

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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# The role of visits and parent–child relationship quality in promoting positive outcomes for children of incarcerated parents

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## Abstract

In the current study, we sought to determine the effects of parent visits on a range of psychological outcomes among children of incarcerated parents. Drawing on data from the Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents Enhancement Demonstration Project, a recent, large-scale evaluation of mentoring programme practices, we hypothesized that ongoing contact would lead to an improved parent–child relationship which, in turn, would promote a range of psychosocial outcomes in children. Results of a structural equation model ( $n = 228$ ) revealed a significant positive association between child's frequency of visits with their incarcerated parent and child–parent relationship quality, which in turn, was significantly associated with the child's life purpose and depression/loneliness. Findings from the current study shed light on the importance of children's visits with their incarcerated parent for later psychological outcomes.

## KEYWORDS

children of incarcerated parents, outcomes, relationship, structural equation model, visitation

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In the United States, over five million children experience parental incarceration at some point during childhood (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). Consequently, over 7% of all US children are at risk for developing adverse outcomes associated with parent incarceration, such as economic and residential instability and behavioural challenges (Geller et al., 2009; Murray et al., 2012). In light of these potential risks, researchers and policymakers have sought to identify factors that might protect children against negative effects of parent incarceration. One such factor is parent visits, in-person meetings between a child and their incarcerated parent, which can provide children with opportunities for continued parent–child connection (Poehlmann-Tynan & Pritzl, 2019). This connection, in turn, may provide security and reassurance children need to thrive and feel confident about the future. For this reason, children who have more frequent, consistent

interactions with their parents may fair better, whereas those unable to frequently visit incarcerated parents may develop negative narratives or beliefs about their future, and how much they are loved or supported by their parents (Shlafer et al., 2019). To date, however, most research related to children of incarcerated parents has focused on their behavioural outcomes, including juvenile delinquency and adult incarceration (Murray et al., 2012; Noel & Najdowski, 2020). Limited research has explored the relationship between children and their incarcerated parents, particularly with regards to the role of visits during incarceration. In this study, we examined the protective role of visiting incarcerated parents on child–parent relationship quality and later child psychosocial outcomes. Although child–parent contact can be maintained through means other than in-person visits (e.g., phone calls, letters and video calls), in-person visits have been selected as the focus of the present study as they represent the most direct form of parent–child interaction.

## 1.1 | Visiting incarcerated parents

Sustaining contact with a parent who is incarcerated can be challenging for the custodial parent for a variety of reasons. Barriers include logistical and financial factors, such as location and distance of the prison from the child's home, availability and expenses associated with travelling to the facility, and high costs of telephone calls (Myers et al., 1999; Poehlmann, 2005; Poehlmann-Tynan & Pritzl, 2019). These barriers are compounded by incarceration facilities, including restrictive visiting policies, visitor screening procedures and limitations on the number of individuals allowed to visit (Poehlmann-Tynan & Pritzl, 2019). Visits with incarcerated parents may also be limited due to lack of willingness to visit, in which either the incarcerated parent or the child does not wish for the visit to occur. The non-incarcerated caregiver may also be unwilling to initiate visits for various reasons including legal constraints in which the incarcerated parent is not legally allowed to visit with their children. Visiting may also be stressful for children due to various security procedures and physical barriers (e.g., plexiglass and lack of privacy) to interacting with their incarcerated parent. Given these barriers, visits can impose strain on familial relationships and potentially elicit externalizing behaviours among children (Shlafer et al., 2019). As a result of these obstacles, 60% of incarcerated parents in state prisons do not have any visits with their children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

Despite barriers, visits may promote positive outcomes in children. For example, one study found regular and frequent contact between children and their incarcerated mothers was associated with more positive adjustment, whereas infrequent or no contact was associated with school dropout and suspensions (Trice & Brewster, 2004). There is also evidence that children with more visits with their incarcerated parents experience a more positive sense of family connection (Poehlmann-Tynan & Pritzl, 2019), decreased negative emotions like anger and fewer feelings of alienation from their parents (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). In fact, a few 'enhanced visitation programmes' have been created to mitigate trauma and subsequent risks children experience as a result of their parents' incarceration (Wakefield & Montagnet, 2019). These enhanced visiting programmes include an extended visit in which children stay all day with their parents (McKeown, 1993) and another in which mothers and daughters engage in structured group activities during visits (Block & Potthast, 1998). The connection developed between children and parents through visiting may provide feelings of security and reassurance to children. Visits may also provide indirect benefits to children, as research has found incarcerated parents with increased visits from children to have improved mental health symptoms (Chassay & Kremer, in press). Improved parent mental health can translate into better parenting practices and enhanced child well-being.

## 1.2 | The current study

The current study sought to determine the effects of visiting on a range of psychological outcomes for children with incarcerated parents. Drawing on data from a recent study, Mentoring Children of

Incarcerated Parents Enhancement Demonstration Project, we hypothesized that more frequent contact would lead to an improved parent-child relationship which, in turn, would promote a range of positive psychosocial outcomes in children.

