

LIFE-COURSE ENGAGEMENT IN CRIME, POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION
AND DESISTANCE FOR FORMERLY INCARCERATED COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Life-course perspectives are useful to enhance understanding of the intricate relationship between education, the onset of crime, criminality and desistance processes (Laub and Sampson 2001; Visher and Travis, 2003). An important facet of this research touches upon the divergent ways in which inequalities related to race, class and place might shape opportunities for educational success and in turn pathways into and out of crime (Irwin, et al., 2013; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). In this study, I investigate the educational life histories of formerly incarcerated college students in a higher education program, investigating the role of race, class and place in shaping their pre-, during and post-incarceration educational and criminal trajectories. Specifically, I draw from 34 in-depth life history interviews with present and past program participants to examine varying levels of engagement in education and crime over time, and the role of race, peer dynamics, families, neighborhoods and school characteristics.

Starting from an early age, connections to school and academic achievements might vary based upon interactions with other students and school officials, particularly with respect to the nature and type of punishments received for school misconduct (Blomberg et al., 2012; Skiba et al., 2011). School cultures are distinct and largely tied to structural differences, which are also embedded in the fabric of surrounding neighborhood contexts. Indeed, schools and communities can have mutually reinforcing influences over pre-carceral involvement in education and crime, which can in turn lead to incarceration (Gottfredson, 2001). Carceral educational experiences are also key considerations in this investigation, given that completion of post-secondary correctional education can inspire readiness for change and better preparedness for reentry and crime avoidance post-release (Chappell, 2004; Davis et al., 2013). This study will contribute to this body of research by exploring ways in which pre-carceral factors and carceral conditions shape opportunities to pursue and engage in post-secondary education during incarceration. Finally, it will shed light on the value of continued participation in college post-incarceration for reintegration and desistance, investigating some ways in which these experiences unfold in the context of race and class inequalities that impact efforts to transition away from crime. Given the recent revitalization and support for post-secondary correctional education programs, this study provides a much needed, detailed look into structural exclusions based on race, social class and place that result in divergent access to and success in college courses for inmates as well as ex-offenders post-incarceration.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Educational attainment at various points throughout the life course has been viewed as a buffer against the onset and prevalence of criminal activity from adolescence through adulthood (Groot and van den Brink, 2010; Machin, et al., 2012), yet access to quality education and educational success remain unequal and fragmented by race and class (Irwin et al., 2013; Smith, 2009). Patterns of racial and social stratification, embedded in different layers of peer interactions, neighborhood and school cultures, are well documented sources of differential levels of engagement in education, delinquency, and entry into crime (Gottfredson, 2001; Logan and Stults, 1999; Pratt et al., 2004; Simons and Burt, 2011; Stewart, 2003). We know less about the role that education might play in desistance, including the divergent ways in which varied environmental features contribute to educational access and success, and their relation to criminal reoffending among racially diverse individuals post-incarceration.

Given recent policy efforts to expand post-secondary education for past and present prisoners (Chappell, 2004; Ford and Schroeder, 2011; Kim and Clark, 2013), it is of particular import to consider possible ways carceral and post-carceral educational experiences are framed by structural and social inequalities. I seek to examine these relationships through the use of qualitative life history interviews with 34 individuals engaged in higher education post-incarceration. Access to a university education is an experience that can potentially alter outlooks on crime for former offenders, and also provide opportunities for post-incarceration success. Yet, a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between higher education and crime requires an exploration into the nature and impact of prior life experiences, as well as careful

attention to the role that race, class and place inequalities may continue to play in shaping educational success both during and after incarceration.

All of the participants in this study ultimately committed crimes that led to their incarceration as young adults. This research will investigate their early educational experiences embedded in neighborhood context and onset of offending, and will also examine the role of higher education in the development of changing perspectives on crime and education that occurred both during and after incarceration. I draw from a life-course framework to examine these issues, considering how relevant educational transitions and turning points are shaped by race, class and place inequalities, including any impact on the onset, continuation, and desistance from crime. As noted, recent attention has been given to post-secondary carceral educational (PSCE) programs, namely those offering four year degrees, and their potential influence on post-incarceration experiences (Anders, 2011; Anderson, 2013; Ford and Schroeder, 2011).

To date, little is known about how continued exposure to higher education post-release can help these individuals navigate through social and economic burdens, and focus on transitioning away from crime. Exposure to a university education after incarceration is an experience that can potentially alter ways of thinking, and provide opportunities for successful reentry (Chappell, 2004; Taylor, 2013). Moreover, research on PSCE has not previously utilized a life-course framework, which requires consideration of how college performance and success might link back to pre-carceral educational and other life experiences. This inquiry is particularly relevant to the experiences of those racial minorities who continuously move in and out of the same disadvantaged environments after release that they were exposed to prior to incarceration.

How do pre-incarceration experiences, embedded within different layers of racial and social stratification, impact educational outcomes and criminal trajectories? Also, what are some ways that involvement in post-secondary carceral education can shape readiness for change and outlooks on crime? More importantly, how are post-carceral college experiences, reintegration and desistance processes tied to race and class divisions which develop around divergent neighborhood structures? These are the questions I explore in this dissertation. This study will contribute to existing literature by offering analyses of the specific ways in which higher education received post-release pulls racially diverse individuals away from criminal influences, including those stemming from community contexts. It also adds to the vast amount of research highlighting the mutually reinforcing criminogenic pressures felt by black urban disadvantaged youth and young adults, while drawing specific comparative attention to the experiences of suburban middle class minorities, and middle to upper class whites and Asians which took place during similar life periods (Irwin et al., 2013; Kupchik and Ward, 2013; Morris, 2005).

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Life-course research shows that crime entrée and offending are often times constructed artifacts of early educational experiences that emerge and evolve from distinct structural demarcations built upon race, class and place (Oakes, 2005; Sampson and Wilson, 1995). Of particular relevance is the school-to-prison pipeline, which considers in tandem school and criminal interactions of urban disadvantaged youth and more importantly how they coincide with the imposition of disproportionate, exclusionary school based punishments (Morris, 2005; Roque and Paternoster, 2011). From this standpoint, poor racial minority students who are repeatedly segregated from

mainstream school environments for disciplinary reasons are also likely to experience diminished connections to school, education and low academic performance. In essence, these pupils become ill prepared for advancement to the next grade level, and remain in schools that lack adequate mechanisms for student support as a result (Blomberg et al., 2012). Over time these factors might culminate into the display and/or escalation of delinquent and criminal behaviors among youth who are systematically ostracized from classrooms, teachers and other students (Fenning and Rose, 2007; Paterline and Peterson, 1999).

Yet, at the core of the nexus between educational foundations, communities of origin and criminality are stratifications carved from race and class distinctions. Specifically, racial minority students who reside in poor urban communities will likely experience a “piling up” of disadvantage whereby their already attenuated connections to school will be further weakened by the influence of subcultural environmental pressures that are conducive to crime (Peterson and Krivo, 2010; Sampson et al., 2008). In that respect, engaging in criminal behaviors can not only be seen as a normative response to unfavorable treatment in school, but also a reflection of neighborhood and peer factors that reinforce the social isolation which is often embedded into the fabric of low-income inner cities (Brunson and Miller, 2009; Gottfredson, 2001). Against this backdrop, this research utilizes a life-course approach to explore criminal and educational trajectories among urban disadvantaged racial minorities, how they relate to structural impediments faced during youth and young adulthood, along with the impact on adult criminal offending, reentry and desistance from crime.

Much less is known about the nature and extent to which early educational experiences characterized by inclusiveness and high academic achievements impact criminal behaviors among middle class and affluent minority, white and Asian students in suburban contexts.¹ Indeed, one implication of theoretical frameworks that focus on school interactions to explain the development of crime among poor urban racial minorities is that other more advantaged students receive preferential treatment by teachers and administrators alike (Rocque and Paternoster, 2011). This research attends to this issue by closely examining the specific ways in which these latter experiences among more privileged young people might impact delinquent and criminal behaviors both in and out of school.

Specifically, this research draws specific attention to the characteristics and influence of better quality, non-metropolitan neighborhoods where white, Asian and some minority participants resided and attended schools as adolescents. The ecological features of these places and the ways in which they framed experiences in education and crime during childhood and adolescence are vital to my investigation. To start, middle to upper class suburban residents have better chances of being well-positioned for upward mobility given the abundant access to resources typically situated in these environments (Dwyer, 2007; Hipp and Yates, 2011). This dynamic only serves to further enhance structural divisions, including social advantages and disadvantages, which transcend into school settings and accumulate over time (DiPrete and Eirich, 2006; Piquero, 2004).

¹ For the purpose of this dissertation, Asian students were not referred to as “minorities,” as they shared stories that more closely paralleled the early educational experiences and criminal trajectories of white students. These commonalities surfaced through the use of inductive analyses techniques.

Accordingly, a critical look into neighborhood concentration of poverty and wealth is needed, particularly their influences on educational experiences and involvement in crime both before and after incarceration.

This exploration is furthered by considering the role of such pre-carceral features in shaping levels of engagement and success in post-secondary correctional education along with the influence of carceral conditions. The experience of being isolated and confined during incarceration can inspire involvement in pro-social, productive activities such as going to school (Maruna et al., 2006; Soyer, 2014). Nevertheless, there is limited availability of college programs across state correctional facilities. Furthermore, inmate eligibility and potential for success are marred by inequalities in prior levels of educational attainment and academic preparedness, which are tied to pre-carceral factors of race, class and place (Case and Fassenfest, 2004; Palmer, 2012). The atmosphere and influence of carceral environments are also pertinent to my investigation, given that experiences in post-secondary correctional education unfold in these very contexts, which are ensconced in prison subcultures (Hall and Killackey, 2008; Hemmens and Marquart, 2000). Even though participation in higher education during incarceration is largely seen as a conduit to non-criminal pathways and desistance from crime upon reentry, progression along this trajectory may be encumbered by prison socialization processes and structural disparities that persist even after incarceration.

Perhaps these challenges can be offset through continued participation and engagement in post-secondary education after release from prison. However, the value of receiving a higher education during incarceration has not always been recognized, as the Violent Crime Control Act of 1994 eliminated inmate eligibility for Pell Grants and in

turn vital sources of funding for inmate college enrollment (Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011). Given what is known about the cycle of crime and incarceration, recent evidence connecting experiences of post-secondary correctional education to successful reintegration and desistance has helped bolster support for college participation among both former and current prisoners (Anders & Noblit, 2011; Anderson, 2013).

From this perspective, a crucial point of consideration for ex-offender college students might be the juxtaposition between the campus locale and post-carceral places of residence. This comparison is paramount to my analysis, as many former prisoners must return to live in the same environments they were immersed in prior to getting incarcerated. Indeed, the push and pull of divergent environmental features are crucial aspects of post-incarceration desistance processes (Kubrin and Stewart, 2006; Maruna and Roy, 2007). In addition, the potential ways in which environmental characteristics shape chances of reoffending and crime avoidance become particularly relevant for these individuals who are placed back in familiar, criminogenic atmospheres post-incarceration (Halsey, 2007; Travis et al., 2001). Nonetheless, inmates who enroll in college class during incarceration and continue this endeavor post-release have access to important sources of human and social capital that emerge through these educational experiences. In addition, research has shown that formerly incarcerated individuals who are presented with opportunities to form pro-social relationships with each other, centered around shared commitments to conventional goals such as higher education have increased potential for successful reentry (Taylor, 2013).

OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation consists of the following chapters: (2) Theoretical Framework and Literature Review; (3) Methodology; (4) Pre-Carceral Educational Experiences: Race, Class, Place and the Onset of Offending; (5) Experiences of Post-Secondary Correctional Education; (6) The Impact of Race, Class and Place on Post-Carceral Educational Experiences; and (7) Conclusion. The organization of these chapters is purposeful and intended to present life experiences in crime and education pre-incarceration, during incarceration and post-incarceration. The methodology used to collect and analyze data is also thoroughly explained to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the findings including the relevant themes and conclusions about how these lifetime developments in education helped shape involvement in and efforts to desist from crime.

In Chapter 2, I discuss past research that was found to be pertinent to the purposes of this study, and describe the specific value the current research adds to the field. This chapter sets out with a review of existing research showing that exclusionary school based punishments are unequally imposed on poor racial minority students, revealing the ways in which these negative school experiences tend to facilitate low educational success, crime and incarceration. It also highlights additional research indicating that crime stemming from this “pipeline” often flows between schools and neighborhoods located within disadvantaged contexts. These examples are used to guide the reader in understanding how the current research can contribute to the field as it compares the educational and criminal histories of other minority, white and Asian students coming from suburban advantaged backgrounds who had very different experiences in early education. It further adds to life course research by piecing together past experiences, namely life transitional events

centered around crime and education that occur before, during and after incarceration. This framework, I suggest, is necessary for understanding the role post-secondary education may play in the reentry experiences and desistance processes of the formerly incarcerated.

Next is the chapter on methodology, which begins with a brief description of Project Achieve, the higher education program from which my sample was drawn. Project Achieve provides an opportunity for formerly incarcerated individuals who successfully complete post-secondary carceral classes to attend college at a four year university. I describe this program, as well as the number of participants who were current, former or incoming students at the time of the interview. The included subsections are intended to present a clear and comprehensive picture of the sample, data collection procedures used, ethical considerations and analysis strategies, including a thorough explanation of how confidential responses were collected and themes were identified within the timeframes of pre-incarceration, incarceration and post-incarceration. It also sheds light on how my analysis strategy helped facilitate the identification of patterns between varying levels of engagement in education and crime over these life periods within race, class and environmental contexts. Finally, I discuss the methodological strengths and weaknesses associated with this life-course based qualitative retrospective study.

Chapter 4 focuses on pre-carceral educational experiences at the primary and secondary levels, including the impact of school based exclusionary punishments and educational attainment on the emergence of delinquent pathways as these are embedded within race, class and neighborhood inequalities. Here I detail the specific nature and development of deviant and criminal behaviors that occurred both in and out of school contexts. Indeed, differences in pre-carceral neighborhoods that surrounded schools and

places of residence along with racial dynamics, peers groups and other social characteristics were also integral aspects of early education and crime and are illustrated through the use of second level subheadings. Specific comparative attention is given to differences in how these elements converge and influence individuals with distinct racial and socioeconomic backgrounds at various points in their lives.

Chapter 5 provides insight into how prior educational experiences and achievements rooted in the social inequalities described in Chapter 4 contributed to experiences in post-secondary correctional education particularly with respect to eligibility and timing of enrollment. Accordingly, experiences in post-secondary correctional education varied and the chapter is organized to highlight these distinctions, denoting how these educational foundations specifically influenced perceived differences in “readiness for change” experienced during incarceration. In addition, this chapter highlights some key institutional aspects of the incarceration experience that cut across race and class lines and distracted efforts to progress towards change through engagement in post-secondary correctional education.

Chapter 6 explores the ways in which participation in a higher education program for formerly incarcerated students presented an alternative pathway from crime post-release and also how engagement in this opportunity was shaped by race, class and place. I also examine related challenges that were an integral part of some students’ post-carceral educational experiences, including issues such as financial strain, low academic preparedness, transportation concerns, issues of cultural assimilation at the university and familiar lures of crime. In Chapter 6, each of these subheadings includes comparisons between the post-carceral educational experiences of program members by race, class and

community type. The last section of this chapter examines ways in which these challenges can be offset through engagement in higher education vis-à-vis program membership and access to ongoing opportunities for academic and social support that can facilitate crime avoidance post-release and successful reintegration.

The final chapter of this dissertation draws from the study findings and offers conclusions about different levels of engagement in education and transitions into and away from crime among current and past students in Project Achieve and how these pathways were unequal and built upon differences in race, class and place. These conclusions are specific to poor minority students from urban disadvantaged communities and middle-class minority, white and Asian students from advantaged communities and highlight experiences in crime and education before, during and after incarceration. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of post-incarceration educational experiences along with social and environmental transitions in managing the desistance process and reintegration. In addition, policy recommendations about access to higher education during and after incarceration are made with a specific focus on the potential value for formerly incarcerated racial minority students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The importance of this inquiry is highlighted through the use of research participants' narratives, for example, on the need for university student housing that accommodates non-traditional students who wish to live near campus and away from criminal ties to former neighborhoods.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The onset of delinquent behavior can be tied to early educational experiences, which contribute to outlooks on crime, incarceration, and higher education in adulthood (Groot and van den Brink, 2010; Machin, et al., 2012). The life course perspective is useful for understanding the relationship between education, crime, and post-incarceration reintegration, as “individual transitions from prison to community are best understood in a longitudinal framework, taking into account an individual’s circumstances before incarceration, experiences during incarceration, and the period after release” (Bushway et al. 2001; Laub and Sampson 2001, Travis et al. 2001; Visher and Travis, 2003: 89). Moreover, because race and neighborhood inequalities can persist over the life course, shaping educational success, and in turn different criminal trajectories, these social processes can be understood by placing them in the context of race, class and place, considering how they might combine to influence engagement in education and crime over time (Brown et. al, 2008; DiPrete and Eirich, 2006; Gottfredson, 2001; Logan and Stults, 1999; Pratt et al., 2004; Simons and Burt, 2011).

Life course criminology focuses on the development of criminal and desistance trajectories, including the ways in which these paths are influenced by demographic characteristics such as race, class and age (Veysey et al, 2013; Visher and Travis, 2003). Social interactions centered on families, schools, neighborhoods and peers might also shape the onset of crime, criminal careers and crime avoidance at different points throughout the life course (Sampson and Laub, 1995). From this perspective, informal social controls on childhood and adolescent behaviors tend to vary according to structural context, levels of parental supervision, peer groups and engagement in early education

(Hirschi, 2004). Furthermore, criminal behaviors might emerge when such controls break down and overlap between schools and neighborhoods particularly in disadvantaged communities (Burt et al., 2006; Pratt et al., 2004). By the same token, desistance from crime can be facilitated through ongoing relationships with pro-social, significant others. Notably, adult life changes that involve marriage, legitimate employment and/or engagement in education can serve as “hooks for change,” by inspiring individuals to break away from criminal pasts (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna and Roy, 2007; Warr, 1998).

Yet, opportunities for change presented during adulthood are largely tied to earlier life experiences. For example, the level of adult educational attainment has been attributed to the quality of primary and secondary education received, which varies by school locale and also affects how students feel they are treated by school staff, teachers and administrators alike (Blomberg et. al, 2012). Actual or perceived unfair treatment in school might inspire certain pathways to crime for socially disadvantaged minority students in particular, who grow disinterested in education and complacent about their scholastic achievement or lack thereof (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). Commonly known as the “school-to-prison-pipeline,” this perspective on school experiences, emerging criminal behaviors, and incarceration has been usefully applied for understanding the experiences of urban minority students. However, it does not sufficiently account for how these developments might unfold among suburban middle-class minority, white and Asian students over time.

There is a paucity of research that specifically focuses on how white and Asian youth from middle and upper class backgrounds negotiate criminal identities (Losen,

2004; Smith, 2009), with favorable academic experiences including the conferral of high grades and advanced placement opportunities. The conduct of individuals who share these demographic features might be more readily perceived as a reflection of mainstream norms (Irwin, et al., 2013; Rocque and Paternoster, 2011), with any deviation from such triggering relatively lenient consequences that do not necessarily weaken attachments to education (Fenning and Rose, 2007; Skiba et al., 2011). This dissertation draws attention to distinct criminal behaviors carved out by early educational experiences influenced by race, class and neighborhood disparities, and the possible impact on subsequent life experiences.

PRE-CARCERAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND THEIR RELATION TO OFFENDING

During childhood and adolescence, inequalities of race, class and place affect youths' educational experiences in important ways of relevance for understanding the relationship between education and crime. These include cultural pressures related to neighborhood and school settings, the quality of education received and punishments faced for school misconduct. While each element might contribute in some way to pre-carceral educational experiences, these influences including their pertinence to offending can be distinct and thus contribute to varying outcomes for minority youth from disadvantaged communities, minority youth from advantaged communities, and white and Asian youth from advantaged communities.

A review of the extant literature reveals that individual, social and environmental forces operate in tandem to reinforce race and class inequalities which contribute to distinct elementary and secondary educational experiences, pulling certain youth

populations away from crime, while pushing others towards it. From this standpoint, life course perspectives can be used to understand the ways in which these factors might shape educational outcomes and involvement in crime with the passage of time. For instance, low academic performance and delayed school advancement might be considered a ‘piling up’ of disadvantage and are “likely to interact with race and structural location, and help escalate adolescent risky behavior into adult criminal behaviors” (Sampson and Laub, 1997: 154-155).

One important facet of the ‘piling up’ of disadvantage is the geographic concentration of poverty, which Krivo et al. (2013) found may also contribute to poor mental and physical health and low educational attainment (see also Peterson and Krivo 2010; Sampson, et al., 2008). Moreover, affluent persons reinforce their own wealth, and thereby create social isolation for those who are less advantaged when they secure homes in better quality areas (Dwyer, 2007; Massey and Fischer, 2003). These structural divisions “mean that the social lives of the rich and poor increasingly transpire in different venues and we *must study both* in order to fully comprehend the newly emerged system of stratification” (Krivo et al., 2013: 145, emphasis in the original; Massey, 1996:409). Considering these issues within the parameters of key life events allows for a deeper understanding of how social and ecological processes develop, and influence involvement in crime, as well as post-incarceration opportunities to avoid it.

For example, the transition from childhood to adolescence is often marked by less salient parental influences and an increased desire to gain acceptance from friends, yet family upbringing remains a prominent factor in the selection of peers (Burt et. al, 2006, Pratt et. al, 2004). During this time, children begin to face separate punishments for their

actions at school, among peers and within community settings, which may have far reaching effects on the sustenance and development of anti-social behaviors over the life course (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Laub and Sampson, 1993; Meldrum and Hay, 2012; Wikström P-O and Loeber; Wilson, 1996; Vazsony and Huang, 2010). From this perspective, childhood violence, if left unfettered may evolve over time, and ultimately contribute to adult incarceration (Sampson and Laub, 1993).

Compared to more advantaged community settings, research suggests that some urban disadvantaged communities are structured around “aggressive regulative rules” that require violent responses to imagined or real threats to one’s persona or image (Baron et al., 2001: 726). This reaction may also be encouraged in certain school subcultures in disadvantaged communities, as “the hallways of the school are in many ways an extension of the street” (Anderson, 2000: 22). The close connection between school and community factors can also be seen from the standpoint that “schools are embedded within communities, and, in many ways, reflect larger community-level processes....Schools in urban, poor, disorganized communities experience much more violence, and other forms of disorder than do schools in rural or suburban, affluent, organized communities” (Gottfredson, 2001: 63). Indeed, research suggests that school and neighborhood conflicts are often reciprocal within disadvantaged communities, with overlaps and spillover in young men’s participation in violent behaviors between those contexts (Brunson and Miller, 2009). To build on that research, life course analyses might be useful in shedding light on the influence of these mutually reinforcing dynamics of school and neighborhood violence, and how they might contribute to social and educational foundations that shape perspectives on crime at different points in time.

In addition to distinct cultural pressures found in disadvantaged communities, “data indicates clear differences in educational attainment across race/ethnicity, with whites having the most (graduation) success at all grade levels” (Blomberg et al., 2012: 205; see also Finn, 2006; Hurtado, 1989). The “school-to-prison pipeline” is the colloquial term used to characterize the educational experiences of minority students as “increasingly punitive and isolating,” where many of them are “taught by unqualified teachers, held back in grade, repeatedly suspended, and banished to alternative out-placements” (Wald and Losen, 2003: 11). In the absence of adequate support systems, these students are likely to progress along the continuum of crime, arrest and incarceration. Students from households where the father is under or unemployed, and those with low socioeconomic statuses face a greater risk of being suspended, expelled, or otherwise subjected to other harsh disciplinary measures (Brantlinger, 1991; Nichols, 2004; Skiba, et al., 1997; Wu et al., 1982). In contrast, students who are more economically privileged receive less punitive consequences for school misconduct (Skiba et al. 2002). Gender also matters as male students are punished more severely compared to females (Artiles 2003; Gregory 1995; Noguera 1995; Skiba et al. 2002).

In the current investigation, although differences in race, class and place among the research participants might have contributed to unequal exclusionary treatment in school, all study participants were previously incarcerated, including those who had favorable pre-carceral educational experiences. This dissertation will examine other possible avenues for entry into crime and incarceration constructed by a range of pre-carceral educational experiences including but not limited to the influence of exclusionary school based punishments. These pre-carceral experiences may also be

important for understanding preparedness and success in carceral and post-carceral educational settings.

Exclusionary disciplinary responses are often described as “preventive,” designed with the goal of encouraging positive school wide behaviors, but ironically they tend to weaken what is, for some minorities, already attenuated connections to school (Kim et al., 2010; Welch and Payne, 2010). Minority students are essentially socialized to believe that the “rewards of education—namely, acquisition of knowledge and skills and ultimately, admission to college, and access to good paying jobs—are not available to them” (Noguera, 2003: 343). In essence, school prepares these individuals for academic failure and low paying jobs, both of which signal bleak prospects for legitimate success, and thus increase the necessity and appeal of crime (Nicholson-Crotty, 2009; Simons and Burt, 2011).

Racial disparities in responses to school misconduct have been attributed at least in part to school location and climate, and are just as prevalent, if not more, in affluent, suburban school districts as they are in low-income metropolitan areas (Wallace et al., 2008). These circumstances might contribute to misperceptions about the involvement of black and Latino students in street cultures, and their threat to the dominant, and what some might describe as white, mores upheld in mainstream academic institutions (Fenning and Rose, 2007; Noguera, 2003; Skiba et al. 2011). In addition, existing research has found that urban black youth from low-income families do not necessarily violate school codes of conduct more frequently or to a greater extent than their socially favored non-minority counterparts when they attend the same schools, yet they are disproportionately subjected to exclusionary measures such as suspension and expulsion

for what might otherwise be considered mere youthful indiscretions (Brown and Beckett, 2006; Skiba, et al., 2002). In fact, exclusionary security measures such as metal detectors, sniffing dogs, and locker searches are more common in schools with higher proportions of lower class minority students, whereas less punitive or inclusionary forms of social control such as surveillance cameras are typically used in schools where students are more privileged (Cohen, 1985; Hirschfield, 2010; Irwin et al., 2013; Kupchik & Ward, 2013).

Moreover, while it is true that some racial minorities might pull away from educational opportunities out of fear of being labeled as “too white” by family members and neighborhood peers, these reservations can be misinterpreted by teachers and administrators who automatically equate their actions, or lack thereof, to limited academic prowess, and subsequently place them in remedial academic tracks as a result (Anderson, 2000; Kupchik and Ward, 2013; Losen, 2004; Morris, 2005; Ogbu, 2004; Skiba, 2002). Students who are categorized in such a way may feel “dumb” and develop low self-esteem, both powerful emotions that can sabotage interests in education and propel efforts in furtherance of criminal pursuits (Moon and Morash, 2013; Oakes, 2005).

Underprivileged minorities who are systematically expelled, suspended or otherwise excluded from school might feel compelled to use violence or crime as means to exert their masculinity and earn street credibility among neighborhood peers (Anderson, 2000; Harding, 2010). For them, the expectation that “schooling reduces criminal activity” is unfounded, as their inferior treatment in this arena may prompt them to seek validation from “street” peers, who push them further along the track to a self-fulfilling prophecy of crime (Balfanz, et al., 2003; Lochner and Moretti, 2004). As noted,

school, community and peers represent distinct aspects in life, but may be viewed as overlapping facets contributing to delinquency and crime (Brunson and Miller, 2009; Gottfredson, 2001).

Educational experiences and neighborhood characteristics can also shape the behaviors of advantaged non-minority students, but generally not in ways that are conducive to crime. For them, school tends to represent a conduit to conventional success, as their conduct within this setting typically is not perceived as threatening to the status quo, and thus warranting the imposition of persistent exclusionary measures (Ogbu, 2004; Zimmerman and Messner, 2011). Instead, middle and upper class students are often directed toward advanced placement classes and otherwise tracked for academic success advantages that are also encouraged by their family members (Berg et al., 2012; Harding, 2007, 2010). Perhaps a life course perspective can enlighten discussions about how educational and criminal pathways might intersect, whereby individuals who are seemingly well positioned for academic success by virtue of their race, class and/or place of residence might turn to crime, but then embrace, with relative ease, higher education during and after incarceration as part of a desistance process.

INCARCERATION EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND RELATION TO OFFENDING

The incarceration experience often places inmates in a position of readiness for change, and can inspire “new and at times productive routines such as going to school on the inside,” nurturing spiritual connections, or other enlightened mindsets (Soyor, 2014: 97; see also Ashkar and Kenny, 2008; Halsey, 2007; Maruna, 2001). Although positive changes that occur during incarceration might very well provide the “scaffolding” for

self-transformation, pre-prison influences along with social contexts within prison or jail might frame how individuals “attend to these new possibilities, discard old habits, and begin the process of crafting a different way of life” (Giordano et al. 2002: 1000). For example, inmates who are ready to transform their lives via participation in higher education might be constrained by institutional limits on access to post-secondary correctional education (Palmer, 2012). Other challenges can include low levels of prior educational attainment and preparedness which, as previously mentioned, tend to emanate from disadvantaged circumstances of race, class and place. These disadvantages might in turn contribute to doubt for some about their potential to succeed in higher education. Regardless of these differences, inmates are confined in a coercive environment that exists in social isolation, an experience that cuts across race and socioeconomic inequalities and can complicate efforts to pursue post-secondary correctional education across groups (Carlsson 2012; Soyer, 2014).

During incarceration, conventional support networks are limited and there is minimal support for personal growth and development. In this environment, the views of other inmates have been found to be “highly salient” in shaping criminal perspectives as “all interaction is centered on the fact that one is in jail [or prison] for having been convicted of committing a crime.” At the same time, “these restrictions may also make those with whom incarcerated participants are permitted to interact highly influential for identities” (Asencio and Burke, 2011: 167; see also Stryker and Serpe, 1982). Aside from inmates, educational staff members and correctional officers may also play a pivotal role in shaping inmate behaviors, including their level of engagement in post-secondary correctional education.

Evidence suggests that completion of post-secondary carceral educational programming can help improve inmate behaviors, opportunities for employment, and crime avoidance (see Ford and Schroeder, 2011; Lockwood et al., 2012). Moreover, individuals who receive “some form of postsecondary certificate or degree” are less likely to reoffend after release from prison because these credentials provide one way to manage consequences collateral to incarceration such as low employability, strained family relationships, and social stigma (Chappell, 2004; Palmer, 2012; Ward, 2009). Indeed, inmates who graduate from a post-secondary correctional education program tend to have more professional opportunities post-release, including a relatively high earning potential, than those who do not (Gorgol and Sponsler, 2011; Ward, 2009; Zgoba, 2008).

In contrast, Cho and Tyler (2010) analyzed the short term post-release benefits of completing a variety of other adult prison education programs during incarceration, and found an estimated net benefit of only US \$125 per month earned for program completers compared to non-completers. This limitation is especially prominent for racial minorities, who only earn GEDs during incarceration as they tend to be further displaced from primary labor markets post-release due to inequalities in race, socioeconomic position and/or place of residence. To that end, the minimal economic benefits that could potentially flow to formerly incarcerated African-Americans as a result of having a GED are likely to decrease within just two years post-release (Western et al., 2001). The role of sociocultural and environmental contexts are also pertinent given that ex-offender racial minorities who live and work in poor urban neighborhoods remain isolated from mainstream business sectors, and immersed in communities based around secondary and illegal employment opportunities (Krivo et al., 2013; Wilson, 1996). Without a post-

secondary degree, it can prove challenging for these former prisoners to identify and progress along alternative pathways to crime (Meyer and Randel, 2013; Wilson et al., 2000.)

Notably, the possible benefits that inmates can gain from taking college classes are well-known, yet only 14.4% of state inmates report having some post-secondary correctional education experience, in stark contrast to a majority of the U.S. population with college credentials (Davis et al., 2013). Indeed, just a mere 6-7% of inmates enroll in post-secondary carceral classes nationwide (Davis et al., 2013; Gorgol and Sponsler, 2011). A related concern is that only about 25-33% of prisons currently offer college courses (Coley and Barton, 2006; Davis et al., 2013). Furthermore, many of the inmates who pursue a higher education do not finish their studies during incarceration because of short sentences or administrative transfers (Palmer, 2012). Health related problems and difficulty in studying may also pose challenges to completion (Case and Fassenfast, 2004; Winterfield et al., 2009).

Another important facet of experiences in post-secondary correctional education is the role of self-selection in the sense that inmate enrollees tend to have at least earned a high school diploma or GED certification prior to their incarceration. In contrast, most inmates lack the educational foundation needed to participate in post-secondary carceral programming (Hall and Killacky, 2008). As a matter of fact, “by 2008 more than half of all male inmates—white, black, or Latino—between the ages of twenty and thirty-four had not completed high school. Among young, black male inmates, more than six in ten had not completed high school or a general equivalency degree (GED),” an obvious prerequisite for post-secondary education (Pettit, 2012: 15-16). In addition to the severe

social disadvantages often endured by inmates prior to entering the correctional system, racial minorities might face additional structural challenges that further impede decisions to pursue a college education while incarcerated. In fact, many racial minorities who are incarcerated through the “school-to-prison-pipeline” possess only remedial academic skills, as repeated school suspensions and expulsions minimized their opportunities for classroom learning in primary and secondary schools (Skiba, et al., 2011). These experiences may foster uncertainties about performing well on a college level, leaving them vulnerable to becoming drawn to other, less positive carceral influences. Yet, this risk of “prisonization” is something that inmates with varied backgrounds might face.

Engaging in post-secondary correctional education provides an opportunity that can offset “prisonization,” or the development of carceral criminal behaviors in response to the “pains of imprisonment” (Clemmer, 1940; Paterline and Petersen, 1999; Sykes, 1958). One aspect of these imprisonment “pains” might include negative inmate perceptions of how they are viewed by others with whom they routinely interact, namely other inmates and correctional officers (Asencio, E. K. 2011; Hemmens and Marquett, 2000). In turn, inmates who believe they are perceived as criminals tend to engage in criminal behaviors; however, opportunities for change presented through educational training can contribute to the development of different perspectives on crime and corresponding behaviors (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001).

Such opportunities would be particularly relevant during incarceration, a time when some inmates feel pressured to prove their toughness, while others are focused on their commitment to positive change (DeLisi, 2003; Maruna et al., 2006). “For still others, prison is dehumanizing, leaving the former prisoner bitter and diminished. Just as

some never recover from war or trauma, some never recover from prison” (Visher and Travis, 2003: 107). Although engagement in post-secondary correctional education can help forge alternative pathways to crime, ex-offenders must have a clear plan for desistance post-release in order to fully realize these benefits (Soyor, 2014: 92; see also Ashkar and Kenny, 2008; Giordano et al., 2007; Harcourt, 2006). This leaves the question of whether engaging in higher education post-release can help former inmates further commitments to avoid crime and also how this educational experience might be influenced by race, class and post-incarceration communities of residence.

