

Household Member Arrest and Adolescent Hopelessness:
The Mediating Role of Future Expectations

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Abstract

Research has shown that family member contact with the criminal justice system is associated with adverse emotional outcomes for children and adolescents. However, little is known about the mechanisms through which this occurs. This study examines whether positive future expectations mediate the relationship between household member arrest and hopelessness, using data ($N = 2639$) from the Mobile Youth Survey, a community-based study of predominantly African American youth from low-income settings. Results suggest that adolescents who have experienced household member arrest (HHMA) manifest lower positive future expectations, as well as higher levels of hopelessness. Results further suggest that positive future expectations partially mediate the relationship between HHMA and hopelessness. Together these findings underscore the importance of identifying processes connecting family member contact with the criminal justice system to emotional outcomes and then intervening to reduce the impact on children and adolescents.

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Understanding the impact of incarceration on family systems is a critical area of research due to the fact the United States has the highest rates of incarceration compared to all other developed countries (Wagner & Walsh, 2016). Contact with the criminal justice system relates to their family systems as well; an estimated 2.7 million children have a parent behind bars (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010) and a significant number of incarcerated individuals have large family networks. These rates are concerning and underscore the importance for investigators to broaden the scope beyond parental incarceration to determine whether any household member has had contact with the criminal justice system may have an effect on children and adolescents (Comfort, 2016). Accordingly, this study examines whether household member arrest (HHMA) is correlated to feelings of hopelessness, and whether positive future expectations mediates this relationship among a sample of predominantly African American youth.

HHMA and Adolescent Hopelessness

Over the past decade there has been an increase in research on incarceration, but overall, much more remains to be understood. We know that parental incarceration is classified as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) and an accumulation of ACEs has been linked to negative developmental outcomes for children (Felitti et al., 1998). In regard to parental incarceration, it is specifically linked with internalizing and externalizing issues, which in turn can lead to problems in school and with peer relationships (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). Research also shows that having a family member incarcerated adds a new level of stress to a family system, often accumulating to a point of crisis and subsequently the potential for childhood trauma (Arditti,

2016; Arditti & Savla, 2015). It follows that if an adolescent has experienced household member arrest, they may be at greater risk for internalizing problems such as hopelessness.

When examining incarceration from an intersectional and intergenerational approach, its connection to other social inequalities and injustices becomes apparent (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). These compounded social and structural inequalities have direct impacts on the mental health of adolescents, one outcome being higher levels of internalizing issues (Murray & Farrington, 2008). Past research has shown a direct relationship between internalizing issues in adolescents and hopelessness (Swearer et al., 2004). Hopelessness has been linked to depression and other negative outcomes in teenagers; therefore, it is imperative for people working with this group to make an effort to address hopelessness directly. Considering these facts, it becomes apparent that the issue of incarceration is complex and affects not only those incarcerated, but also their children.

Hopelessness is an important variable to consider given its implications for mental health (Alloy & Clements, 1998). Adolescents who have experienced parental incarceration are on average 4.7 times more likely than their peers to suffer internalizing issues (Johnson, 2009). It is critical for not only caregivers and policy makers to understand that adolescents who have experienced household member contact with the criminal justice system have specific needs, but also for researchers trying to understand how incarceration impacts adolescents. Although many children do develop short term coping strategies, the internalizing impacts are more long-lasting and have the potential to develop into depression and anxiety (La Vigne et al., 2008). With the potential of mental health challenges, there is an undeniable need for research to address hopelessness in adolescents who have experienced household member arrest.

Positive Future Expectations as a Potential Mediator

Research has shown that the issues surrounding incarceration are extremely complex, with varying lengths of contact and outcomes, therefore it is helpful to know which of these variables might be impacting the others. For this reason, we have chosen to use a mediational model to demonstrate that not only does household member arrest affect an adolescent's future expectations, but those expectations in turn affect their levels of hopelessness. Mediators can help researchers understand the complex nature of incarceration, acknowledging that there are other life variables that affect adolescent hopelessness in conjunction to incarceration. For this reason, this study focuses on whether positive future expectations functions as a mediator between HHMA and hopelessness among adolescents.