## 2 | METHOD

### 2.1 | Sample

The sample was obtained from a larger project focused on mentoring children who had a caregiver currently or previously incarcerated. Participants for the mentoring project were recruited from 20 mentoring sites located across the United States. Children were eligible to participate in the mentoring study if they had a caregiver who was currently or had previously been incarcerated during the child's lifetime. Children were randomly assigned to receive either business-as-usual mentoring or enhanced mentoring services. Enhancements included participating in community engagement volunteer activities, additional training for mentors and more frequent match support. For the purposes of the present study, participants were combined across conditions. Children completed online or paper and pencil surveys regarding internalizing and externalizing behaviours, school connectedness, and adult and peer relationships; their custodial caregiver completed similar surveys on children's behaviours and relationships. Surveys were distributed at baseline, 6 months and 12 months, with data collected between 2016 and 2020. A total of 1335 children enrolled in the mentoring intervention and completed baseline surveys, whereas 548 children participated in all three waves of data collection. Given the present study's central focus on the relationships between children and their incarcerated parent, we limited the analytic sample to 228 children who had a caregiver who was currently incarcerated when baseline data were collected. Demographic characteristics of the sample can be found in Table 1.

To maximize the analytic sample, multiple imputations were utilized to account for missing data due to non-response within the analytic sample of 228 children. Compared with conventional approaches such as listwise deletion, in which observations with data missing on any variable are removed from analyses, multiple imputation allows for observations with missing data to be included. The multiple imputation process has been found to be less biased than conventional approaches, as it makes use of all available data (Allison, 2001). Across the analytic sample, there was a nearly even mix of males (45%) and females (54%) with a mean age of 11.07 years old ( $SD = 2.13$ ; range = 8–17). Roughly half of the sample (57%) were Black, 28% were White and 14% were another race. Nearly 16% of the sample were Hispanic.

### 2.2 | Measures

#### 2.2.1 | Visits with incarcerated parent

Children's non-incarcerated (i.e., custodial) caregiver reported whether their children visited their incarcerated parent. Custodial caregivers

**TABLE 1** Demographic characteristics of the analytic sample (N = 228)

Variables	n (%) or mean (SD)
Visits to incarcerated parent	
Never	142 (62.48%)
1–6 times per year	47 (20.46%)
At least monthly	39 (17.06%)
Parent incarcerated at 12 months	136 (59.58%)
Access to internet	181 (79.39%)
School mobility past 2 years	
0	78 (34.21%)
1	78 (34.21%)
2	38 (16.62%)
3	26 (11.32%)
4 or more	8 (3.60%)
Primary caregiver is married	55 (24.12%)
Family owns home	45 (19.67%)
Distance from incarcerated parent	
Within 20 miles	36 (15.79%)
20–50 miles away	41 (18.07%)
More than 50 miles away	151 (66.14%)
Age	11.07 (2.25)
Gender—Male	103 (45.11%)
Hispanic ethnicity	37 (16.10%)
Race	
White	65 (28.40%)
Black	131 (57.39%)
Other	32 (14.21%)
Parent education	
Less than high school	25 (10.99%)
High school or GED	75 (32.98%)
Some college	72 (31.38%)
Associate's degree	31 (13.66%)
Bachelor's degree	25 (10.99%)
Participation in enhanced mentoring	120 (52.63%)

Abbreviation: GED, General Educational Development.

who responded affirmatively were further asked how frequently their children visit the incarcerated parent, with options including ‘about 1–3 times per year’, ‘about 4–6 times per year’, ‘about once a month’ and ‘about once a week’. Due to small cell sizes, categories were collapsed to indicate whether children visited the incarcerated parent ‘never’, ‘1–6 times per year’ or ‘at least monthly’. Most children never visited their incarcerated parent (62%), whereas 20% visited 1–6 times per year and 17% visited at least monthly.

## 2.2.2 | Relationship with incarcerated parent

Custodial caregivers answered a series of questions about the quality of the relationship between the child and his or her incarcerated

parent with five response options ranging from ‘not at all’ to ‘extremely’. Questions were how much the child respects, looks up to as a role model, looks up to and feels proud, tries to be like, thinks highly of, wants to be like, and admires the incarcerated parent. The custodial caregiver further responded whether the incarcerated parent's opinion is important to the child. Based on responses, a scale was constructed using principal component factor analyses with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1 (range = −1.26 to 1.70). Higher scores indicate higher quality relationships. The scale had excellent internal consistency reliability at both baseline ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ) and the 6-month follow-up ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ). The outcome at baseline was included as a covariate.

## 2.2.3 | Psychosocial outcomes

At baseline, 6 months and 12 months, children responded to a variety of questions to capture their psychological and social well-being, including depression/loneliness, purpose, satisfaction, self-competence and future mindset. The outcomes at 12 months were the primary dependent variables for the analyses. The outcomes at baseline and 6 months were included as covariates.