POST-INCARCERATION EXPERIENCES AND THEIR RELATION TO OFFENDING

Post-secondary educational opportunities for former offenders can bolster efforts to transition back into society and avoid crime over time by providing them with a conventional purpose and clear way to demonstrate commitment to change and achieve upward mobility. In fact, college may be considered a venue where students can readily form pro-social relationships, a feature that can be particularly useful for formerly incarcerated college students, who strongly rely upon positive social interactions to help further efforts to reintegrate and desist from crime (Visher and Travis, 2003). Yet, college is generally speaking, a “figured world”² where “historical positionings in terms of race, class, and gender matter” (Urreita et. al, 2011; see also Delgado, 2001). Perhaps these inequalities can be offset through participation in a higher education program

² In “figured worlds,” people “figure” out who they are and produce identities through social interactions that are shaped by historical narratives of oppression and/or liberation (Brown and Donner, 2011; Holland et. al, 2008)).

specifically designed for formerly incarcerated students that inspires ongoing social support between members (see generally Taylor, 2013; Urrieta, et. al, 2011).

From this standpoint, engagement in higher education post-release from prison may be accompanied by “new life transitions into different environments” and thus can enable crime avoidance “by establishing potential turning points for a troubled life course” (Elder, 1998: 966; see also Maruna and Roy, 2007; Sampson and Laub, 2003). Although educational transitions offer one way for former offenders to “knife off the past from the present,” an integral part of this process involves removing individuals from social circumstances and physical environments that are likely to trigger criminal behaviors (Caspi and Moffit, 1993; Farrall, 2004; Laub and Sampson, 2003: 149; see also Piquero, 2004; Warr, 2002). Yet some individuals either “cannot or will not knife off their past social worlds” (Maruna and Roy, 2007: 115). This situation is especially relevant to the post-incarceration experiences of racial minorities who attend college and commute daily back to poor, urban disadvantaged neighborhoods. These ex-offenders are likely to be presented with criminal opportunities and obstacles not otherwise faced by formerly incarcerated middle-class minority, white and Asian college students who return to live in suburban advantaged neighborhoods.

Of particular import is evidence showing that racial minorities who leave prison and return to urban disadvantaged communities will likely encounter people, places and things that might contribute to reoffending since environments that are fraught with poverty, scarce jobs and unstable households often present structural impediments to upward mobility (Hipp and Yates, 201; Kubrin et. al, 2006; Stewart et. al, 2002). Scholars have paid specific attention to the intersection of race and concentrated

disadvantage, arguing that urban black communities tend to experience levels of disadvantage that parallel Latino neighborhoods, but which are unseen in predominantly white communities (Morenoff, et al., 2001; Peterson and Krivo 2010; Sampson, et al., 1997; Sampson and Wilson, 1995; Wilkes and Iceland, 2004). In addition, socioeconomic differences can be reinforced through communities of residence given that affluent persons tend to remain “isolated in highly advantaged settings,” which contributes to the placement of disadvantaged populations in “deprived social contexts” (Krivo et al., 2013).

Given that race, class and neighborhood inequalities shape social opportunities post-incarceration, the influence of post-carceral university enrollment on routine movements across different residential and non-residential spaces should also be considered. For instance, black urban residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods are socially isolated and left vulnerable to violence and crime in the absence of significant, meaningful contact with mainstream individuals and institutions such as those connected to higher education (Fernandez and Harris 1992, Rankin and Quane 2000; Small 2007; Tigges, et al., 1998; Wilson, 1987, 1996, 2009). On the other hand, whites and the economically advantaged who live in resource-laden communities are usually insulated from those problems (Dwyer 2007; Fitzpatrick and LaGory, 2011; Massey and Fischer 2003). Perhaps this issue can be addressed by examining regular movements within and beyond disadvantaged spaces, along with their impact on social circumstances (Krivo et al., 2013). This includes routine travel from urban disadvantaged communities to economically advantaged settings “to work, shop, worship and conduct other regular activities,” movements which may result in “far greater access to *resource spaces* with

high-quality services” that offset the “economic disadvantage and social hazards” inherent in the risk spaces “where the poor and non-whites often reside” (Fitzpatrick and LaGory, 2011; Krivo et al., 2013: 142; Kwan 2012). Ex-offender college students who live in urban disadvantaged areas but regularly commute to a university located in a better quality environment might be presented with opportunities to network with other college students, including other ex-offenders, and also access resources not readily available to them in their residential communities.

Moreover, “social networks of transformed ex-offenders who have committed to crime-free lifestyles can perhaps enhance the availability of social capital for other transformed ex-offenders, and for releasees who may be undecided about reoffending” (Taylor, 2013: 125). In essence, inclusion in college peer networks composed of ex-offenders might help build an “individual’s stock in social capital,” and encourage opportunities to “marshal the new resources needed for a better life,” including “a job, a place to live, and educational skills” (Clear 2007: 78; Farrall, 2004: 60). This is important given that few released inmates are able to find legitimate jobs on their own, due to the stigma of incarceration or weakened job skills resulting from idle time spent incarcerated (Sampson and Laub 1993; Solomon et al. 2001; Uggen et al. 2003; Western et al. 2001). Furthermore, these opportunities for change emerge from relationships that are based on shared experiences and mutual understanding, and can offer an invaluable source of emotional and social support crucial to successful reintegration (Maruna, 2011; Taylor, 2013).

In addition to the pro-social benefits of going to college post-incarceration, completing this endeavor can also enhance employment opportunities in the primary

labor market and, in turn, desistance efforts (Chappell, 2004; Vacca 2004). This is because “successful educational achievement...can be an important life event that can redirect criminal trajectories....[and] open doors for conventional opportunities over the life course” (Alderson and Nielsen 2002; Blomberg et. al, 2006: 206; Laub and Sampson 2001; Wilson 1996). Yet “it is easier for a white person with a criminal record to get a job than a black person with no record, even among applicants with otherwise comparable credentials” (Kubrin et al., 2007: 13; see also Pager, 2003). Racial disproportionality in access to post-incarceration employment opportunities illustrates how structural inequalities may persist throughout the life course, worsening the collateral consequences of incarceration specifically faced by racial minority ex-offenders, including individuals who successfully complete college during and/or after incarceration. In addition, formerly incarcerated racial minorities who return to live in urban disadvantaged neighborhoods often encounter certain ecological features that might stifle efforts to remain engaged in higher education, avoid crime and reintegrate.

This dissertation will explore the extent to which these challenges are intertwined with social and environmental conditions and distinct from the post-incarceration experiences of minority, white and Asian participants who instead are immersed in more protective environments. It will also seek to understand the extent to which these divergent criminal and life trajectories are entrenched in early educational experiences and entry into crime, which often emerges from disparities in race, class and place. This inquiry is of particular import given the breadth of research on the school-to-prison pipeline showing that the systematic exclusion of urban disadvantaged racial minorities from primary and secondary schools is likely to fuel a cycle of low academic

preparedness and educational attainment as well as crime and incarceration. An important question concerns the roles that carceral and post-incarceration higher education might play in offsetting these inequalities. The onset of crime and early educational experiences among minority, white, and Asian ex-offenders who are not routinely isolated through school based punishments are also relevant and will be investigated as part of this comparative study.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This life course exploration into the educational and crime experiences of former offenders is based on 2012 data collected from 34 qualitative in-depth interviews with past and current members of Project Achieve,³ a voluntary program that affords formerly incarcerated individuals the opportunity to pursue a higher education at a large university located in the Northeast, referred to here as State University. At the time of the research, the program consisted of 33 enrolled students, five graduates and 15 individuals who had withdrawn from the program for reasons including but not limited to re-incarceration. I interviewed former and current students in the program who were available to participate in the study and whose contact information was made available to me by the program director, with some exceptions.

PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

The program director regularly visits youth correctional facilities located throughout the state, and holds general meetings with inmates to inform them about this educational opportunity. Most of the program participants are recruited from male correctional facilities; however some are chosen from a correctional facility for women. Inmates who express an interest in joining the program maintain contact with the program director throughout their sentences via written correspondence and regular in person meetings. In some cases, the program director also communicates with inmates' family members through phone calls or letters in an effort to help build a support system for inmates during their engagement in higher education both during and after

³ A pseudonym

incarceration. Some correctional and educational staff members might also bring awareness of the program during incarceration or at pre-release interviews with inmates who have successfully completed secondary or post-secondary coursework. Nonetheless, the program director makes final decisions about admission into the program based on standard eligibility criteria. Under these standards, in order to qualify for Project Achieve students must have at least a high school diploma or GED, complete 12 hours of transferable college coursework with close to a 3.0 GPA during incarceration, and not commit any major disciplinary infractions during that time. The aforementioned carceral requirement generally involves successful performance in community college courses offered at correctional facilities.

SELECTION AND DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE

Research participants were drawn from individual names and contact information obtained from a list provided by the director of 51 current and former students, with the latter including graduates and other individuals who had withdrawn from the program. He did not have the contact information for two individuals who were no longer in the program. I first attempted phone and follow up email communications with nearly every named person (see below). The email invitation included a description of the research purpose, explanation of participant involvement, outline of benefits and risks, informed consent procedures and information on how to contact me if they were interested in participating.

I did not contact five individuals who were included in the list because they were either in a halfway house or in federal custody at the time. I spoke with an administrator at the halfway house where three Project Achieve participants were staying and learned

that interviews with residents were not permitted as per the facility rules. They remained there for the duration of the data collection phase of this study so I did not contact them for interviews. The other two excluded persons were re-incarcerated at federal prisons, and thus only available to provide written responses to interview questions sent via regular mail. I chose not to utilize that data collection method in order to preserve the confidentiality of my research. There were also eight individuals who never acknowledged my efforts to make contact, another three did not show up at the scheduled interview, and one remained unreceptive to my attempts to reschedule a cancelled interview. The remaining 34 persons were responsive and completed a preliminary phone screening by answering general questions about their involvement in the program and willingness to participate in the study. They also responded to my email communications to confirm their consent to participate and understanding of the potential risks and benefits involved. Each took part in a subsequent qualitative interview, described in more detail below.

The participants revealed prior levels of educational attainment which varied and were reported as follows: seven had no education credentials prior to incarceration but completed carceral GEDs,⁴ four had GEDs they received prior to incarceration, 12 had previously earned high school diplomas, and 11 completed some pre-carceral college classes. None had earned a college degree at the time they began participation in Project Achieve. These differences impacted the timing in which participants were able to start

⁴ Inmates under the age of 21 who had neither a high school diploma nor a GED were mandated by law to take GED classes until they either satisfied the requirements for a carceral GED or reached that minimum age.

taking post-secondary correctional education classes, as a minimum of a GED or high school diploma was required for enrollment. Among study participants, three had the credentials needed to take college classes during incarceration but they did not because of difficulty securing proof of high school diploma, correctional facility restrictions on inmate access to higher education and/or lack of awareness about those opportunities. They were instead required to complete classes post-release at local community colleges in order to gain admittance to Project Achieve.

Most of the research participants had been released between one month and five years prior to our interview⁵ after serving anywhere from three to ten years for a wide variety of non-violent and violent crimes. At the time of the interview, three remained under probation⁶, 21 were serving a parole term, six had already completed a parole term and four served all time while incarcerated. Among the research participants, there were two college alumni, 24 current students who had already taken at least one year of classes at the university, and eight incoming students, two of whom planned to postpone their enrollment for one year with the hopes of gaining some work experience and earning money during that time. Included within this sample were 30 men, three women and one transgender person. They ranged in age from 24 to 57, and the mean age was 28. There was significant racial diversity among the interviewees, who self-identified as Black (12), Biracial (7), Latino (5), White (5), Asian (3) and Middle Eastern (2).

⁵ Research participants were not directly asked about the timing of their release. This information is missing for nine of them.

⁶ These research participants had been released from prison, but might have been placed on probation as punishment for additional charges accrued, family and/or traffic court-related matters.

Aside from racial differences in the sample, there were also inequalities in their places of residence before and after incarceration, which tied into varying socioeconomic influences and experiences with crime and education. With three exceptions, all research participants provided place names of pre-carceral neighborhoods of residence. This information was used to gather details about the socioeconomic conditions and demographics of these areas. Where such information was not available, rich community descriptions emerged in the interviews that served as a basis for classification in the absence of geographical names, and also were used to provide contextual information about their neighborhoods (see Livingston and Miller, 2014). For example, Deb did not specifically name the neighborhoods where she lived growing up but provided sufficient details about these places from which inferences about community context could be based. She explained that as a young child she first lived in a community that was surrounded by “pretty urban...not great neighborhoods,” and added that “it would be pretty dangerous around there.” Deb also mentioned that she and her family then moved to “a better area” in another state.

Such illustrative statements regarding neighborhood characteristics, along with actual place names, were collectively compared to official community classifications included in the 2000 Census in order to categorize communities of origin by type. I used this categorization to analyze each interviewee’s home environment within three overarching contexts: “disadvantaged,” “disadvantaged to suburban or near disadvantaged” and “suburban.” The category “disadvantaged” was used in reference to participants who described their pre-carceral communities of residence as low-income, mostly urban, high crime areas with limited access to mainstream employment

Table 3.1 Prior Educational Attainment, Community Context, and Race/Ethnicity (N=34)

	<i>Some College</i>	<i>HS Diploma</i>	<i>Pre-Carceral GED</i>	<i>Carceral GED</i>
<u><i>Disadvantaged Community</i></u> (N=12)	3 (25%)	3 (25%)	--	6 (50%)
Black	2 (16%)	3 (25%)	--	3 (25%)
Latino	1 (9%)	--	--	2 (16%)
Biracial/ethnic	--	--	--	1 (9%)
Middle Eastern	--	--	--	--
Asian	--	--	--	--
White	--	--	--	--
<u><i>Disadvantaged to Suburban and Near-Disadvantaged</i></u> (N=6)	2 (33%)	2 (33%)	1 (17%)	1(17%)
Black	2 (33%)	1(17%)	1 (17%)	1 (17%)
Latino	--	--	--	--
Biracial/ethnic	--	1 (17%)	--	--
Middle Eastern	--	--	--	--
Asian	--	--	--	--
White	--	--	--	--
<u><i>Suburban Community</i></u> (N=16)	7 (44%)	5 (31%)	2 (13%)	2 (13%)
Black	1 (6%)	--	--	1 (6%)
Latino	--	--	1 (6%)	1 (6%)
Biracial/ethnic	1 (6%)	1 (6%)	1 (6%)	--
Middle Eastern	--	1 (6%)	--	--
Asian	2 (13%)	1 (6%)	--	--
White	3 (19%)	2 (13%)	--	--

opportunities. Next, the “disadvantaged to suburban or near disadvantaged” grouping was applied to interviewees who spent part of their childhoods in poor inner cities and

then moved with their families to middle class communities or grew up in working class African-American urban or near-urban neighborhoods before starting high school. Finally, the “suburban” classification included individuals who grew up in middle to upper class resource-laden neighborhoods where crime was almost nonexistent. Post-incarceration, many participants returned to live in these neighborhoods of origin, while a few were able to find housing near the university. This served to enhance this comparative investigation.

DATA COLLECTION AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All of the interviews were voluntary, confidential, and compensated with the receipt of \$25 made available through a small research grant from the School of Criminal Justice at Rutgers. Interviews were conducted in person at an agreed upon and convenient place close to campus, work or home so that research participants would not incur any additional transportation costs. I outlined the research objectives and guaranteed confidentiality at the start of each interview. I also obtained consent to audio-record the interviews in order to preserve the content of each conversation for later transcription. All participants were informed that transcriptions along with other records of my research will be erased from the computer memory disks within three years after my research is complete.

The interviews consisted of open-ended questions and lasted approximately one hour in duration. These questions were designed to gain an in-depth understanding of transitions into and away from crime over the life course and the ways in which engagement in and withdrawal from education impacted those changes (see Appendix 1: Interview Guide). Included in the investigation was an inquiry into the influence of

environmental and school contexts before, during and after incarceration, with a particular emphasis on the juxtaposition between post-incarceration experiences related to places of residence and the university campus.

I paid close attention to the possibility that some of the topics covered in the interview guide might cause some level of discomfort or embarrassment for participants as they discussed their educational experiences within the context of their past crime and incarceration. One concern was that participants might feel some stress about revealing information related to their prior incarceration, as the disclosure of such details has the potential to damage their reputation among faculty members and other students who otherwise have no knowledge of their past. I attempted to address such fears by informing all research participants that no directly identifying information would be solicited, all information would be kept confidential and maintained in a password protected file on my password protected personal computer, and by assuring them that they could refuse to answer any questions they did not wish to respond to and could withdraw from the study at any time. In fact, I intended to offer a prorated amount of \$10 to any subject who came to the agreed upon interview location but subsequently withdrew from the study as compensation for time spent considering participation. Nonetheless, all of the individuals who agreed to participate completed the interviews and were compensated the full \$25 amount.

As shown in the Interview Guide, research participants were asked to identify and describe any changes in their pre-carceral levels of engagement in education, circumstances influencing these developments and the specific impact on outlooks and involvement in crime. To that end, I inquired about the role of family structure, peer

groups and neighborhood dynamics in shaping pre-incarceration educational experiences, including levels of educational attainment and how these factors might have impacted entry into crime. I also asked questions geared toward understanding the extent, if any, to which participation in post-secondary correctional education helped transform perceptions of crime, and to what extent post-incarceration educational experiences helped to strengthen these outlooks. To that end, research participants were asked about peer and neighborhood factors that might have posed a threat to their commitment to education and avoidance of crime both during and after incarceration. As part of this inquiry, they were encouraged to explain whether their college experiences during those times served to offset negative influences. I also asked them about other challenges specific to reentry related to financial hardships, parental responsibilities and transportation concerns, and how these issues might have impacted academic performance and engagement in higher education vis-a-vis Program Achieve.

ANALYSIS STRATEGY

I transcribed the data, preliminarily sorted it into categories based on pre-incarceration, incarceration and post-incarceration experiences, and then used inductive analysis techniques to uncover thematic patterns. The interview responses revealed race, class and place inequalities that were pertinent to engagement in education and crime over the life course, and this became apparent early in the analysis process. As an integral part of the process, I first thoroughly read the transcripts to locate relevant words, phrases and passages that facilitated the categorical organization of the data, including information related to educational experiences, into groups specific to time periods before, during, and after incarceration. I then closely scrutinized data assigned to each

time period, and made thematic observations regarding the intersection between race, socioeconomic status and community type that were described as contributing to divergent pathways to crime and desistance. This process inspired the emergence of hypotheses suggesting a time order sequence of multiple events affecting the varying levels of engagement in education and involvement in criminal behavior at different life stages.

As hypotheses emerged from these patterns, I refined them to reflect common threads and inconsistencies within and among interview responses, a technique used to increase the internal validity of qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006; Miller, 2011; Silverman, 2006). I began by comparing and synthesizing similar statements included in each of the three main domains related to pre-incarceration, incarceration and post-incarceration to draw logical conclusions. This analysis was repeated for each of the aforementioned sub-categories reflecting communities of origin in order to establish cohesive “storylines” regarding how race and class inequalities along with spatial movements shaped involvement in crime and engagement in education at various periods of time (Agnew, 2006). I separately addressed data that did not fit into that analysis by suggesting alternative explanations for how and the extent to which such information might still be considered using the original hypotheses. This inductive process was rigorous, and the data rich analysis chapters that follow will provide readers with sufficient detail to evaluate the conclusions drawn. Accordingly, the investigation of events over the course of a lifetime is particularly valuable with respect to issues best explained in stages that naturally occur and evolve over time. This analysis helped reveal changes in the interaction between race, class and place factors influenced by key life

events, thus facilitating the formation of analytic inferences about the underlying influences shaping the onset, persistence of, and desistance from crime (Mears et al., 2013; Veysey et al., 2013).

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

There were important limitations to this study related to the methodology used, sample selection and characteristics of sample members that narrowed the extent to which inferences could be drawn from the research participants to non-participant program members and also the general ex-offender population. Most importantly, qualitative retrospective life history interviews carry the risk of misinformation, which is commonly linked to faulty memories, deceit and telescoping (Carbone-Lopez and Miller, 2012). Although I took care to assure interviewees that their responses would be kept confidential, perhaps individuals with criminal records might also deliberately withhold or misrepresent details about the nature and extent of their involvement in crime pre-, during and post-incarceration for fear of prosecution for undetected crimes and/or stigmatization.

A specific concern related to this retrospective study arose from my questions regarding early education and its influence on pathways into crime. For instance, I asked research participants to recall distinct experiences in elementary, middle and high school that shaped their involvement in crime during these specific life periods. Since, at the time of the interviews, most participants were between the ages of 24 and 31 (with the exception of one 57 year old), they might have unwittingly misstated relevant information or even neglected to provide full accounts of life events that shaped levels of engagement in education and crime. Furthermore, this research did not utilize mixed

methodologies, which meant that I was unable to systematically cross-reference these interview responses for accuracy. Yet, I analyzed the rich data by comparing responses about educational and criminal outcomes according to features of race, class and place, which research participants identified using descriptive information. This helped to facilitate the emergence of patterns between individuals who shared similar personal characteristics and life experiences, and also allowed for me to reconcile any inconsistencies.

Next, I inquired about carceral experiences; however, research participants were not directly asked about the timing of their release from incarceration. Consequently, these details were not obtained for nine participants but the other 25 revealed that they had been released from prison between one month and five years prior to our interview. Given these circumstances, I do not take for granted the possibility that recollections about post-secondary correctional experiences, which included interactions with other inmates, correctional and educational staff members, might not be entirely correct. Furthermore, the research participants served sentences ranging from three to ten years, and as a result of this past confinement, might have presented skewed accounts of the behaviors and motives of correctional officers and others who controlled their movements during incarceration.

These limitations aside, the focus of this study was on the richness and depth of the life history interviews responses collected. The purpose was to gain insight into the role of education in the life course pathways of the research participants and its relationship with crime, desistance and reintegration while also assessing the extent to which inequalities of race, class and place affect these developments. To that end, the

research participants provided descriptive accounts about the internal and external forces that shaped not only decisions to pursue a college career at State University through membership in Project Achieve but also ways in which educational experiences influenced post-carceral views on crime. Interviews about life course events provide a comprehensive overview of changes in interactions between people and their surroundings over time, a feature that proves useful when considering situational and background factors impacting involvement in crime, which tend to be dynamic in nature (Agnew, 2006; Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2011; Young and Rees, 2013). Considering these elements in isolation would diminish our understanding of the cumulative impact of life events, which can appear to be subjective and discontinuous in the abstract (Cid and Marti, 2012; Lyngstad and Skardhamar, 2013; Sampson and Laub, 2003).

Although this qualitative retrospective study adds context to existing theoretical frameworks often used to explain engagement in education and involvement in crime, the findings cannot be generalized. Notably, there are two facets of selection effects; one of course is that by definition the sample only includes that small proportion of former inmates able and eligible for participating in post-carceral higher education. Specifically, the research participants had the opportunity to engage in post-secondary education both during and after incarceration, an experience that is not common to the general ex-offender population. Given this restricted sampling frame, inferences were not drawn from this population to those who do not pursue post-secondary education. The second aspect of selection bias is related to the population of potential participants. Specifically, a total of 53 individuals had been admitted into Project Achieve based in part on their

successful academic performance in college courses taken during incarceration.

Consequently, the 34 individuals who actually participated in this study represent just under two thirds of the total population of eligible participants.

I am unable to speak to how representative their experiences are compared to those who could not or did not participate. For example, compared to 19 individuals who did not take part in the research, research participants may have agreed to take part in the study as a result of a greater commitment to education and desistance. However, this was not necessarily the case, as the program director informed me that several of the non-participant program members have, since the time my interviews were conducted, graduated from State University with exceptional grades and are either gainfully employed or graduate students. He also indicated that perhaps they did not participate in my study because of schedule conflicts and/or family obligations. The program director also mentioned that some of the other non-participants have withdrawn from the university due to academic hardships and/or trouble with the law. Unfortunately, I cannot speak with certainty as to the subjective reasons 19 program members chose not to be involved in my research and how their post-carceral outlooks on crime and higher education might have shaped these decisions.

Regardless, this purposive sample will provide insight into the patterned interactions that influence varying levels of attachment to education over time, and how these changes impact participation in crime. These relationships do not suggest causality but instead offer a comprehensive understanding of the connection between educational experiences and pathways into and out of crime. This is politically timely research given the growing commitment nationwide to promote and support post-secondary carceral

educational opportunities, the completion of which has been found to have an inverse impact on crime and reoffending (Chappell, 2004; Lockwood et al., 2012). In addition, the role of post-secondary education in facilitating reentry processes has also been well established (Cho and Tyler, 2010). This research is thus particularly useful given the policy import of carceral and post-carceral secondary educational programming.

Chapter 4. Pre-Carceral Educational Experiences, Race, Class, Place and the Onset of Offending

Research participants in this study shared pre-carceral educational experiences rooted in inequalities related to race, socioeconomic status and community context, which contributed to disparities in levels of prior engagement in education, educational attainment and pathways to crime. In this respect, racial minority participants faced the most challenges. More specifically, Black and Latino interviewees who described growing up in poor, urban disadvantaged communities where crime was commonplace had the least amount of formal education in comparison to the pre-carceral educational credentials reported by racial minority, White and Asian participants living in middle to upper class non-metropolitan neighborhoods at the time of their incarceration. Furthermore, those racial minorities who came from middle-class backgrounds mentioned the school-to-prison pipeline as an integral aspect of their early educational experiences and involvement in crime. Nonetheless, from a general standpoint the research participants entered prison, on average, with exceptional academic credentials compared to other inmates. For example, the Department of Corrections released a 2010 report indicating that among state inmates, 14 percent were GED holders, 17 percent had a high school diploma, and less than four percent had taken college courses but had not received a post-secondary degree, and one percent had a post-secondary degree (see NJ STEP, n.d.). That report did not specify which of those credentials were acquired prior to incarceration.

On the other hand, the results of this study clearly showed that over two thirds of the individuals who participated in this study had a high school diploma and/or some college experience before getting incarcerated, while just eight earned their GED during

incarceration before taking college classes. Overall, the research participants enjoyed early educational success marked by acquisition of a high school diploma, GED and/or college experience. However, these educational trajectories were not unencumbered, but rather marred by delinquency and crime. The racial minority participants in particular spoke about race, social and structural disadvantages that were systematic and blocked access to conventional pathways, as evidenced by their comparatively lower levels of educational attainment.

Indeed, distinct characteristics of pre-carceral places of residence intersected with race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, framing prior levels of educational attainment. As shown in Table 4.1 below (see also Table 3.1 above), 12 participants (35%) were raised in mostly urban disadvantaged neighborhoods, another six (18%) grew up in low-income inner cities but then moved to nearby African-American working class neighborhood or more economically advantaged communities before entering high school and 16 (47%) lived in middle-class or wealthy suburban neighborhoods throughout their childhoods up until the time of incarceration. The research participants who spent all or part of their youth in neighborhoods characterized by poverty and crime were non-white, including 10 of the 13 Blacks, three of the five Latinos and three of the seven biracial participants, each of whom had one African-American parent. Furthermore, half of the participants who spent their entire childhoods immersed in such low-income, inner city environments entered prison with no formal educational credentials but earned a carceral GED before taking carceral college classes. The racial minority participants who transitioned from disadvantaged to suburban or near disadvantaged communities during adolescence fared slightly better, as they all had earned at least a GED before getting incarcerated. Yet, the white, Asian and

Middle Eastern participants from middle to upper-class suburban backgrounds had the most prior educational success given that they all had a high school diploma prior to incarceration and more than half also had some pre-carceral college experience. By way of comparison, less than a quarter of the total number of black and Latino participants had some college exposure prior to getting incarcerated. These distinctions are illustrated in the table below.

Table 4.1. Sample Characteristics

	<i>Some College</i>	<i>HS Diploma</i>	<i>Pre-Carceral GED</i>	<i>Carceral GED</i>
<u>Community Context</u>				
Disadvantaged Community (N=12)	3 (25%)	3 (25%)	--	6 (50%)
Disadvantaged to Suburban and Near-Disadvantaged (N=6)	2 (33%)	2 (3%)	1 (17%)	1 (17%)
Suburban Community(N=16)	7 (44%)	5 (31%)	2 (13%)	2 (13%)
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>				
Black (N=13)	4 (31%)	5 (38%)	1 (8%)	5 (38%)
Latino (N=5)	1 (20%)	--	1 (20%)	3 (60%)
Biracial/ethnic (N=7)	2 (29%)	3 (43%)	1 (14%)	1 (14%)
Asian and Middle Eastern (N=4)	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	--	--
White (N=5)	3 (60%)	2 (40%)	--	--

This chapter will seek to unpack distinctions in race, class and place that shaped fragmented opportunities to engage in education during childhood and adolescence, including some ways in which these factors contributed to disparities in pre-carceral educational achievement, delinquency and entry into crime. I begin by discussing research

participants' experiences in primary school through to college (where applicable) within the context of structural inequalities starting with Asian students from socially advantaged neighborhoods, then moving on to white students who also came from middle-class or affluent non-metropolitan communities. Overall, white and Asian student shared accounts that were distinct, yet both stood apart from the life histories revealed by racial minority participants from both suburban and disadvantaged backgrounds. Of particular relevance was the influence of positive school and safe neighborhood environments in shaping pathways into crime.

These accounts are then compared and contrasted to the perspectives of racial minority participants, who generally characterized neighborhood and/or school factors as part of a conduit to poor academic performance, misconduct and crime. I then describe in the following order the distinct experiences revealed by racial minorities from suburban backgrounds, blacks and Latinos who transitioned from disadvantaged to better quality neighborhoods and finally those who remained living in poor inner city neighborhoods pre-incarceration. In doing so, I highlight relevant comparisons between and among members of the aforementioned groups. These findings reveal emergent patterns concerning the divergent yet overlapping influences of race and socio-structural divisions on engagement in education and involvement in crime during youth.

EARLY EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND PATHWAYS TO OFFENDING ASIAN STUDENTS FROM SUBURBAN ADVANTAGED NEIGHBORHOODS

The three Asian research participants indicated that family mattered and motivated them to become engaged in education starting in elementary school. They each grew up in two-parent households and felt pressured by their families to excel in school. In fact, they

recalled performing exceptionally well in school until high school, when their connections to parents and school began to weaken and deviant behaviors emerged. This is distinct from other research participants, who began to move away from education and into crime as they advanced from elementary school to middle school. One plausible explanation for this distinction is that the Asian students revealed strong commitments to education which they tied back to cultural norms learned during childhood.

To that end, Jeevan, Deb and Wayne explained that they always had strong attachments to school starting in elementary school mostly because of deeply rooted family values centered on education and other conventional pathways. Wayne for example mentioned that he was part of a “very academically focused family,” with a mother who owned a math and reading enrichment center. He began his education at a prestigious private preschool located in the “upper middle class area” where he also lived. Wayne then entered the public school system and always had “extra practice in terms of math and reading comprehension” at home. He received good grades, “participated in class and didn’t have any problems in elementary school.”

Jeevan came “from an Indian household,” and was also taught that getting an education “is just expected of you, it is a top priority,” a belief which compelled him to perform well academically throughout elementary and middle school. Unlike Wayne, he received his primary education at a private school where he would “get into a little mischief, start little troubles and things like that” but was careful not to join friends in what he considered to be deviant behaviors such as “sneaking into their fathers’ liquor cabinets, stealing alcohol” or “smoking marijuana.” As Jeevan further explained, “my friends, you know they started smoking marijuana in sixth grade but I was always like we

can't do that, we're not gonna do that." He went on to say, "I was always against that as a child growing up" and "used to always say 'that's not right, that's wrong' because of the family values instilled at a young age."

Deb was Chinese American and much like Jeevan her childhood behaviors both in and outside of school were largely driven by family dynamics. As she put it, "I just did what I was supposed to do....I think partially because of how my mom is. She just force[d] me to study all the time and she's very strict...so I really didn't have anything else I could do." Deb explained that as a young child she felt obligated to meet certain standards for success imposed primarily by her mother who became a medical doctor after coming "to this country with nothing" because "she just kept working at it to get where she needed to be." With that in mind, she focused on doing "homework first" and took advantage of opportunities for "extra studying" at home.

One important and unique facet of the pre-carcer experiences shared by the Asian participants was growing up in learning conducive environments both at home and in school where they were also provided with invaluable resources and support to help progress their educational advancement. Their early engagement in education was firmly entrenched in family and cultural values which served as a protective feature in their lives as it inspired them to focus on their studies, perform well in school and resist negative peer influences throughout elementary and middle school.

Another point of distinction was that each of the Asian participants graduated from high school prior to getting incarcerated. To that end, these individuals remembered striving for academic success during high school until around junior or senior year, when they began to seek independence from their parents and transition into

crime through negative peer associations and/or substance abuse. They also revealed outlooks on crime and punishment that emerged during this time that were linked to their upbringing in middle to upper class non-metropolitan neighborhoods with families that strongly embraced educational advancement and denounced criminal behaviors. Against this backdrop, the Asian participants explained why they viewed their past crimes as mistakes, driven by some combination of poor-decision making and the influence of peers, drugs or alcohol. In addition, they did not anticipate facing legal punishments for these actions, as such consequences were not frequently imposed upon the few friends and neighborhood residents who had committed crimes.

Growing up, Wayne did not personally know or hear about anyone in the neighborhood who went to prison. As he elaborated further, “it wasn’t something that was very common. So there was that idea like ‘oh that’s not going to happen to me.’ Like, if you got in trouble most people would get probation or something like that or pretrial intervention.” Indeed, Wayne had been “in and out of three treatment facilities” by his senior year in high school and each time was “because of a run-in with the law.” As he explained, “I was a juvenile for most of those, whether it was an assault charge or a possession of a controlled substance charge....I got four juvenile charges.” Wayne believed that time he spent in treatment facilities “took away from academics” because he had been “doing fairly well in school, participating and getting good grades” until junior year when his legal troubles began. He also attributed his disengagement from high school to a “really significant sports injury” after which he “started to spiral downwards...into a bigger cycle of addiction.” Wayne was no longer able to play sports and became “a daily user of prescription drugs” and would “party over the weekends.”

He believed these experiences contributed to change in his educational path and involvement in crime. As Wayne put it, “I didn’t apply to colleges, and so I started to work and that’s when I actually committed the crime and got incarcerated a couple of months after I graduated.”

Jeevan and Deb also graduated from high school but unlike Wayne they demonstrated steady academic success throughout and attended college for a brief time before getting involved in the crimes which led to their incarceration. For instance, Deb was still at the top of her class, “getting straight A’s...and still doing well in AP and honors classes.” Aside from the continued pressure from her mother to perform well academically, she recalled that the students in her high school were “very competitive.” As Deb stated, “I just felt like there were so many people smarter, doing better...I just remember like for SATs I thought I did pretty decent but I think in the high school like it wasn’t even really anything, like everyone did very well.” She added, “I think the competitiveness of it makes you feel like lower than if you were at a different school.” This made Deb feel disingenuous about school, but she continued “to just do what” she “was supposed to do” in order to keep up.

