authority figures respond to Black mothers (Kaplan 1997; Roberts 2002; Soss et al. 2011).

Rios (2011:82) found that schools, police, and probation officers characterized low-income urban Black and Latinx parents as unwilling or unable to discipline their children and often intervened in parents' lives in their efforts to "teach parents the 'right way' to parent." In turn, Rios argues, some parents came to identify with and take on the perspective of the system, enacting similar practices of surveillance and punishment. We also found that mothers at times used the language and practices of the criminal justice system in describing their parenting. However, our research extends Rios's argument by demonstrating that mothers did so out of an effort to prevent their children's criminalization. Moreover, mothers were vulnerable to harsh state sanctions and punishment themselves. Mothers feared losing their children if they were seen as contributing to their children's

perceived delinquency, for example. Mothers thus discussed concerns for both their children's and their own criminalization as considerations in their parenting, indicating the operation of family criminalization.

Cautionary tales. Mothers described telling cautionary tales about the dangers of the criminal justice system as a routine part of their parenting and a shared strategy among their family and friendship networks. Given their understanding of criminalization as omnipresent, they emphasized the high stakes of minor "bad" decisions, even by young children. Theresa's ex-husband once disciplined their son in elementary school for his misbehavior by taking him to a local jail and getting a tour. She explained, "He went downtown to talk to a police officer and they showed him the jail. They showed him the cell. . . . He was like, 'Mommy, I am not ever going back there.'" Theresa praised the jail visit for teaching her child an important lesson about avoiding criminal behavior. Mothers also used their own life experiences, or the lives of family members or close friends, as instructive examples and cautionary tales. Theresa said her children's father was previously incarcerated, "So, you know, he tries . . . to let them know that, you know, you don't want to go down the road that I had to go down." That mothers often pointed to direct or indirect experiences with the criminal justice system speaks to the major role of mass incarceration in the lives of low-income Black families (Comfort 2008; Murphey and Cooper 2015; Pettit and Western 2004; Wildeman and Western 2010).

Cautionary tales were not always confined to the personal experiences of family or community members. Theresa and her sons also regularly watched the A&E reality show "Beyond Scared Straight," "so they'll know, you go down the wrong path, this is where you're going to head." Theresa described the program:

If there are kids acting out . . . parents will sign them up for this program and they will go and visit the jail. . . . Once they're in

there, they treat them just like criminals. They have to put on the orange suits or whatever color the facility wears. It's just like they are incarcerated. Then they have the inmates in their face. I mean, literally in their face, fussing and cussing them out. And some of them, it breaks them down. And then some of them, you know, it's not really getting to them, but then they'll pull them to the side sometimes and they'll have inmates do one-on-one with them and that's when they'll finally break down.

Theresa thought the show helped her sons fully understand the high-stakes consequences of their behavior and that this, along with vigilance and careful monitoring of their clothing and appearance (e.g., she did not allow her sons to "sag" their pants), would help them avoid being criminalized. Another mother also described watching this show with her children. That programs such as this one were prevalent in popular culture at the time of our interviews speaks to the larger cultural emphasis on punitive discipline as a way to teach youth the high-stakes consequences of their actions (Alexander 2010; McDowell, Harold, and Battle 2013). Mothers hoped their children's good behavior and decisions would demonstrate to authorities that they did not fulfill controlling images about Black youth and thus help them avoid criminalization.

Yet, mothers were also torn about using cautionary tales. Despite speaking positively about her young son's jail visit and the TV show "Beyond Scared Straight," Theresa worried that the broader messages highlighting the hazards of being Black could pigeon-hole her sons as criminals or school drop outs:

The way they look at our Black boys. I wish that would be a lot better. I wish they wouldn't put that statistic out there on them, that "Oh you're going to end up in jail or you're not going to—you're going to drop out of high school." No. My child is not going to do that. I'm sorry. And, I wish that

they just would let them be. Because it's like, yeah you're free, but you're not.