Understanding how adolescents view themselves and their future possibilities may help researchers understand how parental contact with the criminal justice system affects youth outcomes. Related research has suggested, for instance, that future expectations mediate the relationship between ACEs and problem behaviors such as substance use, violent behavior, and antisocial behavior in young adulthood (Brumley & Jaffee, 2017). Another study found that positive youth development is directly related to how optimistically adolescents perceive their future, further highlighting the connection between future expectations and youth outcomes (Schmid et al., 2011). Adolescents juvenile offenders have been found to have lower positive future expectations about life outside of jail (Clinkinbeard & Zohra, 2012). In addition, another study found that future expectations could explain up to 70% of hopelessness variance, being defined as the degree to which an individual is pessimistic about the future (O'Connor et al., 2000). Finally, there is evidence that improving future expectations has mental health benefits (Vilhauer et al., 2012). Taken together, the results of these studies suggest that future expectations may help explain the relationship between exposure to adversity and youth

outcomes. Whether this applies to the specific case of household member contact with the criminal justice system is an empirical question that has yet to be addressed.

Current Study

The current study used the data from the Mobile Youth Survey (MYS; Bolland et al., 2005) to examine whether HHMA is related to adolescent hopelessness and whether positive future expectations mediates this relationship. A mediational approach was taken to understand the relationship between positive future expectations and hopelessness in regard to adolescents who have experienced household member arrest (HHMA). Our hypothesis was that adolescents who have experienced household member arrest will have more hopelessness overall than adolescents who have not had this experience, and that their positive perceptions of their future plays a mediational role on hopelessness.

Methods

This study aimed to address the following research questions: (1) “Is household member arrest related to hopelessness?” and (2) “Do positive future expectations mediate the effects of household member arrest and hopelessness?” To test the research questions, data from the Mobile Youth Survey (MYS) data set was examined. This survey was a longitudinal study that looked at mostly African American adolescents in low-income areas of Mobile, Alabama and the surrounding area (Bolland et al., 2005). The original data was collected in 1998 and surveyed adolescents ranging from 8-10 years, all from the lowest income areas of Mobile and Prichard Alabama. For the purpose of this study, we used data from the most recent and final wave of the dataset (see Bolland et al., 2016 for additional information on study recruitment, administration, and retention). The makeup of the sample was 94% African American, 50% female, and the average age was 14 years old.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable of this study is hopelessness and was measured by 6 questions. These questions were founded on the research previously done by Kazdin et al. to establish the validity that the questions asked were accurately measuring hopelessness (1983). Sample items for this variable include questions such as “All I see ahead are bad things, not good things” and the response options were “agree” or “disagree.” Responses were coded 1= agree and 0=disagree. Another sample item is “I might as well give up because I can’t make things better for myself”, the response choices being “agree” or “disagree.” Responses were coded 1= *agree* and 0=*disagree*. Answers to these 6 questions were summed for a total score: the higher the score relating to a higher level of hopelessness.

Independent Variable

To capture HHMA, we used the following item: “During the past year (12 months), was anyone who lives in your apartment arrested? Don’t include yourself” with the response options of “yes” or “no.” Responses were coded 1=*yes* and 2=*no*.

Mediator

Four questions were used to measure positive future expectations. Sample items to measure future expectations include “When I am an adult I expect to have a good job that I like and that will pay enough for me to live on” with the response choices being “agree” or “disagree.” Responses were coded 1=*agree* and 0=*disagree*. Another sample item for this variable is “When I am an adult, I expect to have a long and happy marriage” the response choices being “agree” or “disagree.” Responses were coded 1=*agree* and 0=*disagree*. The four questions for this measure were summed with a maximum possible score of 4, and the higher the score relates to more positive future expectations.

Controls

This study controlled for several theoretically relevant demographic factors including race, age, socioeconomic status, gender, and current school enrollment. Socioeconomic status was measured by the question “Do you receive free or reduced cost lunch at school?” Grade was measured by the grade they will be in the upcoming year. These factors were selected based on the composition of the sample, as well the potential to impact the regression model.

Analysis

Our first analysis examined the descriptive statistics to get a global understanding of our participant makeup. Next, we ran a correlation for the full sample, and one with the sample separated by those who have and have not experienced household member arrest. Lastly, to test for mediation, a stepwise ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model was run following Barron and Kenny’s (1986) framework for testing mediation. To do so, the first model tested the relationship between household member arrest and hopelessness, controlling for demographic variables and without positive future expectations. The second model included positive future expectations in the analysis. Participants with missing data were excluded from the analyses. Data was analyzed using IBM’s Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS; IBM Corp., 2017).