Although Jeevan “slacked off a little bit” around junior or senior year, he attributed that to “senioritis” being that his grades were fairly good. He remembered being careful not to engage in social activities that he felt would distract his attention away from school. As Jeevan put it,

I knew that if I went out and played manhunt or something with my friends and I didn’t come back until eight or nine o’clock at night then I was going to be tired and I wasn’t going to be able to complete my work....But I kind of avoided that. I was always on top of my schoolwork and studies and things like that.

Yet, he also described his senior year in high school as a “downslide” because that is when he started to make what he described as bad choices and eventually gave in to friends and “said ‘yeah, you know, I’ll go out.’ I’ll hang out with you guys I’ll do this, do that. Smoke a little marijuana or drink or stuff like that and then it seemed like a snowball effect.”

Yet Jeevan and Deb were the only two out of the three Asian participants who continued their education beyond high school, although they both dropped out of college before finishing. In addition, they explained how the experience of living on a college campus made them feel independent and in that sense provided an opportunity to offset parental pressures regarding educational success. In fact, Deb started college a semester early and explained, “I started the summer before fall...to start ahead, it was mainly to like get out of my parents’ house.” Despite these efforts to break away from the influence of her parents, she was deeply impacted by their decision to end all financial support during her sophomore year in college. Deb explained that her parents’ decision was the result of their belief that she “wasn’t doing up to par in school.” As she put it: “It’s like nothing is good enough....If you get a 92 on a test it’s like ‘why didn’t you get 100?’ So at that point I wasn’t doing really bad but if I was to get a C in a class then they were just like what are you doing with your life so...I don’t know.” In response, she “just kind of gave up essentially...stopped going to school,” and worked full time. Deb would often feel depressed during that time and turned to her friends for company, which, as she indicated, did not always turn out for the best: “I had work all day and later one of my friends asked me if I wanted to go out with her. She just got out of a relationship with

her boyfriend and she was really upset. I told her I was really tired and I kind of just wanted to stay in, but she convinced me to go out.” Later that evening, Deb was driving home after a few drinks and “dozed off and fell asleep at the wheel for a split second,” causing an accident that fatally killed her passenger friend. She made it clear that the incident was a mistake and mentioned that she always “tried not to break the law” ever since her parents had “bugged out” on her for getting a speeding ticket in high school. In that respect, Deb surmised about how other people from less advantaged backgrounds might not view crime in the same way. As she stated, “if I was raised in a different environment...like if everybody I knew was committing crimes and doing jail time, then I guess that maybe it would be more of a possibility, more likelihood that I would be like that too.”

Jeevan also viewed his past crime as the result of a brief lapse in judgment, which was shaped by peer associations rather than neighborhood characteristics. As he put it, “I didn’t know anyone that went to prison, that got caught, that got arrested.” So Jeevan was “not thinking about the ramifications, what could happen if you get caught” when he along with six friends robbed a local gas station. He further explained, “it’s almost like I got caught up in that type of lifestyle and I guess me trying to be cool, trying to a part of the group.” As Jeevan recalled, “once I got into college...my parents weren’t on top of me, I was living on my own and I started cutting classes just so I could hang out....That affected my grades, I didn’t even make it one semester.” He was subsequently placed on academic probation and “got kicked off of campus” after getting caught smoking marijuana in his dorm room. Jeevan considered his departure from college the beginning of “like a downward...downhill” spiral that involved “more hanging with friends smoking

marijuana, drinking late night, coming home late night...wrong things, wrong crowd, bad company.” Both Jeevan and Deb identified changes in their relationships with parents as largely shaping their pre-carceral levels of engagement in college. Without these restraints they more readily gave in to peer influences and in doing so, made poor choices that led to their crimes. At the same time, they were privileged compared to research participants from other race and socioeconomic backgrounds given their experiences with education and crime, which were reflections of familial cultural norms that deterred their involvement in crime until college.

WHITE STUDENTS FROM SUBURBAN ADVANTAGED NEIGHBORHOODS

None of the five white research participants identified their cultural or family backgrounds as shaping their level of engagement in education during primary school and they were also not steadily focused on education like the Asian participants were at that age. Yet most of them shared positive primary school experiences that included receiving good grades and favorable treatment from school administrators, even in instances where they engaged in school misconduct such as class disruptions, cutting class or fighting. In addition, the majority of them were raised in neighborhoods where there were very few criminal offenders and they rarely knew of individuals who were arrested and incarcerated. The white research participants recalled how these experiences made them feel privileged, as if they could engage in delinquent and criminal conduct that would at the very least go unpunished and even perhaps undetected. These feelings contributed to some of them becoming involved in drugs and other crimes by around the eighth grade, a period when the Asian students were still very much into their education.

Mike exemplified one way in which social advantage might facilitate false pretenses about crime and punishment as he stated, “when I committed crimes...I didn’t know the consequences. I didn’t even think about the consequences because when you think you’re smart enough to get away with anything...you don’t think about the possibilities that it won’t work.” Part of his rationale behind thinking that way was because he did not know of “any cousins or brothers or friends or anyone in the neighborhood or school” who was ever arrested or had to serve time. Mike added, “you know, you see crime everywhere [but] it’s not normal for people to do it at least not in my family or the neighborhood I grew up in.” He elaborated further:

I mean I don’t think a normal person has to avoid something like that. I mean it’s natural to not think about committing crime and doing things like that especially the neighborhood that I grew up in and the family that I grew up in. Like they would never have a need to do that.

Peter too used to live in a neighborhood that he described as having a “very homey atmosphere” and only “knew maybe two people that had gotten arrested” and they received just one year of probation for marijuana possession. He clarified that it was not “the hood or anything like that,” but a “suburban, blue collar type town” with “a lot of horse farms and houses.”

Mike and Peter along with other white participants also did not feel vulnerable to school based punishments during elementary and middle school despite their occasional misbehaviors such as creating distractions in class. In fact, when Mike was in elementary school, he received “good grades, was in the honors program” and “got along with teachers” even though he acted like a “class clown.” He also mentioned that “the [school] environment was good...the teachers and system was good.” Mike went on to

say that in middle school, it was the “same atmosphere, always a good atmosphere, not a bad middle school, not much fighting or crime or anything. It was nice.” Within that context, he continued to demonstrate academic excellence until the eighth grade when he “started to get into partying, girls and cared about sports more and less about school.” As Mike admitted, “somewhere along the line, I just didn’t take as much pride in my grades as I had before.”

Similarly Peter received straight As “all the way up through eighth grade,” maintained a good relationship with his teachers and “really didn’t get into any trouble” despite acting like “kind of a class clown...but not like a disruptive class clown.” Much like Mike, he recalled pleasant primary school environments where he felt a sense of belonging which helped drive his ambition to succeed in school during that time. As Peter stated, “I had a good relationship with all my teachers, they liked me. I was you know a very sociable person, so I engaged with all the students, participated.” He mentioned that his sixth grade teacher was the “most memorable” because he was “a young guy, very engaged with everything” and “made learning fun.” Peter could not recall any aspect of this academic experience that might have thwarted his early engagement in education.

Quincy also had academic success in elementary and middle school yet he remained disengaged in school during that time, which was largely attributed to personal conflicts with both school and neighborhood peers. He explained that his former neighborhood was “not a bad area” in the sense that the “neighborhood itself was nice,” but the “neighborhood sucked,” because the kids who lived there were not nice. For instance, Quincy was bullied and would often get rocks thrown at him during his travels

to and from school, especially after he started gaining weight around 11 years of age. He mentioned that the bullying continued throughout middle school and lasted “for like, five, six years until high school.” Quincy believed these circumstances impacted his life in a negative way, as he stated “I don’t know if that’s what screwed me up...getting incarcerated and what not.” To that end, he “got into a lot of trouble, got into a lot of fights” in school with other students who teased him. He also “didn’t really care about school” preferring to play “video games and what not” but still managed to get “decent grades.” Quincy largely attributed this educational success to the influence of his “fifth grade elementary school teachers” who helped him manage any personal issues stemming from school misconduct such as fighting. In this respect, he believed that the “school system was alright” compared to what he perceived them to be like in urban disadvantaged areas.

Ivan too looked at his past educational experiences as a reflection of the opportunities he was afforded by way of his socioeconomic position. As he explained, “I wasn’t from a rich family, I wasn’t from a poor family, I was middle class. I guess I grew up in the suburbs you know.” He attended elementary and middle school in the surrounding area and felt inspired by a childhood teacher who “really had a strong influence” and helped him manage some “emotional issues” which were mostly related to “being hyper sometimes.” Ivan believed having that support made him a strong student at the time.

One commonality among the white research participants, with the exception of one, was that their views on education and crime were described as an artifact of their immersion in so called safe neighborhoods and early school experiences that included

inclusionary punishments for misbehaving. Dexter was the outlier in this regard. He was white and raised by his grandmother on the outskirts of a major city, and did not share a similar educational history and in turn criminal trajectory with other white research participants. One crucial difference was in his description of “the academic environment” of the public elementary and middle schools that he attended. They were both part of the “lowest paid school district” in the county and were “not funded properly.” As Dexter put it, “we weren’t learning anything in elementary. Once I got out of elementary school, I didn’t really care about school.” As a result, in middle school he sought attention by “acting out in class...you know, being a class clown, feeding off of that” and considered these reactions to be his primary “outlet for support” at the time. Dexter added that he “didn’t really have anybody at home” besides his grandmother and looked for “support out in the streets basically,” which also contributed to his deviant conduct that worsened in middle school. He described himself as “pretty bad” and was repeatedly suspended, sent to detention and finally “held back in eighth grade” after missing so many days of school. As Dexter explained, having to repeat a grade “was kind of like, that’s what set it off and propelled my teenage years into not caring and stuff like that you know.” His lack of motivation in school grew deeper as he transitioned into high school.

Dexter was suspended numerous times in high school, and got kicked out and sent to an alternative school to begin his sophomore year after he “started getting into more trouble with students...you know fighting and stuff like that” during the ninth grade. After one year, he “was allowed back into regular school” but the summer before he “ended up getting into bad things” and “was worse behavior-wise.” For instance, Dexter

got into a physical confrontation with another student soon after his return to regular high school and as a result chose to go back to the alternative school where he completed his secondary education. After graduating, he just “worked, sold drugs, did drugs” and it was a “lifestyle...just committing crimes and stuff like that.” With that said, Dexter never sold drugs for the money but “was kind of selling them to have them around” and considered it a “free for all” because he lived with his grandmother at the time and “didn’t have to pay any bills.” As he further explained, “I was involved in a lot of the things my friends were doing” and “as we got older, things got more grown up like it went from skipping school and smoking weed or something to robbing people or robbing homes, selling drugs you know...we just propelled into heavier things you know what I mean.”

It was evident that Dexter stood out as the only white research participant who had repeatedly experienced exclusionary school based disciplinary punishments and thus he knew at the time that there was a real possibility his criminal actions outside of high school would be punished. Regardless, he felt drawn to neighborhood peers who were involved in crime because he “didn’t really get along with anybody” in high school. Indeed, difficulties related to fitting in with students in high school was something also experienced by other white research participants.

The other four white students described the advancement from middle school to high school as a challenging time, particularly because they all became less interested in doing well in school and more focused on extracurricular activities, which mainly involved hanging out with friends, fighting, using and/or selling drugs. Yet they continued to perform well academically and, just like the Asian participants, all of them

had at least a high school diploma at the time of incarceration. In addition, the white interviewees, except for Dexter, assumed they would continue to escape both legal and school based punishments even despite their worsening deviant behaviors. These beliefs helped forge their criminal pathways.

As Peter put it, “I kind of started straying away from the path that I was on....When I reached high school I guess I reached like a rebellious phase where I stopped really doing my homework. I stopped caring about school.” He added, “that’s when everything snowballed into getting in trouble.” In fact, Peter and Dexter were the only two white participants who had been “suspended for fighting” during high school. Yet, in most ways Peter’s past educational experience was similar to that of other white research participants in the sense that he was only suspended once and never faced any more severe consequences for misbehaving in high school. He used the following example to illustrate:

I fought an Egyptian kid, and he had told the principal that I told him to stop speaking his language in front of me. So they called the police, tried to say it was a racial hate crime and stuff like [that]...and that’s not what happened. So I ended up getting suspended, but I didn’t get in any legal trouble because of it.

Peter also described the student demographics at his high school and some ways in which these factors influenced his secondary educational experience:

The high school down the street from me....There were so many kids in the high school that I had to go to a different high school in [another town], very different from where I grew up. It was very high class, there was a lot of like millionaires. It was very different and...there was like five black kids my freshman year which, when I was in elementary school, middle school there was a few more. But, you know the high school was much less. It was very different, it was a very different atmosphere.

Given these circumstances, Peter grew concerned that the predominantly white affluent students would look down on him and other white students who came from working class families. He “ended up becoming friends” with the students from the other town but remembered still feeling distracted when it came to academics.

As with Peter, Quincy identified race as an integral part of his high school experience. In his case, he mentioned that the student composition at his high school “was mainly whites and Indians” along with “a fair amount of, you know black people.” Quincy mentioned that the school was ranked among the “top 20 in the state” for SAT scores and thought that was “because of all the Indian people” who went there. Yet, he felt disengaged from his studies particularly around junior or senior year when he “completely didn’t give a shit at all.” Quincy believed that was primarily because he started smoking weed during his junior year in high school and then “got like quick into everything else.” As he put it, “my whole senior year of high school was just like one big blur really. I skipped a lot of classes, days and what not” and “got heavy into drugs.” By this time, Quincy was also hanging out with people who “were doing burglaries and stuff like that, purse snatches and what not.” He joined in with friends who were doing “illegal things, but didn’t do like terrible things” and was “on the verge of not graduating and what not” as a result. Nonetheless, Quincy did finish and receive a high school diploma.

Ivan also “barely graduated” from high school particularly because he “started getting involved in drugs and alcohol” during his sophomore year after experiencing a “tough move” with his family to another state. He “had less focus on school at that point” and “was kind of rebellious” although he was never expelled or suspended. In

fact, Ivan believed that his evaluation by a child study team was part of what insulated him from such exclusionary school punishments, a sort of “loophole if you will,” which helped him to “graduate with a diploma.”

Mike also graduated from high school without ever facing any formal disciplinary consequences for “causing fights, not doing work, or being disrespectful to teachers.” In addition, he “cared less about academics” in high school but thought he could just get by. As he stated, “I’m fairly intelligent and I didn’t think I had to put the effort in.” Mike’s confidence was further strengthened by the fact that his “GPA wasn’t what it should be, but it wasn’t horrible.” Aside from academics, Mike also became less involved in sports during this time, which was a change in lifestyle that he believed impacted his high school experience and entry into crime. Specifically, he recalled playing baseball all his life and being consumed by sports until he suffered an injury in high school which left him unable to play and with much unoccupied time. As he put it, “I couldn’t play so I was just left with time and most of the people I associated with, [their] time was taken so then I started going towards selling drugs and then eventually the crime.”

Furthermore, Mike mentioned that prior to his arrest and incarceration he, along with the others, never seriously considered the possibility that they would face legal punishment for their crimes. As he stated, “when I planned an armed robbery I never thought about whether I would ever get caught. I just thought that I was so smart and it would be impossible so that was it.” Looking back, Mike described the crime as senseless, explaining that “anything I needed I could have asked my family but...I wanted to rush to be independent. So when I was young I wanted a car, I wanted my own money, cell phone, bills, clothes and stuff like that.” He added, “there’s no explanation

for it, sometimes people do crazy things.” Quincy too revealed that his past involvement in a robbery was not motivated by any financial need. As he explained, “I didn’t need money. I had a job but I’m just fuckin’ stupid. I get easily convinced to do things and so I got easily convinced to drive the getaway car.”

Quincy also believed that he would have received a lighter punishment for that first time robbery offense had he not “said a little too much” and been “nervous as shit” during a police interrogation. Although he expressed regret over not being able to “really beat the case,” he felt lucky about only being sentenced to “you know 3 with a[n] 85”⁷ because “robberies are serious, sometimes even for drivers ‘cause conspiracy is the same thing as doing it.” Peter too felt that he would have received a lesser punishment for robbery and assault charges had the circumstances been different. As he explained, “all my co-defendants said I was the leader and I made them do it...I’m the one who is saying ‘I didn’t do anything.’ So they didn’t get any time at all and I got five and a half years for it.” Peter had not expected that punishment as he revealed “I was one of those...I knew it wasn’t gonna happen to me that’s how I felt like...I wouldn’t get in trouble.” He also admitted to being “just young, foolish and the consequences just weren’t there” at that time. Ivan shared a similar perspective as he stated, “I never really looked at myself as a criminal or someone who committed crime. I looked at myself more as someone who messed up one time and is paying for it.” He went on to describe his past crime as “impulsive” particularly because he was under the influence of alcohol when he violently assaulted a friend. This was something that Ivan believed made him “a

⁷ Quincy had to serve 2.5 years or 85% of a three year sentence.

little more unique,” and distinct from other males living “closer to inner cities, urban areas... hustlers, drug dealers you know,” people whom he perceived as more likely to commit crimes and get incarcerated.

Though Dexter was an outlier, on the whole, the white participants described positive primary and secondary educational experiences, which included lenient punishments received for school misconduct and strong feelings of attachment to teachers and schools. They also identified these, along with neighborhood factors, as bolstering their confidence in being able to engage in delinquent and criminal behaviors without facing any school and/or legal consequences. From this standpoint, these favorable early educational experiences and advantaged community contexts were key aspects of crime entrée. Dexter’s account was distinct and seemed to parallel the stories portrayed by racial minority students who lived and attended schools in non-urban neighborhoods. His experiences of being bullied by peers led him to feel out of place in ways similar to those articulated by racial minority youth in such settings. Furthermore, he was the only white participant who made no attempt to go to college after graduating from high school.

Even though the white participants became more deeply involved in crime towards the end of high school, three out of the remaining four⁸ who did enroll in college prior to getting incarcerated also completed some post-secondary coursework during that time. Regardless, none of them characterized these experiences as being motivated by any specific interest or engagement in higher education. For example, as Ivan put it, “after I graduated...as a part of what I thought the process was...like ‘now I have to go to

⁸ Mike was accepted to college, but was incarcerated before the start of his freshman year for an armed robbery he committed during his senior year in high school.

community college,' so...I took some courses at community college, but my head really wasn't there." He took about six courses within two semesters "and then kind of just fell off" and did not complete the second semester.

Quincy also went to college immediately after graduating from high school even though he continued to not "give a shit about school at all." By this time, he had stopped doing as many drugs, particularly "hard drugs" but still "smoked weed all the time, got real lazy" and his "grades gradually went down." As Quincy explained, "I was there for three years and I wasted the whole three years. I got put on academic suspension 'cause my grades were under 2.0 and that was my third year." He "got kicked off campus" for smoking weed in his campus apartment and was living in the surrounding neighborhood with some friends when he "just never went to classes."

Peter shared a different account of his first year at a community college which he described as "a change from high school" because he went from "getting C's and D's just to pass to getting A's and B's with a pretty good GPA." As he explained, "I was doing all my work, my papers, homework everything that needed to be done" and "I enjoyed what I was learning about." Peter mentioned how this progress was short-lived as he became "engaged in this lifestyle" as a college sophomore where he "was selling drugs, doing drugs, just partying." He eventually put his studies "aside just to party and have fun" and "withdrew from a lot of classes...failed some classes...just stopped showing up and that's when everything started to slide."

Slightly more than half (three out of five) of the white research participants entered prison with some college experience, although none of them were very successful in that endeavor in part due to involvement in criminal activities. Yet, aside from Dexter,

they all viewed going to college directly after high school as a normative behavior that was part of a larger societal expectation. With that in mind, knowing about the potential benefits of college and/or feeling pressured to enroll in college is a social advantage that is differentially distributed by race, class and place, as shown by comparison to the experiences of racial minority students from suburban neighborhoods, which I turn to next.

RACIAL MINORITY STUDENTS FROM SUBURBAN NEIGHBORHOODS

There were eight racial minority students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds including black, Latino, biracial and Middle Eastern who were raised in suburban middle-class and affluent neighborhoods, where they attended school and lived continuously until getting incarcerated. They revealed distinct school experiences marked by feelings of isolation and frustration resulting from what was described as systematic and unequal school based exclusionary punishments for breaking the rules. Accordingly, these individuals revealed reasons why they believed those circumstances were facilitated by race and/or class inequalities that existed between them and the general school population. Indeed, many of them were often expelled, suspended or subject to other exclusionary punishments starting in elementary school for things such as disrupting class or fighting; conduct that the white participants in particular were not punished for. Furthermore, unlike the white and Asian participants who also came from suburban middle to upper class backgrounds, these eight individuals described their primary school and neighborhood experiences as a conduit to deviance, crime and incarceration.

Isaiah shared elementary and middle school experiences that he believed demonstrated the roots of a school-to-prison pipeline, which impacted his life trajectory. He

felt disconnected from school as a young child primarily because of his racial minority status and low income background, which contributed to perceived maltreatment by school administrators, teachers and other students. Isaiah attended an elementary school located in a “rich area,” but he “wasn’t rich so it was really hard....It’s like growing up on one side of the tracks and going to school on the other side of the tracks....It’s like everybody looks at you like ‘what is he doing here?’” He further explained that it was “an all white school and they were really prejudice[d]” so he and “the other black kids that were poor...had the opportunity to go to a nice school...but didn’t have the money to do all the nice stuff.” Aside from these inequalities of race and class, Isaiah also felt different because of how he remembered being treated by teachers and school administrators. As he explained: “If I wasn’t suspended, I would be fighting. If I wasn’t fighting, I would be eating lunch with the principal. I would be kicked out of class with a little desk out in the hallway or something....I was a little dumbass as a kid.” Isaiah implied that these punishments were deliberate as he mentioned “the teachers allowed students to frustrate me and then get me to beat them up and then the teacher would knowingly not do anything...[and] get me suspended.” At the time of our interview he still seemed quite upset by those circumstances, as he added, “I had to repeat kindergarten...who repeats kindergarten?” In addition, Isaiah mentioned that he did not feel deterred by the threat of such consequences by the time he reached middle school because if “you’re suspended, you’re kicked out of school....It’s like well I already got suspended three other times this year for the same thing...what are they gonna do? It doesn’t get any worse.”

Marcos similarly recalled how repetitive threats and impositions of school based exclusionary punishments during elementary and middle school did not discourage his

deviant behaviors. As he explained, “I always got kicked out of class....That was like a common, consistent thing starting from second grade....I had issues in class, just joking, acting out...nothing crazy.” In addition, Marcos revealed that his parents were often called as a result, yet he “really didn’t care” and “would go back to laughing and giggling in class” and eventually became a “destructive class clown.” Unlike Isaiah, he “loved school” and also felt comfortable socializing with other students and living in the surrounding neighborhood among “black people that got money from New York, and Jewish people that have always had money.” As Marcos put it, “I had a maid so no there wasn’t really no outside factors....It was really just solely just me acting out just looking for attention.” Yet, he recalled that his actions in school escalated and spilled over into neighborhood contexts as he began to face more severe disciplinary consequences in school.

The other racial minority students who came from suburban neighborhoods did not mention getting suspended or expelled for any reason until they reached high school. Yet much like Isaiah and Marcos, they expressed ways in which their early educational experiences were shaped by circumstances of race/ethnicity and/or class which were also closely tied to their pre-carceral places of residence and school locations. Furthermore, these suburban minority participants identified school changes along with dynamic school cultures as contributing to these differences and in turn framing opportunities for educational success and entry into crime.

For example, Oliver—who was of Middle-Eastern and white descent—grew up in a suburban neighborhood that was racially heterogeneous. He believed that his educational and criminal histories would have been different had he grown up in a “rich,

white area,” instead of just attending a school located in this type of environment. Oliver started out as a good student, as he recalled that “I always was engaged...always raised my hand and talked and I feel like that built up a stronger relationship with the teachers.” He remembered feeling disengaged in school starting in the seventh grade when he was sent to a different middle school as per a district policy that involved “switching kids in like the nicer part of the area” and placing them in schools located in lower income neighborhoods and vice versa. Oliver added, “like fourth and fifth [grades], I was in the same school and then we went to another one in sixth...just one year.” He described these forced and sudden changes as facilitating weakened attachments to school and diminished levels of engagement in education during that time. Furthermore, Oliver recalled that his teachers seemed indifferent about relating to students like himself who traveled from heterogeneous, suburban middle income neighborhoods to attend a predominantly white school located in an affluent area.

Tarik was also Middle Eastern and felt mistreated in school primarily because of his race/ethnicity. He described growing up in a predominantly white affluent neighborhood where “there’s not a lot of Arabs or whatever” and he was “pretty much the only one.” Tarik attended school in the same neighborhood so his classmates were mostly white too. He remembered being treated poorly by student peers and teachers and believed this was largely because of his racial minority status. Over time, Tarik grew detached from school, school officials and other students. Ashanti too mentioned that as a first-generation American born to African parents she often felt out of place growing up in a very small, predominantly white “one mile town” where “everyone knows each other.” As she explained, “other students started to like...make fun of me and my brother

because my mom is from Africa, she has a really thick accent.” Despite these social challenges, Ashanti received good grades throughout elementary and most of middle school but believed that she would have felt more connected to school in other diverse contexts.

Overall, these eight socially advantaged racial minorities identified school progressions, such as from elementary school to middle school, as challenging due in part to their own race and/or ethnic features, which made it hard for them to feel as if they could completely assimilate into the mainstream student cultures in their schools. Next, I will turn to the struggles they encountered advancing from middle school to high school, a time when they all felt disproportionately targeted by the imposition of exclusionary school punishments and pushed towards criminal peer circles and ultimately incarceration. These accounts demonstrate that the school-to-prison pipeline can limit access to education for diverse groups of racial minorities, including those who attend schools and live in middle-class suburban neighborhoods.

Albert, who was Latino, stated that he had resigned himself to becoming a criminal after getting suspended from high school on multiple occasions. Accordingly, the isolation he experienced during high school served to strengthen his solidarity with student and neighborhoods peers who were also treated as delinquents and thus ostracized from the mainstream school population. Albert further explained how his past delinquency and criminal conduct emerged from the concomitant influence of school experiences, peer dynamics and neighborhood characteristics. As he put it:

We all stuck together, everybody was pretty much like a clique and we all got kicked out of school and that was also the people who I hung out with. So I grew up with them, [we] got kicked out of school together, so it was

like this is what we're doing, this is how we're doing it and it made it ok at that time. That's how it felt.

Although Albert carefully described his entry into crime as a shared experience with childhood friends, ironically he felt singled out and particularly vulnerable to related legal consequences. For instance, he stated that "everybody was getting into trouble but...when we would do things for some reason I was always getting caught. I was always the one....Sometimes I wouldn't even do it." Albert did not explicitly state the reason why he was singled out, but "felt picked on by officers," which led him to seek the thrill of evading police arrest. In essence, he was not being "productive at all," especially after getting expelled from high school altogether.

Oliver too mentioned that his prior involvement in "pretty much everything illegal," which mainly included fighting, increased after he was expelled from high school. He described himself as a "juvenile delinquent" because he was "pretty bad" and "used to cut class." Although Oliver did admit to some wrongdoing, he felt school administrators reacted too harshly by imposing school based exclusionary punishments that were seemingly disproportionate. He provided the following account, which illustrates this point: "When I used to walk in, stroll in with 10 minutes left in class. You know, be disrespectful to the teachers, I used to always get kicked out, written up and eventually I got expelled. I feel like they just chewed me out, they didn't really care." Oliver was referring to his experiences as a student in a high school located in an affluent white suburb that he was not zoned for, but was required to attend as per the rules of a district policy designed to counteract overcrowding in schools. He surmised that perhaps the distinguishing characteristics of his place of origin, a racially mixed suburban middle

income community, influenced his high school behaviors and in turn the related disciplinary consequences imposed upon him. Oliver stated: “I probably would’ve, I don’t know ‘cause still there was nobody at home to tell me, you know to [focus on school]....I don’t know if it would’ve made a difference, maybe it would. Like if I was in Maine or Canada or something in the middle of nowhere....But I think they expelled me too quick out of school.” Indeed, shortly thereafter Oliver was sent to juvenile hall for an unspecified crime and was then incarcerated for his role in a violent assault. Prior to getting incarcerated, he did earn a GED but was not engaged in the relevant coursework. As Oliver explained, “I took some night classes just to keep my probation officer happy. But we didn’t even do nothing. It was just something...I just barely tried to just stay out of the arm’s reach of the law.”

Tarik also identified negative high school experiences as framing his entry into crime. He was also Middle Eastern but believed his ethnicity rather than socioeconomic background contributed to how he was perceived and treated by teachers and high school peers in the mostly white affluent neighborhood where he grew up, especially after September 11, 2001. His “first year of high school was 2001...the year when the towers got knocked down. So it was September in a new school and stuff like that.” Tarik was one of just a few Arab students in his high school and recalled how that, combined with the political and social climate at the time, made him feel unwelcomed and unmotivated in school. He also explained how these sentiments were reinforced through school-based punishments, which he began facing during his freshman year in high school. As Tarik stated, “I started not going to school a lot and I started getting into trouble when I did go to school. So like from my freshman year in high school I was just always in Saturday

detention, in-school suspension.” He was eventually placed in a child study team and assigned to stay in one class all day along with “four or five [students]...the worse kids who had behavioral issues and stuff like that.” Tarik shared the following account of how those experiences helped forge his pathway to delinquency and crime: “You start to figure, ‘oh well they see me as this problem child, then I’m gonna be a problem child.’ It just kinda did push me further. You know, they put me in this class, they treat you like you’re some sort of problem, then that’s what you’re gonna be.” He graduated from high school, but revealed that the material he learned in that alternative classroom setting was “dumbed down” as if the school pushed him and other students to graduate with little regard for academic preparedness. This contributed to Tarik’s decision to work after graduating from high school instead of going to college, in order to earn money to support his pregnant girlfriend who also had two children of her own. With a third child on the way, he started selling drugs when the money from his two remedial jobs was not coming in fast enough.

Ashanti too felt like her secondary education was basic, and she tied that experience to social inequalities embedded in her small, predominantly Jewish community and school district. Specifically, she described what she perceived as purposeful neglect on the part of high school teachers and administrators with regard to instilling racial minority youth like herself with the confidence and skills needed to pursue a higher education. As she stated:

We used to go on like site visits to go see different voc techs [vocational technical schools]...and when I grew up I realized that most of the people who went on these trips were black and Hispanic. So now I feel like that town, or the school, like really pushed the black and Hispanic students to go to the voc techs, instead of pushing them to go to like college. It’s like, “go to voc tech, when you graduate you’ll have a job.”

Ashanti added that “most of the people in the town came back, and when they came back they either got locked up, or they just hung around and never really made anything of their lives.” Her entry into crime was facilitated through associations with black neighborhood peers, including a younger cousin, all of whom were engaged in crime. As Ashanti explained, “I didn’t really see anything wrong with it at the time because it was just like I knew people that were doing it, so it was just like whatever. I can say my life at that time was carefree...no boundaries.” She recalled a similar lackadaisical attitude towards high school as she noted “performance wise I struggled, I didn’t take high school serious at all and that was that. Like I didn’t really care even though I should’ve cared.” As a result, by the time Ashanti reached the 11th grade, school administrators decided that she was “no longer controllable” and sent her to an alternative school for 45 days. She was arrested and incarcerated before finishing her time there.

Fred also spent the latter part of his high school experience in an alternative academic setting. As he explained, “I got in trouble, so they said I had to go to this other school before they let me back in.” Fred mentioned how academic rigor was a low priority in this restricted classroom environment in the sense that it “wasn’t really anything...It didn’t have no structure, they didn’t know how to teach you there. So they just pretty much, everybody was on their own. So if you didn’t want to do anything you, didn’t have to.” Fred was allowed to return to regular high school after six months, where he completed his studies and graduated on time, but still remained connected to crime.

Everton also spoke about the implications of being required to complete exclusionary, non-traditional classes during high school. In his case, school administrators

accused him of making a “terroristic threat, causing a false public alarm” by bringing a car fuse to school for a school project. It was mistaken for a pipe bomb and police were called to the school in response. Everton recalled how that incident made him feel stigmatized particularly after returning to school subsequent to his arrest. He elaborated further:

On top of me just not being completely focused I had this added distraction of people treating me a certain way when I came back. They were like ‘oh what he is gonna do now,’ and I was like ‘I didn’t do anything.’ So it kinda like I was just focused on getting out. I just wanted to do you know just like what I was brought up to do...get out of school, graduate and just go get a job, and just work and like that was just pretty much it. I was just doing the bare minimum to get by and just wanted to get out because I didn’t want to be there anymore.

Everton was put “on probation for like three years” as a result of this incident and felt this sanction was unfair since he “really didn’t do anything.” As he put it, “that’s why the system to me was a joke, the whole legal system....They just decide, ‘oh if you get caught with this situation, you’re just guilty and that’s it.’” Everton explained how his disengagement from education, negative high school experiences and related outlooks on crime and punishment influenced the direction that his life trajectory took post-high school:

I started going to clubs, little teen nights and all. I fell in love with it. Probably could have gone in a couple of directions, had I actually went and tried to promote parties or get involved in like that aspect of the whole business. But I got caught up in just being at the parties. I graduated in June. The whole summer I went insane, just going to clubs like three or four times a week. I was working at [a warehouse] not doing too much and eventually I quit that job and then started going to clubs full time. Got into dealing drugs a little bit, and a few months later, the beginning of the next year is when I got locked up.

Fred and Marcos were the only two out of eight suburban racial minority students who briefly attended college before getting incarcerated. Fred only completed one

semester before returning “back to the same old neighborhood” where he felt most comfortable “just hanging out, doing drugs, selling drugs.” He did not remember feeling the same way during his short time spent at an out-of-state community college. As Fred put it, “I didn’t really know anybody, and it just wasn’t fun...I don’t know, it’s not like there was anything about them.” Aside from the social aspect of college, he was also not engaged in the coursework given that he “just went to like two classes” and eventually stopped going altogether.

Marcos earned a GED after being expelled from high school and then enrolled in college, but described this post-secondary educational experience almost like an extension of high school. Indeed, he also seemed to continue along the same track he was on in high school given that he was expelled from college during his first semester.

Marcos explained:

I was living there and that was just like high school because you definitely don’t have to go to class once you get to college. So I never went to class. I just smoke, drank and partied and eventually I got kicked off campus...because I was like running around drinking all the time and like causing disruptions. I pulled the fire extinguisher and I ended up getting kicked off campus. Once I was off campus...I didn’t go to class when I lived there, definitely wasn’t gonna go when I don’t live there. They eventually told me I can’t go because I was failing everything.

Marcos revealed that after getting banned from living on campus, he committed an armed burglary, which resulted in his first adult charge and incarceration.

This diverse group of minority participants came from suburban middle-class and affluent communities, attended primary and secondary schools in such areas and described early educational experiences and pathways into crime that were based around race, class and/or neighborhood distinctions. Half of these eight advantaged minority

students grew up in white, homogenous neighborhoods while the others lived in racially mixed communities pre-incarceration. The roles of these places of residence in shaping education and offending were described as tangential to distinct school experiences, which were characterized by unequal exclusionary punishments received for school misconduct and/or perceived social exclusions from non-minority and mainstream peer groups. Indeed, these environmental, school and peer factors helped facilitate criminal behaviors among that suburban racial minorities. However, they did not describe such experiences as emanating from any subcultural context, like other racial minority students did, whose experiences I describe next.