Controlling images of Black boys as “at-risk” of winding up as statistics (e.g., incarcerated), and Theresa’s observation that her sons are “free but not,” point to a long-standing tension experienced by Black Americans, captured by Du Bois ([1903] 1994) in *The Souls of Black Folk*. For Du Bois ([1903] 1994:1), the experience of being racialized—viewed and treated only in terms of a subjugated Black identity by dominant white U.S. society—created a feeling of being “a problem.” Similarly, in calling out the oft-repeated statistics about Black male incarceration and school drop-out rates, Theresa decried the way these statistics shape how society and authority figures look at her sons as social problems, obscuring the fullness of their being such that they could be “free but not.” Theresa’s sentiment underscored her ambivalence in instructing her children to make good decisions to avoid criminalization in a larger context that views Black children as irredeemable (Byfield 2014; Ferguson 2000).

Vivian’s description of her 14-year-old son Dixon and the cautionary lessons she taught him further illustrate this ambivalence. Vivian spoke of wanting to give Dixon the freedom to test boundaries and make mistakes, and simultaneously deeply fearing how one mistake could lead to his incarceration. When asked how Dixon was doing, Vivian said, “He’s a teen. So he’s going to do stupid teen things—we expect for them to do stupid things.” Yet Vivian said she taught Dixon about the severity of making mistakes, explaining, “I’m always in his ear, all the time, telling him what’s to come. It’s just how they say, ‘Only you can prevent a forest fire. Because I already told you, don’t light that match. I told you what was on the other side, but only *you* can prevent that.’” Vivian expressed a common refrain about expecting her son to do “stupid teen things.” But she had to balance the possibility that he might do something stupid—which is to be expected of teens as they test and learn boundaries—with

the reality of living in a racist context of adultification and punitive social control. Vivian said she routinely challenged Dixon by asking, “Which one do you want to be, a name or a number? What I mean by that is, what do you want? A job or you want to go to jail?”

Vivian stressed her efforts to make her son Dixon aware of how combustible his environment was in order to help him avoid “lighting that match” and “go[ing] to jail.” Although some scholars argue that parents reinforce their children’s criminalization by issuing such cautionary warnings (Rios 2011), given the ubiquity of the system, it is not surprising that mothers would highlight the ever-present possibility of criminal justice system involvement to their children. Mothers’ narratives underscored that they did so not out of a desire to criminalize their children, but to prevent their children’s criminalization in a way they had some ability to direct: their children’s behavior. When her 17- and 19-year-old sons were younger and did something wrong, Nina recalled telling them, “I don’t want you to be in and out of jail and prisons. I want you to grow up and be men.”

Mothers also underscored the belief that parents are wholly responsible for their children’s behaviors. Vanessa expressed this when she said,

Teenagers today don’t have the respect. It’s like nobody’s teaching them. Nobody’s taking time with them. . . . It’s so much going on. It’s so much of their lifestyle with their, their parents, just like so many single parents like myself. They’re growing up, you know, without the benefit of a family. A two-parent family and stuff like that.

The discourse of the value of a two-parent family was in heavy circulation during the time of this research, and marriage and fatherhood programs, especially those targeting the poor, were a common political response to concerns about single motherhood (Gavanoas 2004; Randles 2013). These discourses and policies reflect rhetoric around Black families rooted in the culture-of-poverty thesis, broadly

disseminated by Oscar Lewis and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the 1960s and more recently advanced by Charles Murray. According to the culture of poverty, children raised by single mothers embrace actions and beliefs, such as devaluing employment or endorsing criminal behavior, that perpetuate intergenerational poverty (Elliott et al. 2018; Kaplan 1997; Roberts 2002). Along with faulting single parents for the perceived bad behavior of teenagers, Vanessa explained, “A lot of people are not being parents. They’re out here partying like it’s alright. That’s why these kids are growing up crazy.” Similarly, in talking about what prevents teenagers from being “terrible” and “out there,” Sonya said, “I feel it’s got to do with the parenting. I feel that if the parent is on them from day one—I’m talking about when they were born, day one—and stay with that, everything will be all right.” Hence, the strategy of telling cautionary tales was shaped by mothers’ fears for their children amid a larger, ubiquitous system of criminalization and an arena of judgment in which parents were deemed fully responsible for the behavior and outcomes of their children through the transmission of good, or bad, values.

