

BEYONDTHE BARS – EXPLORING THE LIVES OF EXONEREES AND THEIR
LOVED ONES AS THEY COPE WITH MISCARRIAGES OF JUSTICE

By

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To Jenn Jarrett. I wish you were here to experience this alongside me. Thank you for welcoming me to the University with such open arms and being a mentor to me. Rest in peace, Jenn

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AVP	Alternatives to Violence Project
CIP	California Innocence Project
CO	Correctional Officers
FST	Family Systems Theory
GT	Grounded Theory
IRB	Institutional Review Board
LEAD	Legal Eyewitness & Applied Decision Making in Psychology & Law Lab
PI	Principal Investigator
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress. Disorder
RA	Research Assistant
SFT	Structural Family Therapy
UF	University of Florida

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In recent years, wrongful conviction research has grown significantly, expanding our knowledge of those factors leading to wrongful conviction. A smaller, but significant body of literature has addressed our understanding of what it means for individuals to experience being convicted of a crime that they did not commit. Still, many questions are left unanswered – particularly regarding how those closest to the exoneree, termed secondary exonerees, coped with and experienced the miscarriage of justice. In this project, I examined these issues more closely to gather a clearer picture of the wider impact of a wrongful conviction.

This project is qualitative in nature and focuses on the lived experiences of individuals who have been wrongfully convicted of crimes they did not commit and the experiences of their loved ones. I conducted 35 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with primary and secondary exonerees, totaling 142 hours of interview data. Participants were asked general questions about the entirety of their experience and specific topics about social support and family dynamics, mental health, and social services (availability, need, and recommendations), impacts on relationships with loved ones, stigmatization, labeling and community reactions, post-release experiences and

barriers to employment, compensation and support, and perceptions of the criminal justice system and social justice activism.

I utilized a grounded theory approach involving memo writing, theoretical sampling, and constant comparative method to develop themes, codes, and theories for further exploration. Using this method, I focused on the following two themes: 1) the bond between exonerees and their mothers and the impact of wrongful conviction on this relationship and 2) incarceration-induced age stagnation and the impact of this phenomenon on exonerees' social relationships post-release, particularly when it came to peer and romantic relationships. Policy implications, limitations, and directions for future research are discussed based on research findings.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The National Registry of Exonerations reports 2,668 exonerations since 1989, totaling more than 23,950 total years lost behind bars (National Registry of Exonerations, 2020). This number only begins to scratch the surface, with the Innocence Project conservatively estimating that about 20,000 innocent individuals are currently incarcerated in the United States (Innocence Project, 2011). Wrongful convictions can have a far-reaching impact – not only on those who were convicted but also on individuals who were close to them.

Much of the early literature on wrongful conviction focused on identifying and creating science-based practices to address the causes of these miscarriages of justice (i.e., eyewitness testimony, false confessions, jailhouse informants). While these causes are important to investigate, it is equally vital that we continue to expand the lens of wrongful conviction research to examine the social, psychological, and economic consequences of wrongful conviction among *all* of those impacted by miscarriages of justice. Many well-known scholars in the field have highlighted this need (Jenkins, 2013; Scott, 2009, Norris, 2019). More recently, there has been a push towards reframing the way we research and discuss wrongful conviction and to examine their social and psychological impacts on exonerees and their loved ones (Norris, 2019).

Research that explores the wider social and psychological impacts of wrongful conviction from the perspective of the exoneree (Westervelt & Cook, 2009) primarily does so by conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups with exonerees (Grounds, 2004; Scott, 2009). Qualitative research is useful for investigating how wrongful conviction affected exonerated individuals' relationships and social networks and how it

is experienced by the families and friends of exonerees. Interviews and observations allow researchers to better understand the first-hand lived experiences of those they study. Despite a growth in this kind of research, first-person experiences of exonerees' loved ones have yet to be fully explored within the literature. This limits our full understanding of the impact of a wrongful conviction by diminishing our ability to determine the totality of consequences that result when an innocent person is convicted of a crime. Further, this lack of research may create unnecessary barriers for those impacted by wrongful conviction to access needed social services and support. The current project seeks to expand our knowledge about the impact of a wrongful conviction on the wrongfully convicted individuals and their loved ones.

Orienting to the Problem

Over the last decade, research has examined the collateral consequences of imprisonment on the families of the incarcerated. Most of this work has focused on the behavioral, psychological, and financial impacts of incarceration on the romantic partners and children of inmates. Comfort (2003) discussed the concept of “secondary prisonization” to describe how these individuals are impacted by a coercive penal system both indirectly and directly. Specifically, “by producing changes and disruption in the personal, domestic, and social worlds of people who are not themselves sentenced to confinement, secondary prisonization ultimately extends the reach and intensity of the transformative effects of the correctional facility” (Comfort, 2009, p. 297).

Borrowing from this framework, I will examine how the incarceration and wrongful conviction of exonerees impacted their loved ones. As such, I will use the term *secondary exoneree* to refer to the loved ones of a wrongfully convicted individual from this point forward. That is, the term secondary exoneree will refer to individuals who

have not been wrongfully convicted themselves but have been impacted by a wrongful conviction because of the close nature of their relationship with an exoneree. These individuals include children, close friends, romantic partners, parents, grandparents, and siblings of wrongfully convicted individuals, that is, individuals who were convicted of a crime they did not commit and were subsequently released. Primary exonerees or simply exonerees, then, include anyone who has been convicted of a crime they did not commit.

Using a “social harms” definition of state crime allows for an examination of both exonerees and their loved ones as victims of “socially injurious acts committed by the state [which have caused harm] or [violated their] human rights.” Kauzlarich, Matthews, and Miller (2001, p. 176) provided the following definition of state crime victims:

individuals or groups of individuals who have experienced economic, cultural, or physical harm, pain, exclusion, or exploitation because of tacit or explicit state actions or policies which violate the law or generally defined human rights.

Expanding on concepts introduced by Westervelt and Cook (2010), I seek to broaden the scope of who we consider victims of the state to include secondary exonerees. The harms secondary exonerees suffer due to a miscarriage of justice must be taken into account to truly understand the totality of unintended consequences that result when an innocent person is convicted of a crime. Using this framework, we can explore the harms endured at the hands of the state, regardless of whether the harmful action would be legally defined as a ‘crime’ (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Though secondary exonerees may not be convicted and/or incarcerated for a crime, they are certainly impacted by these miscarriages of justice. Due to the more indirect harm secondary exonerees experience, their stories are often not examined within the

wrongful conviction literature. This is problematic, because it limits our full understanding of the problem and consequences when a miscarriage of justice occurs.

Conceptualizing victims of wrongful conviction as victims of the state allows for a deep examination of the challenges these individuals face during various stages of involvement with the justice system as well as the possible long-lasting impacts of a wrongful conviction. This framework opens the door for a discussion on policies that might be enacted to prevent or reduce these negative outcomes and provide relief to both primary and secondary victims of a flawed justice system. It allows blame to be traced back to systematic failures – rather than pointing to one person or cause.

Specific Aims of Current Project

Though some studies have provided insight into the lives of secondary exonerees, the existing literature tends to focus predominantly on the impact the wrongful conviction has on the interpersonal relationships between the exoneree and their immediate family following release from prison. Since research suggests that the negative impact of a conviction on family members begins prior to sentencing (Sharp, 2005), more research is needed to determine the total impact of a wrongful conviction on the lives and relationships of those closest to the exoneree from first accusation to after release. I seek to fill this gap in the current research by examining the first-person experiences of secondary exonerees at all stages and levels of the conviction process – including their reactions and perceptions of the crime investigation, interrogation, arrest, trial/plea arrangement, imprisonment, release/exoneration, and post-release living. I expect a variety of individual (i.e., age, personality characteristics, level of involvement in case/alibi provided, closeness to crime victim, belief in innocence), relational (i.e., relationship type, closeness with accused), and situational/case-specific factors (i.e.,

strength of evidence, official misconduct present or absent, racial makeup of jury/legal actors, and number/type of contributing causes of conviction) to be important in this respect.

To extend previous research and fill the aforementioned gaps, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews to gain insight into the first-person experiences of primary and secondary exonerees at all stages of the wrongful conviction process. This project explored family dynamics, determined the level and quality of social support provided to both groups, examined whether interpersonal relationships were altered temporarily and/or permanently, and looked at how role and responsibilities shifted within the family unit. After identifying the specific needs and experiences of primary and secondary exonerees and the interpersonal challenges they face, I provided recommendations for what types of social services may be necessary to address these needs.

Interviews with secondary exonerees not only provided insight into how the wrongful conviction impacted their own lives, but because of their close relationships to exonerees, these individuals were able to provide unique insight into the lives, interpersonal relationships, and family dynamics of exonerees as well. This approach allowed me to examine previously neglected experiences, ultimately making it possible to paint a more complete picture of the true impact a wrongful conviction has on someone's life.

The data collected as part of this project will be useful in developing numerous projects and analyses moving forward. Despite collecting a wide variety of information on an extensive number of topics, and from several different types of secondary exonerees, during data collection, I chose to focus on analyzing the themes associated

with one main type of secondary exoneree relationship – the relationship between exonerees and their mothers. I chose to focus on exonerees' mothers because these secondary exonerees emerged as the primary supporter for most cases. As such, I decided to analyze the experience of these mothers and the relationships between exonerees and their mothers in depth.

In addition to this major theme, during data collection, I chose to focus on a second theme that emerged. At first, this theme might seem less related to the overarching focus on secondary exonerees and exonerees' social relationships. However, this second theme centers around a psychosocial phenomenon exonerees experienced, age stagnation, which impacted their ability to maintain and form social relationships with others. Specifically, exonerees reported experiencing delays in psychosocial maturity; they also described feeling significantly younger than their actual age. As part of my examination of this second theme, I was able to incorporate other secondary exoneree relationship types such as romantic partners and peers/friends.

Using a Grounded Theory Approach

Grounded theory (GT) is considered to be a method and a theory (Elliott & Higgins, 2012; Emerson, 2001). As a method, it provides guidelines to identify categories, links, and relationships (Emerson, 2001; Charmaz, 2014). Key strategies involved in GT as a method include constant comparative analysis, theoretical sampling, theoretical coding, and memo writing. GT helps generate theory through the coding process which ultimately provides the framework to better understand the phenomena being studied (Emerson, 2001).

GT focuses on building theory, creating meaning from the data themselves. A constructivist grounded theory approach has been chosen for the current project as

outlined by Charmaz (2014). Grounded theorists are supposed to “minimize preconceptions to ensure the concept of interest is grounded in data, yet at the same time [they] are required to evaluate existing literature to support institutional ethics and scientific review of the research proposal” (Cited in: El Hussein, Kennedy, Oliver, 2017, p. 1199).

As a qualitative researcher with interest in wrongful conviction, my understanding of the current literature examining the accounts of exonerees is part of my own experience, which might color my interpretation of the data. Reiterating the recommendations of Charmaz (2006) and Stebbins (2001), a “preliminary literature review [provides] context and [sensitizes] knowledge and understanding of the relevant issues and topics” (Cited in: El Hussein, Kennedy, & Oliver, 2017, p. 1200). I believe it is important to ground any emergent theories in previous knowledge. Thus, outlining the research that has contributed to my previous knowledge is the logical next step. Hence, Chapter 2 focuses on research that examines exonerees’ experiences and a review of the research on secondary exonerees.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of what we know about the experiences of those impacted by wrongful conviction comes from qualitative interviews with exonerees themselves. Within this literature, the focus is typically on psychological impacts of a wrongful conviction, the aftermath of the wrongful conviction, and the stigmatization of exonerees. I will break this chapter into two sections – one focused on exonerees’ experiences and one on secondary exoneree experiences. In the first part of this section, I will review literature that focuses specifically on the experience of the exoneree, at times borrowing from literature examining the experiences of rightfully incarcerated persons as they may overlap with the experiences of exonerees. I will discuss literature on the psychological impacts of wrongful conviction and incarceration, the impacts of labeling and stigmatization, post-release experiences and barriers, impacts of social support, and their involvement in social justice work and activism.

For this project, I have chosen to use a broad definition which includes exonerees who have been formally exonerated and found ‘actually innocent’ by the courts, have had their convictions overturned, and those whose cases have been handled by an organization within the Innocence Network. This allows for the inclusion of individuals who may have been paroled or had their sentences commuted. Part of the mission of the Innocence Project is to help release wrongfully convicted individuals by any means, which sometimes includes parole or commutation of a sentence. I have made this decision because I think it is important to understand the breadth of exonerees’ experiences across different types of exoneration. This broad inclusion will

help close the gap within the current literature, some of which has strictly focused on those who have been found ‘actually innocent.’

Compared to research available that specifically examines exonerees directly, there is significantly less research available on the direct experiences of secondary exonerees. The few qualitative studies which directly observed secondary exonerees will be extensively reviewed (e.g., Jenkins, 2013; Jeudy, 2019; Grounds, 2004); these focus primarily on the psychological and behavioral impacts the wrongful conviction had on spouses and children of exonerees, the stigmatization experienced by the family, and how relationships changed throughout the arrest, incarceration, and release of the exoneree. Many secondary exonerees express feelings that their loved one became a different person as a result of the wrongful conviction. To better understand how incarceration impacts families, I will also explore some of the literature on families and loved ones of rightfully incarcerated individuals as we might expect a logical connection in the shared experience of having a loved one in the system.

By reviewing the literature on exoneree experiences and the literature on the experiences of their loved ones, I can identify themes that may emerge in examining my research questions regarding what type and level of social support exonerees have and how this social support impacts their experience with wrongful conviction. In addition, by including literature on those who have been rightfully convicted and their families, I will identify gaps in our understanding of how social relationships influence experiences of prisonization and how secondary prisonization looks for loved ones of incarcerated folks.

Exoneree Experiences

Like other formerly incarcerated individuals, exonerees report suffering from psychological trauma, long-term mental health issues, and stigmatization (Grounds, 2004; Scott, 2009; Shlosberg, Mandery, West, & Callaghan, 2014; Clow & Leach, 2015). Beyond this, research suggests that the experience of the wrongful conviction itself may result in greater negative consequences for exonerees than rightfully incarcerated persons (Campbell & Denov, 2004). This additional negative impact likely stems from the unjust nature of their imprisonment and may be exacerbated once the individual is released from incarceration. For exonerees, release from prison is marked by unique experiences such as a lack of post-release programming, support, or housing combined with a sudden release and inability to transition back into the community (Grounds, 2004; Campbell & Denov, 2004; Westervelt & Cook, 2010; Shlosberg, Mandery, West, & Callaghan, 2014).

Psychological Impact of Wrongful Conviction on Exonerees

Research consistently finds that exonerees experience mental health problems, including depression, PTSD, and anxiety (Grounds, 2004; Mallik-Kane & Visher, 2008; Bronson & Berzofsky, 2017; Bloch et al., 2020; Wildeman, Costelloe, & Schehr, 2011). Studies tend to suggest that these problems arise during incarceration, but they often persist after the person's release, which might lead to future substance use, more long-term psychological problems (Petersilia 2003, James & Glaze, 2006; Chandler & Fletcher, 2009; Chamberlain, et.al., 2019), and diminished long-term psychological health (Gonzalez & Connell, 2014; Wilper, et al., 2009).

In one well-known study, Grounds (2004) conducted in-depth psychiatric assessments of 18 wrongfully convicted men, following their release from prison, to

more closely examine the psychological consequences these miscarriages of justice may have. Findings suggest that exonerees endure significant psychological trauma, with 14 of the 18 men meeting diagnostic criteria for “enduring personality change following [a] catastrophic experience” (p. 165). Twelve of the men met criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and most reported additional mood and anxiety disorders (Grounds, 2004). The severity of psychological consequences for exonerees was compared to that of war veterans, indicating problems with psychological and social adjustment.

In another study, Wildeman and colleagues (2011) conducted interviews with 55 exonerees, finding that 22% of their participants reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, PTSD, or a combination of these disorders – a much greater prevalence rate than exists among the general population. Wildeman et al. (2011) further explained that financial resources were necessary to address the mental health needs of exoneree, suggesting that these resources should be part of the post-release compensation package.

Labeling, Stigmatization, and Discrimination

Labeling theory explains how criminal offending can be perpetuated by being labeled a criminal. Normally, this occurs after an individual commits a crime and becomes ensnared in the criminal justice system. Exonerees’ involvement in the justice system is not be precipitated by an act of criminality. Still, they are recipients of the criminal title and thus, stigmatization still results. According to Davis (1972), it is the societal process of stigmatization which may transform one’s conception of self. Thus, even if no initial crime has been committed, the ‘name-calling’ or labeling that accompanies the conviction can have a lasting impact on how exonerees are seen by

society and, potentially, how they see themselves. “[T]he experience of being labeled by social control agencies may result in an alteration of personal identity, an exclusion from the normal routines of everyday life, and a greater involvement in delinquent acts” (Paternoster and Iovanni, 1989, p. 363).

To conceptualize the ways in which exonerees and their loved ones may experience stigma and labeling, I will draw on Goffman’s (1963) classic theory of stigma. According to Goffman (1963), stigma is a discrediting label which “marks” individuals to indicate that they “should be discounted from society” (Blandisi, Clow, & Ricciardelli, 2015). Marked individuals are perceived as “tainted [and] disregarded” in the minds of others and considered bad, weak, dangerous, and different from others (Goffman, 1963, p. 3; Blandisi, Clow, & Ricciardelli, 2015; Clow, Blandisi, Ricciardelli, 2011).

Though some exonerees may be able to choose whether to divulge their past to others or not, media coverage and publicity of their case might result in widespread knowledge of their situation. Further, some exonerees may be exonerated for the crime they were convicted of, but their record may not be expunged, resulting in a necessity to disclose their conviction upon applying for housing or jobs. Thus, these dangerous labels are conceivably applied to exonerees—especially if their cases are publicized—further contributing to their stigmatization (Clow, Ricciardelli, & Cain, 2012). This may be particularly true when the original crime occurred in a smaller town or when the case was highly sensationalized. Exonerees may be criticized because they have been incarcerated, but they also might experience stigma because of others’ perceptions

about the psychological trauma they experienced and the likelihood that they may have mental health issues (Saini, 2018).

Social Support While Incarcerated

There seems to be mixed evidence regarding whether prison visitation has a positive or negative impact on the psychological well-being and relationship quality of those involved. According to Jenkins (2013), family visitation, especially visits from exonerees's children, were vital for bonding and "symbolically demonstrating the family's need to 'stick together' and 'fight the conviction' (p. 23). Other studies among rightfully incarcerated individuals show that child visits can be associated with emotional distress, uncomfortable and unfriendly visitation environments, and limited opportunities for meaningful contact (Arditti, 2003; Loper et al., 2009). In particular, concerns about visitors transporting illegal substances and other contraband into prisons may lead to traumatic and degrading experiences for visitors resulting in diminished dignity for the loved ones of a prisoner (Haney, 2003; Jeudy, 2019). Specifically, strip searches and rude treatment from guards can even impact children of prisoners (Haney, 2003). Hairston (1991) found that a majority of jailed parents they interviewed did not wish for a visit from their children because of concerns about transportation costs, visitation and security conditions, and worries that the visit would be emotionally upsetting for the children.

Adjusting to Life Beyond the Bars

Negative stigma does not just impact wrongfully convicted persons at the time of arrest; rather, research shows that exoneree stigma exists even after an individual has been released from prison and been found to be "actually innocent" (Thompson, Molina, & Levett, 2011). This presents an additional barrier to reintegration for exonerees. They

may struggle to re-enter their communities or hometowns due to the perceptions other community members may have about them.

Thompson and colleagues (2011) explained how correspondence bias might perpetuate this stigma following an exoneree's release. Specifically, correspondence bias is the tendency for observers to attribute others' behaviors or situations to dispositional rather than situational factors, even when the situational factors are primarily responsible for the behavior (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Applied to exonerees, observers may attribute the exoneree's initial conviction to the "exoneree's perceived inherent criminality rather than to a flaw in the criminal justice system" (p. 1377). Borrowing from labeling theory, one begins to understand how labeling an individual as inherently criminal or delinquent might increase the likelihood of "secondary deviance" by the labeled individual. In the case of exonerees, no "primary deviance" might have actually occurred, yet due to being labeled as deviant, they might be at a greater risk for engaging in criminal behavior or for other negative outcomes.

Though one might believe that the majority of problems occur at the time exonerees are convicted or while they are incarcerated, research shows that difficulties experienced by exonerees may be long-lasting and that the impact of the wrongful conviction follows them long after their release from prison (Grounds, 2004). Once an exoneree has been exonerated and/or released from incarceration, they face many new challenges, including adapting to new technologies, obtaining a steady job and income, and reestablishing familial relationships or developing new relationships. Research has shown that exonerees face housing, job, and racial discrimination similar to that of rightfully incarcerated individuals (Grounds, 2004; Scott, 2009; Kukucka, Applegarth, &

Mello, 2020; Goldberg, Guillen, Herndandez, & Levett, 2020). Unfortunately, because they are not provided with the same resources (i.e., social services, parole, job training, halfway house residency) as are rightfully incarcerated individuals, they may face additional obstacles in obtaining these goals (Kukucka, Applegarth, & Mello, 2020; Goldberg, Guillen, Hernandez, & Levett, 2020).

Long-term prisoners are normally provided with or assigned to statutory services and supervision following their release from prison. These services often include things like “graded moves to open conditions, working-out schemes and home visits, and supervision and support from a probation or a parole officer” (Grounds, 2004, p. 171). These features of release often help get former convicts adjusted to life beyond the bars in an incremental manner. Alternatively, exonerees do not receive the same types of social services following their release, which can make the transition from prison much more challenging.

Currently, 35 states and the federal government have a compensation statute in place for exonerees. However, compensation is often insufficient and difficult to obtain even in states where it is available for exonerees (Goldberg et al., 2020). Some states consider an exoneree’s prior criminal record in determining compensation eligibility. In Florida, for example, individuals who had a felony conviction prior to their wrongful conviction are ineligible for compensation (Goldberg et al, 2020). Similarly, in Texas a prior conviction would result in a reduced compensation benefit for an exoneree (Goldberg, et al., 2020). Even if exonerees are fully eligible to attain compensation, the pursuit of compensation is likely to be extraordinarily costly, time consuming, and potentially re-traumatizing for exonerees and their family (Goldberg, et al., 2020).

Beyond issues of obtaining compensation, exonerees often experience difficulties gaining employment and/or expunging their criminal record – even if they have been formally exonerated. In a study conducted by Kukucka, Applegarth, and Mello (2020), hiring professionals were presented with job applicants who were either convicted offenders, exonerees, or someone with no criminal history. Other than these differences, the job applications were identical on all other factors. Results of the study indicated that both exonerees and offenders were seen less favorably than the applicant with no criminal background. Additionally, the exoneree applicant was offered a lower wage compared with the applicant who had no criminal background. Since exonerees do not have the same access to job assistance as parolees, finding a job may be more difficult for them (Goldberg, et al., 2020).

Since exonerees often face difficulties when attempting to get their criminal records cleared through expungement, their ability to attain a job may be hindered further. Expungement does not happen automatically, and only four states include language in their statutes that address expunging an exoneree's criminal record (Norris, 2012; Shlosberg, Mandery, West, & Callaghan, 2014). One study found that exonerees were significantly more likely to engage in post-exoneration offending when they were unable to expunge their criminal records (Shlosberg, Mandery, West, & Callaghan, 2014). This study supports the aforementioned labeling research that having an external, societal label of "criminal" is associated with a greater likelihood of offending. The stigma associated with having committed a crime and the resulting lack of resources available (i.e., housing, employment, finances) may increase the likelihood that an exoneree will offend in the future (Paternoster and Iovanni, 1989).

Some exonerees engage in social justice activism to cope with the injustice they experienced. According to Jenkins (2013, p. 123), “their campaign of innocence appeared to represent an opportunity to transform their perceptions of self” that had been spoiled by the charge and conviction. The Innocence Network and other organizations throughout the world provide opportunities for exonerees to gather and connect with one another, while fighting for change and reform within a justice system that they often view as deeply flawed. Exonerees who have this opportunity to network and share common experiences with other exonerees may be able to prevent or reduce negative views of themselves.

Experiences of Secondary Exonerees

Recent evidence suggests that the emotional and psychological trauma, which follow a wrongful conviction, may not be limited to the exoneree but may extend to their loved ones as well (Juedy, 2019; Jenkins, 2013; Grounds, 2004; Scott 2009). Typically, the experiences of secondary exonerees have been discussed in the literature in terms of interpersonal challenges encountered by exonerees, but these accounts are almost always secondary narratives provided by exonerees rather than their family members. Some of this literature focuses on the impact the wrongful conviction had on social relationships following exoneration, but less research exists that directly examines the experiences of secondary exonerees. In one study, Jenkins (2013) explored how miscarriages of justice affected the family members of wrongfully convicted individuals living in the United Kingdom based primarily on interviews with children and significant others of exonerees (primarily women). In a similar qualitative study, Juedy (2019) conducted in-depth interviews with 13 individuals whose parent had been wrongfully

convicted in the United States during their childhood. Findings from both of these studies are discussed in the sections below.

Impact on Children of Exonerees

Research has shown that children with incarcerated parents may experience depression, aggressive behavior, regression, eating disorders withdrawal, detachment, low self-esteem, behavioral problems, and poor school performance (Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Sharp & Marcus-Mendoza, 2001; Stanton & Lutt 1981; Eddy & Reid, 2003; Johnston, 1995). Even though these problems may be experienced by families of both wrongfully and rightfully convicted individuals, there is a sense of injustice experienced by an exoneree's family, which may lead to resentment of the justice system and a belief that the system is illegitimate (Jenkins, 2013; Grounds, 2004; Tyler et al., 2014).

Studies have found that children of wrongfully convicted persons tend to experience a great deal of suffering both prior to and after their loved one's release (Scott, 2009; Jenkins, 2013; Jeudy, 2019). Jeudy's (2019) study examining children of exonerees showed that the majority of participants listing symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Five of the 13 participants reported attempting suicide at least once, and all participants reported experiencing some academic challenges at the time of their parent's arrest and conviction. Moreover, many had difficulties trusting others and were unable to maintain steady relationships throughout their lifetimes.

Of the 13 children of exonerees Jenkins (2013) interviewed, 9 indicated they had experienced bullying and suffered from stigma as a result of the conviction. Further, these children indicated that "[their] experiences led to profound unhappiness, culminating in depression and loss of confidence, with some reporting that they had lost friends and access to important social circles" (p. 125). It seems children of exonerees

often feel isolated and alone. According to Jeudy (2019), the left-behind children of exonerees expressed that they “had endured the wrath of wrongful conviction in silence and never had a chance to speak their feelings” (p. 116). Since much of the family’s focus is on the exoneree, it may be difficult for the children involved to get the help and support that they need.

Post-Release– Family Unit Adjustments to Having the Exoneree Back at Home

The psychological impact of a wrongful conviction does not cease once the exoneree is released and returns home. Similar to military war veterans, exonerees often face additional challenges after they return home and may never truly be able to fully return to the person that they were prior to their justice system involvement. This can be a particularly difficult situation for their loved ones to handle and is likely to have a negative impact on their lives and well-being (Grounds, 2004). Scott (2009) explained that exonerees often are ill equipped to step into a parenting role, leaving their children feeling hurt and abandoned after they return home from prison. Further, personality changes were evidenced by exonerees’ loved ones following their release from prison, with many loved ones reporting feeling like the exoneree was no longer the person they used to be. One mother stated:

He is like a stranger to you ... He always used to be affectionate. Now he can't express emotion, he can't sit and talk. He jumps about, he is unsettled. Prison has changed him. His personality has changed (Grounds, 2004, p. 168).

Loved ones explained that the exonerees had hostile or mistrustful attitudes, felt empty, hopeless, threatened, and estranged, and were socially withdrawn. These realizations were accompanied by feelings of shock, distress, and despair among secondary exonerees (Grounds, 2004).

Further, Jenkins (2013) suggested that children of exonerees may be especially susceptible to continued feelings of anxiety and depression, even after their parent has been released. In some cases, loved ones may be resentful and have trouble adjusting to life with the exoneree back at home. For example, one exoneree, Kristine Bunch, expressed that her son and mother had difficulties adjusting to the new power dynamics once Kristine returned home after over a decade of absence (Flower, 2016).

For children of exonerees, consequences are not limited to psychological effects. Murray and Farrington (2005) found that parental imprisonment is a risk factor for delinquency among boys. Though research has suggested that this delinquency may be a form of mimicking parental criminality (Sack, 1977), when it comes to the children of exonerees, it appears that their engagement in anti-social behavior is more of a “means of challenging authority, particularly against criminal justice agencies” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 125). Research on secondary exonerees supports this, with eight of the 13 participants in Judy’s (2019) study reporting involvement in the juvenile justice system prior to age 18, including involvement in drug trafficking, illegal drug or alcohol consumption, aggravated assault, and in one case – manslaughter. Collectively, these findings shed light on the potential hardship, trauma, and long-term consequences of wrongful convictions that may extend to the secondary exoneree.

Stigmatization and Labeling

Stigmatization does not necessarily stop with the exoneree; rather, it extends to secondary exonerees as well, sometimes resulting in isolation, negativity, and judgement from the community (Westervelt & Cook, 2012). Studies with rightfully incarcerated individuals suggest that the social stigmatization that exists for incarcerated individuals may extend to the whole family (Peters & Corrado, 2013).

Condry (2010) used the term “family blaming” to describe what happens when the families of offenders become targets of societal disapproval. This blame ultimately leads to stigmatization of the relatives of an offender. Based on this research, it is a logical prediction that social stigmatization might also be felt by secondary exonerees as a result of their loved one’s incarceration. Jenkins (2013, p. 122) found that “most families, including their children, shared that they had been labelled, stereotyped and discriminated against because of their family’s experience of wrongful conviction.”

In their book, *Life After Death Row*, Westervelt and Cook (2012) explored some of the ways secondary exonerees experienced stigma, following the release of eighteen exonerees from death row. One of the exonerees, Greg Wilhoit, discussed how difficult the entire ordeal was on his parents:

[My parents], they lost their identity pretty much. Everywhere they went they were like the mother or the father of an individual so vile and so reprehensible that not only had he forfeited his right to live in society, he’d forfeited his right to live altogether. Try living with that. My parents, you know, they did it for nine years (p. 83).

Stigma can be particularly pervasive and harmful to secondary exonerees, as demonstrated in the above quote. Stigma often leads to neighbors, friends, and other family members distancing themselves from the family. In some cases, the stigma, bullying, and other pressures experienced by families may force children to change schools, adults to quit jobs, and the complete family to relocate (Jenkins, 2013; Jeudy, 2019).

Romantic Partners of Exonerees

Significant others of exonerees are likely under extreme stress and pressure following the conviction of their partner. In many cases, they become the sole breadwinner for the family and caretaker for their children (Jenkins, 2013; Grounds,

2004). This can put serious financial strain on them, in addition to the psychological impact they experience.

When examining romantic partnerships, Jenkins (2013) found that fifteen spouses and partners of exonerees often reported that after returning home, the exoneree “displayed negative personality traits including irritability, moodiness, uncommunicativeness, lethargy and detachment” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 128). It was not uncommon for marriages that had remained intact during the wrongful incarceration of one partner to end in divorce or estrangement following the release from prison, despite the conviction being overturned

Some cases of wrongful conviction can be particularly challenging for the family if both the original crime victim and the exoneree are within the same family unit. Cases in which the original crime victim and the exoneree came from the same family posed additional challenges as the family unit must “negotiate a difficult pathway through the criminal justice system” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 120). In some cases, “the conviction and release of the appellant sometimes led to split allegiances within the primary and extended family” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 120). Research on rightfully incarcerated individuals and their partners shows that stigmatization coming from other family and community members regarding the incarceration of one’s partner, and in effect their marriage, may put additional pressure on spouses to divorce their partner (Nurse, 2002; Previti and Amato, 2003; White and Booth, 1991; Siennick, Stewart, & Staff, 2014). Among spouses of wrongfully convicted individuals, this might be expected to be less common, at least in cases where family members believe in the inmate’s innocence, as this would create less pressure. However, in situations where the original crime victim and the

exoneree come from the same family unit, it may be that these pressures are higher – at least from members of the family that believe the exoneree is guilty.

View of the Criminal Justice System – Legitimacy and Potential Delinquency

Having a loved one wrongfully convicted may dramatically shift the way in which one views the criminal justice system and its legitimacy. Each of the 13 participants in Judy's (2019) study expressed negative perceptions about the criminal justice system and indicated that "the [system] had failed them and their families" (p. 116). Moreover, "the sense of injustice and misunderstanding concerning wrongful conviction can sometimes place additional strains on the families of appellants" (Jenkins, 2013, p. 124). The cycle of hope and despair often experienced throughout appeals processes can make family members become weary or cautious about becoming hopeful. A teenage son of an exoneree revealed in an interview with Jenkins (2013) that "his life started to disintegrate after his father lost his first appeal" (p. 124). These feelings can lead secondary exonerees to lose their sense of trust in the criminal justice system (Sharp, 2005).

Previous research finds that feelings of injustice and/or negative experiences with the criminal justice system might result in criminal offending. Specifically, interactions with legal actors, if perceived as unfair or intrusive, lead to decreased assumptions of the legitimacy of the criminal justice system (Tyler et al., 2014). Further, individuals who internalize negative perceptions of police legitimacy may be less likely to cooperate with police or comply with the law (Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Fagan & Piquero, 2007; Jackson et al., 2012; Rios, 2011).

Advocacy

It seems many secondary exonerees find solace in working towards eliminating injustices within the legal system. Jenkins (2013) found a common desire among secondary exonerees to campaign for the innocence of their wrongfully convicted loved one. Some individuals got involved in demonstrations or attended retrials and appeals of other wrongfully convicted individuals. Many of the exonerees' children who became involved in campaigning and protesting later considered themselves "seasoned activists." They found comfort and community by attending demonstrations, campaign meetings, and other forms of activism against injustices of the criminal justice system. It seems that these outlets provided an escape from the stigma and victimization that secondary exonerees often experienced in their communities. For some secondary exonerees, this political engagement was "empowering" and helped aid their recovery from the victimization of the wrongful conviction (Savage et al., 2007; Jenkins, 2013).

CHAPTER 3 OUTLINE OF STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this study, I use a qualitative methods approach to investigate how wrongful conviction impacts the lives and interpersonal relationships of exonerees and their loved ones in the United States. The current project is considered exploratory in nature. For this reason, a wide range of questions were asked that touched on the entirety of the participants' experiences with wrongful conviction. Furthermore, the secondary exonerees included in the study were not restricted to a certain type of relationship, such as romantic partner, child, sibling, or friend. As such, a wide variety of relationship structures existed. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data, because it allows the research to develop, grow, and be guided by the collected data.

By conducting this research, I hoped to gain greater insight and understanding into the full depth of experiences by those impacted by wrongful conviction. The inclusion of secondary exonerees in my research enabled me to gather a full picture of the totality of consequences a wrongful conviction has on a family.

To summarize, in the larger project, I asked the following broad research questions:

1. What type and level of social support did exonerees have and how did this social support impact their experience with wrongful conviction?
2. What psychological and behavioral impact does a wrongful conviction have on secondary exonerees?
3. What role did secondary exonerees play in the exoneration or release of the exoneree?
4. How do those who have been impacted by wrongful conviction cope with the situation?
5. Did the type and closeness of the relationship with the exoneree impact the experience of secondary exonerees?

6. What social services do primary and secondary exonerees feel were or would be beneficial?
7. How did primary and secondary exonerees' experience with wrongful conviction impact their perception of the criminal justice system?

Through my data collection efforts and qualitative interviews, I sought out answers to all the above research questions. However, the scope of the current dissertation project and thematic focus of the analysis I present in upcoming chapters focused on a subset of these research questions.

The research questions I have outlined above reflect those asked as part of the larger research project as a whole. The focus of the current dissertation project is narrower. Here, I provide a guide for what to expect in terms of how this dissertation broke these questions into smaller pieces, what I answered in the analysis, and what was left for future analyses. In particular, the partial answering of these research questions centers on my choice to focus on one type of secondary exoneree relationship – the relationship between an exoneree and their mother.

From the above list, research questions 3, 5 and 7 were not answered partially or in full. At times, these questions may have been touched on as they related to a different topic, but they were not a major focus of the analysis.

The questions that directly asked about the experiences of secondary exonerees were partially answered as they related to exonerees' mothers, not necessarily all secondary exonerees. The experiences of exonerees' mothers should not necessarily be considered representative of the experiences of all secondary exonerees. For example, research question 2 asked, "What psychological and behavioral impact does a wrongful conviction have on secondary exonerees?" For the dissertation, I examined the psychological and behavioral impact a wrongful conviction had on the mothers of

exonerees. Research question 4 asked “How do those who have been impacted by wrongful conviction cope with the situation?” Again, this was addressed in terms of how exonerees’ mothers coped with the situation.

Similarly, research question 6 asked “What social services do primary and secondary exonerees feel were or would be beneficial?” This question was partially answered in the current analysis in terms of exonerees’ mothers discussing the lack of social services they had and what types of services or support they believed would have been beneficial. I did not go into detail on the social services exonerees themselves felt would have been or were beneficial, as my undergraduate mentee focused on this research question in her Senior Honor’s Thesis.

In addition to exploring the experiences of mothers who were secondary exonerees, this dissertation also touched on research questions related to the exonerees themselves. For example, research question 1 asked “What type and level of social support did exonerees have and how did this social support impact their experience with wrongful conviction?” This was again partially answered and focused on the type and level of social support exonerees’ mothers provided to their wrongfully convicted children. I did not delve fully into the second part of the question which asked “how this social support impacted their experience with wrongful conviction” so this portion of the question will be pursued more thoroughly in the future.

Separately, I came up with new research questions over the course of my grounded theory analysis that are related to my overarching focus on exonerees and their relationships with secondary exonerees. As such, a broader research question that arose was: How did the wrongful conviction impact exonerees abilities to maintain and

form new social relationships? Again, I was able to partially answer this question through analyses that examined how age stagnation occurring as a result of incarceration impacted exonerees social relationships.

In summation, the dissertation answered the following research questions:

1. What type and level of social support did exonerees receive from their mothers?
2. What psychological and behavioral impact does a wrongful conviction have on mothers of exonerees?
3. How do mothers of wrongfully convicted individuals cope with the situation?
4. Does the psychosocial impact of incarceration lead to problems maintaining or forming new social relationships for exonerees?
5. What policy changes might be recommended given primary and secondary exonerees feelings about what social services were lacking and/or would have been beneficial for them?

CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

Study Population

To be eligible for the study, respondents had to be over 18 years of age and either be exonerees who were previously wrongfully convicted of a crime or the loved one of an exoneree. More specifically, to be eligible as an exoneree for the purposes of this study, respondents must have been either: 1) declared factually innocent by a government official or agency with the authority to make that declaration, 2) relieved of consequences of a criminal conviction by a government official or body with the authority to make that decision through a complete pardon, an acquittal of all charges factually related to the crime for which they were originally convicted, or a dismissal of charges related to the crime for which they were originally convicted. If a potential respondent did not meet either of the above criteria, they were still eligible to participate if their case had been or was currently being handled by an affiliated Innocence Network organization or they are widely recognized within the wrongful conviction community as an exoneree. An example of a case that would fall under this latter category is an individual who has received a sentence commutation by their state's Governor and whose case is still being handled by an affiliated Innocence Network organization seeking to fully exonerate the individual. To be very clear, no one who is currently incarcerated, confined, or detained in any manner by the criminal justice system was eligible to participate in this study. To be eligible as a "secondary exoneree" or loved one of an exoneree, participants must have a close relationship with an exoneree who meets the aforementioned criteria. These individuals could be close friends, family members, or a significant other of an exoneree.

Attempts to interview respondents from a variety of demographic groups were made so that recruitment of participants was not restricted by gender, race, or ethnicity. Participants were not eligible for participation in the study if they were under 18 years of age or were incarcerated at the time of the interview, because these populations may have additional vulnerabilities, making them more susceptible to harm.

Compared to quantitative analyses, qualitative projects require a smaller sample size. The generally agreed upon minimum standard among studies using a grounded theory approach is approximately 25-30 participants (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994). A study of this kind must have a large enough sample to adequately describe the phenomenon of interest and attain saturation (i.e., adding additional participants would not result in additional perspectives or information). As such, my goal was to recruit and obtain informed consent from approximately 20 exonerees with the goal of interviewing 2 loved ones per exoneree (a.k.a. secondary exonerees). Ultimately, I was able to recruit and begin interviews with a total of 20 exonerees and 17 secondary exonerees. However, the final analysis in this paper excludes 1 exoneree and 1 loved one, because the interviews with these two individuals were not complete at the time of analysis and only began to scratch the surface of the total number of questions in the interview guides. I will discuss this decision in more detail later. Still, I came quite close to my goal with 19 exonerees and 16 secondary exonerees interviewed, with a total of 35 participants to include in analysis.

Study Procedures

To conduct the study, I used a research partner who was an undergraduate student completing her honors thesis on exoneree outcomes at the University of Florida. This student, Nicole Guillen, interacted directly with 8 exoneree research participants as

she assisted me with these exoneree interviews. However, I conducted all of the interviews with secondary exonerees alone. Further, I conducted the majority of exoneree interviews (n = 11) alone as well. I also had the help of a team of undergraduate students working in the Legal Eyewitness & Applied Decision Making in Psychology & Law Lab (LEAD) as undergraduate research assistants (RAs). These individuals primarily aided me in interview transcription and proofreading. Further, they assisted me in pulling quotes related to the primary themes I identified. In a later section, I detail how I trained these individuals and exactly what work they did. Next, I discuss my recruitment methods and the procedures used for enrolling participants. Then, I will discuss how I obtained informed consent, collected initial information about the participants, conducted the interviews, and compensated participants.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via direct and indirect contact methods. Direct contact recruitment methods included electronic and verbal communication with participants with whom I was already personally acquainted. I used a script introducing the study, its goals, and procedures when recruiting subjects directly. Each of the above methods followed the attached "Recruitment Script" (see Appendix A) to assure consistency in the recruitment process across recruitment methods. I was the only person who actively recruited participants.

Due to the hard-to-reach nature of potential respondents as well as the desire to gain the clearest and most complete picture of how wrongful conviction impacts exonerees and their loved ones, snowball sampling was utilized as a primary recruitment strategy (Goodman, 1961). This method of sampling better enabled me to

recruit participation of secondary exonerees, loved ones of exoneree respondents, who might otherwise have been difficult to recruit.

Prior to beginning this research, I attended the Innocence Network's 2019 annual conference in Atlanta, Georgia. At the conference, I met numerous exonerees and their loved ones who met eligibility requirements for my study. Among those individuals, I am connected with approximately 20 - 25 via social media (Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook) and in a few cases, I was given a personal phone number so that I could stay in contact with the individual. Since I was already familiar with these individuals, when I began this study, I contacted them directly and invited them to participate. Once they agreed, I obtained informed consent and scheduled interviews with them.

Additionally, I asked them to pass along information about the study (including my contact information) to their loved ones and any other exonerees they may know. I made contact with these secondary individuals only after confirming that they were interested in participating (through the initial contact person) or when they made initial contact with me themselves.

That is, to best protect the privacy of any potential participants, all snowball sampling was done in a "passive" manner. There were two ways this was done: 1) potential participants who learned about the study from other participants or key informants were provided the necessary information to contact me or 2) I made first contact with potential participants after being told by key informants or current participants that they had agreed to be contacted. To ensure privacy and protect any of these potential participants, any contact information was protected and only used by myself. By using this chain method of sampling, I was better able to secure the

participation of secondary exonerees, ultimately gaining a better overall understanding of the wide impacts of wrongful conviction and meeting the goals of the project. Greater details on how I ensured confidentiality and protection of personal identifiers is provided below.

Though I had planned to recruit individuals through other indirect contact methods, including social media advertisements in wrongful conviction Facebook groups and referrals provided by Innocence Network Organizations, I was able to obtain enough participants for the current study through direct recruitment and passive snowball sampling alone.

Data collection began in October of 2020 and concluded in August of 2021. Data was collected from participants via in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted virtually using the online platform, Zoom. In one case, an interview was conducted over the phone as it was preferred by the participant. All interviews were conducted with individuals currently living in the United States.

Obtaining Informed Consent, Feminist Methodology and Participant's

Collaborative Role

Westervelt and Cook (2012) highlight that “social research is best conducted within a collaborative setting between the scholars and participants in the research” (p. 15). They elaborate to say, “bringing participants’ voices to the public issues of capital punishment and wrongful convictions requires their voices to be heard as authentically as possible” (p. 15). To do this in the most effective way, my goal was to follow the lead of the participants and give them numerous chances to have a role in the research being produced. This includes allowing for the chance to have their names associated

with the data that they are providing for this project. As such, I provided language in the 'Informed Consent Document' that gave participants the opportunity to decide whether they preferred to use their real name or choose a pseudonym (see Appendix B). All but 3 exonerees chose to use their real name. In the cases where exonerees chose to use a pseudonym, I ensured that their loved ones were provided pseudonyms as well as not to give away the exonerees' information and identity.

Borrowing again from Westervelt & Cook (2012), I used a feminist approach to research methods that is principled on the idea that "research is a collaborative process and [that there must be] a centrality of trust and openness in this collaborative process" (p. 15). Patton (2002) explained that "feminist research can create a sense of connectedness and equality between the researcher and researched" (p. 129). Westervelt and Cook (2012) believed that "[their] role in the collaborative process is to facilitate participants in telling their own stories that have consequences for modern society and criminological and sociological theory" (p. 15). As such, I will be sending each of my participants the transcript of their interview to look over and provide me with feedback to ensure they are comfortable with the information that is contained in the transcript. They will be given the option to have any statements redacted or corrected if they so choose. At the time of my dissertation defense, I will not have done this yet but plan to do so as soon as I am able to personally review all the transcripts and make any final corrections after the transcripts have been proofread by research assistants at least twice.

I was responsible for obtaining all forms related to informed consent from the participants. The consent form was a typed document issued to participants to inform

them about the nature and aim of the study, who I am, and why I am studying this topic. I also provided information about the interview process (how long it might take, what sorts of questions would be asked, and what guarantees of confidentiality I can provide), study compensation, potential risks related to the study, and possible benefits. The participants were informed that their participation is completely voluntary and that they can drop out at any time without penalty. I ensured that each participant understood and signed the consent form prior to the beginning of the interview. The participants were given the option to withdraw verbally from the study at any time by simply indicating their desire to terminate their participation. However, none of the participants did this. The informed consent document is attached and was used to obtain consent for all participants (see Appendix B). Since all of the interviews were conducted virtually, informed consent documents were primarily signed via a Qualtrics consent form online. However, due to their preference and lack of internet literacy, 3 participants printed out their consent form. These individuals filled out the form and questionnaire by hand. Two of them scanned the form to their computer and emailed it back to me, while the third mailed it via USPS to my home in Gainesville, Florida.

To ensure comprehension when consent was obtained virtually, I provided opportunities for participants to discuss the informed consent process with me via chat, email, video chat (Zoom), or phone call. I also began each interview by asking if they had any questions about the consent form and answered any and all questions they might have had. In addition to providing a virtual consent form for each participant, I was prepared to read the consent information aloud for all potential research participants. The purpose of this was to make certain that all participants were able to understand

the consent form and its contents. However, when asked if they wanted me to read it aloud in its entirety, all participants declined.

Participants were encouraged to ask questions about any content covered within the consent documents. If participants did not ask questions but seemed to be confused or unsure about content at that time, I took care to address this by providing an oral summary of the risk and benefits sections. This procedure was recommended to help ensure that participants understood the most likely risks and benefits that could result from their participation in the study and were able to make a well-informed decision as to whether they would participate (Nusbaum et al., 2017).

The attached informed consent document explains the various measures that were taken to ensure all information obtained in connection with this study that could identify the participant would be kept confidential (see Appendix B). Specifically, the consent form indicates that the following steps were taken to protect the identity of respondents:

- All information taken from the study was coded with ID numbers to protect each respondent's name and personal information if they chose not to use their real name.
- For those who decided not to use their real names, names in the transcripts of the audiotapes or zoom recordings were replaced by aliases, and the questionnaires bore only random identification numbers as identifiers.
- All audiotapes/videotapes will be erased after the researchers have transcribed them, after transcriptions have been checked for errors, and after all analysis is completed
- The study investigator has kept all physical files and data collected in a secured locked cabinet in the principal investigator's office; all transcription files can only be accessed by those with IRB approval using secure online links.
- Unless express permission was provided by the participant to use their real name, pseudonyms of the respondent's choosing were used in any quotations or reports of the study findings.

In the event that a participant decided to change their mind about revealing their identities, I instituted a two-part consent process. First, I asked participants for permission to use their real identities at the beginning of our interview (which they could either grant or decline, separate from their consent to participate in the actual study). Second, after the interview concluded, I asked for a re-consent for participants who granted permission for their real identities to be used in the study. That is, I asked participants in the debriefing whether they would still like to allow me to use their real identities if they consented to that at the beginning of the study. Further, I plan to allow participants to review their transcribed interview, provide corrections, and decline to have their real identity or data included in any publication that results from this study based on their review. At this time, I have not yet done this but plan to do so once transcripts have been sufficiently proofread and I have had an opportunity to fully review them myself. The goal of this method was to help them to maintain an active role in telling their own story and ensure that it was done in a way they agreed with, felt comfortable with, and could be proud of. These stories are theirs, and my job as a researcher is to help them tell these stories to make life better for someone who may be in a similar situation or to prevent these things from happening to others in the future.

Risks and Benefits

The risk in participating in the study was minimal, but safeguards were included to further minimize the chances of harm. These safeguards also increased the potential benefits of the study.

Potential risks anticipated

Although the study population is not considered a vulnerable group, research on wrongful conviction suggests exonerees may view their experiences as traumatic. As

such, interviews conducted in this study may require participants to reflect on traumatic experiences, which may cause emotional distress. To determine the appropriate risk level for the current study, I examined past research, identifying potential risks for psychological harm among respondents participating in survey interviews in which emotionally distressing events are discussed. Findings suggest that among non-vulnerable populations, interviews on distressing topics may result in negative moods and stress, but they do not harm respondents (Labott, 2013). Additionally, findings show that even when respondents experience some negative changes in their mood or increased stress levels, they are able to recover quickly from these emotional changes (Labott, 2013). In previous research that is similar to the current project, negative emotions, such as grief, anger, and fear that occur in response to remembering a trauma, are typically transitory, understandable, and not harmful to participants (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006, p. 222). Finally, the consensus in research on this topic is that any potential risk of negative affect, though probable, is of such a small magnitude, short duration, and reversible that it is not substantially different from similar reactions experienced in daily life or “during the performance of routine physical or psychological examination or tests” (National Research Council, 2014).