RACIAL MINORITY STUDENTS WHO MOVED FROM URBAN TO SUBURBAN NEIGHBORHOODS

There were six minority participants who spent their childhood years living in semi to urban disadvantaged communities, but moved to what they described as better quality neighborhoods as adolescents and young adults and were still residing in those places at the time of incarceration. Much like the Latino, black, biracial and Middle Eastern participants who lived continuously in suburban settings prior to getting incarcerated, a few of these racial minorities also shared personal accounts of how the school-to-prison pipeline impacted their lives. Yet, a common thread in all of their stories was the pervasive influence of growing up in low-income inner cities where crime, violence and social disadvantage were prevalent and ways in which these circumstances impacted early experiences and perspectives on education and crime, both before and after moving to the suburbs.

Zach, who was Afro-Caribbean attended elementary and middle schools in a “predominantly African American” city located in the northeast, where he lived during most

of his childhood. He moved to a city in the Midwest for just one year during the fifth grade, but drew specific comparative attention to the educational and neighborhood experiences that he encountered in that environment. Specifically, Zach described the place as having a “country type of feel...a good suburban area,” characteristics which he felt facilitated his engagement in education during that brief period. As he explained, “I started to excel in academics and that probably was because I was in [the Midwest] at the time and classrooms out of state is a lot smaller than in the tri state area, so I excelled, honor roll.” Nonetheless, Zach mentioned how this early academic success was short-lived, ending soon after he moved back to the inner city and started middle school.

As he explained, “things started to change, people started to get fascinated with the street life....It wasn’t so much pressure to perform well on academics as it was to perform better in your appearance.” Zach added that one important facet of this mentality “was being cool...usually the rebellious kind of dude and you know fighting and street credibility and you know just urban society[’s definition] of what it is to be a man.” Indeed, he “started to get a lot into fights in middle school” and his “academic grades started slipping” because his “focus was elsewhere.” Zach also noted how these middle school behaviors were inspired by interactions with peers who “don’t commend you on your academic success” but “on the things that’s wrong,” such as fighting.

Similarly, Jaeger who “migrated from Africa” spent most of his childhood living in an urban neighborhood and for the most part completed his primary education in schools located in the same area. Much like Zach, he received good grades in school and was on the honor roll until the sixth grade. During that year, he recalled “acting up...just trying to have fun” and explained, “my whole idea of fun was something that’s not

ordinary, something that gets your heart rushing, your heart pumping and something that's not typical in everyday life...things that are dangerous." In fact, he was expelled for fighting and just "felt like it was going to escalate" into conduct that carried more severe consequences. Jaeger revealed how this self-fulfilling prophecy was framed by the cycle of incarceration that he witnessed as an integral part of the city where he lived as a child and young adolescent. As he put it, "my peoples tried to keep me out [of] the streets but I always found my way, to be out there....I just knew that people would disappear and come back but I never asked."

Jaeger too spent some time away from that neighborhood during the sixth grade when his parents sent him to live in Africa as punishment for getting expelled from middle school. He described the middle school curriculum in Africa as "a lot tougher" compared to his prior inner city educational experience, which lowered his perception of the quality of education he received after returning home. Jaeger added that he "quickly forgot the lessons learned out there" and "just picked back up" on old habits of behavior. Despite these setbacks, he completed the eighth grade and moved with his family to a suburb located in another state to begin high school.

Geoff was Afro-Caribbean and shared similar accounts of how he negotiated living in "hood areas, you know like inner cities" with early educational experiences that took place outside of these settings. He began elementary school in Haiti where he was raised. Geoff remembered that "it was a little strict over there, but the quality of education is really good." For instance, he stated that "they automatically start to try to teach you different numbers over there....They also try to incorporate Spanish and English." Geoff explained that his focus on education began to shift when he came to

live in the U.S. around the third grade. As he explained, “now you start getting conscious about race, you see different colors around you.” In addition, Geoff always attended “schools located in the suburbs,” outside of the neighborhood where he lived and so the quality of education was high, but the “sense of acceptance over there was low,” all of which impacted his level of engagement in school at the time. He spoke more on that point adding:

I was distracted from learning because of everything that was going on around me...If I didn't have problems with like the racial slurs and jokes that were going on in school it was kind like a little fight going on outside of school 'cause I'm Haitian and the African Americans didn't like Haitians like that so we used to fight together too.

Geoff also mentioned how this racial/ethnic tension combined with concentrated structural disadvantage contributed to a neighborhood context where “you see weapons being drawn and drugs being sold out in the open.”

Kerri shared similar experiences growing up in the projects, which were “predominantly black” and recalled feeling overwhelmed by crime, yet enamored by fast paced lifestyles which contributed to her disconnect from school early on. She received very good grades throughout elementary and middle school, but was never engaged in the material. In fact, Kerri remembered feeling bored with school and “always got in trouble” for “starting trouble with the kids.” As she put it, “I would always like to be a bully.” As it was, Kerri had to be tough outside of school considering the social and economic conditions of her former neighborhood.

To start, Kerri revealed that there was a heavy gang presence in her building, “so like one side was the Crip side and one side was the Blood side. Certain people couldn't go to the Crip side because of just their family you know.” She also mentioned that drug

activity was so widespread that, “you could smell crack in the staircases” which led to arrests and incarceration being “like an everyday thing. Patty wagon would come through the projects and people would be leaving.” Kerri believed these environmental features distracted from her focus in school. As she indicated, “I would just be outside with the other kids you know” instead of doing homework after school. In response, Kerri’s parents transferred her to a Catholic middle school, but that change had no influence on her behavior as she “got in trouble there too. It didn’t really make any difference.”

Kenneth too recalled primary school experiences that were shaped by varying school and neighborhood climates along with how these factors influenced his early behaviors both in and outside of the classroom. He started out at a public elementary school that was located in the same urban epicenter where he spent most of his childhood years. Although Kenneth received “mostly A’s and B’s” and considered himself to be “pretty much a smart kid” while a student there, his mother did not believe that school offered the best opportunities for learning. As he explained, “my mother seen how they was and I think I went like a year and after that she was like, ‘ahhh there’s no more of this, you’re going to private school.’” Kenneth attended private school for only a short time in the third grade, but he remembered still feeling unengaged and bored with the material. Shortly thereafter, he moved with his mother out of state, down south and went to school there. As he put it, “that’s when the private school kind of ended. There was no more private school. It was basically public schools and so forth.” Kenneth stated that “in the south, it was a lot slower,” but as “the new kid” he felt compelled to show his power through aggression. He illustrated that point with the following account:

I'm one of those individuals that will speak my mind and not take any junk from anybody...so I had issues with like fighting a lot, especially moving. Once I kind of got my name, like people knew oh he's no pushover then it was pretty much cool from there. But I remember you know moving somewhere and let it be known like who I am and not to be pushed around or anything like that or how they call it now, bullying or anything like that so.

Kenneth further explained that he “would never really be like acting out, lashing out inside the school” so these incidents of fighting “might start in school...but it would be after school this, that and the third.” With that said, he was able to maintain good grades up until around the eighth grade. By this time, he remembered “doing just enough to pass” and would “do homework assignments last minute, cram for a test...no more preparation.” Kenneth mentioned how this change coincided with his move back up north to his home state, but in a suburb located outside of the city where he first lived. Although there was some distance between the two areas, he frequently visited friends in his former neighborhood, which was entrenched in social disadvantage and crime. Accordingly, these socio-structural characteristics drove Kenneth's entry into crime and disengagement from education throughout his adolescence.

Victor also viewed the friendships he formed in elementary and middle school as crucial aspects of his past experiences. He received high honors recognition during middle school and seemed proud of having “never been one to shy away from school.” As Victor added, “I always just loved going to school. I just loved being around people. I just loved I guess feeling wanted, feeling I guess...like the attention I got from people.” He received part of that satisfaction from being a school athlete, as he mentioned, “I guess you could say I was a typical jock, very popular...everybody knew me.” By the same token, Victor portrayed himself as a “violent kid” who “loved to fight” particularly

in instances where he felt unaccepted by peers. He provided the following example, “I did like to fight because I always felt like I had something to prove. Guys always look at me like ‘oh, he’s a pretty boy, he’s this, that.’ They’ll look at that as a weakness, so I’m like alright try me. That was always my mentality.” Nonetheless, Victor kept his fighting out of school and maintained good grades, that is, until he began high school in a different town, where he felt constrained by inequalities related to race and class, as will be discussed further below.

These several black and Latino participants who moved to suburban neighborhoods as teenagers spoke about how their past crimes coincided with this transition and was seen as a way to navigate the social pressures they felt as racial minorities in predominantly white high schools and neighborhoods. In addition, none of them were motivated to do well in high school and that was reflected in their poor academic performance at the time. Kerri, who explained that “school came easy” to her, was the only exception, yet she did share in common with the others perceived notions about criminality which tied back to poor inner city or disadvantaged contexts. She also stood out because she remained living in the same inner city, low-income housing development throughout high school, but did eventually move to a suburban neighborhood after a brief, failed attempt at college.

Kerri did not feel a sense of belonging while a student at what she described as an “expensive” mostly white high school. Those emotions were based in part on the fact that she was still living in the projects at the time with her mother, whom she described as financially stable but cheap. For example, Kerri explained that she was embarrassed to tell other students that she lived in the projects and used to think, “damn, is my life really like this?” She went on to say, “I wouldn’t want to tell people I lived in the projects...stuff like

that ‘cause like I would go to sweet sixteen [partie]s and these girls were having sweet sixteens on yachts. Like heck even marble floors in their house.” Yet, Kerri was enamored by the prospect of becoming “hoodrich,” just like a “big drug dealer in the neighborhood” who she had a “schoolgirl” crush on. He drove a Bentley and she aspired to “have everything he had” and “live nowhere but the projects.” Despite having this mentality, Kerri graduated at the top of her class and “attempted to go to college,” but quickly became distracted by familiar lures of crime back in the city.

Indeed, Kerri identified her precarceral college experience as a time “when everything just went downhill.” She added, “I didn’t care about school anymore because I didn’t have anybody there to show me that attention and caring. So I did whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, didn’t go to class...so I just stopped.” Kerri returned to live in the projects after completing two college semesters. She remembered being “pretty reckless” once back in that environment, which included getting involved with a boyfriend “who was like really in the streets and stuff.” Kerri explained that her parents disapproved of those choices, so she was sent to live with her father in a “pretty mixed suburban town.” She felt frustrated at first because it was hard to “get in trouble,” when “she wanted to get in trouble” in the suburbs. In addition, Kerri did not feel comfortable because there were black people, but they were not “black people in an urban sense.” Regardless, she eventually “just found people out there to hang out with,” including a new boyfriend who convinced her to commit bank frauds, the crimes for which she was ultimately incarcerated.

Kenneth too mentioned how he was drawn to the urban neighborhood where he spent most of his childhood, even throughout his residence in the “more calm and

suburban area,” he moved to after briefly living in the south. At the time, he was just starting high school and his mother made the decision not to go back to the inner city where they had started out. Kenneth explained that she said, “no more [city name],” which he referred to as “a drug area” where “people hang out, drink, smoke weed or whatever.” Despite such efforts, he explained: “I would leave school and stay out there and come home like nine, ten or if there’s nothing to do I might come home do my homework and then I got back out there. It was like that type of thing.” Kenneth eventually brought the excitement that he was looking for back to the suburbs. As he put it, “you seek, you shall find....I might smoke here, drink there....It was just like that and next thing you know it’s five, six of us. Next thing you know it’s about 12, 13 of us hanging out, doing stuff.” This indicated some level of choice on his part when it came to engaging in school, forming peer associations and participating in delinquent and criminal behaviors.

By his sophomore year, Kenneth was mostly hanging out with older individuals who had either dropped out or graduated from high school. So he already felt disconnected on a social level when he also stopped going to class altogether. Kenneth admitted that the decision had a “snowball effect,” and culminated in failing grades and in school suspensions. He finally dropped out of school that same year and did not earn a GED until nine years later. Kenneth was not motivated to get it any sooner because after leaving school he was “already full throttle into a life of crime.” As he explained further, “I was already wildin’, I was already drinking, I was already smoking. I was stealing cars like no other....I wasn’t real heavy into selling drugs, but I would do just enough to keep a little pocket money.”

In contrast, Geoff in some ways felt compelled to start selling drugs as a young teenager in order to make money, but similarly revealed ways in which this decision was facilitated by certain community characteristics and disengagement from school. Unlike Kenneth, he encountered financial stress as a teenager after leaving his mother's home and moving up north to live with his father in a working class, semi-urban town. He mentioned that "money wasn't such a necessity when I was in [the south] living with my mother, but when I came to live with my father it became a necessity so I had to take on a job like my father." Geoff was a sophomore in high school at the time and did not view success in education as a viable way to offset financial burdens. As he stated, "I didn't have nobody to tell me to do good in school" including both his family and teachers.

Geoff elaborated:

As far as somebody in the school like really like talking to me about my grades being bad, we didn't even have that. There wasn't no meeting, no conference between your parents. No calling in, no sitting down with a guidance counselor...there was none of that. If your grades was low, alright so be it, you know, there was no like offering for help....No one seemed to care.

As a result, he did not believe that focusing on school would be a worthwhile use of time and energy, especially given the low quality of education in his former high school and his dire monetary situation at the time. Although Geoff tried "to go to school and everything," he soon realized "it's not working, there's no way I could support myself like this and go to school at the same time." As he stated, "I gave up," which meant leaving high school by the age of 15 and moving out of his father's home to the streets.

Geoff knew that he could survive being homeless in the city-like working class town where he was still living by "selling drugs...weed, coke, heroin...anything" to make

a profit. Indeed, these activities proved lucrative as he “was able to move from the park benches to a decent apartment and stuff” within just one year. Geoff also spoke about the close relationships that he developed with neighborhood street peers and how these networks helped in that process:

My family was those who stuck with me when I became homeless and those was the people on the streets with me like even though they had homes, they didn't want me out there alone because anything could happen. They would watch your back because anything could happen. So those [people] was older than me. I wouldn't call them role models but those was my associates and stuff.

Zach also identified suburban neighborhood peer influences and secondary educational experiences as overlapping and contributing to his past involvement in crime, but in different ways. Similar to Geoff, he also sought friendships with others who were connected to crime, but his motivation for doing so was distinct and largely tied to subcultural beliefs about black masculinity that were described as key characteristics of his prior inner-city residence. Zach explained that “in an urban environment their idea of cool was fighting and holding up this idea of what it is to be a man.” So as a freshman in a suburban high school, he tried to look and act according to perceived racial stereotypes about black males in order to gain acceptance from his mostly white classmates and neighborhood peers. More specifically, Zach mentioned that as the “only black dude” in high school he felt pressure to “live up to the idea of what black is, you know, you gotta wear [a] doo rag, you got [wear] saggy pants” and also commit crime. In addition to selling drugs, fighting became “like second nature” to him especially after his coach told him, ““oh man, I see the guys you're hanging around. You're gonna end up incarcerated. You know, you're gonna end up dead or something.”” Zach revealed how this prediction

became a self-fulfilling prophecy: “I just decided to sell drugs and then...it was the year that I graduated where I got into trouble. So it kind of fit the notion or the pipeline where right after high school, you just go straight into the system and that’s where I was headed.” Indeed, he was arrested on charges of robbery and assault and subsequently incarcerated soon after high school graduation.

Victor too recalled that “things started getting real crazy” after moving with his family to a “basically a white town” toward the end of his freshman year in high school. However, he attributed this in part to being marginalized by his high school sports teams along with the different neighborhood demographics where “you have million dollar houses” and “the closest minority was...Colombian...if you count Hispanic people [as minorities].” As indicated earlier, Victor had always relied on his athletic prowess to gain popularity among peers, so he felt socially excluded, which lowered his motivation in school when he did not make it onto any high school sports team. This was mostly because he believed these rejections were for reasons unrelated to his athleticism, which served as a major blow to his ego and self-confidence. As Victor put it, “down there, their sports system is different. They have the same group of guys together since they was younger, so it’s like they just want to keep that going throughout their whole school years and so it was kinda hard to get into sports that way.” So he “found other things to do” like “hanging out with the wrong crowd...staying out later, being in the streets.” Part of this involved fighting in school, which led to exclusionary punishments and further disengagement from school. Victor recalled one high school incident in particular that he felt shaped his criminal trajectory:

One time, my junior year right before I got locked up, I had got into a fight and I guess you could say I got locked up. They took me out in handcuffs [from] the school and all that, but those charges was dropped...I got suspended for 15 days. I feel like right there, that was the turning point for me. I feel like that's where I was just like... 'it's getting serious.'

In fact, Victor was arrested and incarcerated that same year for his involvement in an assault turned armed robbery.

Jaeger too remembered not caring about high school and “didn’t really want to be there,” especially after moving to a neighborhood outside of the city, where he had few friends. He explained that instead of being focused in school, he would do other things such as “talking back to the teacher, making fun of other students, picking fights, disrespecting the teacher. Just being a jerk.” Jaeger mentioned that the punishments he received in response to these behaviors only escalated his negative feelings toward school. He recalled getting “suspended numerous times,” went “to detention a lot of times” and school officials held “countless meetings” with his parents. Consequently, Jaeger felt further disconnected from school and would often seek to engage in activities that “weren’t the right things to say the least,” which included associating with a group of friends who were considered “cool” because he “could do this...do that and there’s no judgment involved.” By way of example, he recalled the day he was arrested:

So junior year or whatever, I’m with my friend, [an] “A” student he just likes to get high or whatever smokes weed a lot so he’s cool....[We] get into a fight and then do some things to the kids and then I guess I just take that whole adrenaline with me throughout the whole day....We go pick up my friend, we’re walking down the block I’m like “yo let’s just do something crazy.” I didn’t say that but that’s what my actions were saying like he could tell like I was scheming something.

Jaeger was not sentenced for charges related to this robbery until two years after the incident. In the meantime, he graduated from high school and then enrolled in

community college classes upon the insistence of his parents. But he only completed one year before getting incarcerated. Jaeger explained that his parents, who were both in the medical field, encouraged him to take the requisite courses needed to become a pharmacist. He obliged but felt unmotivated, as he recalled, “I really didn’t mind being one, but that wasn’t my real passion.”

The role of Jaeger’s parents in pressuring him to acquire some college experience prior to his incarceration was unique in comparison to the other five urban to suburban or near disadvantaged minority participants. From this standpoint, Jaeger had the privilege of coming from a family who not only encouraged his participation in college but also had the resources to support him to pursue this endeavor. Kerri also completed two semesters of college before entering prison but, as she explained, her motivation in doing so was to satisfy a high school guidance counselor who “was like my mom.” The other four minority participants were either incarcerated during or shortly after high school and had no post-secondary educational aspirations at the time. Overall, they described divergent neighborhood contexts, and experiences in primary and secondary education as coinciding influences in the development of criminal pathways. Yet, they all had a social advantage, that is, the opportunity to move away from urban criminogenic environments to better quality neighborhoods. Accordingly, this was a privilege and something not available to the 12 black and Latino students who could not break away from poor, urban disadvantaged neighborhoods, and whose experiences I discuss next.

**RACIAL MINORITY STUDENTS FROM URBAN DISADVANTAGED
NEIGHBORHOODS**

There were 12 black and Latino participants who grew up in low-income, predominantly black cities where they continued to live at the time of their incarceration. They spoke about how these place characteristics were couched in a deep concentration of poverty and crime, creating social disadvantages that spurred a cycle of crime and weak connections to school. Specifically, these individuals spoke about feeling ensconced in neighborhood subcultures, where they learned to engage in crime as a normative way to manage socioeconomic strains and forge social connections. Although these socioeconomic constraints were generally characterized as hampering educational experiences, most of these racial minorities did well academically during elementary and middle school.

Farley provided rich details about pressures he faced growing up as a black male in a “pretty bad neighborhood,” where he was around “drugs, robberies, assaults, weapons...pretty much the foundation, your basics.” Despite these circumstances, he was engaged in his elementary school education but then started to “get flaky in school...probably middle school.” Farley further explained that he “paid less attention to” academics and started to get into “trouble in the streets,” which often involved fighting. To this point, he mentioned: “When you’re in certain neighborhoods usually your challenges are you have to prove yourself. That you’re not soft, you’re not weak.”

Ulysses was another black male who grew up in an inner city and he also shared the importance of gaining street credibility in that environment. For instance, from an early age he “automatically got this respect” because people feared his older cousin who returned to live in the same neighborhood after serving seven years in prison. As Ulysses revealed, “growing up he was the reason that I could be able to walk the neighborhood

and not worry about nothing....Nobody ever bothered me because of my cousin, you know he had this crazy reputation.” He also framed these pressures as spilling over into other contexts, noting that he along with other students at his local primary school used to compete for social status by fighting. Ulysses attended the same school from kindergarten through eighth grade, which he described as a “kind of rough” because “in there you’re in the third grade, the other kids is 13...the older kids pick on the little kids.”

Nate was a black and Latino participant who shared similar experiences from his early years spent living in an urban disadvantaged environment which he described as “the hood” where “you could find drugs, violence, guns all that.” Much like Ulysses, he remembered getting involved in fights as a way to offset the bullying he faced. Nate explained that he “got teased the most” during the fifth grade, but “got into a lot of fights that year too.” As he further stated, “I never started the fights but I didn’t do anything to prevent getting into them.” Nate believed these incidents negatively impacted his academic performance as follows: “Fifth grade came and I did terrible. I kept passing, but it just wasn’t...it was never honor rolls, rarely did I get A’s. It was like just getting by. Plenty of D’s.” He remembered how that all changed in the sixth grade when he began middle school with students from several other local school districts. At that point, Nate “really didn’t care about school” and “would skip class any time there was big fight” which he “somehow would end up getting involved in.” He described this school environment as “crazy” being that it was in “the papers everyday” for reasons that included: “Girls getting earrings snatched out they ears, desks getting thrown out the windows...gang members warring with each other.” In addition, Nate explained that “you could barely finish class in there because they pulled the fire alarm like 30 times a

day and we would be in and out of class.” By the eighth grade he would often leave school to visit friends who lived in nearby “housing projects” or “just neighborhoods that are rundown.” At the time, Nate aspired to be the “biggest drug dealer in the world” and revealed how important neighborhood relationships were to that endeavor. As he explained, “I would know somebody from every area and so I spent...those were my days. I would be over here one day, be over there the next day, you know come through, show love thinking that everybody cared and loved me.”

Randy too came from a mostly black urban community and stated that “everybody knows everybody” in the particular neighborhood where he used to live. He illustrated that point by adding, “I walk out the house, the people I see...I’ve seen them for over 20 years from when they was kids ‘til they was adults...you know, Laundromat, corner stores...that’s where everybody go to sell drugs, chill.” Randy further explained that arrest and incarceration were common because if some residents “wanted money...if they wasn’t selling drugs, they would say ‘let’s rob this or let’s do this to get money.’” As he put it, there “was always some criminal activity...I was around I was a part of it.” To that end, Randy joined a gang and started committing armed robberies but managed to stay focused on school and receive good grades until the eighth grade.

These 12 black and Latino participants from disadvantaged neighborhoods shared secondary educational experiences that included a disconnect from school intertwined with worsening criminal behaviors. Indeed, they reported the lowest levels of educational attainment, as only half were high school graduates at the time of incarceration. These individuals identified anti-social influences embedded within neighborhood frameworks as contributing factors. For example, Cameron, a Latino

participant who grew up in a mostly black and Latino inner city neighborhood, believed that “when you’re a kid, if you grew up in a certain environment,” reaching a “kingpin status” or earning large amounts of money through illicit means was a coveted goal. He thought this statement was accurate, “unless you take school or education very seriously and then [those] in the circle you’re with have that same mentality.”

However, Cameron did not recall being a studious student in high school, which he believed was partly because he “never had anybody to look up to...nobody had anything good to say.” Instead, he remembered becoming “engaged with a group of people...smoking weed” and “shying away [from school] a little starting 15, 16 years old, getting into the streets.” Cameron was eventually “kicked out of school for getting incarcerated too much” in the 11th grade. In fact, he described zero tolerance policies at his former high school, which he viewed as further weakening his attachment to school. As Cameron explained: “It started to be like a prison system type, you know writing down when you go to class, you know things were ridiculous....That’s when it started being a lot uglier for kids. I thought this was an educational system. It started to be something else, that’s the way I looked at it.” In response, Cameron “started cutting classes...going to people’s houses...and then smoking weed.” He added, “it’s like the dominoes [effect]. I think everything starts in high school.” Cameron was “mostly selling drugs” after getting expelled but “ended up getting caught most of the time.” So then he “took it to another level” and “started doing robberies and stuff” until he got arrested and incarcerated for these crimes. Cameron continued his education during incarceration and earned a GED.

Yvette also mentioned that her involvement in crime escalated after she dropped out of high school. At the time, she did not feel engaged in school and attributed that in part to her parents having low expectations about her potential for success in education. Looking back, Yvette remembered that she “never had people that really cared...it was always just ‘you’re not gonna make it, you’re gonna die of AIDS,’” in part because they did not agree with her transgender “lifestyle.” She added, “I had nobody like telling me, you could be this or you could be that...so it led me to do bad things, or what everybody expected me to do.” Yvette recalled how this impacted her secondary educational experience as follows: “High school just was high school. It was just play hooky, go when you want to go. I did summer school so that tells you...I really wasn’t focused in high school but I did what I had to do for the most part to pass before I dropped out.”

Ultimately, her decision to leave high school was driven by both family and economics. As Yvette explained, “when I told them my lifestyle [e.g. that she is transgender], my family just kinda like kicked me to the curb...so I was forced to raise myself. I was trying to maintain going to school but I couldn’t do both.” She stated that crime seemed like an easy and much needed solution at the time particularly in her former neighborhood, which she described as “death row...’cause some people make it out, some people don’t...it’s either death, jail or you become what the environment is.” Yvette added that it was common for people to survive by “selling drugs, committing murders, robbing, carjacking. It’s the projects so you see it all...shoplifting, boosting you see it all.” With no family support, and minimal formal education, she followed suit and “basically hustled,” by engaging in “prostitution, escorting, and things of that nature” to support herself. Yvette eventually started “robbing the clients, and things like that” when

“the money wasn’t coming in fast enough” and was incarcerated for such crimes. She completed GED coursework during incarceration.

Similarly, Bob dropped out of high school and received his GED while incarcerated. He also grew up in an inner city where he had “seen a lot of people get arrested...for selling drugs,” including close family members. Bob too started selling drugs by the age of 16 in order to support his growing drug addiction. As he stated, “I wended up getting hooked on [marijuana]. So I started feeding my habit and from there it escalated to ecstasy pills.” By then Bob had “lost track of school and...it was hard to get back” so he just dropped out. He struggled financially after leaving high school and was “working from paycheck to paycheck.” Bob resorted to selling drugs because he knew family members who had earned money that way and plus there was ready access to drugs in the neighborhood where he lived at the time.

Ulysses was born and raised in the same inner city where, he explained, it was common for residents to get incarcerated for “drugs, drug dealing, robberies....You know it could go either way, it could be a robbery or robbery and homicide. It could just be drug dealing but most of the stuff, it stems from money.” This included family members, as he mentioned, “my older cousin her got locked up seven years [for] robbery, my other older cousin [was] in and out of jail, selling drugs....So that’s basically, you know everything I was seeing.” Aside from these community factors, Ulysses also described experiences in secondary education that contributed to his low educational aspirations, disengagement from school and use of crime to earn money. He attended a private high school, but explained:

A lot of the kids who went to the school was kids who got kicked out of the public district 'cause you know like in public school after a while you keep misbehaving you get kicked out the district altogether so you can't go to that school. So they put them in that school. So a lot of the kids that went to that private school was just kids that got kicked out of the district....It wasn't academic to get into the school or anything like that....They was accepting anybody who was willing to pay, so we ended up having a lot of rough kids in my school...myself included.

Ulysses added, "I got in the most trouble at that school than any other school that I went to and that was supposed to be the school where I excelled, but it was the complete opposite." Just like in elementary and middle school, he mentioned that he and some friends were "constantly fighting for respect, trying to earn the respect from our peers...and show that...we not soft." As a result, Ulysses got kicked out and returned to a public high school to complete the 11th and 12th grades. He was academically advanced compared to most other students at the school and for this reason was presented with the opportunity to take college preparatory classes, but turned it down. Ulysses did not think college was for him at the time and instead started selling drugs with some neighborhood friends after graduating from high school. He shot a former neighborhood acquaintance during a dispute over money, which led to his incarceration and also served to illustrate his previously mentioned sentiment about money being the root of most crimes that occurred in his pre-carceral neighborhood of residence.

Sam, who was African-American, grew up in a different neighborhood located in the same city as Ulysses and also identified financially motivated crimes, particularly those involving drugs, as the reason many residents got incarcerated. He explained that "it was common for the neighborhood, you know coming up in poverty...a lot of people's parents be on drugs....That's what they grow up around, seeing they parents on it, not

caring, definitely don't have no money mostly their family's on food stamps or getting assistance from the government." Although Sam's disabled father and only living parent at the time was not on drugs, he described what it was like as a teenager surrounded by these social and economic conditions:

I was the youngest I was like 16, 17 everybody else in my crowd was probably like 18, 19 at the time. The ones older than us was in their 20s and...[we]would see them a lot you know getting incarcerated...post bail, come home. You just see the revolving door of them [getting re incarcerated]. As far as in my group like no, 'cause not only was we smoking weed and out there, we would leave and go play basketball or go look for girls. We wasn't fully out there as the older guys was, but we was still around.

In fact, Sam attended a nearby Catholic High School on a basketball scholarship, but that opportunity was short-lived. He revealed what he believed were some contributing factors: "I'm a kid from the ghetto with nothing....When I got to [the school] they were giving me...special privileges. I would get into trouble, they wouldn't discipline me....So I was getting away with so much and I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't doing a lot of work." Sam basically went through his freshman year "not doing so much" and "got kicked out" for reasons that he thought were related to his grades. After that, he returned to a public school and "that's when everything really started going wrong." Sam elaborated, "you know back in public school with all my friends...you could just hit the side door and walk out. So I started cutting every day, not doing any work." Sam eventually "dropped out of high school and then started running the streets." He described in more detail this pathway from high school to street crime:

When I dropped out, I just started selling drugs. At first, I wasn't selling drugs, I was just chillin' with the drug dealers. You know just being out there and smoking marijuana with them and just chillin' outside and then eventually I started selling drugs. So I think we was on spring break and I

was home and my best friend was living with us at the time, 'cause he ain't have nowhere to stay. But he was [involved] in street hustlin' and he used to bring it home every night. And he used to come in with a lot of money and, my father was living on social security. So he was buying sneakers, buying this, and buying that. So I was like "I want that." So sometimes he used to be sleep and I be going to the store. I'm a morning person, so I go to the store in the morning and I see some customers, they want it. And I know he had it. So I go get it and you know do the [transaction] for him and then after awhile I was getting used to doing [transactions] for him. So I'm like "well I might as well make my own money," so I started doing it myself.

Sam explained that after five years, he became a "full fledged hustler" and "in the way the streets would say...graduated." As he put it, that meant "I became the head guy on the block, everybody was working for me now. I'm making a lot of money, I got the connections now, I'm getting the surplus of supplies....So you kinda just feel like you just god of the street." Sam was motivated to sell drugs in part because, as stated before, his father was disabled and "couldn't fend for himself" or "take care of the family." Aside from that he also saw things from the "hood perspective," which is that "you gotta have the latest, you gotta have the stuff that these rappers are talking about." He clarified that people living in the "hood" can't afford designer clothes, "but everybody wearing them in the ghetto. If you not...then you not up to speed."

Xander, who was Latino, also felt pressure to find alternative ways to make money as a poor, inner-city teenager living in what he described as economic deprivation. He spoke in detail about his family situation at the time and how these dynamics shaped his involvement in crime:

You know we had to share a two bedroom apartment. You know, six siblings and a parent and you know moneywise things weren't great. Things weren't even good. You know my mom was working a job, two jobs from time to time just to make sure that we was able to get by. So early childhood experiences, I would say we kinda just roughed it. So I

think that going through grade school and into high school things were getting a little but difficult in terms of, what I wanted and couldn't afford.

Xander further explained, "We were really fucked up in the house. My younger brother sometimes would be hungry, and I would say 'I could get money. I'll feed him or whatever.'" He first started selling marijuana during high school to help alleviate some financial burdens for his family and spoke about how opportunities for crime that were available in his former neighborhood shaped this decision: "I didn't want to be like the local drug dealer, but at the time I wanted to get money like the local drug dealer....I had no money." Xander was mostly raised by a single mother and also mentioned, "the way I seen things in my environment was that the dudes in this situation or just men. You know, the guys I saw as men were out there hustling, getting their money. So that was an early influence that I kind of acquired in high school." Part of what he learned being in this environment was "when you're in the drug trade...if I go in and get money that you owe me...and issues happen off of that, in the legal world I guess they charge it as a robbery," but in the streets this would only be considered "a civil dispute."

During this time, Xander was also a star player on his high school football team, and because of this status, became reliant upon his athleticism rather academic preparedness for advancement to the next grade. He stated, "my brothers, we were all athletes and we excelled. Pretty much we were like highlights of the team every time we played....Sports was pretty much key to getting us through school." Xander explained that "coaches just kinda, you know, some way, somehow make it work out. So, if I was like a C- student, I was like a B- student, something like that. In the process of that, I felt

that I didn't really develop the skills in high school to excel at the next level." Yet, he did enroll in an out-of-state college immediately after graduating from high school.

Xander stated that "without having the grades," his acceptance into a two year college through a football program was his only option for post-secondary education at the time. However, he still remained involved in crime, back in the city, even while away at college. Xander explained: "I resorted back to going home a lot. I had issues on the football team and in academics....In the process of all this, making the transition, I'm dealing with the drug trade, you know, selling weed or whatever." As a result, he eventually stopped attending classes, dropped out and started "getting heavily involved in the streets," which culminated in his commission of an armed robbery. At the time of our interview, he still believed that the robbery was justified, given subcultural neighborhood rules such as the aforementioned one, which encouraged the use of violence to obtain money that is owed for drugs.

Besides Xander, Henry and Farley were the only other racial minority participants from urban disadvantaged communities who entered prison with some college experience. In contrast, none of the remaining ten individuals in this group even had aspirations to attend college while in high school or immediately after, which is a pattern that will be discussed in more detail below. Indeed, Xander, Henry and Farley were in the minority among this particular group of participants given their advanced pre-carceral levels of education. At the same time, their educational and criminal histories also stood out in comparison, and Xander did complete two semesters of college, on a sports scholarship before getting incarcerated.