In this context, some mothers suggested a willingness to use aspects of the criminal justice system as a cautionary lesson in their efforts to protect their children from worse consequences. Christina worried about keeping her 13-year-old son, the oldest of her four children, “out of the streets” and about his temper: “If it’s not his way, it’s the highway. I’ve been having a big problem with him destroying things around the house.” If things got worse, Christina said she would turn to the juvenile system, as she advised her friends to do. In both North Carolina and New York at the time of this research, 16- and 17-year-old children could be prosecuted as adults. Hence, Christina speculated about sending her son to juvenile detention as a way to teach him a lesson that would help him avoid adult incarceration in his later teens:

I’m like, “How can you put all your focus to one [child] when you have, you know,

several more that’s actually growing up and seeing what’s going on? You’ve got to do something about it.” That’s what I tell them [my friends]. “Find detention. You can’t seem to keep them in sports and keep them out of the streets, so send them to detention, give them a wakeup call. Because if you don’t do it now, when they get over the age of 17, 16, they’re going to jail, you know, and there’s nothing you can do about it. So, start them off early if you’ve got to.” That’s what I encourage. [My son] doesn’t give me all those problems right now. But if I was to experience it, that would be what I would do.

Christina described the value of sending children to juvenile detention as a way to impart a lesson that would protect them from worse consequences and also as a cautionary tale for younger siblings. However, Christina had not sent her son to juvenile detention and, in fact, no mother interviewed said she had done this, even though a few said they would. By asserting their willingness to use the criminal justice system, mothers may have been discursively demonstrating their strict parenting and preparedness to go to whatever lengths necessary to protect their children. They did so amid dominant discourses of Black mothers as lacking the ability to control their children (Kaplan 1997; Rios 2011) and the simultaneous valorization of the strong Black woman (Dow 2015; Elliott and Reid 2016; Harris-Perry 2011). Yet mothers could also feel and be accused of being overprotective, as we will discuss.

Sheltering. Another strategy mothers described using in their parenting involved monitoring and restricting their children’s activities in an effort to limit their children’s possible exposure to criminalization. Mothers’ use of a sheltering strategy reveals their ambivalence about the idea that merely instructing children to make “good” decisions is enough to protect them. Mothers said that, in the absence of supportive law enforcement, community programs, or school resources, simply being out in public could be dangerous for their children. Their concerns had to do

with fears about negative peer influences and street violence in their predominantly Black neighborhoods (Furstenberg et al. 1999), and also their children's exposure to criminalization in these heavily surveilled communities. Marielle explained that the police labeled her neighborhood "a drug area" and noted, "You see them riding all the time, the police riding [around]." She instructed her son to be careful while out in public to avoid police suspicion which might lead to "a criminal record." Like Marielle, mothers expressed the need to be vigilant in safeguarding their children not just from neighborhood crime or violence but also from hypersurveillance by the state.

Isolating children from peers and the outside world was a commonly discussed sheltering strategy, related to mothers' concerns that social interactions and relationships could be pathways to criminalization. Vivian said she was concerned that hanging out in public with his friends could lead her son Dixon "to go to jail." She described pulling her son out of his social environment and separating him from those friends to shelter him: "I pushed those friends away from him. And look at him now, he's out there working." Vivian emphasized her strength as a mother in sheltering Dixon from peer ties that could lead to his incarceration.

Describing the world outside the home as possibly exposing their children to law enforcement surveillance, some mothers discussed the value of electronic entertainment for sheltering their children inside the home. Vivian said Dixon now came home and played video games with his brother. She said, "If the video game keeps them out of the streets, they can play it all day, you know. Hey, if they keeps them under me, under my eye watch, go right ahead. I'm not saying all day, but it keeps them here, you know?" Delia also saw video games as sheltering her son from "the streets": "My son, he 15-years-old, he still plays the video games in the house. So he's not a kid that runs in the streets and stuff, thank god." Even as mothers described the effectiveness of electronic entertainment for keeping their children at home, they also

expressed ambivalence about this strategy, as Vivian did when she said, "I'm not saying all day." Asked whether she liked her son playing video games, Delia replied, "I like them, but sometimes too much is too much." Mothers expressed a feeling that long hours in front of electronic entertainment was not ideal for their children, but it beat the dangerous alternative of being outside in the streets where they could be exposed to both crime and criminalization.