### *Depression and loneliness*

Children reported on a single item of depression about how often in the past 2 weeks they ‘felt miserable or unhappy’ from the Short Mood and Feelings Questionnaire (Angold et al., 1995) that was rated on a 3-point scale from 1 (*not true*) to 3 (*true*). They also rated three items on a 5-point loneliness scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*) on how true the statements were for them in the past 2 weeks. The items were ‘I feel alone’, ‘I felt left out of things’ and ‘I'm lonely’ (Asher et al., 1984). The scale of depression/loneliness had good internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

### *Life purpose*

Children responded to two items on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Items were ‘My life will make a difference in the world’ and ‘I am doing things now that will help me to achieve my purpose in life’. The items were adapted from Lippman et al. (2014). The scale of life purpose had good internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

### *Life satisfaction*

Children responded to two items on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Items were ‘I am happy with my life’ and ‘So far, my life is working out as well I could hope’ (adapted from Lippman et al., 2014). The scale of life satisfaction had good internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ).

### *Self-competence*

Children responded to five items on a 4-point scale ranging from *not at all true* to *very true*. Items were ‘I'm often disappointed in myself’, ‘I don't like the way I'm leading my life’, ‘I am happy with myself most

of the time', 'I like the kind of person I am' and 'I am very happy being the way I am' (adapted from Harter, 2012). The scale of self-competence had good internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

#### *Optimism for future*

Children responded to four questions related to their future goals and activities on a 5-point scale from *not at all likely* to *extremely likely* (adapted from the Expectations/Aspirations measure developed by Loeber et al., 1991 for the Pittsburgh Youth Study). Questions were whether the child will 'have a well-paying job when you grow up', 'have a happy family life', 'stay out of trouble with the police' and 'get the kind of job you would like to get when you grow up'. The optimism for the future scale had good internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

### 2.2.4 | Covariates

Several demographic and behavioural characteristics were included in the model as covariates. Based on parent surveys, demographic characteristics of the child consisted of child's age, gender, race and Hispanic ethnicity. Our inclusion of race and ethnicity as separate variables is in accordance with guidelines established by the US federal government's Office of Management and Budget (1997). Parental demographic characteristics were parent educational background and marital status. To serve as proxies for familial disadvantage, analyses further controlled for whether the family has 'stable access to the internet', whether the family owns their home, and the number of times the child 'switched schools in the past two years of his or her life'. We further controlled for distance of children to their incarcerated parent, as children who live closer to their incarcerated parent may be able to visit more frequently. Additionally, given that children could participate in the programme beyond the duration of their parents' incarceration, we controlled for whether their parents were still incarcerated at the 12-month follow-up. In addition, analyses of all outcome variables at 6 and 12 months controlled for their baseline, and baseline and 6-month values, respectively. Finally, because the present study utilized data from a broader mentoring study, we included a covariate indicating whether the participant was engaged in the enhanced mentoring treatment programme or the business-as-usual mentoring programme.

### 2.3 | Statistical analyses

We employed several analyses to understand the association between parent-child relationship and psychosocial outcomes. First, we conducted pairwise correlations between independent and dependent variables measured continuously. We then utilized generalized structural equation modelling (GSEM). Given our research questions sought to understand both predictors of parent-child relationships and its association with psychosocial outcomes, a structural equation modelling (SEM) approach was most appropriate. SEM combines multiple regression analyses into one model to simultaneously predict several outcomes and complex relationships among independent and

dependent variables. GSEM, in particular, was utilized for analyses, as it allows for inclusion of generalized responses, such as binary, ordinal and count variables. Traditional SEM is only able to include variables measured continuously with a normal distribution.

Our generalized structural equation model sought to understand whether visiting incarcerated parents is associated with parent-child relationships and if the parent-child relationship is then associated with enhanced psychosocial outcomes for children. Analyses were specified with a Gaussian distribution, as all dependent variables were measured continuously. Each path analysis included the previously mentioned covariates. Path analyses with psychosocial outcomes as dependent variables further included parent-child relationship at 6 months along with that outcome measured at baseline and 6-month follow-up. For example, the path analysis predicting depression/loneliness included parent-child relationship at 6 months, demographic covariates, and child's depression/loneliness scores measured at baseline and 6 months. Meanwhile, the path analysis predicting self-competence included child's self-competence scores at baseline and 6 months but did not include depression/loneliness. Our variables appear in appropriate time-order sequence as no exogenous variables preceded endogenous variables in time. Analyses were calculated in Stata/IC 16.0 (StataCorp, 2017).

### 2.4 | Ethics statement

This research study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Data were collected according to the guidelines in the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from parents, and children assented to participation at the start of the survey.

## 3 | RESULTS

### 3.1 | Correlations between focal study variables

Pairwise correlations were utilized to understand associations between psychosocial outcomes at 12 months with one another and with parent-child relationship at 6-month follow-up (see Table 2). Parent-child relationship at 6 months was significantly associated with 12-month outcomes, including depression/loneliness ( $r = -0.19, p < 0.001$ ), life purpose ( $r = 0.30, p < 0.001$ ), life satisfaction ( $r = 0.22, p < 0.01$ ) and optimism for the future ( $r = 0.11, p < 0.05$ ). Most psychosocial outcomes were also significantly associated with one another. Strongest relationships were observed between life purpose and life satisfaction at 12 months ( $r = 0.70, p < 0.001$ ) and life satisfaction and self-competence at 12 months ( $r = 0.74, p < 0.001$ ).