For instance, Henry accepted an offer to attend college immediately after high school and explained that he learned from an early age the value of engagement in education and educational attainment. As he put it, “my mom wanted me to go to Catholic school because of [the] better education....She understood the importance of education, so she wanted me to get there and she really stressed that I do well. K through 12, I attended Catholic school.” Henry also recalled that his mother gave him incentives to perform well in high school: “I always had As on tests. I got really good grades and my mother helped me too. She knew I liked to play sports and she wouldn’t allow me to play sports if I wasn’t bringing home As.” He viewed these circumstances as contributing to his educational and criminal trajectories, but in ways that more closely mirrored the experiences of white and Asian participants: “I’m not the average person that goes to prison. I actually had opportunities. I had resources. I had both my parents, and none of them did drugs. I didn’t have the same situation as most people have. I made some stupid decisions that sent me to prison.”

Henry also minimized the role of the urban disadvantaged community context where he lived in shaping his criminal offending, which escalated after he dropped out of college. He stated that there “was definitely a presence” of crime in the city where he used to live but it was not a place where residents “constantly heard gunfights or people were murdered....It’s not your typical urban scene.” Yet, he added that it was common for people to get “arrested for drug possession or drug distribution.” Henry too grew “really got accustomed to fast money coming in,” which largely contributed to his decision to leave college. Henry further explained that he was operating a “semi-legitimate” business venture and “didn’t have to worry about money” as a result. As he

put it, “I had this lifestyle that I wasn’t willing to give up” even after the business was shut down for legal reasons. Instead of returning to college, Henry started dealing crack alongside his brother, who “was already plugged in” and thus had established clientele and a location for selling. Although such environmental factors did influence the development of his risky behaviors into criminality, he did not feel compelled to start dealing drugs because of any economic *necessity*.

Farley also grew up in a mostly black, low-income inner city neighborhood that as he stated was fraught with “drugs, crime...the usual.” Much like Henry, he did not feel drawn to crime because of any financial pressures and his mother also motivated him to succeed academically throughout his youth, even post-high school graduation. For example, Farley recalled how his mother did not want him to attend the local inner city high school because she thought “it probably would’ve turned out negative for me. I probably would’ve been influenced by the wrong people. She just did what she could to keep me away from that particular high school.” So, using his grandmother’s address, Farley’s mother got him enrolled in a high school that was located on the outskirts of the city. Farley graduated from high school “on time” and immediately began taking classes at a local community college. Yet, he did not feel engaged in this educational experience and admitted to “probably just going through the motions.” Farley added, “a lot of it had to do with my mother, just saying what she wanted me to go to school for, as opposed to just asking me what I was really interested in. You know, I was social, I would ask questions but...I wasn’t really taking it serious.”

Farley noted that his involvement in the streets also took away from his focus on college during that time:

Just trouble in the street. Just like altercations here and there that had a lot to do with...distractions. I had got into a fight and I had got struck with a pipe. So my whole eye was like shut and I couldn't go to school for...I don't know a week. When I finally did go to school, I had a patch over my eye. I had a couple of teachers ask me what was going on or whatever but I didn't really get into too much detail. I just had outside issues that kinda distracted me from...which eventually led to me getting in trouble basically.

For these reasons, he left college after completing just one semester and began “carrying a gun all the time” because the city where he lived at the time was “pretty small...only about seven miles. So there's a pretty good chance you could run into your enemies again.” Farley was arrested and incarcerated not too long after leaving college for shooting an armed assailant who was threatening his cousin. The incident took place in his old neighborhood.

Among these urban disadvantaged racial minority students, pre-carceral participation in college was an exception and to some extent, a privilege, given that just three out of 12 entered prison with some higher education. An important facet of this educational feature was that most of these black and Latino students were not taught to understand the importance of educational attainment at different life stages. Accordingly, Bob and Ulysses identified some familial and cultural factors that contributed to their own lack of interest in pursuing a higher education and low academic preparedness to succeed in college directly after high school.

For instance, Ulysses encountered very few people in his environment growing up, including teachers and family members, who emphasized the value of pursuing alternative pathways to crime such as post-secondary education. As he put it, “you know back in the day, they made it seem like [a] high school diploma was everything...like they

just made it seem like boom...you graduate from high school, it's over, we good." As a result, he graduated from high school with the impression that "going to college was just like a piece of paper." With that in mind, Ulysses never took the SATs and believed the "SAT is something like your parents have to be on you about." He did not have such support and viewed this as a social disadvantage. As Ulysses put it: "my parents, my father wasn't there, you know my mother dropped out of school in the eighth grade. She don't know nothing about that. You know, my grandmother she old school, she don't know nothing about no SAT." Ulysses also dropped out of high school and began selling drugs with some neighborhood friends when he was unsuccessful in finding steady employment.

Similarly, Bob mentioned, "there wasn't a mentality to go to...college. You know, I didn't see that, it didn't exist in my family." Instead, he saw close family members drop out of high school, become local drug dealers and/or become employed in secondary labor markets to earn money. Consequently, as Bob explained, "in the back of my head, it was like [a high school diploma was] a piece of paper that you needed to get a job, but I also saw that people were able to get this job without this paper." He added, "so my mentality was, well if I drop out of school, I can always get a job." When Bob could only secure menial jobs after leaving high school, he started selling drugs to support himself.

For most of these black and Latino participants, weak connections to school were facilitated by inner city neighborhood features and, in some cases, school contexts that hampered opportunities to pursue a higher education prior to getting incarceration. These conditions also served as a conduit to crime. The same could be said for the three out of

these 12 socially disadvantaged racial minority participants who went to college before getting incarcerated but left without finishing because they could not focus on higher education given their uninterrupted and deep involvement in crime back in their former neighborhoods.

CONCLUSION

The research participants described divergent ways in which pre-carceral educational experiences shaped pathways to crime. These distinctions were portrayed as emerging from structural conditions built around inequalities of race, class and community type, which also impacted levels of prior educational attainment along with the age and circumstances of entry into crime. With that said, the three Asian students from suburban neighborhoods were the most advanced academically, as all of them were high school graduates and two of them had also started college at the time of incarceration. Furthermore, they recalled feeling engaged in school throughout most of high school, a connection they believed was inspired by family values. Each of them came from stable, middle-class or affluent suburban families and were raised in neighborhoods where crime, arrest and incarceration were low. None of these suburban Asian students described such familial, community and educational features as contributing to any part of a criminal trajectory. Instead, they explained that it was when these protective spheres broke down that they made impulsive decisions to commit crime.

In contrast, the five white participants from suburban neighborhoods did not identify their families or cultural backgrounds as shaping levels of engagement in education or involvement in crime during childhood and adolescence. Yet, much like the Asian students, they all entered prison with a high school diploma and in addition, three

had some college experience. Furthermore, these white participants were also socially advantaged, coming from suburban middle-income neighborhoods where criminal offending and the threat of significant legal punishment for crime were rare. As they explained, in some ways these community characteristics inspired their involvement in delinquent and criminal behaviors, which they felt confident would remain undetected or minimally sanctioned. In addition, the white suburban students also spoke about the role of educational experiences and school context in forging pathways to crime. Indeed, most of them received lenient disciplinary consequences for school misconduct and identified these responses as further strengthening this sense of privilege. Dexter was the one exception, as he recalled difficult educational experiences marked by a pattern of suspension and expulsion, which facilitated his entry into crime. His narrative was more closely in line with the pre-carceral experiences of the non-urban racial minority participants.

The eight Latino, biracial, black and Middle Eastern participants from suburban neighborhoods described early educational experiences characterized by social isolation imposed through systematic exclusionary school based punishments and/or casual encounters in school. They mentioned race, ethnicity and/or class as contributing to these experiences, which in turn shaped opportunities to become involved in delinquent and criminal behaviors both in and outside of school settings. Although their educational histories varied, one source of commonality was the impact of these features on pathways to crime. More specifically, each of these non-urban racial minority students identified school-related aspects of their primary and/or secondary education as pushing them in the direction of crime. Yet, these diverse students from suburban neighborhoods were still

socially advantaged compared to racial minority participants who came from urban disadvantaged communities.

The six racial minority students who were raised in poor inner-city neighborhoods and moved to non-urban middle-income areas around high school highlighted school and community factors as influencing connections to school and levels of engagement in education starting at an early age. They all grew up in disadvantaged contexts and mentioned that crime was common there, in part because involvement in illegal activities was considered a socially accepted means of acquiring respect and/or financial stability. They described ways in which these elements influenced their own behaviors in the neighborhood and at school as children and adolescents. Even though these racial minority students moved to better quality neighborhoods with their families, they still felt drawn to their low-income, disadvantaged communities of origin. They explained that such connections were useful in helping to offset challenges that arose from feeling displaced in predominantly white, non-urban neighborhoods and schools. Yet, at the same time, these ties helped facilitate entry into crime and in some cases, disengagement from school in suburban contexts.

There were 12 black and Latino students who came from urban areas where poverty and crime were prevalent, but lacking the resources to move out, they had to live in these disadvantaged communities until the time of incarceration. They shared accounts of how these socioeconomic factors also propelled their involvement in what was described as necessity crimes, committed for financial gain and/or to fulfill subcultural rules about using illegal behaviors to gain social status and money. These racial minority students, who were continuously immersed in such structural conditions

prior to getting incarcerated, became more consumed by crime and detached from education as they advanced through school. They identified negative role models and neighborhood peers as also contributing to these criminogenic processes. Xander, Henry and Farley were the three outliers, as they had single mothers who tried to steer them away from criminal pressures by encouraging their engagement in school, including college. Nonetheless, just like the other urban disadvantaged racial minority students, neighborhood factors contributed to their continued involvement in crime and detachment from school.

Chapter 5. Experiences of Post-Secondary Correctional Education

This chapter will explore issues concerning readiness to change during incarceration as demonstrated by participation in post-secondary correctional education, including ways in which engagement in this endeavor influenced commitments to transition away from crime.

There were 31 participants who completed at least one post-secondary correctional education course and the remaining three (Peter, Quincy and Zach) did not for reasons generally related to facility restrictions on inmate access to higher education. Those individuals who had some post-secondary correctional education experience identified interactions with other inmates, faculty members and correctional officers as shaping various aspects of their incarceration experiences, such as levels of engagement in education along with educational success. Encounters that took place within carceral classroom settings were portrayed as a reflection of subcultural norms, and in that sense posed constraints on higher learning. Research participants also provided rich details about how other conditions outside of the classroom shaped opportunities to attend classes and study course materials. Finally, the interviewees described their experiences in post-secondary correctional education as influencing perspectives on crime and punishment, which were also framed by dynamic social processes that unfolded during incarceration.

BEGINNING A POST-SECONDARY CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION

ACCESS

At the time of our interview, 19 research participants had completed sentences at the same state youth correctional facility for men, which I refer to here as “Main Facility.” There were 12 other men including one transgender person⁹ who were formerly incarcerated at several other institutions for males, in addition to three female research participants who completed sentences at a state correctional facility for women. Many of the research participants who were assigned to a specific housing unit within

⁹ Although Yvette was a transgender female (trans-woman), she was sentenced to a state youth correctional facility for men.

Main Facility expressed frustration over challenges they faced with respect to beginning a post-secondary correctional education there. Furthermore, the two female students shared similar sentiments regarding the limited number of courses offered and inflexibility on the part of the administration to facilitate and support inmates' efforts to pursue a higher education. The other 12 research participants did not describe any problems related to college access during incarceration. However, they all had in common the struggle of trying to focus on higher learning in carceral environments, which I will describe in detail in this chapter.

With regard to college access during incarceration, the rules at "Main Facility" were described as particularly cumbersome, which in turn reduced the number of inmates who were eligible to enroll in college classes. Accordingly, Henry completed just one college course while housed on the compounds at Main Facility, which included "max or medium" security designations. Subsequently, he was transferred to the "camps" where there were no opportunities for higher education. Henry described the relationship between these housing classifications, sentence lengths and thus opportunities for post-secondary correctional education as follows:

You have the compound and you have the camps. The camps were for people who were either close to going home or who were close to going to a halfway house. People that typically had more time to do, or they had too many problems and they required a higher level of security were on the compound.

However, Quincy was sentenced to three years on the Main Facility camps which made him ineligible to take any post-secondary courses during this time. As he explained, "I got to like the full minimum unit and it's like a waiting room 'til you leave. There's no classes except if you don't have a high school diploma you could go for your

GED classes and that's all. There's nothing." Quincy had entered the facility with some college experience, and expressed frustration over the fact that he wanted "to change for the better" by advancing his education but had no opportunity to do so at that time. He also considered participation in post-secondary correctional education as a potential opportunity to tune out daily conversations with inmates who talked about "the dumbest shit," like "selling drugs, who could hustle more, who could make more money, who could fuck more, you know have sex with more women." At the time of our interview, Quincy still seemed annoyed as he stated "I heard those stupid arguments damn near all day long." He emphasized this point by adding, "I didn't even know about this [Project Achieve] until a couple of months before my release."

Zach also did not take any college classes during incarceration and stated that was "because they wasn't promoting it as much as other things." He added, "I could count one time...I heard about schooling in DOC¹⁰ and it wasn't something that they hold to a high standard at all. It's just another thing that gets swept under the rug." Instead, Zach mentioned that going to work was strongly encouraged because "if you don't get up, out of bed you get this blue sheet. You rack up enough blue sheets and they send you somewhere else." He thought that was counterproductive because "they kinda promote how to be a worker instead of how to be an entrepreneur. So they would have things like landscaping courses or shoe repair courses. A lot of things that aren't even feasible to do when you're free." Henry shared the following account which also highlighted this point:

They tell you to do all these programs and they give you a certificate like it means something when you leave, and it means nothing. It will get you a

¹⁰ Shorthand for Department of Corrections.

parole date, but it means nothing in the world after you leave the facility. But education does...That GED, you could take with you and apply to college. If you get an associate's you could take it and go into a bachelor's program.

Peter proposed that one way to support participation in post-secondary correctional education is to streamline enrollment processes and “make it easier for people to get an education.” He spoke from personal experience when he mentioned that:

There's a lot of red tape....If you're under 21, you have to get your GED or high school diploma. If they see that you're over that age, they're not gonna look to verify if you actually have your GED or high school diploma because it's not required by [the state] for that to happen.

Peter further explained that when he was over that age they didn't check to verify his secondary education credentials “because they didn't really care.” Consequently, he was not permitted to take any college classes for the entire duration of his five year sentence at Main Facility.

Ashanti also thought that the youth correctional facility for women where she was previously incarcerated had rules that were too stringent regarding when inmates could take post-secondary correctional education courses. She spent the first part of her five year sentence completing correspondence work sent from her high school and was awarded a high school diploma while incarcerated. By that time, Ashanti was starting to feel more engaged in education, but was “only able to take one [college] class on the inside.” As she explained:

I was leaving and if I would've signed up for another class it would've stopped me, prevented me from leaving at the time that I left. Like if you're in the middle of a class or if you sign up for a class...say I sign up in February and I'm supposed to leave in March and the semester is three months or four months I cannot leave until the class is over.

Ashanti thought that “the [facility’s] education system needs to be a lot less rigid” because she had to choose “whether to take a class or go to the halfway house.” As she put it, “I don’t think that should be a choice, like that’s crazy you know.”

Deb was formerly incarcerated at the same correctional facility and raised a similar concern that “there wasn’t enough classes offered.” She completed two college courses during incarceration, but “could have taken a lot more if they were offered...but they weren’t.” Overall, the research participants were motivated to pursue a higher education during incarceration, yet such educational opportunities were limited or unavailable as per the facility rules. Regardless, they revealed ways in which the mere experience of being incarcerated played a crucial role in the development of emergent perspectives on crime and higher education.

READINESS FOR CHANGE AND CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

The research participants entered prison with varying levels of prior educational attainment and criminal histories, as they were exposed to divergent school and neighborhood environments. Yet the experience of becoming institutionalized via incarceration cut across these underlying inequalities of race, class and place. Against this backdrop, research participants provided detailed accounts of how the solitude and confinement brought on by incarceration in many ways inspired them to occupy their time by getting involved in post-secondary correctional education. Furthermore, it was during incarceration that research participants began to seriously consider involvement in higher education as a conduit to perceived aspects of conventional success, such as earning a college degree and gaining post-release employment. Indeed, many of them

explained how their participation in post-secondary correctional education helped inspire non-criminal behaviors.

These changes were part of a developmental process that occurred in stages, beginning with participation in post-secondary correctional education. To start, Dexter expressed that “most people that are incarcerated don’t think. They’ve never thought. It’s always impulse, you know impulse, reaction, that’s it. Never ‘what am I doing? Why am I doing this? What can happen?’ You know what I mean?” As Marcos put it, “when you’re into crime, you don’t think about people really, you’re selfish.” They both spoke about how their experiences in post-secondary correctional education encouraged them to think more rationally about their behaviors. Dexter touched upon this cognitive shift as he noted, “I think that once your brain gets kicked into gear...that’s when you start realizing like why am I here? Do I want to keep doing this? It invokes the thought process you know what I mean?” By way of example, Marcos mentioned that after getting involved in post-secondary carceral education he “kind of switched over” and realized “you can’t hurt people, that’s not normal, that’s not something that’s good to do, healthy to do and you shouldn’t feel good doing it.” To that end, Jaeger shared his personal experience starting a post-secondary correctional education: “All education did was made me want to be conscious...to think about my consequences now. So I think, more than I act now. So before I just liked to act. I would like to say if that’s true of me, then that’s true of somebody else...” Indeed, Wayne began doing “a lot of reflecting” after getting incarcerated and enrolling in colleges classes. He made “education a priority” by “acting a certain way or participating in certain behaviors” to demonstrate that commitment. As Wayne further stated, “I would just stand clear of certain people”

and “focus on my schoolwork in order to have more freedoms while I was there and less oversight or pressure.”

Similarly, Xander conceptualized his former incarceration as a “big, major pitfall...the big awakening” and “went into education as soon as they allowed” him. He explained that being separated from outside pressures helped him focus on attaining his longtime goal of pursuing a higher education, which he had previously put to the side to sell drugs. In fact, Xander finally felt ready and able to completely break away from his former criminal life during incarceration because, “you’re surrounded by walls, you’re being treated in a way where your psyche is the way out. You use your mind a lot more.” So instead of “playing cards and gang banging and doing all this other dysfunctional stuff,” he was reading books and learning new things. Xander thought fondly of one professor in particular who inspired him to look at “the deeper meaning behind the surface of whatever the literature may be...you know the perception and seeing things in a different way.” Kenneth also spoke to this point as he stated: “the college courses, they allowed me to open my mind...just a whole bunch of mind wandering things that had me ponder how life is, and it’s a bigger picture than just the street little nonsense....There’s a bigger world.”

Mike also described his participation in post-secondary correctional education as an enlightening experience that afforded him the opportunity to think more critically about pertinent issues. Yet, he clarified that regardless of his engagement in those classes, he “still would have never did all the time and went home and even thought about doing crime again.” For Mike, actually getting incarcerated for robbery was enough to convince him that the “risks that you take aren’t worth it.” As he put it, “I got

sentenced to ten years, I would've learned my lesson after a year or two or three.”

Nonetheless, Mike still believed that “taking classes while you're inside does so much” particularly because “the people that you're surrounded by, you can't really engage intellectually that much.” From this standpoint, he expressed that: “the value of having an intellectual conversation and using your mind to refresh what you might already know, or to learn more is the best possible thing in that situation 'cause other than that you're just stagnant and you don't think about anything.”

Ivan described prison as “kinda like a vacuum, where it's such a structured environment.” For this reason, he “was using education as a tool” to better himself in the future. Much like Mike, he had already resolved to avoid crime and thus did not consider this subsequent educational experience as part of a transitional process. Rather, as he stated: “it was more about coming out with something instead of nothing....I don't think I took any courses that would cause me to think about my past actions or my life of crime or what led me to be incarcerated.” Yet, Ivan admitted that perhaps his experience in post-secondary correctional education indirectly shaped his outlook on crime because “being active and doing something to try to take some steps in the right direction...education is part of that.”

Kerri also stressed the value of keeping busy during incarceration and viewed involvement in higher education as an effective way to accomplish that because: “on the outside they always say ‘time doesn't stop’ you know but for people in jail it does. You lose track of time like it's no tomorrow but it's like while your time is going and you're doing all this amazing stuff look at what I'm doing too.” Kerri acquired “a sense of self

worth by going to school” which helped deter her from being drawn to criminal influences both during and after her incarceration.

Jaeger too explained that he enrolled in post-secondary correctional education classes in order to “manipulate” his time, especially since he was incarcerated at a facility where inmates are confined on a “23 and one” basis meaning “you’re in your cell all day, every day” except for one hour. To that end, he admitted that “at first, it was just a way to get away from all the nonsense ‘cause there was a lot of fights, stabbings, ‘locks and socks,’¹¹ a lot of CO¹² nonsense.” Yet, Jaeger also revealed that over time he became eager to learn, focused on the course materials and committed to long-term professional goals. As he put it, “I figured out what I wanted to do with myself as far as career wise. I started buying books accordingly.” Although he had a set plan for change in motion, at times it proved challenging to execute it in the prison environment. Jaeger elaborated: “People would notice, like you walk by my cell I might have my door open and there’s an Algebra 2 book in there and you’re looking like ‘what’s that?’ It’s not typical. So it was kind of a struggle to actually keep doing it because like I said in the environment. “ He recalled being able to strike a balance by focusing on his higher education but still acting “mad cool.” Jaeger said doing so meant he “could vibe with people and they would vibe back.” Yet, he acknowledged that this was not an easy task because during incarceration there were constant surrounding pressures to “be a tough guy” and “that whole stereotype just gets perpetuated and perpetuated and just keeps going, going and going.”

¹¹ Jaeger explained that “locks in socks” refers to when an inmate puts a lock in a sock and then uses it as a weapon.

¹² Shorthand for correctional officer.

Similarly Jeevan observed that some inmates felt “pressure from friends when they’re all hanging out, playing cards and they call ‘college courses, it’s time to go!’ ...there’s some sort of juxtaposition between friends and college courses.” He believed this was especially troublesome for inmates who “may be deep into a certain type of lifestyle” that involves engaging in criminal activities with friends including other inmates. Fred exemplified this point in the personal account he shared regarding his prior relationships with other inmates and how they began to change when he started taking college classes during incarceration. More specifically, he explained that: “You got the people who you used to be with more...now they probably feel some type of way ‘cause now you’re hanging out with this guy over here but...it don’t be things that said but you could feel the difference when you’re around someone.” Fred explained this predicament came about because some inmates had certain expectations of him that did not coincide well with his participation in post-secondary correctional education. To that point, he mentioned that “sometimes there’s pressure to do things. Sometimes people gotta get beat up, so they might come talk to you about it. Somebody gotta do it. It all depends on who it falls on that day to do it.”

Despite these challenges, Fred continued his participation in college and eventually “did feel engaged in those classes” but just towards the end of his sentence. He also viewed the experience as a useful way to counteract anti-social influences. As Fred mentioned, “it probably kept me out of trouble while I was in there ‘cause it would give me...a goal to try to reach and a reason to stay out of trouble so I can finish it.” Tarik expressed a similar perspective on the value of post-secondary correctional education because without that experience he believed:

You don't have anything. If you're just sitting there doing time, you're surrounded by a whole bunch of negativity, nobody's talking about anything positive you know. Nobody really has plans. Everybody's talking about how much money they used to make or you know what girls they used to sleep with or whatever you know.

In fact, Farley, who "got into a fight" on his first day of incarceration, noted how participating in post-secondary correctional education impacted his life. Once involved in this endeavor, he began to view success in higher education rather than violence as a reflection of social status. He elaborated:

I think it kind of replaced certain things like as far as me trying to establish how tough I am. And it went on to me establishing maybe how smart I am. It's a shift in my energy, as opposed to worrying about what's going on in this realm of like [using violence to gain respect]...Now I just took that same energy and now it's like, alright I've always had something to prove so now I have something new to prove, now as far as like I have to let it be known like, yeah I've been in trouble but I could still get my degree. So it's like a new challenge basically.

In general, the research participants recalled feeling ready to embark upon positive life changes after getting incarcerated and viewed participation in post-secondary correctional education as an important life event that sparked and/or furthered this commitment. In this respect, experiences in post-secondary correctional education served to embolden progress along alternative pathways to crime, particularly for those individuals who had been deeply involved in criminal subcultures both before and during incarceration. Rather than valuing this educational experience as a transition life event, others considered it an aspect of already established non-criminal trajectories. Nonetheless, the research participants were subject to scheduled movements and social interactions during incarceration which framed their experiences of post-secondary correctional education in the same ways.

ENGAGING IN POST-SECONDARY CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION

The research participants experienced varying levels of engagement of post-secondary education during incarceration as they were distracted by having to manage criminogenic influences, including anti-social behaviors. Of particular import were the interactions between inmates and faculty members within the context of carceral classroom environments and how these factors influenced educational experiences. Furthermore, the interviewees spoke in detail about their efforts to complete homework and other school related assignments in what was described as dormitory-like cells that housed numerous inmates, many of whom were not concerned with contributing to a learning conducive environment. In addition, some correctional officers were also portrayed as interfering with attempts to engage in higher education during incarceration through both words and actions. Although many of the research participants expressed a readiness for change vis-à-vis participation in post-secondary correctional education, the pathway toward that goal was often encumbered by certain elements of incarceration.

INTERACTIONS WITH INMATES

As previously noted, the majority of research participants reported prior levels of educational attainment that were more advanced compared to the educational histories of most state inmates. These past educational experiences contributed to outlooks on crime and higher education that research participants developed during incarceration, including conceptions about the value of participating in post-secondary correctional education. However, they attended college classes with other inmates who were described as being caught up in a culture of incarceration and motivated by reasons unrelated to education. Accordingly, some inmates were described as enrolled in post-secondary courses just to

get out of their cells, while others would merely congregate with criminal associates during class meetings. As a consequence, these inmates were portrayed as engaging in classroom behaviors that were not conducive to learning. Such distractions were pervasive and continued to influence levels of engagement in post-secondary correctional education outside of the classroom. To this point, research participants revealed that there were added pressures during incarceration to behave in ways that contravened opportunities to engage in higher learning.

Henry, for instance, provided a vivid description of how difficult it was to focus on academic learning in a carceral classroom setting. He began by asking, “could you imagine being in a room with a bunch of class clowns? So there’s a lot of joking, a lot of class disruptions.” Henry went on to explain that “a lot of guys in prison joke a lot, they call it “jailing.” He said that “jailing” was often done to just to pass time, yet it created a major distraction in the classroom. Henry said he was “ready to learn” but would quickly lose interest after realizing that some of his classmates were “gonna ‘jail’ the whole time.” He provided the following narrative to illustrate how difficult it was to simply disregard these behaviors:

Jailing would happen in class. They would jail off the teacher and she doesn’t know its jailing but they would say something and a lot of times it’s very indirect, like you say something that’s seemingly harmless or innocuous but it’s really not. They’re talking about you in a way that you just don’t understand or they’re like playing dumb when they really know the answer, you know it’s so many different ways to do it. But if I’m sitting back and I know you’re jailing it’s like come on...I know you’re jailing, let’s get on with the class.

Evidently, Henry was more interested in learning than others in his class. In fact, a common feature of post-secondary correctional education classes appeared to be

diversified student populations in the sense that inmates were not equally attentive to classroom instruction.

Indeed, Oliver mentioned that “some people are serious and some aren’t so you have like the people that are jokers you know and they’re just there to be there just to get out a little while” and “other people you know take it” seriously. He was among the latter group, as he stated: “you know in that environment anything is appealing and interesting...so I would say I was engaged. I’m never one to bite my tongue, you know, I spoke up.” On the other hand, Albert described himself as an introvert and felt his personality made it especially challenging to get involved in certain class activities. That was mostly because he was not “the type of person to talk in front of people” and felt intimidated “in those classes especially...in prison.” As Albert put it, “you’re in there, it’s like you’re amongst like comedians, like if you say the wrong thing if you look a certain way.”

Marcos felt the same way and believed that classes offered in prison “could be more structured, organized” because “it’s lax, people joking you know they don’t take it serious.” He used his public speaking class as an example stating that “there was only like four people that actually took their speeches seriously...that really tried to do well on their speeches.” Marcos seemed disappointed and believed the class would have been more rewarding without “outside factors” presented by uninterested classmates. He had some prior college experience which contributed to his perspective:

A lot of these kids in those college classes they really don’t know like the severity of the school thing. It’s serious you know, like you will fail class. So in prison they’re kind of lolly gagging it’s like this is nothing compared to how it can get. So I think it would be important to...exemplify that it’s

ok to sit in a class quietly for an hour and a half and not move, that's ok, you know, people do it you know.

Overall, the research participants offered a variety of reasons besides being interested in pursuing a higher education for why some inmates might enroll in college classes, and they described how such divergent interests framed their own post-secondary educational experiences. Victor spent his eight year sentence at Main Facility, but in the part designated for inmates who were serving longer sentences. As previously noted, there were plenty of post-secondary carceral classes available to inmates who were placed in this location within Main Facility. Victor explained that many of the inmates with whom he was incarcerated pursued these opportunities, yet they had varying motivations for doing so. As he stated, "some people did it because they was bored, other people did it because they seen the bigger picture like...this is my way away from the streets. Other guys seen it as an escape."

Fred and Everton served time at what I call, "Boarding Facility" and also described non-academic reasons for why some prisoners might have taken college classes. For instance, Fred revealed that enrollment in post-secondary correctional education was incentivized by the administration. He further added, "they would give you a food incentive where you could order food from a restaurant after you finished the class...little perks you could get. I guess they were getting some type funding for the amount of people, so they would try to get as much people as they could."

Everton, who served the majority of his sentence at Boarding Facility, explained the end result was that an overwhelming number of inmates would sign up to take college classes at the beginning of every semester. He referred to it as a "free for all," given

people with different criminal histories were brought together in the same place. As a consequence, he would often remind himself “you’re still an inmate, you’re still in prison, you still have to look over your shoulder and watch what’s going on around you.” Everton remembered feeling distracted by the fact that students with gang affiliations, rivals included, would enroll in the same classes for the sole purpose of convening in one place. Under these circumstances, he felt there was a great possibility that violence could erupt at any time.

Victor articulated the same point stating, “you could just feel tension, like you always feel that tension and that was a little uneasy...nerve racking.” He added that “there will be like subliminals thrown out, but nothing physical every happened.” Victor responded to this situation by just keeping to himself in order to avoid any trouble. Yet, such stress is something that went far beyond the classroom atmosphere and was an integral part of his incarceration experience. He described it as “pressure you know to do bad” because “there’s really no opportunity to do good. It is its own world. I can’t even explain it.”

Dexter categorized these pressures as subcultural norms and revealed ways in which they influenced interactions between inmates, including those centered around post-secondary correctional education. He described the carceral setting in general as “an aggressive environment...nobody has any consideration for the other.” Dexter further explained: “that disregard to consideration is a part of prison culture and you don’t even acknowledge the rudeness, it’s like this is normal. You know, you don’t get annoyed.” He mentioned how in this situation “you don’t have any peacefulness” to complete schoolwork, adding: “you can’t get to the level of concentration you need in a cell or unit

because there's people slamming cards, playing poker or fighting over food and just loud laughing and just reckless behavior you know...it's just a ruckus." In essence, Dexter believed post-secondary correctional education programs would be more effective if inmates were offered "more time to learn...more time out of the unit." As a matter of fact, when Oliver was asked if there were any challenges during incarceration to completing coursework for post-secondary classes his response was "other than like 60 other kids in the dorm room?"

Kerri mentioned that her "focus and behavioral problem" were aggravated by "just the noise, the noise" level in her housing unit. Yet, she was determined to pursue college while incarcerated and developed ways to effectively cope with these distractions and also manage her time:

I would put my walkman on and read and that would be it. I would stay up all types of night and I had to be to work at four in the morning so I would go to work from I think it was four to 12, four to 11 something like that I would come home...well come back to my bunk lay down, then I would go to class at three. I was up a lot.

Farley also intimated some problems related to studying in a shared space where personal movements are structured and routinized within the confines of a correctional institution. Specifically, he stated that "it's kinda hard to explain to 30 people that you got to read and keep it down. It's kind of difficult and then when everybody is keeping it down the lights are off so you can't really read like that." Indeed, Everton noted how he felt less constrained after getting transferred to a facility where he had a single cell:

It was beautiful, go to work, come back for the afternoon, eat dinner, go to college, come back from college and my room was quiet, locked. I would just sit there and just do my work. It was a perfect environment for me at the time. Doing my work, not being harassed or bothered by anybody. No

outside distractions besides just being in jail period, but you know it worked out and I was able to focus a lot more and do what I needed to do.

Other research participants were not fortunate enough to have their own cells and recalled their experiences in handling provocative confrontations with inmates regarding their participation in post-secondary education. Jaeger provided some contextual reasons behind such encounters. As he expounded, “it’s a war zone so to have someone try to be a scholar when everyone else is warriors or soldiers...it’s like ‘what are you doing?’ You’re the oddball.” Accordingly, Jaeger believed that he made himself “a target as far as people being like ‘oh, you’re a geek.’” Nate recalled a similar experience:

I remember one time I was sitting in my bunk and one of the guys walked up to me and was like, “yo what are you doing?” I was like, “I’m working.” He was like “why? You’re in jail, relax.” I told him, “you do your bid how you do yours and I do mine how I do mine.” So I did my homework.

He always tried to be resilient during incarceration even when challenged in this way because, as he put it, “there was this second chance miracle opportunity dangling in front of my face and all I had to do was survive, make it out of here without getting in trouble and do good in school.” Nate coming from a disadvantaged urban community and having received his GED while incarcerated was referring to his chance to attend a four year university post-release via Project Achieve, which was contingent upon successfully completing post-secondary classes during incarceration.

Marcos too spoke about how the opportunity to pursue a post-secondary correctional education helped him “realize the ignorance behind certain things...certain statements” and remain focused on achieving his long-term academic goals. Yet, ironically it was because of his educational experience, among other related things, that

he felt like an “oddball.” As he explained: “I’m from the suburbs. I speak properly and I’m not in a gang and I’m no Muslim. So like in there like I was definitely the odd ball but never had pressure. People would always say, ‘why you speak white for?’ I would get that every day in prison.” Marcos added that his education, including during incarceration, gave him the confidence to disregard such behaviors. He stated, “it didn’t bother me at all ‘cause I know that just means they associate proper speaking with only white people which is insulting their own. You know, they just don’t realize it yet, so no I never felt any pressure.”

The research participants portrayed their engagement in post-secondary correctional education as an experience that in many ways distinguished them from most other inmates. By the same token, it contributed to the isolation they felt during that time, which was described as an embedded part of incarceration. Yet, because they were ready to learn, being confined also served to minimize real world distractions and facilitate their engagement in higher education. As Jeevan stated, “I feel like you have to have a certain level of determination, drive, focus. If you have that, then it’s easy...because you don’t have distractions. Like you don’t have a full time job, you don’t have work.” Oliver too expressed that once “you just block everybody out, you can focus on education” because “you’re pretty much isolated to that specific thing you know that’s at hand...you don’t have to worry about driving anywhere, getting food, a girlfriend or whatever.” To that point, Marcos stated “there’s nothing to do. There’s nothing you can do so homework kind of like excites you...to have something to do.” Yet, there were research participants who indicated that some post-secondary correctional education

classes could have been more academically rigorous especially given the particular conditions of incarceration. As Ivan explained:

There wasn't a lot of coursework...I didn't have to study for hours like I do now. Not hours every day, but I don't remember having to study for three hours on end ever. I would maybe spend an hour to do some school work, do some problems so you know...what else would I say was challenging about that?