Another sheltering approach some mothers discussed, but none were currently enacting, was homeschooling (some had transferred their children from one school to another). Black families have increasingly turned to homeschooling, with "racial protectionism"—avoiding school-related racism—as their main reason (Mazama and Lundy 2012). Adrianna's 11-year-old son was facing a school suspension because of his Mohawk hairstyle, which violated the school dress code, and Adrianna was contemplating homeschooling both her sons. As prior work shows, dress codes often contain implicit racist biases, such as bans on sagging pants, that effectively target Black students (Ferguson 2000; Morris 2012). Adrianna defended the Mohawk "as part of who we are as a people" and said of the school system: "I think the system is set up for them to fail, especially as African American children." Malaya described setting out to homeschool her 3-year-old son based on concern about him developing friendships at school that could lead to his criminalization. Her teenage daughter Jayla had recently been skipping classes with friends from school, whom Malaya characterized as bad influences. She worried Jayla would be exposed to criminalization through these friendships and by violating school rules: "If she continue not going to school, that's going to get her in trouble with the law, wrong or right." Malaya emphasized being "scared" for her son if he "gets out" of her purview, but a social worker convinced her to enroll him in a public preschool. Other mothers mentioned authority figures, like social workers, parole officers, and

judges, who were monitoring their families and intervening in their parenting practices (see also Rios 2011).

In describing their sheltering practices, some mothers used the language of the criminal justice system, reflecting the omnipresence of this framework in their lives. Discussing all she did to keep her teen sons from experiencing criminalization outside the home, Dionne described herself as “the warden” of the house: “*I’m the warden. I run the house . . . if the boys get in trouble, it’s [with] me.*” Mothers stressed they were tough on their kids to protect them from tougher institutional consequences. Dionne explained that she also had “a tight eye” and “a close grip” on her 11-year-old daughter and was “hard” on her because her daughter’s school was “strict.” “They are really strict and that is why I’m strict on her,” she said. Mothers said they mirrored the strict institutional practices their children faced outside the home in their parenting because they wanted their children to understand that even a minor misstep could lead to punitive sanctions.

Mothers also expressed a deep sense of accountability for sheltering their children from harm. In emphasizing the lengths she went to in her efforts to monitor her children, Doreen, for example, highlighted the ways parents could be blamed as irresponsible for not doing so:

Some parents don’t care what their kids do. But I do. You know, I make sure [to know] where my kids are at and stuff. . . . It’s best to know where your kids are ’cause if something happening in the street, they looking at you like, “You didn’t know where your kids was?” And that’s something on your head. It’s best to know where your kids is at all times. ’Cause anything can happen.

In distancing herself from negligent “other” parents, Doreen reproduced the controlling image of low-income urban parents as lax or indifferent to the risks their children face (Kaplan 1997; Rios 2011). Yet, she and other mothers also revealed that their vigilance may not be enough to keep their children safe in a

context in which “anything can happen.” Thus, mothers distanced themselves from controlling images of neglectful or permissive parents and enacted parenting practices that demonstrated their vigilance and care, even as their narratives underscored their sense of ever-present risks to their children.

Yet mothers could also feel and face accusations of being overprotective. Berna said the difficulties she was currently having with her 16-year-old son and 19-year-old daughter stemmed from her strict sheltering strategies: “I could have given them a little more space.” Felicia wanted to shelter her 13-year-old son from harm but kept getting the message that she was overprotective:

I have a tight grip on him. And it’s kind of hard to loosen up because you know what’s out there, you know what to expect and they don’t. So it’s almost like you want to make every decision for them knowing that they have a mind of their own and they’re going to do what they want to do. . . . I feel like I don’t have a, you know, a tight grip on him, but other people may say I hover [over] my son.