### 3.2 | Results of GSEM

Results of GSEM are displayed in Figure 1 and Table 3. At baseline, children who visited their incarcerated parent one to six times per

**TABLE 2** Pairwise correlations between psychosocial outcomes and parent relationship

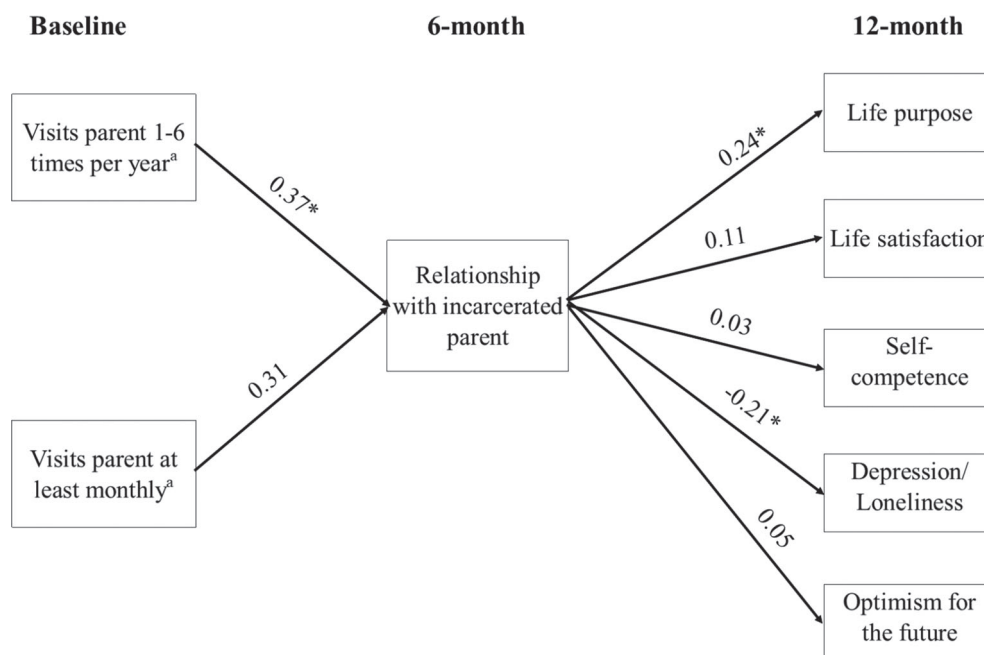
	Parent relationship	Depression/loneliness	Life purpose	Life satisfaction	Self-competence	Optimism for future
Parent relationship	1.00					
Depression/loneliness	−0.19**	1.00				
Life purpose	0.30***	−0.47***	1.00			
Life satisfaction	0.22**	−0.33***	0.70***	1.00		
Self-competence	0.14	−0.51***	0.43***	0.58***	1.00	
Optimism for future	0.11*	−0.31***	0.20***	0.44***	0.35***	1.00

Note: Parent relationship measured at 6 months; depression/loneliness, life purpose, life satisfaction, self-competence and optimism for future measured at 12 months.

\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**FIGURE 1** Generalized structural equation model of relationship with incarcerated parent. Note: Path analyses controlled for household disadvantage, race, Hispanic ethnicity, parent education, gender, child age, parent marital status, household distance from incarcerated parent, child baseline relationship with incarcerated parent, and child psychosocial outcomes at baseline and 6 months.

<sup>a</sup>Reference group is *never visits incarcerated parent*. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$



year had significantly higher quality relationships with their incarcerated parents at 6 months compared with children who never visited their parents ( $B = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). There was no difference in parent–child relationship at 6 months between children who never visited their parents and those who visited monthly. In turn, children's relationship with their incarcerated parents at 6 months was significantly associated with life purpose ( $B = 0.24$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and depression/loneliness ( $B = -0.21$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) at 12 months. These results indicate that children with stronger parent relationships at 6 months had improved feelings of life purpose and were less depressed/lonely than children with weaker parent relationships. Relationship with incarcerated parent did not predict the other psychosocial outcomes after controlling for covariates.

With regards to the covariates, 6-month relationships with incarcerated parents were higher among children who were Hispanic and African American. Compared with White children, African American children had higher self-competence ( $B = 0.53$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and optimism for the future ( $B = 0.38$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Children who lived

20–50 miles away from their incarcerated parents also had lower optimism for the future ( $B = -0.60$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) compared with children who lived within 20 miles. Optimism for the future declined as children got older ( $B = -0.07$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Finally, children of parents with a bachelor's degree exhibited increased depression/loneliness ( $B = 0.68$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) compared with children of parents with less than a high school diploma.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

Research suggests children of incarcerated parents are at risk for negative outcomes (Geller et al., 2009; Murray et al., 2012). However, certain factors regarding the context of incarceration may mitigate these outcomes and promote positive development. Thus, the current study examined the role of visiting and parent–child relationship using data from the largest study to date of this historically understudied population.