INTERACTIONS WITH FACULTY MEMBERS

Another important facet of engagement in post-secondary education was how faculty members interacted with research participants and other inmate students in the classroom, and whether they were perceived as genuine and at ease teaching in a carceral setting. These inmate student perceptions were based in part on the extent to which they felt treated like traditional college students. In that sense, the interviewees spoke about how their focus in post-secondary correctional education classes was closely related to the degree of academic rigor and quality of instruction. Yet, the ways in which faculty members conducted those courses were in part influenced by whether inmate students respected them and each other. For these reasons, relationships between inmates and faculty members emerged from reciprocal interactions, which ironically were influenced by subcultural norms that were perpetuated during incarceration.

Looking back, Ivan thought his experience in post-secondary correctional education would have been more rewarding had the courses been more challenging. As he stated, "I felt maybe you know I'm gonna pass either way. The professor is gonna pass most people just for showing up, doing the basic stuff." Fred expressed the same concern and for that reason believed the faculty "were just there getting a paycheck, an extra paycheck. So they didn't really care." For example, he mentioned that some of his

former professors “would just let people carry on side conversations. It would be just one big joke...the whole class.” Deb also commented about what she described as an apathetic attitude held by professors who taught the post-secondary correctional education courses that she took. She recalled one class in particular which was “kind of boring” because the teacher “didn’t really do much. He didn’t really teach much. He just made people do homework in the class and a few people asked questions. He couldn’t really answer them.” In fact, Marcos found it necessary to tell all of his professors, “listen, don’t grade my papers leniently because I’m in here...I don’t need leniency....We still have access to a lot of information. We still have more time to study than the average person out there, so I don’t need that.”

Jaeger spoke about how inmates might react to professors who seem less motivated in ways that only serve to deepen the disconnect between the two. As he put it, “If you come with a ‘I’m not playing type of personality,’ we’re gonna chew you up, we’re gonna try and break you.” By way of example, Jaeger mentioned one professor he had during incarceration who was not seen as having a congenial demeanor and as a result, his class was “like a zoo” because students had no respect for him. As Jaeger further explained:

He used to always rub his Ph.D. in our face like, “yeah I just wrote a book,” and we used to be like, “so?” We used to give him a hard time and he just tried so hard to try to be down. He would come in with his little Lauryn Hill quotes and we would look at him like, come on. But he just wasn’t himself.

He compared that person to another professor who “was so cool...just mad down to earth.” Jaeger remembered how that professor “would talk about the paper, he would read with you, he would let you know what was going on outside. Tell you the news or

whatever.” For those reasons, he thought that professor gave off positive energy which made students focus more in his class. As Jaeger put it, “we would give him that much courtesy and respect. We would still bullshit, but we wouldn’t do it in front of his face.”

Alternatively, other participants considered faculty member perspectives on administering post-secondary correctional education, especially some potential challenges they might face in a carceral context. For instance, Oliver believed the teachers are “not working with anything great so to speak” and in light of these circumstances he tried to “see from their eyes and how they think.” To that end, Albert thought carefully about how faculty members might struggle to teach students comprised of inmates with divergent criminal backgrounds. He specifically noted that: “in a way sometimes...they felt vulnerable. Like, you’re in a room and now you’re stuck with 30 guys. You don’t know what they’re here for...so they might be a little afraid and then you have guys that are just straight gangbangers so they just go in there for meetings.” Indeed, Fred mentioned that a lot of faculty “are kinda standoffish especially at the beginning” and surmised that perhaps the administration warned them to “stay back” and not to “get too close with any of the inmates.” Regardless of what factors might contribute to those initial interactions, he recognized that many times professors would “get warmed up” over time.

Randy believed that maintaining regular, ongoing communication with professors during incarceration was an important part of developing a good rapport and in turn feeling motivated to learn from them. He spoke from personal experience and shared the following account:

I actually built relationships with some of them 'cause they didn't just come there for one semester or two semesters, they had years in. And since I worked for [an educational staff member] I would see them all the time. Every day I would see them. Not just for class, they would come to talk to her and I would be back there typing or doing things for her and they'll speak and we would stop and have a conversation you know about general things. You know it was pretty good.

Kerri similarly mentioned that “it made you want to try harder” when “somebody who had taken the time out of their own schedule” to teach at a correctional facility also interacts with inmate students on a more personal level. She recalled a specific instance where a tutor whom she had been working with revealed to her, “I think everybody should go to jail before they come to college because you guys are the most dedicated people I've ever met in my entire life.” Kerri added, “it's like when you have nothing and this person still wants to help you and not get anything back...that alone makes you want to prove to them like “I'm not what you think I am.”“ To that point, Wayne remembered performing exceptionally well in a post-secondary correctional education course that he took with a professor who “went above and beyond” by “letting students know that we could be students in a university setting and we were smart enough to do so and she really pushed us.” Kenneth summed up that point noting that during his experience of carceral college classes, he would consider a good professor to be someone who “don't look at us like, 'oh you're incarcerated.’“

INTERACTIONS WITH CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS

The research participants described their encounters with correctional officers as a crucial aspect of their experiences in post-secondary education, particular with respect to efforts to engage in those opportunities. To start, their freedom to attend classes was

literally contingent upon the discretion of correctional officers or “COs” who, with some exceptions were unsupportive of their involvement in post-secondary correctional education and would often restrict access to classes. Furthermore, there were some COs who reinforced power inequalities inherent to incarceration by treating research participants in ways that left them feeling like controlled objects rather than individuals. Of particular import were daily struggles to manage relationships with COs who overtly ridiculed inmates about participating in post-secondary correctional education and their potential for success in higher education including post-release. Interestingly, most research participants explained how these interactions empowered them to remain steadfast in their commitments to pursuing a higher education both during and after incarceration.

Accordingly, Cameron stated that “treatment inside the prisons...what’s going on inside the system, those things play a role on how the person will come out.” To that end Nate stated “the officers hated us, they treated us like crap...You feel like you’re worthless.” He added, “they talked to us any old kind of way. They made us feel like we was never gonna be nothing.” Ivan also spoke about the challenges of navigating what he described as a “pretty cynical” attitude on the part of COs toward “anything the inmates are trying to do to benefit themselves, whether it’s religion or education.” He continued: “the officers are worse than the inmates sometimes. Just their attitudes in general about life and their attitudes toward women and education and all that stuff.” Mike suggested that perhaps some COs seem opposed to post-secondary correctional education “because a lot of them didn’t graduate college” or otherwise questioned why inmates should “be

afforded a free education.” Kerri too thought that “some of the officers felt like it was a reward when you should be punished.”

Farley revealed a similar perspective explaining that “the way our culture is structured, incarceration it’s not really geared towards rehabilitation. It’s more geared towards just the housing prospect.” Ethan found it curious that correctional officers whom he interacted with during incarceration were seemingly indifferent to inmate efforts to attend post-secondary classes but very strict when it came to enforcing other types of scheduled movements within the facility. He elaborated:

They basically want you to stay stagnated in your mindset that jail is like the thing to do or continue what you’re doing when you get home. For one, I looked at it like correctional officers would always tell us certain things we had to do as far as lock in, what time we gotta eat, what time we gotta be up for group. They made us tuck in our shirts but they would never tell us to go to school. So I looked at that like they putting progression on the backburner.

Nonetheless, Ethan continued going to college classes and also remained motivated to learn. He remembered thinking, “I’m just gonna stay intact and go as far as I can without basically letting anybody deter me from what I’m trying to do.”

Victor coped with these stresses of incarceration in the same way noting, “I just always put myself in my own zone. I was always in my own zone and no matter what you do to me, you could never take me out of my zone.” For him, that meant trying to feel more at ease by engaging in activities like “playing basketball, volleyball, working out, school, reading a book...not really being in the population.” Victor explained that this was his way of dealing with “just a whole bunch of negativity” during incarceration, including COs who verbally antagonized inmates like himself for their involvement in post-secondary correctional education. He captured this tension in the following account:

When you tell them you're taking college classes they would be like "oh why are you doing that? You wasn't going to school on the streets 'cause if you was you wouldn't be in here. What do you think you're gonna accomplish out of this? You won't be able to get a job still 'cause there's people that have diplomas that haven't been locked up and still aren't getting no job."

Farley too thought that COs generally "seemed a little ignorant" about the value of inmate participation in post-secondary education, especially the ones that "had the 'I don't know why you're going to school now' mentality, 'when you get home you're gonna go back to doing the same things.'" In addition, Isaiah framed CO perspectives as "more cynical...like they don't want you to learn something. They don't want you to get out there. They want you to go back out there and commit a crime and come back."

Indeed, Geoff shared his observations of how some inmates struggled to overcome these doubts and develop unwavering commitments to change. To that end, he revealed that it was common for inmates to give up and simply decide, "you know what forget this...I'm gonna break as much laws when I get home." He further explained that such reactions were attributed in part to interactions with COs who:

Put you in a whole "F' the police" state of mind just by how they treat you....What you think the outcome is gonna be of that? It's gonna be a small proportion that's gonna be like, "nah I gotta elevate from this, I gotta stop coming back here." But the majority is like, "alright I'm a con. I'll be the best con I can be then," because you're not teaching them nothing besides that.

Ivan likewise noted that "how officers generally interact with inmates...carries over to whatever you're doing and particularly when it comes to when you're trying to better yourself, which education is...that's what you're trying to do." For those reasons, he felt it was important for inmates to focus on education more and "focus on what you have to

deal with from the other side less” because “just getting your mind off the bullcrap and being able to focus on something that’s beneficial” is key.

Although the research participations demonstrated a readiness for change through participation in post-secondary correctional education, their engagement in this experience was largely constrained by institutional rules. More specifically, they recalled how COs would often exercise their wide discretion to limit or block access to classes for security related concerns or reasons that were otherwise described as more dubious in nature. Many research participants recalled missing important class meetings as a result, which hampered their post-secondary correctional education experiences in different ways.

While correctional facilities might legitimately need to take certain measures to quell violence between inmates, these procedures were also seen as potentially hindering success in post-secondary correctional education. Dexter, for instance, explained that “distractions in prison is like someone fighting and they call a code and they shut the whole place down...and you can’t get to your things, you can’t get to your books or whatever.” As an example, he provided:

Let’s say you’re out of your cell and all your books or learning materials are in there....Once they call a code, they lock the place down and you can’t get to it. It’s locked down for the rest of the night and you have an assignment due that morning...what can you do?

Those setbacks not only impacted inmates, but educational staff members alike. Isaiah said that “there was always a conflict between the education department and custody.” Specifically, he mentioned that “they always had a conflict if a fight happened earlier that day....They may try their best to not let school go out, college go out because they’re

afraid a reaction is going to happen between inmates and the gangs.” Isaiah portrayed that as a legitimate response, but also added “any little thing that happens, they try to just get rid of school.”

Dexter also recalled the same tension during incarceration, which he emphasized by saying “once you leave the classroom, it’s like you’re on your own....Correctional officers are not supportive...they don’t care that you have to study.” To further illustrate that point, he spoke about the risk of class materials being destroyed during cell searches:

When they do their searches...they search everybody’s room. Even if you didn’t do anything, they’re still gonna search your room. Searching to them is grabbing your stuff and throwing it everywhere and you know if you have a book there and they throw it up and rip it up or whatever it doesn’t really matter you know. And the staff they can’t do anything either except get you another book.

Kerri expressed that, “you can’t get any lower than jail in my opinion unless it’s death” and for that reason she viewed “shakedowns” or cell searches as contributing to that already vulnerable state. To illustrate this point, she shared her observations of how a cell search greatly impacted one inmate in particular during incarceration:

I don’t know exactly what they were looking for from her but they destroyed all of her stuff. Her schoolbooks and everything that she had so organized ‘cause she knew she was gonna be there a long time you know and it broke her down....broke her spirit.

Kerri explained after witnessing that incident she resolved to never have the same happen to her. Yet, she stated that it was not so easy to stay under the radar during incarceration because “everything we do, officers feel threatened.”

Accordingly, Jaeger shared a personal account of how COs misconstrued what was described as an innocuous act during a cell search along with the impact it had on his post-secondary correctional educational experience. Specifically, he was sent “to the

hole¹³“ and “almost didn’t graduate this class” as a result. Jaeger revealed more about the details of that incident:

I was learning a lot...so I made a plug out of the light so I could have an extra plug for my TV and my cooking utensils. So one time the CO is searching my cell and they touched this plug and got shocked so they lock me up. They say I assaulted the officer. They put me in the hole. So I’m in there missing class.

He was released after two weeks and subsequently completed the coursework needed to pass the one college class he was enrolled in at the time. Jaeger noted that he “was cool with [the] school cop” and for that reason had immediate access to the school area and his teacher once he was let out of administrative segregation.

Albert believed that COs or “police...had an advantage just like a power thing” over inmates, which was also demonstrated by how they controlled movements including to and from classes. He elaborated this point explaining how inmates might become institutionalized to behave in certain ways in order to navigate these inequalities. As Albert mentioned “like simple stares...you know don’t look at them ‘cause it’s gonna rile something up. Don’t talk, no lines, have your ID properly shown so they wouldn’t pull you over.” Xander spoke about how those informal rules might contribute to divisiveness, both real and imagined between inmates and COs:

We’re all inmates and they’re all officers or people who work for the state so there’s always that in the way. The difference in treatment is that we don’t have no rights and they’re the overseers so it’s similar to like some of the stuff that was going on back in slavery times...but in the institutions. That’s pretty much what goes down so I never really got comfortable with any of the personnel.

¹³ I.e. Administrative segregation unit.

Albert too recalled feeling oppressed while incarcerated because, as he put it, “I’m a man too and just because I have a color, khakis on, doesn’t make you any better than me.” He remembered a time when these emotions finally culminated “into a verbal argument with a cop” and as a result he “ended up getting locked up for three months” in “AdSeg” or Administrative Segregation. Albert thought the punishment was also motivated by an attempt to restrict his access to post-secondary classes. Nonetheless, he was able to resume his studies after serving his time in AdSeg.

Fred was not so fortunate, because as he mentioned, “a couple of times I went to lockup and I failed a class ‘cause of that.” He remembered getting sent to lock up for refusing to work on his job assignment. Fred further explained that lockup meant “you get in trouble, go to detention, you’re away from everybody for however long.” Yet, he was not deterred by this punishment. As Fred stated, “I got a problem with authority so I just pretty much do the opposite of what they tell me to do....I just won’t listen to them.” Kenneth too mentioned, “even while I was taking college courses, I was real rebellious toward the authorities.” He further explained that during incarceration, he adapted anti-social behaviors as a way to counteract what was experienced as the CO’s systematic exertion of control. For example, Kenneth said, “officers...they’ll talk to you any kind of way. They would do dumb stuff like come in and mess up my locker...and say it’s routine. I would say, ‘would it be routine if I put my hands on you?’”

Research participants also found it difficult to be complacent when faced with COs who obstructed access to post-secondary correctional education. To that end, Xander described his attendance in carceral college classes as sporadic at best and largely based upon the whim of the particular CO on duty. As he put it, “we basically gotta

travel by whatever rules they have or whatever ways they're feeling. So even if you are rightfully deserving of going to class that day, the officer might not let you off the tier." Xander further mentioned that although the "professors work with you," they cannot coordinate inmate access to education within the correctional facility. He spoke more directly about this power structure, stating: "it's kind of like their hands are tied, our hands are tied and you have the overseers." In addition to "overseers," Xander referred to COs as "watchdogs" because they "might not want to let you off the tier, so you might not make it to your class." He explained that as a result, the "educators are left with having to resolve or address the absence issue."

Isaiah also touched upon how restrictions on scheduled movements and educational experiences during incarceration are so closely tied together. As he stated: "The cops may not wanna let you out. If they don't let you out, the teacher's gonna write you up. If the teacher writes you up, you're gonna get locked because you didn't go to school and you could be like well the cop didn't let me off my tier." Overall, he "liked going to school" but thought some COs viewed inmate participation in post-secondary classes as an "inconvenience." Furthermore, Isaiah surmised that "if it was up to them, they would lock you up and wouldn't let you out all day." Indeed, Cameron remembered being subject to what he described as excessive and unconstitutional confinement during incarceration. He shared this experience in the following account:

There was one officer that, you know, we would be in our rooms from eight in the morning till three o'clock in the afternoon until his shift was done. Technically you're not supposed to be doing that. Lock us in the room and don't come out, not watch TV, nothing. Just out for lunch and breakfast that's it. Once you eat breakfast you go back inside and [are] locked in like an animal, that's it. We stayed looking at those four walls every day the whole first shift. That's torture. That's illegal. Let us get

some air, go watch TV, let us read a book....He locked us in there for a period of time just because he had the authority to do so.

Marcos too recalled times when COs offered what he considered senseless reasons for refusing to allow scheduled movements to college classes. As he stated, “they’re assholes. Sometimes they deter you from going to class ‘cause they won’t open your cell door or they say they opened it already and you missed your door so they won’t let you out.” Marcos also remembered being absent from class because scheduled movements for education were announced too late or not at all. He added that “even though the officer sees people going to college...he might look out the window and be like ‘whatever.’”

Nate revealed that “even though they’re only certain lock in times the officers on the unit would be like ‘I don’t feel like watching you. Go in your cell.’” He also mentioned that such actions always seemed to be justified because “they’re allowed to call a random count any time they think the numbers might be off.” Nate warned that under those circumstances, “if you complain” or “drop a slip about it...you was gonna pay for that, you know.” Instead, research participants had to face the consequences alone for being absent and/or missing exams even if it was for reasons outside of their control.

For example, Everton was devastated when his carceral college GPA declined due to his absence on the last day of class. As he stated, “our regular CO wasn’t on the tier. It was a different CO, he didn’t open the doors for college.” Everton added, “sometimes they’re a little temperamental. They hear it, other guys just ignore it, they’re like ‘oh I’m not getting up from my desk.’” He further explained that the “one stipulation this teacher had was attendance” so his “GPA dropped down to 3.97” due to his absence that day.

Everton was very upset by this, as he revealed that “I beat myself up and everything even though it wasn’t my fault.”

CONCLUSION

The 31 out of 34 research participants who took post-secondary classes during incarceration shared carceral educational experiences that were largely tied to structural elements of incarceration. From this standpoint, being in carceral environments served as a common ground between these racially diverse students who came from different places and socioeconomic backgrounds, that is, circumstances which also contributed to varying prior levels of educational attainment. As previously mentioned, early educational experiences largely shape the timing and eligibility for enrollment in carceral college classes. Yet, the experience of being incarcerated and pursuing college opportunities within this context motivated changes in routines and behaviors and also helped forge desistance processes regardless of the divergent precarceral factors that led research participants to prison.

To start, many of them first expressed a genuine interest in transitioning away from crime and instead pursuing a higher education once they experienced the reality of incarceration. In sum, the research participants identified the imposed solitude and confinement which are at the core of incarceration, as circumstances that helped facilitate the development of new outlooks on crime and higher education. For some, engaging in post-secondary correctional education was also seen as a key life experience that helped to inspire or strengthen commitments to change. Still others did not view this experience as an element of readiness for change but rather an artifact of it. Regardless, all research participants described routine encounters with inmates, faculty and correctional officers

during incarceration as shaping experiences of post-secondary correctional education in similar ways. Upon leaving the institution, however, realities related to inequalities of race, class and place resurfaced in the post-incarceration experience. I turn to this topic in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6. The Impact of Race, Class and Place on Post-Carceral Educational Experiences

The focus of this chapter is on post-release college experiences, including the role of community contexts and the concomitant influence of structural inequalities. While the value in taking post-secondary correctional education classes is well-established, less is known about continuing higher education after incarceration (Kim and Clark, 2013; Lockwood et al., 2012). Given the recent prioritization of carceral and post-carceral college education, there is a need to critically examine the specific ways in which participation in a higher education program for formerly incarcerated individuals might serve to facilitate progress toward conventional aspirations and away from crime. The life-course perspective was useful in terms of analyzing the distinct processes at the core of this transition, and particularly how they developed in relation to divisions of race, class and place. Another important aspect of post-carceral educational experiences was the impact of stigmatization, which encumbered these ex-offenders in ways that transcended any structural differences existing between them. Specifically, the research participants' past criminality and former incarceration were seen as dually operating as prominent features of their higher education that set them apart from traditional students, or individuals who entered college directly from high school.

Furthermore, racial minorities and especially those from low-income backgrounds identified racial, socioeconomic and environmental characteristics as framing their post-incarceration experiences, including levels of engagement in higher education. Specifically, those interviewees who commuted to the university from urban disadvantaged neighborhoods spoke about the financial and social implications of these circumstances,

along with the parallel influence of these neighborhood contexts on criminal outlooks and potential for educational success post-release. Against this backdrop, I draw specific comparative attention to the post-incarceration experiences of white and Asian participants who, with the aid of family members, were able to live on campus, or at the very least in better quality neighborhoods. Indeed, the opportunity to obtain housing on or near campus was regarded as a buffer against monetary and criminogenic pressures and, in turn, a pivotal step in the process of assimilating into the role of ex-offender/college student. Research participants came from divergent backgrounds, which contributed to unequal access to this much coveted post-carceral location of residence.

Regardless, since all of the research participants were formerly incarcerated and came to the university through Project Achieve, these combined experiences were part of their identities and thus served as a key source of commonality among them. In that respect, multifaceted networks organically emerged through participant interactions both in and outside of classroom settings. Research participants demonstrated specific ways in which these relationships inspired a shared sense of accountability, which served as a driving force behind academic success and crime avoidance post-release. Furthermore, being a Project Achieve participant also provided a mechanism for inclusion in a social group and thus an opportunity to offset challenges that stemmed from both real and imagined exclusions emanating from stigmatizations.

A POST-CARCERAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

As mentioned, the research participants had the opportunity to attend college post-release through their participation in Project Achieve and they perceived this educational experience as an integral element in the processes involved with rejoining society as law-

abiding citizens. Geoff noted that the timing of Project Achieve, as a resource available following incarceration, is particularly useful given that some ex-offenders are “stagnant because they don’t see a glimmer of hope.” He added that such individuals especially “need the opportunity to be able to progress...[and have] at least a glimmer of hope.” Likewise, Henry saw the chance to attend college post-release as providing a “buffer period to sort of accumulate some positive experiences” in the sense that “it gives you the ability to say ‘yeah, that was a mistake that I made a while ago but this is what I’ve done since.’” He compared the experiences of people “coming straight out and trying to get a job,” which he thought would be “much harder because you’re trying to convince someone that the person you were, the last thing that’s on paper about you, is not who you are today, but you have nothing to corroborate that.”

From this standpoint, research participants also framed that post-carceral educational experience as offering an alternative pathway away from crime. Accordingly, Tarik mentioned that “coming home is a crazy experience, after you’ve been in the same place over the years” and on top of that, “there’s so much pulling you in the wrong direction....[The university], it’s kinda like something that’s pulling you in the right direction.” In this respect, Farley believed the program serves as an essential resource for formerly incarcerated individuals given that some “go back and get in trouble again because they surround themselves in the same environment, same network.” He further explained: “when you commit a crime, it’s because you run out of options.” Indeed, Zach stated that “education is definitely a blessing” because it keeps “people away from crime in more than one way.” As he explained, “I don’t think anybody really loves to do crime. I think they do

it because they feel it's the only way. They do it because they don't have the proper education...the proper role models.”

By comparison, the research participants revealed multiple channels of academic, professional and personal support they received as part of their post-incarceration college experiences via Project Achieve. They also described various ways in which the program helped facilitate reentry processes and non-criminal trajectories. As Henry articulated, “we are an identifiable, small community that a lot of the important people know they can connect with...We're on a first name basis with a lot of people in high places that traditional students don't know and probably could never get to.” For instance, Marcos explained that Project Achieve participants “get to meet the deans and there's a lot of special attention” such as with registering for classes, gaining access to tutoring services or securing work study positions. He provided the following example to showcase that distinction:

I'm hearing people on the bus talking about how long it's taking them to get a placement for work study and I'm sitting there in my head like that's crazy 'cause I could just call [a Project Achieve affiliated university staff member] and they'll get me job like that.

Yet, Marcos clarified that these “special” accommodations were administrated in a way that did not make him or other Project Achieve participants feel “slower than others” but instead part of a “secret society.” Deb too believed that when people with felony records pursue an education, the experience “does boost their self-esteem” which is further enhanced by “having people who understand your situation and who don't judge you for it and are willing to help.”

Overall, research participants considered this educational experience a privilege, yet provided reasons for why it did not give them an undue advantage over other college students who were not part of the program. For example, Henry adamantly stated that Project Achieve participants were not “getting rewarded for being a criminal” but merely given access to tools needed to better manage specific disadvantages that both contributed to and resulted from incarceration. He distinguished the prior experiences of non-felons such as myself to further explain this point:

The person who typically finds themselves in [Project Achieve] on average hasn't had access before. They haven't had the opportunities that they had growing up in a cul-de-sac. I don't mean to be sarcastic but these guys come way further than you've had to come to get here so you know technically they work harder than you. They are going from prison and coming here. I'm talking about from childhood coming here, the distance traveled is much different for the average person who's been to prison versus the average person who goes to college.

Dexter mirrored that sentiment as he mentioned, “we have a lot that we're carrying, so the stuff we're going through is a little more difficult for us than the average person because of who we are and where we came from.”

Cameron spoke more specifically about some of the challenges arising from former incarceration, which he believed warranted the educational and social benefits that flowed from being a part of Project Achieve. He expounded upon that perspective in the following narrative:

When it comes to incarceration...helping those people get an education is a whole different topic because other people that don't have that situation just need to get their education and go home and that's it. You don't have no problems. Go play with your toys, you know what I mean? These people have another situation. They have a situation where they have a history. They might have a hard time getting employment. They have a situation of mistreatment if they get pulled over. It could be for a ticket and they run your name. They might treat you different, people might look

at you different. So those people have a little bit more of a problem in the educational system than people that don't have that problem.

Accordingly, Isaiah stated, "at the end of the day, I will forever be haunted by that checkbox. Have you ever been convicted of a crime? Check, I have to check it."

NAVIGATING THE ROLE OF EX-OFFENDER/COLLEGE STUDENT

Randy opened up about how racial and socioeconomic differences in particular might contribute to both real and perceived stigmas on the college campus. He believed that other students singled him out when he engaged in regular activities on campus such as catching the bus or walking around. As Randy put it, "you know I could feel it...like even though they don't know that I've been to prison, they know something like 'oh he's not' [of this place]" He surmised about possible reasons why he might stand out, at least from the vantage point of other university students:

The way I dress, by the way I talk actually....I'm totally different....Even if I hadn't been to prison I would be different because of the environment that I grew up in. Not to say that everybody here grew up in a nice environment or the suburbs or an upscale neighborhood but you could see a big difference.

Despite these concerns, Randy was preoccupied with performing well academically. As he stated, "I guess that's like my light you know what I'm saying? Regardless of what happens I'm still enrolled." Randy had only completed two weeks of his first semester at the time of our interview, but already felt engaged in classes including some that he initially had reservations about. To highlight this point, he recounted his classroom interactions with one professor in particular:

I already had a bad taste about the class being that the name is 'Black Experience'...the professor is something that I wasn't expecting. He's not even black, white or nothing....He's Indian. So I'm like you know this is something different and then his lectures is on point, they on top so I

really enjoy it. I'm always the one that raises his hand and had an opinion so...when he's giving his lectures he always walks right up to me and he don't say nothing but he just look waiting for me to raise my hand and then he just go back if I don't raise my hand. It's pretty good.

Similarly, Geoff at times felt socially awkward during his interactions with other students on campus but did not allow that to distract from his focus on school. Yet, much like Randy he did identify some features of his physical appearance that might be disconcerting to some students:

The cultural environment, it was little crazy when I first came here. I had a couple of people run from me. I was trying to get around on [campus] and I actually asked one of the students, two Indian girls and I was like, "excuse me do you know how to get to this class?" And they actually ran....So it's diverse but you still feel fragments like...a stereotype that automatically goes with your skin color or the way you have your hair or whatever.

Aside from that, he explained there were "more people pushing you forward especially these honor societies," which in turn inspired him to strive for academic excellence.

Kerri stated that an additional challenge is "trying to sit in a class with people that are 18, when you are 30." In fact, Tarik also mentioned that "the majority of people at [the university] go there fresh out of high school" and "at first you don't really know how to deal with it." He further explained, "a lot of people used to ask me 'how old are you?' I'd say 'I'm 25.' They'd say 'oh you're a senior?' I'd say no 'I'm actually a freshman' and they'd say...'why are you a freshman?'" Although Tarik described these encounters as "awkward situations," he eventually learned ways to handle them without necessarily revealing his criminal history. Furthermore, he was focused more on "getting college classes done" given other competing responsibilities of parole, fatherhood and work. As Tarik stated, "even on my Saturdays I pretty much spend them here. You know I go

either in the library or in the cafeteria and I just get my studying done....I don't do too much hanging out and stuff like that." He proudly revealed that his diligence paid off, resulting in a consistent B average over the course of three years.

Even though research participants were impacted by distinguishing features of race, class and age that existed between themselves and more traditional college students, they nonetheless framed participation in college post-release as helping them to make the transition from incarceration to post-incarceration. Yet, some interviewees still remained uncertain about their potential to succeed in college due to academic and social factors, which emerged prior to incarceration and were made more apparent through incarceration. To that end, Oliver explained that his precarceral educational experiences contributed to a perceived disconnect between himself and other college students who did not have criminal histories: "You really don't have too much in common with a lot of people and that makes it hard....You have a social stigma and you don't have to tell the whole world that you were locked up but at the same time I dropped out of school in 2002." Specifically, Oliver left high school as a sophomore and for this reason believed his academic skills were not up to par with other students who did graduate from high school. Although he earned a GED and also took post-secondary carceral classes he "didn't have any experience writing essays, papers." In addition, Oliver struggled with rudimentary college math and admitted that overall, "academically it's a challenge." With that said, he "didn't [do] too well" his first semester and "just kinda slacked off." Oliver attributed this mostly to not knowing how to prepare for exams and manage time efficiently. As he revealed, "I crammed the night before. I didn't study at all sometimes. I would skip class and think you know that I was able to get away with it...but it caught

up in the long run.” Oliver further explained that over time he realized “whatever you put in, you get out” and with that in mind, became a “front row student.”

Ashanti shared a similar story having also been incarcerated as a high school sophomore and she framed that experience as a setback to her academic preparedness post-incarceration. At the time of our interview, she had just begun her fifth and final year of college. As Ashanti put it, “time in an academic setting was really what helped me get prepared...time in an academic setting that I lost when I was inside.” She said more on this point:

When I came to [the university] I was really underprepared for a good three years. I didn't really feel prepared to actually be a college student until last year and this year, and I could study right and I could read the way you're supposed to read and not take hours and hours and hours to read one page. But...in my school they had college prep like the whole senior class will take AP classes that's pretty much how advanced they were. So I was prepared in the sense of you know my school is third in the nation for education but I left school when I was like in the middle of tenth grade. So I went from there to studying on my own, trying to learn the material and then straight to college.

In essence, Ashanti described her engagement and success in post-secondary education as a time consuming process that was enabled with the assistance of academic coaches and tutors.

Another important facet of post-carceral educational experiences at the university related to developing social awareness and learning how to assimilate into the role of ex-offender/college student. More specifically, research participants expressed concern that their maturation and ability to casually interact with others were in some ways thwarted as a result of being confined and isolated from mainstream society during incarceration. As Kerri pointed out, “people that spent six, seven, eight, ten years in prison” don't know

how to be an adult because “once you get to prison, you stop aging.” In light of these circumstances, Oliver commented that “coming from prison to some place like this...we’re shelled up and our social skills aren’t that great from being locked away in cages.” Wayne captured the same sentiment in the following account:

I really had to learn how to be in society again...I was 21, 22 when I got out. I had to learn how to just be a young adult again and where I fit in. I just think there’s that adjustment period and kind of shaking off that institutionalization and just realizing, you know, I belong here, I’m going to do this....So just making that adjustment to daily living again.

Oliver believed that in order to successfully accomplish this, it was necessary “to find how to break out of that shell, be comfortable, talk to people and make the most out of this experience.”

Yet, Kerri for example admitted that she had “no idea how to be a social adult” and mostly attributed this to being incarcerated between the crucial ages of 18 and 22. She added, “my main issue is social skills...so you know, it’s a work in progress.” Our interview took place approximately one year after Kerri’s release and at the time she struggled to trust people, as her past crimes were precipitated by relationships with negative peers and significant others. Kerri elaborated on this point: “I get nervous about my own judgment about trying to...make sure that I’m being around the right people. So I become very hyper-vigilant in that sense....I start cutting off friendships really early.”

Dexter too spoke about challenges he faced when it came to developing friendships with others post-release, especially on the college campus. He recalled not knowing “how to deal with males” in particular and even felt “socially retarded” at times. Dexter connected these feelings to what he described as a “culture shock...coming from this spectrum of rude aggression and everyone just not caring about anybody” to a

university setting where “not only are you learning, but you’re interacting with people on a positive level and it’s always positive.” Looking back, he mentioned: “that’s what blew me away...I’m like wow somebody held the door for me, somebody said thank you, or someone said bless you.”

Tarik also touched upon the dichotomy between social interactions that unfolded on the university campus and in carceral environments. At first glance, he noted that it was a “really shocking to experience” because:

In the correctional facilities everybody has this mentality where everybody’s tough, you know what I’m saying? Everybody has something to prove. Nobody feels as though you could let somebody talk to you in a certain kind of way or else it was just a lot of real tense, tough kind of situation. The college situation is just the complete opposite. I remember my first day people would sit down like, “hey how’s it going? What’s your major? Where are you from?”

Although Tarik was initially taken aback by this congenial college atmosphere, he “eventually opened up a little bit...and just really liked it a lot.”

While Dexter also appreciated the opportunity to connect with college students in what was described as a friendly academic environment, he struggled to embrace this change. He too connected his struggles to his former incarceration experiences:

I’ve grown a lot but still have that aggression. I feel like that’s the one thing that you don’t lose. I’ve been there for four years, so you’re just impatient all the time, 24 hours, and being impatient for four years straight is gonna create some type of discontent so I’m still trying...I’m fighting with that now.

Dexter learned ways to cope with those feelings mostly through the relationships he established with other Project Achieve participants who were dealing with similar issues.