Felicia was torn between sheltering her son and letting “life teach” him, as she said her father advised. “Guys [she’d] dated in the past” had also called her overprotective. Her dilemma underscores a common challenge of modern mothering that emphasizes mothers’ role in cultivating and protecting children (Elliott and Bowen 2018; Elliott and Reid 2016; Hays 1996; Lareau 2011; Reich 2014) and how this expectation can intersect with the controlling image of the Black matriarch. This long-standing controlling image is perhaps most clearly exemplified in Moynihan’s 1965 government report that depicted Black women as domineering “matriarchs” who eschewed or undermined husbands’ and fathers’ patriarchal authority, transmitting deviance to their children and causing the breakdown of Black families (Collins 2000; Hancock 2004; Kaplan 1997; Roberts 2002).

The notion that parents are fully responsible for their children’s behavior was also

encoded in institutional practices. Mothers shared examples of their parenting coming under suspicion when their children received institutional discipline. For instance, when Tiffany's 16-year-old son Corey got caught skipping school by truancy officers, rather than extend a supportive or helpful hand to Tiffany, who agreed that Corey should attend school and worried about the effect his absences and potential expulsion would have on his future, school officials blamed her:

I get a phone call telling me that it is mandatory that I makes the school meeting. . . . Basically, they were telling me the principal was going to call ACS [Administration for Children's Services] on me because Corey is not coming to school. I was like, "I have a 7-year-old and you can check, he has perfect attendance. So you cannot fault me for Corey's mistakes."

The school reported Tiffany, subjecting her to a 30-day investigation involving home visits without warning by ACS workers, which included interviews with her minor children. At the end, she received a form "basically saying that I wasn't found to be doing anything wrong." In the meantime, she researched a Job Corp schooling program a family member recommended, and she enrolled Corey. The school treated Tiffany as guilty until proven innocent of negligent parenting and activated intrusive surveillance of her parenting as a result.

Several mothers spoke of the importance of demonstrating to authority figures in their children's lives that they were involved, active parents (see also Fong 2018). Yashonda discussed "requesting meetings all the time" at her daughters' schools "because even though they might not expect me to be as involved or to request those meetings . . . [with] me being a single parent and working full time, I was." A few mothers explicitly said it was important to demonstrate their active involvement in their children's schooling to avoid being seen as negligent. Tiana described calling her 15-year-old son's school

about his attendance record to preempt any suspicion that she was not an involved parent. She said, "I'm like [to son], 'If you are not going to go to class, *every class*, I'm going to let them know to call me.' Because I let him know, like, 'I'm not getting in trouble for you not going to school.'" Later, Tiana was even more explicit about how she could face sanctions because of her son's behavior. When she found a picture her son had posted on Facebook with a "blunt in his mouth," she confronted him, asking, "'Like are you trying to get me sent off [to jail]? Are you trying to get your sister and them taken from me?'" Similarly, when Janelle found pictures of her 16-year-old son with marijuana that he posted on Facebook, she feared he could "go to jail and [I could] get in trouble behind [him] because that's illegal." Interviewees revealed a deep sense of vulnerability to criminalization by a system that presumed them to be inadequate mothers who deserved punishment rather than support. Some said they strove to avoid such an outcome by underscoring and demonstrating their involvement and vigilance. Thus, mothers' sheltering strategy was informed by fears for their children's and their own criminalization.

Complying. As research about the frequency of Black children's contact with the criminal justice system would suggest, a few mothers had children who experienced contact with school punishment, police, or the courts. In these cases, mothers described trying to ensure their children complied with sanctions they received to avoid facing further consequences. As Flores (2016) found, juvenile system procedures and services can further criminalize children. For example, when Tiana's now 15-year-old son Malik was 14, he received six months' probation for kicking a motorcycle. The probation involved meeting a number of conditions, including attending regular classes. When a judge threatened to put Malik on probation for another six months after he did not turn in some paperwork, Tiana agreed to take him to more classes to demonstrate her commitment as a mother and to keep

him from receiving additional time. Speaking of all she had to do to help Malik, Tiana said, “[I felt] I was the one that committed the crime,” pointing to the ways her son’s criminalization extended to her.