Minimizing risk

The informed consent documentation asks participants to consider whether they believe participating in an interview about their personal experience with wrongful conviction would be particularly distressing. I asked that they take this potential into consideration, along with the potential to experience emotional distress, when deciding whether they would like to participate.

Even though the risk is minimal, strategies were implemented to minimize any potential harm. Attempts were made to discuss pleasant events and positive takeaways related to the wrongful conviction throughout the interviews (i.e., release from prison and visits with loved ones). Not only are these events important in understanding the larger picture surrounding each case but focusing on positive experiences and happy moments can help ensure the stress level of participants and overall discomfort remains low. By including questions designed to elicit narratives about pleasant experiences throughout the interviews, any psychological discomfort that could arise from recounting such negative experiences and memories might be minimized. Interrupting these negative accounts with a focus on pleasant memories is likely to reduce stress, unpleasantness, and negative affect, which might otherwise accompany a subject's focus on their experience with wrongful conviction. In addition, as mentioned previously, participants were given the option to cease participation in the interview at any point.

Participants were encouraged to contact the PI if they had any concerns or experienced any distress related to participation in the study at any point, even if it was at a much later date. Further, at the end of the interview participants were provided with information about the National Mental Health hotline's 24-hour phone number if they need to seek professional help. We did not expect this to be the case but providing this information to participants was an additional step to mitigate any future adverse reactions that might require immediate attention.

Potential benefits

Studies have shown that many potential benefits exist for respondents who participate in interviews about distressing or traumatic experiences, including the "opportunity to discuss the event, access to resources, new insight, feelings of well-

being, improvements in health, and the potential to help others” (Labott, 2013, p. 2; Newman et al., 1997; Newman, Risch, & Kassam-Adams, 2006). By sharing their experiences and identifying the kinds of services they believe would help them cope with the negative effects of the wrongful conviction, the participants in this study might contribute to change. Their stories and suggestions provide unique and valuable insights that might improve the lives of current and future victims of miscarriages of justice. Among participants who identify as loved ones of exonerees, their perspectives and experiences tend to be ignored within the research and media coverage of wrongful conviction. Providing these individuals an opportunity to disclose their experiences could ultimately be extremely beneficial and cathartic (Jorm, Kelly, & Morgan, 2007; Labott, 2013; Newman et al., 1997; Newman, Risch, & Kassam-Adams, 2006).

Data Collection Methods

Face sheet – brief screener assessment

I only interviewed subjects once they signed the consent form, indicating their willingness to participate in the study voluntarily, and after they completed the short assessment in the attached “Face Sheet,” which informed me of specific characteristics of the subject’s case, personal demographics, and familial details (see Appendix C). Both the consent form and the face sheet were combined into one Qualtrics survey. Participants signed the consent document before they completed the face sheet questions. Each assessment indicated the respondent’s status as an exoneree or their relationship to the wrongfully convicted person. This short assessment also helped to ensure that all subjects met the study eligibility criteria, which utilized a somewhat broad definition of “exoneree” for study participation.

Once potential subjects were identified, contacted, and informed consent was provided, I made attempts to have participants fill out these 'Face Sheet' assessments either online via Qualtrics or by printing out the form at home and filling it out directly. If filled out on Qualtrics, the Face Sheet and Consent Form were combined into one single document survey. If the participant chose to print the items out and fill them out at home, these documents were separate as they appear in the Appendix (see Appendix B and C). This way, I was able to ensure a certain level of variability among respondents and make strategic decisions on interview scheduling. Triaging respondents based on case characteristics maximized the diversity of respondents' experiences, given the small sample size.

Basic demographic questions asked participants about their current situation and their situation at the time of their initial involvement in their wrongful conviction case, including a) gender; b) racial or ethnic background; c) age; d) residence and how long they have lived there; d) marital status; e) children and children's ages; f) veteran status; g) employment status; and h) job title.

Exoneree participants were asked the following questions to explore details relevant to their wrongful conviction case: Identify whether a) they were declared factually innocent by a government official or agency with the authority to make that declaration or relieved of consequences of a criminal conviction by a government official or body with authority to make that decision; b) their case involved a complete pardon, acquittal of all charges factually related to the crime for which they were originally convicted, dismissal of charges related to the crime for which they were originally convicted, or other (if other, participants were asked to explain); c) the pardon,

dismissal, or acquittal was the result of evidence of innocence that was not presented at the trial where they were initially convicted; d) there was evidence of innocence that was not known to them, the defense attorney, or the court at the time the plea was entered if they pleaded guilty; e) they or their family received any financial compensation for their wrongful conviction; f) any factors, which contributed to their wrongful conviction, included false confession, official misconduct, mistaken eyewitness testimony, faulty forensic science, jailhouse snitch/informant testimony, inadequate defense counsel, false guilty plea, or other; g) they were familiar with or a stranger to the original crime victim; h) they took their case to trial or accepted a plea agreement; i) there were any co-defendants in their case and what their relationship to them was; j) an organization affiliated with the Innocence Network ever handled their case; and k) DNA or non-DNA was used by them and their defense counsel to obtain their release and exonerate them. Respondents were also asked about (l) the crime of which they were wrongfully convicted; (m) what the race, gender, and age of the original crime victim(s) were; (n) what their sentence was and how much of it they served; and o) when they were released.

Scheduling interviews

Upon completion of the informed consent process and the face sheet, I worked with each respondent to schedule a meeting time to conduct the interview. This scheduling usually took place the same day that the participant filled out the face sheet and signed the consent form. When Nicole was working on her senior thesis, I made sure to coordinate with her so that she could join as many interviews as possible. To schedule these interviews, I contacted the respondents via phone or direct messaging online. The day before each interview was set to take place, I followed-up with

participants to confirm the set time. In some cases, we needed to reschedule for another time. In a number of cases, we were not able to complete the full interview in one sitting and had to schedule additional interviews to finish the interview.

Conducting interviews

I had initially expected that the semi-structured interviews would take between 45 minutes and 2 hours to complete. However, in most cases they went well over the estimated time. In total, I spent 141 hours and 50 minutes interviewing all participants included in the analysis, with an average interview session lasting 2.25 hours and a median of 2.42 hours. The average amount of time spent interviewing each individual person was 4.05 hours with a median of 2.95 hours. To be clear, “interview session” above refers to one session with a participant. Since I interviewed some people in multiple sessions, I included the interview session averages and the average time spent interviewing each person, which might have taken place over multiple sessions. Most participants (n = 21) were only interviewed in one session, but others were interviewed over a series of sessions. Seven participants were interviewed over two sessions, 2 participants were interviewed over three sessions, 3 participants were interviewed over four sessions, and 2 participants were interviewed over a total of five sessions. The interview length of time for one continuous session ranged from 45 minutes to 5 hours and 14 minutes, with the longest amount of time spent interviewing one participant being 14 hours and 5 minutes after adding up all individual interview sessions for this person.

The semi-structured interview style was particularly useful for examining experiences of participants who have been relatively understudied in the past, because this structure allowed a broad range of information to be gathered. Semi-structured

interviews are less formal than structured interviews and allowed me to gain greater insight on topics important to the interviewee. This type of interview is often called an “in-depth” interview and provides more opportunities for the interviewee to describe their opinions, feelings, and experiences in their own words (Esterberg, 2002, p. 87). In these interviews, I utilized the two attached interview guides, which I developed for use with exonerees and their loved ones, respectively (see Appendix D). These guides provided the starting points and topics that were discussed in the interviews, but additional information from the respondents was also used to shape the order and structure of the interviews and to introduce new topics and follow-up questions.

As an interviewer, I did my best to remain neutral, while also being relatable, so I could build trust with the participant and so that the interviewee felt comfortable engaging in conversation. I used a conversational interview style with my participants, which allowed my participants to feel more at ease and open when talking to me. If we got off topic or they went into a tangent, I did not guide them back to the target question right away. We spoke about things that were not always relevant to the questions I asked. By doing this, I learned more about participants and their unique situations and perspectives. As a result, I was better equipped to ask more in-depth questions about topics they mentioned that were not always included in the interview guides. This approach allowed participants to open-up to me more and offered a safe space for them. In turn, engaged in reciprocity when appropriate and I opened up to my participants and revealed things about myself and my life where I deemed it necessary to build rapport. This style created a certain level of mutual trust between me and the participant and resulted in more informative, deeper interviews.

The questions included in the interview guides addressed general characteristics of the specific cases, the participants' interpretation of certain case characteristics and procedures, experiences during all phases of the wrongful conviction process (arrest, incarceration, release, post-release), suggestions for services, aid, and/or treatment, which may be beneficial in assisting exonerees with their transition back into the community, and their reconnection and rebuilding of relationships with their loved ones. Additionally, questions asked participants what they believe would have been helpful at various stages of the process and what types of services they think should be implemented to aid all parties impacted by wrongful conviction.

Interview questions for exoneree participants

The following questions were designed to gather information about the exonerees' circumstances of the conviction and prison experiences: a) tell me the story of your wrongful conviction; b) do you know how you were initially implicated in the crime; b) if applicable, can you describe what you remember most about the trial proceedings; c) describe what a typical day was like while you were incarcerated; d) how would you describe the prison environment in general; e) how did you cope in prison; f) tell me about your release and how you were ultimately able to obtain your release; g) what were the major barriers you faced while trying to obtain release and/or exoneration?

The following questions were designed to gather information about the role of the exonerees' family and loved ones and social support they experienced: a) how did your family or loved ones react; b) did you play a role in your own exoneration; c) were you able to consult with family or people you were close with early on when making case decisions; d) describe the role(s) your loved ones had in your case; e) tell me about

your social interactions with fellow inmates, including relationship quality, level of bonding, and how you maintained these relationships; and f) did you develop any new relationships with individuals on the outside while incarcerated?

The following questions were designed to explore family and friend dynamics among exonerees: a) who were your closest loved ones/relationships at the time when you first became under suspicion for the crime; b) did these relationships change throughout your experience with the justice system; c) how much contact did you have with your loved ones throughout the wrongful conviction; d) describe how you managed your relationships during incarceration; e) how do you believe did your wrongful conviction impact your family and your relationships; f) how did your wrongful conviction change your ability to parent you children; g) how did you handle the death of loved ones, while you were incarcerated; h) was there anyone close to you who did not believe you were innocent; and i) how did your role within the family or your relationships shift or evolve throughout the wrongful conviction process?

The following questions were designed to explore exonerees' post-release experiences: a) tell me about your release; b) what did you do in the first days and weeks after you were released; c) what are your favorite things about being on the outside; d) what are your least favorite things about being on the outside; e) what sorts of challenges have you faced since your release; f) did you have any difficulties reconnecting with loved ones after your release; g) have you faced any challenges when attempting to interact socially now that you are on the outside; and h) are you able to communicate your feelings and needs to your family now that you are out?

The following questions were designed to explore exonerees' levels of social support in the greater community, social services, and involvement in advocacy: a) describe the level and types of social support, if any, you received from your family and community; b) outside of your family, do you feel you have peers or support groups you can talk to who understand what you've been through; c) do you have relationships with other exonerees; d) do you think that this experience has affected your mental or physical health; e) are there any social services you can take advantage of that might help you; f) what sorts of services do you think you could benefit from; g) what sorts of services or social support would have been helpful; h) what types of social support do you think could be most beneficial for exonerees; i) what types of programs or aid do you think would be most beneficial for families of incarcerated individuals; and j) if you could give advice to anyone going through something similar, what would it be?

Finally, the last section of questions for interviews with exonerees asked them to reflect on any positives they might have experienced and their general takeaways and overall experience. Including positive questions was intentional and the placement of these questions on the interview guide was done to reduce or minimize any potential risk to participants (see 'Minimizing Risk' section for further details). The following questions were designed to gather this information: a) how has this experience changed you; b) what lessons did you take away from this experience; c) is there anything positive that you feel you've gained from this entire experience; d) what sorts of things gave you hope; e) describe your thoughts and feelings about the criminal justice system; and f) do you have any suggestions for how the criminal justice system should change?

Interview questions for secondary exoneree participants

The following questions were designed to explore the secondary exoneree's overall experience and interpretation of the wrongful conviction: a) tell me the story of your loved one's wrongful conviction; b) describe how you felt and what you thought when you initially heard of [your loved one's] involvement in the criminal case; c) tell me the story of your loved one's release; d) describe your thoughts and emotional reactions to hearing [your loved one] was going to be coming home; e) how have these feelings changed/evolved since release; f) how has the wrongful conviction impacted you; g) what were your initial perceptions of [your loved one's] guilt or innocence; h) was there a point where you began to feel hopeless about (loved one) ever being released; i) tell me about some of the major challenges you faced while [loved one] was incarcerated. How did you cope with these challenges; j) can you think of any positive moments or memories you were able to share with your loved one throughout this whole process; k) describe your involvement, if any, at the various stages of the process; l) were you able to help [loved one] get exonerated or released; m) how did you contact [your loved one] while they were incarcerated; n) how often were you able to write letters, speak on the phone, etc.; o) if you were able to visit, tell me how visitation with [exoneree] was like; and p) tell me all about the release/exoneration process.

The following questions were designed to explore the secondary exoneree's perspective of family dynamics: a) in general, how do you think your loved ones' wrongful conviction has affected your family or relationship; b) did this experience with wrongful conviction impact your relationship with other family members; c) how did your relationship with [exoneree] evolve; d) if applicable, describe how your role as a parent/caregiver was impacted by the wrongful conviction; e) if applicable, did you

notice any changes in [exoneree's] children; f) did you take on any additional duties or responsibilities within your family unit; g) tell me more about your experience with this and how you felt about taking on additional responsibilities; h) can you recall whether anyone else in your family took on any additional duties or responsibilities; i) if applicable, did you receive any social support from family and friends that enabled you to handle these additional duties; and j) have your roles shifted since the release of [loved one]?

The following questions were designed to explore the secondary exoneree's experiences regarding community reactions (i.e., stigmatization) and social support: a) how did members of your community react to [exoneree's] initial conviction; b) how were you and your family treated by your community; c) do you feel you have faced any stigmatization as a result of this experience; d) did anyone in your community attempt to retaliate against you or your family; e) did you remain in the same community following the conviction; f) how did members of your community react to [exoneree's] exoneration and release; g) describe the level and types of social support, if any, you received from your family and community; h) were there support groups or support networks you could reach out to for help who understood what you were going through; and i) what sorts of services or social support would have been helpful?

The following questions were designed to explore the secondary exoneree's post-release experiences and their perceptions of the exoneree following their release: a) how has this experience changed your relationship with [loved one]; b) do you notice anything about [exoneree] that is different from before their wrongful conviction; c) is life post-release what you had imagined it would be; d) compare how you imagined life

would be following [loved ones'] exoneration to the reality; e) describe how your relationship is today and how it compares to the way it was before the wrongful conviction; and f) describe any challenges you have faced since [exoneree's] release.

The following questions were designed to explore social support and services available to the secondary exoneree and their involvement in criminal justice advocacy:

a) have you been able to access any sorts of mental health services to help cope with the wrongful conviction; b) are you aware of any social support or mental health services provided in your area that you all could take advantage of; c) what types of programs or aid do you think would be most beneficial for families of incarcerated individuals; d) do you feel you've been able to adequately take care of yourself mentally and emotionally throughout this process; e) do you have people you can talk to or services you can access that might help you cope now (after exoneree's release); f) if you could give advice to anyone going through something similar, what would it be; g) what types of services do you think should be offered and implemented that could help individuals impacted by wrongful conviction; and h) are you involved in advocacy for other wrongfully convicted persons?

Last, the following questions ask secondary exonerees to reflect on any positives from their experiences and to describe their overall experience and general takeaways regarding the impact of the wrongful conviction on their lives: a) has this experience changed you; b) what lessons do you take away from this experience; c) is there anything positive that you feel you've gained from this entire experience; d) what sorts of things gave you hope; e) describe your thoughts and feelings about the criminal

justice system; and f) do you have any suggestions for how the criminal justice system should change?

Compensation

Nicole Guillen, my undergraduate research partner, conducted a sub-project using the data generated from this project. Her project focused on exonerees' mental health and the social services available to them. For her part of the project, she was able to obtain funding through the American Psychology-Law Society. Using this funding, we were able to compensate participants with a \$10 reloadable VISA prepaid debit card. Following all the University of Florida's Human Subject Payment procedures for tracking and sending payments, I uploaded details for each participant into the Payment Log at my.ufl.edu. Then, I packaged each card along with a handwritten card thanking each participant for their time and participation. I sent the cards via USPS. Once the cards arrived at their destination, I updated the Payment Log so participants were able to activate their card.

Observations

Following each interview, Nicole and I recorded our reactions to the researcher-subject dynamic along with other observations about the participant and situation. Because most interviews took place over Zoom, Nicole joined me in the interview space whenever possible. I was the primary interviewer and Nicole took observational notes about the interview, context, and participant. Additionally, Nicole was able to ask follow-up questions when necessary and asked specific questions that were more relevant to her sub-project. We also used the Zoom chat feature as another way for Nicole to message me certain questions she wanted to be sure we asked participants. In these cases, I would either ask the participant right away, tell her to ask, or ensure we came

back to the question later in the interview. Using the observational note was particularly useful when we did not complete an interview in one sitting. In these cases, I made notes on specific subjects to return to in future interviews, and it helped me to keep track of where we left off in previous sessions and indicated any questions that were not fully answered or skipped.

Analytic Strategy

As mentioned prior, I used a grounded theory approach as the primary method for analyzing and collecting respondent data. More broadly, this type of approach allows researchers to move from the specific features and details of the data to develop more general themes (Emerson 2001; Corbin, 2008). Such an approach moves from the 'ground up' and allows the interpretation of data to be open to multiple potential explanations. More specifically, the decision to use grounded theory for this project was made so I would not be restricted by any theoretical explanations when interpreting the observed phenomena or the collected interview data (Foley & Timonen, 2015). Once completed, each interview audiotape/videotape was reviewed and transcribed.

Transcription and Training RAs

Either one of my research assistants (i.e., members of the LEAD lab) or I transcribed and checked each interview. This project would never have been able to be completed without the assistance of my LEAD undergraduate research assistants (RAs). From the Fall 2020 semester until the Fall 2021 semester, I managed a team of 10 – 22 RAs each semester who were enrolled in the LEAD lab for credit in UF's course CCJ4911, Research Experience for Undergraduates in Criminology or as volunteers who had already taken the course for credit. I met with the team each week to check-in and discuss techniques and progress. I also created a group text message thread with

all RAs so that we could keep in contact with each other daily, ensuring I was available for any questions or troubleshooting.

Training Research Assistants

The first task for the RAs was to train how to transcribe the interviews. All RAs were asked to download the program, Express Scribe, which enabled them to slow down interview audio/video and cut out background noise to make the speech clearer. They were given an instructional document and provided links to instructional videos on the program so that they could understand exactly how it should be used. We also created our own instructional video that showed RAs exactly which version of Express Scribe they should download, as there was initial confusion regarding this. Prior to registering the RAs with IRB to allow them to work on the data in this study, RAs completed the required human subjects training through UF and then registered on the project. Then, they were given a document that gave general instructions on how each interview should be formatted, what should be included in each transcription document, how to proofread transcripts, and general instructions on how to transcribe (i.e., how to indicate when two people are talking at once, how to indicate gestures/emotions, when to exclude words/phrases, such as “like” or “um”). One more training document was given to the RAs that included examples of transcribing different types of phrases and emotions. To train RAs, I used materials created by one of my committee supervisors, Dr. Britni Adams’ after eliminating the weekly update section she included, because I held weekly meetings with my RAs (Dr. Britni L. Adams, University of Nevada, Reno).

Once IRB approved the RAs to work on the project, they were provided access to a private OneDrive folder that included training materials and the interview video and audio. Within the folder, interviews were organized according to the individual who was

interviewed. Most interviews included a Zoom transcript that RAs could use as a basis while transcribing. Sometimes the Zoom transcript was quite clear, but other times it was less useful. It often depended on the quality of the video, connection, and the dialect and accent of the interviewee.

I used Trello (an organizational website) to organize and prioritize which portions of the interviews the RAs would work on. On the site, I created numerous columns which included the following titles: “Transcription To-Do,” “Transcription Doing,” “Transcription Done,” “Proofreading To-Do,” “Proofreading Doing,” “Proofreading Done,” “Proofreading X2 To-Do,” “Proofreading X2 Doing,” and finally, “Proofreading X2 Done.” The transcription columns included blocks that each had a 20–30-minute time stamped chunk, which RAs could claim and move across the board to the next column while they were working on transcribing it, until it ended up in the the “Transcription Done” column.

Once each single interview had been fully transcribed, meaning each 20–30-minute chunk within the entire interview had been moved to the “Transcription Done” column, I added the title for the entire interview to the “Proofreading To-Do” section. For example, a block here might read “Ronnie Long Part II.” Once all the original 20–30-minute chunks were transcribed, RAs could begin proofreading and combining an interview. They would combine all the 20–30-minute chunks for an interview and carefully proofread that interview, highlighting and labeling any sections that they could not fully understand or were unsure about. Once all original transcriptions were proofread once, RAs began proofreading an interview for a second time. RAs were instructed to never proofread the same interview they had transcribed a chunk for and to never proofread the same interview twice to ensure that at least three RAs were

responsible for each part of each interview. At the time I am writing this, all of the interviews have been transcribed and proofread at least one time. Approximately half of the interviews have been proofread twice, but we have not had enough time or RAs to proofread everything twice at this stage. Although I do not have the exact total number of hours RAs have spent working on the project, between 4 to 10 full time RAs have been working on the project at a time. Each full time RA is required to put in at least 140 research hours a semester. In addition to the full time RAs, I have had anywhere from 2 to 12 volunteer RAs each semester who committed to work on the project 2 to 7 hours per week.

Identifying Themes

The first step of the data analysis procedure for reviewing the transcribed interviews was the categorization of the data through manual coding. Specifically, a code is considered a word or short phrase that represents a theme or an idea. Therefore, once interviews were transcribed, I strategically analyzed them by coding for potential themes, patterns, and relationships within the data, which were then clustered into broader categories (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Morse, 1991). That is, by examining all transcribed interviews, I determined whether there were patterns or themes found across multiple interviews. Comparisons were then made between cases to determine similarities and differences that might exist within those themes. Initially, I created the following broad themes: parent-child relationships (exoneree as child), parent-child relationships (exoneree as parent), age stagnation, romantic relationships, other important social relationships (excluding mothers, children, and romantic partners), and age stagnation and romantic relationships. Within each of these broad themes, there were more specific themes and patterns that I began to identify as I analyzed the cases.

For example, some of the subthemes within the category of parent-child relationships included: visitation, sacrifices of exonerees' mothers, emotions and initial reactions to trial, perceptions of guilt/innocence, and relationship changes after exoneree release.

After interviews had been proofread at least one time, RAs were instructed to pull quotes from the interviews that related to any of the above themes I had identified into documents. As they pulled these quotes into the documents, they were also instructed to include a comment in the transcription document with the specific category or theme listed (e.g., visitation). I did this work alongside them and provided numerous examples for RAs. These "quotes documents" were specific to a wrongful conviction case rather than an individual participant. For example, the quotes document for the Kenneth Nixon case included quotes from his mother, Tracy Nixon, and his girlfriend, Wendy Woods. When pulling a quote from the transcription word document into a quotes document, a citation was provided for each quote which included the name source name, the date of the interview, and the part of the interview. An example citation would look like this: (WW; 04/24/21; Part II). These were ultimately the quotes that I sampled from to use in my dissertation. To assist the RAs in identifying appropriate quotations, I provided examples for them to use and separate training on how to code and pull quotes. Only the RAs that had worked on the project for at least 4 months pulled quotes.

Once several of the individual cases had been analyzed and quotes had been pulled, I went through the quotes documents meticulously organizing them into more specified themes. At this point, I had decided what I was going to be focusing on in my two results chapters and had begun analyzing the data. I created a more refined coding document at this time, using an Excel spreadsheet with three separate coding schemes

RAs were instructed to use, depending on what type of interview they were coding. Specifically, I created a separate coding scheme for primary exoneree participants, mothers of exonerees, and other secondary exonerees (excluding mothers of exonerees). This specific coding scheme has been adapted into a table for the reader to view (see Appendix E).

RAs were assigned to code portions of interviews. 8 RAs coded 30 participants interviews between them. I coded the remaining 5 interviews myself so each interview was coded by one coder. The Excel spreadsheet was setup such that as each person coded a participant's interview, they were able to indicate within the spreadsheet whether a specific code was present. The indication of "yes" under a particular code for a certain participant on the Excel spreadsheet usually meant the participant explicitly stated something or exhibited a certain behavior. This allowed me to be able to look at the Excel document in the end to determine how many participants had certain behaviors, attitudes, or experiences in common.

This systematic approach to data analysis enabled me to categorize certain concepts and themes that re-occurred in the data, reevaluate these themes and refine them as the analysis process continued, and carefully review the data to develop general concepts that I used to make suggestions about plausible relationships among these larger concepts. Additionally, I developed a case-oriented understanding of the participants' experiences by identifying themes within the transcribed interviews. I used the qualitative analysis of interview data to build a theoretical understanding of how various behaviors, themes, and experiences were relevant to exonerees and their loved ones.

There are a few methods or techniques used in developing a grounded theory that I will briefly explain. These include memo writing, theoretical sampling, and the constant comparative method – all of which were used in my study. First, an analytic memo is a write-up or mini analysis about what one learns or is learning over the course of conducting research. It is a useful method for developing ideas and codes, formulating preliminary hypotheses, and developing analytical insights. In particular, Glaser (1978) stated that memos are “the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding” (p. 83). Essentially, memo writing provided an organized way to keep track of and come up with thoughts and ideas about the codes I used and helped me develop relationships between codes. Further, these memos or conceptual notes helped me come up with additional questions that I wanted to ask in future interviews. I had a journal that I used throughout the course of my research, where I recorded different thoughts and ideas about the interviews I had done to date, especially when I began noticing patterns between participants and cases. This helped generate new questions that I asked in upcoming interviews and in developing the primary themes I focused on for this dissertation. I included some personal reflections about the study, the participants, and my relationship to the participants in Appendix F.

Next, I used theoretical sampling. This is the process of selecting “incidents, slices of life, time periods, or people on the basis of their potential manifestation or representation of important theoretical constructs” (Patton, 2001, p.238). Basically, this meant that my sampling decisions were continuously informed by my research. The focus of these sampling decisions was made based on the categories developed in the

analysis and the characteristics of each participant, and this combination was considered when deciding who to interview next based on how it filled the gaps in saturating the data (Flick, 2014). For example, initially I was only connected with one female exoneree. After interviewing a number of males, I began the process of selectively requesting to be connected with another female exoneree when speaking with my current interviewees. In the end, I was able to interview a total of 5 female exonerees.

Finally, the constant comparative method of Grounded Theory was used. Similar to theoretical sampling, the constant comparative method involves the analysis of using early data to inform subsequent data collection (Flick, 2014). Specifically, the constant comparative method involves continually comparing “sections of the data ... with each other to allow categories to emerge and for relationships between these categories to become apparent” (Harding, 2006, p. 131; Flick, 2014). Glaser (1965) explained that this method “raises the probability of achieving a complex theory which corresponds closely to the data, since [this comparison] forces consideration of much diversity in the data” (p. 444). Memo writing was extremely helpful in developing ideas and utilizing the constant comparative method throughout the data collection process. Further, by using the constant comparative method throughout the analysis process from the very beginning of data collection, I was able to become better informed about how to use theoretical sampling in determining who to interview next and what questions and comparisons to explore.

Once all the themes were identified and quotes had been pulled, I focused on two broad themes for the purpose of this dissertation: age stagnation and the overall

experience of exonerees' mothers. For example, after I had interviewed the first few participants, I started to notice a pattern of behavior. Essentially, many of the exonerees who had been incarcerated for a significant period of time described how they felt they were "frozen in time" developmentally, and once released, they explained that they felt as though they were still the same age that they were when they were initially incarcerated. After noticing this pattern, I included questions about this phenomenon in future interviews. For example, I asked exonerees if they felt they had aged 'normally' while they were incarcerated and why or why not they believed they did or did not. At the point I noticed this pattern, I had been interviewing individuals who were initially convicted at young ages (in their late teens or early 20s), so I sought to add participants who had been convicted later in life (in their 30s) to compare to experiences regarding age stagnation to the experiences of those I had already interviewed. This is an example of how I utilized grounded theory techniques to build my theoretical ideas, detect specific themes, compare experiences among my participants, and ensure my sample reflected the full scope of experiences around these ideas.

Conflict of Interest

Nicole and I have no conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, related to the current study that would potentially impact our ability to collect, analyze, and/or report data as it relates to the research. Furthermore, no such conflict of interest exists, which could adversely affect a subject in this study.

CHAPTER 5 INTRODUCING THE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR CASES

Participant Information

Even though there were a total of 37 participants over the course of data collection, for the purposes of this dissertation data from interviews with two of these individuals were not included in the analysis, reducing the sample size to 35 participants. Interviews with two participants were excluded, because I was only able to ask a small number of questions in initial interviews with Marty Tankleff and JF due to their busy lives and schedules. Because I have yet to complete these interviews, I do not have enough information from these cases to include them in the analysis.

The 35 participants included in the analysis represent individuals involved in 19 different wrongful conviction cases. Of the 19 exonerees interviewed, 9 were individual interviews that did not include interviews with secondary exonerees. Among the remaining 10 exoneree participants, I interviewed a total of 16 secondary exonerees who varied in their relationship to the exoneree. This sample included four mothers, two children, one grandmother, five romantic partners, one father, two siblings (one brother and one sister), and a friend (although the friend was more like a child or younger sibling to the exoneree). Although all exoneree participants were asked if I could conduct interviews with their loved ones, the 9 'solo' participants did not connect me with their loved ones. Reasons they gave were either to protect their loved ones or because these exonerees were more independent and not close enough to their loved ones. In two cases, I have been connected with secondary exonerees for interviews but have been unable to schedule an interview time. In other cases, exonerees' closest loved ones passed away so interviewing them is not a possibility.

In the following sections of this chapter, I provide specific details about all the participants included in this study. First, I introduce exoneree participants, providing demographic information and describing the most important case characteristics (i.e., factors that contributed to the wrongful conviction, length of time served, type of exoneration). Next, I provide demographic information for each of the secondary exoneree participants and describe which exoneree is related to each loved one. Finally, I present a brief but detailed summary of every wrongful conviction case in the analysis to provide the context for each participant's unique situation.

Exoneree Participants

Biographical and case-related characteristics. Table 5-1 displays a summary of biographical and case-related details of the participants. Among the 19 exoneree participants, 4 identified as female and 15 as male. All females were White. Of the males, 7 were Black, 6 were White, and 2 were Hispanic/Latino(a). Current age of exoneree participants ranged from 33 to 69 years, with an average of 54 years at the time of the interview and a median age of 49. Collectively, all the exonerees in my study spent 396 years behind bars. The average length of time participants were incarcerated was 21 years with a median of 16 years, although this masks variation in time served by exonerees, ranging from 4 to 44 years. Three individuals I interviewed spent over 35 years incarcerated. Only one participant served time on death row; however, this individual, John Huffington, was ultimately resentenced after serving 10 years on death row due to Maryland eliminating the death penalty. At the time of our interview, the amount of time that had passed since participants' exonerations ranged from 2 months to 26 years. Kenneth Nixon and Ronnie Long had both been out for less than a year when I initially interviewed them.

The exonerees' age at time of arrest ranged from 16 to 37 years (average 23 years); most were in their late teens or early 20s. Only three exonerees were over the age of 30 at the time of their arrest. The 19 exoneree participants represented 14 different states in which their wrongful convictions occurred. Multiple wrongful convictions occurred in North Carolina, Illinois, and New York. Only one individual was wrongfully convicted outside of the United States.

For 8 exoneree participants, DNA was instrumental in securing their exoneration and release. For 2 of these 8 participants, DNA results identified the actual offenders, who were later tried and convicted for the crime. Nine of the exoneree participants received some form of compensation for their wrongful convictions and incarceration.

The majority of cases ($n = 12$) involved a charge of homicide. Other charges included robbery, rape, sodomy, arson, manslaughter, and possession of a weapon/stolen property (see Figure 5-1). Four of the exoneree participants were wrongfully convicted of killing a close loved one: Kristine Bunch, her 3-year-old son; Kimberly Long, her boyfriend; Virginia 'Ginny' Lefever, her husband; Doug DiLosa, his wife. As a result, they suffered the tragic loss of their loved one at the same time they were accused, convicted, and sentenced for those murders. In two of these cases no murder occurred. Virginia Lefever was convicted of murdering her husband, even though it was a suicide. Kristine Bunch was wrongfully convicted of arson and the murder of her young child, although the fire was later proven to be accidental in nature.

Five of the male participants were wrongfully convicted of a serious sexual assault offense (i.e., rape, sodomy), subjecting them to additional stigmatization among fellow prisoners. Anthony Dipippo and Darnell Phillips were wrongfully convicted of the

rape of young girls under the age of 12, and Anthony was additionally wrongfully convicted of murder. Jeffrey Deskovic was wrongfully convicted of the rape and murder of a 15-year-old classmate. Ronnie Long and Juneal Pratt are Black men who were accused of raping white women in the late 1970s and were convicted by all-white juries, adding an additional layer of stigma to their cases.

Consistent with statistics about causes of wrongful conviction nationally, several issues contributed to the wrongful convictions, including official misconduct, false confessions, jailhouse snitches/informant testimony, inadequate defense counsel, mistaken eyewitness testimony, and faulty forensic science (see Figure 5-2). Official misconduct encompasses police, prosecutorial, judicial, and forensic expert misconduct. Eighteen of the exoneree participants went to trial, while Christopher Ochoa initially pled guilty to a crime rather than taking his case to trial. Although current research cites eyewitness misidentification as the primary cause of wrongful convictions (Gross et al., 2005; Scheck et al., 2000), official misconduct was the most frequently contributing factor among these 19 cases and was identified in 15 of the cases. It should be mentioned that it is rare to have only one single contributing factor or error that causes the wrongful conviction. Rather, many of these factors or errors co-occur to lead to the wrongful conviction.

Eligibility. Regarding the exoneration process or the criteria making participants eligible for participation, the most common exoneration process involved being declared factually innocent. Nine exoneree participants indicated that they had been declared factually innocent by a government official or agency with the authority to make that declaration. Five exoneree participants indicated that they were relieved of

consequences of a criminal conviction by a government official or body with the authority to make that decision. The remaining 5 exoneree participants indicated another reason for their exoneration or for them to be considered an exoneree or wrongfully convicted person.

I included these other 5 individuals because they are recognized within the wrongful conviction community and Innocence Network as individuals who had been wrongfully convicted. Keyontay Ricks indicated that he had been “halfway exonerated,” as the prosecution agreed to the dismissal of his primary charge of robbery. Since he was not fully exonerated, he still has a charge of “possession of stolen property” on his record and is currently fighting to get this erased and to receive compensation for his wrongful conviction. Daryl Roberts was paroled early, because the original crime victim came forward to recant her trial testimony, stating that she had been coerced by police into making false statements. Daryl is currently awaiting an official pardon from the governor. At the time of the interview, Kimberly Long had her conviction overturned but was waiting to find out if the judge was going to dismiss the charges against her or retry her. Shortly after our interview, all charges were officially dismissed. Juneal Pratt was paroled but served his sentence fully. He is represented by the Midwestern Innocence Project. However, since he has been released, it is more challenging to receive a full exoneration because the non-profit must prioritize cases where the wrongfully convicted individual is still incarcerated. Unfortunately, this also means that Juneal is still a registered sex offender in the state of Nebraska.

John Huffington’s case is unique in that his conviction was overturned, yet he was charged again immediately after his release. While he was out on bail, he was

forced to make a very difficult decision to take an Alford Plea and ensure his freedom or go back to trial and fight for his innocence again. An Alford plea is defined as “a guilty plea in which a defendant maintains their innocence but admits that the prosecution’s evidence would likely result in a guilty verdict if brought to trial” (Lexico, 2021, p. 1). John ultimately made the decision to take the Alford Plea, primarily due to the official misconduct displayed by the prosecution. In 2021, the prosecutor in his case was reprimanded for this misconduct. Unfortunately, John still has a criminal record due to the Alford Plea, and it will be incredibly difficult for him to receive compensation, even though there is evidence of the prosecutor’s misconduct.

Secondary Exoneree Participants

A total of 16 loved ones of exonerees or secondary exonerees were interviewed. Five were romantic partners, four were mothers, two were children, two were siblings, one was a grandmother, one was a friend, and one was a father (see Table 5-2). The age of the secondary exonerees ranged from 18 to 81 years, with an average age of 51 years and a median age of 49.5 years. Eleven of the secondary exonerees identify as White, four identified as Black, and one identified as Hispanic. Of the 16, 14 identified as female and 2 as male. All but five considered themselves to be close loved ones of the exonerees prior to their arrest and wrongful conviction. Among the other five, four were romantic partners and one was a friend. The friend was Donna Waters who met Kristine Bunch while they were incarcerated together. The other four were romantic partners of the exoneree. One of the romantic partners, Tonya Torain, met Ronald Cotton after his exoneration. The other three – Wendy Woods, Ashleigh Long, and Amanda Villegas – met their wrongfully convicted partners while they were still

incarcerated and began a romantic relationship during that time. Both Amanda and Ashleigh married their wrongfully convicted partners while they were incarcerated.

Confidentiality and Participant Discretion to Use Their Real Name

In some cases, the primary exoneree participant chose to keep their identity confidential. In each of these cases, the primary exoneree and any of their loved ones who participated were given an opportunity to choose their own pseudonym. If they did not choose one, a pseudonym was provided for them. Additionally, details of the wrongful conviction case were altered as to not reveal the identity of the primary or secondary exonerees. These details included altering the location of the wrongful conviction, identities of other individuals discussed in the interviews, details of the crime (i.e., weapons used, year it occurred, etc.).

Although a few participants chose to keep their identity confidential, I found most participants were more than willing to use their real name and were excited about the chance to tell their story and bring more attention to the issue of wrongful conviction. Since most primary exonerees I interviewed are public figures who are accustomed to being interviewed by and/or quoted in the media, they may have felt that remaining confidential would impede their advocacy efforts within the innocence movement. Most primary exonerees I interviewed were actively involved in the public domain when it came to criminal justice reform efforts and often spoke to criminal justice stakeholders about their experiences with wrongful conviction. Additionally, there were no cases where a secondary exoneree wanted to use a pseudonym where their exonerated loved ones wanted to use their real name. Family units were consistent in these decisions.

Since most of the information and topics discussed within the interviews were personal and participants were vulnerable in sharing their stories with me, I used my

discretion to ensure that any information I included in my analysis would not result in negative consequences for the participants. Additionally, there were instances when participants asked for a statement they made to be taken “off the record.” In these cases, I asked RAs not to transcribe the statement. In cases where the request that the statement remain off the record came prior to the statement, I paused the Zoom recording until the participant indicated that the recording could resume. I made careful decisions about what information I did and did not share, and certain information that was revealed during interviews I would never consider publishing or quoting without consulting directly with the participant beforehand.

Biographical Case Summaries

To provide additional context to the cases and persons that were analyzed, I first provide a brief summary of each of the 19 cases. Information in the biographical summaries came from the interviews with exonerees and secondary exonerees and was supplemented by information from the exoneree’s page on the National Registry of Exonerations (2021) and the Innocence Project (2021) websites. In each summary, I also include a brief introduction of the loved ones who were interviewed, although 9 exonerees did not have a loved one who participated in interviews. Despite their loved ones not being interviewed, the exonerees themselves answered questions about social support, loved ones, and their relationships, so this information was still analyzed, even though I did not have the first-person perspective from these secondary exonerees.

Jason Strong, Illinois

Jason Strong, a white male, was wrongfully arrested for the brutal first-degree murder of a Jane Doe (unidentified female) in December of 1999, when he was 24 years old. It took another 7 years until police and private investigators (working with

Jason and his family) found out the identity of the woman. The victim's name was Mary Kate Sunderlin, a developmentally disabled woman who had been living in a neighboring community prior to the time of her death. The factors that contributed to Jason Strong's wrongful conviction included a false confession, misleading forensic evidence, perjury or false accusation, and official misconduct.

Two weeks after the discovery of the body, Jason Strong, Jeremy Tweedy, and Jason Johnson were also charged with concealing a homicide. Lake County Sheriff's Police records show that all three men confessed to being involved in the homicide and that Jason had been the one to pick up the woman (whom they believed to be a homeless sex worker) and bring her to the motel where he resided. According to the stories pieced together through the three false confessions, Jason allegedly got into an intense argument with the victim over a burrito and proceeded to beat her, whip her, and pour hot wax over her body. After the alleged beating, the three men took the woman (still alive) to a neighboring forest preserve, where they dumped her body along a road. After falsely confessing, Jason Strong immediately recanted his confession. It is also worth mentioning that at the time of his false confession, Jason had been awake for multiple days and was exhausted. According to Jason, police also threatened his girlfriend and had promised he could go home if he told the police what they wanted to hear.

By the time Jason's trial arrived in October 2000, Johnson had also recanted his confession, and so Tweedy was the only eyewitness testifying against Strong at trial. By the time Tweedy testified, his story had changed multiple times, and many of the statements he made on the stand about the night of the incident were contradictory to

previous statements he had made. This was so notable within the courtroom that the prosecution admitted Tweedy was “truthfully challenged.” Despite these confessions, the facts regarding the relationship between Tweedy and Jason did not match up. Specifically, Tweedy had not met Jason until after the body of the Jane Doe had been found. It is also noteworthy that both Tweedy and Johnson pled guilty to much less serious criminal offenses and as a result were offered significantly less prison time (2 years and 3 years, respectively). Jason was convicted of murder based on the false confession evidence, Tweedy’s testimony, and the misleading and incorrect assumptions made by the state’s forensic pathologist. He was sentenced to 46 years in prison.

The original forensic pathologist in the case had testified that the victim had been killed as a result of blunt force trauma to the head, but he never gave a specific time of death. However, the state argued that the victim had died the same day her body had been discovered and that all injuries on her body had been sustained that same day. In 2014, three separate medical experts independently reviewed the autopsy reports and photos of the victim. They all came to the same conclusion that the victim had been dead for numerous days when her body was discovered and that many of her additional injuries had occurred in the weeks or months leading up to her death. This meant that the victim had likely been severely abused or tortured prior to her eventual death.

Ultimately, the discovery of Mary Kate Sunderlin’s identity and the involvement of attorneys with Northwestern University’s Bluhm Legal Clinic helped free Jason Strong from his wrongful incarceration. Investigators found that right before her untimely death, Sunderlin had secretly married Gonzalo Chamizo and was living with a mother and

daughter who had a record of preying on elderly and disabled people. This mother-daughter pair had forbidden Sunderlin from contacting her family and used her bank card to withdraw cash from her account. Further, they attempted to get a new bank card in her name a year after her death. In 2002, Chamizo, living in a psychiatric hospital in Florida, admitted to police investigating Sunderlin's disappearance that he had murdered Sunderlin and buried her in his backyard. When no body was found, the police did not continue their pursuit of Chamizo as they were unaware that her body had already been found in a nearby community.

On May 28, 2015, the Lake County State's Attorney's Office dropped all charges against Jason following the unopposed grant of federal habeas relief. Jason was released from prison later that same day. In 2016, Jason was granted a certificate of innocence and compensated by the state. Later that year, he filed a civil rights lawsuit against the county and was awarded additional compensation after settling the lawsuit in 2017.

For this study, I interviewed Jason, his mother Debbie King, and his grandmother CeCelia 'CeCe' Benovsky. Debbie and CeCe were both immensely supportive of Jason throughout his 15 years of incarceration.

Kimberly Long, California

Shortly after 2 a.m. on October 6, 2003, Kimberly Long, a white female, arrived home to find her 32-year-old boyfriend, Oswaldo "Ozzy" Conde, unresponsive and bloodied on the couch. She immediately called 911 and requested medical attention. Police arrived to find Ozzy deceased, likely due to a massive head wound. They identified blood spattered all over the room. Kimberly had no blood on her clothing at the time. Kimberly was taken in for questioning the night of the murder and soon after,

she passed a polygraph examination. A little over a month later, Kimberly was arrested and charged with Conde's murder.

The prosecution's theory of the murder was complex and relied on a timeline provided by a friend of Kimberly's - Jeffrey Dills. Earlier in the evening, friends had witnessed Kimberly and Conde arguing in their driveway after a significant amount of drinking. Around 11p.m., witnesses stated that Kimberly left with Dills on the back of his motorcycle. According to the statement Dills gave to police, he had dropped Kimberly off outside her home around 1:20 or 1:25 a.m. The prosecution theorized that in the forty or so minutes after Kimberly was dropped off, she beat Conde to death, cleaned herself off completely, and disposed of the murder weapon and her bloody clothes (none of which were ever found despite police searching the area). Further, prosecutors stated that Kimberly also removed items from the house, including a shotgun, a change bowl, and speakers to make it look like there had been a robbery.

Kimberly's first trial in 2005 ended in a mistrial because the jury could not reach a verdict. Nine jurors reported voting in favor of acquittal. In December of 2005, she went to trial a second time. Despite Kimberly's statements that she had arrived home right after 2 a.m. and immediately called 911 the lack of physical evidence against Kimberly, she was found guilty of second-degree murder in this second trial. The primary cause of wrongful conviction presented in Kimberly's case was "ineffective assistance of counsel."

During the second trial, Kimberly's defense counsel never asked the medical examiner who performed the autopsy for the estimated time of death. This point was crucial to the case and alone could have been the evidence that created reasonable

doubt and resulted in an acquittal. Specifically, in the second trial the medical examiner stated that death occurred 10 to 15 minutes after the bludgeoning. When police arrived shortly after 2 a.m., they found Conde cold to the touch, suggesting death had occurred earlier in the night and not within a matter of minutes after Kimberly arrived home, which was the prosecution's theory. Though the prosecution's theory primarily rested on Dills' timeline given to police, Dills was killed in a motorcycle accident prior to the trial. So, there was no opportunity to cross-examine him and dig deeper into the timeline. Some neighbors had suggested it was closer to 2 a.m. when they heard a motorcycle outside and shortly thereafter heard Kimberly screaming, but these neighbors were not called to testify at trial (National Registry of Exonerations, 2021). Additionally, all the walls surrounding the body being completely covered in blood spatter, however, Kimberly's clothing and body had been clean and dry. Further, there was no evidence that the sinks or showers at Kimberly's home had been used. Last, there were many other potential suspects, including an ex-girlfriend of Conde who had been harassing Kimberly and Conde.

Ultimately, Kimberly was found guilty of murder at the end of the second trial and sentenced to life in prison. After the trial verdict, the presiding judge, Judge Magers, stated, "To make a perfectly clear record in this matter, if this was a court trial, if the Court would have heard the evidence in this case, I would have found the defendant not guilty. I would have found that the evidence was insufficient to prove beyond a reasonable doubt." Further, the judge found it troubling that Dills' preliminary hearing testimony played such a large role in the case, since no real cross-examination had taken place (National Registry of Exonerations, 2021).

Kimberly began her prison sentence in 2009 and in 2010, the California Innocence Project (CIP) took on her case. A federal petition for a writ of habeas corpus was filed, claiming her conviction was not supported by the presented evidence. It was denied, then appealed to the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, where the dismissal was upheld. Ultimately, CIP was able to obtain DNA from multiple locations at the crime scene, including a cigarette butt that had not been there earlier in the day and speaker wires. Kimberly's DNA matched neither of the two items, though an unidentified male's DNA matched the cigarette butt and a mixture of DNA was found on the speaker wires. Further, medical experts concluded that the time of Conde's death would have been earlier in the evening prior to 1:20 a.m., a time for which Kimberly had an alibi.

Finally, after hearing all the above new evidence, Judge Magers granted the habeas petition and ruled that Kimberly's defense counsel had been inadequate, because he had failed to consult and present testimony from a time of death expert and did not present evidence that supported Kimberly's claims that she had not changed clothes after arriving home. Kimberly was released on bond, but in 2018, the Fourth District California Court of Appeal reversed Madgers' ruling and reinstated the conviction (NRE, 2021). CIP appealed the ruling to the California Supreme Court and in 2020, they vacated her conviction. In April of 2021, just a week after my interview with Kimberly, the prosecution fully dismissed the charge against Kimberly.

In addition to interviewing Kimberly, I also interviewed her mother, Darleen Long, and her father, Roger Long. Her parents stood beside her throughout the entire process and provided her with a great deal of emotional and financial support.

James Gibson, Illinois

On December 22nd, 1989, 61-year-old insurance agent Lloyd Benjamin and 56-year-old car mechanic Hunter Wash were shot and killed at a garage on the south side of Chicago, Illinois. A week later, an anonymous call to police implicated 23-year-old James Gibson, a Black male, and his brother, Harold, in the murders. Harold provided an alibi and was released, while James was interrogated for the next three days. James told police that 19-year-old Eric Johnson and “Bodine” Fernando Webb may be involved in the shooting, which led to their arrest.

After three days of questioning, James was released and filed a complaint with the Chicago Police Office of Professional Standards regarding how he was treated by Lieutenant Jon Burge and his subordinates. James claimed that he had been slapped, punched, and kicked by police during the interrogation. They also refused him access to a bathroom, so he was forced to urinate on the floor. James’ later claimed that his admission to being present at the shooting was a coerced confession resulting from this police torture. An internal police investigation concluded that James’s claims were unfounded.

On December 31st, 1989, James and Johnson were arrested and charged with first-degree murder; Webb was not. On January 2nd, 1990, James’s public defender obtained a court order to have James’s injuries photographed. James went to trial before a judge without a jury on October 7th, 1991. The prosecution called numerous witnesses for their case. One particularly incriminating piece of testimony was from a detective who claimed that James had admitted his involvement in the crime and that no police misconduct occurred. An emergency room physician who examined James after he was arrested also denied claims of abuse by police. Additionally, two of Johnson’s

sisters and Webb incriminated James in their testimony. The sisters later recanted, citing police coercion. On October 8th, 1991, James was convicted of two counts of first-degree murder at a bench trial and sentenced to life in prison without parole.

During the trial, James's defense attorney failed to present any evidence supporting his alibi and did not raise the issue of his physical abuse and coercion. Also, in the decades following James's conviction, numerous allegations of torture emerged against Burge and detectives under his command. Burge was eventually fired and convicted of perjury in 2010. In 2013, James filed a claim with the Torture Commission and in July 2015, they ruled that he was entitled to a hearing based on his claims of torture and false confession. Judge Neera Walsh presided over this hearing and denied James's petition for a new trial. In 2018, the Illinois Appellate Court reversed this ruling and remanded Judge Walsh to reconsider, but she again denied the petition. In March 2019, the Illinois Appellate Court vacated James's convictions and ordered a new trial. On April 18th, 2019, James was released on bond after serving over 29 years in prison. On April 26th, 2019, James's charges were dismissed.