TABLE 3 Results of generalized structural equation model

Variables	Parent relationship (6 months) B (95% CI)	Depression/loneliness (12 months) B (95% CI)	Life purpose (12 months) B (95% CI)	Life satisfaction (12 months) B (95% CI)	Self-competence (12 months) B (95% CI)	Optimism for future (12 months) B (95% CI)
Parent visits						
None	Reference					
1–6 times per year	0.37 (0.04, 0.71)*					
At least monthly	0.31 (–0.02, 0.64)					
Baseline parent relationship	0.40 (0.25, 0.55)***	0.09 (–0.08, 0.26)	–0.05 (–0.23, 0.13)	–0.12 (–0.31, 0.06)	0.15 (–0.06, 0.36)	0.00 (–0.18, 0.17)
Parent relationship (6 months)		–0.21 (–0.39, –0.05)*	0.24 (0.04, 0.45)*	0.11 (–0.1, 0.32)	0.03 (–0.16, 0.26)	0.05 (–0.13, 0.23)
Parent incarcerated (12 months)	0.13 (–0.10, 0.37)	0.12 (–0.19, 0.42)	–0.11 (–0.43, 0.21)	0.01 (–0.29, 0.31)	0.10 (–0.30, 0.50)	–0.07 (–0.37, 0.24)
Outcome at baseline		0.15 (0.02, 0.28)*	0.22 (0.07, 0.38)**	0.13 (0.00, 0.27)	0.13 (–0.03, 0.29)	0.11 (–0.02, 0.24)
Outcome at 6 months		0.20 (0.06, 0.33)**	0.22 (0.06, 0.37)**	0.44 (0.28, 0.59)***	0.04 (–0.12, 0.21)	0.25 (0.10, 0.40)**
Stable internet access	0.05 (–0.26, 0.36)	–0.18 (–0.48, 0.13)	0.09 (–0.24, 0.43)	0.21 (–0.12, 0.53)	0.14 (–0.26, 0.54)	0.26 (–0.07, 0.60)
Times changed schools						
None	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
1	–0.09 (–0.37, 0.19)	–0.03 (–0.33, 0.26)	–0.02 (–0.33, 0.29)	0.09 (–0.23, 0.41)	–0.18 (–0.58, 0.22)	–0.25 (–0.58, 0.07)
2	0.05 (–0.32, 0.42)	0.05 (–0.34, 0.44)	–0.09 (–0.52, 0.34)	–0.11 (–0.53, 0.32)	–0.55 (–1.07, –0.04)*	–0.34 (–0.77, 0.09)
3	0.27 (–0.18, 0.71)	0.20 (–0.31, 0.71)	0.44 (–0.10, 0.97)	0.56 (0.06, 1.06)*	–0.07 (–0.69, 0.56)	–0.31 (–0.83, 0.21)
4 or more	0.28 (–0.35, 0.91)	0.27 (–0.39, 0.93)	0.06 (–0.60, 0.73)	0.23 (–0.43, 0.89)	0.32 (–0.51, 1.16)	–0.04 (–0.73, 0.65)
Hispanic ethnicity	0.56 (0.20, 0.91)**	0.07 (–0.34, 0.49)	–0.04 (–0.48, 0.39)	0.27 (–0.16, 0.70)	0.04 (–0.49, 0.58)	0.22 (–0.23, 0.67)
Race						
White	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
African American	0.36 (0.04, 0.68)*	–0.12 (–0.45, 0.21)	0.14 (–0.21, 0.49)	0.33 (–0.02, 0.68)	0.53 (0.1, 0.96)*	0.38 (0.02, 0.74)*
Other	–0.10 (–0.49, 0.30)	0.48 (0.06, 0.91)*	–0.49 (–0.96, –0.03)*	–0.71 (–1.17, –0.25)**	0.10 (–0.48, 0.67)	0.02 (–0.47, 0.51)
Parent education						
Less than high school	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
HS or GED	0.31 (–0.06, 0.69)	0.49 (–0.01, 0.98)	0.19 (–0.32, 0.70)	–0.05 (–0.59, 0.48)	0.04 (–0.60, 0.68)	–0.28 (–0.81, 0.24)
Some college	0.38 (–0.01, 0.77)	0.54 (0.05, 1.03)*	–0.08 (–0.6, 0.43)	–0.02 (–0.56, 0.51)	–0.07 (–0.71, 0.57)	0.01 (–0.50, 0.52)
Associate's	0.36 (–0.14, 0.85)	0.37 (–0.19, 0.93)	0.37 (–0.23, 0.98)	0.33 (–0.29, 0.94)	–0.03 (–0.74, 0.68)	0.13 (–0.46, 0.72)
Bachelor's	0.37 (–0.12, 0.86)	0.68 (0.12, 1.24)*	–0.29 (–0.91, 0.33)	–0.16 (–0.81, 0.48)	–0.15 (–0.91, 0.61)	0.04 (–0.57, 0.65)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Variables	Parent relationship (6 months) B (95% CI)	Depression/loneliness (12 months) B (95% CI)	Life purpose (12 months) B (95% CI)	Life satisfaction (12 months) B (95% CI)	Self-competence (12 months) B (95% CI)	Optimism for future (12 months) B (95% CI)
Male gender	0.08 (−0.15, 0.30)	0.05 (−0.19, 0.30)	−0.02 (−0.29, 0.25)	0.03 (−0.23, 0.30)	0.15 (−0.18, 0.48)	−0.27 (−0.54, 0.00)
Family owns home	−0.24 (−0.58, 0.10)	−0.24 (−0.65, 0.17)	−0.19 (−0.59, 0.21)	−0.06 (−0.45, 0.34)	−0.31 (−0.8, 0.18)	−0.21 (−0.62, 0.20)
Child's age	−0.07 (−0.12, −0.01)*	−0.05 (−0.11, 0.01)	−0.02 (−0.09, 0.04)	−0.04 (−0.11, 0.02)	0.00 (−0.07, 0.08)	−0.07 (−0.13, −0.01)
Caregiver marital status	0.25 (−0.04, 0.53)	0.11 (−0.18, 0.41)	0.06 (−0.27, 0.40)	−0.06 (−0.39, 0.27)	0.03 (−0.37, 0.43)	0.11 (−0.22, 0.45)
Distance from prison						
Within 20 miles	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference	Reference
20–50 miles away	−0.03 (−0.51, 0.45)	0.37 (−0.16, 0.90)	−0.10 (−0.64, 0.44)	−0.47 (−1.01, 0.07)	−0.58 (−1.17, 0.02)	−0.60 (−1.12, −0.08)*
More than 50 miles	0.02 (−0.33, 0.37)	0.37 (−0.06, 0.81)	−0.13 (−0.56, 0.31)	−0.25 (−0.68, 0.18)	−0.34 (−0.82, 0.14)	−0.25 (−0.66, 0.17)
Enhanced mentoring treatment	0.01 (−0.26, 0.27)	−0.14 (−0.39, 0.11)	0.20 (−0.07, 0.46)	0.22 (−0.05, 0.48)	0.55 (0.23, 0.88)**	−0.01 (−0.28, 0.27)