Results

Descriptive statistics for our overall analytic sample are shown in Table 1. Table 2 displays descriptive statistics separated by participants who have and have not experienced household member arrest. Important demographic information to note is that 94% of our sample was African American, and 790 out of the 2942 (27%) participants had experienced household member arrest (HHMA). The average age of the sample was 14 years old. Table 2 shows that

adolescents with HHMA had higher levels of hopelessness ($M=1.32$; $SD=1.76$) compared to those with no HHMA ($M=0.97$; $SD=1.58$). Table 2 also shows that adolescents who had not experienced HHMA ($M=3.56$; $SD=0.81$) had more positive future expectations than their peers who had experienced HHMA ($M=3.40$; $SD=0.90$). Table 3 is the global correlation matrix, and Table 4 shows the correlation matrix disaggregated by those who have (bottom) and have not (top) experienced household member arrest. Table 3 illustrates that household member arrest is negatively correlated with positive future expectations ($r=-0.08$). HHMA is also positively correlated with hopelessness, ($r=0.10$). Table 4 shows that for adolescents who have and have not experienced HHMA, there is a negative correlation between hopelessness and positive future expectations ($r=-0.28$, and $r=-0.31$).

Results of the regression analyses are displayed in Table 5. The first model does not account for positive future expectations when hopelessness is the dependent variable, while the second model does account for future expectations. In both model one and two HHMA was positively related to hopelessness ($B=0.30$; $B=0.23$). The size of the coefficient for HHMA on hopelessness, however, was attenuated when future expectations were added to the regression model. The pattern of the results therefore suggests that positive future expectations partially mediate the relationship between household member arrest and hopelessness.

Discussion

Since the ultimate goal of this research is to have a direct application into fields where the information can be used to give appropriate resources to the populations of interest, addressing the root of family member incarceration must happen at the level of state and national governments. But by identifying variables that help mediate the negative outcomes of parental incarceration, such as adolescent positive future expectations, policy makers and practitioners

can use that information in their day to day careers. This study looked at household member arrest (HHMA) and the relationship between hopelessness and positive future expectations. This study aimed to advance our understanding of how household member contact with the criminal justice system impacts the wellbeing of adolescents, and to test if positive future expectations mediates hopelessness as a part of adolescent's overall wellbeing. The framework for measuring hopelessness drew from previous work that focused on boys with incarcerated parents, and the extent to which they showed internalizing issues such as hopelessness (Murray & Farrington, 2008). We then connected the research surrounding hopelessness to that of positive future expectations (Clinkinbeard & Zohra, 2012). Using previously established and peer reviewed research, our team was able to frame and test our research questions "Is household member arrest related to hopelessness?" and "Do positive future expectations mediate the effects of household member arrest and hopelessness?"

Results suggested that adolescents who experienced HHMA reported higher levels of hopelessness than youth who had not experienced household member contact with the criminal justice system. This finding is consistent with the internalizing research done by Murray and Farrington (2008) as well as work that has established connections between hopelessness and internalizing issues (Swearer et al., 2004). Our results further suggested that adolescents who had experienced HHMA had lower positive future expectations than their peers without any HHMA. This is consistent with the established research in the field of adolescents and future expectations (Clinkinbeard, & Zohra, 2012).

The first model did not account for positive future expectations when hopelessness is the dependent variable, while model two did not account for future expectations. In both model one and two HHMA was positively related to hopelessness although in the second model the

significance went down. From these results, we concluded that because there was a change in significance with the addition of positive future expectations, there was some evidence for the effect of positive future expectation on hopelessness in relation to household member arrest. We also found that race was not a significant determinant of hopelessness, which is consistent with the previous research by Brumley (2017). Our analysis relied on a mediation model, therefore future research could test a moderation model and see if there is any significance with this framework. In addition, the Baron and Kenny (1986) model of mediation is not the most up-to-date system for analyzing the relationship between variables. Future research might also benefit from approaches that account for more external forces such as the Preacher and Hays bootstrap method (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

Another important area of future research would be looking at hopelessness in regard to teacher and self-future expectations. One study used experimental manipulation to see how teachers responded to vignettes of students with different family systems, some of which included incarceration (Dallaire, 2007). They found that having a mother absent from the household due to imprisonment is more stigmatizing than almost any other reason for maternal absence. This was measured by the significantly lower expectations teachers have of children with currently imprisoned mothers, as opposed to children whose mothers were absent for other reasons such as death or divorce. Moreover, one study found that teachers produce self-fulfilling prophecies when it comes to the performance of their students; if they believe they will succeed they will give them more opportunities to do so, and if they do not have any expectations, teachers offer less help overall (Jussim, 1989). We know that other's perceptions of us influence how we see ourselves, so future research should examine the relationship between teacher expectations and student hopelessness.

With all this in mind, we concluded there is a gap in research on the protective factors surrounding parental contact with the criminal justice systems, and future research might aim to identify these protective factors (Murphey et al., 2014). It is important to note that although incarceration is an ACE, there are both challenges and resilience faced by the children. One study that was the first of its kind specifically analyzed how children conceptualized their recent incarceration of a parent, and through their own words the researchers found that feelings of resilience was a common factor among their sample (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Future research could build off this study and look more into how children develop resilience in the wake of an ACE.