Kristine Bunch, Indiana

In 2005, Kristine Bunch, a White 22-year-old female, was arrested and charged with arson and felony murder following an incident that occurred in June of that year. A fire in Kristine's trailer home killed her three-year-old son Anthony. She was convicted on March 4, 1996, of murder and arson.

Kristine's wrongful conviction was primarily due to faulty expert witness testimony and official misconduct. A state arson investigator, Brian Frank, concluded that a liquid accelerant was used in two locations in the home. William Kinard, a U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) forensic analyst testified that there was "a heavy

petroleum distillate” in several areas of the home. The defense had their own independent arson investigator, Tom Hulse, who testified that there was “a probability” that the fire had been accidental.

About ten years later, Kristine’s attorney spoke with three fire forensic experts, who all agreed that the prosecution’s arson testimony from her trial was likely false. They also subpoenaed ATF records, finding that there was no heavy petroleum distillate found anywhere in the trailer and the presence of kerosene could be explained by the family’s kerosene heater. Withholding these exculpatory documents from Kristine’s defense lawyer was a violation of *Brady v. Maryland* (1963). In March of 2012, the Court of Appeals of Indiana reversed Kristine’s conviction and called for a retrial. The prosecution dropped the charges in December of 2012. In total, Kristine spent 17 years in prison.

In addition to interviewing Kristine, I also interviewed her brother and biggest supporter, Michael Bunch, and her close friend, Donna Waters. Donna and Kristine met shortly after Kristine was sent to prison. Donna was a 14-year-old inmate who had been sent to an adult women’s prison after being convicted of murder and arson. Though Donna was not wrongfully convicted, her story is much more complicated than it may seem on the surface. Her parents severely abused her for many years, and her father essentially convinced her to start the fire that ultimately killed her mother and sister. Yet Donna had been unaware that her mother and sister were on the premises. Donna came to the prison while she was still a child, and Kristine took her under her wing. Kristine became the mother figure Donna had so desperately desired and needed. Donna turned her life dramatically around and credits her progress to Kristine. The two

share an incredibly special bond with one another; including Donna in this study provided a unique perspective.

John Huffington, Maryland

In 1981, John Huffington, a White 18-year-old male was arrested for the double homicides of Diane Becker, 21, and Joseph Hudson, 30. John originally came under suspicion when Deno Kanaras, his co-defendant, asked John to provide an alibi for the night of the crime. Kanaras later alleged that John held him hostage and forced him to commit the murders.

John's wrongful conviction was primarily due to the faulty testimony of Kanaras and inaccurate hair analysis provided by the FBI. John was originally convicted in Caroline County in 1981. He was later granted a new trial in Frederick County in 1983. In the new trial, he was convicted of both homicides again. Later, Michael Malone, an FBI hair analyst, was discovered to have consistently misrepresented evidence and to have testified out of his area of expertise. In fact, the Justice Department found that FBI experts gave inaccurate testimony regarding hair comparison in 96% out of 500 cases, one of which was John's. Following this discovery, John's conviction was overturned. He was released 76 days later on bail, making his total time incarcerated 32 years and 55 days. During the first 10 years of his sentence, John was incarcerated on death row until the death penalty in Maryland was overturned.

In November 2017, State's Attorney Joseph Cassilly offered John an Alford Plea in exchange for time served, which John accepted. This agreement meant that John was able to maintain his innocence, while also acknowledging that the state had enough evidence for a conviction. In November 2018, John filed a formal complaint against Cassilly with the Attorney Grievance Commission. In October 2021, Cassilly was

disbarred for various issues regarding John's case, including lying to the court and withholding evidence. John is currently seeking a pardon from Maryland Governor Larry Hogan.

Christopher 'Chris' Ochoa, Texas

On October 24th, 1988, Nancy DePriest, a 20-year-old female Pizza Hut worker, was tied up, raped, and murdered in Austin, Texas. 22-year-old Christopher 'Chris' Ochoa, a Hispanic male, and 18-year-old Richard Danzinger became the lead suspects after another Pizza Hut worker had seen them toasting in the victim's honor. Both men were Pizza Hut workers at another location, and police believed that a master key had been used to gain entry.

Chris was questioned separately from Danzinger. Police reported that Chris confessed, claiming Danzinger shot DePriest and that both men had raped her. Misleading forensic evidence eliminated Danzinger but was used to claim Chris was among the 16% of Mexican Americans who could not be eliminated as the source of the semen sample. After being repeatedly threatened with the death penalty and reporting that his mother had been harassed by his attorneys, Chris accepted a plea offer from the prosecution, pleading guilty to murder in May of 1989.

In 1996, the real perpetrator Achim Josef Marino, a convicted robber, sent a letter to Governor George W. Bush confessing to the crime. Given details provided in this letter and a follow-up letter containing details that only the killer would know, police began re-investigating the crime. Chris was exonerated after serving 13 years in prison after the Wisconsin Innocence Project got involved in his case in 1999 and was able to get the semen evidence from the case DNA tested in 2000. Chris was officially released

in 2001 and formally exonerated in 2002. After filing a wrongful conviction lawsuit, Chris received \$5.3 million from the City of Austin in compensation.

Keyontay Ricks, New York

In 2004, Keyontay Ricks, a 22-year-old Black male, was arrested and charged with robbery, criminal possession of stolen property, and grand larceny. A 15-year-old Rent-A-Center employee, on his way to the bank, had handed off the cash receipts from the store to his friend, Kurtell Walker, to pay his debts. Walker then ran to a car that Keyontay and two other women were in, leading a suspicious bystander to report that a robbery had taken place. Despite the employee not claiming to have been robbed, Keyontay was convicted of first-degree robbery and third-degree criminal possession of stolen property in October of 2005.

The racism of the Amherst police, particularly Officers Brown, Dates, and Lauber, contributed greatly to Keyontay's wrongful conviction. One officer had previously harassed Keyontay, allegedly objecting to him having a white girlfriend. Officers also ignored the employee's confession that it was a staged robbery to pursue charges against Keyontay. The evidence against Keyontay was mostly circumstantial. Walker did not testify at Keyontay's trial to offer an alternative course of events. Additionally, Keyontay was on parole and had a prior felony conviction. Eventually, Walker and the other people that were present made statements supporting Keyontay's innocence. On January 30th, 2017, Keyontay's robbery conviction was vacated. Since he had been incarcerated for 12 years, Keyontay had exceeded his 7-year sentence for criminal possession of stolen property, and he was released.

In addition to interviewing Keyontay, I also interviewed his 18-year-old daughter, Karina Ricks. Karina was just a baby when her father was initially convicted; the

majority of experience she has had with her father while growing up were while he was behind bars. Although they maintained a relationship, Karina is getting to know her father more now and building a closer relationship with him following his release.

Daryl Roberts, Virginia

In 1990, 10-year-old Mary Tisdale was walking beside her bike when she was approached by a man from behind who physically assaulted and then raped her. During the assault, she was in and out of consciousness. After the crime, her body was tossed in water, and the man ran away. A 17-year-old girl testified to seeing Daryl Roberts, a 19-year-old black male, run past her after the incident. Daryl was arrested two days after the assault occurred.

Daryl was convicted in 1991 for rape. At trial, the primary evidence against him was the testimony of the 10-year-old victim. Later, the victim would explain that the police coerced her to identify Daryl and coached her in her testimony. The primary factors contributing to his wrongful conviction included false confession, official misconduct, mistaken eyewitness testimony, and faulty forensic science.

His family spent the time he was in prison working with lawyers and scientific testing to get him released. Ten years after his conviction, DNA was tested and determined not to match Daryl. He was granted parole after the Innocence Project at the University of Virginia School of Law took his case. His parole was supported by the original crime victim coming forward and recanting her testimony identifying Daryl as the perpetrator and the DNA evidence that did not match Daryl's DNA profile. Daryl was incarcerated for a total of 27 years and released in September 2018. He is still in the process of getting his conviction fully overturned.

In addition to interviewing Daryl, I also interviewed his now-wife, Nicole Richardson, and one of his sisters, Maria Roberts. Nicole and Daryl had been close to one another prior to his conviction and rekindled their relationship during Daryl's incarceration. She stayed with him throughout the majority of his incarceration, and they became engaged after his release. By the time I interviewed Nicole, she and Daryl had just been married and were beginning their new lives together. He continues to seek a full exoneration.

Romeo Fernandez, Texas

In early 1993, Romeo Fernandez, a 16-year-old Hispanic male, was arrested for a crime that occurred a month earlier. Four young men were shot at from a car as they were walking home, resulting in the deaths of 18-year-old Reggie Sanchez and 17-year-old Andy Martinez. The lead investigator subjected the two surviving victims to lengthy and intimidating interrogations, despite them stating that they could not identify the shooter or car. Fifteen-year-old Nicholas Jackson and 17-year-old Henry Estevan were also interrogated, with the latter implicating his cousin, Romeo Fernandez, as the shooter.

The police interrogation tactics resulted in multiple false confessions that contributed to Romeo's wrongful conviction. The police held the young men for long periods while threatening them with the death penalty and telling them that their friends had implicated them. The police also told the boys that they would be raped in jail if they did not confess. He also made Estevan write his statement multiple times to be more consistent with the known events and evidence, though it was ultimately still inconsistent with the evidence in the case. Another 15-year-old was also coerced into signing a statement that implicated Romeo. When Romeo was arrested, he was

handcuffed to a chair, threatened, and physically assaulted by an officer. This went on until Romeo confessed, which he recanted shortly after.

Romeo's first trial was in late 1994 and resulted in a hung jury. His second trial was in mid-1995. The second trial ended with Romeo convicted of capital murder and sentenced to life in prison. In 2012, a judge recommended that Romeo receive a new trial based on ineffective assistance of counsel in the second trial. The judge cited the defense attorney's failure to attack the numerous inconsistencies in the witnesses' statements and testimony and his failure to challenge Romeo's confession and the police interrogation tactics. In addition to the ineffective assistance of counsel ruling, there was also new evidence in the case that identified two new individuals as the actual perpetrators.

In late 2013, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals ruled that Romeo was entitled to a new trial due to ineffective counsel, and he was released on bail in early 2014 after serving 18 years in prison. In Romeo's third trial, which began in late 2018, the jury found him not guilty.

In addition to interviewing Romeo, I also interviewed his wife, Stephanie Fernandez, and his mother, Sylvia Fernandez. Stephanie and Romeo met while Romeo was still incarcerated, and she became a staunch advocate for his release.

Anthony DiPippo, New York

On October 4th, 1994, a mother reported her 12-year-old daughter Josette Wright missing in Putnam County, New York. In November of 1995, a hunter found her deceased body in the woods. There was evidence that she was raped and murdered.

A teen named Dominic Neglia was being questioned on unrelated drug charges when he implicated 18-year-old Anthony DiPippo, a white male, and several of his

friends in Wright's rape and murder. Anthony was convicted of murder and rape in 1997 after three of the others who Neglia implicated testified against Anthony. Anthony was sentenced to 25-years-to-life. On appeal, Anthony was granted a new trial, because the lawyer who represented him had also represented Howard Gombert, an alternative suspect in the Wright murder, on a previous rape charge. The appeals court noted that Anthony's lawyer had failed to present evidence that pointed to Gombert as the real killer. Two of Anthony's friends recanted their original testimony and claimed that the detectives were threatening to charge them with murder if they did not implicate Anthony. The other friend stuck to her original testimony that Anthony committed the crime. Anthony was once again convicted of murder and rape in 2012.

On another appeal, Anthony was ordered a third trial because of information provided in a sworn affidavit from a man who was incarcerated with Howard Gombert, named Joseph Santoro. Santoro stated that Howard Gombert admitted he was the individual who committed the Wright rape and murder. In this final trial, the former female friend testified and stuck to her original testimony that Anthony committed the crime. This time, the defense presented multiple witnesses who contradicted her testimony. Santoro also testified about the multiple women Gombert admitted raping, including Gombert's admissions to raping and murdering Josette Wright. Neglia also recanted his implication of Anthony. In 2016, Anthony was finally exonerated after spending 19 years in prison.

Since his release, Anthony won a federal civil rights lawsuit receiving \$2.9 million in compensation from the New York Court of Claims in 2018. In 2020, Putnam County agreed to settle the federal lawsuit for 12 million.

Jeffrey Deskovic, New York

On November 17th, 1989, a 15-year-old was found naked and appeared to be raped, beaten, and strangled in Peekskill, New York. Sixteen-year-old Jeffrey Deskovic, a white male, became a suspect, because he had been late to school the day after the victim went missing, appeared to be overly distraught about the victim's death, and had started his own investigation into the victim's death.

After Jeffrey agreed to take a polygraph test, he was taken to a private polygraph business without his parents or a lawyer. Jeffrey was interrogated for 6 hours, given three polygraph examinations, which he was told he failed, and was given excessive amounts of coffee without any food. Eventually, Jeffrey made a confession. The semen was DNA tested before the trial and showed that Jeffrey was not a match. However, the prosecutors continued on the strength of his alleged confession. Deskovic was charged as an adult despite being under 18 years of age at the time of the crime. At trial in 1990, the medical examiner explained the mismatched DNA results of the semen by claiming the crime victim was "promiscuous" and must have had intercourse with someone else earlier in the day prior to her rape. Jeffrey was convicted and sentenced to 15-years-to-life. The primary factors contributing to his wrongful conviction included the false confession, official misconduct, and inadequate defense counsel.

The Innocence Project took on his case. With more advanced technology, they tested the semen sample and found it to be a match to a convicted murderer, Steven Cunningham. Steven Cunningham then confessed to the rape and murder. Jeffrey was exonerated after serving 16 years in prison. In October of 2014, a federal jury awarded Jeffrey 41 million in a civil rights lawsuit. Jeffrey used 1.5 million of his compensation

winnings to start The Jeffrey Deskovic Foundation for Justice, which fights to free wrongfully convicted persons and help exonerated individuals get back on their feet.

Ronnie Long, North Carolina

In 1976, Ronnie Long, a 20-year-old Black man living in Concord, North Carolina, was arrested for the sexual assault and attempted robbery of Sarah Bost, a 54-year-old wealthy, white widow. Bost described her attacker as “a yellow-skinned Black male wearing a dark, waist length leather jacket, blue jeans with a dark toboggan pulled over his head.” She used the term “yellow-skinned” to refer to a lighter skinned Black person as opposed to someone with darker skin. Bost spontaneously identified Ronnie in a courtroom, while Ronnie was attending a court hearing for a prior, unrelated trespassing charge. Bost was sitting in the courtroom for multiple hours in the presence of Ronnie prior to making this identification. Ronnie was seated by other Black men but was the only one wearing a leather jacket. The jacket was similar to the one Bost described her attacker wearing. She would later pick Ronnie out of a photo lineup, where he was, again, the only one wearing a leather jacket.

Ronnie went to trial on September 27, 1976, with an all-white jury seated. The potential jury pool had only two Black residents out of 49 persons; both potential Black jurors were disqualified. Bost’s testimony at trial differed from her earlier description, which stated her attacker had a moustache and was light skinned. Ronnie Long was dark-skinned. Expert testimony by Detective Van Isenhour and Dennis Mooney (State Bureau of Investigation print expert) was not conclusive in placing Ronnie at the scene. Ronnie had provided a strong alibi for the night of the crime, being seen attending a meeting until 8 p.m., on the phone with family members until 10:30 p.m., and then at a party where his attire did not match the Bost’s description of her attacker.

Ronnie was convicted of burglary and rape on October 1, 1976 and was sentenced to life in prison. He ended up incarcerated for 44 years. Ronnie filed multiple petitions at both the state and federal level, which were all denied. Ronnie was represented by the North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission and Duke University's Wrongful Convictions Clinic; the latter was able to win a successful review of his case in 2020. The U.S. District Court granted Ronnie's petition for a writ of habeas corpus on August 27, 2020. He was released from prison, and charges were dismissed the following day. The contributing factors presented by his defense in the petition included Bost being misled by police into making a false ID, misleading evidence being presented at trial, perjury of an expert witness, and official misconduct in the mishandling of evidence from the trial.

Ronnie received a pardon of innocence on December 17, 2020, and later received \$750,000 in compensation for his wrongful conviction, the maximum amount allowed under North Carolina's wrongful conviction law.

In addition to interviewing Ronnie, I also interviewed his wife, AshLeigh Long. AshLeigh and Ronnie met while Ronnie was still incarcerated and got married a year later. AshLeigh became one of Ronnie's most vigorous supporters, especially as his mother's health began to deteriorate. Ronnie and AshLeigh were together for 7 years prior to his release and remain together today.

Ronald Cotton, North Carolina

One night in July of 1984, an unknown assailant committed two sexual assaults and burglaries. The scenes of both crimes were in Alamance County, North Carolina. The assailant was believed to be a 22-year-old black man named Ronald Cotton. He was convicted based on faulty eyewitness testimony, a flashlight resembling the one

used the night of the attack found in Ronald's home, and some rubber matching the type of rubber in Ronald's shoe found at one of the crime scenes.

His first conviction was in January of 1985 where he was found guilty of burglary and the rape of Jennifer Thompson. In November of 1987, he was charged with a second rape of an unnamed woman and yet another charge for burglary. He was sentenced to life in prison plus fifty-four years. He was later exonerated after 10.5 years in prison in 1995. The primary contributing factor to Ronald's wrongful conviction was mistaken eyewitness testimony. The lineup procedure where Jennifer Thompson identified Ronald was deeply flawed.

In the spring of 1995, there was a huge breakthrough in the case when the Burlington Police department finally handed over all the evidence to Ronald's legal team. DNA evidence including the attacker's semen were sent for testing and were not a match for Ronald. However, they were a match for a previously convicted man who confessed of a crime involving another prisoner.

In May of 1995, the motion was made for the dismissal of all charges against Ronald. Finally, on June 30th, 1995, Ronald was cleared of all charges and was released from prison. Subsequently, in July of 1995, the governor of North Carolina also pardoned Ronald from all offenses. Since his release, he has received \$110,000 from the state of North Carolina in compensation.

In addition to interviewing Ronald, I also interviewed his romantic partner, Tonya Torain. The two had gotten together and begun a relationship following his divorce from his previous wife. He and his previous wife met and were married shortly after his exoneration.

Juneal Pratt, Nebraska

On August 10th, 1975, Juneal Pratt, a 19-year-old Black male, was arrested for purse snatching. These charges were eventually dropped, but while in jail, police put Juneal in a lineup for an unrelated crime. The lineup was for the August 2nd rape and robbery of two young White sisters, 19-year-old Kathy and 17-year-old Gail Schiefen. Both sisters identified Juneal as their assailant. However, the lineup procedures in this case were deeply flawed.

At trial, Juneal had numerous alibi witnesses who testified they were with him during the time of the crime. Despite this evidence of innocence and the lack of evidence of guilt, Juneal was convicted by an all-White jury of sodomy, forcible rape, and two counts of robbery on December 8th, 1975. While incarcerated, Juneal tried to escape twice (in 1976 and 1982), which added time to his sentence.

The lineup procedures and the victims' identification of Juneal greatly contributed to his wrongful conviction. The victims' described their assailant after the incident and picked out three mugshot photos, none of which resembled Juneal. There were only three individuals in the lineup and none of them looked remotely alike. Although they were all younger Black males, each of them was a completely different height, complexion, and had objectively different haircuts, facial hair, and facial features. Additionally, Juneal was wearing jailhouse clothing while the others were wearing street clothes. The two other men in the lineup were significantly taller than Juneal. The victims paid particular attention to Juneal since they described a shorter man. Further, the victims stated that the ring that Juneal was wearing looked like Gail's and that the shoes he wore looked similar to those the assailant wore. Both sisters also identified Juneal's voice.

Despite the mishandling of DNA evidence, the presence of an unidentified male's DNA at the scene, the presence of a partial palm print that did not match Juneal, and the problematic lineup procedures, Juneal's appeals were unsuccessful. Other than the two escape attempts, Juneal had good behavior in prison and completed numerous college courses and certifications. On April 27th, 2017, the Nebraska Parole Board granted Juneal parole after serving nearly 42 years. Juneal is currently represented by the Midwestern Innocence Project and hopes to one day be fully exonerated. At present, Juneal still has a record and remains a registered sex offender.

Rodney Lincoln, Missouri

In 1982, Rodney Lincoln, a 37-year-old white man, was arrested and charged with capital murder and two counts of first-degree assault related to a crime that occurred in April of that same year. A white woman, JoAnn Tate, had been brutally murdered, and her two daughters (age 7 and 4) were brutally attacked but managed to survive.

The first trial resulted in a hung jury, but in the second trial in 1983, Rodney was convicted of manslaughter and two counts of first-degree assault. The wrongful conviction was primarily due to the then 7-year-old Melissa DeBoer's eyewitness identification of Rodney and expert testimony claiming that a hair found at the crime scene matched Rodney's. Rodney had also previously dated Tate and had a prior criminal record.

The only eyewitness, DeBoer, later recanted her identification and advocated for Rodney's exoneration and release. The lineup shown to DeBoer was suggestive, and documents previously withheld by the State revealed that her identification had been manipulated. DNA testing also revealed that the hair found at the crime scene did not

belong to Rodney. Rodney was represented by the Midwestern Innocence project and in 2018, the Governor of Missouri commuted Rodney's sentence, and he was released after serving 36 years.

In addition to Rodney, I interviewed his daughter, Kay Lincoln. Kay was only 13 years old when her father was initially arrested for this crime. Kay always believed in her father's innocence and began fighting for his exoneration when she became an adult. It was Kay's hard work that ultimately got the Midwestern Innocence Project to take Rodney's case.

Virginia 'Ginny' Lefever, Ohio

Forty-one-year-old William LeFever suffered from a drug overdose in September of 1988 in his home in Newark, Ohio. He was rushed to Licking Memorial Hospital but died the next day. His 37-year-old wife, Virginia 'Ginny' Lefever, a white female, told the authorities that he committed suicide, and that she found his bottle of antidepressants empty before he went to the hospital. They were in the middle of filing for a divorce around the time of William's death. The coroner confirmed that William died from an overdose, but he also said William would have died earlier if he had really taken all the antidepressants in the bottle.

Ginny, a nurse, was arrested and stood trial at Licking County Court of Common Pleas for the murder of her husband. She defended herself to a judge with no jury. A toxicologist named James Ferguson declared that an injection of the medicine into the body would be the only way William could have died in the timeline that he did. Ferguson also insinuated that Virginia's husband had been poisoned (NRE, 2021). Ginny was finally convicted of murdering her husband in February of 1990. She was sentenced to life in prison.

The primary factors contributing to Ginny's wrongful conviction include false or misleading forensic evidence, official misconduct, and inadequate defense counsel.

In 2010, it was discovered that Ferguson, the toxicologist, had lied about his credentials in Ginny's trial as well as other court proceedings. With knowledge of Ferguson's faulty credentials and minimal evidence against Ginny, her trial judge dropped the charges in November of 2010. She was later released from prison, and in April of 2011, the prosecution also dropped all charges against her.

Marie Huff, Spain

Marie Huff, a 20-year-old white American female, was living and working in Spain. In 2000, her neighbor, Tracy Birch, was murdered in her bedroom in the apartment next to Marie's. After the discovery of Tracy's body, police began questioning everyone in the building. Marie initially came under suspicion, because she was reportedly behaving strangely. A man who had been arrested for robberies in the area, Robert Gross, also came under suspicion for the crime.

Though significant evidence of Gross's involvement in the crime was located at the crime scene, Marie remained the primary suspect. Additionally, after being interrogated for 5 ½ days in Spanish, which was not her primary language, Marie gave a false confession. Marie claimed she had been physically harmed while in police custody. Though the confession was ultimately ruled as inadmissible, it was used by police to further their belief that Marie was guilty and pursue a case against her. DNA evidence found at the crime scene pointed to Gross. Gross was also arrested, and both were tried for the murder in separate trials. The police created a theory that they worked together to orchestrate a robbery and that it had gone wrong, resulting in Tracy's murder. In 2003, Marie was found guilty and sentenced to 26 years in prison. The

primary contributing factors to her wrongful conviction included false confession, official misconduct, mistaken eyewitness testimony, and faulty forensic science.

In 2004, Marie's lawyer filed appeals, contesting the evidence and credibility of the witnesses. On appeal, forensic experts said that the DNA evidence used at trial was unreliable and a witness came forward for the defense who stated that Gross told him that Marie was not involved in the murder. Marie's conviction was overturned on appeal. However, it was several years before the charges were dropped and she was formally exonerated.

Kenneth Nixon, Michigan

In May of 2005, Kenneth Nixon, a Black 19-year-old male, was arrested for a crime that occurred earlier that same month. A Molotov cocktail, or gasoline bomb, was thrown through a second-floor window, killing 20-month-old Tamyah Vaughn and her 10-year-old brother Raylond Vaughn. Their mother and three of her other children escaped unharmed. Kenneth and his then girlfriend, Latoya Caulford, were tried together, but before separate juries. He was convicted of two counts of murder, four counts of attempted murder, and one count of arson in September of 2005. Caulford was acquitted.

Kenneth's wrongful conviction was primarily due to mistaken eyewitness testimony. Brandon Vaughn, 13, was in the house and gave conflicting stories about the course of events, although he ultimately identified Kenneth as the perpetrator. An accelerant-sniffing dog, Swifty, also alerted to Kenneth's clothing and Caulford's car, which was due to Kenneth's work for a towing firm, not from the gasoline bomb. False statements from Caulford's cousin, Mario Mahdi, and jailhouse informant Stanley January Jr. also contributed to Kenneth's wrongful conviction.

January later admitted that his testimony that Kenneth had confessed was false. Evidence that Brandon's statements were inconsistent was also uncovered. In addition, Caulford and Kenneth both took polygraph examinations that were declared truthful in saying that they were not involved in the crime. After the case was examined by a Conviction Integrity Unit, Kenneth was exonerated on February 18, 2021, after 16 years of incarceration.

In addition to interviewing Kenneth, I also interviewed his mother, Tracy Nixon, and his girlfriend, Wendy Woods. Wendy and Kenneth met while Kenneth was incarcerated, and Wendy was a correctional officer at his prison. After meeting Kenneth, Wendy researched his case and decided to leave her job to help fight for his innocence. They were together for several years before Kenneth was ultimately exonerated.

Douglas 'Doug' DiLosa, Louisiana

In September of 1986, 34-year-old Douglas DiLosa, a white male, was found bound and his wife dead in their home in Kenner, Louisiana. The couple had two young children who were upstairs at the time the crime occurred. Police suspected that Doug had murdered his wife for the insurance money, because he was in financial trouble.

He was convicted of second-degree murder in 1987 and sentenced to life in prison. The primary factors contributing to his conviction included official misconduct, faulty forensic science, and inadequate defense counsel.

Five years after his conviction, Doug requested his case records and received a 150-page police report that had not been overturned by prosecutors to his trial attorneys. The police report said the police were investigating a similar crime nearby, the hair found on the rope belonged to an African American male, unidentified fingerprints were found at the crime scene, and two black men had been seen leaving

the building after the murder. Doug's attorney filed a writ of habeas corpus, and his conviction was vacated in 2001 and he was released on bond. In 2003, the charges were dismissed. Doug was ultimately awarded compensation of \$329,000 by the State of Louisiana.

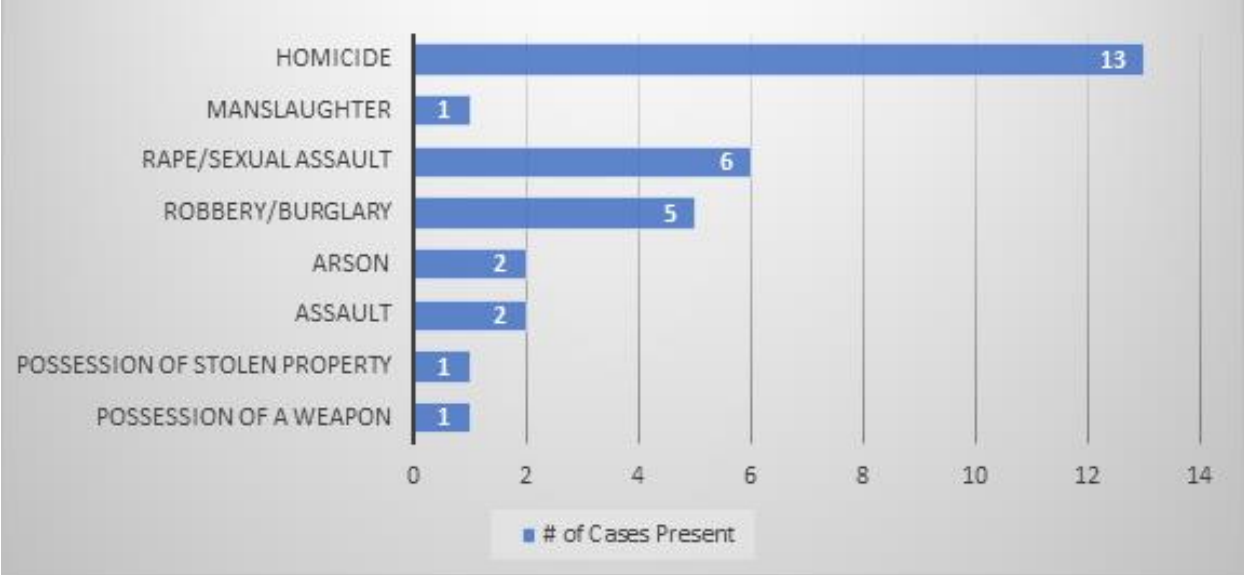


Figure 5-1. Charges in wrongful conviction cases for participants.

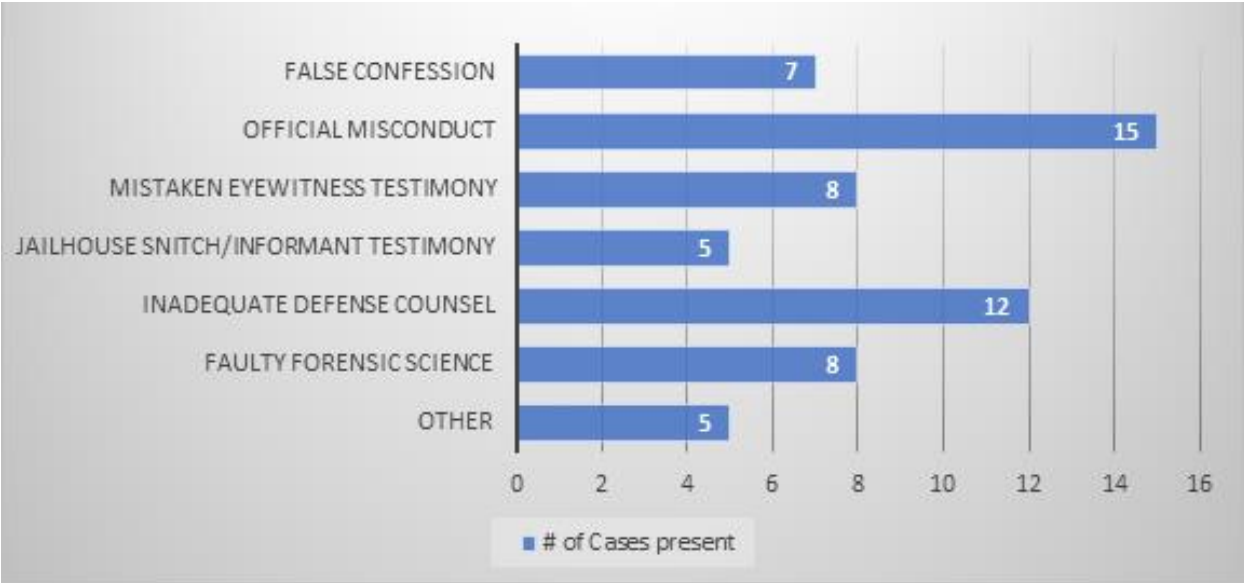


Figure 5-2. Errors contributing to wrongful convictions for participants.

Table 5-1. Biographical details of exoneree participants.

Name	Sex	Race	Year of Arrest	Year of Conviction	State where arrested/convicted	Years in Prison	Year of Release	DNA?	Compensation received?
James Gibson	M	Black or African American	1989	1991	Illinois	30	2019	No	Yes
Keyontay Ricks	M	Other	2004	2005	New York	12	2017	No	No
Daryl Roberts	M	Black or African American	1990	1991	Virginia	27	2018	Yes	No
Kenneth Nixon	M	Black or African American	2005	2005	Michigan	15	2021	No	No
Kimberly Long	F	White	2003	2005	California	7	2016	No	No
Juneal Pratt	M	Black or African American	1975	1975	Nebraska	42	2017	Yes	No
Jason Strong	M	White	1999	2000	Illinois	15	2015	No	Yes
Virginia W. Lefever	F	White	1988	1990	Ohio	22	2010	No	No
Jefferey Deskovic	M	White	1990	1990	New York	16	2006	Yes	Yes
Romeo Fernandez	M	Hispanic or Latino, White	1993	1995	Texas	19	2014	No	No

*Served time on death row until the death penalty was repealed in Maryland

Table 5-1. Continued.

Name	Sex	Race	Year of Arrest	Year of Conviction	State where arrested/convicted	Years in Prison	Year of Release	DNA?	Compensation received?
Anthony DiPippo	M	White	1996	1997	New York	0	2016	No	Yes
Douglas DiLosa	M	White	1986	1987	Louisiana	14	2001	No	Yes
Ronnie Long	M	Black or African American	1976	1976	North Carolina	44	2020	No	No
John N. Huffington*	M	White	1981	1981	Maryland	32	2013	Yes	No
Kristine Bunch	F	White	1995	1996	Indiana	16	2012	No	Yes
Ronald Cotton	M	Black or African American	1984	1985	North Carolina	10	1995	Yes	Yes
Marie Huff	F	White	2000	2003	Spain	4	2004	Yes	No
Christopher Ochoa	M	Hispanic or Latino	1989	1990	Texas	12	2001	Yes	Yes
Rodney Lincoln	M	White	1982	1983	Missouri	36	2018	Yes	No

Table 5-2 Secondary Exoneree Biographical Details

Name	Age	Race	Exoneree Loved One	Relationship to Exoneree	Start of Relationship
Stephanie Fernandez	36	Hispanic or Latino	Romeo Fernandez	Wife	During incarceration
Sylvia Fernandez	60	White	Romeo Fernandez	Mother	Prior to arrest
Ashleigh Marie Long	35	White	Ronnie Long	Wife	During incarceration
Anthony Michael Bunch	43	White	Kristine Bunch	Brother	Prior to arrest
Maria Roberts	45	Black or African American	Daryl Roberts	Sister	Prior to arrest
Wendy Woods	44	White	Kenneth Nixon	Romantic Partner	During incarceration
Tracy Nixon	55	Black or African American	Kenneth Nixon	Mother	Prior to arrest
Donna Waters	40	White	Kristine Bunch	Friend	During incarceration
Tonya Torain	49	White	Ronald Cotton	Romantic Partner	After exoneration
Debbie King	64	White	Jason Strong	Mother	Prior to arrest
Karina Ricks	18	Black or African American	Keyontay Ricks	Daughter	Prior to arrest
Roger Long	70	White	Kimberly Long	Father	Prior to arrest
Nicole Richardson	50	Black or African American	Daryl Roberts	Wife	Prior to arrest
CeCelia Benovsky	81	White	Jason Strong	Grandmother	Prior to arrest
Kay Lincoln	52	White	Rodney Lincoln	Daughter	Prior to arrest
Darleen Long	74	White	Kimberly Long	Mother	Prior to arrest

CHAPTER 6 OVERVIEW OF THEMES COVERED IN RESULTS

Over the course of my data collection and analysis, a wide range of themes emerged; many of these themes related to the impact the wrongful conviction had on secondary exonerees and the relationships between primary and secondary exonerees. Although I would have preferred to explore all these themes and findings in more detail, that was not feasible at this time. As a result, I narrowed the focus of this dissertation to two overarching themes: examining experiences of exonerees' mothers and the emotional and social development of exonerees as a consequence of incarceration.

Broadly speaking, a life course perspective and family systems theory (FST) provided a framework through which to understand the connection between the two themes. In this framework, wrongful conviction can be conceptualized as a "life course disruption," "turning point," or a point in ones' life that alters the trajectory and development of an individual exoneree as well as their family system (Hutchison, 2011).

To fully understand what is meant by a life course disruption, I first introduce the sociological framework of the life course perspective. The life course perspective examines "how chronological age, relationships, common life transitions, life events, social change, and human agency shape people's lives from birth to death" (Hutchison, 2011, p. 1586). Within this framework, a "turning point" is understood as a "time when major change occurs in the life course trajectory" (p.1588). Specifically, the arrest and wrongful conviction of each of the exoneree participants can be considered a forced "turning point" or major disruption in their lives. This forced turning point disrupted their lives in such a significant way, causing their life course trajectory to shift completely and resulting in lasting impacts to their lives and the lives of those closest to them.

This life course perspective, coupled with a family systems framework, also allows one to make sense of how a wrongful conviction that directly affects one individual (e.g., primary exoneree) can disrupt the life course of multiple individuals (i.e., secondary exonerees). When considering wrongful conviction from the secondary exoneree's point of view, it may be useful to refer to the disruption as a "family systems disruption" or "family systems life course disruption." This is consistent with the life course perspective. According to Hutchison (2011), "a life course perspective emphasizes the interdependence of human lives and the ways in which relationships both support and control an individual's behavior" (p. 1590).

Family systems theory fits nicely within the life course perspective and suggests that the family is an emotional unit and that it is vital that individuals are understood as part of their family, rather than in isolation from one another (Bowen, 1978). Additionally, the life course perspective emphasizes the influence family members have on one another and how the life course trajectories of one person in a family unit impacts the lives of the others. As such, it is reasonable to assume that when a loved one is wrongfully arrested and convicted, the family system is disrupted. This, in turn, leads to secondary exonerees' life course trajectories being forever altered, leaving them with a disrupted life course as well. Finally, this perspective allows us to better understand how roles shift over time and family dynamics change as a result of the wrongful conviction and imprisonment.

Examining these two themes within a life course framework means focusing the analysis on how the life course of individuals, and the family unit, was altered and disrupted at the time the exoneree was wrongfully arrested and ultimately incarcerated.

The following chapters examine some of the issues that arose due to this disruption of the the life course.

The first theme I focused on relates to the overall experience of exonerees' mothers and how the wrongful conviction impacted the relationship between mothers and their exoneree children. Many different secondary exonerees were interviewed as part of this dissertation, but the relationship between a mother and her wrongfully convicted child was unique, consistently important, and strong throughout most cases I studied. Thus, I chose to focus on the mothers as individuals who were primarily indicated as being the greatest supporters and closest family members to exonerees – those whose life trajectories tended to be significantly disrupted as a result of the wrongful conviction. Due to the interdependence of exonerees and their mothers, the wrongful conviction of exonerees led to shifts in family dynamics, roles, and significant changes for the mothers and other loved ones.

In this chapter, I explore the sacrifices made by these mothers, their rituals for visitation and communication, their role in obtaining legal help for their child, and the impact the wrongful conviction had on their lives throughout the various stages of the process. I discuss the mental and emotional toll the wrongful conviction had on exonerees' mothers and what they did to cope with these challenges. I examine the social support available to these mothers and the stigmatization they experienced. Further, I examine the bond between an exoneree and their mother and how some exonerees coped with losing their mother prior to their exoneration. I used both primary (i.e., interviews with mothers) and secondary accounts (i.e., interviews with the exoneree and other secondary exonerees) to develop this chapter.

For exonerees, I primarily focus on their lack of development in terms of psychosocial maturity and how this influences their life course trajectory following their release. Specifically, I examine how this lack of normative development impacts their ability to relate to others their own age, find “age appropriate” romantic partners, and behave in a manner that is consistent with societal expectations of what their level of social emotional maturity should be. Thus, in the second results chapter (Chapter 8), I examine a phenomenon I refer to as ‘incarceration-induced age stagnation.’

In Chapter 8, I discuss the many ways in which exonerees described feeling younger than their actual age, how emotional and social development was stunted because of their incarceration, and how age stagnation manifested in the lives of exonerees following their release from prison, particularly regarding their relationships with peers, potential romantic partners, and children. I relied on primary accounts from interviews with exonerees to develop and explain the concept of age stagnation, providing evidence and a theory for why age stagnation might exist following lengthy periods of incarceration. Then, I examine the ways age stagnation impacts exonerees’ social relationships. For this, I incorporate accounts from secondary exonerees, especially romantic partners of exonerees. This allowed me to better understand what age stagnation might look like from an outsider’s perspective and the ways in which age stagnation may impact those that are close to the exoneree.

The goal of the overarching research project is to examine the totality of impact a wrongful conviction has on both primary exonerees, secondary exonerees, and the social relationships between both groups. Furthermore, the chosen themes relate back

to the original goals of the project by 1) examining a specific type of secondary exoneree and the social relationship with the primary exoneree, and 2) examining a psychosocial phenomenon that directly impacts the way exonerees are able to maintain and form relationships with secondary exonerees and new social connections more generally. By using a life course perspective, I am better able to examine how the wrongful conviction caused a disruption in the lives of both primary and secondary exonerees. I use this perspective to examine how the conviction impacts the relationships exonerees have, as well as to examine the roles of exonerees' mothers and how the dynamics of roles shift over time.

CHAPTER 7 IMPACT OF WRONGFUL CONVICTION ON EXONEREES' MOTHERS

The goal of this chapter is to provide a glimpse into the lives of the exonerees' mothers as those closest to the exonerees. I will also examine the impact of the wrongful conviction on the mothers, their relationship with the exoneree, and their other social relationships with family and friends. Even though the exonerees' mothers were not behind bars, they suffered alongside their loved ones and fought to help release them from this injustice. Though I interviewed several types of secondary exonerees in this project, including romantic partners, parents, children, siblings, and friends, I have chosen to focus primarily on mothers of exonerees in this section. The bond between exonerees and their mothers is especially strong when compared to other relationships and mothers tended to be the most consistent supporters for the wrongfully convicted persons in my study. Further, mothers of exonerees and mothers of prisoners more generally have been neglected in the incarceration and wrongful conviction literature. The specific methodology of the current study allowed me to reach a unique population that has rarely been interviewed about their experiences with incarceration. Since the mothers in my study were aware of their child's innocence, their experiences of parenting an incarcerated child were distinctive; this approach offered an uncommon narrative on what it is like to have an incarcerated child.

Mothers of Exonerees – Primary Pillars of Support and Strength

Beyond the recent DocuDrama on Netflix, *When They See Us*, literature and media seem to be lacking when it comes to the lived experiences of mothers of wrongfully convicted individuals. Not only is this perspective extremely important to understand, but among all the interviews I conducted, the mother-child bond among

exonerees and their parents and female exonerees and their children tended to be the strongest and characterized by unconditional love. Although, I was only able to conduct interviews with four mothers of exonerees, I was able to gather a significant amount of information about mother-exoneree relationships from most of my participants as exonerees tended to focus extensively on their relationships with their mothers and the impact of their mothers on their well-being and overall experience with their wrongful conviction.

One major theme/pattern I identified amongst the majority of exonerees was the role of their mother in supporting them throughout the entirety of the process. For the vast majority of exonerees, their mother was their biggest advocate. Among exonerees' various loved ones or primary support persons, mothers were at the top of the list when it came to providing support (financial, emotional, physical), presence (visiting or letter writing), and legal advocacy. For this reason, the upcoming sections focus on the experiences of these mothers and just how important the relationship between exonerees and their mothers tended to be.

This information is gathered from both primary and secondary accounts. Primary accounts were accounts from the mothers themselves and exonerees where appropriate. Specifically, I interviewed four mothers of exonerees including Debbie King, Tracy Nixon, Sylvia Fernandez, and Darleen Long. Secondary accounts included information from other secondary exonerees, such as siblings, grandmothers, or fathers of exonerees, when the information they provided related to the impact the wrongful conviction had on exonerees' mothers and the relationship between exonerees and their mothers. In terms of other secondary exonerees included in this chapter, I included

information provided by Rodger Long (Kimberly Long's father and Darleen's husband), Maria Roberts (Daryl Roberts' sister), CeCelia or CeCe Benovsky (Jason Strong's grandmother and Debbie King's mother) and Michael Bunch (Kristine Bunch's brother). These secondary exonerees' were used more often than others due to their closeness to and observance of the relationships exonerees had with their mothers and/or the individual experiences of the mothers.

The sections of this chapter are ordered in such a way to tell the story of how mothers of exonerees were involved with their child's case from the beginning when they were first arrested, how they handled the guilty verdict and/or conviction, what it was like for them while their child was wrongfully incarcerated and how they fought for their child's innocence, and finally, what life after exoneration has been like. I will also provide details on the mother-child relationship and how it evolved throughout these stages of the wrongful conviction experience. Beyond the story of the parent-child relationship, I analyze the overall impact the wrongful conviction had on the mothers themselves and the ways in which this injustice disrupted their life course trajectories. This experience altered their lives forever and changed who they were as people and parents. It forced them to take on additional roles within their family systems due to the absence of their wrongfully convicted child, putting additional pressure on them and those providing them with support.

This chapter mainly focuses on sixteen exonerees who had the support of their mothers from the initial time of arrest. Each mother believed in their child's innocence and seemingly did what they thought was best for their child. Yet, there were three exonerees whose mothers were less involved and less supportive than the rest. These

were the outliers, which I discuss in the section on “unsupportive mothers.” However, the majority of exonerees interviewed (n = 16; total N = 19) described their mother as their staunchest supporter. For example, Juneal Pratt, in referring to his mother, stated that “she was my greatest supporter.” These sentiments were echoed across nearly all the interviews I conducted and were additionally supported by information obtained from interviews with other secondary exonerees. Even two of the exonerees whose mothers were generally more selfish and less helpful in the exoneration and support process made statements indicating that their mothers were among their main outside contact persons. The exonerees could not necessarily sever ties with their mothers, even if the exoneree wanted to and even if the mother’s support was less than ideal or helpful. Exonerees’ mothers generally stuck by them, although these mothers went through hell alongside their wrongfully convicted children.

Understanding the Role of Exoneree Mommas - Initial Reactions and Focus on Fighting for Release

Always there, she always believed in me. And she did what she could, but our system is a tough system. Ya get caught in the gears, and it doesn't matter how good a person is, it just takes a lot to get up out of it. - Juneal Pratt

The moment their child was arrested and convicted, all the mothers I interviewed sprang into action mode. This was the forced turning point where their lives changed dramatically and their life course as they knew it was disrupted. Their lives became entirely about one goal – getting their child out of prison and ideally proving their child’s innocence in the process. Their jobs, relationships, and what they did with their free time revolved around this end goal. The wrongful conviction changed the landscape of every part of the mothers’ lives, including their relationship with their romantic partners and, in some cases, their place within the overall community in which they lived. Beyond

the information provided from mothers about their love for their child, it was quite clear by the endearing and loving way they spoke about their mothers that the majority of the exoneree participants also felt a deep sense of love and connection to their mothers, especially after they had received such unwavering support from them. Four exonerees did not come out and say exactly how much they loved their mothers, but every time they had to discuss their mothers, they became extremely emotional, and it was clear that they felt quite attached to their mothers. Specifically, three male exonerees stayed quite positive throughout the entire interview, answering most questions with no problem and even making jokes throughout. However, when these men were asked questions about their mothers or their mothers' deaths, their affect changed dramatically. These individuals either became avoidant when asked about their mothers or they became extremely emotional, sometimes crying for the first and only time throughout the interview.

Initial Involvement in the Legal System

To understand the role mothers played in their children's cases, I first explain some of the mothers' initial reactions and emotions and their level of involvement during the beginning phases of the case (i.e., arrest, plea bargaining, trial). Further, I will provide some case details that will better orient readers to the cases to better understand what was occurring throughout this time.

The exonerees, whose mothers I interviewed, were relatively young at the time of their arrest (16 – 27 years old). Having a younger child likely influenced how quickly these mothers mobilized into action and how involved they were in the process. Their children were at stages in their development and life course which required mothers to play a more centralized and involved role. Though most of these mothers had never

had any involvement with the criminal justice system before, upon their child's arrest, they began learning everything they could about the system and the specific crime their child was suspected of committing. Whatever plans these mothers might have had for the next stage of their life course evaporated, indefinitely put on hold.

Arrests and interrogations

Strength and Motivation. Marie Huff described what her mother did the moment she found out she was being brought in for questioning for robbery and murder in Spain at the age of 20.

So, my entire family from the beginning, like my mom was on the way, on a flight the moment I was arrested. She was on her way to Spain to help me and support me. And she landed and found out that I had been arrested ... So that was bad [laughs], but of course all of them, they all knew that I was innocent and that they were just scared. And they were like 'what the hell is going on?' And so, they went into mission mode immediately. My mom went straight to the embassy, got a lawyer immediately, and came to visit me in prison as soon as she possibly could. Meanwhile, my entire family just again went into mission mode ... Yeah, basically my entire family's life stopped and became about saving me ... immediately. And, we didn't know how long it would take. We thought, maybe it was just a big misunderstanding, and it would just be a few weeks, and then it turned into years.

Marie's family was extraordinarily supportive throughout the entirety of her wrongful conviction and her mother spearheaded efforts to begin the process of getting her daughter released. This quote shows just how quickly Marie's mother initiated the process of hiring an attorney and traveling to be closer to her daughter. Her whole life shifted focus and became solely about helping Marie. This was true of all the mothers I interviewed. Marie's case was unique in that she was overseas studying abroad when she was initially arrested, but this case illustrates just how far a mother is willing to go despite these additional obstacles of the case being in another country. While this quote from Marie shows the actions her mother took, the following quote from Darleen

provides details of the internal feelings she experienced at the time her child first came under suspicion for a crime she did not commit. Darleen Long, Kimberly Long's mother, described the courage and strength that arose in her when Kimberly was first arrested for the murder of her boyfriend at the age of 27:

I think it's just in us. I think there's strength that's just there. You - we don't - every human being doesn't believe it's there, but it's there, an inner strength that does come out and you do, do it, you have to do it. That's how you get through each day. And there are days, yeah, when you do want to go in your closet and shut the door. And touch your prayer closet and just shut the door and go 'no one can see me. I don't have to see anymore what's happening,' but you don't. You just can't. You love, you love your loved one, you know, we loved Kimberly. Oh, my God, we loved her, we love her so much.