THE ROLE OF PROJECT ACHIEVE

On a practical level, Project Achieve itself was not portrayed as a comprehensive approach to addressing some important obstacles that ex-offenders/college students might face, yet the social connections that surfaced through participation in the program helped fill in these gaps. Ashanti spoke in general about the advantages of reentering society alongside other formerly incarcerated individuals who were also seemingly committed to higher education as a vehicle for change. As she put it, “our support system is great. I think that having somebody to talk to really fulfills” a social need. Ashanti further explained:

Most of my friends are still doing the same thing that they were doing before....So there wasn't really no need for me to hang out with them and I definitely feel some type of loneliness because it's like who do we run to for that shared experience? Where do you get the companionship from...friendship? And you know, that's where [Project Achieve] came into play, especially as far as reintegration....I know people that have had a rough time with it.

Furthermore, Wayne believed that Project Achieve “has the power to not only change peoples' recidivism, but also change the way people view things.” To that end, he tapped into some ways in which involvement in the program might facilitate engagement in college post-incarceration. Wayne first described Project Achieve as “a peer-to-peer support community that's based around education.” He then added that the program is “not only bringing people into education, but supporting them in their academic pursuits.” Wayne provided some examples of how program participants helped one another in navigating some of the hardships that formerly incarcerated college students in particular might encounter:

That first semester I had classes with other [Project Achieve] students and so we would all go to class together, study together. We weren't the only ones going through this change of transition from incarceration or a halfway house to coming to school here, and then the demand of taking four courses at once versus when we were at [the correctional facility] taking one course at a time.

Additionally, Marcos explained that first semester classes are chosen for students who enter the university through Project Achieve, and primarily consist of large lectures "where it's not required to write papers." At first, he felt that program policy could stifle opportunities for educational growth, but quickly realized its benefits. As Marcos indicated, "I could use more work, but at the same time it's alright. I would rather just start practicing studying for exams and making it to class and then I'll work on exams, class and papers....So it definitely works." Furthermore, Albert mentioned that being enrolled in the same classes with other Project Achieve participants inspired a sense of responsibility. As he revealed, "sometimes these classes are so easy not to go to...but they kind of encourage you. There's always someone to help you."

In sum, the research participants strongly motivated each other to succeed in college post-release. Henry, for instance, explained that "we are surrounded by people who are all striving for the same positive outcome....That camaraderie encourages other people because nobody wants to be the one who goes back to prison, falls short or who doesn't make the Dean's List." Adding to that point, Dexter revealed that he felt like "a role model at all times" because of the social relationships that he built with other program participants. Similarly, Ulysses mentioned "that's the thing about the program...it pushes you, because you know you got a whole bunch of guys depending on you. Because if we all failing, they could cancel the program at any time." He added, "I

don't want to be a part of the problem...so that's mainly what drives me to say 'let me just do what I need to do'You know, they gave me the opportunity. They didn't have to." In fact, Ulysses maintained a consistent B average over the three years he had been enrolled at the university.

On the other hand, Farley recalled one semester when he "didn't do so well" and also how that setback influenced a change in his attitude towards school going forward. As he stated, "even though I feel like I let myself down...I was like 'damn I let [the program director] down'I kind of used that like 'yo I have to show him 'cause he believed in me'Not even counting other people, but just that alone by itself is enough to make someone be like 'yo I got to really bear down.'" Nate summed up those sentiments as he declared: "this is my opportunity and it was given to me and I don't want to lose it first of all, and I don't want to let anybody else down."

INEQUALITIES OF RACE, CLASS AND PLACE

Despite their shared experiences of being college students post-incarceration, the research participants were racially diverse and also embedded within contrasting neighborhood contexts prior to getting incarcerated. This contributed to deeply entrenched structural differences that were persistent and shaped post-incarceration experiences. Of particular import was the fact that many racial minority interviewees were unable to live close to campus and thus resided in the same urban and semi-urban disadvantaged neighborhoods post-release as they had prior to incarceration, amid familiar lures of crime. These research participants described how routinely moving in and out of these environments could potentially influence their chances of reoffending

notwithstanding any level of engagement in higher education, or commitment to crime avoidance.

In addition, financial hardships related to commuting and other aspects of post-carceral living were a common concern shared by most racial minority students from poor and middle-class backgrounds alike. In contrast, the three Asian and five white participants, with the exception of one, had the support of their families post-release. This enabled them to have housing either within close proximity to the university or in low crime economically stable suburban neighborhoods. Overall, the research participants described university campus housing as supreme, not only as a matter of convenience, but more importantly because the school environment and culture were considered invaluable features of their post-carceral experiences.

FACTORS OF PLACE AND THE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

Generally speaking, research participants characterized the university location and atmosphere as contributing to their transition back into society, as these attributes also helped facilitate engagement in higher education post-release. Dexter stated: “environment...is key to reentry.” More specifically, Ivan noted that “being around people here at the university...it’s refreshing compared to being incarcerated. The kind of people that you’re around and being out here and starting to see yourself as just one of them, but just different [than] past experience.” He further distinguished the two climates on the basis that the latter is more pro-social because, “you’re not doing things that are just mindless or destructive or just out of habit...you’re learning. It’s a cool experience.”

To that end, Peter believed that attending college post-incarceration helped program participants learn how to establish conventional routines:

This is their job and so even if they don't have class they're here studying or they're helping other people or they're just hanging out on campus instead of going back and hanging out with their old crowd or going back to the old places they're here in a positive environment instead of being in a negative environment.

Adding to this point, Sam touched upon the specific juxtaposition between the heterogeneous suburban campus environment and predominantly poor black inner city neighborhood where he grew up. He pointed to certain physical qualities of the university setting which also served to reinforce normative behaviors:

I love the campus....My first year there it was spring and just to see like cherry blossoms and stuff. To see the grass and people sitting on the grass and people just reading, conversation and throwing Frisbees and riding they skateboards, this is all new to me. We don't throw Frisbees in the ghetto, we don't ride skateboards, we don't sit in the grass and read books, we don't stare at the cherry blossoms. All that was like a new experience to me. Different cultures, different languages....So it's like when I get up there I take a deep breath, like this is beautiful. I was in prison...and I'm here with students whose families are wealthy and students who actually took a SAT and went through the whole spiel of coming through here and I'm coming through incarceration and I got the same opportunity as you so. It's a breadth of fresh air every time I walk up there.

For similar reasons, Henry referred to "education" in general as "kind of a safe haven for ex-offenders especially being at such a liberal institution as [this university] where they're open minded and they accept you as you are." He further stated within this context, program participants "do not have to walk around constantly with the weight of being an ex-offender" because "people want to see how they could help you, they want to take some of that load off your back and say 'listen you don't have to carry that around here.'" Ivan too believed that "it's a pretty accepting community" and more so than "the general population at large in the United States, you know business, private sector or whatever" where "you're more stigmatized." He spoke more about how being a part of

that academic community helped minimize some challenges of rejoining society as an ex-offender:

I realize that it's not that I'm just some sort of freak or anything. I have a lot in common and sometimes not a lot in common with some students here, professors. But like the interaction that I do have with professors and students when I do tell them about my experience, it's encouraging. They think it's an interesting and powerful story and experience. A unique experience, something not to necessarily be ashamed of....So this environment is like helping me deal with it in a positive way like what happened and having that as a record as a label.

In sum, Ivan enjoyed being “able to connect with people like that” and it was through these relationships with faculty and students alike that he gained new knowledge “about systems...things going on in this country...other kinds of institutions and sciences.”

Dexter also identified the campus locale as place conducive to learning, which in turn motivated him to become more engaged in classes. Much like Ivan, he attributed these circumstances in part to how inclusive faculty members and students seemed to be toward Project Achieve students. For example, Dexter revealed that university professors are “understanding...when things happen that are out of our control like if we had to go to parole or just something happened with our family you know.” He added, “I've never came across any professor that was just like, ‘oh well’....They are all like ‘well what can I do?’” In fact, Dexter recalled one particular instance where a professor made an exception for him to take a midterm exam remotely so that he could attend a mandatory parole meeting.

INEQUALITIES OF RACE, CLASS AND PLACE: POST-CARCERAL LIVING

The research participants described post-carceral living arrangements that were closely tied to family support networks, and in turn the nature and extent of resources

available to them at that time. For that matter, those who could rely on the assistance of family members either for a place to live or financial support in securing a residence experienced the least housing related post-carceral challenges. The Asian and white students shared similar accounts regarding the role of their families in helping to provide a smooth transition from prison back to suburban pre-carceral places of residence or communities located near the university. They also portrayed these circumstances as facilitating their engagement in college and desistance from crime post-release, as they encountered very low monetary and/or social pressures. Dexter was the one exception, given that he experienced financial strain as a college student-parent commuting between the university and his old neighborhood, which he characterized as being fraught with crime. His account paralleled the stories shared by some commuter racial minority students who were also raising children and thus regularly incurring transportation costs. Specifically, slightly more than half of the 26 racial minority participants returned to live in or near prior communities of residence and they also described ways in which these familiar environmental settings could possibly contribute to crime and reoffending and hamper opportunities for college success. Yet, the other racial minority students were privileged in the sense that they were able to secure housing near the university either with the help of their families, friends or on their own. However, most could not afford to make this move alone directly post-release, but had to first accumulate the resources to do so. I will further discuss these patterns between race, socioeconomic status and post-carceral places of residence below.

Ivan was white and lived within two miles of campus, and because of that had more flexibility in terms of managing the financial costs associated with traveling to the

university. For instance, given how expensive university parking was, he drove one mile and then walked the other to campus in order to save money. As Ivan put it, “I refuse to pay for parking because....they want you to spend like \$300 or \$400. I live pretty close, that’s really important too.” In that respect, he acknowledged that it was not only useful to live close to campus for monetary reasons, but also relevant to post-incarceration success. He explained, “[the director] said that it’s always been a big challenge with guys who have to commute a lot....They could fall off you know.” Other white research participants also lived off campus, but found ways to offset daily traveling expenses with the help of their families.

Accordingly, Mike was released from prison and “went home to a good environment” and could not think of any post-carceral challenges other than “just normal day to day things that people go through.” As he further explained, “I live at home with my mother, my stepfather, my brother and my sister and they’re not looking to charge rent and stuff like that.” Without that financial responsibility, Mike appeared to seamlessly juggle two work study positions that required a two hour round trip between home and campus. At first glance, he “thought it would be hard to work...and go to school” such a distance away from home, but it turned out to be easier than expected.

Similarly, when I asked Quincy to share any challenges he faced post-release he responded by saying: “Challenges? Not at the moment.” At the time of our interview, he had been out of prison for just one year and already had an established place of residence and steady employment. As Quincy revealed, “when I got out, I got my old job back right away so I didn’t have any problem getting employment....same GM [General Manager], she welcomed me back.” He also returned to live with his parents in his old

neighborhood but “didn’t really see anybody around.” On the whole, Quincy conveyed that living off campus in his childhood home did not pose any barrier to him taking full advantage of all the benefits that the university had to offer. He added, “it makes me want to stay out...like being in this [university] environment, it’s great.”

Peter described himself as “lucky” because he too was able to just focus on going to college and enjoy the overall experience without feeling constrained by any outside factors. He attributed this situation to having a very close-knit family and described some ways in which they helped him:

My mother, brother and sister are my core and whatever I need...they help me out a lot ‘cause I’ve only been home a couple of weeks now. I came home...and since then I had one week to take care of everything I needed to take care of before school started. As far as shopping, getting a car together, getting other bills taken care of...whatever help I needed, or financially, they help me out.

Furthermore, Peter recalled that his situation was “kinda like that throughout the whole time” of his incarceration. In fact, this ongoing assistance and support also contributed to what he described as a fluid reentry process, which afforded him the freedom to engage in his post-carceral college studies right from the start. Yet Peter realized that unlike him, some commuter program participants might “have transportation issues” because “they don’t have a car or they don’t have enough money for the train.” By the same token, he appeared to minimize potential ways in which such factors might hinder post-carceral educational experiences. As Peter put it, “I see people struggling, but you also see a lot of people succeeding.” He then added “if we really want to do something and we set our heads to it, then we’re gonna do it....A lot of us are strong minded people.”

In contrast, Dexter shed light on how varying social and environment conditions might indeed forge divergent post-carceral educational trajectories:

If you look at the track record of everyone in the program some excel, and those are people that have less...family obligations and having to worry about money or financial things. Those that excel, they don't have those troubles. They have a really supportive family and stuff you know, and a lot of us don't have that. So we're not only dealing with life, but we're still trying to make it at a university.

Furthermore, Dexter was the only white research participant who distinguished between the characteristics of his post-incarceration place of residence and the university campus.

He shared the following account to illustrate this point:

As I step foot on campus, it's like I'm a different person. Once I leave here I'm not as social, I'm not as friendly. It's like living a double life. Once you leave the campus then you get back to reality and there's poverty and you know drugs and everything else...There's never anything negative happening around you on campus.

It was evident that Dexter believed there was great value in living close to the university post-release. In fact, he stayed in a nearby apartment during his freshman and sophomore years, but moved an hour away, back to his pre-carceral low-income suburban neighborhood after starting a family.

Aside from Dexter, the white students revealed post-carceral experiences that were in many ways similar to the accounts shared by Asian participants. When I spoke with the Asian participants regarding their post-carceral educational experiences, two had already been formally released from incarceration, while one was still completing her sentence at a local halfway house. Yet they all shared examples of how family assistance helped lessen burdens related to housing or finances. To start, none of them mentioned any monetary or practical concerns associated with traveling to and from the university.

In addition, they framed these social and economic advantages as a conduit to their engagement and success in higher education post-release.

For example, Jeevan characterized his post-release as an overall positive experience given that he had not encountered any “obstacles to reintegrating” such as “finding a place to live.” He had no problem maintaining an apartment close to campus despite being unemployed for a period of time. Indeed, Jeevan considered himself “fortunate enough to have family support so when times got really rough” and he did not have a job, his family was there to step in. He added that “many former inmates, they don’t have any type of father figure or mother figure, or any type of family to go to so it could be very hard” to focus on college while managing those challenges alone. In this sense, he thought that having a “strong foundation” was “almost like an enigma” among most ex-offenders.

Wayne also had the support of a close-knit family, which contributed to his post-incarceration college success and overall confidence to persevere beyond the criminal label. Accordingly, he shared the following outlook: “no matter what our history, no matter what mistakes we’ve made, our future could be different. We’re not defined by our past.” Even though Wayne admitted to “feeling really uncomfortable” after his initial release from prison because “there is an adjustment period,” things quickly got better when he found employment and a place to live, all with the help of close family members. As he revealed, “I was living with my mother for a period of time....You know it was pretty simple in the sense that I came home, and my brother had lined up a job for me.” Coincidentally, Wayne also excelled in his post-secondary studies and reached a 4.0 GPA by his senior year.

Deb too found success in college post-incarceration and had recently graduated at the time of our interview, but still had a couple of months left to serve on her sentence. Back then, she was living in a halfway house, but was permitted to leave for classes and work. Deb imagined that after getting released, she would possibly have to grapple with “financial issues, where to live, jobs.” She tried to minimize these potential hardships by preparing for law school, an endeavor that her parents strongly endorsed even during incarceration by providing her with books and study materials for the law school entrance exam. They also taught Deb a strong work ethic and the importance of planning for the future. Accordingly, she diligently saved money earned from campus employment and intended to use it toward first month’s rent and a security deposit post-release. Although Deb’s situation was distinct in the sense that she was technically still incarcerated, she did not foresee any post-release challenges that might thwart her professional ambitions.

In contrast, a prominent theme that emerged from the post-incarceration educational experiences shared by the eight racial minority students from suburban advantaged neighborhoods was the connection between issues related to housing, employment and money and the combined influence on crime and higher education. There were six who returned to live in the middle-class neighborhoods where they were raised and some of them lamented about how their efforts to move closer to campus were encumbered by financial difficulties that arose in part from the commute. In addition, all of these commuter racial minority students felt to some extent detached from school and/or vulnerable to criminal peer and neighborhood influences.

Everton made the following comment, which succinctly captured this reality: “everybody’s got something on their plate...we’re all coming from different levels of

support.” He mentioned that growing up in a blue collar working class family, household resources had always been scarce. Yet Everton stated that these conditions further deteriorated following the death of his mother which occurred during his incarceration. Accordingly, it was not until his release from prison that he realized the full extent of the family situation. Everton provided a vivid account of the mixed emotions he experienced post-release as a result:

The house was like something out of hoarders....I’m excited to be home and finally freakin’ starting my life over and I come home to this....I spent the first couple of weeks, besides running back and forth to parole and trying to find employment, which I did within a few weeks, I just tried to clean up the house. My only concern with this whole thing is getting myself to a position where I’m financially stable so I can either have a place, or just get back and forth to classes.

Furthermore, Everton described how the pressure to find close and affordable housing mounted as the start of his first semester quickly approached: “I’m running short on time... I don’t live far but at the same time it’s like I’d rather be in this area so I could ride a bike...or the bus instead of worrying about the car....Hopefully something will work out in the next week or two.”

Although Marcos lived on campus, he seemed to empathize with other program participants who were unable to do the same. As he put it, “I would imagine that they want to get out of their area. They probably want to live here...away from where they used to be at, and that might be an issue ‘cause it’s hard to find a place.” Accordingly, Marcos guessed the root of that problem was largely based on money. For instance, he admitted, “if my parents didn’t help me I wouldn’t be able to live here.” In addition, Marcos believed program participants who cannot obtain adequate housing might also lack other resources that are useful in making a successful transition from prison.

To this point, Isaiah was an incoming student and mentioned that his first priority was “finding a good job” near the university. He continued: “I could get a job...but I just want a nice third shift job. If I get a third shift [warehouse] job and go to school and work, then I’m just gonna do that...until I’m done with school.” Isaiah explained that this type of employment would enable him to move closer to the university and also focus more on learning. Without these conditions in place, he feared not being able to manage going to college: “I’m terrified. I’m gonna have to commute for the first couple of weeks....I can’t jump [and relocate]...it takes me 90 minutes from where I live.” In addition, Isaiah spoke vehemently about how difficult it would be to earn disposable income in legal ways, and also balance responsibilities related to college, work and commuting. He knew there were work study opportunities readily available to program participants but thought the limited hours offered would not even suffice to cover daily living expenses. In essence, Isaiah believed the totality of these circumstances could make some participants resort back to crime:

Right now, you just got us a school, you ain’t got no housing, you’re gonna get us a job and we’re gonna work 20 hours a week what the fuck am I gonna do with 20 hours a week? Sell drugs on top of that just to stay afloat? They don’t want you getting any more hours ‘cause they don’t want you toggling too much work and school.

On the other hand, Ashanti did not experience the same pressures living with her parents in a middle-income, non-urban neighborhood located within a short distance from the university. Yet, given her family situation she too was fixated on finding a job immediately after getting released. As she put it, “when I came home, I was just like ‘I need a job. Give me a job and I’ll go to school.’” Ashanti eventually settled for a work study placement but noted that many program participants instead opt for warehouse

positions, which pay slightly more and offer additional hours. From this standpoint, she thought “the biggest struggle is” realizing “that working at that warehouse job is not more important than going to school.” Ashanti added that “if your grades slip and you can’t graduate, or you can’t get into grad school or you can’t get a good job after you graduate it hurts you more.” Accordingly, she considered it “a major decision, realizing that working is not all that it cracks up to be when you’re going to school.” Furthermore, Ashanti thought that restricting the number of work study hours allotted to Project Achieve participants would help them learn to manage time efficiently.

Although Isaiah did acknowledge that working too many hours could possibly interfere with school, he thought it had to be done in order to afford housing close to the university. Furthermore, he predicted that “with all three” components—housing, employment and school—“there would be no way you would go back to prison.” Isaiah further explained that “most crime doesn’t happen here,” near campus, “it’s outside areas.” By way of comparison, he provided the scenarios below to depict how certain structural characteristics might impact ex-offender/college students who live off campus, back in pre-carceral neighborhoods:

God forbid your homies are calling you to come back so they could get you back into that lifestyle. You’re gonna take it...you came home with nothing. Guess what? They’re gonna throw you some bud, throw you some crack, give you a gun or something and say here “hit the streets go make money” and you’re gonna do it. You know why? At the end of the day you gotta survive.

With that said, Isaiah revealed, “If I don’t get a job, that’s the difference between what I’m gonna do to stay afloat.”

Fred too stated that some post-carceral challenges were “trying [to] stay out of trouble...find a job, generate some type of income and then just integrating back into society.” Aside from that, housing was not a concern given that he returned to live with his mother “in the same town” but “not in the same neighborhood” where he had grown up. Although Fred had a short commute to the university, he resided just outside of the neighborhood where he lived prior to getting incarcerated. Being in such close proximity, he was often tempted to return to this familiar environment. As Fred further stated, “it’s like you always want to go back around...what you used to be doing, where you used to be at.”

Oliver and Ashanti still resided in the same non-urban middle class neighborhoods where they grew up, but explained how place factors influenced their post-carceral educational experiences in very different ways. Ashanti described the onerous process of re-connecting with neighborhood friends, while also carefully carving out ways to resist negative influences from them:

It’s such a tough decision, you know. Your friends are telling you...”you’ve been gone for so long let’s party, let’s hang out” and then your other side is telling you, “I have class.” You don’t want to seem like you’re stuck up or because you know you go to [university]. I think one of the hardest things is trying to...not really stay away but like not go back to your old life and to accept your new life.

Despite these conflicting pressures, as Ashanti stated, the demands of home life, college and work “made me what society would call a normal person.” Specifically, she had “to take full control” of family matters especially with a disabled father and mother who relied on her for transportation. Overall, Ashanti described her post-incarceration life as

“just work, work....and throughout the work” she “developed a normal routine” and didn’t have time to get involved in any criminal activity.

Oliver on the other hand, did not recall such a smooth post-incarceration experience. From the outset, he got into a physical altercation and was subsequently placed on house arrest, all of which diminished his academic performance in college. Furthermore, Oliver was among neighborhood peers when the incident occurred; that is, the same individuals who also used to accompany him in looking for fights prior to getting incarcerated. Yet, he distinguished these contributing factors from the circumstances that he believed might entice chronic re-offenders back into crime:

Some kid...I had money in my hand and he tried grabbing it from me so I didn’t even think. I hit him and he fell down, and you know I pretty much defended myself. It was just a reaction, most of the people that do get sent back, they go back to their old lifestyles. They make calculated decisions. They would rather go and make illegal money and do illegal things to make money. They don’t have a lot of money...the refund checks, they’re not gonna cut it sometimes and neither is work study. I never really sold drugs like that but obviously I met a lot of people that did and it’s fast....It’s a lot, so the temptation’s there. So when you react on a temptation that’s when you become enthralled again in that lifestyle...school or no school.

Oliver also indicated the importance of location by adding, “not too many people are from around this area. Luckily I’m from [hometown] and that’s like ten minutes away, so I save a lot of money.”

Other racial minority participants did not have the same geographical advantage. Accordingly, the six black, Latino and biracial participants who transitioned from urban disadvantaged to suburban or near disadvantaged neighborhoods during their youth did not return to live in those urban epicenters post-release, but still felt drawn to them. Figuratively speaking, it was a struggle for many of them to resist certain ways of

thinking about crime, which initially stemmed from these environments. This was especially true for those who maintained social ties and thus regular contact with loved ones who still resided in poor, urban neighborhoods. Geoff provided an example of how these connections might in turn complicate efforts to “knife off” from criminal pasts:

It’s a form of attachment even if you pull us out of it. We have families over there and you have so much going on like...alright damn such and such is homeless, now she needs help. Such and such just got hurt real bad from these guys down the street. It’s just so much...life is not that simple you feel me?

In this sense, Geoff was driven by a fear of becoming “raceless,” a term he used to describe “black people who cut all ties with their whole community” when they “reach corporate America.” He considered himself part of a “group of people who was being successful” and, because of that, did not want to neglect loved ones who were not necessarily on the same path. Geoff added, “you come from your family....If you’re cutting ties with you family, now what?” At the time we spoke, he lived with his sister in a better quality neighborhood compared to the one he grew up in, but still felt connected to that former place of residence, at least to a “certain extent.”

Similarly, Kerri would often visit her mother in the projects after getting released from prison. In this environment, she usually encountered “people, places and things” that she thought could lead to temptation for a former addict. Kerri further explained, “that’s where I go back all the time and it’s like people...they know about that stuff that I used to be involved in.” She figured that given these circumstances, if “you need quick money” it would be easy to find a “guy who could get you that money.” Yet Kerri preferred the delayed gratification that she got from working full time and taking college classes over making fast money.

Jaeger lived in the suburbs with his parents and agreed that “your focus should be the education, but the way society makes it...it’s like, ‘yo I gotta have the money to pay the bill, wear the nice clothes or drive the nice car’ especially coming from where you came from.” He was committed to doing the hard work needed to succeed in college post-release and become financially stable, but at times felt overwhelmed and frustrated by this seemingly cumbersome process. To that end, Jaeger realized how easy it would be to simply fall back into old criminal habits of making fast money:

It’s hard being on the bottom again ‘cause you was on the bottom when you was locked up so you figure when I come home, that part is behind me....But you come to realize it’s the same way, just minus the bars and its stuff. It’s like wow any small step and I could fumble. We all basically have something in common and it’s basically money. We all need it and chances are if you was locked up you went through some pretty unsavory or some inappropriate ways to get it and you’re used to that because it comes so quick and it comes so easy and trying to do it any other way is out the question ‘cause it’s hard. Who wants to do something that’s hard? It’s a headache, it’s a hassle.

Jaeger was employed by a moving company but didn’t consider it “a job ‘cause it’s under the table” and “it’s a headache because it’s such a demand on your body.” When we spoke, he was looking forward to an interview that his sister had arranged for him and hoped it would lead to more lucrative work.

Zach noted that “support is always a great thing,” and is something that helped him to become an exception in the sense that he never encountered any housing or financial obstacles post-release. At the time of our interview, he lived with his girlfriend in an apartment near the university. Zach explained that she came from a “very traditional African background” and for that reason was strongly opposed to his ongoing friendships with longtime friends who still sold drugs. Regardless, he had already made a

conscious effort not to “indulge in anything” illegal and attributed that decision in part to the knowledge he gained in college post-release. Specifically, Zach felt enlightened through higher education and came to realize that “there’s only a small percentage of people who sell drugs and then turn their money clean.” He added, “why would I go with something that’s gonna give me the least ROI, return on investment, than something that’s gonna give me more return on investment?”

On the other hand, most of the 12 Latino and black participants from urban disadvantaged neighborhoods went back to living in or within a short distance of the same poor, socially disadvantaged neighborhoods where they also grew up for financial or family-related reasons. Indeed, only two were able to secure housing close to campus and viewed this opportunity as a privilege, given the potential challenges they knew came along with living in familiar, low-income inner cities post-release. In fact, the interviewees who did reside in such places post-incarceration shared their experiences in balancing criminogenic pressures that were seemingly embedded in their urban disadvantaged environments with being formerly incarcerated college students. In addition, these racial minorities were for the most part the only participants who had children and in turn the added responsibility of supporting their own families.

Henry and Xander were the only two research participants in this group who resided near the university, and thus did not have to return to their socially disadvantaged pre-carcer neighborhoods on a daily basis. They considered themselves lucky in this respect, given the chance to engage in higher learning away from the potential threat of criminal influences in their communities of origin. For example, Henry mentioned, “there are certain characteristics or components that make up or constitute a situation in

which someone would reoffend....One of them is location.” Specifically, he thought the campus location was “ideal” because “not too many people are from” that area and “crime isn’t as concentrated” there compared to other places. Furthermore, Henry noted that “those of us who live around the university, we’re detached from that stimulus, that would cause us or trigger behaviors that would make us resort back to criminal activity.”

Xander too believed that “moving closer to all the resources, everything is a lot easier,” but unlike Henry, he initially went to live in an inner-city with a close family member after getting released. He described this former living arrangement as problematic and a potential hindrance to his post-incarceration success. As Xander revealed, “I had to be enrolled in school here, so I couldn’t be in [the city] caught up in an unstable environment....You want to have a spot where you’re gonna sleep at and you need to know that your food is gonna be there.” He feared that without these elements in place he could easily get drawn back into the criminal life. So, as Xander put it,

just the way I did in the hustling world, I made something happen and got me a little spot [in the town where the university is located] whether I was allowed to or not allowed to. I’m not really gonna get into that but I just made it happen. I got a little spot right next to the school and excelled in my grades.

Overall, he thought the move also helped facilitate his reentry because “coming home...is a long process. When you’re released things aren’t the way you want it, or the way they should be for you to achieve.” Xander added, “that was just a slow moving process and it got better and better and better.”

Most of the minority research participants who were from disadvantaged urban communities were commuter students who shared the post-carceral experience of going to college and still living in poor, inner city neighborhoods. For instance, Cameron

expressed strong emotions about the fact that Project Achieve provides “the opportunity to come to the school” but not the financial and housing related resources he thought were needed to succeed in this endeavor. He explained how this programmatic concern might impact some participants, like himself, who come from disadvantaged backgrounds:

So you’re telling me I’m coming from one institution with no ID, no clothes, no toothbrush and telling me I have to pay to commute from one location to another and then find an apartment on my own? Do all that work on my own? Who you thinking I am? You know what I’m saying?

Cameron tried to offset these burdens by working and going to school full time. Yet he also mentioned that there were other challenges that persisted and were closely tied to neighborhood peer influences. As Cameron stated, “the same people I grew up with I’m still there....We’re all older, thinking different but at the same time, it’s still the same.”

He added,

they still want to hang out weekends, drinking, inviting the girlfriends over I mean it’s like they don’t move they’re stuck in this one place. I mean it’s cool to hang out but...they want to stay in the house and drink and then the problem arises sometime with confrontation and drinking. You know you want to act tough. I mean we’re going back to the beginning you know so I try to shy away from that.

Ulysses expressed a similar point regarding the influences of people and places post-release. Just like Cameron, he commuted and shared some of his related experiences:

If I lived on campus it would probably be a breeze, but I still come back to my old neighborhood every day. That’s kind of like the hardest part ‘cause most of the people out there they still doing the same things....So when I get off the bus and I have to walk past these guys that I used to have shootouts with. They don’t care that I’m in school now.

With that, Ulysses noted that it was a constant struggle “to try to be submissive and not be aggressive” because “even if you change, the streets don’t change and they don’t care.”

He further explained how that dichotomy was akin to a “switch” given that he was social on campus but immediately became more guarded once back home. Ulysses elaborated more on the coinciding change in environment and behavior:

It’s either, you know, be the prey or the predator. So it’ll force you to get aggressive. Just like a pig. The pig on the farm is all pink and cuddly and cute and submissive but you put that pig in the wild, within two weeks it grow hooves, it change colors, it become aggressive....And that’s how it is when you in a different environment. It forces you to become aggressive because it’s the survival of the fittest.

To that point, Ulysses revealed, “I’ve been out there for years. I have a name, I did a lot of things and people don’t care...There’s always somebody out there that want to make a name off of you....Then they get that respect.” He sounded defeated when he added, “if it’s time for me to die or end up doing something that forces me to go back...I guess that’s just my story. I just can’t let nobody disrespect me or nothing like that.”

Farley too mentioned that some post-release “challenges were primarily just trying to avoid certain enemies” despite the fact that his routines had changed. At the time we spoke he was living on the outskirts of the inner city where he was raised. Regardless, Farley believed that given his criminal past, the mere fact of living close to that poor, urban environment posed a threat to his safety. He further elaborated on the imminence of this perceived danger:

I don’t hang out...but I’m still conscious that there are still people that don’t like me and I don’t know what their intentions might be....A situation may present itself and I kinda won’t really have a choice [except]

to protect myself. Not necessarily with a gun, but it might be fight....Even though I'm consciously trying to avoid this, it still could catch me.

In this respect, Farley believed "even if you change, your environment hasn't....So I think it's only a matter of time before it gets to you. So I think keeping us away from our home environments should be a priority 'cause that's where change starts."

Moreover, Randy mentioned how "that lifestyle is like a magnet if you've been a part of it...'cause it's the easiest thing to do. So if that person feels discouraged and they want to go back to that lifestyle then they're gonna do it." To that point, Ethan described how he put himself through "the struggle of denying that option." As he stated, "I did have people...once I was released, they knew my reputation so they was like, handouts was basically awarded to me and I had to turn it down." Ethan explained how difficult that decision was given the potential money he could have made by selling those drugs that were offered to him:

That would've put some money in my pocket. I basically went through the struggle and then still is going through it as far as instant gratification being that I have bills, rent, two kids. If I was still in that lane, it would be a little different....Money would be more accessible.

Given these circumstances, Ethan added "sometimes I definitely want to go back and do what I used to do."

Nate was also under financial pressures and admitted there were times when the thought of reverting back to crime seemed very appealing. Much like Ethan, he had a family to support, which complicated efforts to find suitable and affordable housing. In addition, Nate spoke about how these factors impacted his post-carceral educational experiences, especially after getting released from a halfway house:

So I came home and my plan was to hit the ground running and I did that. I had my first semester while I was in the halfway house and I got a 4.0. I made the Dean's List. I believe the only reason why I was capable of doing that was because I was in the halfway house and I didn't have all the responsibilities that I have now...I had nothing but go to school, come back study and do work. Now I have children, I got bills to pay. I knew it would be hard but I couldn't have foreseen the stuff....I came home to bed bug infestations, spent all money like refund checks and all that.

Nate mentioned that the situation worsened when he and his family "got evicted from that spot in the middle of the semester." As he put it, "the move put me behind. I was showing up to class late and it was very hard for me." Nate stated that just two months later he was forced to move his family yet again due to deteriorating structural conditions in the building where they were living at the time. He eventually found an inexpensive place to live, but still had to commute to school, which only exacerbated financial pressures. In fact Nate revealed, "we made the rent this month by the skin of our teeth. We'll be fine as soon as that refund check come in but....We've borrowed a lot of money so far."

Sam too "started off with a bang" when he was in the halfway house and mostly attributed that to having "no responsibility, no kids, no rent, no bills...nothing." Once released, he struggled to "juggle those responsibilities in with school" and failed two classes as a result. Sam further explained why that post-release period was so overwhelming for him:

I've been gone out of society for three years so just coming home straight off the bat like my mother deceased, my father deceased. I don't have a relationship with my family so I came home doing everything by myself—job, school, paying rent, paying this. It was just a whole new experience for me 'cause I'm used to making \$700, \$800 a day to coming home and working and only making about \$500 every two weeks. It's a different ball game. It's something new to me so the whole change of last year was just like something new. So the distraction was responsibility period.

Similarly, Ulysses could not afford to live on campus and in addition had to simultaneously balance family needs and school. In addition to caring for his daughter, he also felt obligated to help his grandmother who was “struggling to pay all the bills” on the “family home.” Ulysses further revealed, “that’s why I stay there [living in his pre-carcer home] to try to keep the house up, but it’s the same place, the same neighborhood where I did all my dirt so it’s kinda like...that just comes with it.” Despite those drawbacks, he figured it would not be as cost effective to move onto campus, “paying somebody else \$900 and still having to give” his “grandmother a couple of hundred just because.” Furthermore, Ulysses noted how crucial his financial contributions were to the family as he stated, “it’s either that, or we just lose the house.”