A limitation of study is that we do not know who in the home was in contact with the criminal justice system, if they were ultimately arrested, and if so, for what length of time. Understanding these nuances would give us more insight into the specific nature of incarceration, and how different kinds of contact impacts adolescents differently. In addition, although the original study by Bolland was a longitudinal study (Bolland et al., 2005), this project used one wave of data. This gives us a limited scope of study and does not allow us to identify changes over time. In addition, this was a homogenous sample of adolescents in terms of socioeconomic status and race. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing results to other samples of youth.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is much more research to be done on family member incarceration so policy makers and social workers can conduct a more informed practice. When people understand the real effects of incarceration on a family system, they are better equipped to provide the correct and necessary resources to help those families live their best life. If research

proves that hopelessness is a major issue in adolescents, then professionals from all disciplines should work together to figure out what mediates this hopelessness and how to specifically address the issues in adolescents across the county. Continuing to understand the inner working of adolescent development is key for adults to provide them the best support, and for that reason it is critical to continue research in this field.

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Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max</i>
Hopelessness	1.062 (1.643)	0	6
Positive Future Expectations	3.513 (0.838)	0	4
Household Member Arrested in Past Year	1.27 (0.443)	1	2
Age	14.38 (2.554)	9	19
African American	0.938 (0.241)	0	1
Female	0.495 (0.5)	0	1
Free or reduced lunch	1.80 (0.568)	0	2
Were you in school this previous year?	0.964 (0.187)	0	1

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics Disaggregated by Household Member Arrest

Variable	No HHMA = 2152 <i>M(SD)</i>	Yes HHMA =790 <i>M(SD)</i>	Test Statistic
Hopelessness	0.966 (1.583)	1.320 (1.763)	$t(1280) = -4.947$ $p < 0.01$
Positive Future Expectations	3.555 (0.810)	3.40 (0.899)	$t(1279) = 4.256$ $p < 0.01$
Age	14.42 (2.539)	14.27 (2.583)	$t(2940) = 1.393$ $p = 0.164$
Female	0.501 (0.5)	0.477 (0.5)	$\chi^2(1) = 1.240$ $p = 0.278$
African American	0.945 (0.231)	0.923 (0.266)	$\chi^2(1) = 4.047$ $p = .046$
Free or reduced school lunch)	1.80 (0.561)	1.79 (0.587)	$t(2729) = 0.564$ $p = 0.573$
Were you in school this previous year?	.966 (.181)	.958 (.200)	$\chi^2(1) = 0.933$ $p = 0.366$

Table 3.

Bivariate Correlations

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Age	1.00							
2. Female	.004	1.00						
3. Black	.063**	-.003	1.00					
4. Attending school	-.206***	.001	.014	1.00				
5. Free/reduced lunch	-.116***	.027	.007	.074***	1.00			
6. Household member arrest	-.026	-.021	-.037*	-.018	-.011	1.00		
7. Positive Future Expectations	-.050**	.165***	-.047*	.041*	.071***	-.082***	1.00	
8. Hopelessness	-.089***	-.142***	-.074***	-.057**	-.035	.096***	-.304***	1.00

Notes: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Table 4.

Correlations Disaggregated by HHMA

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6	7.
1. Age	-	.022	.078***	-.197***	-.147***	-.044*	-.093***
2. Female	-.046	-	.010	.012	.008	.162***	-.134***
3. Black	.027	-.036	-	.012	-.002	.020	-.067**
4. Attending school	-.225***	-.034	.016	-	.088***	.040	-.062**
5. Free/reduced lunch	-.036	.073*	-.032	.039	-	.049*	-.034
6. Positive Future Expectations	-.070*	.168***	-.019	.037	.108**	-	-.311***
7. Hopelessness	-.073*	-.153***	-.082*	-.028**	-.039	-.275***	-

Notes: Below the diagonal are those who reported a HHMA; Above the diagonal are those who did not report a HHMA; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 5.

Regressions Analysis

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
HHMA	0.297***	0.069	0.230**	0.066
Age	-0.067***	0.012	-0.077***	0.012
Female gender	-0.418***	0.061	-0.277***	0.059
Black race	-0.342**	0.128	-0.274*	0.124
Free or reduced lunch	-.119*	0.054	-0.077	0.052
In School	-0.537*	0.235	-0.561*	0.225
Positive Future Expectations			-0.574***	0.037
Constant	16.56***	0.358	4.934***	0.368
R^2	0.041		0.34	
F	18.97***		52.38***	

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.