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; GED, General Educational Development; HS, highschool.

\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Two critical findings emerged from analyses. First, results revealed that children who visited their incarcerated parent one to six times per year had significantly higher quality relationships with their incarcerated parents at 6 months compared with children who never visited their parents. Secondly, we found children's relationship quality with their incarcerated parents at 6 months was significantly associated with children's life purpose and depression/loneliness at 12 months.

Although previous literature has considered the concern that children will be distressed by their parent's incarceration and that they may lose touch with them, findings from current analyses suggest otherwise. Indeed, data suggest it is possible for children to maintain connections with their incarcerated parents through visiting. We found this effect controlling for distance between children and their incarcerated parents. Thus, it is not simply the case that children are visiting their incarcerated parents as a function of geography. Interestingly, results indicated that children's relationship with incarcerated parents did not differ significantly between children who visited incarcerated parents monthly versus those who never visited. It may be that repeated monthly exposure to a prison setting may not support the parent–child bond, or that less frequent (but still regular) visits may hold more meaning to children or be visits for special occasions (e.g., holidays and birthdays). It may also be that children who visit less often are supplementing in-person visits with telephone calls and letters, which help to support the parent–child relationship.

Custodial caregivers who are able to maintain their children's relationships with their incarcerated parents are likely doing a service for their children by allowing them to sustain a sense of relational closeness. Losing a parent to incarceration can be experienced as an ambiguous loss, often with accompanying feelings of shame, stigma and secrecy (deVuono-Powell et al., 2015). Custodial caregivers who break through these challenges and communicate the importance of maintaining children's relationship with their other parents have collateral benefits, including increased feelings of life purpose and reduced depression/loneliness for children. Research suggests that having a sense of purpose is a critical protective factor for positive youth development. Inherent in the construct of purpose are 'commitment, goal-directedness, personal meaningfulness, and a beyond-the-self focus' (Bronk, 2013, pp. 13–14). For example, having a strong and positive sense of purpose may give children a direction or meaning in their life, and thus, more of a reason to try harder academically or avoid getting in trouble. Mariano and Going (2011) suggest that a sense of purpose may reflect one way that children adapt to and cope with threatening life circumstances and identify positive aspects that may result from the situation.

A few other findings emerged from the data related to the covariates included in the analyses. First, we found that children's 6-month relationship with their incarcerated parent was higher among children who identified as Hispanic and children who identified as African American/Black. Furthermore, children who had parents with higher levels of education were lonelier compared with children of parents with less than a high school diploma. It is possible that incarceration may be more stigmatized in middle-class families who tend to

have relatively higher levels of education. Pervasive systemic injustice and racism have led to the disproportionate incarceration of men of colour with lower socio-economic status (Lewis, 2018). Thus, the social stigma (and resulting psychosocial outcomes for their children) that are experienced as a result, may be less severe, as the incarceration may be attributed to abusive law enforcement practice rather than actual crime (Garland, 2001). It is also possible that families in which parents hold higher degrees of education may also earn higher salaries, making the incarceration and loss of a crucial financial resource particularly more financially stressful than in families where parents earn less money.