CONCLUSION

This chapter investigated post-carcer experiences with a focus on participation in Project Achieve, including relevant contextual factors that shaped opportunities for college success and progress towards desistance. Generally speaking, the university campus was considered an ideal location of residence given that it stood apart from the environments that interviewees were immersed in prior to getting incarcerated. Yet, structural inequalities influenced options for post-carcer living whereby every Asian student and most white students received financial support from family members and as a result, found it much easier to secure places of residence near the university. Some racial minorities also had the same advantage, except many of those who came from poor, low-income families could not afford housing in the middle-class suburban neighborhood surrounding the university. Instead, they were bound to former disadvantaged

neighborhoods for different social and economic reasons and also encountered additional financial costs as a result of traveling to and from the university, just as other commuter participants did.

These divergent factors of race, class and post-carceral places of residence contributed to varying levels of engagement in education, college success and chances of reoffending. However, one important source of commonality among research participants was their participation in Project Achieve. To start, they were all ex-offenders who then became college students vis-à-vis Project Achieve and thus were integrally connected in those ways. At the core of these relationships was a deeply rooted social fabric built upon shared experiences and mutual accountability, which in turn helped facilitate entry into new roles and progression toward non-criminal trajectories. In this sense, such elements also operated against the stigma of incarceration by serving as a well-based conduit to change. Indeed, research participants described these support networks as helping to build their determination and confidence to transcend beyond the criminal label through achievement in college.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

This qualitative retrospective study explored the development of educational and criminal trajectories among past and present participants in Project Achieve, a higher education program that provides formerly incarcerated individuals the opportunity to enroll in State University post-release. The data was collected in 2012 and included life history interviews, which revealed changes and continuity in levels of engagement in education and crime over time, along with converging influences of structural demarcations defined by race, class and place features. Although this was not a life-course study, it can be used to enhance life-course perspectives that explore the role of agency, pro-social routine behaviors and support networks in shaping crime entrée, reentry and desistance processes (Giordano et al., 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2011; Maruna, 2006). In this chapter, I will discuss some key substantive and theoretical contributions this study makes to life-course frameworks used to explain underlying factors behind the development pathways into and out of crime for people who experience incarceration during their lives, and will make note of the study's insights in support of enhancing the availability and support for carceral post-secondary education.

Of particular import is the fact that all research participants were seemingly motivated to change, as evidenced by their voluntary engagement in post-secondary classes during and after incarceration. Both educational experiences inspired ongoing involvement in activities that served to facilitate the development of and progress along pathways alternative to crime. Yet, the characteristics of carceral environment settings and some post-incarceration residential places threatened to dampen motivations to change, desistance

efforts and opportunities for higher education success. For instance, in the carceral setting, research participants recalled that some encounters with inmates, correctional officers and faculty members during incarceration seemed to contravene their efforts to pursue a higher education. Furthermore, nearly half of the research participants went back to living and/or socializing in or near urban disadvantaged communities and as a result viewed reoffending as a real possibility in light of these environmental circumstances. The implication was that perhaps there was some variance in levels of readiness and commitments to change among research participants, but this was also tightly coupled with inequalities in the opportunity to smoothly transition to college life. Regardless, all research participants had enrolled in post-carceral college classes and in doing so became ex-offender/college students who shared similar experiences related to their prior incarceration and recent involvement in Project Achieve. These commonalities created an informal layer of academic and social support on top of the resources already bestowed upon them through State University because of their membership in Project Achieve.

On the whole, this research is expected to have critical policy implications at the pre-, carceral and post-carceral levels. With regard to pre-incarceration, evidence shows that racial minority students from poor, inner cities are at risk of facing disproportionate exclusionary punishments that can facilitate the onset of crime (Rocque, 2011; Skiba, 2011). This study supports these findings but also offers a much needed look into how white and Asian students from middle class and affluent backgrounds might form criminal identities around more favorable educational experiences. These results might be used to guide reforms in the nature of punishments imposed for student misconduct at the primary, middle and secondary levels. Furthermore, this research sheds light on possible changes that could

be made within correctional facilities to better accommodate and support inmate students who have demonstrated a desire to change vis-à-vis participation in post-secondary correctional education but remain vulnerable to counterproductive influences often embedded within carceral contexts. This is a crucial point of concern given recent public attention that has been devoted to completion of post-secondary education among current and former prisoners and the impact of such educational experiences in lowering the risk of crime and reoffending. An important facet of this relationship involves the influence of post-carceral contexts. For instance, this study revealed that being able to secure affordable housing in safe environments is an essential element of post-incarceration success for those ex-offender/college students at State University who remain connected to environments fraught with criminality. These implications and suggestions are discussed in greater detail below. Lastly, in this chapter, I describe the drawbacks associated with relying upon qualitative life history interviews but also note significant benefits of using this method.

This research revealed important substantive and thematic conclusions that highlight connections between levels of educational attainment, race and class disparities as reflected in divergent personal, social and environmental characteristics. Although research participants described distinct educational and criminal experiences, they shared in common the advantage of entering prison with more advanced levels of education, compared to most state inmates. Yet, the five white and three Asian students from middle-class and affluent suburban neighborhoods had the highest levels of pre-carceral education attainment as they were all high school graduates and slightly more than half also had some college experience. They shared life-histories that revealed favorable elementary and middle school experiences, characterized by high academic achievement resulting in consistent good grades and

advanced placement classes for some. However, the source and extent of their connections to school varied, given that Asian students were the only participants who identified their parents and cultural backgrounds as facilitating their engagement in education and performance in school. In contrast, the white students did not recall being as focused in school at the primary level and sometimes engaged in disruptive classroom behaviors like talking back to teachers or making other students laugh, especially towards the end of middle school. Yet, none of them faced exclusionary disciplinary punishments for such conduct and thus they were able to seamlessly advance to the next grade level and remain in school.

Dexter, the least economically privileged white student, was the one outlier in this group, and described a pathway into delinquency and crime that was facilitated by getting held back in the eighth grade after missing an excessive number of school days because of suspensions. He was then sent to an alternative high school where he chose to graduate from after experiencing repeated difficulty conforming to the conduct rules at his original, mainstream high school. After graduating, Dexter resorted to selling drugs in order to earn extra money and social status among friends who lived in the same lower income neighborhood which surrounded an inner-city. Given his school history, he had no college aspirations at the time and viewed crime as the most viable life choice, a decision that ultimately led to his arrest and incarceration.

The other four white participants—Peter, Quincy, Mike and Ivan—received good grades in the beginning of high school, but also cared less about academics by this time, as they became more involved in socializing with school and neighborhood peers during adolescence. Along with this development came a growing awareness of the low threat of

punishment for crime and delinquency within the predominantly white non-urban communities where they grew up and also attended school. These features, combined with the favorable treatment they received for school misconduct, framed privilege-based perceptions about the risk of punishment for crime and in turn contributed to their onset of delinquency and crime. Although Peter, Quincy and Ivan went to college directly from high school, they were not focused on higher education and/or became involved with drugs and negative peer influences while pursuing this endeavor. As a result, they dropped out and became involved in the crimes that led to their incarceration. Mike was enrolled in college but was arrested and incarcerated for a crime he committed during his senior year in high school, before the semester began.

Deb and Jeevan were the two out of three Asian participants who had some pre-carcer college experiences and both identified going to college directly from high school as a turning point in their life histories. More specifically, it was the first time in their lives spent away from parents, whom they described as overbearing at times, particularly with respect to school performance. Without these controls, Deb and Jeevan became less focused on educational success, a change that was followed by their withdrawal from classes or expulsion from college. Out of school for the first time, they both were drawn to peer influences and got involved in situations that culminated in their arrest and incarceration. It was apparent that Deb and Jeevan's engagement in education, which was shaped by parental influences, served as a buffer against delinquency and crime from elementary through high school. They lost this educational and familial attachment once they started college out of state, and soon after became first time criminal offenders.

Wayne, on the other hand, was the exception in this group, given that he did not pursue a higher education prior to getting incarcerated, a circumstance he tied back to a pain-killer addiction he developed after suffering a sports injury during high school. Yet, similar to the white students, he had felt confident in his ability to avoid incarceration for the crimes that he committed while under the influence of drugs. Wayne had been in and out of juvenile detention centers because of related behaviors throughout high school but never thought he would actually have to serve time at a correctional facility. In this respect, Wayne, along with Peter, Quincy and Mike, identified early school and neighborhood experiences that made them feel socially advantaged, especially being immersed in middle-class to affluent suburban neighborhoods where, given these community characteristics, they believed crime would likely go undetected or unpunished.

On the other hand, the eight Latino, black, Middle-Eastern and biracial participants who spent their childhoods and adolescence living in suburban middle-class communities revealed distinct experiences with education and crime. Specifically, they felt pushed out of mainstream school environments through the imposition of expulsions, detentions and/or suspensions that were intended as punishments for breaking school rules by doing such things as cutting class and being rude to teachers. They perceived this treatment in school as unfair given that their classmates from other race and class backgrounds were seemingly penalized more leniently for similar behaviors. Indeed, the white participants recalled making disruptions in class, but for the most part, were never routinely isolated from peers and teachers as punishment for such conduct. From this standpoint, these suburban racial minorities had unequal access to learning opportunities in school, given the time they spent outside of classroom settings. This placed them at a disadvantage as demonstrated by the

fact that two of them—Isaiah and Ashanti—had no formal educational credentials at the time of incarceration. Still, three others—Albert, Marcos and Oliver—earned a pre-carcer GED only after getting kicked out of high school altogether. Although Everton, Fred and Tarik graduated from high school before entering prison, they, along with the other suburban racial minority students, made direct statements about how factors of race and class contributed to structural exclusions in school and communities, which facilitated their detachment from school and involvement in crime. Nonetheless, Marcos and Fred took some college classes, but were not engaged in that experience as they continued to frame their personal identities around crime rather than educational success. In sum, the suburban racial minority students identified inequalities of race and/or class, including perceived and actual ways in which they were treated because of these features, as shaping early experiences in schools and neighborhoods, which also helped forge pathways into crime.

The six racial minority participants who grew up in mostly black, urban disadvantaged communities and moved to better quality neighborhoods before or immediately after high school also touched upon the role of structural conditions, but from subcultural perspectives. They all spent their childhoods living and going to schools located in low-income inner city neighborhoods and most described crime as a prominent aspect of these environments. Embedded into the fabric of these communities were anti-social and criminal influences, which emerged from normative rules that extended over into school contexts. Specifically, these racial minorities recalled using violence and/or aggression in their interactions with others and described such behaviors as learned responses to actual or perceived threats. These outlooks laid the foundation for educational experiences and crime

entrée, which were interconnected, and shaped their life paths before and after moving away from poor, urban communities of origin.

They were presented with more opportunities for upward mobility in the suburban or near disadvantaged communities where they lived during early or late adolescence, yet struggled to break off ties to crime and criminal peers in inner cities. In addition, they conducted the same criminal behaviors, such as selling or using drugs and/or fighting, in these new environments and also sought friendships with others who had similar interests. The focus was not on succeeding in school and as a consequence, three of these six participants did not earn a high school diploma or GED before getting incarcerated. However, the other three graduated from high school and two also took some college classes not because they aspired to graduate, but rather to fulfill the expectations of others. Both dropped out of college and were incarcerated shortly thereafter because just like the other racial minorities who transitioned out of urban disadvantaged communities, they were drawn to illegal activities particularly because of their upbringing in such environments where crime and offending were structural norms (Anderson, 2000).

There were 12 black and Latino students who lived continuously in predominantly poor, African-American urban neighborhoods before getting incarcerated. They described social disadvantage and crime as coinciding aspects of these communities, which also shaped their progress (or lack thereof) toward educational advancement and involvement in crime. Specifically, ten of these urban disadvantaged racial minority students felt compelled by neighborhood factors and socioeconomic constraints to get involved in crime. From this standpoint, using illicit means to make fast money was portrayed as a necessity to offset financial pressures, and was also seen as socially favored among inner city residents who

also lived in the communities where they were raised. Part of their vulnerability to these subcultural influences was attributed to growing up in low-income, single parent headed households, among family members who did not encourage them to pursue alternative avenues to financial success, such as through educational achievement. For these reasons, some aspired to be like older neighborhood peers or loved ones who used crime as a way to earn respect and social status within the community and in doing so became disengaged from school. Still there were two urban disadvantaged participants who shared educational and criminal histories that stood out. Particularly, they framed their entry into crime as an option, rather than a need, and both also had the advantage of attending private schools, finishing high school and briefly going college before getting incarcerated. While four other black and Latino participants from poor urban neighborhoods also earned at least a high school diploma before getting incarcerated, the remaining six entered prison with no formal educational credentials. Yet, they all shared in common pathways to crime that were fueled by urban disadvantaged neighborhood factors, which contributed to low educational aspirations and success.

As a whole, the 34 research participants described divergent communities of origin that were structured around inequalities of race and class. In fact, pre-carceral educational outcomes, which were largely tied to structural disparities, impacted the timing of eligibility for enrollment in carceral college classes along with potential for success in this endeavor. For example, half of the Latino and black participants entered prison with no formal educational credentials and had to earn carceral GEDs in order to qualify for participation in post-secondary opportunities during incarceration. On the other hand, all of the white and Asian students had graduated from high school prior to getting incarcerated.

These differences aside, the research participants were all formerly incarcerated, an experience during which these features seemed to be less prominent. Firstly, all study participants identified the experience of getting incarcerated together with involvement in post-secondary carceral programs as helping to facilitate readiness to break away from their pre-carceral criminal lives. Research participants expressed varying reasons for their initial decisions to pursue this educational endeavor. For example, some just wanted to occupy their time while others envisioned participation in post-secondary correctional education as a vehicle for change right from the start. Nonetheless, they all portrayed this educational experience as having a transformative influence over their lives. Still, opportunities to demonstrate these commitments were marred by the realities of incarceration. Specifically, during incarceration research participants' daily movements, including to and from post-secondary classes, were controlled by institutional rules and informal constraints that were imposed based upon the whim of correctional officers. As a result, research participants recalled times when correctional officers would refuse to open the cell door in time and they would miss classes, which typically led to a lowered or failed class grade. Indeed, these coerced interactions with correctional officers largely shaped opportunities to steadily participate in post-secondary classes.

Despite these challenges, 31 out of the 34 research participants completed at least one college class during incarceration. This experience helped inspire pro-social routines that included attending classes, interacting with other inmate students and preparing for courses by studying outside of carceral classroom settings. However, these carceral contexts were not characterized as conducive learning environments, especially given that the larger inmate population, including inmate students, were not portrayed as being strongly

committed to change. In light of these circumstances, an important facet of post-secondary correctional education experiences described by research participants were their encounters with inmates both in and out of carceral classroom contexts. Although many found it easier to engage in education during incarceration because they were isolated from outside distractions, such scholarly conduct also made them targets for ridicule and possible violence from other inmates. In addition, the majority of research participants were confined to dormitory-like cells under noisy conditions, which hampered learning processes. Nonetheless, the research participants did become motivated to change after getting incarcerated and beginning a post-secondary correctional education. Yet, opportunities to forge non-criminal pathways through this educational experience were constricted by what were described as inherent features of carceral contexts. These findings contribute to life-course research that portrays the incarceration experience as transformative and a foundational part of reentry and desistance processes post-release. In addition, it enhances theoretical perspectives that highlight the positive impact of routine behaviors that emerge from involvement in pro-social activities such as post-secondary correctional education. Finally, it bolsters evidence suggesting that even though such actions can be considered a reflection of readiness for change, they must be supported by a strong individual desire for transformation that persists during and after incarceration, and the opportunities to pursue such transformation, in order to attain post-incarceration success (Maruna and Roy, 2007; Soyer, 2014).

Indeed, continued engagement in post-carceral higher education was largely shaped by contextual factors, particularly characteristics of collegiate spaces and places of residence, the latter of which was tied to inequalities in race and socioeconomic position.

The research participants had the opportunity to attend State University post-release through membership in Project Achieve and identified the university campus environment as helping to facilitate their progress toward post-secondary educational success and alternative pathways to crime. As noted, post-carceral college participation helped established habits centered around going to classes, socializing with other college students and studying on campus. These routines also served to insulate research participants from pre-carceral neighborhood and peer influences at least during time spent on campus.

A related point is that the suburban middle-income community surrounding the university was distinct from pre-carceral neighborhood settings, where some students commuted from after getting released from prison due to social, family and/or economic related reasons. There were certain qualities of these urban and non-urban home environments, such as poverty, social isolation and familiar lures of crime, which posed a threat to the development of non-criminal trajectories. The financial cost of traveling back and forth to these environments compounded these struggles. Against this backdrop, individuals who remained connected to disadvantaged communities post-release felt vulnerable to the possibility that exposure to people, places and things within these environments might contribute to their reoffending. From this standpoint, perhaps they were not as steadfast in their commitments to avoid crime and potential triggers of crime compared to other participants, but they also faced disproportionate burdens as they attempted to do so. All of the ex-offender college students who took part in this study expressed a desire to break away from their criminal pasts.

A crucial part of this process involved having support from designated State University employees who helped them apply for financial aid, obtain work study positions

and complete other miscellaneous tasks. Furthermore, research participants described social and academic networks that organically emerged between Project Achieve members and specific ways in which these channels of support helped promote a sense of mutual accountability among program participants. They were already connected through shared experiences of former incarceration and post-carceral higher education but were brought closer together through both mandated and informal social interactions with each other. This foundation helped strengthen efforts to perform well academically and also desist from crime. In essence, these results contribute to life-course theoretical frameworks used to describe the role of higher education in creating a “hook for change” as students become involved in conventional routines inspired by their educational pursuits (Giordano, 2012). Moreover, it draws specific attention to reasons why Project Achieve should be considered a “hook for change” and catalyst for post-carceral transitions away from crime.

Collectively, these study results will further enhance understanding about ways in which distinct school, neighborhood, family and peer factors can shape experiences in education and crime at different points in time. Consequently, this research suggests the need for policy changes directed toward enhancing educational experiences pre-, during and post-incarceration, with a particular emphasis on higher education, to help lower the risk of crime and reoffending. Starting with the pre-carceral phase, this study brings into focus the idea that racial minority youth, regardless of socioeconomic background, might gain some benefit from getting involved in community based educational support centers. For instance, the 12 Latino and black participants described pathways to crime emboldened by negative school experiences and community characteristics. More specifically, impoverished living conditions and subcultural norms inspired reliance upon the use of

violence, aggression and crime to acquire social status and money over educational advancement. Another point of concern is that the six racial minority students who had the advantage of moving away from predominantly black, urban disadvantaged neighborhoods to better quality non-urban areas during their youth still either regularly returned to those communities of origin to commit crimes and/or were drawn to similar criminogenic atmospheres in their suburban places of residence.

Overall, these results show that perhaps an increased presence of academic enrichment facilities in inner city environments might help promote the importance of education among poor racial minority children as they grow up. Of particular use would be support within such institutions for afterschool tutoring services and mentorship with positive neighborhood role models who have demonstrated educational and professional success. Perhaps this might counteract criminal socialization processes that, as this study demonstrated, emerge from and are reinforced through social interactions between residents living in predominantly African-American poor, urban communities.

The study findings pertaining to racial minorities who transitioned from urban to suburban settings prior to incarceration also demonstrate the role of individual choice in shaping early school, neighborhood experiences and the onset of crime. The same could be said for the white and Asian students who made misguided decisions to commit crime in part due to their perceptions about the low risk of crime and punishment, which were perpetuated by protective features of school and community environments. Accordingly, with one exception, none of the white or Asian participants faced multiple suspensions or expulsions for breaking school rules. As a result, they felt privileged and confident in their abilities to continuously avoid punishment for engaging in deviant and criminal behaviors.

In essence, research participants from various race and socioeconomic backgrounds made poor judgments about the costs and benefits of crime due in part to neighborhood or school experiences which in turn contributed to criminal pathways.

Aside from community based learning initiatives, this research indicates the need for changes in the administration and type of student disciplinary consequences at the elementary, middle and high school levels to more effectively promote equality and rational behaviors. The study results revealed the disproportionate imposition of exclusionary school based punishments on poor and middle class racial minorities and more importantly that such responses tend to be counterintuitive, leading up to crime. Taking these factors into consideration, policies designed to reinforce positive school wide behaviors through the conferral of nominal but meaningful student rewards might have the opposite effect on educational and criminal trajectories. More specifically, such non-punitive responses can indirectly deter student misconduct and promote rational thinking by facilitating engagement in education and adherence to conventional normative behaviors for all students regardless of race and socioeconomic background.

Next, I turn to policy implications of the carceral environmental characteristics discussed as they relate to participation in post-secondary correctional education and in turn alternative pathways to crime. As mentioned earlier, all of the research participants were formerly incarcerated and the majority of them also completed college classes during incarceration. One related issue was access to college classes, as research participants who served sentences at “Main Facility” were subject to stringent rules about inmate enrollment in post-secondary education. In essence, these rules barred inmates in the minimum security housing designation from registering for classes regardless of their academic eligibility.

Given the recent policy shift in support of college participation for both past and present prisoners, there should be changes put in place to ensure that inmates who are ready to transform their lives are also able to take advantage of post-secondary educational opportunities and other resources that are known to help facilitate this process.

Yet inmates who enroll in college classes face certain vulnerabilities within carceral contexts because of their involvement in higher education and regardless of how committed they are to change. This should be addressed starting at the institutional level given the potential impact of participation in post-secondary correctional education on inmate behaviors, reentry and desistance processes. As the research participants indicated, inmate college students are typically in the minority during incarceration, as most inmates choose not to or are ineligible to pursue a higher education. With that said, incarcerated individuals who take college classes make themselves a target for ridicule or even physical harm because fighting, violence and other disruptive behaviors, rather than studiousness, are seen as accepted ways to gain power within carceral settings. From this standpoint, attempts to learn and study under these conditions might prove problematic for numerous reasons. As Dexter suggested, a possible solution might be to offer separate housing for inmates who have demonstrated a serious commitment to higher education in order to help support their academic growth and progress. This would also shield them from possible backlash from members of the larger inmate population.

Regardless, the aforementioned policy change would not resolve tensions that might exist between inmates and correctional officers who enforce their security related duties in ways that trump efforts to engage in post-secondary correctional education. During incarceration, research participants often felt they were treated as inferior to COs, who

would make disparaging remarks about their ability for college success and/or prohibit them from leaving the tier for class for what were described as senseless reasons. Some students surmised that many COs acted in such a manner because they did not understand or care to appreciate the value of inmate participation in post-secondary correctional education. This made some participants feel less motivated to follow the instructions from correctional officers. A possible solution might be for correctional facility administrators to make correctional officers more aware of the benefits of inmate engagement in higher education both during and after incarceration. This could take place during mandatory training programs as an added feature designed to promote safety, the efficiency of carceral college programs and in turn the development of non-criminal pathways.

Indeed completion of or at the very least participation in carceral college programs is a key factor in successful attempts to reenter society and avoid crime post-release. With that said, ex-offenders who also take post-carceral college classes might rely on this educational experience and related activities as a “hook for change,” helping them to further progress along non-criminal trajectories. However, this study also shed light on specific challenges faced by ex-offender/college students largely due to inequalities related to race, class and place, which threaten to damper efforts to break away from crime. Although research participants, in the process of attending classes at State University, developed pro-social routines centered around learning, studying and commingling with traditional college students and more importantly other Project Achieve members, many of them did not live near the college campus. This meant commuting daily back and forth to neighborhoods characterized by people, places and things that might contribute to reoffending. For this reason, during our interviews some interviewees recommended that Project Achieve

members be provided with housing options on or near the campus to help offset the social and economic costs of traveling to and from pre-carceral or otherwise criminogenic environments. I also believe this policy idea should be given adequate consideration because the influence of post-carceral places and spaces are crucial aspects of reentry and desistance processes that can transcend efforts to abandon criminal pasts.

An important facet of post-incarceration experiences is individual will and commitment to change. As previously discussed, some racial minority students who spent all or part of their childhoods in urban disadvantaged neighborhoods chose to return to these communities to live and/or socialize among familiar faces. A possible source of encouragement to help strengthen internal change might come from parole. When the interviews were conducted, 21 participants were on parole and none of them identified their post-carceral enrollment and/or success in college as a contingency of this conditional release. I do not believe involvement in higher education should be formally tied to parole outcomes given the potential for post-incarceration challenges to thwart such opportunities and thus perpetuate a cycle of recidivism and incarceration stemming from technical parole violations. However, it might be useful for parole agencies to systematically recognize the value of parolee participation in post-secondary education by providing informal incentives for continued enrollment and/or academic achievement.

Lastly, I will discuss in detail some strengths and weaknesses relate to this study. As noted, there are important limitations associated with the accuracy of reflections on past life events that draw from distant past memories. For instance, it is possible that research participants might have inadvertently given misleading or incorrect responses regarding early educational experiences including how these circumstances influenced the

development of criminal trajectories. In addition, these formerly incarcerated individuals were seemingly committed to change and for this reason, might have chosen not to fully disclose details about past or present involvement in crime.

Since I did not employ mixed methods, my ability to check the veracity of interview responses was limited to the use of qualitative research techniques, which included data from 34 in-depth life history interviews. The sample size was small because by definition only formerly incarcerated individuals who successfully completed college classes during incarceration were eligible to enroll in Project Achieve. Aside from that, there were 19 program members who chose not to participate. In light of these circumstances, the findings obtained from this study could not be generalized to non-participant program members and the general ex-offender population. Yet, the study results were rich in nature, which helped to guide the emergence of patterns between structural differences, engagement in education and changes in criminal offending at different points in time. In addition, the post-carceral aspect of this investigation was limited given that at the time the interviews were conducted research participants had varying levels of participation in post-secondary education at State University. As mentioned, the majority of them were already in the process of taking classes, there were a few who had graduated, and others were incoming students.

I plan to conduct follow-up qualitative in-depth interviews with the original research participants since it is nearly three years since the data collection phase of this study was completed. The purpose will be to explore any continuity or changes related to engagement in post-secondary education at State University, including the impact of such experiences on academic success, nearness to completion of college studies, potential for viable employment and/or access to graduate study opportunities. Part of this inquiry will also

include questions about the salience of support networks such as connections that were described as emanating from and also reinforced by membership in Project Achieve.

This investigation will also include a critical look into the aforementioned structural inequalities embedded in race, class and place factors that research participants identified as shaping opportunities to progress toward higher education and away from crime post-release. More specifically, have these features persisted, framing criminal and educational outcomes in similar ways over the past few years? Of particular interest is neighborhood context and the extent to which racial minority participants continuously commuted to campus from disadvantaged communities or areas with place characteristics that could possibly have contributed to reoffending within this time. I will also compare the post-incarceration experiences of the more advantaged research participants who reported living close to campus or in low crime, protective environments three years ago. In doing so, this comparative study will seek to identify any stability or developments in post-secondary educational experiences, desistance pathways and reoffending along with how such features have interconnected and impacted life trajectories since the initial round of interviews were completed in 2012.

There are certain methodological strengths of this future research that are expected to address some key limitations associated with the initial retrospective study. Most importantly, the design of this study is intended to be longitudinal in nature, focusing on the same thematic patterns related to varying levels of engagement in education shaped by structural inequalities and their concomitant impact on pathways into and out of crime, which were also observed and analyzed as part of the first study. However, in this follow-up study, I will be able to verify the accuracy of research participants' responses by checking

for consistencies in statements made during the first and second wave of interviews. In instances where differences do exist, I can ask interviewees to provide further explanation in order to gain a more critical and comprehensive understanding of their recollections about post-incarceration life experiences.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questionnaire

To start our conversation I would like to ask you a series of open ended questions. These questions are not structured and are intended to start an open dialogue between us. Is it okay if we proceed with the interview?

Just as a reminder, all information that you reveal will be kept confidential. So, no one will know what you have shared with me. I will not keep any record of your real name so your identity will remain hidden and no one will be able to trace any responses to you.

I would like to record our interview so that I can accurately recall everything that is said. I will erase the tape once I write down everything that is on it. Is it okay if I use the tape recorder?

I. PRE INCARCERATION

I would like to begin by talking about some of your childhood experiences.

1. Tell me about your experiences in elementary school and middle school.
2. How many elementary schools did you attend as a child? If more than one, was there any reason why you didn't remain at the same school?
 - Was it public or private? Where is this school(s) located? What is the surrounding neighborhood(s) like?
 - What was the race/ethnicity of most of the students? What about in the surrounding neighborhood(s)?
 - What was the quality of education like? What about the teachers? Did you look up to any them? In what ways?
3. What were your grades like in elementary school? Middle school?
 - Did you feel engaged in elementary school? Middle school? All or just some of your classes?
 - If some, what facilitated engagement?
 - What led you to feel disengaged from others?
 - Was there ever anything that made it difficult for you to complete your school work when you were in elementary or middle school? Anything else?

4. What was the academic environment like at the elementary and middle schools that you attended? What kinds of resources did the school have? How did the teachers interact with students? What was the student culture like?
 - Taking those environments into account, how would you compare you elementary and middle school experiences?
 - Can you recall any problems? How did the administration handle them?
 - Does this have an impact on you? How so?

5. How many high schools did you attend? If more than one, was there any reason why you didn't remain at the same school?
 - Was it public or private? Where is this school(s) located? What is the surrounding neighborhood(s) like?
 - What was the race/ethnicity of most of the students? What about in the surrounding neighborhood(s)?
 - What was the quality of education like? What about the teachers? Did you look up to any of them? In what ways?

6. What were your grades like in high school? Did you feel engaged in school? All or just some classes?
 - If some, what facilitated engagement?
 - What led you to feel disengaged from others?
 - Was there ever anything that made it difficult for you to complete your school work when you were in high school? Anything else?

7. Did you graduate from high school?

IF YES: What did you do after graduating?

IF NO: Do you recall some of the things that were going on in your life at that time? At what age did you drop out? Why? When did you receive your GED?

8. What was the academic environment like at the high school(s) that you attended? What kinds of resources did the school have? How did the teachers interact with students? What was the student culture like?

- Can you recall any problems? How did the administration handle them?
 - Does this impact you in any way? How so?
9. Tell me about where you grew up.
- Was it in one neighborhood? If not, how many? What was it like there?
 - Was criminal activity common? What types of individuals were typically involved?
 - Did you ever face pressure to become involved in a crime? How did you react?
10. Can you tell me about the events that led to your former incarceration? Can you recall some of the things that were going on in your life at that time?
- How or why did you get involved? Can you tell me more about it?
 - Do you think your experiences in school had any impact on your involvement in crime? In what ways?
 - At the time did you think there were legal ways to accomplish the same things? Did you think they were realistic for you? Why/Why not?
11. Before serving time was your behavior influenced by the threat of legal punishment? In what ways?
- Did you think you could ever be arrested? Incarcerated?
IF NO: Why not?
IF YES: What motivated you to take that risk?
12. Was it common for people in your neighborhood to go to jail or prison? What types of crimes did they typically commit?
- What about among your friends and family members? What impact did that have on you growing up?
13. Are there some people in your neighborhood who have never been incarcerated? What about among your friends and family members?
- How did they avoid it?
14. Can you tell me about a person who you looked up to as a child?

- What made you look up to them?
- What was your relationship like? Did that influence your behavior at all? In what ways?

II. INCARCERATION

Now I want to ask you some questions about your time served at the correctional facility.

15. What was your highest level of education prior to serving time at the correctional facility?
 - What motivated you to start taking college courses there?
 - How did you learn about that opportunity?
 - Was there ever anything that made it difficult for you to complete your coursework? Or anything else?
16. What were your grades like? Did you feel engaged in the classes? All or just some?
 - If some, what facilitated engagement?
 - What led you to feel disengaged from others?
17. What was your relationship like with the faculty?
 - Did you feel connected to any of them? How so?
 - Did you feel disconnected to any of them? How so? Why?
18. How did the staff respond to the higher education program? Did this have any impact on you? How so?
19. Tell me more about your experience with higher education while incarcerated.
 - Was there a high demand for participation in the program?
 - What types of classes did you take?
20. Did you take any classes with students who were not incarcerated?

IF NO: Is that something you would have been interested in doing? Why?

If YES: What was that experience like?

21. What was the academic environment like? What kinds of resources did the prison have for facilitating your studies?

- Did taking college classes have any impact on your relationship with other inmates? What about prison staff?
- Can you recall any problems? If so, how did the faculty respond?
- What about the facility administration, how did they respond? Did this have any impact on you? How so?

22. How did you first learn about the Mountainview Program [at State University]? What made you want to continue your higher education through the program?

23. How were you treated by others (staff, loved ones, other inmates) when you first began serving time at the correctional facility?

- Did these relationships change once you began taking college courses? How so?
- Were there any further changes once you got accepted into the Mountainview Program? How so?

24. Is there ever any pressure to behave a certain way while incarcerated? Have you experienced that?

- Where does this pressure come from? Who initiates it? Who is on the receiving end?
- Is the staff involved? If so, to what extent?
- Did your response to this type of pressure change once you began taking college courses? What about after your acceptance into the Mountainview Program? How so?

25. Has your prison educational experience shaped your outlook on crime? If so, in what ways?

III. POST-INCARCERATION

Now I have some questions about your re entry.

26. Tell me about your experience in the Mountainview Program.
27. What are your grades like? Do you feel engaged in the classes? All or just some of them?
 - If some, what facilitates your engagement?
 - What kinds of things lead you to feel disengaged from others?
 - Is there ever anything that makes it difficult for you to complete your coursework? Anything else?
28. Tell me about your relationship with the faculty.
 - Do you feel connected to any of them? How so?
 - Do you feel disconnected to any of them? How so? Why?
29. Are you currently employed? If so, doing what? What are your future career plans?
 - Do you think that your participation in the program will increase your options? Why/Why not?
30. What is the academic environment like at Rutgers University? Cultural environment?
 - Can you recall any problems? If so, how did the faculty responded? How about the school administration?
 - Does this impact you in any way? How so?
31. Has your post release educational experience shaped your outlook on criminal offending? In what ways?
32. Starting with your educational experiences in elementary school and middle school all the way up to your Mountainview experience: are there any aspects of your educational experiences you that have had a positive impact on you?
 - Negative impact?
 - In what ways?

33. Do you have a parole officer? If so, tell me about your relationship with him/her. Have they assisted you in any way since you have been released? How so?
- Have they had any role in your educational experiences? If yes, how so?
34. What are some of the challenges that formerly incarcerated individuals face upon release?
- Have you experienced any of them? How have you handled this?
35. Do other Mountainview students face similar or additional challenges? Such as?
- Do you think the program has helped students manage these issues?
If NO: How do you think the program can improve in this way?
If YES: How so?
 - How do these challenges compare to those others who were incarcerated but haven't pursued higher education?
 - What about other Rutgers students who haven't been incarcerated?
36. Do you think the Mountainview Program can help students avoid reoffending? In what ways?
- Are there other benefits to the program? Tell me more about them.
 - Are there any downsides to the program? Tell me more about them.

IV. SUGGESTIONS

37. Are there any suggestions you would make about how to improve the quality of:
- Elementary school education?
 - Middle school education?
 - Prison education?
 - The Mountainview Program?
38. What suggestions do you have about how to emphasize the importance of access to higher education in correctional facilities?

I have come to the end of my questions. Is there anything else that you think I've forgotten to ask you about or think it's important for me to know about?

Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you.