Some mothers described their children’s schools as conduits to criminal justice system involvement, consistent with the school-to-prison pipeline research. Mothers routinely emphasized the value of education for their children; they did not want their children to drop out of school or be excluded from educational opportunities (Elliott, Powell, and Brenton 2015). They also described being tasked with trying to get their children to comply with harsh, zero-tolerance school policies. Victoria’s 17-year-old son was facing a 365-day school suspension for drinking alcohol on school grounds. Victoria said she was doing everything she could to prevent the suspension. She explained, “Under no circumstances am I gonna just sit by and let them try to suspend my son for 365 days of his life. Everybody’s entitled to an education.” An administrator told Victoria that her son might be able to come back to school but would face dire consequences if he was out of compliance with school rules again. “The lady said, ‘Well if he comes back, he can’t get in any trouble.’ But I know he will. . . . I don’t know if he gonna drop out, they’ll throw him out, or he’ll be incarcerated. It boils down to three possibilities and [none] of them I like.” Victoria desperately wanted her son to get an education but worried she would not be able to ensure he complied with the school’s stipulations and that, subsequently, he might face even worse consequences, for which she would feel and be held accountable.

Governments have long tasked parents with controlling children’s behavior (Donzelot 1979), and these expectations persist in the modern era of personal responsibility (Elliott and Reid 2016; Kaplan 1997; Reich 2005, 2014). Tasha’s 17-year-old daughter Amber was facing a school suspension for repeated absences. School administrators told Tasha that it was her responsibility to ensure Amber’s attendance. Tasha explained to the

school that she stressed to Amber “school is very important” and sent her to school each day, but she could not literally force her to go to school as she cared full-time for her two young grandchildren. The school nevertheless said she was responsible. Caught in this bind, Tasha imagined Amber being confined to jail on the weekends to underscore the necessity of attending school: “I really believe . . . either they go to school or they do some type of—. You know, be in jail every weekend. If you can’t go to school, you need to be sitting up there [in jail] every weekend until y’all can get it, because school is very important. I try to tell her.” Tasha wanted to protect Amber from the consequences the school was threatening but viewed her power over her as limited, whereas the school positioned Tasha as fully responsible for ensuring Amber’s compliance. Mothers often noted that the state doled out punishment but did not offer support or resources to assist mothers in parenting their children.

When resources were offered, they further cemented the idea of mothers’ sole responsibility. For example, as part of the conditions of her 15-year-old son’s probation, Mariah was required to take parenting classes:

It’s through his probation. They send a guy over here to do a parenting [class]. He shows us some videos of other parents and their children, going through probably the same things. [And teaches us] maybe the different things that maybe I can do instead of yelling and screaming, you know.

Mariah said the classes were “sometimes” helpful, but they did not acknowledge the challenges she was facing: “You tell them, ‘Don’t go, or you can’t go outside today.’ Soon as you turn your back, he’s out the door.” The mandatory parenting classes, in contrast to Mariah’s personal experiences, sent the message that, with the right kind of parenting, mothers could—and should—gain control over their children (see also Gengler 2012). Ferguson (2000) found that elementary school teachers and administrators

characterized families of “at-risk” children as lacking in nurturing skills. As low-income Black youth transition to adolescence, authority figures may condemn their mothers for ineffectual disciplinary skills based on controlling images of Black mothers as irrationally angry (the angry Black woman) or negligent (the welfare queen) (Elliott and Aseltnie 2013; Elliott and Reid 2016; Harris-Perry 2011; Kaplan 1997; Rios 2011).

DISCUSSION

Mass incarceration is one of the most significant civil rights issues today. Laws and policies that disproportionately and punitively target Black Americans, coupled with popular imagery and rhetoric of Black criminality, propel high rates of Black incarceration. Children are not immune to the machinery of mass incarceration. Studies find Black children are disproportionately surveilled and punished by authority figures who view their behavior through controlling images based on negative stereotypes ascribing criminal natures to Black children. Research demonstrates Black women also face a plethora of controlling images about Black motherhood that demean their mothering, position them as transmitting deviance to their children, and shape their interactions with institutional authorities. By bringing insights from these bodies of literature together with research on parenting in low-income neighborhoods, we advance understanding of parenting in disadvantaged contexts and the long reach of criminalization.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 46 low-income Black mothers of adolescents in New York and North Carolina, we develop the concept of family criminalization to explain the relationship between criminalization and family life for Black Americans. First, mothers described criminalization as a ubiquitous and threatening presence in children’s lives—even if a child had no formal contact with the criminal justice system—and said they had sole responsibility to protect their children from it. This finding extends previous research on how formal contact with

the criminal justice system affects individuals *and* their family members (e.g., Comfort 2008) by revealing how informal contact, such as concerns about children’s criminalization, also shapes family life. Second, mothers feared and received collateral sanctions when their children faced institutional punishment, another way criminalization extends to families. Black mothers must prove their innocence under suspicion of guilt, and this may necessitate demonstrating law-and-order parenting. Family criminalization thus reveals the intertwining of fears and realities of both children’s and mothers’ criminalization.