Finally, children who lived 20–50 miles away from their incarcerated parent had lower optimism for the future compared with children who lived within 20 miles of their incarcerated parent. This finding is relatively intuitive, suggesting that closer geographical distance between an incarcerated parent and child may better promote positive child outcomes, given that distance is a particularly strong predictor of frequency of visits (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015). This finding also brings to light important implications for policies surrounding incarceration, which are discussed further below.

#### 4.1 | Strengths, limitations and future research directions

There are a few limitations to the current study that should be acknowledged when interpreting findings. First, we did not have detailed information about incarceration and release dates for parents; therefore, we constrained our sample to include only children who had an incarcerated parent at the baseline assessment and controlled for whether the child had an incarcerated caregiver at the 12-month assessment. Some children's parents were released from prison throughout the course of the study, which may have affected the parent–child relationship. Similarly, we did not have detailed information regarding the length of the incarcerated parent's incarceration. Although some were incarcerated for short periods and others for the child's entire life, information was limited and prevented the inclusion of this variable to analyses despite its importance to the parent–child relationship.

In addition, participants in the current study were engaged in a mentoring programme, which could have washed out some potential effects, although this was included as a covariate. It may be that the social support children were receiving from a non-parental adult could have also influenced psychosocial outcomes such as depression and loneliness across the whole sample and biased findings. However, the mentoring programme likely gave children a relatively 'lightly dosed' intervention, as the mentoring activities were primarily non-specific, non-targeted friendship model programmes that other studies demonstrate did not have much empirical effect (e.g., Dubois et al., 2002; Stump et al., 2018). In addition, children and parents continued to participate in the study, regardless of whether they were still participating in the mentoring programme. Parents who seek out programmes like mentoring, however, may be inherently different than parents who do not, leading to potential self-selection bias.

These parents might feel less shame or more acceptance of the situation with the incarcerated parent and have demonstrated their interest and ability to seek out supplementary support services, which could influence outcomes as well as the child's relationship with the incarcerated parent. Future studies should continue to examine children of incarcerated parents in larger samples and outside the context of mentoring programmes. In addition, to the extent possible, future studies could gather data from the perspective of the incarcerated parent to gain a more holistic picture of this critical understudied, marginalized population and relevant research questions.

Only children and parents who completed surveys at baseline, 6 months and 12 months were included in analyses, potentially limiting the dataset to participants who are more conscientious about study participation, less likely to move away and easier to contact. These factors should be considered when generalizing findings from this study to the broader population of children of incarcerated parents.

Further, given that this study used secondary data that had been collected for a previous purpose, there were constraints and limitations in the variables available for analysis. Datasets did not include neighbourhood-level factors, other protective supportive relationships children may have had, or detailed information about the parent's incarceration. We did not have information about the reason for the incarceration, thus making it challenging to understand potential reasons for the frequency or infrequency with which a custodial parent may take their child to visit their incarcerated parent. Moreover, several of the psychosocial outcomes (i.e., life purpose and life satisfaction) were based on two-item scales. These outcomes may be more robust using further indicators. Further variables that would have been worthwhile to explore as covariates include detailed information about the visit (e.g., length, face-to-face or through plexiglass, and structure) and other forms of communication (e.g., calls and letters) for which the child was engaged to maintain contact with the incarcerated parent. Although the study controlled for parent–child relationship at baseline, it did not capture the relationship prior to the start of incarceration, which may have further altered study findings.

Finally, only custodial caregiver's report of the quality of the child's relationship with the incarcerated parent was included in the current study. Thus, it is not known whether these relationships between visit frequency, relationship quality with the incarcerated parent, and psychosocial outcomes hold or are different based on the child's perception of their relationship with their incarcerated parent. Similarly, the study did not survey incarcerated parents to understand their perception of the relationship with their children. This could have provided further insight on the relationship and its correlations with variables of interest.

Despite these limitations, there were a number of strengths to the current study. Even though we had to reduce the number of participants in our final analyses, the current study still has a sample size that is considered quite large for this niche, vulnerable and hard to reach population. In addition, we controlled for many covariates, which allowed for greater confidence in the true effects of our results

by accounting for confounding factors related to demographic and behavioural characteristics as well as baseline measures. Relatedly, we maximized our ability to draw more causal conclusions by establishing temporal precedence through the longitudinal nature of this study, which few previous studies have done. Future research studies should continue to investigate the mechanisms of outcomes as well as circumstances surrounding the incarceration to gain insight and better understand this phenomenon.

## 4.2 | Policy implications and recommendations

The current study adds to the growing literature related to children of incarcerated parents and has very clear and significant implications for policies relating to parent incarceration. Taken together, findings from this study outline some of the benefits of children having access to their incarcerated parents, contradicting some previous literature that suggests visiting is not ‘worth the risk’ or that it has the potential to elicit significant psychological distress in children (e.g., Schlafer et al., 2019).