This quote shows that the sole motivation these mothers had was their love for their child and that when the time came, a strength arose within them to fight as hard as they could to free their child from incarceration. Though she felt like giving up, Darleen knew this was not a possibility for her. She knew she had to fight for her daughter, and it was the unconditional love she had for her daughter that allowed her to never give up. In this quote, we also see a bit of the pain that Darleen felt at the time as she described wanting to completely give up and disappear. The quote shows that when a mother loves her child, she is willing to do whatever it takes to protect and free her child from pain or hardship. Each of the four mothers I interviewed knew the character of their children and immediately knew that the police had gotten it wrong. They now had to prove this to the authorities while maintaining some semblance of mental stability and strength for their children.

Negative Emotional Reactions. Exonerees' mothers generally experienced strong feelings of guilt, anger, shock, and disbelief upon first finding out their children had been arrested in connection with particularly heinous crimes. Three of those interviewed

specifically mentioned how they directed their anger and blame at the city, police, and/or other legal actors involved in the case – many of whom committed serious acts of misconduct. All the mothers and secondary exonerees I interviewed described how shocked and confused they were upon hearing their child had been arrested, particularly for such gruesome crimes. Tracy Nixon described those initial moments after receiving the call that Kenneth, her 19-year-old son, had been arrested for arson and multiple murder, including young children as victims:

But I never lost faith, you know. I knew in my heart that he was innocent, and I knew that one day he would get- that he would be released, because I was not giving up. It was very, very heart-wrenching, from the first moment that I got the phone call. I remember growing up, and you hear the saying- people say, “things happen to you and your whole world goes black.” I understood at that moment what that meant, because I literally couldn't see. My world went black. And I couldn't think. The only thing I could really think to do was to get my twins out of the house, take them to school, so that they wouldn't turn the news on and see him.

Upon receiving such horrible news, Tracy explained that her whole world went black. She was in such shock that she physically could not see. At the same moment, she knew that her son was innocent and knew that she would do anything and everything she could to prove his innocence. Tracy's situation was made more complicated by the fact that Kenneth had two younger siblings at home that she had to care for. When examining Tracy's role as a mother, it is useful to consider her as a piece of an interrelated family system. Although she had increased demands placed on her by Kenneth's arrest, his siblings (the remainder of her family unit) equally depended on her for protection and support. Tracy's place within her family unit was centralized and vital for all of her children. Shutting down entirely was not an option for Tracy, because her other children needed her. The very first thing that she did after finding out her son had been arrested was to get her other children out of the house and to school as if it were a

normal day. This allowed her to have a bit of time to herself once she returned home to start making calls to professionals that could help her or provide her with advice on what to do next. Even though Tracy had to take certain steps to protect Kenneth, she ensured the safety and care of her other children at the same time. Ten of the exonerees I spoke with had younger siblings or young children that their mothers were responsible for, which meant many of these mothers had to balance caring for these children on the outside while also supporting their incarcerated child financially and emotionally.

When a loved one becomes entrapped within the criminal justice system, sometimes their family on the outside feels hopeless about the situation. They do not feel as though they have much agency in changing the outcome and the vastness of the criminal justice system can feel quite powerful and overwhelming. Darleen Long described feeling this way especially right after her daughter was arrested.

It's gotta be one of the hardest things that a family, that parents can go through. You know, the good times you support your children, the bad times you support your children and then, this happens, and you feel- you're still going to support your child, but you have no control. There's nothing you can do, it's bigger than you... and we're all in shock it's... yeah, that's the word, brutal. It's so brutal from point one. Your world stops, which I've said that in interviews, and you go 'well, what do you, what do you do, what do we do, what do we do?' You know? It's brutal, it's horrific, it's unbelievable. And that was just the very first part, you know. We gotta get through it, 'Kim, you know what, we'll get through it.'

In the above quote, Darleen explained how the whole situation felt so big and completely out of her control. These thoughts led to feelings of helplessness among close loved ones and made it challenging to know what to do next. Feeling as though they had no control over the situation was common among the mothers I interviewed, with three of them specifically mentioning that they felt this way. Despite these feelings,

Darleen knew how important it was to provide necessary support and reassurance to Kimberly. In the beginning stages, mothers tended to not reveal these feelings to their children as they felt they needed to remain strong and provide an example of strength and encouragement, yet they often felt uncertain and overwhelmed by the vastness of the entire situation. In the coming sections, I discuss some of the actions mothers took to gain back some of this control, including becoming deeply involved in the legal case and legal legwork.

Of the mothers I interviewed, one of them had overwhelming feelings of guilt regarding the initial arrest and ultimate conviction of their child. She felt as though she should have done something differently and protected her child more than she did. Specifically, Sylvia, the mother of 16-year-old Romeo, who had been arrested for murder, had strong feelings of guilt for allowing the police to come into her home without a warrant. She explained this in the following quote:

I mean, I couldn't do it [sit back and not fight for your kid], you know? But then I set up a lot of guilt, after he was locked up. Because, I said to [my sister]], I should have asked for the warrant, you know? I should've been like, "Let me see it." I should have said, "He's a minor," you know? But they did it so quickly. I mean, it was like a blink of an eye, within a few seconds, you know? And I was like, "Oh my God." So, that's why I thought that. I tell you, anybody, I would tell every parent, "I don't care what you say, if this happens, this..." And I know, I saved a few kids for it [giving their parents advice to not have their children speak to police and immediately get a lawyer].

Sylvia's situation and experience of guilt was unique in that she was actually in the home with Romeo when he was initially taken in by the police. Since he was still a juvenile, Sylvia felt she should have done more to stop the police, and she ultimately carried this guilt with her for 20+ years.

Minor Children and Navigating Interrogation. Jeffrey Deskovic, like Romeo, had been arrested for murder at the age of 16. In addition to murder, Jeffrey was additionally charged with rape. Both Jeffrey Deskovic and Romeo Fernandez were minors when they were arrested and, in both cases, parents were not present during the interrogations. Neither Jeffrey nor Romeo knew or understood what their rights were. During the investigation, Jeffrey was actually under the impression that he was helping the police as a part of a “junior detective program.” By contrast, the officer in Romeo’s case was more aggressive, physically attacking him throughout the extensive interrogation. Neither young man believed they had the right to call a parent throughout the process and both ultimately falsely confessed after some time. Though many of the exonerees I spoke to falsely confessed, Romeo and Jeffrey were the only two minors. Sylvia explained how helpless this made her feel. When Romeo was first taken in for questioning, Sylvia was under the impression that he was not in any trouble and that it would be sorted out quickly. After finding out about the physical mistreatment and false confession, Sylvia never fully forgave herself for not making a greater attempt to intervene.

Pleas and trial experience

You will never know how many times I heard ‘it will be okay, son.’ They all thought that it would be a just justice system. - Rodney Lincoln

Plea Deals and Mothers’ Influence. Among all the exonerees I interviewed, only one of them took a plea deal. All the others went to trial. Christopher or “Chris” Ochoa who was 22 years old when he was arrested for rape and murder was the one individual who took a plea deal prior to being sentenced, and his decision to take a plea was

directly influenced by his concern for his mother. He described his decision and the events that preceded it as follows:

One of the lawyers was calling my mom ... that she had to get me – “Get your son to plead guilty or you’re going to lose a son. They’re going to kill him.” I mean, they had my mom stressed out. She got to a point of a stroke. Fortunately, she got to the hospital on time. They fixed her up but... so that’s what prompted me to plead guilty...I was in the county jail fighting this for a year trying... And my grandma told me about what happened to my mom, and that really hurt me. I called up the phone, and I said, “I can’t. I know I’m innocent. I know, I’m facing whatever I’m gonna face, but I can’t have my mom sick or die.” Or die, and she doesn’t know this till this day, but so I went to my room, my cell, and there was a phone number they told me to pick. So, I called my defense attorney, “I’ll do it. Just leave my mom alone. Leave my mom alone.” It was the hardest decision I’ve ever had. It’s still, you know? I had to make my life, plead guilty, to something I didn’t do.

Chris explained how the apparent harassment from his attorneys caused such severe stress to his mother that she ultimately had a stroke. Although it is not clear for certain what caused the stroke, it seems reasonable to assume that the stress of Chris’ arrest and upcoming trial, in addition to the constant calls from the attorneys, caused severe stress and made a stroke more likely. It is interesting that his attorneys involved his mother to such a degree, considering that he was over the age of 18 at the time of his arrest. Even though Chris knew he was innocent and wanted to take the case to trial, he was genuinely concerned for his mother’s life and well-being. This shows how an individuals’ care and concern for their mother could lead them to make decisions about their case that may not have been in their best interest.

Lack of Experience with Justice System and Public Defenders. Two mothers and four additional secondary exonerees mentioned feeling overwhelmed when it came to helping their wrongfully arrested loved one navigate the criminal justice system. None of the families had ever been involved with the criminal justice system prior to this and

certainly not in such a serious manner. This naivety made the families vulnerable, because they did not understand how important legal representation is for an innocent person. Further, they held the view that the justice system was just that, a just system. That is, because their child was innocent, they would not necessarily have to purchase an expensive, private attorney, assuming that the whole situation should sort itself out. Their belief that the truth would prevail sadly made them more vulnerable to conviction – their innocence put them more at risk of wrongful conviction because they believed their innocence would set them free.

Jeffrey Deskovic described how his mother perceived the entire situation initially and how she was unable to consult with his public defender, even though he was only 16 years old when he was arrested and only 17 years old at the time he went to trial. He stated:

I would say my mother was kinda in over her head. She didn't really know much about court and law and trials and all, all, all of that, all of that. I mean, she just knew that it was a problem, but that was it. But, you know, the lawyer kinda made the situation worse. He wouldn't allow any adults to speak with him. He wouldn't speak with any adults in the case. He just kept –being, uh, “you're not my client”. You know, your son, or your nephew, whatever, is his client. So, it was kinda like, he found a way to basically apply the attorney-client privilege against his client, is what he did. Which is a ridiculous application of it. So, yeah, that would be how I would categorize that.

This quotation is in line with some juvenile crime literature. Families are often pushed out of the legal process (Justice for Families 2012; Pennell, Shapiro, and Spigner, 2011). Further, sometimes legal actors take advantage of the fact that the average family does not necessarily know a lot about the law (OJJDP, 2018; Luckenbill 2012; Osher and Hunt 2002). If the suspect were guilty, things would be different when it comes to loved ones' expectations about how the trial is going to go. However,

innocence can become a risk factor for not only the suspect but also their closest loved ones in that one's belief in their innocence (or their loved ones' innocence) might lead them to put their guard down, being more trusting of law enforcement than they should. For example, they may not feel the need to immediately seek out defense representation and they may speak to police rather than invoking their right to remain silent. Three of the mothers and four secondary exonerees I spoke to explained how they were not necessarily worried at first. They believed their child was innocent and they expected that the system would work as it was supposed to.

In both Jeffrey and Chris' cases, it seems that the court-appointed attorneys were less than helpful regarding legal decision-making. Further, they had almost opposite issues, with Jeffrey's attorneys refusing to speak to his mother and Chris' seemingly harassing his mother. In both cases, however, the mothers did not know what the proper protocol was and so did not have the tools to refute what was being done. Additionally, neither of them hired private attorneys, in part because they could not afford to but also because they did not feel that it was necessary.

The decision not to hire a private attorney ended up haunting families and exacerbating feelings of guilt among exonerees' mothers. CeCe, Jason Strong's grandmother, explained that she and her daughter, Debbie King, Jason's mother, immediately went to hire a private attorney following 24-year-old Jason's conviction of first-degree murder. She stated that "we wish we would've done [this] before the trial, but we thought he doesn't have anything to worry about, because he didn't do it. There's not any evidence whatsoever." They both felt a lot of guilt that they did not go

with a private attorney rather than a public defender. Similar to the other families, they felt that things were going to work out, since their child or loved one was innocent.

Mothers' Trial Experience. Not all mothers were able to attend the trial, but not because they chose not to go. One of the mothers I interviewed, Sylvia, was placed on a witness list, even though the prosecution had no intention of calling on her to testify. Sylvia explained that the reason she was put on the witness list was, because the prosecution did not want to have her in the courtroom, where she might show emotion and make the jury more sympathetic to her and her son. Instead of observing the trial, Sylvia waited right outside the courtroom, pacing the halls and waiting for any updates from other loved ones or from journalists.

One mother did testify on behalf of her 20-year-old dark-skinned black son, Juneal Pratt, as an alibi witness, when he was accused of raping two white women in Nebraska in the late 1970s. Juneal described this testimony and his mother's stance on lying to protect her son:

My family testified to everything. I was right there with them. Uh, but you know, ... I guess the expectation is that families will lie for their kids, even when they're wrong. And they couldn't be more wrong about my mother, because my mother was not one of those kinds of people. If I did something wrong, she'd want me to be held accountable. She wouldn't be playing no protect-you games. If anything, she would say, "Leave him here and imma whoop his ass. But we ain't getting ready to cover for him, that's for damn sure."

Sadly, Juneal's mother passed away while he was incarcerated, so I was unable to interview her and ask her how it made her feel to testify at trial and not be believed by the jury. However, it must have been incredibly difficult for his mother to know that she told the truth and was not believed. He explained that "the only other black thing in the courtroom was [his] shoes," referring to the fact that all the jurors and other legal actors

in his case were White. One might very well assume that his mother felt as though her and her son's race played a role in the jury doubting his alibi and her testimony.

Though I believe this is important to mention and likely impacted his trial and conviction with such weak evidence, a lengthier discussion of how race impacted this case is beyond the scope of the current analysis.

Tracy Nixon was among the mothers who were present throughout the entirety of the trial of her 19-year-old son, Kenneth. She described what it was like for her to be at the trial and hear the prosecution make a case against her son:

Oh, the trial was [sighs], that was for me a situation that I never imagined that I would be going through as a mother. And one thing I can say, as a mother, if you've never gone through it, you can't even imagine the pain. You know, the digging, that they dig into your life, and they bring this stuff, and they bring that, and you know, they twist things, and they say stuff, and you know, it'll really make a person think twice, some of the things that they say. And, for me, ...watching my son go through it, and... he didn't cry, he held strong as a 19-year-old. You know, he was focused, and he had the same impression that I did, "I didn't do it, they gonna let me out of here, things are going to be okay." Day after day after day, it was just more and more heart wrenching. You start to lose faith in the system. You lose faith in the police officers. And, you know, it's-it's, it's [stutters] a challenging situation.

Tracy explained that as the trial went on, she lost more and more faith in the criminal justice system. Like the mothers I discussed earlier, she believed that her son's innocence would set him free, but the more she heard the case against her son and the story constructed by the prosecution (which she referred to as lies), this belief diminished. Tracy also explained that her mothering was attacked by the prosecution - they made specific comments that she was a bad mother. Despite all the negativity in the trial, it was clear just how proud Tracy was of her son and how strong he held throughout the trial. She explained how difficult it was for her to keep it together while they were bashing her and her son. Yet, Tracy's pride for her son and his character was

noticeable in the interview. In fact, Kenneth has somehow maintained this grace throughout the entire ordeal. Tracy was able to make it through this whole situation, in large part because of the strength and encouragement she received from Kenneth.

Entering the Prison Environment

But it was, it was living Hell. It was living Hell. - Sylvia Fernandez

Though the arrest and trial processes were incredibly difficult for mothers to handle, the thought of their children being behind bars in a maximum-security prison was even more challenging for the mothers. All four mothers I interviewed mentioned how they were worried about what might happen to their child behind bars, and two specifically mentioned feeling guilty living their own day-to-day lives due to a strong sense of what I believe is similar to “survivors' guilt,” which is “a particular type of guilt that develops in people who have survived a life-threatening situation” (Cherry, 2021, p. 1). Although their child did not die, these mothers were forced to watch from the sidelines as their children were subjected to lengthy sentences in dangerous prisons. The mothers, by contrast, “survived” the conviction in that they were not subjected to the same treatment within the prison environment. They did not feel that it was fair that their child had been punished and incarcerated for something they did not do, and many told me they would have much preferred to trade places with their child. Sylvia, Romeo’s mother, described how challenging it was to have fun or enjoy life while, in the back of her mind, all she could think of was how Romeo was stuck in that dangerous environment:

I need the healing time. I need to heal from it, I need to just be able to say, “Okay I’m gonna - I just want to enjoy life and laugh,” when we would go out when Romeo was locked up. I’m sorry – I want to cry. We would be having a good time and then I’d remember like, “how am I supposed to be having a good time when he is stuck in there?” And then, I’d end up being

the grouch and angry, because I was angry at myself for allowing myself to have a good time, because I thought, "This isn't fair. I'm over here having a good time and my baby is stuck there with strangers," you know?

For all the mothers I interviewed, the wrongful conviction of their child meant they could no longer enjoy life in the same way they had before. Their lives became focused around the singular goal of getting their child released from prison – no matter what it took. Again, these feelings and inability to enjoy life, showcase the level of life course disruption the wrongful conviction had on their lives. Things they used to do were no longer appealing and would cause mental anguish. Two of the mothers described feelings of guilt and shame if they did anything to enjoy themselves, such as attending parties, concerts, or going on vacation because they saw it as time taken from their main goal of attaining their child's release. They felt that they should not spend any money on themselves and that their fight for innocence would be negatively impacted if they took time to enjoy their lives or treat themselves. For Sylvia, this lingering feeling of guilt has remained. To this day, Sylvia struggles to be still and present with herself and to enjoy the time post-exoneration. The trauma from the years Romeo was behind bars remains, and even though he has been out for about 5 years now, Sylvia has not yet had enough time to properly heal from this experience.

Pride Despite Fear. Though the prison environment was bleak, the mothers I interviewed also reported being proud of their children's accomplishments behind bars. Fifteen of the exonerees I interviewed used the time they had behind bars to improve their own lives or make others' lives better. Whether it was through tutoring, jailhouse lawyering, or simply being a friend and mentor, these exonerees used the time they were in prison to better themselves and their environment. They took care of others and supported them. All the mothers I interviewed described feelings of pride when it came

to these achievements of their child. For example, Tracy Nixon recounted how Kenneth was of service to his fellow inmates:

You know he graduated valedictorian of his class? Top of the class. And, you know, the professor, her speaking of him highly, the way she did, I knew in my heart then, I said, "Okay, we're on a roll, we're on a path to greatness from here."...So I asked him, I said, "How [come all the other family members of the graduating prisoners knew who you were]?" And he said, "Well, ma," he said, "remember I called you," he said and he told me, "I don't know how to act, I don't know what to do here, I don't know how to be." And I'd said, "Be yourself, but don't take no wooden nickels. Don't let nobody take nothing from you that you can't take back. Be yourself." He said, "When you told me that, the only thing I knew to do was be myself." He said, "About 15 of these guys have been here for every bit of 10 years, and they couldn't pass this test. I tutored them, and they called and told their family members that this kid came in and tutored them, and they passed the test. So about 15 of these guys only passed the test because of me. And so, that's how they knew my name, because they called and told them." And I was like, "Oh, my God, you did that?" And he was like, "Yes, I did." So, then I said, "Well, don't be too good, because they'll keep you as a model prisoner, and then they won't let you go."

While telling me this story, Tracy was glowing with pride for her son. She knew that he had felt lost when he was first incarcerated. Often, there is an expectation to act tough or to become someone to be feared when an individual enters the prison environment. Usually, this toughness is a survival necessity, so Tracy was nervous about what the environment and experience might do to her sweet, fun-loving son. She gave him the above advice in the hopes that he would not have to change who he was to survive in prison. Fortunately, he was able to use his own skills and personality to befriend and mentor other prisoners. This mentorship and tutoring brought with it a sense of safety. Though illegal and aggressive activity was prevalent in the penitentiary, Kenneth was able to avoid most of it, because he provided a valuable mentoring service to the other inmates.

Mothers remained proud of their incarcerated children, but these prideful events were few and far between. Primarily, mothers were concerned and terrified for their child due to the dangerous conditions of the prison environment. Additionally, mothers worried about the mental and physical health of their children, as many of them suffered from severe depression and anxiety. Sylvia described a conversation with her son Romeo, when he had thoughts of suicide:

Romeo was like, "Oh, I want to die," you know? "I just can't do this anymore," you know? "If I have to stay here, I'm going to kill myself." And I'd be like, "Hold out, hold out. I know you're coming home; I just can't tell you when," you know? I mean, it's in God's time, not in my time.

Dangerous Prison Environment. The mothers' fears regarding the dangers of the prison environment were certainly not unfounded. Most of the prisons were fraught with gang activity and extremely dangerous individuals. Ten of the exonerees I interviewed described witnessing murders, stabbings, or other acts of extreme violence. One exoneree I interviewed discussed being raped in prison, while another described an incident where he was stabbed. Further, correctional officers (COs) were often unwilling to protect the inmates. In some instances, COs were actively involved in the harming of inmates. In one particularly horrific instance, Sylvia Fernandez discovered that her son Romeo was being "fought" and "bet on" by the guards inside the prison. Romeo described it as "being fought like gladiators." In addition to this, the prison guards would frequently use dogs to terrorize and attack the inmates. When Sylvia Fernandez discovered this, she went to work to expose what the prison was doing, writing letters and making calls to officials she believed might help. She explained how she received criticism from prison officials due to her willingness to fight back and report the inhumane treatment of her son and other prisoners.

Every time I would call, Romeo would say, "Okay, they're doing this," or "They're doing that." And they'd go, "Oh. Oh, you're the one that likes to go high up. You're, yes, we know we have to treat your son good, because the way, you know, you'll cause so much trouble for us," And blah, blah, blah. You know, like I said, "What do people want you to do? Are you supposed to let your son just get killed?" You know what I mean? Like I said, no one could ever understand it. [crying] They never will, because they didn't have to go through it! To know that they were hurting him, and I couldn't protect him. He was my baby, he was a baby, he was, you know? He was so young, and it killed me. Oh my God, I can't imagine, just being in there and knowing he can't come home! And these bastards – just do your frickin' job! I remember telling people, "Why can't they just do their god damn job? I'm not asking them to be his best friend. Just do their job as best as they can. Take care of him! Don't let him, don't let them kill each other. Give them some dignity, so that they can all maybe get out of there and become something."

Even though Romeo has been home for a few years now, I could feel the fear in Sylvia's voice when she told me this story. These mothers were afraid for their children, knowing that their children were locked away with extremely dangerous violent criminals, particularly if they did not believe the guards or prison officials were going to provide them with any sort of protection. The mothers I interviewed believed that their number one duty in life was to protect their child and when their child was locked away, they felt helpless in their ability to fulfil this duty. Three of the four mothers I interviewed contacted the prison wardens, and other higher officials, numerous times when they felt that their child was being mistreated or that they could potentially make a difference in their child's environment. These mothers did everything they could do to gain back some control and make a difference in their child's prison experience.

Sacrifices Made by Mothers in Fight for Innocence

It took a great toll, because you have, even though I'm one that behind bars, you have a lot of unwilling participatory people who are involved, which is your family members, so they become victimized. They only, not only become victimized by the media, but they become victimized by the court system and so everything that's going on in their lives. That part of them that went behind bars with me, they can never regain that back. A

sleepless nights, you have people putting together funds to pay for attorneys, and so a lot of their dreams have been cut short as well. Going hearing your loved one being bashed, you know he's innocent, going hear him being bashed in court, that's not easy. They sat watching my mother, course you know who was affected the most. Watching her stay up all night long praying for me, watching her going and hearing your son getting 107 years and never come home – Daryl Roberts

As a result of the wrongful conviction, the lives of exonerees' mothers took on a completely new trajectory. These mothers and their families made extensive sacrifices, including giving up on their own dreams and goals, leaving jobs, exiting retirement to go back into the workforce, leaving their homes, and many more financial sacrifices. All of these decisions and sacrifices occurred as a result of the disruption to their lives, earlier referred to as a 'forced turning point.' These mothers made their child's release their top priority and as such, the other roles and responsibilities in their lives shifted to fit in with that goal. Quality of life for mothers as well as the relationships they had with other individuals were put on the backburner. In this section, I outline some of the many sacrifices mothers made so that they could focus on achieving their goal of proving their children's innocence and getting them released from prison.

General Financial Sacrifices

The financial and emotional impact of a wrongful conviction is immense, and because the incarcerated individual is unable to bring in any substantial pay, the financial burden ends up falling on the loved ones of the wrongfully convicted persons. An arrest and incarceration are often financially disastrous to the family (Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006; Green et al., 2006). One might expect these costs to be amplified for those that are wrongfully convicted, because in these cases the family typically feels the need to hire an attorney for the appeals process. In some cases, they might additionally seek out the assistance of a private investigator, so they can delve

into the original crime to determine who committed it. Beyond legal fees, other costs are incurred, including the cost of commissary, phone calls, visitation, taking time off of work, and traveling. In some cases, families had to pay bail for their child after the initial arrest and then again once the conviction was overturned. This was the case for Kimberly Long's parents, whose father stated that neither of these payments were ever returned. Though I did not ask a follow-up question about why this payment was never returned, my assumption is that they were referring to the amount they paid the bail bondsman to make bail. This fee is typically not returned as it is a fee paid in order to use the services of a bail bondsman.

Although parents of exonerees tended to be the main source of financial support for exonerees, the wrongful conviction also had financial implications for other members of the family, such as younger siblings or even the children of exonerees. Any extra funds that the family had were spent on the wrongfully convicted person, meaning that money that might have otherwise been available for others was no longer there. Tracy Nixon described how her daughter was impacted in this way and how it influenced her family dynamics:

It actually changed the whole dynamic of my family. You know, our living arrangements - our lifestyle. Because I had to... we had to be creative, and building money for lawyers, raising money, getting people to actually listen to what was going on and what was being said. I can remember times, when there were things that we wanted to do, and I remember hearing my daughter tell somebody "well, we had a lot of money until my brother went to jail, and then my mother had to pay all these people to save my brother's life, so now we don't have a lot of money anymore," and I thought to myself [tearing up] "wow, I didn't know it impacted her like that." In the sense of she felt like his situation took away everything from everybody else in order to be happy or be comfortable.

This quote illustrates just how important it is to examine the total impact of a wrongful conviction on the entire family network, acknowledging that the hurt and impacts stretch

far beyond the initial conviction and incarceration of an individual. Tracy's role as breadwinner and responsibilities as a mother were affected by the conviction, leaving her unable to provide the same level of financial stability to her other children. There was a great deal of financial strife and sacrifice that these secondary exonerees experienced, particularly the mother and their dependents. This caused additional pain for Tracy, because she felt that her fight for her son was causing her daughter to feel neglected in some ways. Even if her daughter understood, why she had to make these financial sacrifices, it still added a layer of discomfort, making everyday life more challenging and causing additional stress. Kenneth, Tracy's wrongfully convicted son, noticed Tracy's financial stress:

My mom, yeah. There were some things that were happening in her life that were causing her a lot of stress— I mean, 10 years of investing everything you have, and you're not getting the results you're looking for. And I don't just mean everything emotionally, like financially, you know. She's sacrificing houses and cars and insurance payments and retirement funds and at that point it's like "what more can I give?" And I started to pick up the sense that she was reaching that point.

Though exonerees might not have experienced their family's financial losses in the same way their families experienced them, the exonerees still dealt with guilt and stress regarding the financial toll their families went through. In the above quote, Kenneth explained just how much his mother sacrificed, and it was obvious that this caused him a great deal of guilt. Although the financial sacrifices were necessary, the exonerees felt guilty that their families had to give up so much of their lives and their financial security to ensure the exonerees were taken care of and to help fight for their release.

Lost Homes, Mortgages, and Relocation

Many families had to downsize their homes or relocate because of the wrongful conviction. For some, this was related to stigma experienced in the neighborhood or

community where the crime happened. For others, it was more of a financial or logistical decision. Marie Huff described the lengths her family went to in order to support her financially in her legal pursuits of proving her innocence:

My family...sacrificed everything to figure out how to save me. Everyone, like my entire extended family, people were taking out mortgages, dipping into their retirement. They rented an apartment in Spain, and someone from my family was always there the entire time, which meant that, of course, like the relationships were strained, because my mom would go six months without seeing her husband.

This quote summarizes the various sacrifices made by families, particularly mothers, in terms of what they must give up and do to fight for justice. Because she was wrongfully convicted in another country, some of the challenges were amplified when it came to visitation and family separation. Fortunately, her mother and her extended family had enough resources to be able to rent an additional apartment in another country, but that might not have been a viable option for many of the other families I interviewed. Other mothers and secondary exonerees described having to take out 2nd or 3rd mortgages on their homes to pay legal fees and other costs, while some ultimately moved across the country to make visitation more affordable and less time consuming. Sylvia and John Fernandez, Romeo's parents, explained that they lost their home due to trial costs:

Until the trial came up, and we had to, we lost the house. We had to, I had to borrow money, you know, and then we got behind, and it all led to a mistrial. And then the district attorney came back, and they retried, and then they found him guilty.

The financial impacts on the parents of exonerees sometimes reached beyond the immediate family to extended family and friends. This depended on whether the parents even had friends or family members they could borrow money from. Among the four mothers I interviewed, three of them explicitly mentioned borrowing money from another

relative. In the above quote, Romeo's father described how he and his wife, Sylvia, lost their home despite being able to borrow money from other loved ones.

Jobs and Retirement

Many of the exoneree mothers took on additional work roles, whether it was taking on additional jobs or working more hours in one job. In at least three cases, the financial burden of the case caused families to come out of retirement and return to work or delay their ability to go into retirement. For example, CeCe, Jason Strong's grandmother, described how she helped Jason's mother financially and the career sacrifices she and Debbie, Jason's mother, made to hire additional attorneys and a private investigator to work on Jason's case and afford travel and other costs related to Jason's incarceration:

And I went back to work, so I that I could put all my earnings from going back to work towards getting an attorney and helping him out. Debbie had to quit her job in order to pull out the 401(k) to use that... My husband and I went in to see what we needed to do to up our 401K's, or whatever, to be able to have a decent retirement fund and everything. So I didn't want to interfere with that, taking out of that to do it. So that's why I went back to work so that I would not have to touch our personal income and stuff, you know, and security and just work to pay it. Which I still had to go in some to my own savings sometimes, especially for the airlines and the money we'd spend on hotels, when we went to trial and we went up to Illinois to visit him and everything. That would always be an extra expense and food. The food at the prison is horrendous, the prices they ask for, which is like \$25 or \$30 just for a visit with him. Well, that would be like for a couple of days, just to get him some snacks and stuff that he was never allowed to have in prison.

This captures the additional financial strain families felt as a result of having to balance the stress of having an incarcerated loved one, both in helping to contribute to legal fees, visit their loved one, and provide funds for the loved one in prison. CeCe went on to explain that even with all of this, they could not afford to continue paying the private attorney that they hired. CeCe explained how saddened Debbie was to have to quit her

new, well-paying job she had recently started. Debbie ended up waiting tables at multiple restaurants to pay her own bills, put money towards Jason's case, and travel to see him. CeCe was not the only one who mentioned how expensive the visitation room food was. Eight of the secondary exonerees I interviewed talked about this and explained the 'hidden costs' of a visitation that the average person might not consider.

Legal Work, Advocacy and Keeping Busy

The mothers I interviewed talked about how they kept themselves busy working on the case, working to raise money, and focusing on other activities to keep themselves from focusing too much on all the negatives. For example, Sylvia Fernandez decided to take in homeless youth and young adults to look after them and to ensure that they did not get caught up within the legal system like Romeo had. Kenneth's mother, Tracy, described how she spent most of the years while Kenneth was incarcerated:

I don't care about nothing else at this point, nothing. I told some people the other day, "For 16 years I had to pick and choose my battles," because 12 out of the 16 I took care of my mother who had full blown Alzheimer's. She had become completely bedridden. [At the same time], the next 16 years taking care of him, taking care of her, going to school, running a salon, breeding dogs. I never had got a break. I never got a break, and my clients would fuss at me and say, "Why don't you go out of town, why don't you take a vacation, how come you don't take a week off work?" Because if I do, what am I gonna do, sit at home and cry?

The above quote shows just how busy Tracy was, but it also provides insight into the reason behind the need to stay busy – to distract oneself from the plight of their child. Other mothers mentioned this exact same need to fill their time, so they did not dwell or focus on the fact that their child was sitting in a cell. The mothers I spoke to did not feel as though they could ever really take time for themselves. Tracy explained that if she had a moment to herself, she would just sit at home and cry. Similarly, Sylvia described

moments where she would almost have a good time, but then immediately felt guilty because of her son's circumstances. It was a rare moment that these mothers were able to feel truly happy, while their children were incarcerated.

To keep herself busy, Darleen Long pored through trial transcripts, constantly attempting to uncover a quote or piece of evidence that might be the key to unlocking Kimberly's freedom. Darleen was not alone in getting involved in the legal aspects of the case. All of the mothers I spoke to were somehow involved in the legal legwork on the case. Whether it was more private investigating work, reading through trial transcripts, or helping their child with filing motions – these mothers did all they could to make sure they knew every detail of the case and understood the legal jargon relevant to the case. For example, Tracy Nixon enrolled in college to take criminal justice classes so she could understand the legal terminology to help bring Ken home:

My son had been gone probably three years, and I started school. And my first class was an English class and a criminal justice class. And my professor asked me, "Why are you here?" Because I would cry in class if somebody asked me, you know, "Why are you here? You're not doing well." And I would cry, and I would say, "Well, I'm not here for a career. I'm here to learn terminology so that I can get my son home." And when my professor asked me and I told him that, he looked at me and he said, "What? You're taking a class?" Yeah! Because I don't know terminology, and I've been giving away money- giving away money to everybody that said they could help me.

Tracy described how challenging it was for her to go back to school but explained that she believed it would help her in pursuing justice for her son. She felt that she was being taken advantage of in many ways when it came to attorneys and others who she had hired to help with the case. Despite how busy she already was, she felt that it was important to take some control over the legal ins and outs of the case, learning the lingo for herself. Additionally, she and her daughter engaged in private investigating work.

They visited and photographed the crime scene, learned a lot about fire science, and gathered information on similar arson cases.

Visitation Rituals and Methods of Maintaining Contact

The happy times I think was just seeing his face and a smile on his face when he'd come to those doors, and we were sitting there waiting for him. And then the sad times was having to hug him and say bye to him, and knew that it was going to be, for me, a little longer time again 'till I'd see him again. For Debbie, probably about 6 weeks. But those were the happy times, just being able to go see him. – CeCelia Benovsky

Visitation was one of the most important means for mothers to maintain a close, supportive relationship with their wrongfully convicted child was visitation. Though there were specific rules and regulations for how often wrongfully convicted persons could have visits and what those visits looked like, being able to spend time with their child face-to-face was crucial for the well-being of both the mother and child. In this section, I discuss the visitation routines that developed for mothers and their child, the rules and regulations set forth by prisons, and how some exonerees encouraged their mothers not to visit due to concerns about treatment by the guards and exposing their parents to the prison environment more generally. Additionally, I discuss other means of communication and contact in this section, such as phone calls and letter writing.

Prisons had specific rules for when exonerees could have visits and who could visit. Most had specific days of the week when visits would be allowed. Visits were limited in the length of time each person could visit. Phone calls were similar in that exonerees would typically have specific times throughout the day or week where they were allowed to use the phone. It is important to note that exonerees could only call out and that they could not receive incoming calls. In some rare cases, a loved one may be able to call the prison to notify the wrongfully convicted person that another loved one

had died. However even in these circumstances, the exonerees were usually unable to speak to the family members right away. Phone calls were monitored, recorded, and expensive. Due to the costs, families often limited the length of phone calls and would write letters more frequently to stay in touch with their loved one. These three methods were typically the only means of communication between exonerees and their mothers or other secondary exonerees. However, those who were released during the last several years or last decade could use Jpay, which includes an online means of communicating via email. This allowed for written communications to be transmitted more quickly. However, these communications cost more money than a typical handwritten letter and stamp would have cost to send. Jpay's prices and fees vary based on the correctional institution, location, and the method of payment used. However, in my own experience using Jpay, one can buy "stamps" for \$4.40 that allows one to send 11 letters. These letters are short emails. If one goes above a certain word count in the email/letter or wants to send a picture with the letter, it counts as two separate letters that cost two stamps.

Communication Routines

Since there were many rules regarding how this communication would work, certain routines developed between an exoneree and their loved one. This could be a routine around visitation, phone calls, or letter writing. Sylvia Fernandez developed very specific routines around visiting Romeo which involved her grandchildren and often other extended family:

And I made it a family routine. And I took my granddaughters, who for them it was just typical, they thought the whole world did it. And then I had my rules and regulations - if they were going to visit Romeo, how everybody had to visit him. Back in the beginning, they only allowed you 20 bucks. And so, since it was only 20 bucks, I was like, "Okay we're

gonna let him eat – we're gonna go eat before and during the time we're gonna, you know, he's gonna get sodas, chips, whatever, sandwiches. You can't touch anything. And when we leave, I'll buy you food..." And then I take them to Disney. So, we never even thought twice that, "Oh!" Like it was, here we're going to a torturous moment. They're just like, "Okay, we're gonna go talk to my uncle, we're gonna have a good time. He's gonna eat first, we eat after." "And then we go to Disney or we go to Sea World, we go to Six Flags."

Sylvia's intention was to ensure everyone had a fun trip, that Romeo was well fed and taken care of, and that once they left, they had something to distract them, so that leaving Romeo behind was not so difficult. All the secondary exonerees I spoke to described just how traumatic walking out of the visitation room and saying goodbye was for them. Sylvia developed her routine and rules for the visits to soften the blow slightly, and it seemed to have worked well for her and her family. By making it a mini vacation for her and her grandchildren, they had something to look forward to once the visit was over. Sylvia was also quite strict when it came to making sure that someone was always there to visit Romeo every time he was allowed a visit. She would coordinate with extended family, and once Romeo began dating his now wife, Sylvia made certain that she also followed her rules. She described a situation in which someone who was supposed to visit Romeo for one of the assigned days did not show up:

We had somebody try to come, I don't know if it was just like a friend or somebody, and they didn't go, and I was like, "Oh my God, do you just – like, oh hell, no. You didn't go, you're off the list. You don't get on the list anymore. The privilege is gone." You know what I mean?

These routines, and the strictness with which Sylvia made everyone follow them, might seem unnecessary or overbearing to an outsider, but for Sylvia they were one of the few aspects of Romeo's incarceration over which she could have control. She was able to ensure that Romeo had the maximum amount of time possible with his loved ones, which allowed him to have something to consistently look forward to.

Though none of the other mothers I spoke to had routines quite as rigid as Sylvia's when it came to visitation, they too had specific routines related to visitation and phone calls. If something out of the ordinary occurred within the normal routine, it might have caused concern for one or both parties. For example, one day Kenneth Nixon did not call his mother, Tracy, by noon – their designated phone call time. She immediately went into panic mode:

And later that day, I think I spoke to Wendy [Kenneth's girlfriend] or I texted her, and I asked had she talked to him, and she said, "Well, no, I haven't." And I said, "Something is wrong." And she said, "You're sure? What'd you think?" I said, "I don't know, I haven't heard from him." And a few hours went by, and he called, and as soon as he called, I started crying, and he said, "Why are you crying?" And I said, "Because you didn't call at your normal time, so I assumed something was wrong! I'm at these people's house, and these people making me tea and running me bathwater, making me soak, because I'm crying"- and he was like, "Ma, are you serious?" And I said, "You never go a whole day!"

For Kenneth, the missed call on this day did not seem like a huge deal. However, Tracy had organized her entire life and daily schedule around receiving this call at noon. She was waiting by her phone after making sure that she did not have any clients in the salon at this time and that her phone was fully charged. When Kenneth did not call, her mind raced through all the potential horrific possibilities that she believed might be the cause for the missed call. Fortunately, this was not the case in this instance, but this recollection highlights just how easy it was for her to slip into panic mode due to the general fears and anxieties she had about him being in prison and her awareness that it was a dangerous environment.

Visitation and Travel

All the mothers I interviewed had to travel significant distances to visit their wrongfully convicted loved ones. Six secondary exonerees also mentioned how they

had to travel significant distances for visitation. There were times when family members were so far away that they were only able to visit every few months. If the wrongfully convicted person was a long drive or flight away from their loved one, this could mean expensive travel costs. Families would have to purchase hotel stays, gas or flights, and meals while they were in the area. These costs added up quickly, and since many of the families were also covering legal costs or costs of private investigators, sometimes they had to forfeit visits and go long periods of time without seeing their loved one.

Debbie King, Jason Strong's mother, stated that she would always call the prison prior to making the 10-hour drive to visit her son. This was before she ultimately moved to another state to be closer to the prison where her son resided. The purpose of the call was to be certain that the prison was not on lockdown. If the prison was on lockdown, visitation with inmates would be canceled. Debbie and CeCe recounted multiple occasions, where they made the 10-hour drive to the prison only to be turned away, because the prison had just gone on lockdown. Despite their preparations and attempting to ensure the prison was not on lockdown, some lockdowns occurred while they were driving to the prison, which meant that they had made the whole trip for nothing. Sometimes they waited around near the prison to see if they could visit their son in the following days, but often this was a lost cause. These lockdowns were beyond disappointing for families who were already suffering and struggling to afford the trip and the time off work financially.

Debbie, Jason's mother, moved completely across the country from Texas to Tennessee solely to be closer to Jason to make visitation easier, more affordable, and

less time consuming. She explained the difficulties she faced while attempting to navigate visitation and financial support for her son.

I moved out to Tennessee from Texas in 2007, because I'd go see him every month, every other month, and it would take me 10 hours to get there. So I moved to Tennessee, cuz I had a friend that lived out here and it only took me four and a half hours... And I thought, "I can't keep doin' this." And so that's when I moved to Tennessee. It was a little bit closer. But it was still a lot of hardship. You know, I'm tryin' to get off work to go and see him, get the money together. My mom would help me with gas and everything. She'd just tell me, "Put it on the card." And then I had to spend so much for commissary for him, you know, when I go visit him and everything. Get stuff for him and everything else. The machines, you know, and everything. It was expensive, and it was just a lot of pressure.

Since Debbie lived in Texas when Jason was wrongfully convicted in Illinois, she had a particularly challenging commute if she wanted to visit Jason. Ultimately, this commute was too lengthy and costly for her to manage. So halfway through his incarceration, she moved to Tennessee to be closer. In this quote, Debbie also explained some of the additional costs and financial obstacles that were involved, emphasizing just how expensive visitation can be.

Treatment by Guards and Visitation Rules

Prison visiting rooms have extensive rules and regulations that families must follow to visit their incarcerated loved ones. These rules dictate the process for arriving at the prison for the visit and the waiting room process, what clothes could and could not be worn for a visitation, the length of time an individual can visit with their incarcerated loved one, and the types of food and drink that could be consumed during the visit – just to name a few.

Six of the secondary exonerees, including two of the mothers, I interviewed described an instance where they witnessed a guard turn them or another visitor away based on some sort of dress code violation. For instance, Debbie King was once turned

away because she had a wire in her bra. In another case, Tracy Nixon's daughter, Kenneth's younger sister, had a fray on the side of her jeans, which prevented the whole family from being able to visit. Tracy explained this instance as follows:

I can remember going to Muskeet-Saginaw and because his sister had a fray on the side of her jeans, they wouldn't let us visit. It was a fray, it wasn't a tear, it was strings that were sticking out. You couldn't see no skin, no nothing, because of the tear on her jeans. So the lady, - they call it the bubble, where you have to go in and be searched - and she wouldn't let us visit. So I can remember the youngest kid, he was so upset that he couldn't visit his dad. He started crying. He was probably three, and he was kicking the lockers, kicking on the desk, "I want to see my dad, I want to see my dad!" So I told the lady, I said "You realize what you just did, because now I gotta ride for two hours listening to this baby cry, because he wants to see his dad."

Although prisons need to have certain rules to ensure the safety of the visitors and the prisoners, some of the rules described by the secondary exonerees I interviewed seem overly strict. Regardless of the fairness of these rules, it is clear that the additional rules and the consistent scrutiny by prison guards put a lot of pressure on the visitors. After describing a scenario where she had to leave the visiting room and purchase a new shirt so that she would meet the visitation dress code guidelines, Debbie explained her thoughts on the rules and how the whole visitation process tended to cause additional stress for her:

They just make things hard. And I'm like, "God!" You know? [Laughs] It was just kinda ridiculous and everything. And I was already stressed, trying to get in to see him and waiting. It was painful sometimes and hard to let him go, when I had to say goodbye and didn't know when I'd be able to come back out again.

She went on to explain how she felt the guards often treated her and her mother as if they were the guilty ones:

And then being sympathetic to the family and stuff, because what they're going through, the way they [the guards] treat them, like they're the ones that are guilty also. And, I mean, I felt like that when I would go and get

searched and everything, before I go in and can't do this, can't do that. I thought, I'm not the one that's in prison, my son is. you know? And they treat you like you're the one that's bad and having to do this and that, before you even go in and see him.

Debbie described the loss of dignity she felt when she went through the frisking and searching process that was required to visit her son. The whole process felt humiliating to the mothers. After traveling significant distances, usually after waking up at the crack of dawn, these mothers were subjected to strict rules and procedures to see their children for just a short period of time. Contact between mothers and their children were limited in all cases. The rules and the treatment by the guards during visitation left the mothers feeling judged, undignified, and further stressed.

Exonerees Discouraging Mothers from Visiting

Six of the exoneree participants described how they pushed their mothers away or attempted to convince them not to come visit them. For at least two exonerees, this seemed to be based on feelings of guilt that family members were not moving forward with their own lives, because their incarcerated loved one was holding them back.

Ashleigh Long, Ronnie's wife, described the involvement of Ronnie Long's family and Ronnie's feelings on this:

They've been there since day 1, since 1976, his family. But over three decades to do something is a long time, and people pass away. They do carry on with their lives. Ronnie told everyone, "I don't want you to stop your lives for me."

Ronnie felt guilty that his parents had dedicated so much of their lives fighting for his innocence and visiting him. He did not want his wrongful incarceration to prevent them from living their lives. Though at least one other exoneree felt like Ronnie about this, three others specifically discussed not wanting their mothers to visit them in prison due to concerns that their mothers would be mistreated.

The six men who discouraged their mothers from visiting did so because they either wanted to protect their mothers from the prison environment or wanted to protect them from seeing their innocent child portrayed as a criminal. There is a certain loss of dignity and humanity that comes with visitation, and at least four exonerees did not want their families, particularly their mothers, to go through that, even though they longed to see their mothers. In the following quote, Daryl Roberts described his reasoning for not wanting his mother to visit him:

Why would I want the matriarch of the family - she has like 16 nieces and nephews and grandchildren - why would I want her coming to an institution, even though I wanted to see her, just to be mistreated, mishandled, you know? She was the most precious person in my life, and so, why would I want her to be mishandled by an institution that had inflicted that on me? And so, I didn't want to do that, and so I missed a lot of years like that, I missed a lot of years like that.

This quote shows that Daryl had concerns about how the prison staff might treat his mother, a person who was so special and dear to him. Sadly, missing this time with his mother meant that he was not able to grow with her in the way he might have liked or might have been able to, had he encouraged her to visit more often. Either he saw his mother more often and felt selfish and guilty for having her visit so much, or he was deprived of visiting with his mother but at least could protect her from any mishandling by the guards.

Despite many exonerees pushing away their mothers and other loved ones and discouraging them from visiting, at least five of these mothers eventually visited and typically visited regularly. They continued to do so as long as it was physically possible for them. For at least eight exonerees, their mothers were their primary visitors. When asked about visitation and his mother, Jeffrey Deskovic stated, "I mean [my mother] was kinda the only consistent visitor that I had, although that really slowed down in the last

five, six years.” Similar to Jeffrey’s mother, many of the exonerees’ mothers ultimately slowed down their visitation after some years or decades, which was almost always due to sickness, disability, or death.

Letters and Phone Calls

Phone calls are one of the few lifelines incarcerated individuals have to the outside world and their loved ones, and all exonerees expressed a desire to communicate with their loved ones often. Despite the desire to do so, the financial cost of phone calls can be prohibitively expensive. Prison regulations require that all phone calls are made collect to the recipient of the call. Loved ones are unable to call into the prison to speak to their incarcerated loved one - they must wait until their incarcerated loved one calls them.

Debbie King, Jason Strong’s mother, described how the cost of the phone calls forced her to primarily communicate with Jason via letter, because she could not afford to continue talking to him on the phone:

We write letters. When I lived in Texas, he was calling me quite often. Calling me, like several times a week, and I'd always look forward to his calls. But then I got my phone bill one month. It was like \$500. I'm like, “Ooh, okay, I can't afford that.” So, I told him. I said, “Baby, you have to lower it to once a month, and we'll just have to write.” So, he goes, “Okay.” So we would, and then we got this thing, where we could call, and it wouldn't be so much and everything. So, we limit that to once every two weeks or something.

Though some might believe that the letter writing option is a perfectly fine alternative, there are many disadvantages, including the length of time it takes information to travel as well as potential literacy issues. For example, Sylvia had difficulties writing, which meant that she needed help to write a letter to Romeo. She did not always have someone to assist her, so she had to wait for another loved one to be

available to write a letter while she dictated it. Then, she had to wait for the letter to be processed and delivered by the prison, at which point Romeo could respond but had to go through a similar process. This meant that Sylvia often had to choose between extraordinarily expensive phone calls or going weeks without communications with her incarcerated son.

Phone calls were made even more difficult for Marie Huff who was incarcerated overseas in a completely different time zone. Marie explained the systems she and her family had in place to communicate via phone call:

They [who?] were able to visit six times a month, for one hour at a time. And then I had one 10-minute phone call a week. And that's what I had, plus letter writing. So, it was always the same. I didn't have a choice. There was only one number that I was allowed to call, and it was my mom's home phone number. And I didn't even get to choose the time. The prison chose the time. And it ended up being around 5am, 6am in the morning here in Seattle time. And so, what would happen - it was just the same time every week - and my family and friends would gather the night before at my mom's house and have a big sleepover and then wake up at five in the morning, put me on speaker phone, and talk to me for 10 minutes [laughs]. And then that was it.

This phone call routine was extremely vital to Marie's well-being, as it was the only time she was able to speak with anyone in her family each week. Since Marie was overseas, things were even more complicated for her family and friends due to the time difference. Marie explained how her mother coordinated with all of her friends and family members to ensure that Marie was able to talk to as many individuals as possible when she called. This allowed her to hear the voices of most of those within her support system, even if she did not have enough time to catch up with them or hear what each of them had to say. This example is further evidence of how mothers were the center of the support system for most exonerees in my study.

Support for the Supporters: The Importance of Receiving Social Support for Mothers

Mothers tended to provide the primary support system for their wrongfully convicted child throughout the majority of their incarceration and were frequently described as “the rock” for the entire family or “the glue” that held the family together. Their source of strength was vital to the entire family unit, but that did not mean that they did not also require a support system of their own. Among the mothers I interviewed, each had at least one outside person they could fully depend on. These individuals provided them with emotional and financial support. Additionally, each of these mothers received support from their wrongfully convicted children who helped them remain positive and hopeful when times became tough, or they began to feel hopeless. This social support improved the functioning of the family system as a whole and in some cases, took a bit of the weight off these mothers.