Mothers commonly used three strategies—telling cautionary tales, sheltering, and enacting compliance—in the face of family criminalization. Paying attention to their ambivalent responses to oppressive and unequal conditions (Collins 2000) highlights the ways mothers resist and try to protect their children from racist institutions, as prior work has found (e.g., Dow 2016), even as they at times use the language or practices of the carceral system (Richardson et al. 2014; Rios 2011). Our analysis demonstrates the ways mothers’ strategies are linked to their contextual understandings of criminalization as ubiquitous, unjust, and high stakes, and how they use these methods to try to prevent their children’s entrance into the criminal justice system. Mothers expressed ambivalence about these strategies, and some explicitly critiqued the rhetoric and institutions with which they had to engage, but they nevertheless felt these tactics were necessary for their children to grow up safely and have happy, successful lives.

Parents across racial and social class categories may use similar parenting strategies as those described in this article. However, the mothers interviewed felt they had no choice but to parent in these ways. They explained that without their vigilance, strictness, and compliance with institutional rules, their children risked arrest, incarceration, and even death. Mothers were also aware of their own vulnerability to criminalization. In this way, fears around criminalization restricted mothers’ parental autonomy, another meaningful

way family criminalization reproduces inequality.² Moreover, whereas privileged mothers express great confidence in their ability to protect their children from risk (Reich 2014), the low-income Black mothers described their deep investment and efforts in protecting their children from harm but also the limits of what they were capable of given the larger context of punitive social control, neighborhood disadvantage, and structural racism. These mothers also noted that others accused them of being too lax *and* too protective in their parenting.

Alexander (2010) argues that mass incarceration has become “the New Jim Crow,” shaping every aspect of life and excluding Black Americans from full participation in society. Family criminalization expands existing studies of the consequences of the surveillance and punishment of Black people in the United States. We find that as the criminal justice system reaches into the everyday lives of low-income Black children it extends to their mothers, shaping their parenting strategies and subjecting them to collateral consequences. The findings are similar across two different geographic sites, suggesting the policing of Blackness shapes family life nationally. That neither study focused on criminalization and yet it emerged as highly salient lends credence to the findings but poses limitations. Because interviewers were not attuned to criminalization, they missed opportunities to ask direct questions and, occasionally, did not follow up when the issue was raised. Future qualitative research should continue to investigate the meanings and experiences of family criminalization. Quantitative, nationally representative studies are needed to test the theory of family criminalization by, for example, using surveys to assess the intertwining of surveillance and punishment of parents and children. Court records should be investigated for race, gender, and class patterns in parents being sentenced on their children’s behalf, such as with truancy. Overall, future work can further elucidate how punitive carceral policies affect both parents and children and the far-reaching effects of family criminalization. Our

work demonstrates that family criminalization punishes and further marginalizes both children and mothers.

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Notes

1. Consistent with many Black authors, scholars, and publications (e.g., *Essence* and *Ebony* magazines), we capitalize “Black” to signify that Black Americans constitute a group with a common history and experiences of racial injustice and resistance to oppression. We do not capitalize “white” in deference to Black writers who argue in favor of this racialized grammatical disruption” (Gurusami 2019:129).
2. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

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Sinikka Elliott is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at The University of British Columbia. Her research broadly focuses on family dynamics, intersecting inequalities, and social policy.

Megan Reid has a PhD in sociology from the University of Texas at Austin and has served as a National Poverty Fellow at the University of Wisconsin's Institute for Research on Poverty and a Project Director at the National Development and Research Institutes in New York City. Her scholarship primarily examines families, social inequality, and social policy.