However, visits can be inherently physically and emotionally draining, so eliminating any additional barriers can significantly assist families. For example, the monetization of fundamental human connection in this context is apparent through phone calls costing upwards of \$24 for a 15-min call with additional hidden fees (Wagner & Jones, 2019) and far distances that families must often travel to visit their loved ones. Practical applications and changes include requiring facilities to provide transportation to families to increase accessibility and encourage visits. Furthermore, dehumanizing practices that still occur in many prisons, such as strip- and dog-searching of visiting family members (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015), may discourage families, particularly those with young children, from connecting with incarcerated family members. Research also shows that in-person contact is most beneficial for children, especially when facilities offer activities and family support programmes for children to engage in with their parent (Poehlmann-Tynan & Pritzel, 2019). The elimination of exploitive economic hurdles, overly restrictive policies and other barriers to visiting will also serve to combat the prison-industrial complex and the oppression inherent in incarceration.

Sentencing must also take geographical proximity into consideration. Currently, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) determines incarceration location on a limited number of factors, including, ‘bed availability, [inmate] security designation, [inmate’s] programmatic needs, [inmate’s] mental and medical health needs, any [inmate request] related to faith-based needs, recommendations of the sentencing court, and other security concerns of the BOP’ (Bureau of Prisons, 2020). These vague criteria, particularly the last two, may allow for opportunistic jurisdictions with hidden agendas to incarcerate individuals, placing them in inaccessible, isolated areas far from their families, to the outskirts of society and the public eye. Indeed, the majority of individuals (63%) in state prisons are located over 100 miles from their families and homes (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015). Policies relating to the distance of prison location, how location is

decided and visiting rights must be overhauled to rectify and prevent inhumane practices from occurring in the future.

As a result of the typically vast distances between families and their incarcerated loved ones, recommendations have been made for virtual visits (i.e., using computer-based video technology) as an alternative to in-person visits. Although video visits may potentially help decrease common barriers to in-person visits such as distance and the stigma of physically entering a correctional facility (Martin, 2016), more harm than good is likely to result from this approach, as virtual visits have a strong potential to reify the prison-industrial complex (i.e., the profiteering of social issues such as poverty, housing insecurity, mental illness and substance use through privatized correctional institutionalization). Although some suggest the relative benefits to video visits compared with letters or phone calls alone, this practice may also eliminate or replace in-person visits to the detriment of both the parent who is incarcerated and their children. One study from the Prison Policy Initiative found that ‘74% of jails banned in-person visits when they implemented video visitation’ (Rabuy & Wagner, 2015). In addition, virtual visits require that the families and loved ones of the incarcerated person have access to technology, which is not always possible. Further, when technology is available, challenges in using the technology or the quality of technology available are common for all parties involved (Digard et al., 2017). Much like phone calls, virtual visits also pose often impossible economic barriers to families through fees that can rise to \$12.95 or more for just a 30-min video call (Digard et al., 2017). This is yet another example of exploitive profiteering practices, as the incarceration of a parent often increases financial strains and exacerbates poverty in a family (Phillips, 2012).

Taken together, the policy implications from the current study are clear and actionable. Efforts should be focused on remediating oppressive and harmful sentencing procedures that do not take geographical proximity into consideration. In addition, policymakers should work to de-privatize prisons to prevent the capitalization of human suffering, particularly through restrictive in-person and video visiting policies. On a broader level, work must also be done to resist and dismantle the prison-industrial complex, mass incarceration, police brutality and pervasive systemic racism. Part of this work will be to implement alternatives to incarceration, such as community-based or non-custodial sentencing when possible, which allows parents to maintain custody and residence with their children (Goldman et al., 2019). Other alternatives include substituting physical incarceration with enrollment in relevant evidence-based mental health and social services programmes (Goldman et al., 2019). These policy and practice recommendations will increase the feasibility of parents maintaining vital relationships with their children, which in turn, has the potential to significantly increase child well-being.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

A majority of the extant studies of children of incarcerated parents have focused on outcomes alone, rather than critical factors that might be associated with these outcomes, such as visits and parent-

child relationship quality. Using data from one of the largest studies of children of incarcerated parents to date, results from the current study revealed a significant positive association between children's visits with their incarcerated parent and child-parent relationship quality, which was in turn associated with children's life purpose and depression/loneliness. Findings from this study suggest the importance of visiting and fostering a high-quality parent-child relationship, as well as a number of critical implications for policies. When addressed, these shifts in policies relating not only to visit practices, but incarceration in general, have the potential to significantly improve the lives of children and incarcerated parents alike.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

## ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

This manuscript is in compliance with APA ethical principles in the treatment of research participants and has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

## PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from parents, and youth assented to participation at the start of the survey.

## PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES

All necessary permissions have been obtained.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

To remain compliant with ethical guidelines set forth by our Institutional Review Board, data are unable to be shared with outside researchers.

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