Primary Support Persons

Sylvia Fernandez and Darleen Long remained married to the exoneree’s father throughout the entire wrongful conviction process and for both of these mothers, their husband was their primary source of support and partner in fighting for their child’s release. Darleen and Sylvia’s husbands stood by them and their wrongfully convicted children, providing stability for the family as a whole. I interviewed Roger Long, Darleen’s husband, and spoke with John during the beginning of my interview with Sylvia, though I have not formerly interviewed him yet. Both these men were less talkative in terms of discussing the emotional impact, but they never wavered in their support of their wives, encouraging them to do whatever they felt necessary to help exonerate their children and be there for them.

Roger Long and John Fernandez were helpful in many ways, including being the primary breadwinners of the family. They worked overtime and delayed their retirement to generate revenue that could be used to fund commissary, attorneys, travel costs, and private investigators. In both cases, the fathers were not as involved in the legal work or emotional support elements as the mothers. Rather, these two fathers often lost themselves in their work, doing everything they could to stay busy and make money for their child and their child's legal fight for innocence. By contrast, the mothers did the opposite – they planned the visitations, spent countless hours on the phone, and provided the emotional support that exonerees desperately needed. However, by being the primary breadwinners, the husbands enabled Sylvia and Darleen to handle the planning and provide the emotional support necessary to the wrongfully convicted children.

In contrast, Tracy Nixon and Debbie King were not in consistent romantic partnerships throughout the entirety of the wrongful conviction and incarceration. Instead, women in their lives, their daughter and mother respectively, provided them with the necessary social and emotional support that gave them strength to be there for their incarcerated child. For Tracy, her daughter – Kenneth's younger sister – was her primary source of strength throughout the ordeal. Though she felt support from her clients, her sons, and her extended family, the support she received from her daughter was unmatched. Tracy described her daughter's involvement as follows:

The two brothers, they did their part, but they were not as – what's the word? [hands on?] – exactly, as she was! They would give money, and they would say "Okay, here, y'all take money and go do this" or whatever, but she was right there. She made runs with me, she took pictures with me, she did paperwork with me. And she never faltered, she never said "I don't feel like it," or "maaa." She was right there every bit of the way. We

were sent to the neighborhood to take pictures, and I would drive, and she would be out the window snapping pictures and asking questions and making calls. So, yeah, she was right there.

It was clear from speaking with Tracy that her daughter's support and presence gave her strength and allowed her to push forward, when she felt the whole world was against her. From my interviews, I discovered just how important it was for these mothers to have some sort of support system beyond the exoneree. They needed someone to bounce ideas off, to cry to, and to vent with, when things felt too heavy. They helped the mothers feel less alone. Having another person was especially helpful regarding the legal work on the case. It helped to have someone with whom to discuss the case, to make necessary phone calls, and to do investigative work. In these situations, two bodies were certainly better than one.

Debbie's support person was her mother CeCelia or "CeCe", Jason's grandmother. CeCe provided Debbie with constant support throughout the ordeal. Though CeCe did not live in the same state as Debbie, she consistently traveled to be with Debbie, and they often spoke on the phone, usually multiple times a day. At one point during Jason's incarceration, Debbie was diagnosed with cancer. When Debbie was busy with work or her cancer treatment, CeCe took her place in being there for Jason. As I mentioned earlier, CeCe came out of retirement to support Jason and Debbie financially. Beyond this, she also did a significant amount of legal work for Jason. Specifically, she helped him contact various legal officials and private investigators. CeCe was the primary point person when it came to this type of work, because Debbie was so busy working multiple jobs to provide the financial support necessary. In fact, CeCe learned to type with the sole purpose of helping Jason file a

motion he had handwritten in prison. Jason described just how integral his mother and grandmother were as a pair and how much his grandmother did to aid his case:

I always called them my special forces. My grandmother, she was my records person. She kept all my documents. If I needed things copied and sent back in, she would do that. If I needed something researched online, she would do that. She was on top of that stuff for me... And then, when it came to writing my first post-conviction petition, my grandma [laughs] - she always gives me credit for this, but we worked together. I wrote my entire petition, which was over 70 pages, by hand... And I color-coded it and wrote an instruction manual and everything and sent that home to my grandmother. And she followed my instructions and all the color codes and typed it all out for me the way I needed it.

Debbie and CeCe's roles were crucial for Jason. Although he had the support of his grandfathers and his uncle, the support the men provided was a little less hands-on. His mother and grandmother provided him with support and worked on his case. Further, CeCe and Debbie relied on one another throughout the entire process and the wrongful conviction brought them much closer together.

In both Tracy and Debbie's experiences as mothers, maternal bonds were powerful, strong, and unbreakable. Although they took different forms (one through the relationship between mother and daughter – the other through the relationship between mother and grandmother), these bonds held strong and brought solace, support, and wisdom throughout the traumatic experiences these individuals endured.

Cyclical Support Between Mothers and Exonerees

In addition to the primary support persons mothers had on the outside, the mothers' wrongfully convicted child also provided them with reassurance and support when they were feeling down. The support mothers and the exonerees gave one another, what I am calling *cyclical support*. Cyclical support can be understood as support that was provided by secondary exonerees to exonerees when exonerees were

feeling down and hopeless about their situation and the return of support provided by exonerees to the secondary exonerees. Debbie described how her son Jason and her mother provided each other with this sort of support:

And so then, we got closer after he got put in prison, and I just devoted my life to him, and I stood by him. I just knew he was innocent, and I just stood by him, and he was my whole life after that. I just upped and went and moved to Tennessee and did everything I could to give him support. And then, when I was feeling down, he'd cheer me up and give me support and strength. My mom and just the three of us, really just right there for each other, 'cause that's what got us through, and that's what got Jason through. Because he would feel down or whatever, just call us, you know, we talk to him. I'd go and see him, and he'd say, "Mom, I'm so glad you came. Mom, I really needed to see you." And I said, "I know, I needed to see you too." Just seeing him and being there for him. And if we were feeling down or something, he would send a card that'd say, "I'm thinking about you. Love you." Or call us or something, you know? And that's our spirits too, you know? Right, and that helped me tremendously, giving up my life in Texas and moving here and starting a new life and be closer to him and be there for support all the way. And that's what helped me and him.

This quote shows how vital it was for Debbie to have her son's support throughout the entire process. It may seem strange that the person who is incarcerated is the one providing support and a positive outlook for the family on the outside, but this was fairly common. Specifically, six exonerees' explained how they provided positivity and encouragement to their mothers or other loved ones. Although the mothers were not incarcerated, they were still suffering a great deal. Hearing words of encouragement and appreciation from their wrongfully convicted loved one was sometimes all it took to help them get through the day. By being there for one another, Debbie, CeCe, and Jason created a cyclical support system in which they were each able to help one another through love and support, continuously instilling hope in each other when they needed it most.

Non-Supportive Romantic Partners

Not all romantic partners were supportive of the exoneree's mothers. Both Debbie and Tracy described partners that were less than helpful in their fight to prove their son's innocence. Debbie had problems with her husband at the time, Jason's stepfather, whom she had married a few months prior to Jason's arrest. He ended up making it more difficult for her, rather than supporting her efforts to see her son. Since her ex-husband did not work, she paid all the bills. This meant that she had less money to make the 10-hour drive to the prison to visit Jason, which was important to her. This also made it much more difficult to pay private investigators and attorneys or to investigate the case and assist in proving Jason's innocence. However, as described above, her mother, CeCe, provided both financial and emotional support for Debbie and Jason. Debbie explained,

This was just a boyfriend. But I married this guy. He was 12 years my senior, and I married him a couple months before Jason got arrested. And he was kind of supportive, but yet, he didn't work. He didn't keep jobs. So it was hard for me to make money to go and see Jason. And like I said, I lived 10 hours away. And sometimes it would be really stressful, because I would make the trip, I'd get time off to go to see him, and I'd make the trip, and then I'd have to be worried about him, what he was doing at home and everything. Gettin' drunk or whatever.

Debbie discussed how her ex-husband did not work, drank too much, and used up a lot of the money that she made. This was money she would have otherwise spent on investigations into Jason's innocence. Her ex-husband's habits and inability to keep a job caused Debbie additional stress that she certainly did not need. It created another obstacle she had to overcome to care for her son, taking away from her ability to fulfill her role aiding in his defense and release.

Similarly, Tracy Nixon explained how negative her ex-boyfriend was and how much his negativity impacted her, when she was initially fighting for her son. He discouraged her from telling her clients (she worked as a hair stylist in a salon) and peers about her son's arrest and wrongful conviction. He and his family members made numerous statements that could be interpreted as them believing that Kenneth was guilty, and he also stated that "[Kenneth] was never coming home." This negativity was difficult for Tracy to deal with. Ultimately, she left this man in 2012, in large part due to his pessimism that her son would come home and her suspicions that he believed Kenneth was guilty. Interestingly, Tracy explained that she stayed with this man as long as she did because of his business knowledge. From him, she learned how to make certain financial decisions and investments that would ultimately provide her with additional funds for Kenneth's case. Even though it might have appeared that she was making a mistake by remaining in this relationship, she did so to better financially support her son. Tracy described how freeing it was to break up with this man and the impact it had on her ability to fight for her son:

Well, I've been single since [I broke up with him], and I left him July 12 of 2012. And I've been single since. And I know that that opened doors for me to fight even more for my son. That allowed me space to not have to deal with this mess over here. And it gave me room to say, "Okay. I can sit down, and I can focus. And I don't have all this other stuff on me that's clouding my mind from doing what I need to do for my son."

Tracy described just how freeing it was once she finally decided to end this relationship for good. Having the space away from him gave her more clarity and allowed her to better focus on her primary goal. If her son had never been wrongfully convicted, it is possible she would have ended up with this man long-term, even marrying him. However, because of his lack of understanding and support, she chose to let him go.

She might have decided to stay single so that she had the time to focus on Kenneth's case. This is another example of how these mothers sacrificed their own desires for the sole purpose of fighting for their wrongfully convicted child.

Support and Stigma from the General Community

The time is the hardest and I will tell anybody that has never been through it, you can't even imagine the pain, the thoughts, the anger. It's different, it's different. ...sometimes, I would just get in my car and drive and cry. Because I had nobody to talk to, I had nobody to trust, to say, "This is how I feel," without being judged. So I really believe 24/7, as mothers that has had incarcerated sons or daughters or whomever, we need that... Sometimes, you just want a hug. And a lot of times that was my issue, I just wanted a hug and somebody to say, "It's gonna be okay." - Tracy Nixon

For nine individuals living on the outside, the wrongful conviction of their loved one isolated them from the general community. In six cases, this led to a lack of general social support and a feeling that they had no one they could talk to about the pain of having a loved one who was wrongfully convicted. Although all mothers had some support systems, however limited these might have been, two mothers and six secondary exonerees discussed how difficult it was for them to converse about the wrongful conviction with peers and some members of their community. In five of these cases, secondary exonerees did not feel comfortable speaking to their own relatives or friends about the case because of perceptions of their child's guilt. Six secondary exonerees, including three of the mothers, I interviewed explained that they had close friends and family members who believed the wrongfully convicted person was guilty and were not willing to discuss the possibility of innocence. This ended up isolating two families from other loved ones and in one case, broke families into separate groups. Maria Roberts, Daryl Roberts' sister, described some of the reasons her family kept the case information to themselves:

And just the wrongful convictions, not only we know, he was in prison, but it put us in a form of prison as well. ... until the day he was released, there's some coworkers that knew, because I'd be working there and they probably saw me on the news, but I've had coworkers that I'd worked with for 15 years and I never shared that he was my brother. And not because I was ashamed or anything but, just in case they had some sort of opinion, I didn't want to hear it... 'cause when somebody is away that long, as long as he was, we know people have said, "Oh, he must have done it, because how come he's not free?"

Maria explained why she did not want to broadcast her brother's case to co-workers or let many people into her bubble, when it came to speaking about his case. This lack of sharing served to protect herself and her family from stigma or unwanted negative opinions from outsiders. She mentioned that she was not ashamed of her brother or of the situation, but she was aware that most people might not believe in his innocence. As a result, she felt it was better to not say anything and to keep the information to herself.

For mothers, one of two approaches seemed to be taken when it came to sharing information about their child's wrongful conviction with the outside world and general community. Mothers would either broadcast the information to anyone that would listen, hoping to find assistance and gain support, or they would keep the information to themselves, because they were afraid that no one would believe their child was innocent. Two of the mothers I interviewed fell into each of the above categories, respectively. Tracy Nixon's philosophy aligns more with the former approach. She explained her reasoning as follows:

I didn't stop. I knew that there was something or somebody that would help me, and everybody that said they would help me, I gave them a chance. I put it out there, and I never stopped talking about it. People would tell me "You know, you can't tell everybody everything, because everybody don't have your best interests at heart," and I would say, "Well, one thing about it I know, when you talk about it and get it off your chest, you're not carrying a heavy load. You're not constantly beating yourself up." So, everybody that will listen, I've talked about it, and I put it out there, and I don't care who knows. I'm going to speak on it and I'm going to let

people know my son is wrongfully convicted. We wore shirts, we wore hats, we did masks, we did everything. So, in the meantime, it took me a long time to adjust and accept it.

Tracy explained why she felt the need to tell everyone about her son's case. Her desire to put that information out into the world in case someone could help was not diminished by her concern that people might not believe her or that they might judge her. She wanted everyone to know what happened to her son. Whether they believed her or not – that was up to them. However, she felt if she did not put that information out into the world, she would lose any chance of having an outsider assist her or spread the word about her son's case. To her, the risk of judgment was worth it if it meant she could get some sort of support or bring additional awareness to the case. For Tracy, this openness paid off and allowed her to receive outside support from her community, particularly among women who were clients at her hair salon:

There were times when I didn't have money to put on his book or on the phone - and opposed to them paying \$60 they would pay \$80 and say, "Well, take this and put it on his book or put it on your phone, whatever you need to do with it, but make sure it's for him." So, we had a lot of that support. Ladies that were coming to me when he was a kid. And they're still coming, and they were there, they were there. And now he's home, and they just look at him and cry and say, "Wow, we remember when it all started, we remember when it happened and look at you."... Even when he would call home, and I would be doing their hair, I would put it on speaker and let them talk to him. And that was, to him, I could hear in his voice like, "Wow, these people really love me," you know, and they really did, they really did.

Tracy was quite engrained in her community and felt as though she was friends with many of the women whose hair she cut and styled. Since many of them had known her and Kenneth for years, they understood his character and did not have trouble believing that he was innocent. This might not necessarily be true for other community members, but the salon was a unique and special place for Tracy where she was able to be

herself and be honest with her clients and co-workers. Having their support, both emotionally and even financially, allowed her to feel an additional layer of security and have a sense of belonging. It also gave Kenneth a sense of comfort and appreciation, because he could tell just how much these women cared about him when he would speak to them on the phone.

Debbie King described a situation in which her mother came to visit her at the restaurant she worked and told a couple of patrons about her son's wrongful conviction. Her mother, CeCe, was surprised that the couple did not know already, but Debbie explained why she had not told them:

I was a server. I worked at Red Lobster. There was an older couple, and I would wait on them every Friday and everything. Well, my mom had come to visit, and I had brought her in there one day when I was serving, and they had come in and they got to talkin'. And mom told them and everything, and they were kind of like surprised, and she goes, "Oh, I didn't realize you haven't told them." I said, "I don't tell anybody mom. Mom, you know, 'cause I know, nobody understands, you know? They think I'm just being biased, you know?"

Debbie's sentiment was echoed by six other secondary exonerees. At least four secondary exonerees felt that anyone they talked to about their wrongfully convicted loved one would just think that they were biased. They fell back on the assumption that "everyone says they're innocent," so why would they believe me when I explain my situation – why would they think my child is any different? Debbie's quote exposed the frustrations felt by mothers and other secondary exonerees. They often felt isolated and alienated. They did not feel that they would be believed by the average person, and in six cases, their friends and other family members did not even believe in the innocence of the wrongfully convicted person. Because of this, they felt it was often better to

remain silent and fight alongside their closest loved ones instead of attempting to reach everyone with whom they came in contact.

Ten secondary exonerees reported feeling stigmatized or labeled by their communities at large. In some cases, the stigma came from within their family, not just the greater community. Exonerees were not always able to provide specific information on their loved ones' experiences with stigma; three exonerees mentioned how they believed their families did not share their problems or experiences of stigma to try and protect them. As a result, most of the information I have on the stigmatization of the secondary exonerees came from the secondary exonerees themselves. Sylvia and John, Romeo's parents, had a particularly difficult time within their community of El Paso, due to the extensive media attention the case received. When asked about the community sentiment surrounding her son's case, Sylvia explained:

The majority of them, maybe, I would say, probably 90%, believed he was guilty. They believed the news, and the news never were on our side at the time. So, like I said, they just would give us a hard, hard time. They just, like I said, would hound us... And then the people try to attack you, you know what I mean? Because they think your son's guilty. ... And they would recognize you, you know? And they would attack you either visually, or some would even go as far as verbally attacking, you know? Like I said, at the time we were going through it, I couldn't tell you how frustrated I was, because in the beginning everybody hated us. And the news hounded us, and they just, they weren't kind, you know? "These are the worst parents in the world. This guy's a killer." And we went through a lot of people literally always trying to attack us. So I was very defensive.

This stigmatization and verbal harassment Sylvia experienced in her community was particularly troubling for her. She became extremely defensive and angry at the entire situation. She explained to me that she never felt that she had enough self-control to hold her tongue when they would get recognized and harassed in public. So, she would

ultimately respond to the individuals when they said something. She and her husband worried that this might get her physically hurt at some point.

Sylvia's situation highlights the importance of media coverage. Since Romeo was a juvenile, one might believe that such aggressive media coverage was unwarranted and problematic. In the court of public opinion, Sylvia and John were attacked based on their parenting abilities and their character. Since most people knew one another in the community, it became difficult for Sylvia and John to be in public without concerns about being harassed or judged. This compounded the stress they were already experiencing, leading Sylvia to become defensive and even more angry.

Three mothers described situations in which the stigma of their child's situation led them to make significant life changes. For example, Darleen Long quit her job due to the discomfort of the stigmatization and labeling she was experiencing in the workplace. Roger, her husband, stated, "My wife had to retire a little bit early. She couldn't take it. Everybody looks at you different, you know?" Even though Darleen could have used the additional funds to help assist Kimberly, the judgment was too much for her to take such that she retired early. Rodney Lincoln also mentioned that "Mother was threatened so bad that she had to move from where she lived." Though Rodney did not expand on this statement much more and his mother has now passed, it is hard to imagine what she must have gone through to feel so threatened that she no longer felt safe in her own home. These quotes demonstrate the impact of negative stigmatization and discrimination from community members and co-workers. In these cases, mothers made decisions about their lives they otherwise would not have made. They left jobs or communities they had lived in for decades because of the stigmatization they

experienced. Again, their life course was disrupted and their role trajectory forever altered, all because of the initial wrongful conviction.

Sickness and Loss of Mothers – Coping with Loss of Biggest Supporters

Throughout the time they were incarcerated, exonerees dealt with the death of many of their closest loved ones. The experience of grieving in prison was much different than grieving on the outside, and in seven cases exonerees did not feel that they were truly able to grieve properly while incarcerated. One reason exonerees explained they could not fully grieve in prison was because they were not able to cry or show weakness. Additionally, it was difficult for them to process the loss of someone when they were isolated from the outside world. Sadly, the lost loved ones sometimes included exonerees' mothers who were usually their staunchest supporters – ten of the exonerees lost their mothers or a mother figure while they were incarcerated. In three separate cases, exonerees' mothers became very ill, while they were still incarcerated, and although they did not die, the illness caused difficulties for the mothers to visit and support their child. Further, exonerees often felt helpless due to their inability to support their mothers throughout their illnesses. In this section, I discuss some of the experiences of exonerees and their mothers as they dealt with illness, death, and grief.

During Jason Strong's incarceration, his mother, Debbie, developed severe colon cancer, which nearly killed her. Up until her diagnosis, Debbie and her mother, CeCe, had been Jason's primary source of strength and emotional support. As mentioned previously, she moved across the country to be closer to Jason's prison, and her work and social life revolved around him and his case. Even after she was diagnosed, Debbie did everything she could to support and be there for Jason, regularly traveling great distances to visit him between chemotherapy and radiation sessions. While speaking to

Jason, it was apparent how much his mother meant to him and how difficult this whole time period was for him and his family. The following quote from Jason illustrates how difficult it was for exonerees to be incarcerated, while their mother was suffering with a terminal illness:

Well, it was hard, I mean it was hard to see her going through that period and not being able to do anything to help her. You know that there's nothing worse than having a loved one suffering or die or something, while you're in prison, because you can't do shit about it.

Jason and other the other two exonerees and six others described feelings of helplessness and despair when discussing how it felt to be on the inside, while their mothers were ill or dying. Fortunately, Debbie survived colon cancer and is currently in remission. She explained that she was ready to give up at one point, but the fight for her son's innocence motivated her to continue pushing forward. She knew that Jason would ultimately get out, and she wanted more than anything else to be there on his Freedom Day – the day he walked out of prison a free man. Sadly, not all exonerees were able to celebrate their Freedom Day with their mothers waiting on the other side of the bars.

Despite how difficult any death would have been for these exonerees, I found that their mothers' deaths tended to be the most difficult for them to discuss and likely the hardest for them to accept. Among the group of exonerees who lost their mothers while incarcerated were Ronnie Long, John Huffington, Juneal Pratt, Ginny Lefever, Rodney Lincoln, Ronald Cotton, and Doug DiLosa. For three of these individuals, the only time I saw them cry or tear up throughout the interview was when they discussed their feelings about their mother's passing or how the wrongful conviction impacted their mothers.

For example, when asked how the wrongful conviction impacted his family, Ronnie Long discussed the death of his mother and father and how he believed the wrongful conviction haunted his parents until their dying breath, potentially playing a part in their demise.

My momma died four weeks before I got out of the penitentiary. My sister said my momma asked her before she died, "Is Ronnie home yet?" With those two thoughts on their mind and they on their dying bed, you think my people rest in peace? You think my people rest in peace, when they know they die with their son still in the penitentiary? You think they're resting peacefully? [Angrily] And what kind of impact does that have on my family? Let me tell you something: It ain't over. I don't give a fuck who knows, it ain't over. It ain't over, man. And like I said, with my momma having that thought on her mind and my daddy having that thought on his mind when they died, "Tell Ronnie I tried." "Is Ronnie home?" How the hell they rest in peace then? I don't know what the good Lord has in store for me, but I do know this: North Carolina hasn't seen the last of Ronnie Long. Believe that. They haven't heard the last of Ronnie Long. Believe that.

Ronnie Long was rightfully enraged about the way he and his family were treated by the criminal justice system and the fact that his mother died weeks before his release.

Though he was able to celebrate a reunion with many of his closest loved ones after his 42-year-long incarceration, Ronnie felt this victory was somewhat shallow given that his mother passed away right before his release. Ronnie also explained how he feels he must avenge the deaths of his parents by proving the corruption and racial prejudice within the Cabbarus County, North Carolina criminal justice system. For Ronnie, losing his parents was particularly difficult due to the timing. He was forced to grieve for his mother while at the same time celebrating his release. Since I interviewed Ronnie within months of his release, I could tell that the wound was particularly raw and it seemed to me he had not had nearly enough time to heal.

Though John Huffington had lost his mother years ago by the time I interviewed him, he still had difficulties discussing her passing and her constant support of him

without getting emotional. One of the major things he focused on while discussing the death of his mother was how difficult it was to properly grieve her passing. John described the day he found out she had died:

Even when I found out she died. I was there in my office, in the sign shop, and my sister called me to tell me and I just walked into the bathroom, so I could have a moment, and threw my fists in the air a few times and walked back out stone faced. Like you can't have emotion inside, it's weakness. You can't ever show it, you can't never let it out. But now, when I do talk to something, every time if I start thinking about my mother or say something about her, it's like [tears up].

John explained the difficulty of showing emotion in prison where an unspoken rule is that one cannot cry. Crying is viewed as weakness, and weakness is not permitted to be shown in prison. Eight other exonerees I spoke to reiterated the same sentiment. Not showing emotion for years and years can cause a person to bottle up and avoid the feelings and emotions that they might have otherwise experienced on the outside. Because of this, it can be nearly impossible to properly grieve and process the passing of a loved one. Furthermore, this bottling up of emotions likely causes mental and emotional problems in the long term.

Kristine Bunch did not lose her mother while she was incarcerated, but lost her primary parental figure, Tom. She explained what probably many felt upon release regarding the grief they had ignored or bottled up while they were on the inside.

You're in a different world, but you also have to really guard and protect yourself while you're in there, because anything can be looked at as weakness, and then somebody can take advantage. So, everything inside prison is always a power play. And then, when you walk out, you know you don't have somebody sitting there just looking at how you react to things, so it all hits you all at once and just piles up.

Seven of the exonerees who lost someone, while they were inside, explicitly stated that they felt they were unable to grieve properly. This likely left them with many unresolved

feelings to deal with upon re-entry. After getting settled into the world outside of prison again, they all recognized just how different things were in their environments. Not only had technology, trends, and social life changed generally, but their social support networks and structures had changed - many of their loved ones were no longer there with them. Three exonerees stated that this was the first time they truly felt the loss in a real way. Behind bars, they could not be fully present with any of their loved ones, so they might not have missed them in the same way or felt the same sense of loss that they did when they experienced the outside world without them for the first time. This brought on a delayed grieving process for these three, and at least one person mentioned that their ability to grieve had been permanently altered. For example, after his 36-year incarceration, Rodney Lincoln explained his permanent difficulties with grieving:

And I found out, after I got out, that when a loved one died, it's hard for me to properly grieve. Good example is my sister passed away, and I was at a doctor's visit, and I came out to the car, and Kay told me when I got in the car. We were expecting it, I mean, it wasn't a surprise... but... I didn't feel like I could grieve the way I should have.

This quote illustrates that some exonerees might never be able to grieve in the same way they had before they were incarcerated. Since prison trained them to push aside the grief and ignore it, they might have a particularly challenging time attempting to process the loss of loved ones who died – even after the exoneree was released.

Though Daryl Roberts' mother did not pass away while he was incarcerated, he had a unique experience, when it came to her health, that was quite devastating. Daryl's mother was his number one supporter throughout his incarceration. Shortly before he was released, his mother developed dementia following a stroke. The dementia was rather advanced by the time he was nearing his release. His mother could not recall

anything about Daryl's incarceration or wrongful conviction. When Daryl was finally released, his mother could not remember where he had been due to her illness, and his family had an extremely difficult time attempting to explain to his mother why he had been incarcerated. Instead of telling her the truth, she ended up believing that he was returning from the military. This was quite difficult for Daryl, because he had been waiting to share this glorious homecoming with his mother. Sadly, his mother was not the same person she was prior to his incarceration when he arrived home. Although he still spent a lot of time with her, she was unable to experience his exoneration and release in the way he had dreamed of. Daryl explained the pain he felt when he was unable to celebrate his release with his mother:

Even though the prison portion was gone, but the trail of pain that happens when I didn't get a chance to celebrate that with my mom, you know? On her end, she didn't know why I was celebrated, [why I] spent all that time with her like that, right? But on my end, I didn't even get a chance to spend a full two years with my mom. And so I could never tell them, for instance, right when I went to Congress and fought on Congress ... She didn't know if you would go on the news, you going on news reports and papers. You will see a picture of my mom, and she still didn't know where I was coming from. She didn't know it. She thought I was coming from the military. So what's terrible is that five months [ago] in October, October 11, my mom passed away.

Tragically, Daryl's mother passed away from COVID-19 in October of 2020. Although he spent his last years with her, she was no longer the same person she had been before Daryl went to prison and during the majority of his incarceration. The health struggles his mother had were extremely difficult for Daryl to witness. Being unable to celebrate his release with his mother dimmed the excitement he would have otherwise felt. Although his mother was there for him throughout his incarceration, she was not there to see the fruits of her labor after all the hard work she put in to help prove his innocence.

Mental Health Impact and Access to Social Services

The impact the wrongful conviction had on these mothers' mental health was devastating. All those I interviewed discussed experiences with severe anxiety and depression disorders. In this section, I briefly provide details on some of these mothers' personal accounts of their mental health symptoms. Then I explain how they coped with the situation and what their access to mental health services, including therapy and support groups, looked like.

Tracy Nixon explained that the first several years of her son's incarceration, particularly the first six months after the conviction of her son, were the most difficult for her in terms of the depression she experienced:

The first five years and the first six months was the worst, because the first six months I didn't do nothing but cry and pray and cry. I didn't eat, I didn't sleep. I really couldn't function. I went to work and did all my clients, but I would always just go straight home. I had a hard, very hard time being a parent to my other three children ... The guy that I was with, my ex, he would always say, "Well, you know, Tra, you got to get up. This girl needs you. You know, I can't deal with her, that's not my daughter, you have to get up." And I would say, "I can't. Pack her a bag and take her to her dad." And he would say, "I can't." [laughs]. I would say, "Figure it out. Call him, tell him to come and get 'em, I can't right now."

Tracy's depression was so severe that she could hardly get out of bed in the morning, and she was unable to fully take care of her other three children. Tracy felt hopeless about the entire situation and sadly, her other three children likely suffered because of her depression. This reaction and experience of depression is not surprising and was common among the three other mothers I spoke to. Regardless of anyone's previous mental health state, an external event such as having your child being wrongfully convicted of a crime might reasonably cause a mother to develop depression.

All exonerees that I interviewed reported having post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or numerous symptoms of PTSD. This finding is supported by previous research, which indicates that it is extremely common for exonerees to develop PTSD as a result of the trauma of being wrongfully convicted and incarcerated for something they did not do (Grounds, 2004, 2005). However, research on the mental health impact of a wrongful conviction on an exoneree's loved ones is nearly non-existent. Even though they were not incarcerated, the mothers and eight other secondary exonerees I interviewed reported various negative mental and emotional impacts including PTSD. For example, Darleen Long described her own experience with PTSD:

Nightmares, anxiety, it's a horrible play- it's a horrible feeling to not have something normal when Kim's around. I think she spent a total of 120 some days in and out of the jail and then that was over, and then, of course, when she was convicted. I always remember [sighs] her being shackled, and that's the hardest part, because if I hear a sound that sounds like chains, I mean it just triggers you, so it's pretty ugly.

PTSD occurs in people who have experienced a traumatic event or series of events. It is not surprising that those closest to the exoneree might develop PTSD as a result of the entire experience as it is traumatic for the secondary exonerees as well, not just the exoneree. Darleen's diagnosis of PTSD was later confirmed by a mental health professional. Nightmares, flashbacks, and anxiety are all prominent symptoms of PTSD. Sadly, Darleen still has PTSD to this day. Although all the charges have been dropped against Kimberly, there is still a great deal of healing that Darleen will have to do to get more relief from these symptoms. Darleen went on to discuss how she and her husband prepared for the interview with me. They wanted to be sure that they did not share too much or dig too deeply into how they felt, when they were going through the situation,

because they did not want to relive everything or get into the same dark place they had been in at times. Specifically she said:

Roger and I were talking last night that we need to not share everything, because it makes you come inside out. Like you go to a funeral and all your emotions show, and so you're so vulnerable, because you got to tell, you got to talk to people. This is, this is really awful. I mean, my daughter is alive. It really destroys so many parts of you, and you have your really good days, and you have a lot of bad days, where you just think you can't catch your breath anymore, and then you wonder why you're feeling so bad. So it plays real havoc on your emotion, on your body, and physically just drains you, you know?... The confusion, shock, bewilderment, it's like you can think of those words, you can spell those words, you can hear from other people, but when you're in the situation, it's a whole different level. It's just different. It's magnified so bad, everything is just so magnified, and, like I said, we just get up and you just do it. You have to do something and it, yes, it is bigger than you.

Darleen described how small she felt throughout the whole experience and how she and Roger took certain steps to protect themselves in the interview process, so they did not become too vulnerable. She explained that this vulnerability and openness in explaining the trauma they went through may lead to re-experiencing some of the pain she felt. She did not want to be retraumatized by discussing her experience, which is quite understandable, but she also believed that telling her story was important and that it might help others who are going through a similar situation. In doing interviews, Darleen believed that she must strike a balance that allows her to protect herself while also doing the best she can to explain her experience and their story.

Coping with Mental and Emotional Impacts

In earlier sections I discussed how beneficial social support was for mothers of exonerees. This and keeping themselves busy were ways in which these women coped with the wrongful conviction of their child. Since I have gone into detail on these coping mechanisms earlier, I will refrain repeating it here, but I would like to expand on other

ways in which these women dealt with the mental health impacts of the wrongful conviction. In addition to keeping themselves busy and leaning on their closest loved ones for social support, faith in something greater (i.e., God) and individual therapy were utilized by the mothers to help cope with the impacts of the wrongful conviction.

Faith in God and belief that everything happens for a reason

My mother always said, "There's a reason you're there," whatever. You just gotta figure it out. - John Huffington

All four mothers and the grandmother I interviewed discussed how influential their faith was in getting them through their loved one's wrongful conviction. It was a primary coping mechanism for all the mothers I spoke with, and according to the other exonerees, their mothers also used their faith to get them through the entire experience. Not all of them necessarily considered their God or their higher power to be the typical Christian God, although some did. Yet all believed that the situation was in the hands of a higher power and that for whatever reason, their child was meant to be wrongfully convicted to serve some greater purpose. The following quote from Tracy Nixon illustrates this sentiment:

He [Kenneth] asked one time, "Well, if God loved me, why did he let this happen?" And I say, "Hey, you don't question God, but seeing as though you did, I'm gonna answer your question." And that's when the subject came up. "You just don't know why. Maybe He was saving you, or maybe He was saving somebody else, we don't know. Maybe those 15 guys needed you to help them, those guys that you talked to that you told to never give up, maybe, you know? Maybe that was the reason. We don't know. But in turn to it, you just focus on the positive coming out of it now, because there's gotta be some good to come out of it. There has to be." And I never got my answers to why, but...it came to me that everything is for a reason. "You're there for a reason. And it's not because of what they accuse you of, but it's because God wants you to make a difference, some kind of way."

Tracy's belief in God allowed her to have some sense of comfort. By trusting that God had some sort of plan for Kenneth, Tracy was able to let go of some of her anger. She did not presume to know God's plan. However, she did know that many young men in her community who had been friends with Kenneth or her other sons prior to Kenneth's wrongful conviction became involved in illegal and dangerous activities, which led to many of them being killed quite young. She also knew that Kenneth provided important mentorship to other prisoners and helped them achieve their educational goals. Even though Tracy would have preferred that the wrongful conviction had never occurred, she allowed her faith in God to lead her to believe that there was some greater explanation as to why it did happen.

Debbie and Darleen believed that in many ways the situation might have saved their children's life because of the lifestyle their children were leading prior to their arrest. To be more specific, both Jason and Kimberly were heavy substance users and alcoholics, respectively, at the time of their initial conviction. Debbie stated:

I thought what Jason was. He wasn't living the great life. He was young, he was doing drugs, he worked in an [adult] bookstore, and I thought, "Okay God, I know that you put Jason here for a reason – you saved his life by putting him in here."

Debbie fully believed that there was a greater reason for Jason being put into such a horrific situation. Although we will never know whether there was indeed a greater reason, it is also true that both Jason and Kimberly became sober while they were incarcerated. Though Jason might have a drink every now and then, he is no longer using substances regularly and is not putting himself in danger because of his usage. Kimberly became very involved in Alcoholics Anonymous while she was incarcerated. She remains sober to this day. She has been sober for nearly a decade and takes AA

and her recovery very seriously. It has become a major part of her identity, and Darleen could not be prouder of her daughter for making such a positive change in the middle of such a horrific situation.

It appears that the mothers' faith allowed them to cope with and understand the wrongful conviction. I would not go so far as to say that they accepted the situation, as they never gave up in their pursuit for justice. But I do believe faith allowed them to have some semblance of peace and not be completely paralyzed by anger, depression, or other negative emotions. Their belief in something greater gave them some answer as to why something so unjust and traumatic could happen to themselves and their children.

Experiences with therapy and support groups

Of the four mothers I interviewed, two went to therapy – Darleen and Tracy. Tracy found therapy to be a helpful tool for her as it helped her process the stress and anger she felt. Tracy Nixon described her experience with therapy as follows:

And one day, I just woke up, and I said, "I need to speak with somebody that's not gonna judge me." And I made an appointment. And I talked to this lady. And she really did help me, but she also kept sayin', "Ain't nothing wrong with chou." [Laughs] "Ain't nothing wrong with chou. You just do too much. You need to relax. Sit down. Take a break." And I would say, "But these are things that I have to do. If I don't do it, it won't get done. These are things that I have to do." When I started speaking with the therapist, she allowed me to vent my emotions concerning my son. And during my business with her, I was releasing a lot of pent-up energy and anger that resulted from my son being taken. So, I found that, for me, talking about it made me feel better. Harboring it just made me cry a lot, you know? Be mad. So, upon the therapist allowing me to open up and say whatever I felt, however I felt like saying it, that really worked for me. It really did.

Tracy explained just how beneficial it was for her to talk to an objective professional who she knew would not judge her. She felt that it was necessary for her that she had a

chance to open up and speak to a professional about what was going on. Since her primary support person was her daughter, Tracy likely did not feel as though she could open up about her feelings with her daughter to the fullest extent since Tracy also had to be a mother and a source of support for her daughter. Having a therapist served that purpose for her.

Debbie and Sylvia did not go to formal therapy. However, they did consult with other women who had a loved one in prison. This fellowship allowed them to get some perspective from others going through something similar to them. At least three of the secondary exonerees I spoke with felt that traditional therapy might not help them due to the unique circumstances of the wrongful conviction. This was also true for at least two of the exonerees. There may be some truth to this. Even though Darleen did go to therapy and found it helpful, she explained that the most effective and important social support she received came from the California Innocence Project (CIP) rallies, where she was able to meet with other families of wrongfully convicted persons. For this reason, it seems that a support group for loved ones of exonerees would be a useful resource.

Lack of support groups for mothers

Based on my interviews and my research, it seems there are very few, if any, support groups specifically designed for loved ones of exonerees or individuals that are currently wrongfully incarcerated. All the individuals I interviewed suggested more specialized support groups for families of wrongfully convicted individuals would be helpful resources. Sylvia believed the reason why Romeo was doing better than she was currently had something to do with his ability to connect with other exonerees, people who understand exactly what he has been through:

I really think he seems to be doing better than I am, but I'm assuming, because he gets to go to those meetings, he gets to meet with people, and see he's not the only one. And then, when he came out, he was like a movie star, so that helped, you know what I mean? No one really remembers mama, you know what I mean?

This quote demonstrates a need for support groups or meetings where loved ones of exonerees, or more specifically mothers, can meet up to discuss their experiences and provide support to one another. Sylvia believed that connecting Romeo with other exonerees allowed him to heal. Further, Romeo's release and exoneration received a great deal of media coverage, which meant that he was received back into the community with open arms. Though Sylvia was happy that Romeo had this warm welcome, she also felt that she had been forgotten and neglected by the system and media. This finding suggests that we need more social services for families of exonerees so that they can have more tools to heal and are not forgotten following their loved one's exoneration.

When asked, none of the mothers knew of any support groups for other mothers of exonerees or even just loved ones of exonerees, but all mentioned they would be very interested in being involved with a group like that. They all suggested that they would be open and interested in providing mentorship to mothers whose child was currently wrongfully incarcerated. There might be something vital about having the ability to talk to those who have been through a similar traumatic situation – something that cannot necessarily be achieved through individual therapy alone.

Post-Exoneration – Adjusting to Life After Exoneration

Following the release and exoneration of their loved ones, all four mothers expressed deep feelings of happiness and relief. All four explained that the homecoming of their child improved the dynamics within their family as a whole and that

they became much closer to their child. Once their child was released and exonerated, mothers could finally transition out of the role they had been serving for so long. Despite most of the feelings around release being positive, there were also some negative emotions and issues reported by mothers that should also be discussed. Although freeing and positive, the traumatic experience they endured as a result of their child's wrongful conviction made it difficult for some to adjust to a "normal" lifestyle or to go back to the way things were before the conviction. That is, the disruption in their life course made it difficult to return to a "normal" life course stage.

Growing Closer as a Family

All of the mothers and the one grandmother who I interviewed reported becoming much closer to their child/grandchild throughout this process. For three, this was a new closeness they had not experienced before the incarceration. Darleen explained:

What actually made us closer, I think, each of us started thinking about our relationship. Because then that's our real focus. All of a sudden, you're just focusing on it seems more important than any other time, I think.

Darleen explained that the conviction led her and Kimberly to focus more on how important their relationship was. Since the conviction wiped away pretty much everything they had known as their "normal" life, it allowed them a clarity with which to see one another and to appreciate their bond.

Tracy described how Kenneth coming home has brought her entire family closer together. She explained that Kenneth's younger brother had fallen into a risky lifestyle throughout Kenneth's incarceration. Kenneth's brother did not exactly know how to process his Kenneth's wrongful conviction and so turned to drugs, drinking, and illegal activities. Kenneth returning home allowed his younger brother to find some happiness and leave his risky lifestyle behind. Although I do not know much about his brother's

experience leaving this lifestyle behind, his mother, Tracy, explained that something in him changed once Kenneth was exonerated and that he had been “brought back to life” in a sense. At the time I interviewed Tracy, Kenneth had only been home for a couple of months, and it was obvious that the only emotion she felt was pure joy to have her child back with her. She stated, “I noticed that our relationship has gotten much, much deeper, stronger....” Similar to the other mothers, the experience of the wrongful conviction deepened Tracy’s relationship with Kenneth. Tracy attributed this gained closeness to the shared trauma and bonding they experienced with the wrongful conviction. Now, they work together making deliveries for Amazon Flex and spend most of their free time together.

Frequent Contact with Child Post Release

Having their child being ripped away from them so early in life kept mothers at a stage where they were parenting a young adult or teenager. When their child was released and exonerated, they had to adjust to being a parent of a grown adult instead of a parent of a younger person their child was prior to incarceration. This adjustment was hard for at least two of the mothers to make, and all the mothers I spoke to still had trouble letting go of their child or going for any long period of time without speaking to them. The entire experience made these mothers become somewhat over-protective once their child was back home. For instance, three explained that they wanted daily calls or texts from their child about their whereabouts. Debbie explained:

Before the Covid, he was going places and traveling and doing things, and I've got him where he'll call me now in the morning, and he'll call me at night. And I know when he would go someplace or something, I'd say “Okay, well, be careful and call me,” [he'd] say, “Mom, I'm 45 years old,” and I'm like, “I don't care. If I'm 110 and I'm still breathing, you call me, let me know [where you] are. You my baby, I want to know.”

It is important to remember the trauma these families went through to understand the mothers' insistence to know their child's whereabouts and desire to keep tabs on them after release, which is uncommon for mothers of adult children. These mothers had issues trusting and would be on edge if they went for too long without hearing from their children. When asked how the experience changed her, Darleen explained:

I'm more cautious. It'll make you more cautious when people walk up to you. And I've had it happen, and I don't understand why they do the things they do, and I'm more suspicious. So I'm just a little more cautious. That's come out in my life. I think I'm stronger.

Mothers and other secondary exonerees described similar sentiments to Darleen, discussing how they kept their social circles small and how they had a general distrust of strangers and the criminal justice system. This distrust likely exacerbated these mothers' need to keep tabs on their children and ensure their well-being on a regular basis. These mothers may never reach the point where their relationship with their child resembles what one might expect the typical relationship between a middle-aged individual and their mother to be. For these mothers, their children were taken from them when they were teenagers or young adults and as a result, they might always treat them as the age they were when this life course disruption occurred.

Loss and Recovery of Sense of Self

Having given up on their own happiness and dreams to help exonerate and release their children from the grips of an unjust criminal justice system had long-term implications for these mothers' personal lives, even after they achieved their goal of freeing their child. For example, Sylvia Fernandez described how difficult it was for her to simply relax and enjoy life. She said, "I'm trying to learn how to enjoy myself, and it's not easy, because I don't know how to be myself anymore." Having spent decades

focused on the singular goal of supporting the release of their child took its toll on these mothers and attempting to adjust to life following the achievement of their goal proved challenging in a way at least two of them never expected.

Two mothers, Sylvia and Darleen, described how they did not exactly know what to do with themselves, but all mothers stated that they wanted to advocate for other families who have also been impacted by wrongful conviction. Darleen explained how she was able to gain back a sense of purpose in doing just that:

And we still have to help people. I told the CIP [California Innocence Project], I told Kim, we'll never go away, we can't. I cannot just walk away from other people that made something that we've said may help them, oh my God. I want to do something, before I die, and this is a good thing to be a support.... A sense of purpose, I have really- I think everyone wants to do that, as you get older you go, "Before I die, I hope I've done something." Oh my God, the sense of meeting other people and giving them that support back and their respect and mine to them, the humanity part is - yeah, I feel good about that.

Darleen explained just how meaningful fighting with the California Innocence Project has been for her and Rodger and that it has helped her gain a sense of herself back after all that she had lost. She indicated that she wanted to give something back to the world and make a difference before she dies and that working to help other families like hers could be her purpose. Sylvia discussed the desire to help support other mothers whose child is currently wrongfully incarcerated. She mentioned that she was not entirely sure how to go about doing this, but she felt she could give a lot to families who are currently in this position. In this way, her suffering would not be for nothing as she could provide guidance and support to those in need.

Unsupportive Mothers

Earlier, I mentioned that there were three exonerees whose mothers were not as supportive, if supportive at all, as the rest of the exonerees' mothers. In one of those

cases, the exoneree's mother was absent. Ginny Lefever explained that she and her mother had been estranged prior to her arrest and wrongful conviction. As such, the relationship did not change much once she was arrested and convicted. Rather, she and her mother continued to be estranged. Sadly, this meant that Ginny's children went into foster care as her mother had no desire to take care of the children. However, based on Ginny's relationship and experience with her mother, it is unlikely she would have wanted her mother to have custody of her children even if her mother had wanted it.

In the remaining two cases, the exonerees' mothers played some role in the case or in taking care of the exoneree's child. Kristine Bunch and Chris Ochoa both described their mothers as being rather selfish and not necessarily interested in what was in their best interest. Chris's mother was involved in supporting him for part of his prison sentence and incarceration. However, they had a falling out at some point. This resulted in his mother ceasing to speak to him, which was incredibly difficult for Chris, given that he was in prison for something he did not do and only had a few lifelines on the outside. He could not make outgoing phone calls either, so it was hard for him to lose contact with his mother – one of the only few people on the outside with whom he had regular contact. However, losing his mother's support and communication led him to become extremely close to one of his uncles. His uncle provided him with the support he was lacking from his mother, and he became Chris' primary parental figure throughout the remainder of his prison sentence.

In Kristine's case, her mother was around during her incarceration in the sense that she helped Kristine care for her child. Kristine was pregnant at her trial, and she

had to give the baby up immediately after giving birth during her incarceration. However, her mother was not supportive of her in the way the mothers discussed earlier in this chapter were. In fact, Kristine explained that “my mom had gotten into this... kind of victim mode. You know this martyr” by viewing herself rather than her daughter as the victim of the wrongful conviction. Kristine never felt that her mother truly had her best interest at heart. Kristine and her brother, Michael, both believed that their mother was more concerned with her own needs rather than that of her children or grandchild. Further, the care Kristine’s mother provided her son, Trent, was not what Kristine wanted for her child. It seemed to cause Kristine additional stress during her incarceration. She was often worried about what Trent was doing under the supervision of her mother and the way he was being cared for. Kristine’s brother, Michael Bunch, described the role his mother had in caring for Trent:

My mom, I'll be nice and say, yes, she took on additional roles and helped me raise my nephew. But, the reality is, all she did was sit around and watch TV and smoke cigarettes.

Even though Kristine’s mother had custody of Trent, her parenting was less-than-ideal. It required Michael to do a lot of Trent’s parenting on the rare occasions when Michael was not at work, earning money to financially support all of them. Kristine was kept in the dark with some of what was going on with Trent while she was incarcerated. When she was released, it was very difficult for her to parent Trent, because Trent was used to being with his grandmother who mostly let him do whatever he wanted. Beyond that, Kristine felt Trent needed psychological support due to his depression and previous suicide attempts. She got him into therapy and made additional discoveries about her mother:

We did counseling every week, but that's also where he got to tell me what my mom was doing and how she kind of manipulated him. So, in the meantime, I'm dealing with all these people for him and I'm trying to get help for me.

Reintegration post-conviction was challenging enough for Kristine on its own, but it seems that it was made even more difficult by her mother's contributions of raising Kristine's child. The role Kristine's mother had played in Trent's life made it more difficult for her to rekindle a relationship with her son. Additionally, after Kristine had been released for some time, she decided she wanted to move to Chicago. Kristine explained how her mother impacted her ability to move with her son despite how excited she was for the opportunity to move away and start over with her son:

I'll feel comfortable there, and we can just start over. So my mom waited until the week before I was ready to move and told Trent that she would just die if he left her... and so then he came back crying and said, "I shouldn't be made to choose." And I said, "No, you shouldn't." So, I moved him back in with my mom. And, so I left, and I told Trent, "You don't ever have to choose. You want a relationship with me, it's up to you to come have a relationship with me. I'm your mom, I love you, I'm proud of you, I'm gonna support you in whatever way, but you have to make that choice." And so, I was in Chicago for about 8 months when he reached out and said, "Yeah, Ima need my mom."

Sadly, Kristine's mother was not willing to let go of Trent. Kristine did not want to cause Trent any additional stress or harm, so she did not fight her mother when it came to moving to Chicago. She knew that Trent would have a hard time adjusting to a completely different life. Even though she hated that her life with Trent was not what she had imagined it would be, she understood why he behaved the way he did. On the other hand, she could not look past the behavior of her mother, which seemed incredibly immature and harmful to Trent. Since the move to Chicago, Kristine and Trent have gotten much closer and have a good relationship; Kristine does not have much contact with her mother today.

Despite these issues with her mother, Kristine did have a wonderful support system in her brother. Due to their mother's negligence in their childhood, Michael and Kristine were forced to grow up quicker than most children. Kristine explained that growing up, she was essentially a second mother to Michael. Michael made the comment "when we were kids, we, most of the time, only had each other." Kristine is 3 years older than Michael and took care of him when he was a child and teenager. When Kristine was arrested and wrongfully convicted, Michael returned the favor and took amazing care of Kristine – working 80-hour weeks to make money to support her and her son and help prove her innocence. At one point in my interview with Michael, he explained he was the one person Kristine had and that he would send her care boxes with various items to the prison:

I would send boxes in for Kris and whoever else she needed boxes for, and that was our family, because I couldn't count on my family. And I knew she couldn't count on my family. So, I made as much effort as I could to help facilitate her to have that family value in there. Because I feel like it's very important. Especially when you're in a place where you don't feel safe, where the whole world is against you, it feels like, and you have nothing.

In my interview with him, Michael came across as such a genuine human being. Since he and Kristine grew up together, he knew that their mother was not going to provide the support Kristine needed once she was wrongfully incarcerated. He stepped up to ensure that she was taken care of. In Kristine and Chris's cases, even though their mothers did not provide the utmost support, they had other family who stepped in and made sure the exonerees felt loved and supported. These other family members filled the void within their family systems that their mothers left vacant.

CHAPTER 8 AGE STAGNATION AND ITS IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS

Whereas exonerees' mothers had their life course disrupted due to having to shift their roles and general life trajectories to meet the needs of their wrongfully convicted children, the life course disruption experienced by exonerees was more obvious as the wrongful conviction directly and unjustly removed their freedom. Whereas mothers were motivated by the family system disruption and felt a responsibility to take on the role as an advocate and supporter, exonerees were physically removed from society and thrown into a total institution that was unlike anything they had ever known before. They were constrained by the rules, personnel, and culture of the prison environment, and their former lives were essentially over as they knew it.

Being placed in a total institution for a lengthy period of time had serious impacts on how exonerees developed psychologically, emotionally, and socially as well as the way they conceptualized their own age and identity. By age, I do not mean their physical appearance; rather, it is their emotional and psychological aging that seems to be stunted. For most, it was not until they were released that they were able to pick up their lives where they left off. However, even though they felt like their younger selves and behaved like someone who was the age they were at the time they were initially incarcerated, they did not look it. This resulted in a mismatch between the exonerees' physical appearance and the way they felt and behaved.

To explain this aforementioned phenomenon, I created the term "age stagnation" or "incarceration-induced age stagnation." Stagnation is defined as "the state of not moving or flowing, or lack of activity, growth, or development" (Lexico, n.d., p 1.).

Although I am referring to this concept as age stagnation, it should be noted that it is

more of a lack of development and experience that causes the exonerees to have a distorted view of their own age and identity. I likely could have used the term “developmental stagnation” or some other wording to describe the phenomenon, but I have chosen to use the term age stagnation because of the continual usage of numerical age by participants to describe their personal feelings and experiences.

There were clusters of feelings and behaviors that exonerees described that indicated they felt age stagnation. Not all features were present in all exonerees who experienced incarceration induced age stagnation, but generally the themes that emerged commonly across exonerees included several specific features. These include: 1) the feeling of having been frozen in time as a result of living a significant period of time in a total institution (i.e., prison), 2) lack of “normal” development during late teenage years and early 20s (i.e., dating, break-ups, marriage, college, platonic friendships, and travel), 3) behaving in a manner that is more consistent with a younger age or the age an individual was when they were first incarcerated, 4) being perceived as less mature by others, including close loved ones, and 5) having trouble identifying with peers and dating “age appropriate” romantic partners. Throughout this chapter, I will examine the concept of age stagnation, the explanations exonerees gave as to why they feel younger than their actual age, the behaviors and attitudes associated with age stagnation, and the ways in which age stagnation impacts exonerees’ relationships and social lives.

General Concept and Self-Described Feeling of Being Younger and Feeling Frozen in Time

In this section, I explain the general concept of incarceration induced age stagnation and report how exonerees describe what age stagnation feels like and why they feel that way. I start with specific examples of age stagnation.

James Gibson was incarcerated at the age of 22 and released nearly 30 years later. However, when asked about how he felt when he got out he stated “when I got out, I still feel like I'm like in my 20s.” This exact sentiment was echoed by 9 other exonerees. I also found that exonerees were not the only ones who perceived themselves as younger than they actually were, but that their loved ones perceived them in this way too, even to the point where mothers of exonerees felt they should parent the exoneree upon re-entry (see discussion of post-release experiences of mothers of exonerees in Chapter 7). Upon asking more questions about why exonerees felt this way, I found that it tended to come from a lack of experience in the real world. While all their peers were living their lives out in the world – going to college, getting married, having children, and establishing their careers – these exonerees were living in concrete cells, learning prison culture, and attempting to find meaning and purpose in their lives. The culture and social environment within the prison was something entirely separate from what they might have experienced in the outside world. As such, they missed out on years, sometimes decades, of typical socialization and development.

In one of my first interviews, Jeffrey Deskovic said, “So, there's that aspect of it, I mean I'm 47, but I don't feel like that. I feel like I'm 25, 26.” This quote summarizes the essence of what age stagnation feels like to an exoneree. Basically, at the time of an exoneree’s release back into the outside world, they feel as though they were re-

entering this world at the age they were when they were first incarcerated. It is as if they had been developmentally frozen throughout their entire incarceration and were finally thawed. Although their bodies still aged, and their minds developed in many ways, their development took place within an institution that was separate from the outside world. Once they were released back into society, they felt as if they were continuing where they left off. Yet, they simultaneously felt dislocated in time and reentered a society that had drastically changed and was unfamiliar to them.

Jason Strong described how it felt going into prison at such a young age and missing out on what was happening beyond the prison walls:

I went in at 24 and prison is like putting life on pause. Everybody else in the world goes on and progresses and changes and evolves through different changes in the world. But in prison, you don't. You're like on pause watching the rest of the world live. Because every day is the fucking same.

Jason contrasted his incarceration experience with the experiences of his loved ones and peers. While serving a prison sentence, life was evolving for all his friends and peers. They were growing, developing, having new life experiences, and adapting to changes in society. The prison environment is extremely monotonous and does not enable individuals to develop and grow in the same way they would if they were out in the world. Most of prisoners' behaviors are rigorously controlled and restricted without opportunities to make mistakes in societal roles and learn from them as they would have if they had been living among others in society.

If inmates are incarcerated on death row or in solitary confinement, many prisons allow inmates out of their cells for only one hour each day. For example, John Huffington was on death row for 10 years and at least four other exonerees mentioned being put in solitary confinement at various points during their incarceration. Although

they tried to keep up with the lives of their peers on the outside, they depended on the peers to continue writing or reaching out. All of the exonerees I interviewed lost connections to the outside world as their friends' lives changed and they grew apart. Regardless of whether they were able to keep track of what was going on with their peers and loved ones on the outside, these exonerees were watching the outside world from afar. Listening to their descriptions, it sounded as if they were watching the outside world like a TV show or movie, rather than living in it. One exoneree, Jason Strong, commented that he felt it was like he was “on pause, watching the rest of the world live.” This lack of experience and development, particularly during their late teenage years and twenties, left them frozen or dislocated in time. Furthermore, once they returned to society, the society they once knew had transformed significantly from what it was when they left it.

John Huffington described what age stagnation feels like in terms of mental and emotional maturity:

Well, I say it all the time, it's like you're cryogenically frozen in time. So, your body ages, you age, but your emotional and mental maturity level doesn't necessarily keep up. Like, I think mine did, to a degree. I'm functional and whatever, but I'm not age appropriate, either.

John explained that even though on the outside he looks like a 58-year-old man, his emotional and mental maturity matches that of someone significantly younger. To be sure, he did not feel he had not grown emotionally or mentally at all – instead, he felt his growth was not to the same degree if he had not been incarcerated for 32 years. Additionally, this also meant that the socialization and skills that he had developed throughout his incarceration were not necessarily transferable to life in the outside world. His learning and growth within the prison walls was focused on surviving prison

and finding purpose in his incarceration. He was not living the same life he would have lived had he never been convicted.

This lack of mental and emotional maturity often left exonerees feeling inadequate and alienated from those around them when they returned home. Jason Strong explained how his lack of emotional development made it hard for him to comfort others and be there for them in an emotional way:

I've always struggled with loss, because nobody ever showed me how to do things, so I don't know how to teach others how to deal with things or how to comfort people. And so emotionally I'm very stunted, but I still have that part of me that's that old very caring person and very emotional. I just don't know how to help others but, I don't know, it's weird.

Jason expressed his frustration that once released, he could not comfort people in the ways he would like to. He felt that he never went through the emotional developmental stages necessary to obtain the skills he would need to be there for others in certain ways. He described himself as “emotionally stunted,” which gets at the heart of what age stagnation is.

Most of the exonerees I interviewed spent decades of their young lives behind bars. Fourteen were incarcerated for the majority or entirety of their twenties. For many people, their twenties and even their thirties are time periods in their lives where they develop emotionally and socially. They go through break-ups, marriage, parenthood, moves, job changes and many other transitional phases that contribute to their sense of self, experience, and maturity. Fifteen exonerees in this study went to prison in their late teens and early twenties and, besides Marie Huff, none of them saw the outside world, while they lived out the remainder of their twenties. As a result, they missed these critical learning and developmental stages of their lives. Although they may still experience some of these milestones, they will do so at older ages without being

surrounded by same-age peers going through the same experiences. Their life course trajectory was forever altered and out of line with what society might deem normal or expected.

All exonerees I interviewed explained that they had difficulties adjusting to the outside world following their release from prison. James Gibson who went to prison at age 23 and was released at age 52 summarized how this loss of time and attempts to readjust to a completely new and different society impacted him mentally by stating, “I’m really traumatized, and I feel like I’m in a time war.” Upon his release, James dealt with a great deal of shock and confusion. Adjusting to the world that had moved on without him proved to be challenging, especially in terms of adapting to new technology.

Romeo Fernandez described how difficult it had been to transition into an average adult following his release from prison:

So, when I came out here, I started seeing after a while— at first, I didn’t see it, it took me a while, and then after a while I started seeing how really of a convict I was. And I started comparing myself as the 16-year-old kid that didn’t know shit to this convict, and I was like “holy fuck.” And now I’m trying to put this adult into the picture as well, and it gets confusing.

Romeo’s prison experience was particularly brutal. Not only was he initially incarcerated as a 16-year-old child, but the prison environment where he served most of his sentence was dangerous and filled with violence. Romeo described how he went into prison fully expecting to die there. After being wrongfully convicted, he had no will to live and was put into dangerous and violent situations on a daily basis. He had to live day-to-day as a “tough guy” to ensure fellow inmates and guards did not sense weakness in him. This general disposition separated him from his loved ones on the outside and the experiences of his peers.

Towards the end of Romeo's sentence, he began to find the will to live and developed a relationship with his current wife, Stephanie. Despite altering his trajectory to become more like those on the outside, Romeo had trouble shaking the convict persona when he was first released. He reported feeling that he was in his twenties, as it has only been a few years since he came home from prison. He has begun settling into his role as a husband and father. However, a great deal of strife resulted when he attempted to live again as that 16-year-old kid once he was released. I discuss this in more detail in the later section which focuses on age stagnation and romantic relationships.

Similarly, Jeffrey Deskovic reflected on what he would have likely done had he not been wrongfully convicted and the types of important events and developmental periods he missed as a result of his incarceration:

From 1998 to 2006, I read like three or four nonfiction books a week. But on the negative side of it, I would have finished education at a more traditional age. Perhaps I would have been already well established in a career. And maybe I would have been married and had a family, maybe. I mean, I think that I don't want to do that anymore. But maybe it would have been a different life in that way, and I could have gone to the prom and graduated high school, and you know? Yeah, births, deaths, weddings, holidays, that kind of stuff; everything that I missed. I mean, there's certainly still the psychological aftereffects of the experience, which I still have some of the other aftereffects, which I'm dealing with. So, I feel like it's altered my life in that way. And it's caused me to have to try to— I mean I'm still trying to figure out the social part of my life that was in place before. So, I kind of feel like the train got knocked off the tracks in a way.

Jeffrey explained how his wrongful conviction derailed his social development, because he was only 16 years old, when he was initially arrested and still a minor when he was tried as an adult and sentenced to prison for rape and murder. He also mentioned that at this point he did not want to start a family and become a father. He was not the only exoneree that discussed the possibility of parenthood in the past tense, as Jason Strong

and Christopher Ochoa also explained that they felt it was too late for them to get married or have children. The concept of giving up on romance will be discussed in more detail in the romantic partners section.

Behaviors Associated with Age Stagnation

I identified certain behaviors and behavioral patterns that were related to or indicative of age stagnation. Some of these behaviors might be risk-seeking in nature, such as drinking, partying, or risky sexual activities, while others might not necessarily be risky but behaviors more typical of a younger individual than an older individual, such as excessive video game playing, sports or recreational activities, or attending college at a less traditional age. Other behaviors included getting tattoos and jumping out of airplanes. Seventeen exonerees mentioned engaging in behavior(s) that were somewhat atypical for someone their age.

For example, Ronnie Long spent the longest time incarcerated of all individuals in the study, serving 44 years. Ronnie went to prison as a 21-year-old and was exonerated in 2020 at the age of 65. His wife, AshLeigh, stated that “he's like a 20-year-old; he wants to go and be wild.” Even though Ronnie expressed the desire to party and “be wild,” he also reported that he did not necessarily have the stamina to do so. As a result, his wife reported worrying that he might get hurt or do something that could put him in danger.

Similarly, Sylvia Fernandez described how her son, Romeo, tended to behave like one of her grandchildren (age 11) at times:

I was just like, “Oh dude, like at this age,” you know? But he wasn't at that age. He wasn't at that age. And if you see him with my other grandkids, ah, I would always take them trick or treating. With Romeo, I couldn't, because he'd be so excited. “Trick or treating!” You know? And so, me and Chano were like, “Oh we're gonna get to take [the] kids again!” And

he's like, "Fool, I'm going!" You know what I mean? Like I want to take them, because I'm going to have fun and he's dressing up. Stephanie's like, "I just want to be at home and rest. I walked all day, the last thing I want to do is trick or treat." And Romeo's trying to be the pirate, be the -, whatever the heck he was going to be for the night. ... Easter, just all the holidays ... Like it's a holiday or like when he goes to buy school clothes, he's more excited to than [the] kid is. Like he's taking [his daughter], but I think he's more excited than [his daughter] is, you know what I mean?

Romeo has missed out on so many holidays and events since his initial arrest at age 16 that he gets extremely excited for holidays and holiday activities that the average adult might downplay. It is hard to say whether this behavior is due to him feeling younger than he is, or if he is just cherishing the time that he has now with his children. However, his mother seemed to think that it is related to him feeling and behaving in a way that is more aligned with the age he was when he was first incarcerated. Sylvia went on to describe how excited Romeo was when he first got his motorcycle and how he behaved like a kid with a new toy:

When he got his Harley, it was like a new toy. When he got his truck..., anything, he does it, it's like a kid style. That's why, when I see them go here or spend a lot, I'm like, "oh my God," but at the same time, it's like, "well, he's missed out on so much, he's gonna try to catch up," you know what I'm saying?

Sylvia explained that Romeo missed out on so much while he was incarcerated that he now needs to catch up. Although his behavior frustrated her at times, she understood why he engaged in it. As most exonerees were incarcerated for the majority or entirety of their twenties, they might throw themselves into activities that they missed to make up for lost time after their release. This is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it seemed that exonerees had a great appreciation for the little things in life – things that adults often take for granted.

Kristine Bunch described some of her behaviors that might be more typical for someone who is younger:

Yep, got piercings, got tattoos going on everywhere. I went parasailing. I zip-lined through Vegas. I went to Mardi Gras, I had weed suckers, I got drunk, I threw up on Bourbon Street. I showed my boobs off. I mean, yeah, I go to rock concerts with my kid. So yeah, it was really, really hard coming out at 39 and feeling like you're still 21.

In this quote, Kristine described some of the things she has done since she has been released that one might consider atypical for someone her age – behaviors someone might engage in during their early twenties. This illustrates that exonerees might feel the need to make up for lost time, thus truly living their lives to the fullest. After such a lengthy disruption in their life course, exonerees described lengthy bucket-lists of things they wanted to do or accomplish now that they were free. For example, shortly after my interview with Rodney Lincoln, he went skydiving for the first time at nearly 80 years of age.

Four exonerees went back to school to complete their undergraduate degrees following their release from prison and their exonerations. Two other exonerees mentioned plans to do so. Of those four, two, Jeffrey Deskovic and Chris Ochoa, ultimately went on to law school and received the Juris Doctorates. Jeffrey also received a master's degree prior to his law degree. Two of these exonerees described feeling out of place in school because of the age difference between them and their fellow students. I will expand upon this experience further in the later section focused on “age stagnation and peer relationships.”

One positive outcome of these behaviors is that on release, exonerees reported that they did not take things for granted in the same way as someone who has never lost their freedom might. Rather, they cherished all new experiences. Even though the

disconnect between their outside appearance and the way they felt on the inside might cause them hardship, they were able to hold onto their inner child, exhibiting a playfulness that most people lose during adulthood.

The negative side of some these behaviors comes from the risk involved, especially in terms of substance use. Although five exonerees mentioned how they “partied” a lot after their release, making up for lost time by getting drunk with peers, younger individuals, or fellow college students, only one individual explicitly described how his drinking turned into a problem. A related problem exonerees experienced was the inability to find peers to share and enjoy these activities with.

So far, I have explained the general concept of age stagnation, what it meant to exonerees and the evidence they gave for the experience of age stagnation. Further, I provided some examples of general behaviors and/or attitudes associated with the concept of age stagnation. I now discuss how age stagnation impacts exonerees’ relationships and interactions with their loved ones and peers.

Age Stagnation and Social Relationships

In addition to exonerees reporting their own experiences with age stagnation, secondary exonerees I interviewed also noticed features of it. Twelve secondary exonerees mentioned observing some sort of behavior or attitude of their exoneree loved one that was indicative of age stagnation. In the following sections, I explain some of the observations and how perceptions of age stagnation impacted secondary exonerees’ relationships with the exonerated loved one. I incorporate some of these observations throughout the following sections while also explaining how age stagnation impacted exonerees’ abilities to relate to their children, peers, and romantic partners.

Exonerees with Age Stagnation Parenting Children

Of the 19 exonerees I interviewed, 10 exonerees had children at the time of their arrest and conviction and missed significant portions of their children's lives while they were incarcerated. Both Keyontay Ricks and Romeo Fernandez had older children prior to incarceration. These children were adults by the time they were exonerated, and both had more children in their new marriage once they were released from prison, each having a new baby with a new partner shortly after their release. It makes sense that both of them would want to have children that they could be fully present with throughout their childhoods, but in each case, members of their families were initially skeptical about their decision to do so.

In Romeo's case, his mother, Sylvia, was concerned that Romeo and his wife, Stephanie, were going to be having kids shortly after his release. She stated:

I was skeptical on the side and – all I said, when she was having kids, I was like, “Oh my God” - and not because I didn't want the kids but just telling them, “Let him get mentally stable,” because the guy's a little wackadoodle at this point. He's 16 still, you know?

Sylvia went on to explain how she was questioning Stephanie, saying “Why would you be having a kid with him? We got to make sure this guy is going to be normal.” Sylvia's concern stemmed directly from her observations of Romeo's age stagnation. She was worried about how he might be able to handle the responsibility of taking care of a baby, given that he was still like a 16-year-old in so many ways. Sylvia believed that they should wait longer to decide to have children to give Romeo space to ensure he was mentally well.

Adult children of exonerees might feel deprived of having a parent if the exoneree acts more like a peer. Karina Ricks, who is Keyontay Ricks' 18-year-old

daughter, was a baby when Keyontay was first arrested and put in jail. Karina described how her father sometimes behaved as if he was closer to her own age and more like a peer, rather than a father figure:

I feel like he acts like a teenager. Yes, he gets on my nerves. I'm just like, "we are not in high school, we are not about to argue like high schoolers, we're not about to fight like high schoolers like." But I'm not, I'm just like, okay he's been arrested for a long time. I've heard where he is coming from. It's also like I'm 18, you're in your 30s, we should not be talking like we're arguing in high school. So, you should be talking like father and daughter. I feel like sometimes, he does stunt how his actual age is, I don't think purposely, though.

Karina explained that when she and her father disagreed about something, it felt as if she was arguing with another teenager or sibling rather than her significantly older father. Keyontay was 21 years old in 2004 when he was arrested and was released in 2017, which means that developmentally his life experience outside of prison is close to that of someone Karina's age. Karina reported that viewing her father as being somewhat developmentally on the same level as herself was frustrating, but she did not blame her father for behaving this way. Viewing her father as being somewhat developmentally on the same level as herself was likely frustrating for Karina, but she explained that she did not blame her father for behaving this way. She was mature and aware enough to understand that this psychological immaturity came from his lack of experience and his near 20-year incarceration.

Romantic Relationships and Age Stagnation

One of the primary areas where age stagnation impacts social relationships is in the context of romantic relationships. Age stagnation influenced exonerees' abilities to relate to similarly aged peers as potential romantic partners. This sometimes led exonerees to date individuals who were significantly younger than they were. This was

quite common among exonerees, but they felt it often led to judgement from outsiders or other loved ones as they saw the relationship as not being “age appropriate.” Further, the emotional and mental maturity of exonerees might cause relationship issues with similarly aged romantic partners. In this section, I discuss the association between age stagnation and exonerees’ romantic relationships in greater detail. Although there are many other factors that might impact an exoneree’s romantic relationships, such as PTSD or trust issues, this section solely focuses on age stagnation and romantic relationships.

Difficulty relating to potential mates

First, I explore the thoughts and feelings exonerees expressed when it comes to engaging with and relating to potential romantic partners. The average person spends their late teens and early twenties making mistakes, dating people they probably will not end up with, experimenting with new and risky activities, and learning from these behaviors. All 14 exonerees who were arrested in their late teens and early twenties, never had this opportunity. So, they never fully matured in the way many of their potential romantic partners likely did. This lack of maturity and inexperience placed exonerees in a difficult position when it came to dating. For example, Jason Strong articulated how his age stagnation impacted his ability to engage with potential romantic partners:

People my age want a person that's grown up, is ready to be an adult. And I'm like, well okay, so I'm too young mentally for those people, and I feel like I'm kind of trapped in this weird world. You know, I always compare a time in my head to like Salvador Dali's clocks. They're all warped and twisted and fucked up.

Jason explained that women his own age have expectations about how mature and “grown up” he should be based on his physical age. At the time of the interview, Jason

was in his mid-forties and so his similarly aged potential dating partners usually had extensive relationship experience in their lives. Often, they had been married and divorced or had been involved in multiple serious relationships. They knew what they were looking for in a partner. Jason believed that he was too young mentally to be a suitable partner to these women. He explained that his perception of time was “warped and fucked up.”

Jason compared his perception of time to a famous painting by Salvador Dali titled *The Persistence of Memory*. This particular painting showcases multiple clock faces that are warped and almost appear to be melting. According to Dali, the clocks in the painting symbolize “the human perception of time” and how time can flow quickly or slowly given an individual’s experiences of enjoyment or discomfort. Jason explained that he had been in prison for such a long period of time, yet once he was released, he felt he was starting over where he had left off, as if the time had completely vanished. Due to being incarcerated for nearly two decades, Jason’s conception of time has been forever altered – he explained that he felt misplaced in time after his release.

Jason and at least five other exonerees described how they experienced an incredibly slow passage of time while they were incarcerated due to boredom, trauma, and waiting for the truth to set them free. However, their time behind bars lacked emotional and social connection with romantic partners. As such, their maturity level and growth in romantic relationships was lacking, and this lack of maturity and inexperience made them feel insecure in romantic relationships or encounters. Similar to Jason Strong’s experience, Jeffrey Deskovic discussed some of these issues due to his lack of experience with dating overall:

You talk to somebody my age, they're like, "Well, what are you looking for?" and I'm like "I'm not quite sure." I'm trying to figure out and navigate everything around, and I don't want to lock myself into something that, you know, people say, "well, this one's a keeper." I mean that usually means you've been around the block a couple times, and you have a comparative point. You know what's out there, and you have a comparative point. And you've already developed what things you like, what characteristics you like, what you don't. And I think that as you date people, I feel you learn as much about yourself as you do other people. But I haven't fully done that, though. They're ready to be serious and you're just figuring it out still.

Jeffrey explained that his largest struggle with romantic relationships was his lack of experience, which was common among other exonerees too.

Jeffrey did not have any romantic dating experiences during his incarceration, nor did he have any serious ones prior to his arrest at age 16. Due to this lack of experience, he found it extremely difficult to get into relationships. He had no frame of reference to which he could compare potential partners. He had not dated different types of people and was unable to identify what he wanted in a partner or what he needed in a relationship. When a person starts a relationship with an exoneree or a formerly incarcerated person, it seems that they would need a lot of patience and understanding for that individual. Dating is so novel to a newly released exoneree.

Jeffrey went on to explain how his uncertainty with relationships and his inexperience often deterred potential dating partners. These individuals knew what they were looking for and were not necessarily willing to give him the patience he needed:

Nobody wants to hear, whether you don't know what you're looking, you're not sure. "What are you looking for?" "I'm not sure yet." Nobody, you know? I haven't found very many people who want to hear that. I mean that they're ready to move on at that point, because they're at a different place.

Jeffrey explained how he truly did not know what he wanted in terms of a romantic relationship. He elaborated on this to say that when he meets a potential mate, he

typically finds that his indecisiveness and inexperience leads these individuals to end things before they get started. Although he felt pressured to settle down or commit to them, he did not feel that he was ready to do this. He felt so much uncertainty existed for him.

Being rejected by potential partners due to lack of experience or uncertainty about what one wants in a relationship might lead exonerates to stop approaching potential partners or to give up on the idea of having a successful romantic relationship in the future. Next, I discuss in greater detail those exonerates who have chosen to give up on romantic relationships.

Giving up on romance or having a family

Five exonerates reported giving up on romance or starting a family. This decision was made, at least in part, because of how difficult it was for them to relate to others. This was the case for Jeffrey. As mentioned in an earlier quote, Jeffrey reflected that “maybe I would have been married and had a family, maybe. I mean, I think that I don’t want to do that anymore.” It seemed Jeffrey felt that the stage of his life where he would have gotten married and had children had passed him by. Although it would still be biologically possible for Jeffrey to have children, he no longer believed that it was part of his future.

Throughout our interview sessions, Jason Strong discussed how his prison experience took away the romantic side he had prior to incarceration. He explained that he did not want to get married anymore and felt as though he no longer had time to get married or start a family as a result of being incarcerated for so long. However, his mother, Debbie, saw it differently. In the following quote, she described an unknown woman who she thought would be a good fit for him:

Well, I think it's funny, because he met this girl and he met her in Ireland. And I think she would be good - she's a lawyer, so I don't worry about her. She knows Jason, and she knows what he's gone through, and all this stuff. But he says, you know, he likes her. He liked her more than he wants to admit. I think he feels like he'll be rejected, so he's kind of like, 'if I'm not interested in all this, because she's younger and all that, and wants to have kids.' But I feel, if the time came, he would probably go for it, if he knew that's what she wanted. And they would be happy, because he doesn't act his age. So where she's 26 or 27, he's almost like that age frame in how he feels in his mind. I would just trust her more with him, and I think he likes her too, but he's afraid he's too old for her. But, like I said, given the timeframe, I don't think he is.

Debbie reflected on her son's hesitancy regarding starting a family or becoming romantically involved with a woman who was a little less than 20 years younger than him. Debbie did not believe the age difference should matter all that much. In his mind, Jason was closer to this woman's age than his own age. This is consistent with many of the other exonerees' relationships and tendencies to date or marry individuals who were significantly younger. That Jason felt as though his opportunity to get married and have children had passed him by was another collateral consequence of his wrongful conviction.

Taking away someone's youth might make them feel as though they were too old to live the life they had once dreamed of or expected they would have. These exonerees' paths were certainly not traditional. As a result, some believed that they could no longer achieve the goals for family or relationships they once had. Moreover, female exonerees who are incarcerated for a significant period of time might no longer be biologically able to have children when they are released, which also impacts their ability to find romantic partners who desire to have their own biological children. Social constraints caused by prison and the wrongful conviction left these exonerees

convinced their life course trajectories would never follow a normative pattern in terms of these milestones.

In this section, I discussed why some exonerees' had given up on romance and felt that they had surpassed the time in their life where getting married or having children was appropriate. In the next section, I discuss the cultural changes of the dating world and what this means for exonerees following their release.

Changing socio-cultural context of the dating world

Another important factor to keep in mind when examining romantic relationships, dating, and age stagnation among exonerees is that the social and cultural context of the dating world has evolved since the time most exonerees were initially incarcerated. Gender expectations have shifted. Technology is increasingly used for matchmaking, creating a dating world completely different from the dating world an exoneree might have known prior to their wrongful conviction. These changes can be difficult for exonerees to adjust to, especially if they were incarcerated for a lengthy period of time. For example, John Huffington discussed how he was not used to women making the first move:

I think your mentality, you know, you get older, but I kept up with a lot of things, I was current to a degree, but you're not current on a lot of social standards. Here's an instance, when I went away, boy chased girl. Come home, and women chase men. That was interesting.

John explained that prior to his conviction in 1981, it was typical for men to initiate intimate relationships with women in terms of asking women on dates or beginning to flirt or compliment them. Today, this has shifted somewhat. John perceived that there is less of an expectation on men to make the first move. Women might be just as likely to

do so if they are interested. For John, this was a big adjustment. He explained that he was a bit offput the first time this happened to him.

So far, I primarily focused on exonerees who have trouble initiating romantic relationships, the changing socio-cultural contexts in which these relationships might be initiated, and why some exonerees have become discouraged from dating altogether. In the next subsections, I examine dating preferences among exonerees and some of the issues that arise in active romantic relationships as a result of age stagnation.

Tendency to date younger or less “age appropriate”

As explained above, experiences of age stagnation resulted in exonerees struggling to relate to potential romantic partners. This issue led four exonerees to give up on the idea of having serious romantic relationships or getting married. Alternatively, some exonerees chose romantic partners who were significantly younger than they were. Five exonerees explicitly mentioned how they tended to have romantic or intimate relationships with individuals who were significantly younger than they were. Three of the male exonerees described various reasons for this. Specifically, they mentioned having trouble relating to women their own age, having difficulties being attracted to women their own age, and trouble finding similar hobbies or activities to do with women their own age.

Juneal Pratt, age 65, described his preference for younger women in detail and explained that he had a hard time finding women his own age attractive. Juneal spent a particularly long time incarcerated – 42 years. As a result, he explained that his confinement meant he never grew old with a romantic partner and did not have the opportunity to age alongside a woman. He thought that if he had grown old with a woman, he would be able to find women his own age more attractive. Juneal explained

his feelings regarding dating older women and why he was not attracted to women who were the same age as he was as follows:

And so I recognized that I have to grow in my maturity, and I gotta update my maturity without the benefit of advancing through it, where you learn to appreciate it in gradual pieces. Like a few wrinkles first and maybe some crow's feet. But when you're going from smooth to crow's feet, wrinkles, sag, and all of this stuff at once? No hair? Shit, no! I don't know how to agree to wrinkles and stuff hanging down and stuff, and stuff looking- I didn't grow older with anyone, where I can learn to appreciate them. That's robbed from us, that when you grow older with someone, it stops being about the person and starts being about the personality. When you didn't have no one to grow old, then what are you working with? I come out the door, I'm not attracted to women that are 80 years old. What the hell? What is she gonna do? What are we going to do? Going straight to the hospital for me trying stuff that - I'm preserved, and she ain't - and, you know, breaking shit and so, I don't know how to relate to it, I don't. I see 'em, I talk to 'em, they always coming on to me, but I ain't attracted to no old ass people. I mean, as friends? Cool. But in the bed? Hell no. No.

This excerpt illustrates Juneal's frustration. He felt he was robbed from aging alongside a romantic partner. He came across as being a bit angry when describing his feelings and lack of attraction for women that are his own age. His time in prison took away a whole life of romantic experiences. He indicated that he was not willing to become involved with someone his age who looks her own age, because he was not attracted to them physically. Looking back at what he missed being incarcerated, he believed that if he had grown old with a romantic partner, he would be able to look past their physical attributes and focus more on the individual's personality. However, because he felt that he would never have an initial physical attraction to these women, he would never be able to consider being romantically involved with them.

Juneal felt that the system cheated him and took away his opportunity to have a more traditional marriage or romantic relationship in which the couple grows old together. Although Juneal is not currently in a romantic partnership, he explained that

the individuals he had dated since his release were significantly younger than he was. Yet, he also explained that some of the women he was involved with were a bit “wild” and he felt that these relationships sometimes put him in risky situations. He had been actively scammed via social media on multiple occasions by younger women and was physically assaulted in another instance. Specifically, Juneal described dating a younger woman who ended up biting him when they were breaking up. On other occasions, he was contacted on social media by “fake profiles” with pictures of beautiful young ladies who requested that he buy them a phone or send them money. Fortunately, he did not fall for the scam more than once. However, his lack of experience in the dating world and with technology likely puts him at greater risk of being victim to these scams by not being able to discern the true intentions behind these social media solicitations.

Juneal was not the only exoneree who felt a lack of attraction and connection with women his own age. After his release, Doug DiLosa married a woman who was 26 years old at the time they met shortly after his release— Doug was 49. When they became involved, Doug’s adult daughter jokingly criticized Doug stating, “I always wanted a little sister.” The following quote from Doug explains how he responded to his daughter after she made this comment:

A guy, you know, his mentality is different, maybe, but I said, “You know, I loved your mother. If we had grown old together, I'm sure physical appearance wouldn't have mattered to me in the least.” [...] I said, “but, I'm looking at all these 50-year-old women, and number one, I don't want to play bingo. I don't want to go on cruise ships” – [...] I don't want to do the stuff that people my age are doing. And to this day I joke about it, but I'm serious that I think one of the things that keeps me young in all ways, physically, mentally, is my wife's youth transferring in a way to me. Attractive woman. It was being around somebody that had the energy and the mindset that I had.

Both Doug and Juneal explained that they did not think appearance would matter so much if they had been able to grow old with someone their own age. However, because they missed out on these growing stages with similarly aged partners, they found it difficult to suddenly adapt to being attracted to women who are significantly older than the women in whom they were interested when they were first incarcerated. It is almost as if what they found attractive in romantic partners was also frozen in time. Since they see themselves as being significantly younger than they actually are, dating women their own age feels to them like dating someone who is significantly older than they are. Beyond appearance, Doug explained how he and his new wife had a similar mindset and energy level.

John Huffington was another exoneree who reported a tendency to date younger women, though this was not necessarily because he was not attracted to women his own age. John explained that age was not a determining factor for him, even though he was more likely to date younger women. He did so because he felt and acted younger than his physical age. He explained:

So, there was always that kind of disparity and stuff. But also, I do think younger, feel younger, date younger usually. And that's why I say, I dated young, I dated age appropriate, whatever. It went the ranges, and I blend into both. And, I don't know, even like in my dating world, I'm not always age appropriate, either. Two of my girlfriends- one was 29 and I dated her for like six months, another one was 30. So, I don't pay age any mind. I mean, somebody else might be looking at me like, "how are you, you're dating a young girl," and I'm like, "well, good for me, then, whatever." I just don't pay it any mind. It's not something that I think about, it's just, "Are we mutually attracted?" It's not just about physicality or something like that. For me, it always has to be more anyway. I gotta connect here [motions at his heart]. And sometimes, as society trains us to look at it, you look at me like, "What the heck?," because it's such a difference. But then other times, you get it, because they're on the same level, you know?

John's perspective was different from Juneal and Doug's in that he did not deny being attracted to women his own age, nor did he not feel attracted to older women. Rather, he explained that for him, attraction in romantic relationships had nothing to do with age. However, because he tended to behave like someone younger than he was, he often dated women who were younger than him. John explained this had more to do with his ability to relate to these women and his level of experience with relationships rather than his level of attraction for these partners.

In this section, I have provided details on how age stagnation might leave exonerees feeling attracted to romantic partners that were the same age they were at the time they were first incarcerated. Next, I want to briefly reflect on some of the dating experiences exonerees had while incarcerated and then move into the challenges related to age stagnation that exonerees and their romantic partners experienced following their incarceration.

Dating in prison

John did not describe having as much difficulty relating to women his own age as some of the exonerees I previously mentioned, and I suspect this is in part due to his level of experience with dating during his incarceration. Compared to some other exonerees, John had one of the longest serious romantic relationships while he was incarcerated. He dated a woman on the outside for 25 of the 32 years he was incarcerated. He met this woman while he was incarcerated. They broke up shortly after his release, because she had gotten married while he was still inside without telling him about it. Interestingly, John took this news really well. He had told her that she should move on and live her life outside, encouraging her to date other people. However, she

never told him that she was actually doing this and had fallen in love with someone else.

When discussing this, John explained:

She's like, "I just gave up. I didn't think you were gonna come home. I met somebody, I fell in love. I didn't want to tell you, because I didn't want to lose you." ... And in a way, she kept me alive. I was lucky, I had a woman in my life. I thought I did, you know? And it gave me a support system. It gave me something to head towards, you know? I mean, that's huge to have somebody like that. So, a lot of my friends, that are like, "Oh, that's terrible despicable, what she did." How can you say that? She fell in love. She got married. She could have just told me, and then that woulda ended us. Or she can do what she did, and that probably kept me alive. That probably gave me the energy to make it to the finish line. I don't know what woulda happened, had she told me. I'll never know, and I don't need to know. I know what happened, because she didn't tell me.

Although John lost trust in this ex-girlfriend and felt quite crushed when it all ended, he was thankful that she continued their relationship, while he was in prison, because it gave him a "finish line" and a support system. John described feeling lucky that he had this woman in his life for as long as he did and that she was so supportive and positive about his growth. She enabled him to stay positive and fight for his release despite being physically separated from one another by the prison walls. John's experience dating from within the prison might have given him a significantly greater familiarity with dating compared to other exonerees like Jeffrey or Jason, who had no experience dating while incarcerated. However, this experience was not equivalent to dating outside the prison walls. This woman had been married for the last ten years of John's incarceration and was able to maintain both relationships without John (and possibly her husband) knowing. Therefore, it seems clear that the relationship between John and this woman was not quite like it would have been if John were not incarcerated.

In addition to John, ten other exonerees explicitly mentioned having some sort of experience with dating while they were incarcerated. Dating while incarcerated was a

different experience than dating on the outside - the primary communications were through phone calls, letter writing, and visitation. Although visitations occurred, exonerees were unable to be intimate with their partners. Even if an exoneree had experience dating while they were incarcerated, this experience did not translate to dating on the outside. Only four of the eleven exonerees maintained these dating relationships following their release. The other seven either broke up with their significant other before or right after their release, or the relationship was not that serious to begin with and primarily served the purpose of having some sort of intimate companionship while being incarcerated.

The four exonerees whose relationships continued following their release had to adjust to dating on the outside. Couples transitioning from dating while one was incarcerated to living together or dating following the release faced unique challenges related to age stagnation. Moreover, couples that got together shortly after an exoneree's release had similar issues. To illustrate this point, the next section focuses on difficulties experienced by romantic partners of exonerees as they attempted to adjust to living together post-release and exoneration.

Dating challenges post-exoneration

Five male exonerees mentioned getting into serious romantic relationships either shortly after their release or prior to getting out. All five described some difficulties in their relationship that might be explained in part by age stagnation and their lack of experience in the real world. For example, Ronald Cotton began a romantic relationship soon after his release from prison and ultimately married this individual. Unfortunately, this relationship eventually ended in divorce, at least in part due to Ronald's infidelity and desire to engage in behaviors he would have likely experienced earlier had he not

been incarcerated at such a young age. His current romantic partner, Tonya Torain, provided her theory on why this marriage eventually ended:

His wife probably blamed him for their relationship not working, and he kind of blames her for the relationship not working. Which really doesn't have to do with anything that you're asking but, for a man or a woman--I could say even if a woman was incarcerated, say for all of her 20s and then she comes out in her 30s. Then you got married, you have a child, and then two or three years down the road it hits you, "Oh, my gosh! I didn't get to go do what I wanted to do. I didn't get to enjoy my 20s, I didn't get to go to a club," or, "I didn't get to go to a party," or, "I didn't do this and I didn't do that." And then all of a sudden maybe you find yourself hanging out with the fellows or the ladies—find themselves hanging out with their friends. And the next thing you know, you're back out kind of doing what you would have done maybe in your 20s.

Tonya believed that due to his incarceration, Ronald and others like him end up feeling as if they never got to live their lives fully. As a result, they end up wanting to go out and party, but their romantic partners expected them to settle down. Rather than settling into a marriage and dedicating most of their time to their spouse and children, exonerees and other formerly incarcerated individuals indicated the need to make up for lost time. The behaviors and activities they reported wanting to engage in did not always match up with what their spouses wanted them to do, which ultimately causing a great deal of strain in the marriage. It can be difficult for partners to accept exonerees and their lack of experience, even when they understand fully why their partner might need to make up for lost time.

As seen in Ronald Cotton and Ronnie Long's relationships, age stagnation can cause strife in romantic relationships when the exoneree does not behave as maturely as their romantic partner. This may be particularly true in cases where the exoneree is closer in age to their significant other, because the romantic partner may be expecting a certain level of maturity. Romeo Fernandez and Kenneth Nixon were two exonerees

who began serious and significant relationships with romantic partners while they were still incarcerated and were close in age to their partners. Both exonerees were incarcerated as teenagers and, therefore, did not have a great deal of relationship experience prior to their incarceration. As a result, both of their partners experienced some hardships and difficulties when their exonoree partner was released and they moved in together. This was the first significant relationship Romeo and Kenneth had since their teenage years; beginning the relationship while incarcerated and continuing it after release presented unique challenges. Making the relationships work required a great deal of patience, understanding, and love from their romantic partners, as their exoneree partners' inexperience led them to behave as if they were significantly younger.

For instance, Kenneth Nixon's girlfriend, Wendy Woods, described some of the frustration she felt brought on by her perceptions that Kenneth behaved like a 19-year-old man rather than a 35-year-old. She compared it to the behavior of her ex-husband with whom she had been together since high-school:

I'm trying to give him his space and let him grow as a person, but it's so hard sometimes, because I know he's just coming home and like...It's just like with my ex-husband, you know? He turned 21, and he wanted to go out and drink and party and do all the stuff that he never got to do, because he'd never been single, he'd been with me since high school.

For exonerees who have been incarcerated for a significant period of time, they have missed out on essential parts of their development. In this case, Kenneth was 19 when he was first arrested, and so he was never able to experience the fun and excitement of his mid-twenties. As a result, he was trying to make up for lost time after release.

Conversely, Wendy was at a stage in her life where she was ready to settle down and wanted to spend quality time at home with Kenneth as a couple. She wanted a normal

and relaxing life with Kenneth, especially after all the time and effort she put into fighting for his release for the six years they were together while he was incarcerated. She had no way to know exactly how Kenneth would behave when he got out. However, the discrepancy between their daily interests and desires had begun to cause strife within their relationship. Wendy had difficulties understanding why her presence was not enough to keep Kenneth happy and sustained, and it seemed to her that Kenneth felt too tied down to Wendy. According to Kenneth's mother, Tracy, Kenneth felt as if Wendy was controlling his behavior, which reminded him of the way guards had control over his behaviors in prison.

Based on my interviews with romantic partners and other loved ones, it seems that romantic partners were willing to accept and work through behaviors exhibited by exonerees that they likely would not have accepted had their partner not been incarcerated wrongfully for such a long period of time. The romantic partners who initiated relationships with exonerees while they were incarcerated fought to free their partner. Even though life after release was not exactly what they had imagined or hoped for, they understood that the lack of experience and trauma endured by exonerees was partially to blame for the immaturity and effects of age stagnation. However, these relationships were still difficult and stressful for romantic partners.

Stephanie, Romeo Fernandez's wife, struggled with how to handle some of Romeo's behaviors when he was first released. As mentioned in an earlier section, Romeo struggled to adjust to life as a father and husband following his release from prison. When he was still incarcerated, he and Stephanie got married. While Romeo was out on bail, awaiting his last trial, Stephanie became pregnant with his child. So,

when he was acquitted in this final trial, he was immediately thrown into a life that he had no experience with or preparation for. Romeo struggled to remain faithful in his marriage initially. His mother and wife believed that this was, in large part, due to his mentality being like that of a 16-year-old boy. His social maturity was not developed in the same way as his wife's maturity. He had no experience with a romantic relationship on the outside as an adult. Stephanie explained what that was like for her:

He came out, and he did have the mentality of a teenager. [pauses] Like the maturity of a 16-year-old boy. He really did. And that was really hard for me to deal with. He did have a lot of affairs. [laughs] The first year he was out, and as I say that, I'm going to pour more wine! [laughs]. But I kept telling myself- because I had talked to a lot of people who had done time before he got out, and they were like, "Dude, he's a cave man. He's gonna come out, and women are gonna flock to him. They're gonna want him, just because they see him as a different kind of creature. He's been locked away for so long." And I was like, "Okay." So I told myself, 'Okay, you got it. You can't be mad at him, you got to [sighs] be a little understanding. He's coming out, and he's going in straight into a relationship.'

Stephanie did not necessarily blame Romeo entirely for his infidelity. The time period following Romeo's release was extremely difficult for Stephanie. She explained that there were many times where she thought their relationship might not survive. However, her love for Romeo and her understanding that he came from a complete lack of sexual experience allowed her to be more patient with Romeo and more tolerant of his behaviors. She went on to state the following:

He missed out on all of that. I had that fun in my 20's and in my teens and whatever. But I'm also a woman. And so I took it very hard a lot of the times. I mean, every time I would find out something, I was like, "You fucking asshole." You know? But, like I said, he's my person, so I was like, 'I'm gonna stick through this, and he's gonna grow up, he's gonna realize.'

It is very likely that Stephanie would not have remained in the relationship if Romeo had not been through such a traumatic experience in which he was wrongfully incarcerated

as long as he was. Stephanie attributed the reason for these struggles was largely because Romeo had never lived outside of prison as an adult. To go from a juvenile, to being in prison, to immediately being a father and husband in a family environment was quite difficult for him due to the abrupt transition to the roles of husband and father.

Stephanie stayed with Romeo, and they ultimately worked through their issues, becoming even closer and growing stronger as a couple because of it. However, Stephanie had a challenging time coping initially. Eventually, and as a way of coping, Stephanie got seriously involved in advocacy for exonerees and began reaching out to significant others of wrongfully convicted individuals, whether they were currently incarcerated or already exonerated. She created a small support group of women who also had wrongfully convicted significant others so that they could be there for one another and help each other in their own journeys. In the following quote, she explained why she wanted to create the group and what she said to these other women:

“I was alone, I didn't know how to deal with any of this. But I know all of y'all's stories, and I think we can really help each other out.” So, they were all in. So, every Thursday we would- or we still do, in the evening we get on facetime and we all just shoot the shit. Or if one of them – like recently, when Kenneth Nixon's girlfriend was having a real hard time with him, so we did an early call, and we just talked to each other. We just get each other through whatever we're going through. Yeah, I had nothing like that. And yeah, and I needed to. Yeah. But [the] majority is- they're alone. And even if they're not, people cannot understand the actual situation. Yeah, the support groups would have been helpful but not just regular support groups. I would have wanted people who have actually been through it and who survived it and who are content with their life now. That's the people I want to hear from. There was no therapist that I could talk to, who I could say, “Right? You know what I mean, right?” Like, I didn't want to hear the textbook hoopla from a therapist. I wanted them to say, “I know exactly how you feel.” It's kind of like when there is a tragic event and everyone says, “My thoughts and prayers to you.” That doesn't do shit for me! I want to hear you say, “I know exactly what you're going through, and I can be proof that it's going to be okay.”

Stephanie explained that the primary reason she felt the need to create this group was because of how alone she had felt when Romeo was still incarcerated and when he was first released. She thought it was important that these other women had someone who understood what they were going through. Interestingly, Kenneth Nixon's girlfriend, Wendy, was part of this small group. During our interview, Wendy explained how vital this group of women was to her healing and how much it helped her understand what her exoneree partner was going through.

AshLeigh Long was the only romantic partner who I was able to interview who was significantly younger than her exoneree husband. AshLeigh is currently 35 years old, and Ronnie is 65 years old, resulting in an age gap of 30 years. The couple met because AshLeigh was a local advocate for justice reform living in Concord, NC, and a neighbor told her about Ronnie's case. After spending several days researching his case, AshLeigh wrote Ronnie a letter, letting him know she believed in his innocence and wanted to help him fight for his freedom. Ronnie allowed AshLeigh to come visit him, and she became his biggest advocate, creating a line of "Free Ronnie Long" clothing and merchandise. During their first year getting to know one another and maintaining regular visits, the two fell in love and were married soon after.

The age gap between Ronnie and AshLeigh caused frustration for AshLeigh. Many individuals in her family ridiculed her for being with someone so much older than herself. The age difference led to judgement and isolation from family members on both sides. Some of their loved ones even went so far as to call her a "gold digger" for marrying Ronnie, which she found to be especially offensive, considering she married him nearly a decade before his release with no guarantee that he would ever be

exonerated, much less compensated. This external stigmatization and apprehension from outsiders about their relationship was difficult for the couple, but they did their best not to let these comments harm them.

Even though the couple was together for 7 years prior to his release, adjusting to life with Ronnie outside the prison walls has been difficult and has created new challenges in their relationship. Although AshLeigh is significantly younger than Ronnie, she had more experience in social relationships outside of prison. AshLeigh explained that Ronnie acted like a 20-year-old and that she clearly understands why Ronnie would want to behave in a “wild” manner since he has missed out on so much time. However, she went in to discuss that it can also be stressful since Ronnie is older and she wants to be sure he is safe and takes care of himself.

In addition, because Ronnie had only been out for approximately 6 months, he was learning many new things about the world, and she was his primary support person, his living partner, and his wife. He lived a few hours drive away from his other close relatives, so AshLeigh was essentially all he had - his sole social support. AshLeigh was responsible for helping him learn new technology, understand new social norms, and keep up with his doctor's appointments and legal responsibilities. Since he was released during the COVID-19 pandemic, this added an additional layer of responsibility to AshLeigh's plate. AshLeigh explained that sometimes she felt as though she was forced into a motherly role with Ronnie, and this was likely due to his lack of experience in adulthood.

So far, I have discussed age stagnation as it relates to some of the ways exonerees' romantic relationships were impacted by immature behaviors, inexperience,

and the tendency for exonerees to become intimately or romantically involved with individuals significantly younger than them. In the next section, I move on from romantic relationships to focus on how age stagnation may influence platonic peer relationships.

Relating to Peers and Creating Social Networks

Although family members and close loved ones can often recognize the reasons why an exoneree may experience age stagnation and be less emotionally mature or psychologically developed, outsiders are not necessarily going to understand this. In this section, I describe how age stagnation impacted exonerees' abilities to initiate and maintain friendly peer relationships and the frustration that followed. Additionally, I explain how important it is for exonerees to have a social group that understands and can truly relate to them and how fellow exonerees fill this void for many.

Struggling to relate to peers and forge new relationships

Twelve exonerees explained how they had difficulties making friends or relating to similarly aged peers. Even though Kimberly Long served a significantly shorter prison sentence (7 years) compared to most of the other exoneree participants in this study, her time away still made it very difficult for her to connect with peers following her release. She explained her frustrations and the difficulties she had when attempting to relate to people following her release from prison as follows.

Everybody's talking about their life, what they're doing, where they've been, where they're going, their education, and I'm like, "Fuck." I was just home from prison, so I could not relate yet at that time. That was really, really, really hard for me. Or when people had kids and they would talk about their kids and [I] couldn't relate to that either. So, there's a lot of that I couldn't relate to.

Being a former inmate, regardless of the status of one's guilt, often leads to stigmatization and a gap in one's life course. Even though Kimberly was only

incarcerated for seven years, this is quite a long time during the formative years of early adulthood where she did not work, go to school, raise her children, or form new social relationships in society. A seven-year gap in experience and a resume is hard to explain, but what was most difficult for Kimberly was missing those seven formative years with her children. At the time she was initially arrested, her children were 5 and 10 years old. When potential friends and peers spoke about watching their children grow up and being present for certain milestones in their children's lives, this hurt Kimberly. She was unable to be similarly present for milestones in her own children's lives. As a mother, wanted to share these experiences with her children, but her wrongful conviction and incarceration took that opportunity from her. Simultaneously, lack of sharing those life experiences made it more difficult for her to relate to her peers.

Similar to Kimberly, Jeffrey Deskovic explained why he did not feel that individuals his own age were the appropriate social group for him:

When I do meet other people in the [legal] field—I mean their life wasn't interrupted for 16 years, like mine was so, they're a lot further along in their personal lives. And so, the majority of them, they're married or ready or they have some kind of serious relationship already. So, their life is already setup. So, that's not really the right group for me.

As mentioned prior, following his exoneration, Jeffrey completed his undergraduate degree, a master's degree, and finally attended law school, receiving his J.D. a few years ago. Most of the individuals he interacted with worked in the legal field or did criminal justice reform work, such as advocacy or lobbying. In that sense, he had a lot in common with them. However, although these individuals might understand Jeffrey through their understanding of wrongful convictions, they were typically further along in their personal and social lives. Most had families, serious relationships, or were married, and Jeffrey lacked experience in these areas. Jeffrey did not feel that he truly belonged

to this social group, even though they did similar work. Furthermore, Jeffrey explained that these individuals did not necessarily have extra time to spend with him to develop solid and lasting friendships. Besides the lack of time, Jeffrey also stated that he could not relate to individuals in his age group, but he did not feel that he would fit in with younger individuals either:

I found it hard to meet new people, yeah. But, I mean, it was hard to form social relationships... It feels a little bit awkward at times because it's 'who are my real peers to do things with?' I mean, you gonna go to the nightlife and for parties and throw a ball around and do other energetic things. But who [are my] peers to do that with? I mean I'm 47. So, there's not many people, plus or minus three or four years, that are going to want to do that. They're past that stage of life.—But then when I go a lot younger— I mean, I don't look like them, right [chuckles]? No one's gonna mistake me. I'm probably reminiscent of a father figure to them. I'm a square as far as they're concerned, right? But then also, while I feel a lot younger than my age, at the same time, I also feel a lot older than my age also. And I don't think that younger people necessarily think about what the consequences or implications of things are. So, if I think that people are not thinking that way, that makes me feel uncomfortable.

Jeffrey explained that he did not fit in with groups of his similarly aged peers or younger groups of individuals for various reasons. It is interesting that he also highlighted how he becomes nervous and uncomfortable when spending time with younger people because of their lack of forethought about potential consequences for their behavior. Similarly, Jeffrey indicated he was not interested in engaging in risky activities like some of the other exonerees. Rather, he just wanted to spend time doing things younger people usually do – things he missed out on doing as a teenager and young adult. He was never able to go to prom, graduate high school, or attend college with his peers. Although he attended college after his release, it was not the same experience he would have had 15 years earlier with his same age classmates.

Of all those I interviewed, Jeffrey seemed to have the greatest difficulties starting and maintaining new social relationships, whether they were friendships or romantic relationships. It is possible his difficulties might have been exacerbated by the fact that he was so young when he was first incarcerated. The only other individual I interviewed who was arrested as a minor was Romeo Fernandez, and he had a strong social support network while he was incarcerated. Jeffrey received social support from his mother, but she was essentially his only real contact with the outside world beyond pen pals. Romeo developed at least one serious romantic relationship while he was incarcerated and had consistent visitations with his immediate and extended family members. Jeffrey was more isolated from an outside support network compared to Romeo.

Jeffrey explained how his incarceration impacted his ability to socialize post release as follows, "From 17 to 32, when I was away, so understanding, reading body language, approach dynamics, and that kind of thing, so in that aspect of relationships, I found out to be a challenge as well." While in prison, Jeffrey kept himself isolated from fellow prisoners and focused on his education, reading, and legal work. This benefitted him from an educational and intellectual perspective and might have kept him safe from prison violence. However, it also meant he was not forming many social relationships with fellow inmates. This lack of socialization made social life even more difficult for him following his release.

Further, when Jeffrey was in law school, he did not have much extra time to spend with peers. If he had, he might have learned more socialization skills, developed closer bonds, or improved his ability to read social cues. Instead, Jeffrey threw himself

into the legal world to fight for those impacted by wrongful conviction and to achieve actionable criminal justice reform. Although Jeffrey loves his work, he did not grant himself time to socialize with those outside the criminal justice system. He spent a lot of his time in law school, working to earn money and advocating for justice reform through interviews, speaking engagements, and authoring articles about his experience with wrongful conviction.

By contrast, John Huffington explained how he was able to fit in with groups of all ages. In the following quote, John explained how he viewed his age and how this impacted his friendships with older and younger peers:

So age for me doesn't factor into it, it's more about connection, it's more about that. And I don't act my age. I don't, you know? I have friends that range from, obviously, your age group up to mine. Like I'm still very young at heart. I mean, I get away with it, even with my volunteers for AVP [Alternatives to Violence Project] program. There were two different sets: the younger crowd, the older crowd. And [when] I came home, each different set threw a thing for me and I blended in with each. The older crowd, they had lamb on the grill, and it was hoity toity kind, and I'm like, "I don't even know what I'm eating." And then the younger crowd, it was like, "we're going to grab Chipotle."

John was a very gregarious person by nature and even built a large network of friends, peers, and connections while in prison. In the above quote, he explained how he adapted to different social situations depending on the age of the group. John's experience developing close bonds with fellow prisoners and being actively involved in prison programs that consisted of mentorship of fellow inmates allowed him to develop some of the social skills that Jeffrey did not develop.

Like Kimberly and Jeffrey, Jason Strong had difficulties relating to and making friends with peers his own age upon release. Jason explained the reasons as follows:

That was one of my struggles to meet friends in the first place when I got out. Most people, when you go and hang out with your friends, you

probably talk about things that you all have in common. You know, work or school or family birthdays and Christmases, whatever. My only thing I had a knowledge of for the past 15 and a half years was prison. I'm thrown into a free world at 39 years old, and I'm like, 'well, how the fuck do I make friends at 39 years old? I have no commonality with anybody.' You know, other people are talking about their jobs and their kids, and college and birthdays, and I'm like, 'I know about concrete walls and steel bars. I can tell you how life is conducted on the yard.'

Here, Jason explained that he had a particularly difficult time trying to make friends when he was first released from prison and exonerated. He had moved to a new state and did not have any connections to his peers. It is already challenging to make new friends as a middle-aged adult, but it becomes even more challenging when an individual feels that they have nothing in common with their peers due to a traumatic experience like wrongful conviction. Jason felt like an outcast and outsider. Even though he was not guilty of the horrific crime he was convicted of and had been exonerated, this did not change the fact that he had spent nearly 16 years in a maximum-security prison. When considering the impact of a wrongful conviction, we often forget the impact the incarceration has on exonerates well after their release. The lack of commonality exonerates have with the rest of society is just another unintended consequence of a wrongful conviction.

Jason went on to explain that beyond just having difficulties making new friends, he also felt that he was losing some of the closer friends he had due to their busy lives, relationships, and role as parents:

Another problem that's been arising for me is, I'm losing friends again in my life. Not by like, 'oh they'll never be my friend,' but by adulthood. I got so many friends that are getting married, having kids, building careers. And they don't have time to come and hang out with the fucking kid that never grew up. So that creates a lot of issues. And, in my head, I mean, I know I'm 45 and all that, but the way my brain feels, I still feel like I'm in my early twenties.

Sadly, there seems to be a level of insecurity that comes from age stagnation and attempting to develop and maintain new relationships. Jason described himself as the “kid that never grew up” and explained that friends who were married and had families and careers did not necessarily have time to spend with him. In a similar vein, Kristine Bunch described her feelings about interacting with individuals her own age and how she felt that she could not relate to these peers. Due to this lack of similar experiences, she sometimes felt she needed to lie to fit in or avoid certain interactions altogether:

So it's [sighs], it's hard when you go out with a group of your peers, because they all have experiences and things going on in their life that I don't and I can't relate to, and I never had. And so, when you're in that interaction, you have a choice you can either lie and fit in with them – and act like you've experienced that, or you can be honest and telling the truth and then get looked at like you're an alien. So, it's really hard. And so, most of the time, I want to be anti-social and just not deal with it. And, of course, I hear a lot from my brother that I am anti-social and I only deal with people that know me, so like [my friend] and her partner and their kids. Um, it's just not comfortable, I guess.

Kristine explained that in some cases she felt pressured to lie about her experiences in order to fit in. She hated being judged by others as being different and seeming like “an alien,” because her adult experiences were so different from that of her peers. Since she did not feel that she fit in and often felt uncomfortable in these scenarios, Kristine often decided to just avoid people and social situations with certain people. Instead, she chose to spend time with a small group of close friends and her brother who knew her well and understood what she went through. Among these individuals, she could feel comfortable and be herself.

As previously mentioned, at least three older exonerees enrolled in higher education following their release, meaning they attended University at significantly older ages than the average student. Like Jeffrey, Chirs also experienced some discomfort

when enrolling in higher education, because he did not quite feel like they fit in. While both Chris and Jeffrey felt similarly aged to their fellow students due to age stagnation, they looked and were considerably older. However, their unique experiences as exonerees who had been wrongfully convicted was particularly useful to their law school studies and ultimately their legal careers. Even though they did not feel that they always fit in at parties or during extracurricular activities, they did feel that there was a place for them in the classroom. Chris Ochoa described how his sense that he did not fit in ultimately led to his decision to attend law school:

When I was released, I didn't feel that I fit in anywhere, I really didn't. I mean I would go with my uncle, and we'd go and hang out with people my age, and they would talk about current events. This was me 3 months released. And, you know, they don't realize how much a prisoner reads. We know a lot more about the world than they think we do, but because they feel that we don't, they don't mean to, but when I was in conversations, I would try to add on to the current event topic, they would look at me like [makes blank facial expression]. They wouldn't say anything, but I felt it, like a "what do you know?" I just got out, "what do you know about this?" They didn't do it on purpose, but then I was hanging out with young people when in college, right, 'cause of the law students. I mean, I was like 34 years old, not much older than them, but still. But like, 20, 34, no. So, I didn't fit in anywhere, until one place I figured out: law school, because law students, they talk to me. They want my opinion. They wanna know what I know. They know that I'm not dumb. I think that's the perception, that we're not. So, I decided then, if that's the only place I feel comfortable—that's where I'm gonna be. So I switched, switched to political science, but that was the last minute— I always liked political science anyway.

Chris explained how he felt like an outcast among both peers his same age and fellow students, while he was an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin. He had been majoring in business up until this point but slowly drifted into becoming more and more interested in law and the legal system. In particular, he described how individuals his age did not include him in conversations shortly after he was released, because Chris felt that they did not believe he was up to date on current events and would not be able

to add value to the conversation. As a result, he felt left out and excluded among people his own age. Similarly, while he was an undergraduate, he felt like an outcast because he was older than most of the other students. He was not comfortable going to parties or making friends with these individuals, because they seemed judgmental toward him. Finally, he realized that he could find a sense of belonging in law school. After incarceration, this was the first place Chris felt he truly belonged; it was not necessarily because he could relate to the other law students in terms of life experience, rather it was because he felt his lived experience within the justice system was valued by those interested in the law.

Due to their inability to relate to peers who have never been incarcerated, exonerees might find it more comfortable to become friends with people who share their experiences, whether these individuals are exonerees or formerly incarcerated people who were rightfully convicted. All the exonerees that I spoke to highlighted just how important the exoneree community has been to their healing and sense of belonging. The network of exonerees that exists is reminiscent of a family unit – dysfunctional at times but full of love, understanding, and social support. Exonerees felt that other exonerees were often the only people that truly understood them. In the next section, I explain the importance of the exoneree community as a whole and how exonerees felt about relating to others with shared experiences of injustice.

Importance of the innocence community and exoneree support

Because exonerees often reporting feeling that they could not fit in with most individuals in society, it became extremely important and valuable that they had friends and peers they can relate to. For most, the only individuals that they could truly relate to and felt 100% comfortable with were other exonerees. However, they also discussed

important and supportive relationships with former inmates more generally and members of the wider wrongful conviction community (i.e., attorneys or advocates).

For example, Kristine Bunch has an extremely special and familial bond with a woman named Donna Waters, who also participated in my study. The women began their relationship behind the prison walls when Donna was only 14 years old. Kristine had just lost her older son to a fire and her other child to her incarceration. Donna had been treated horribly by her father who also tricked her to start a fire, which killed her sister and mother. Kristine took Donna under her wing and became a mother figure to her during the several years they spent in prison together. Today, they are still best friends. Donna is able to relate to Kristine in a way most of her peers are unable to, but even Donna recognized that she could never fully understand Kristine. Donna stated the following when discussing Kristine's move to Chicago where Kristine was around other exonerees:

Chicago saved her life because Chicago allowed her to, one, be around other exonerees, because no matter how close Krissy and I are, Krissy needed others exonerees who knew what it was like to be 100% innocent.

Families, friends, and those who went through the experience with the exoneree, but were never wrongfully convicted, cannot relate to exonerees in the way another exoneree can. Due to their shared incarceration experience, Donna reported understanding Kristine on a level that the average person cannot, and that feeling was mutual for Kristine. However, Donna explained that it was vital that Kristine had exonerees in her life who she could relate to on a more complete level.

Similarly, Romeo Fernandez discussed his friendship with a female exoneree. He explained that there were certain things that were difficult to discuss with a partner or loved one, but he could discuss with his fellow exoneree. He said, "There's certain stuff

that she cannot tell her wife that she can tell me, right off the muscle. Because of my position, her position, you know what I mean?” He reported feeling more comfortable discussing some of these experiences with other exonerees. There seems to be a strong bond forged between exonerees. Whether they would have been friends had they never endured these shared injustices does not seem to matter when the exonerees come together to share experiences and be with one another at the annual events for exonerees.

These events and opportunities to connect are pivotal for exonerees. In the quotation below, John Huffington explained his take on the importance and necessity of the conferences and wrongful conviction events that bring him and his fellow exonerees together:

And that's why these conferences are so important, because that's where we bond. That's where we feel at home amongst ourselves. It doesn't matter if we don't know each other we meet. But we share that commonality, and that lets us bond. I'll never forget my first conference that was in San Antonio. You knew who everybody was, you could pick out each other, and the first time I really just felt like, “okay, I'm comfortable, and I'm home.” You know?

John's explanation shows how important, and comforting being bonded to fellow exonerees can be. As previously discussed, exonerees had extreme difficulties relating to peers and potential romantic partners who have never experienced incarceration. Having events and mechanisms to allow exonerees to come together to learn, grow, and celebrate is particularly meaningful – not just for them but also for their loved ones.

I want to briefly mention that at least two exonerees in my study did not have the same access to attend events hosted by the Innocence Network as other exonerees did. This was because their cases had not been handled by an affiliated Innocence Project organization. This meant their fees for major gatherings, like the Innocence

Network Conferences, were not waived. They were still permitted to attend, however, if they paid for their own entry. Because of this, one of the two exonerees in this predicament felt resentful towards the Innocence Project for being not afforded the same opportunities as other exonerees after having experienced the same injustice. However, despite their problems with the Innocence Project as a whole, they still felt bonded to other exonerees and formerly incarcerated persons.

Nine exonerees specifically mentioned serving time and bonding with other wrongfully convicted individuals. That is, they met other exonerees while still incarcerated. Jason Strong developed close bonds with a few exonerees prior to their exonerations while they served time together. He explained how valuable these friendships are to him today:

It helps, you know? I think about...oh when was this? It had to be about 2019. I was in Chicago, and I met up with Mario, Joker, Misfit, Fourty, and Mario's girlfriend, and we all went to Gino's East and got pizza and wrote our names on the table. And went and hung out at Mario's penthouse balcony and the whole night, it was just the comfort of being able to talk about all that we went through with people that understood, because we were all in prison together, you know? So, we understood what we had gone through. It was also kind of nice to be able to be like, "Dude remember that time when so and so," and it's like, yeah, you don't really want to reminisce about moments in prison, but those were our part of our life, you know?...It's one thing that exonerees get it, but it's another deeper level when it's people that you have actually been inside with, like Joker and Misfit. Us three, we actually were in prison together. So, I knew them on the inside. So, that makes a whole 'nother category of understanding between us.

Jason described how the connection he has with these individuals is even deeper than his relationships with other exonerees he met after release. He brought up an important point about the value of having a shared history and shared memories with friends. This is something that gives meaning to relationships. Having been through such a similar situation allowed these friends to discuss specific events, former incarcerated peers,

and experiences that no one else could relate to in the same way. Jason lives in Tennessee now. Therefore, he does not get to spend a lot of time with these individuals, but he discussed how he looks forward to being with them at future exoneree events. Jason described the bond between exonerees as familial or comparable to veterans who served in the same war together – which includes an understanding that cannot fully be matched by another person. He compared his closest exoneree friends to military buddies with whom he was in the trenches. They saw what he saw and felt what he felt – they went through it together. The bond he has with these individuals is unique and special.

Lower Levels of Age Stagnation Among Certain Groups

Although the vast majority of exonerees were incarcerated in late adolescence or early adulthood (n = 16), this was not true for all cases. Three individuals were incarcerated when they were in their 30s rather than in their teens or twenties. These three individuals were Ginny Lefever, Doug DiLosa, and Rodney Lincoln. They seemed to be less impacted by the psychosocial maturity aspect of age stagnation than those who were incarcerated in their late teens and early twenties. However, they experienced some of the features of age stagnation, such as feeling the age they were when they were first incarcerated.

For example, Doug tended to date younger women and explained that he felt younger than his true age. Ginny went back to school later in life, and Rodney engaged in behaviors that might be more typical for someone significantly younger. As discussed in the earlier section on risky behavior, he went skydiving a few months ago at nearly 80 years of age. Yet Rodney and Ginny's motivations seemed to be more related to experiencing things they missed out on and living life to the fullest. Neither expressed

feeling very distressed by how old they were and neither spoke about difficulties relating to peers in the same way exonerees who were incarcerated in their teens and twenties did. When asked to elaborate on his feelings about his relative age, Doug said the following:

And a lot of people have asked me, having gone in in my mid 30s, do I think it was better going in at, say, age 36 or would I have preferred going in as a teenager or no older than my early 20s? And I had mixed feelings about that. I think the very fact that I had memories to fall back on meant a lot to me. [Interviewer: Yeah, you could think about your kids?] And I've had more than 10 years of work experience, I had already travelled from one end of the world to the other, lived and worked in 10 different countries, you know? That helped me.

Doug explained that having had a family, work and travel experience, and positive memories to look back on during his incarceration provided him with some comfort. It seemed that when Doug was released, he had a slightly easier time adjusting to life on the outside compared to other exonerees, despite not really feeling his age. I believe this was due to that fact that he had experienced a lot of the development and socialization that was deprived from the other exonerees. He had been married and had children. Although he had missed a significant amount of time with his children, he had still been a part of their lives. Doug explained how he was a very present father from prison, as much as was humanely possible. He helped his children with homework over the phone and wrote letters and contacted them constantly. This allowed him to experience some of those developmental stages with them, even if he was not physically there for the most important events. This does not mean that he did not lose a great deal of quality time and vital moments with his children and his other family members, but it was an experience that some of the other exonerees did not have.

Along the same lines of Doug's experience, Rodney Lincoln seemed to have less issues when it came to developmental maturity. Like Doug, Rodney was incarcerated in his late thirties. However, Rodney spent significantly longer incarcerated, serving a total of 36 years before he received a pardon. When interviewing Rodney's daughter, Kay Lincoln, she explained that her father "acts like a 77-year-old man as far as normal development." She went on to state:

I think it is because he was a little older when he went in. He already had a career, family, life experiences that younger guys haven't. However, on the other hand, I think it's hard for him to reconcile that he grew old in there. He gets frustrated that he can't do the things he did before... even though it is normal for his age, it still doesn't feel normal to him.

Kay's above statement seems to support the idea that exonerees who were incarcerated later in life (mid-thirties) did not have the same level of age stagnation challenges or indicators as those who were incarcerated in their late teens or early twenties. Kay attributes this to her father's experiences prior to his incarceration. Like Doug, Rodney had been married, had a career, and was a father. He was able to experience almost two decades raising children prior to his wrongful conviction and as such, he had more life experience than most of the other exonerees who participated in this study. Still, Kay explained that Rodney struggled to accept his old age after his release. So even though he did not experience age stagnation in the sense that his developmental and social maturity was stunted, he also still felt as though he was a much younger man than he truly was.

In addition to these three who were incarcerated later in life, there was another exoneree who did not report experiencing age stagnation. Marie Huff never described any behaviors or feelings that were associated with age stagnation, possibly because she served the least amount of time among the exonerees (4 years) and was released

while she was still in her early twenties. Although I am sure her period of incarceration impacted her social and psychological development, our interview provided no evidence to suggest her development was as stunted as other exonerees who spent significantly longer periods of time behind bars.

However, it is also possible that the interview did not reveal evidence of age stagnation because these individuals were among the first I interviewed. Therefore, I did not ask all of them directly whether they felt as though they were their true age or not. However, despite this possibility, it appears that age stagnation was most pronounced for those exonerees who were incarcerated in their teens or early twenties and spent many years behind bars, which stunted their normal developmental transition into adulthood.

The concept of life course disruption introduced earlier can help make sense of the difference between exonerees who were incarcerated at younger ages and reported lower levels of psychosocial maturity and those who were incarcerated at older ages. Despite having a greater number of memories to fall back on, these older exonerees still experienced decades long disruptions of their life course trajectories. Their marriages were cut short, they did not have the ability to watch their kids grow into adults, and they were still placed into a total institution for extensive periods of time. Although they may have fared better than their younger wrongfully convicted counterparts when it came to developmental maturity, their lives were entirely disrupted due to the wrongful conviction.

This chapter explored the ways age stagnation impacts an exonerees' actions and their social relationships, particularly among peers and romantic partners. Further,

results highlighted the importance of the Innocence Network in providing exonerees support and community. Next, I move into a discussion of all the results from this chapter as well as the previous chapter that examined exonerees' mothers. In this final chapter, I will discuss how the findings in the current project relate to existing research and address the potential policy implications of the current study. Additionally, I will reflect on the limitations of this study and what future research should do to address these limitations.

CHAPTER 9 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The broad focus of my project revolved around exploring the totality of the impact a wrongful conviction has on those in social relationships with or closest to the exoneree. Although so many more topics and issues were covered throughout the course of my data collection and interviewing process, I chose to narrow the dissertation to focus on two of the most repetitive and noticeable patterns I identified through the interviewing process and grounded theory analysis. These two themes centered around: 1) the bond between exonerees and their mothers and the impact of wrongful conviction on this relationship and 2) incarceration-induced age stagnation and the impact of this phenomenon on exonerees' social relationships post-release, particularly when it came to peer and romantic relationships. Both themes can be understood in terms of the disruption the wrongful conviction had on primary and secondary exonerees' life course trajectories. In this conclusion chapter, I summarize my findings related to these two themes, addressing and describing the major takeaways from the study. I compare my findings to existing research, explaining how this project addresses gaps in the current literature. I then discuss the implications of these results, focusing primarily on policy and programming recommendations for exonerees and their loved ones. Finally, I explain many of the limitations of this study and recommendations and plans for future research.

Mothers of Exonerees

A great deal of research on parent-child relationships and incarceration focuses on the impact of parental incarceration on the development of the child (see Geller et al., 2009; Murray & Murray, 2010; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002 for good reviews). I

took a different approach in this project, examining the role of mothers in supporting their wrongfully incarcerated children. I chose to focus on mothers and the relationship to their exoneree children because all except three exonerees consistently identified their mothers as their primary support person and pillar of social support. I explored how the wrongful conviction impacted mothers personally. In addition, I also examined how the conviction impacted the relationship between mothers and their exoneree children throughout the entirety of the process of wrongful conviction and eventual exoneration. Prior research has shown that relationships with romantic partners and children of inmates were more likely to deteriorate over time compared to relationships with parents, particularly mothers (Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006; Holt & Miller, 1972). In this research, I similarly found that exonerees' mothers were the long-lasting, primary supporters for the majority of the exonerees in the study.

Initial Reactions to the Trial and Wrongful Conviction

All four mothers I interviewed described being incredibly shocked when they found out their child was suspected of committing a heinous crime. They all described feelings of distress, sadness, and mental anguish that resulted from their child's initial arrest and conviction. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting the emotional and psychological trauma of a wrongful conviction likely extends to an exoneree's loved ones, including mostly exonerees' children and significant others (Jeudy, 2019; Jenkins, 2013; Grounds, 2004; Scott, 2009). This study broadened that finding to include exonerees' mothers.

Despite this initial shock, the exoneree mothers reported immediately springing into action; their sole focus became proving their child's innocence. There was no

specific pattern of involvement across all cases during the initial stages of the arrest, interrogation, negotiations and trial for the four mothers I interviewed. The trial stage was particularly notable for all those mothers I interviewed. They had different experiences when it came to the trial process. Some were put on a witness list – unable to watch any of the court proceedings, while others described how horrific it was for them to sit by as prosecutors painted the picture that their child was a murderer. All the mothers I interviewed reporting believing that the truth would prevail at trial. They believed the system would work as intended. However, after their children were found guilty and wrongfully imprisoned for years, often in dangerous facilities, these mothers lost their faith in the legitimacy of the legal system.

Sacrificing to Help Their Child

Exonerees' mothers made numerous financial and personal sacrifices while fighting to prove their child's innocence and helping them obtain their release. These sacrifices included monetary payments in the form of bail, attorney fees, travel, commissary costs, and visitation costs. To make these sacrifices, mothers or other caregivers had to leave retirement, obtain additional jobs, downsize their homes, relocate to be closer to their child, and/or cut other living expenses. This impacted the whole family. For one mother who had other minor children, this made her role as a mother to her other children even more challenging. For the average incarcerated person, social and economic costs for loved ones is already quite high (Christian, Mellow, & Thomas, 2006). Future research should further explore the economic costs for wrongfully incarcerated individuals. Additional financial costs are likely for wrongfully incarcerated individuals as money is put towards the legal case to prove innocence,

which often includes numerous appeals. According to Green et al. (2006), the increased financial burden of having an incarcerated child may result in more negative impacts on psychological well-being among mothers. These data show that this result extends to mothers of wrongfully incarcerated individuals as well.

Maintaining Contact with Their Wrongfully Convicted Child

For the mothers in this study, maintaining contact through phone calls, visitation, and letter writing was key for their well-being and their relationship with their exoneree children. Mothers often developed rituals or routines around visitation or calling. They reported calling at a specified time each day or organizing visits to maximize the time they were able to spend with their child. Other research suggests that visitation can be incredibly important for incarcerated persons as it allows them to stay connected to their loved ones and provides access to social support networks (Brunton-Smith & McCarthy, 2017; Liu, Pickett, & Baker, 2016; Barrick, Lattimore, & Visher, 2014). The current study findings corroborated this as visitations were important for the exonerees and their mothers to stay connected. However, the current study is unique in that motivations for visitations are slightly different for secondary exonerees. Specifically, the participants in this study reported spending a lot of visitation time discussing the wrongful conviction case itself, including appeals processes and upcoming court dates. Mothers and exonerees also reported spending a significant amount of their visitation time encouraging one another about the case and the chances of release. Alternatively, mothers and exonerees also reported instances in which they received bad news about an appeal or the case in general and had to handle that during a visitation.

In this study, the primary barrier keeping exonerees' mothers from visiting their children tended to be the distance they needed to travel to get to the facility and the costs associated with this travel. Most exonerees were incarcerated in prisons that were, at minimum, several hours away from their mothers and other loved ones. In some cases, mothers would spend over 10 hours driving to the prison. Sometimes mothers had to travel by plane and take multiple days off work to make the trip. In addition to taking their time, visiting was costly. This usually meant mothers were unable to visit their children as frequently as they would have liked. However, when they were able to, the mothers felt that these visits were incredibly important to their well-being and the well-being of their wrongfully convicted child. A recent study by Young and Turanovic (2020) found that families were likely to visit incarcerated juveniles even when they were housed in facilities that were significant distances from the families. Families with greater parent-child closeness and higher household incomes were more likely to travel far distances to visit. These data support that as well – for the families who participated in this study, distance was a significant barrier families worked to overcome to visit their wrongfully incarcerated child.

Although visitations tended to be described as happy times by mothers, negatives outcomes were also associated with them. There were hidden costs and rules, and sometimes mothers were unable to visit their child if correctional officers strictly enforced these rules. Many mothers and other loved ones reported being treated disrespectfully by prison guards and experiencing a loss of dignity when they visited the prison. All the mothers reported strict rules when it came to visitation, which caused at least three additional stress and trauma. This is consistent with other research

suggesting that visitation might be harmful to family members if they receive disrespectful treatment by guards and/or it is uncertain if they can see the prisoner (Arditti, 2003, 2005).

Some exonerees reported that they discouraged their mothers from coming to visit them because of concerns about how their mothers would be treated during the visitation process. That is, exonerees preferred to forfeit their visits with their mothers so they would not have to put their mothers through this traumatic process. This was especially true when the mothers were elderly, sick, or had to travel extensive distances to get to the prison. Although exonerees explained that they discouraged visitation to protect their mothers, this loss of connection with their families could have led to a reduction in social support and decreased well-being for both them and their mothers.

Although mothers typically visited as often as possible, letter writing, and phone calls were also crucial when it came to maintaining contact. Unfortunately, the costs of phone calls usually kept exonerees' mothers from contacting their child as much as they would have liked. High costs of prison phone calls have been identified in previous research (Hannem, 2003; Jackson, 2007). Prisoners are a "captive market", meaning they are unable to use alternatives or opt out of using whatever provider the prison uses for their collect calls. Therefore, fees associated with phone calls in prison are not susceptible to pressures of competition (Hannem, 2003). Although the companies that provide these telephone services are quite aware of the financial burden that these prison phone calls put on the families, they have no incentive to lower costs or come up with more affordable, alternative methods for verbal communication (Jackson, 2007). By driving up the costs of communication, these companies are harming the social support

networks for incarcerated individuals and negatively impact families of incarcerated individuals financially and likely psychologically. In this study, exonerees and their mothers both discussed the financially prohibitive nature of being able to communicate regularly via phone.

Support Persons for the Support Person

All the mothers I interviewed described just how vital it was to have social support from individuals outside of the exoneree. Each of the mothers had at least one primary support person who was a close relative they could lean on to help them handle the psychological burden the wrongful conviction caused and who became the right-hand man/woman of these mothers in many aspects. Sometimes, these support people also provided financial support. In all cases, the support included joining the mothers' efforts to prove their child's innocence. Other research shows that positive social support is particularly beneficial for children of incarcerated parents (Luther, 2015). Similarly, mothers in this study reported that social support was beneficial for them.

Despite having these primary support persons, mothers often felt isolated from their communities and unsupported by some close loved ones. Two of the four mothers explained that their romantic partners had been unsupportive of their fight for their child's innocence. In both cases, these relationships ended, which was at least partly due to this lack of support. Other mothers and secondary exonerees described how they did not feel comfortable communicating with extended family members about the case or conviction, because some harbored suspicions that the exoneree was guilty. That is, many explained that members of their family, their friends, or their co-workers believed their child was guilty, which led to them feeling isolated.

Beyond these closer individuals, many families experienced social isolation and stigmatization from the community at large. Mothers' experiences with stigmatization and isolation were consistent with the research on "family blaming," which suggests that social stigmatization extends beyond the incarcerated individual when family members become targets of societal disapproval (Westervelt & Cook, 2012; Peters & Corrado, 2013; Condry, 2010). Similar to the current study, Jenkins (2013) also found that stigmatization caused neighbors, co-workers, friends, and family to distance themselves from secondary exonerees. In some cases, stigma was so troublesome that it resulted in loved ones quitting their jobs or relocating entirely (Jenkins, 2013). Similarly, in this study, mothers reported quitting their jobs, avoiding public places, and relocating.

I found that exonerees and their mothers provided one another with cyclical support, such that they uplifted and encouraged one another throughout the process. This was also discussed in Westervelt & Cook's (2012) book, *Life After Death Row*, in which the authors described how each exoneree had one or two support persons who were there with them completely. Westervelt & Cook (2012) explained that this cyclical social support was one of the major factors that helped exonerees adjust following their release from prison. They stated that "the value of this support is in the connections they foster for exonerees, connections that help to reduce their isolations and feelings of detachment... these relationships increase their level of investment in others and expose them to feelings of love and acceptance that were taken from them..." (p. 162). This idea of cyclical support and connection between exonerees and loved ones is reflected in my findings, particularly regarding the relationships between exonerees and their supportive mothers.

Dealing with Loss of Support Persons During Incarceration

Ten exoneree participants' mothers or mother figures died while they were still incarcerated, and three mothers became severely ill prior to their release. Exoneree participants who went through these experiences became quite emotional when discussing the death of their mother who they described as their most vigorous supporter. Many explained that they felt as though they were unable to properly grieve while they were still incarcerated. Therefore, they experienced additional grieving following their release. This inability to grieve the death of a loved one while in prison is supported by literature suggesting a person's "ability to cope is compromised by their incarceration" (Hunt, 2021, p. 18). According to Hunt (2021), the prison environment itself obstructs the grieving process. Hunt described prisoners who lost a loved one as "doubly bereaved," because they were grieving the loss of a loved one at the same time they were grieving the loss of their own self. That is, incarceration and removing the person from society removes a person's autonomy, personal security, purposeful activity, livelihood, civil rights, dignity, and reputation, among other things. Thus, incarcerated individuals are grieving both the loss of their previous selves and the loss of their loved one (Hunt, 2021).

According to Worden (2018), a bereavement expert, there are certain tasks of mourning that must take place such that an individual can properly grieve the death of a loved one. Worden's tasks of mourning require the bereaved individual to do the following: 1) to accept the reality of the loss, 2) to work through the pain of grief, 3) to adjust to a world without the deceased, and 4) to emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life. Exonerees reported that they had not been able to truly accept the

reality of the loss or adjust to a world without the deceased while incarcerated. The prison environment is a total institution separate from the rest of the world - as a result, exonerees were only able to adjust to the world without the deceased after they were released. This caused them to experience the grieving process again upon release while simultaneously celebrating their release. Based on exoneree interviews, this process may have been particularly challenging for those who lost their mothers before their release and exoneration. For these exonerees, the individual who had been supporting them the most throughout their incarceration was unable to see them emerge victorious and could not celebrate with them as they reclaimed their innocence.

Mental Health Consequences for Secondary Exonerees

The emotional and mental impact of the wrongful conviction was particularly devastating for the mothers I interviewed who reported suffering from depression, anxiety, and PTSD. This made the day-to-day lives of these mothers more challenging. Similarly, Green et al. (2006) found that having an incarcerated adult son increased levels of psychological distress among a group of 615 African American mothers due to the financial burden and additional responsibilities of caring for grandchildren. If mothers of rightfully convicted individuals experience reduced psychological well-being, one might expect the negative impacts on mothers of wrongfully convicted persons to be even greater, because the wrongful conviction creates an additional layer of trauma. Other research has also identified trauma and negative mental health impacts for secondary exonerees (Jenkins, 2013; Jeudy, 2019; Grounds, 2004). In the current study, mothers and secondary exonerees similarly reported reduced psychological well-being, consistent with this past work.

In the interviews, mothers also revealed the coping mechanisms they used to deal with the psychological trauma and consequences. The primary way mothers coped with their child's wrongful conviction was through their faith in God and belief that the wrongful conviction happened for a reason. Additionally, some of the mothers sought out talk therapy. Others relied on members of the wider Innocence Network community for support. In addition to leaning on others for support, the mothers found some solace in advocating for the innocent and criminal justice reform generally. Some explained that they wanted to do more for the wrongful conviction community and that this was the work they felt most comfortable doing. This aligns with Jenkins' (2013) discovery that secondary exonerees found comfort and community in justice related advocacy.

All of these coping mechanisms had positive impacts on these mothers' well-being. Despite these coping mechanisms, none of the mothers was fully able to meet her mental health needs. The mothers also reported having difficulties prioritizing their own mental health while their child was still incarcerated.

Mothers Experiences Upon Their Child's Release

Immediately following the release of their exoneree child, mothers reported feeling ecstatic and grateful. However, they also reported being concerned about the lasting psychological impact the wrongful conviction would have on them and their children. The adjustment to a new family dynamic following the exoneration was challenging for both the exonerees and their mothers.

All the mothers I interviewed reported growing closer to their exonerated child over the course of their experience with wrongful conviction. This finding was somewhat counter to the existing research, which tends to indicate relationship breakdowns

between primary and secondary exonerees and focuses on the distance between exonerees and secondary exonerees following their release (Brooks & Greenberg, 2020; Grounds, 2004). The Brooks and Greenberg (2020) study was a systematic review that examined the psychological impact of being wrongfully accused. Though this work was extremely informative, the studies in the review that included evidence from secondary exonerees primarily gathered information from romantic partners, not mothers. Brooks and Greenberg found evidence that exonerees tended to isolate and shut down communication following their release. Although the mothers in my study might have noticed the mental and emotional issues of their child post-release, three of them reported solely positive experiences after being reunited with their child. However, none of these mothers were living with the exoneree at the time of our interview. It is likely that romantic partners who lived with exonerees (Brooks & Greenberg, 2020) were more negatively affected by exonerees' mental and emotional issues like PTSD because they were living with the exoneree and seeing them at their worst. This should be examined more thoroughly in future research.

For the most part, exonerees' mothers were incredibly important to them and their sense of well-being throughout the course of their incarceration. In the above sections, I focused on the experiences of these mothers and the relationship between exonerees and their mothers. I explored mothers' initial reactions, sacrifices made by the mothers, the ways of maintaining contact, social support or lack thereof, and the psychological impact on mothers among other things. My findings are consistent with most previous research and expand on that body of literature. In the next section, I turn

my focus the other primary theme from my dissertation, age stagnation, I will summarize the findings from the current study and connect these findings to existing research.

Age Stagnation

I coined the term “age stagnation” or “incarceration-induced age stagnation” to describe the perception of disconnect between psychological age and physical age exoneree participants reported. Specifically, age stagnation can be understood as a developmental stunting or delay in one’s perception or feeling of their own age that is caused by living in a total institution for an extended number of years. Formerly incarcerated participants explained that they felt “frozen in time”. Once they were released, the exonerees reported feeling as though they were the same age they had been at the initial time of their incarceration. Using the life course perspective, Hutchison (2011) explains that “psychological age” can refer to both “the capacities that people have and the skills they use to adapt to changing biological and environmental demands” and “how old people perceive themselves to be.” The latter definition is also referred to as “subjective age” or “age identity” (p. 1589). Based on this definition, I suggest “subjective age” or “age identity” is what exonerees were referring to when they described how they perceived their own age as being the same as when they were first incarcerated.

This phenomenon has been identified in earlier exoneree research as well. In a 2004 qualitative study, Grounds found that all 18 research subjects reported feeling “psychologically the age they had been on entry to prison, [at the time of their release]” (p. 172). In addition, research on former prisoners has similarly identified the phenomenon I refer to as age stagnation (Zamble, 1992; Zamble & Proporino, 1990).

Based on my interviews, age stagnation may at least be in part due to exonerees' lack of experience with the outside world combined with the rigidity of the prison environment. Exonerees compared their psychological age with similarly physically aged peers and highlighted gaps in their emotional, social, and mental maturity levels. The exoneree participants felt that they missed typical social and developmental milestones, like going to college, getting married, or starting a family and raising children, while being incarcerated.

What Does Research Say About Why Age Stagnation May Occur?

Research on brain development may help elucidate how the prison environment may impact perceptions of psychological age (Steinburg, 2005; Scott et al., 2018). Fourteen of the exonerees in the current study went into prison while their brains, particularly their prefrontal cortexes, were not yet fully developed. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that controls judgment, decision making, emotional and behavioral regulation, and risk and reward perception; it does not fully develop until the mid-twenties (Steinburg, 2005).

To understand why the lack of experience during the late teenage years and early adulthood are so problematic for exonerees' psychological and emotional development, it is important to understand the role social context plays in brain development and maturation. Scott et al. (2018) found that "[an] individual's interaction with [their] social context during adolescence can determine whether he or she accomplishes developmental tasks essential to successful maturation. For adolescents in the justice system, correctional facilities and programs constitute this social context and can have a critical impact on whether they successfully navigate the transition to productive adulthood" (p. 56). Essentially, the prison environment is such that it takes

autonomy and critical decision-making away from inmates. The lack of autonomy and ability to make decisions are likely to negatively impact a prisoner's psychological maturity (Scott et al., 2018). The aforementioned research paper specifically discusses the impact on juveniles. However, since the brain is not fully developed until an individual is approximately 25 years old, it is reasonable to believe that exonerees who were incarcerated prior to this age may be similarly impacted.

Other research shows that while incarcerated, prisoners become more involved in structured routines while withdrawing emotionally and socially (Zamble, 1992). While this might be beneficial for protecting themselves in a prison environment, the lack of being in touch with their emotions and their inexperience with forming and maintaining social relationships is likely detrimental to their ability to socialize and form new relationships upon their release. Though the current participants often involved themselves in mentorship or educational activities, their experiences were still marked by social and emotional withdrawal. They reported being unable to show emotion, especially weakness, or socialize in the way they would if they had not been incarcerated.

In their examination of inmates during incarceration, Zamble and Proporino (1990) summarized that "what happens during imprisonment [is like] a 'behavioral deep freeze' in which a person's set of outside world behaviors are stored until release" (p. 62). As a result, former prisoners may face a number of difficulties when readjusting to the outside world following their release. The world as they knew it is now gone, and they are thrown back into it without any real guidance on how to behave or connect with others. My results support and extend these previous findings. Exonerees in the current

study described their incarceration as like “being frozen in time.” Furthermore, the exoneree participants in the current study struggled to adjust to the outside world upon their release, specifically when it came to relating to peers or potential romantic partners. Their time in prison made it more difficult for them to socialize with the average person on the outside.

Other Relevant Research

Further giving context to the idea of age stagnation, Lambie and Randell (2013) reported that while juvenile “incarceration is intended to support the major task of adolescent development of achieving both social autonomy and social integration,” it actually “inhibits opportunities for prosocial development by restricting autonomy” (Lambie & Randell, 2013, p. 450). Research exists on the impact incarceration has on psychosocial development of adolescent maturity. Specifically, Dmitrieva et al. (2012) examined how incarceration during adolescence affected psychosocial maturity (e.g., temperance, perspective, & responsibility). Their goal was to determine if this development was like development in a normative context or if this atypical context had a negative impact on maturity. A 7-year longitudinal study showed that both secure (more incarceration focused) and residential (more rehabilitation focused) facilities negatively impacted development of psychosocial maturity in the short term, but these impacts might not last beyond the time an individual is released. Dmitrieva et al. (2012) also discovered that incarceration reduced opportunities for prosocial development while restricting autonomy, which made it more difficult for juveniles to integrate and have opportunities for social interaction (Dmitrieva et al., 2012; Lambie & Randell, 2013). It seems that the deprivation of normative development leads to lower psychosocial maturity development, rather than the specific treatment or punishment

received in either incarceration context. However, more research might illuminate the negative impact of facilities on adolescent and young adult development, particularly if examined over longer periods of time to analyze long-term effects for lengthier prison sentences.

Given the population of exonerees in the current study, one might expect long-term effects of incarceration on psychosocial maturity, given that these exonerees spent much longer periods of time incarcerated than those in the Dmitrieva et al. (2012) study. Furthermore, all exonerees served time in adult prisons regardless of age at conviction. Studies show that incarcerating juveniles in adult facilities may be inappropriate due to their low levels of developmental maturity (Steinberg et al., 2009; Lambie & Randell, 2013) and that transferring youths to adult court leads to heightened levels of recidivism (Lanza-Kaduce et al., 2005).

Behaviors Associated with Age Stagnation

Exoneree participants experiencing age stagnation reported often behaving as if they were significantly younger than they truly were. Behaviors included engaging in risky activities (i.e., drinking, partying, or risky sexual activities), being more childlike and enjoying activities typical of teenagers or young adults (i.e., attending amusement parks, going trick-or-treating), and pursuing life experiences more typical of earlier stages of life, such as attending college at less traditional ages. Exonerees tended not to take things for granted as they perceived the average adult might. However, sometimes engaging in certain activities led to being judged by others. Secondary exonerees often reported that exonerees were less mature or behaved as if they were the age they were at the time of their arrest.

Age Stagnation and Social Relationships

Although the general concept of being “frozen in time” has been identified by previous research on exonerees, none of this research examined how age stagnation expresses itself in terms of relating to peers and developing romantic relationships. Most of the previous research has examined this phenomenon from the exonerees’ point of view. This research examined age stagnation from both the exoneree and loved ones’ perspectives. One of the goals of this analysis was to examine the way age stagnation impacted exonerees’ social relationships – romantic, parental, and platonic. I focused on peer and romantic relationships in my analyses, because exonerees and loved ones reported that these relationships were often influenced by age stagnation.

Age stagnation left exonerees struggling to relate to similarly aged peers and, conversely, left exonerees’ children sometimes feeling as if their parent was more like a peer than a parent. It warped exonerees’ sense of time and maturity level when compared to the rest of the world. Sixteen exonerees reported having extreme difficulties in meeting new peers or potential romantic partners, because they felt they could not relate to them appropriately. They reported that this was mostly due to their lack of experience in the outside world, including lack of experience with romantic relationships, college and partying, or building families and getting married. By the time exonerees had been released, most of their peers had experienced all these aforementioned events and milestones while the exonerees were incarcerated. Furthermore, the socio-cultural context of the dating world and the world in general had changed. This change left some exonerees feeling stressed and confused about their place in it.

Age stagnation and romantic relationships

Exonerees who experienced age stagnation described that they often dated individuals who were not considered “age appropriate” for them by society writ large. These romantic partners were sometimes decades younger than the exoneree. Exonerees generally felt that they could better relate to younger romantic partners and felt more attracted to them (although there were some exceptions), and they described having difficulty relating to similarly aged peers or potential mates who had no experience with incarceration.

Further, this experience of difficulty in relating to potential romantic partners led some exonerees to give up on romance or their goals of having children. For these exonerees, they often felt they had missed their opportunity to get married or have children because most of those who they considered potential mates were much further along in their lives and did not have the patience to date or marry someone so inexperienced. Furthermore, they often felt uncomfortable pursuing potential mates in social situations more generally.

Exonerees who dated or married individuals who were closer in age to themselves were often perceived as immature for their age by their romantic partners. This was an additional challenge for some of the romantic partners I interviewed as they had to attempt to adapt to living with someone who behaved as if they were decades younger than they truly were. In a few cases, romantic partners endured extremely stressful situations, such as the exoneree cheating or partying constantly. They described the exoneree as attempting to make up for lost time and behaving like a teenager or young adult, but at the same time expressed stress over the behavior.

Similar to what I observed in this study, previous research indicated that romantic partners and other loved ones of exonerees may feel disconnected from their exonerated partner upon their return home (Gounds, 2004; Brooks & Greenberg, 2020) and that exonerees have trouble relating to others socially. That research showed that exonerees tended to be withdrawn, isolated, and uncommunicative (Gounds, 2004; Brooks & Greenberg, 2020). I do not believe that the exonerees in my study were as uncommunicative or withdrawn and those in this previous research, but the exonerees did describe feeling isolated from peers and often avoided socializing. It is possible that some of this behavior reported in previous research stems from exonerees feeling unable to relate and connect to their peers. Future research could attempt to more specifically examine how age stagnation impacts the psychological well-being of exonerees and their relationship quality with peers, romantic partners, and other close loved ones (e.g., children and parents).

Peer relationships and the Innocence Network

Exoneree participants emphasized how important and helpful the Innocence Network has been for their personal development post-release. Specifically, exoneree participants described that they often felt that fellow exonerees were the only other people who could fully understand them. DeShay (2021) recently conducted a study interviewing exonerees about what advice they would give to those who were recently exonerated. One of the top four pieces of advice provided by the exonerees interviewed in this study was to connect with other exonerees to feel less alone, feel understood, and be able to truly trust someone else. Specifically, an exoneree in this study stated:

You prefer to be around somebody that's done been down there where you done been. He had to go through what you had to go through. Your

family member went through a different thing because they was out here, but still they was going through you bein' locked up. But if somebody gettin' outta prison, they want to speak to somebody that's done got out and made it. Been out for a while and everything (p. 6).

Similar to the exoneree in the above study, primary exoneree participants in the current study also described feeling most comfortable around groups of other exonerees and advocates. They said that the Innocence Network Conferences felt like "home." This finding is consistent with research from Jenkins (2013), indicating that exonerees were able to improve their sense of self by working with other exonerees to reform the flawed justice system. In some ways, the wrongful conviction will always be with exonerees and influence who they are as a person. Many exonerees have chosen to use their innocence to advocate with others to improve the system.

Not All Exonerees Experienced Age Stagnation

Based on my interviews, exonerees who were incarcerated initially in their thirties or who were only incarcerated for less than 5 years tended to experience less severe symptoms of age stagnation. Exonorees who were older at the time of their arrest and conviction did not report experiencing as much emotional or psychological immaturity compared to those who were incarcerated in their late teens or early twenties. This is consistent with the prefrontal cortex research discussed earlier in this section in that those who were older upon initial incarceration already went through the stages of development associated with prefrontal cortex development (Steinburg, 2005; Scott et al., 2018).

Further, the three exonerees who were wrongfully convicted later in life were able to experience things that the younger ones could not, such as getting married, having children, attending college, and traveling. Despite these experiences, these exonerees

still experienced a life course disruption and as such, they self-identified as younger than they truly were. The exoneree who was only incarcerated for four years did not mention any experiences with age stagnation. To be fair, we only had a short time for an interview compared to the time I spent with the other participants, so I was not able to ask many questions about age stagnation. However, it is reasonable to assume that due to her shorter sentence, she did not have have the same experience in terms of stunted development.

Though more research is needed to fully understand the concept of age stagnation, the results of the current study identified a pattern of exonerees feeling frozen in time and developmentally stunted. I discussed the existing literature on this phenomenon and how the current project identified socialization and relationship challenges that relate to age stagnation. In the upcoming sections, I discuss the implications of this study, recommendations for future research, and limitations of the present study.

Policy Implications

Family relationships are vital when examining the ways in which crime, punishment, imprisonment, or any criminal justice system intervention impacts a family (Rodriguez, 2016) and as such, family systems and individual relationships should be included when determining how best to serve individuals ensnared in the justice system. This study sheds light on the difficulty for families, particularly mothers, in having a wrongfully incarcerated loved one – experiences that likely generalize to all those who are incarcerated. These experiences demonstrate why it is important to invest in policies that take the pressure and suffering off the secondary victims of incarceration. Whether the incarcerated person is innocent or guilty, punishing family members is a

collateral consequence that is unfair, unnecessary, and far reaching. As such, policy should consider how we can reduce negative outcomes on family members of incarcerated individuals. This might include improving their visitation experiences, providing families with financial subsidies to aid in the increased costs of incarceration and/or appeals, and incarcerating people close to home or offering temporary housing close to the prison for families of incarcerated loved ones.

Mental Health Supportive Services

Additionally, this approach should include systematic and widely available mental health care options for incarcerated individuals and the loved ones of incarcerated individuals. This may include support groups, individual therapy, or group therapy options that are low-cost, available on a sliding scale, or free. Further, mental health support should extend beyond one's prison sentence to include post-release care. As a society, we would all benefit from having additional supportive services and aid for incarcerated individuals and their families, regardless of the incarcerated person's guilt or innocence.

Support Groups for Primary and Secondary Exonerees

One of the primary needs identified by this study is the need for supportive programs that provide therapy, mentorship, and other resources for not only the exonerees but their impacted loved ones as well. Mothers reported benefitting from connecting with support people, loved ones reported benefitting from connecting with people in similar situations, and exonerees reported benefitting from connecting with each other. Thus, although the mothers included in this study emphasized how they would love to be able to connect with other loved ones of wrongfully convicted people in

the form of support groups or mentorship programs, almost all of them maintained that they were unaware of such programs.

A few romantic partners were involved in initiating and maintaining a support group made up of partners of wrongfully convicted persons. Those involved reported the positive benefits and social support they received from speaking with other women like them. Creating more support networks that are specifically tailored towards the needs of secondary exonerees, such as the one organically started by a secondary exoneree in this study, could be extremely beneficial for secondary exonerees' healing. Furthermore, these types of support networks could provide mentorship to loved ones of wrongfully convicted persons who are still incarcerated.

Additionally, adjusting to living with the exoneree post-conviction can be challenging, especially for children and romantic partners of exonerees. As such, it is vital that there is support available to all individuals and groups involved to provide secondary exonerees with helpful strategies for adjusting following the exoneration. Almost all the loved ones I interviewed stated that they would love to be of service to those who are currently dealing with the wrongful incarceration of their loved one. Indeed, advocating for innocent individuals helped many secondary exonerees find meaning and purpose in their lives. Moreover, secondary exonerees are the perfect persons to provide mentorship and support to other people who go through a similar traumatic experience. These programs could facilitate healing among the secondary exonerees and give secondary exonerees (and exonerees) a purpose in sharing their experiences and tips for making it through. For those struggling to find their purpose

and heal from the trauma they endured, this could be a life-changing experience and perfect outlet for them.

Group Therapy

Beyond individual therapy for primary and secondary exonerees, policies could develop group therapy and programs that allow exonerees and their close family members to come together to discuss their experiences, lives, concerns, and adjustments to living together post-release. When it comes to problems within relationships or adjusting socially, being able to come together as a unit and get help might be particularly useful. It is vital that group therapy be offered post-conviction for exonerees and their families, but it may also be useful for incarcerated persons and their families throughout their incarceration. Structural family therapy (SFT) or other types of group therapy could be offered during and after incarceration for prisoners and their families.

Although there is limited research on using structural family therapy (SFT) for incarcerated populations, research shows that having an incarcerated family member has a negative impact on loved ones living outside prison within the larger family system (Datchi et al., 2016). SFT has been recommended as a therapeutic model uniquely suited for incarcerated populations and their families. Specifically, it “defines a problem in terms of family structures, boundaries, hierarchies, roles, rules, and patterns of interactions” (Tadros & Finney, 2018, p. 253). This type of therapy could be utilized by incarcerated individuals and their loved ones while the incarcerated individual is still serving their sentence to improve family dynamics and increase positive outcomes for all involved (Tadros & Ogden, 2020).

Research could also examine how this type of therapy could be used to help repair family systems following an exoneree's return home and reentry into the world. Specifically, SFT is used to help facilitate creation of positive, flexible boundaries while decreasing dysfunctional relationships (p. 254). Furthermore, SFT focuses on the future, rather than the past, in helping a family unit adjust to new roles and boundaries (Tadros & Finney, 2018). This could be particularly useful when considering the shifting of roles that occur when an incarcerated individual returns home and how all those impacted by a wrongful conviction likely need to heal the trauma they experienced while learning to move forward in their disrupted life trajectory.

Exonerees expressed that connecting with others in similar circumstances helped them cope. Further formalizing these programs could be a path to greater recovery and would make such programs systematically available to all exonerees rather than being dependent on the individual exoneree's ability to make connections and foster such community. Such programs could ease the pressure that comes with adjusting to life outside of prison, especially for romantic partners and children.

Currently, at least one non-profit organization exists that does this type of work. *Healing Justice* is a nonprofit organization that focuses on helping crime victims, exonerees, and the families of both groups heal from trauma and injustices they have faced (Healing Justice, 2019). This organization organizes retreats that involve peer-support, mentorship, and social worker led programming that is focused on the larger goal of restorative justice. The program is unique in that it allows families of exonerees to join them and speak openly about their trauma and experiences with wrongful conviction and the justice system. Some of the exoneree participants in the present

study described how vital *Healing Justice* retreats were for them, because they focused on healing wholistically and involved the participation of their loved ones. Expanding such programs would make access to these benefits more readily available for all those impacted by wrongful conviction.

Financial Help for Exonerees and Secondary Exonerees

Examining all of the costs and financial sacrifices secondary exonerees made to support their exonerees begs the question of whether there should be compensation statutes that allow families to be reimbursed for their own sacrifices and suffering. Although they were not wrongfully incarcerated themselves, secondary exonerees faced immense financial burdens and made many financial and personal sacrifices to support the exoneree. As such, it would seem reasonable that they should also be compensated for this suffering and the costs they incurred. Future research or policy analysis could examine how this might be done in an effective manner.

Support for Feelings of Age Stagnation

Beyond the previously identified mental health issues exonerees and ex-prisoners report, participants reported age stagnation, or a feeling of disconnect between exonerees' physical age and their perceived psychological age. Future research could develop programs that allow prisoners to develop some of the social and emotional skills they seem to be lacking upon their release. That is, if we know that prisoners feel age stagnation, and this is at least in part caused by the total institution of prison during one's formative years, it seems logical to develop programs that would allow prisoners to develop in developmentally appropriate ways. This could be applied to anyone who is incarcerated, not just wrongfully convicted.

For example, prisons could be setup to mimic the outside world and allow prisoners to live with more dignity and socialization experience that resembles the outside world. We may consider altering prisonization to a model that is more closely aligned with that of Danish countries. Specifically, these “open prisons” allow prisoners to come and go, setting up their prison cells more like dorm rooms and minimizing security features we typically seen in American institutions. They allow prisoners to leave the facility to attend school and socialize while requiring they return at curfew. This model of prisonization treats prisoners with more dignity and responsibility, while prioritizing rehabilitation (Foote, 2012).

Even if we do not go as far as an “open prison” model, expanding access to visitation (e.g., through improved visitation policies and less costly phone calls and mail service), longer weekend visits, and conjugal visitation might improve prisoner’s socialization skills and experiences and decrease age stagnation. Similarly, policies should allow for more frequent and affordable communications via phone calls or visitations. Research shows that social support and communication between incarcerated individuals and supportive loved ones leads to positive outcomes (Brunton-Smith & McCarthy, 2017; Liu, Pickett, & Baker, 2016; Barrick, Lattimore, & Visher, 2014). The present study confirmed the positive outcomes associated with visitation and phone calls. As a society, if we genuinely want to focus on improving the well-being of those impacted by incarceration and reducing recidivism, we should strive to make visits and calls more affordable and available. This might include ensuring prisoners are housed within a certain distance from their families. Being able to have greater communication and access to their loved ones might also reduce levels of age

stagnation among prisoners, because exonerees expressed that their feelings of age stagnation were partly caused by an inability to form age-appropriate social relationships. Thus, future research should study policies to increase visitation and the effects of these policies on age stagnation.

Expanding Support for the Innocence Community Broadly

This study also highlighted just how important the innocence community is to both primary and secondary exonerees. Expanding the innocence network would benefit individuals who are currently wrongfully incarcerated and those who have been released. Further, we should ensure that all exonerees and their families, regardless of type of exoneration, can afford to go to the annual Innocence Network Conference and other similar events. Currently, exonerees are only admitted for free if their case was or is currently handled by an affiliated Innocence Organization. Some of the exonerees in my study were left out of these types of events, and a couple of them described animosity towards the Innocence Project because of this. This is something that should be addressed to make sure that all wrongfully convicted persons and secondary exonerees feel connected to the innocence community and are able to access the same resources.

Unique Nature of Discussing Criminal Legal Reform Using Exoneree Experiences

Issues of innocence and wrongful conviction provide a unique perspective in broader discussions of criminal legal reform. When it comes to considerations of prisoner rights, it is much easier to argue that an innocent person in prison should be treated with dignity, humility, and respect than it is to argue in favor of an individual who committed heinous offenses being afforded similar rights. That is, people might be more willing to support the prison reforms and policy recommendations only when considering

how these policies would impact innocent individuals. However, as soon as the conversation shifts to actual perpetrators, their support may diminish. Although people might not support prison reforms for true perpetrators, part of the paradox here is that exonerated individuals are considered the same as actually guilty individuals prior to exoneration. That is, it is impossible to distinguish between the rightfully and wrongfully convicted prior to exoneration. Thus, sharing the negative correctional and judicial experiences exonerees have may open some individuals' minds to change, because it forces them to consider individuals within the prison system as human beings who, in at least some cases, may be completely innocent.

So why should we broadly reform the correctional system to incorporate the policies I have suggested when we cannot be certain if those inside prison are innocent or guilty? First, the fact that any one prisoner may be innocent is reason enough to treat prisoners with more dignity and thus implement the proposed changes. However, if that argument is not sufficient due to our more punitive societal stance on criminal justice, it may be useful to consider the broader negative impact of incarceration on the families and loved ones of prisoners, particularly their children. Programs exist that can benefit both innocent family members and reduce recidivism (which one might expect to be the ultimate goal of punishment in society). According to Dmitrieva et al. (2012) "programs that utilize a family like setting, do not sever inmates' ties to family and community, and provide professional counseling are more successful at keeping recidivism low" (p. 1074). Given this research and the current study's findings on how incarceration impacts families, it seems policies that prioritize the mental and social wellness of the families of incarcerated persons could lead to broader societal improvements, including

lower levels of crime. By considering these collaterally damaged persons (i.e., families of incarcerated persons) and involving them in the rehabilitation and recovery of prisoners, we can help sustain important social relationships and prevent unnecessary harms.

Concerns Regarding Pushback on Policy Reform for Exonerees and Rightfully Incarcerated Persons

Unfortunately, there still seems to be issues gaining public support to provide the necessary, or even basic, social services for exonerees who have been proven innocent. Current research suggests exonerees are often stigmatized (Westervelt & Cook, 2012) and viewed more negatively than parolees (Thompson et al., 2012). This stigma impacts citizens' willingness to support reintegrative services for exonerees (Clow & Leach, 2015; Scherr, Normile, & Putney, 2018).

To explore why exonerees tend to experience stigma and a lack of support for reintegration services, Scherr, Normile, & Putney (2018) compared public perceptions of exoneree guilt and mental health by manipulating whether the wrongful conviction resulted from a false confession or eyewitness misidentification. After making determinations about perceived guilt and mental health, participants were asked to indicate their willingness to support reintegration services, such as career counseling, job training, and psychological counseling. Results of the study indicated that when participants believed an exonerees' wrongful conviction was the result of a false confession, they perceived the exoneree as less intelligent and more likely to be mentally ill compared to if the wrongful conviction was the result of an eyewitness misidentification. These views of mental health and intelligence led participants to doubt exonerees' innocence and thus, be less willing to support reintegration services.

These findings provide evidence that our education systems need to inform the general public better on criminal justice reform issues and issues of wrongful conviction, particularly when it comes to false confessions and how and why they occur. As stated by Scherr et al. (2018), reintegrative services should be guaranteed to exonerees automatically. This ensures that public biases against certain types of exonerees does not impact an exoneree's ability to receive services. Not only can reintegrative services improve mental health and career outcomes of exonerees, but they are also likely to reduce crime (Shlosberg, Mandery, West, & Callaghan, 2014). Changing laws to guarantee reintegrative programming for exonerees may be one way to ensure exonerees receive support in the short term.

Study Limitations

Sample Size

This study had several limitations. First, a primary limitation of the current study was the limited sample size, particularly related to the specific relationships between secondary exonerees and their exonerated loved one. Specifically, I interviewed four mothers of exoneree participants who were able to provide details on their first-hand experience with having wrongfully convicted children – this is a small sample even though the interviews themselves generated large amounts of data. Despite using interview data from exonerees and other secondary exonerees to fill in the gaps regarding relationships between mothers and their exoneree children, my goal is to interview more mothers over the course of the next year to create a larger sample size from which to gather information, draw conclusions, and further test the validity of the findings reported here.

Additionally, I interviewed just two children and five romantic partners of exoneree participants. Hence, sections of the dissertation in which I discussed romantic partners' or childrens' perceptions on the exonerees' age stagnation could be improved by having a larger number of romantic partners and children of exonerees included in the study.

Despite this small sample size, the current study provided an immense amount of data from which to gather information. As mentioned in the method section, interviews lasted 2.25 hours on average, with each individual person providing anywhere from 45 minutes to 14 hours of interview data. However, it is important that I expand my search to ensure I have at more participants that fit into each relationship category (e.g., mothers, romantic partners, children).

Participant Selection and Recruitment

A second limitation of the study was the way in which participants were selected and recruited. Participants were recruited in one of two ways: 1) I knew them personally as a result of meeting them at the Innocence Conference or connecting over social media from shared advocacy experiences, or 2) they were passively recruited through snowball sampling at the recommendation of another participant. Although this type of sampling was useful in gathering a sufficient number of participants without having to move onto other potential recruitment methods, it also meant that those who participated were more likely to be involved in wrongful conviction advocacy work. At the very least, participants were likely more connected to others in the Innocence Network community as a whole than others who were not sampled through this method.

Although this is not necessarily a problem for interpreting these data, it may mean I missed an opportunity to interview exonerees who are less involved in advocacy

work or less connected with other exonerees following their release from their wrongful imprisonment. In spite of this limitation, I secured a relatively representative sample in terms of gender, age, and race. As I move forward with the study, I plan to utilize other recruitment methods to expand the sample. Doing so will allow me to reach more exonerees who might have had experiences that differed from those included in the study.

Time Limitations

A third limitation was the timeline for data collection, transcription, and analysis. Both transcription and interviews took a much longer time than initially anticipated. As such, I was unable to proofread and code all of the interviews more than once prior to writing the dissertation. Additionally, I was unable to complete interviews with two other participants due to their busy schedules and the lack of time I had available to interview them and transcribe their interviews. Prior to publishing the dissertation data in a book or journal articles, all transcripts will be proofread two times and coded for the themes by two independent research assistants. The limited amount of time and resources was the primary reason I was unable to reach the goal of 50-60 total research participants. However, I nearly reached the goal of 20 exoneree interviews with the 19 interviews that were included in the analysis. Together with the 16 secondary exoneree interviews, the present study analyzed a total of 35 interviews.

Directions for Future Research

As mentioned above, in the future, I plan to recruit and interview a greater number of individuals from each relationship group, including mothers, romantic partners, and children. Doing so will provide greater insight into the relationships explored in this dissertation and into other initial themes I saw in the data. It was very

difficult to narrow down my dissertation to focus on two themes, despite how broad the themes I chose were. As I continue to work with these data, I would like to further investigate other themes that exonerees and secondary exonerees reported contributed to the quality of their relationships. Further, I plan to explore issues exonerees and secondary exonerees discussed in their interviews in greater detail. Some of these themes concern official misconduct, primary and secondary exoneree mental health, reintegration difficulties, prison environment, and a number of other topics that were covered throughout the interview process.

Finally, the qualitative data will be useful in developing quantitative research studies that include a large number of participants to test the generalizability of the themes across a broader sample. To further explore age stagnation, it would be useful to conduct a longitudinal quantitative or mixed-methods study examining how prison impacts an individual's emotional and psychological growth and development. Such a study would help elucidate differences in experiences of age stagnation based on the age a person is when they enter or exit prison, how long their sentence is, and the social exposure and experiences they have while they are incarcerated. Thus, we need both qualitative and quantitative studies to thoroughly examine the concept of age stagnation and how prisoners experience time and develop emotionally and socially and how prisonization impacts the development of juveniles and young adults' prefrontal cortex. A longitudinal study of this sort could follow incarcerated individuals from the time they were initially incarcerated, throughout their incarceration, and years after their release. In addition, we could examine whether there are ways to counteract its negative effects on exonerees and formerly incarcerated individuals.

Future research could also examine what types of social services may be most useful for primary and secondary exonerees. Intervention programs, such as support groups, group therapy with primary and secondary exonerees, or mentorship programs, could be evaluated with quantitative and qualitative analysis to determine which types of support might be most effective in improving social relationships between primary and secondary exonerees and helping all those impacted by wrongful conviction heal.

Conclusion

The current project focused extensively on the impact a wrongful conviction has on exonerees' mothers, a novel contribution to exoneree research. By identifying the experiences and needs of this group of secondary exonerees, I have expanded the literature examining the experiences of secondary exonerees and the relationships between mothers and their incarcerated children. The strength and sacrifice of the 'exoneree mommas' was impressive. The brutality of the trauma they had to go through by having their children, sometimes teens, wrongfully incarcerated by the state was all but palpable.

Beyond PTSD and other mental illnesses that arise from the trauma of a wrongful incarceration (see Grounds, 2004), exonerees may also experience age stagnation which is a developmental stunting that can impact their ability to relate to peers, parent children, and engage in healthy romantic relationships. Age stagnation highlights how depriving incarcerated individuals of age-appropriate experiences may lead to delays in maturity that could negatively impact them throughout their lives, even decades after their release from prison.

In addition to exploring age stagnation and the experiences of secondary exonerees, the current project is unique in its methodological contribution to the

literature, because it expands what we know about how incarceration impacts individuals to include primary and secondary exonerees. Although I identified some similarities between rightfully and wrongfully convicted persons when it comes to prisonization, reentry, and secondary prisonization – this study extends our knowledge to include a unique and comparatively understudied group of individuals. As I move forward in collecting and analyzing more data, I will introduce a wider range of themes related to primary and secondary exonerees relationships and the overall experience of being incarcerated and reentering society as an innocent individual.

Moving forward, researchers, advocates, and legal professionals need to understand the totality of impact a wrongful conviction has on exonerees, secondary exonerees, and the greater community. Considering the wider implications of these injustices further clarifies the importance of preventing wrongful convictions before they happen and identifying and rectifying wrongful conviction when it does happen. For those who have already been affected by wrongful conviction, it is vital that we support them in all the ways necessary – financially, emotionally, psychologically, and socially.

APPENDIX A RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hello, my name is Amanda Lewis, and I am a PhD student at the University of Florida, Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law. I am currently working on my dissertation which focuses on the experiences of exonerees and their loved ones. I think that in order to understand the consequences of wrongful conviction, it is key to speak to all of those who have been impacted directly. Because of this, my research includes conducting interviews with those who have been exonerated for crimes they did not commit as well as the loved ones (i.e., family, friends, significant others) of exonerees. I think it is important that you all be able to tell your story firsthand so that society can begin to understand the variety of impacts that result from just one wrongful conviction. This project was inspired in part by my own experience last year at the annual Innocence Network conference. I met so many incredible exonerees and I believe each person's story is worth hearing, especially those loved ones of exonerees who are often ignored in media portrayals of wrongful conviction. If you would like to hear more about the study, I would be happy to provide you with any details and information available. Would you be willing to participate in my study?

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT



IRB202000274

Department of Sociology
and Criminology & Law

P.O. Box 117330
Gainesville, Florida 32611-7330
Fax (352) 392-6568

Study Title: Beyond the Bars - Exploring the Lives of Exonerees and Their Loved Ones as they Cope with Miscarriages of Justice

Dear Participant,

Please carefully read this document before you make the decision to participate in this research study. It is important you know that your participation is voluntary and if you so choose, you may decline to participate or withdraw consent at any time. There will be no consequences if you choose to withdraw or decline to participate.

Purpose of Current Study

As a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law, Amanda Lewis (phone: [REDACTED]; email: amandalew.27@ufl.edu) will be examining the experiences of exonerees and their loved ones as part of her dissertation project. With the assistance of another student, Nicole Guillen, Amanda will be conducting interviews to learn about the first-hand experiences of those whose lives have been impacted by wrongful conviction. We are interested in the accounts of exonerees themselves, but also wish to hear from those closest to exonerees (including their significant others, parents, siblings, and adult children) to better understand how the wrongful conviction impacted their lives. Nicole Guillen will be using information gathered in the interviews for her Honor's Thesis which focuses on the availability of social services for exonerees both during incarceration and after exoneration.

The interviews we conduct are planned to be one-time, audiotaped, and are expected to last between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Interviews will primarily focus on your direct experience with wrongful conviction, how the experience has impacted your family dynamics and interpersonal relationships, and the types of social services and social support you have received over the course of your experience. You will also be provided an opportunity to use your own experience to make recommendations as to how our communities and government could be better addressing the impact of wrongful conviction. The interviews will take place with both researchers (Amanda and Nicole) with Amanda leading the interview while Nicole may ask follow-up questions and will be taking notes on her personal observations of the interaction. These observational notes will be

recorded, and some information obtained in them may ultimately be recorded in the final manuscript(s).

Your Role in Current Study

If you agree to participate, interviews will be scheduled with you based on your availability. Ideally, they will take place in person if agreed to. However, if an in-person meeting is not feasible, interviews may be conducted electronically through video software, such as Zoom or Business Skype, or over the telephone. If you cannot continue an interview, we will attempt to reschedule in order to complete the interview at your convenience. You are free to stop the interview at any time, and you do not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer. If you would prefer not to answer a question, that is absolutely okay, and we will move on from that question. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Additionally, if you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw consent and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty.

Protecting Your Confidentiality

Any information obtained in connection with this study that can identify you will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. The following steps will be taken to protect the identity of all participants:

- All information taken from the study will be coded to protect each respondents name and personal information.
- Names in the transcripts of the audiotapes will be replaced by aliases, and the questionnaires will bear only random identification numbers as identifiers.
- All audiotapes/videotapes will be erased after the researchers have transcribed them and after the transcriptions have been checked for errors.
- The study investigator(s) will safely keep all files and data collected in a secured locked cabinet in the principal investigator's office.
- Your name will not be used in any quotations or reports of our findings and I will use a pseudonym/alias of your choosing. Finally, we will omit or obscure any other identifying details related to your or your case that could be used to infer your identity.
- We will strive to ensure that any quotes or paraphrased experiences obtained during the interviews and recorded in the final manuscript are not identifiable. However, we cannot explicitly guarantee this given the nature of the experiences described.
- None of the comments and responses that you are providing during the interview will be shared with other people you are affiliated with (including our loved ones who have also agreed to participate in interviews with us).

Unless you decide otherwise, the researchers will keep all of your information confidential and you will remain anonymous. If you would prefer to have your real name disclosed in any publications that may result from information obtained in these interviews, you will be given the opportunity to indicate this below and “opt out” of having your name replaced by a pseudonym.

Please circle yes or no below to indicate your preference when it comes to confidentiality:

I give permission for Amanda Lewis and Nicole Guillen to use my name in any research publication in which my information is used.

Yes

No

Potential Risks

We do not believe that there is any risk to you from participating in this research beyond the minimal level or risk an average person might encounter in daily life. Since you will be asked to discuss details of your experience with wrongful conviction, it is possible that these discussions could elicit a negative emotional reaction from you. Despite this potential, we have no reason to believe that any emotional discomfort you might experience would be greater than that encountered in daily life and we expect that any discomfort will be short in duration, magnitude, and will be outweighed by the benefits of the research.

However, if you believe there is any reason that participating in an interview about your personal experience with wrongful conviction would be particularly distressing for you, we ask that you take this into consideration when deciding whether you would like to participate.

Potential Benefits

We expect that your study participation may be beneficial for you in a number of ways. By providing an opportunity to tell your story and have your voice heard, these interviews have the potential to increase your feelings of empowerment, improve your sense of purpose, and to give you a chance to help others who may be similarly impacted by wrongful conviction. Participants in similar studies often report feelings of catharsis that come from interview participation as well as increased feelings of well-being (Jorm et al., 2007; Labott, 2013; Newman et al., 1997; Newman, Risch, & Kassam-Adams, 2006). Ultimately, this research may be distributed within the population and as such, your words may reach a wide range of individuals. Your participation may influence the way others think about the justice system, its legitimacy, and the commonality of miscarriages of justice.

Compensation

If you are willing to participate in the interview, you will be compensated with a \$10 gift card following your interview participation. If you decline to answer some of the interview questions but answer others, you will still receive the same compensation amount.

If you have any additional questions, please contact Amanda Lewis at [REDACTED], or our supervisor, Dr. Monika Ardelts at [REDACTED]. For information about your rights as a research participant please contact the University of Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) office at (352) 392-0433.

By signing this letter, you indicate that you have decided to participate in the study (**IRB202000274**) and have read and understood the information in this consent form. You also give us permission to report your responses anonymously in the final dissertation to be submitted to supervising faculty. A second copy of this letter will be provided for your records. Your decision whether or not to participate will not, in any way, affect your relationship with the University of Florida or with the Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law at the University of Florida.

Thank you,

Amanda Lewis and Nicole Guillen

I have read the procedure described above for the study. I voluntarily agree to participate in the interview, and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant's Printed Name _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Person Obtaining Consent Printed Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

IRB Project #: **IRB202000274**

APPENDIX C
FACE SHEET

ID: _____

Total Duration of Interview: _____

Date: _____

1. Gender: _____

1. Racial or Ethnic Background

a. Asian or Pacific Islander

b. Black or African American

c. Hispanic or Latino

d. Native American

e. White

f. Two or More Races _____

g. Other _____

2. What is your current age? _____

3. Where do you live currently? _____

4. What is your current marital status?

a. Single

b. Married

c. Divorced

d. Separated

e. In a serious relationship but not married

f. Other

5. Do you have children?

a. Yes

i. What are their ages? _____

b. No

6. Are you a veteran?

a. Yes

b. No

7. Are you currently employed?

a. Yes

i. What is your job title? _____

b. No

Demographics at Initial Point of Involvement in Case

1. What was your marital status when you were first arrested?
 - a. Single
 - b. Married
 - c. Divorced
 - d. Separated
 - e. In a serious relationship but not married
 - f. Other

2. Where were you living when arrested? _____
 - a. How long had you lived there at that point? _____

3. Did you have children before you were wrongfully convicted?
 - a. Yes
 - i. What were their ages when you were arrested? _____ Convicted? _____
 - b. No

4. Were you employed when you were arrested?
 - a. Yes
 - i. What was your job title? _____
 - b. No

Details Relevant to Wrongful Conviction Case

1. Which of the following most accurately describes your exoneration?
 - a. Declared factually innocent by a government official or agency with the authority to make that declaration
 - b. Relieved of consequences of a criminal conviction by a government official or body with authority to make that decision
 - i. Which describes this official action?
 1. complete pardon
 2. acquittal of all charges factually related to crime for which you were originally convicted
 3. dismissal of charges related to crime for which you were originally convicted
 - c. Other

2. If applicable, please check all that apply. The pardon, dismissal, or acquittal was the result of evidence of innocence that:
 - a. Was not presented at the trial where you were initially convicted
 - b. If plead guilty, was not known to you, the defense attorney, and the court at the time the plea was entered

3. Have you or your family received any financial compensation for your wrongful conviction?
- a. Yes
 - i. How much? _____
 - b. No
 - i. Have you sought it out?
 - 1. Yes
 - 2. No
 - 3. Not eligible
4. Identify ANY of the below factors which contributed to your wrongful conviction.
- a. False confession
 - b. Official misconduct
 - c. Mistaken eyewitness testimony
 - d. Faulty forensic science
 - e. Jailhouse snitch/informant testimony
 - f. Inadequate defense counsel
 - g. False guilty plea
 - h. Other _____
5. What crime were you wrongfully convicted of? _____
6. What was your relationship with the original crime victim(s)? For example, were you a stranger, friend, family member, or acquaintance?
- _____
7. What was the racial or ethnic background of original crime victim(s)?
- _____
8. What was the gender of original crime victim(s) _____?
9. What was the approximate age of original crime victim?
- _____
10. Did you take your case to trial or accept a plea agreement?
- 1. Plea
 - 1. Standard plea
 - 2. Alford plea
 - 3. No contest
 - 2. Trial

11. Were there any co-defendants in your case?

1. Yes

1. What was your relationship to them?

2. No

12. What was your sentence?

13. How much of the sentence did you serve? _____

14. What year were you released? _____

15. Did an organization affiliated with the Innocence Network ever handle your case?

1. Yes

1. Which one?

2. No

1. Who did?

16. What evidence was used by you and your defense counsel to obtain your release and exonerate you?

1. DNA

2. Non-DNA

APPENDIX D INTERVIEW GUIDES

Interview Guide – Exoneree Interviews

Subtopic 1: General Overview of Case and Self-Described Experience

1. Tell me the story of your wrongful conviction.
2. Do you know how you were initially implicated in the crime?
 - a. Tell me more about this.
3. If applicable, can you describe what you remember most about the trial proceedings?
4. Describe what a typical day was like while you were incarcerated.
5. How would you describe the prison environment in general?
6. How did you cope while in prison? What helped?
7. Tell me about your release and how you were ultimately able to obtain your release.
8. What were the major barriers you faced while trying to obtain release and/or exoneration?

Subtopic 2: Initial Reactions, Family Roles, Types of Social Support

1. How did your family or loved ones react?
 - a. Walk me through that...
2. Did you play a role in your own exoneration?
 - a. If yes, please describe what you did and how you did it.
3. Were you able to consult with family or people you were close with early on when making case decisions?
 - a. If no, why not?
 - b. If yes, in which way? Can you describe what these discussions were like?
4. Describe the role(s) your loved ones had in your case.
5. Tell me about your social interactions with fellow inmates.
 - a. Relationship quality
 - b. Difficulty bonding
 - c. Did you maintain these relationships?

6. Did you develop any new relationships with individuals on the outside while incarcerated?
 - a. If so, tell me how this initiated and progressed.
 - b. What is your relationship with them now?

Possible Follow-Up Questions:

1. Were there certain resources or opportunities you were able to access that allowed you to investigate/work with lawyers, etc.? Conversely, were there any that you didn't have access to that prevented your abilities to aid the exoneration?

Subtopic 3: Family Dynamics

1. Who were your closest loved ones/relationships at the time you first became under suspicion for the crime?
 - a. Tell me about the quality of each of these relationships at that time.
 - b. What sorts of things would you do when you spent time together?
 - c. How long had you been involved in this relationship?
2. Did these relationships change throughout your experience with the justice system?
 - a. If yes, in what ways?
 - b. How do you think this occurred?
3. How much contact did you have with your loved ones throughout the wrongful conviction?
 - a. What means did you use for communication?
 - b. Describe a typical visitation.
 - c. Were there any barriers preventing you from interacting with or contacting loved ones?
 - i. Tell me more about these.
4. Describe how you managed your relationships during incarceration.
5. How do you believe your wrongful conviction impacted your family? How did it impact your relationships?
6. How did your role within the family or your relationships shift or evolve throughout the wrongful conviction process?
 - a. Tell me more about this and how this occurred

Possible Additional Follow-Up Questions:

1. If they had children,
 - a. Did your wrongful conviction change your ability to parent you children?
 - i. If yes, how so?
2. How did you handle the death of loved ones while you were incarcerated?
 - a. Were you able to grieve in the same way you would have if you were not incarcerated?
3. Was there anyone close to you who did not believe you were innocent?
 - a. Tell me more about this and how you dealt with that
 - b. If so, did this individual(s) ever change their opinion?
 - i. Have you been able to reconnect with or rebuild relationships with them?
4. What were the most difficult moments to miss while incarcerated?

Subtopic 4: Post-Release Experiences

1. Tell me about your release.
2. What did you do in the first days and weeks after you were released?
3. What are your favorite things about being on the outside?
4. What are your least favorite things about being on the outside?
5. What sorts of challenges have you faced since your release?
6. Did you have any difficulties reconnecting with loved ones after your release?
 - a. If no, why not?
 - b. If yes, how? Tell me more about this.
7. Have you faced any challenges when attempting to interact socially now that you are on the outside?
 - a. If so, tell me more about these.
 - b. How have you or are you coping with these challenges?
8. Are you able to communicate your feelings and needs to your family now that you are out?
 - a. If no, why not?
 - b. If yes, how? Tell me more about this.
 - c. What might help you improve your communication?

Subtopic 5: Social Support, Social Services, and Advocacy

1. Describe the level and types of social support, if any, you received from your family and community.
2. Outside of your family, do you feel you have peers or support groups you can talk to who understand what you've been through?
 - a. If yes, who are they and how do they help?
 - b. Is there anything you can't talk to them about? Please explain.
3. Do you have relationships with other exonerees?
 - a. If yes, tell me more about these relationships
4. Do you think that this experience has affected your mental or physical health?
 - a. How so? Tell me more about this
5. Are there any social services you can take advantage of that might help you?
6. What sorts of services do you think you could benefit from?
7. What sorts of services or social support would have been helpful?
8. What types of social support do you think could be most beneficial for exonerees?
9. What types of programs or aid do you think would be most beneficial for families of incarcerated individuals?
10. If you could give advice to anyone going through something similar, what would it be?

Subtopic 6: Positive Reflection, General Takeaways and Overall Experience

1. Has this experience changed you?
 - a. If so, in what ways?
2. What lessons do you take away from this experience?
3. Is there anything positive that you feel you've gained from this entire experience?
4. What sorts of things gave you hope?
5. Describe your thoughts and feelings about the criminal justice system.

6. Do you have any suggestions for how the criminal justice system should change?

Interview Guide – Loved One Interviews

Subtopic 1: Summary of Wrongful Conviction Case and Overall Experience and Involvement

1. Tell me the story of your loved one's wrongful conviction.
 - a. Describe how you felt and what you thought when you initially heard of [your loved one's] involvement in the criminal case.
 - b. If applicable, what was your reaction to the trial verdict (if they went to trial)?
 - c. If applicable, what was your reaction to [your loved one's] guilty plea?
 - d. Tell me the story of your loved one's release?
 - e. Describe your thoughts and emotional reactions to hearing [your loved one] was going to be coming home.
 - i. How have these feelings changed/evolved since release?
2. How has the wrongful conviction impacted you?
3. What were your initial perceptions of [your loved one's] guilt or innocence?
 - a. How did you know?
 - b. Did you ever have doubts?
4. Was there a point where you began to feel hopeless about (loved one) ever being released?
 - a. If yes, tell me more about this.
 - b. Is there anything that helped you get over this feeling of hopelessness?
 - c. What do you believe could have helped you get over this?
5. Tell me about some of the major challenges you faced while [loved one] was incarcerated. How did you cope with these challenges?
6. Can you think of any positive moments or memories you were able to share with your loved one throughout this whole process?
 - a. Tell me more about these.
7. Describe your involvement, if any, at the various stages of the process.
8. Were you able to help [loved one] get exonerated or released?
 - a. If so, what did you do?
 - b. What enabled you to do this? (i.e., resources)
9. How did you contact [your loved one] while they were incarcerated?
 - a. How often were you able to write letters, speak on the phone, etc.?
 - b. Type of contact
10. If you were able to visit, tell me how visitation with [exoneree] was like.

- a. What were your thoughts and/or feelings about the prison environment?
11. Tell me all about the release/exoneration process.

Possible Follow-Up Questions:

12. Were there certain resources or opportunities you were able to access that allowed you to investigate/work with lawyers, etc.? Conversely, were there any that you didn't have access to that prevented your abilities to aid the exoneration?

Subtopic 2: Family Dynamics

1. In general, how do you think your loved ones' wrongful conviction has affected your family or relationship?
2. Did this experience with wrongful conviction impact your relationship with other family members?
 - a. If so, in what ways?
3. How did your relationship with [exoneree] evolve?
4. If applicable, describe how your role as a parent/caregiver was impacted by the wrongful conviction?
5. If applicable, did you notice any changes in [exoneree's] children?
 - a. If yes, what were these changes? How did you deal with them? How did you cope?
6. Did you take on any additional duties or responsibilities within your family unit?
 - a. If so, what were they?
 - b. Tell me more about your experience with this and how you felt about taking on additional responsibilities.
7. Can you recall whether anyone else in your family took on any additional duties or responsibilities?
 - a. If so, tell me more about this.
8. If applicable, did you receive any social support from family and friends that enabled you to handle these additional duties?
 - a. If so, tell me more about this.
9. Have your roles shifted since the release of [loved one]?
 - a. If so, in what ways?

- b. Why do you think this is the case?

Subtopic 3: Community Reactions and Social Support

1. How did members of your community react to [exoneree's] initial conviction?
2. How were you and your family treated by your community?
 - a. Provide examples.
3. Do you feel you have faced any stigmatization as a result of this experience? For example, did you feel that anyone treated you in a discriminatory or biased manner?
 - a. If yes, tell me more about this.
4. Did anyone in your community attempt to retaliate against you or your family?
 - a. If yes, describe what happened?
 - b. If yes, how did you handle it?
5. Did you remain in the same community following the conviction?
 - a. Why/why not?
6. How did members of your community react to [exoneree's] exoneration and release?
7. Describe the level and types of social support, if any, you received from your family and community.
8. Were there support groups or support networks you could reach out to for help who understood what you were going through?
 - a. If yes, what were they and how did they help?
9. What sorts of services or social support would have been helpful?

Subtopic 4: Post-Release Experiences and Perceptions of the Exoneree

1. How has this experience changed your relationship with [loved one]?
2. Do you notice anything about [exoneree] that is different from before their wrongful conviction?
 - a. Describe these changes.
 - b. How do you feel about these changes?
3. Is life post-release what you had imagined it would be?
 - a. Compare how you imagined life would be following [loved ones'] exoneration to the reality.

4. Describe how your relationship is today and how it compares to the way it was before the wrongful conviction.
5. Describe any challenges you have faced since [exoneree's] release.

Subtopic 5: Social Support, Social Services and Advocacy

1. Have you been able to access any sorts of mental health services to help cope with the wrongful conviction?
 - a. If yes, what were they and how did they help?
2. Are you aware of any social support or mental health services provided in your area that you all could take advantage of?
3. What types of programs or aid do you think would be most beneficial for families of incarcerated individuals?
4. Do you feel you've been able to adequately take care of yourself mentally and emotionally throughout this process?
 - a. Why/why not?
 - b. What sorts of services or social support would have been helpful?
5. Do you have people you can talk to or services you can access that might help you cope now (after exoneree's release)?
 - a. If yes, who or what are they and how do they help?
 - b. Is there anything you can't talk to them about? Please explain.
6. If you could give advice to anyone going through something similar, what would it be?
7. What types of services do you think should be offered and implemented that could help individuals impacted by wrongful conviction?
8. Are you involved in advocacy for other wrongfully convicted persons?
 - a. Tell me more about this.

Subtopic 6: Positive Reflection, General Takeaways and Overall Experience

1. Has this experience changed you?
 - a. If so, in what ways?
2. What lessons do you take away from this experience?
3. Is there anything positive that you feel you've gained from this entire experience?
4. What sorts of things gave you hope?
5. Describe your thoughts and feelings about the criminal justice system.

6. Do you have any suggestions for how the criminal justice system should change?

APPENDIX E
CODING SCHEME DOCUMENTS

Specific Coding for Exoneree Participant Interviews	
Description of Phenomenon/Theme	Code Utilized
Had young children or siblings their mothers took care of	MOTHER_CG
Mother was Biggest Supporter or primary support person	MOTHER_SUPPORT
Mother/Mother Figure Died while Incarcerated	MOTHER_DEATH
Did something positive while incarcerated (i.e., tutored/mentored other prisoners, received an education, did something productive)	PRODUCTIVE
Encouraged Mother not to Visit (Include reason why)	MOTHER_NOVISIT
Loved one came out of retirement or had to work additional job to help support exoneree financially	SACRIFICE
Limited phone calls with loved ones due to high costs	EXPENSIVE_CALLS
Loved ones had to travel long distances for visitations	VISITATION_LONG
Mother was primary visitor	MOTHER_VISITATION
Their loved ones felt stigmatized or isolated from their communities	LO_STIGMA
Had extended family members who believed they were guilty	GUILTY_FAM
Drama or separation in families because some family members believed in exoneree's guilt	GUILTY_FAM_PROB
Explicitly mentioned not being able to appropriately grieve after loss of loved ones	DIFF_GRIEF
Mother became seriously ill but did not die while exoneree was incarcerated	MOTHER_ILLNESS

Explicitly stated they could not show weakness or cry while in prison	NO_WEAKNESS
Explicitly stated they did not feel the loss of their loved one until their release from prison	GRIEF_PROBLEMS
Felt they can no longer grieve properly at all	GRIEF_PROBLEMS_PERM
Had doubts about therapy because they did not believe a therapist could truly understand their situation	THERAPY_DISTRUST
Reported growing closer to mother through the WC process	MOTHER_CLOSER
Reported feeling younger than their actual age	AGE_STAGNATION
Expressed some difficulty adjusting to world after release	ADJUSTMENT_DIFFICULTY
Exhibited some sort of behavior related to age stagnation - Could include risky behaviors, dating significantly younger, partying, attending college later in life, playing lots of video games, etc.	AGE_STAG_BEHAVIOR
Had children after release at an older age	AGE_STAG_CHILDREN
Mentions giving up on the idea of getting married/having children (specific which one)	NO_MARRIAGE
Describes partying a lot after release	AGE_STAG_PARTY
Attended College after release	COLLEGE
Attended law school	LAW_SCHOOL
Dated someone/was intimate with someone while they were incarcerated (could be within prison or outside of prison)	INCARCERATION_DATING
Explain that they typically date younger or are in relationship with a significantly younger partner	DATING_YOUNGER

Indicated they had some difficulties relating to peers their own age or other adults	PEER_ISSUES
Indicated they had difficulty relating to potential romantic partners	DATING_ISSUES
Mentioned serving time with other wrongfully convicted individuals	EXONEREE_FRIENDS
Witnessed Violence in Prison	VIOLENCE_PRISON
Were able to have contact visits with family or were able to hug family when they came to visit	CONTACT_VISITS
Had doubts about therapy because they felt therapist could not fully understand their situation	THERAPY_DOUBTS
Reported feeling very close to mother after release	CLOSE_TO_MOM

Specific Coding for Exoneree Mother Participants	
Description of Phenomenon/Theme	Code Utilized
Were angry at or blamed legal actors/city/police/etc.	BLAME_SYSTEM
Felt Guilty about child's conviction	GUILT_CONVICTION
Felt guilty living day-to-day life while child was incarcerated	GUILT_DL
Explicitly stated they would have traded places with their child	SWAP_PLACES
Still has issues with feeling guilty/depression/PTSD/mental illness even after the release of their child	LASTING_MENTAL_IMPACT
Explicitly stated they borrowed money from family to pay for costs related to the wrongful conviction	LOANS_FAMILY
Had to take on additional work roles or delay retirement to help pay for costs related to wrongful conviction	FINANCIAL_STRAIN
Had to take on additional work roles or delay retirement to help pay for costs related to wrongful conviction	VISITATION_COSTS
Limited phone calls with exoneree due to high costs	LIMITED_CALLS
Visitation required lengthy costly travel	VISITATION_TRAVEL
Witnessed someone being turned away from visitation due to dress code violation or some seemingly silly infraction (i.e, wire in bra or fray on pants)	VISITATION_RULES
Mentioned having contact visits	CONTACT_VISITS

Were not able to have physical contact during visits with loved ones	NOCONTACT_VISITS
Exoneree child discouraged them from visiting (include reason why)	DISCOURAGE_VISITS
Visited child regularly	REGULAR_VISITATION
Felt Isolated from community	COMMUNITY_ISOLATION
Lack of social support due to stigma of child's conviction	LACK_SS
Had some sort of support system	SUPPORT_SYSTEM
Had close family/friends who thought child was guilty	FAM_GUILT
Felt Isolated from their own family	FAM_ISOLATION
Did not talk about WC of loved one because of fear of judgement from outsiders	KEPT_SELF
Kept spirits up for exoneree so did not necessarily talk about serious problems they were having - did this in order to protect exoneree	PROTECT_EXONEREE
Made a significant life change due to stigma they faced (i.e. quit job, moved towns, changed careers, avoided certain places)	LIFE_CHANGE
Went to therapy	MOTHER_THERAPY
Had doubts about therapy because they did not believe a therapist could truly understand their situation	MOTHER_THERAPY_DOUBT
Became closer to child over the course of process	CLOSER_EXONEREE
Was already very close with child to begin with	CLOSE_EXONEREE
Explicitly stated having some sort of difficulty or trouble adjusting once child	MOM_DIFF_ADJUSTING

was released (i.e., wanted to keep tabs on them)	
Explained that they wanted daily calls/texts from child so they knew how they were/that they were safe	MOM_KEEPING _TABS
Feeling lost and not knowing what to do with themselves following child's release	EMOTIONAL_DIFFICULTY_PR
Placed on witness list so they could not attend trial	WITNESS_LIST
Unable to hug exoneree at visitations	NO_HUG

Specific Coding for Secondary Exoneree Participants (Not Mothers)	
Description of Phenomenon/Theme	Code Utilized
Initially were not worried and thought truth would be discovered that exoneree was innocent before trial	TRUST_IN_SYSTEM
Had to take on additional duties (jobs, etc.) due to the conviction	EXTRA_DUTIES
Mentioned high costs of visitation (e.g., costs of vending machine food)	COST_VISITATION
Mentioned financial concerns generally	FINANCIAL_CONCERNS
Discussed high costs of phone calls	PHONE_COSTS
Wrote letters due to high costs of phone calls	LETTERS_PREF
Had to travel significant distances for visitation or mention travel when discussing visitation	TRAVEL_VISIT
Witnessed guards/C.O. turning away them or other visitor for dress code violation or other minor rule issue	STRICT_VISIT_RULES
Mentioned having contact visits	CONTACT_VISITS
Felt isolated or stigmatized by general community	ISOLATION_COMM
Felt they could not talk about the wrongful conviction to just anyone	RESERVED
Felt they could not even talk to all their family members about the wrongful conviction	RESERVED_FAMILY
Had family members or close friends who thought exoneree was guilty	FAMILY_GUILT

Isolated from family/friends because they thought exoneree was guilty	FAMILY_GUILT_ISOLATION
Thought people would assume they were biased when discussing the WC and assume guilt	BIASED_PERCEPTION
Stigma led to significant life changes like quitting job or moving	STIGMA_CHANGE
Reported negative mental/emotional impacts due to WC	MENTAL_HEALTH_LO
Described exoneree as behaving/acting younger than he/she actually is	AGE_STAG_LO

APPENDIX F PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY

The interviews with mothers, whether they were the mother of an exoneree or were an exoneree separated from her children due to their conviction, were the most difficult interviews for me to conduct, but also the most rewarding. Seeing and feeling the pain they felt, even just for a moment, has changed my life and my perspective permanently. Although I already had compassion for individuals suffering these injustices, this project has caused me to understand it on another level. This new understanding has motivated me to make an actual difference in their lives or the lives of those individuals who are currently going through this pain.

Over the course of doing this research and data collection, I experienced so many emotions from rage to sadness and at times, sheer joy for good news. For example, when I interviewed Kimberly Long, she was waiting to find out if the District Attorney (DA) was going to re-charge her. At the time of our interview, she had a court date less than a week away. She was incredibly concerned about what might happen, especially since she was finally establishing herself outside of prison and was reconnecting with her children. The following week, I received a text from Kimberly informing me that the DA had dropped the charges. I immediately cried tears of joy. In fact, as I sit here writing this months later, the tears returned. I cannot quite explain the feelings I had being involved in this type of work. I have been personally affected by absorbing and learning about these horrific traumas, but that one moment learning of Kimberly's joy made all the suffering worth it. Even though I was not involved in helping Kimberly throughout her legal journey, being able to witness the joy and happiness this news brought her and her family was extremely rewarding.

The connections I made with my participants extend well beyond the study. The exoneree population functions as a community, and I have been welcomed into that community. I have become friends with almost all of the exonerees I interviewed. I have checked in with them to tell them “Happy birthday” and ask how their kids/grandkids are doing, and I advocate for others who have become victims of the justice system and the state just as my interviewees were. After interviewing several mothers and loved ones, I began the initial planning stages of creating a support network of loved ones (primarily mothers of exonerees) to connect with similar others whose loved ones are still incarcerated and are believed to be wrongfully convicted.

Being able to bond and connect with individuals who have been through similar situations and traumas is beneficial for primary and secondary exonerees. During the project, I began to feel as though I was part of the larger innocence and exoneree family. My participants trusted me with some of the most challenging and traumatic experiences they have ever endured. Many of them mentioned that our interview sessions felt like therapy to them.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Amanda Lewis received her Ph.D. in Criminology, Law, and Society from the University of Florida in 2022. She grew up in Western North Carolina and earned a Bachelor of Arts in psychology with a second major in philosophy from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in philosophy and psychology. In 2018, she earned her M.A. from the University of Florida in Criminology, Law, and Society. Her masters project focused on the use of mindfulness-based meditation interventions to prevent mental, emotional, and behavioral problems among juveniles and young adults. Now, her focus is prodominantly on wrongful conviction and legal psychology. She has a passion for working with exonerees and reforming the criminal legal system by working to reduce mass incarceration and assisting individuals and families who have been impacted by the prison system.

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