The proposed study aims to identify if children with incarcerated parents have negatively associated academic cognitive development. By providing online tests to students of the Columbus, Ohio public school system in grades three through eight that are based on the appropriate Ohio Achievement Test for each respective grade, each child's academic cognition will be assessed. The child will be asked if they have an incarcerated parent at the end of the test to avoid the question itself influencing academic performance. The children’s test scores will be separated into the respectively associated group, non-incarcerated or incarcerated parent. The test scores of the incarcerated parent group will be compared to the scores of the non-incarcerated parent group via a one-tailed t-test. It is expected the children belonging to the incarcerated parent group will have lower test scores than the non-incarcerated parent group, thus indicating a negative relationship between parental incarceration and academic cognitive development.

With the early years of a child’s life being the most formative, it is important to have both parents actively participating in the child’s development. When at least one parent is absent from the child’s life, disruptions in their development become a possibility. The study by Murphey and Cooper reports that almost seven percent of children from 2011 to 2012 in the United States have a parent that was incarcerated during some part of their life from the ages of zero through fifteen. (2015). With more than five million children having a parent in prison at some point in their childhood, the effects it has on their development should be investigated. As the maturation of children is greatly influenced by their environment, it is reasonable to believe that having one or both parents incarcerated during some time in their child’s life from birth through age seventeen has a negative impact on their academic cognitive development.

By not having such an influential person, such as a parent, in someone’s life due to incarceration, the potentiality of incurring issues with mental health is not completely unfounded. The study by Davis and Shlafer used demographic data to provide a detailed investigation into those at risk for developing mental health issues by having a parent incarcerated (2016). As Davis and Shlafer hypothesized, adolescents of incarcerated parents reported a higher affinity to have poor mental health. Moreover, it was older adolescent females who were the child of a parent currently incarcerated that were at the most risk of developing issues with their mental health. It is important to consider that having a close relationship with the parent while they are incarcerated served to moderate the probability of developing mental health issues (2016). Sadly, on average children reported a negative relationship between the closeness they felt with their parent and their being incarcerated.

It is impossible to effectively discuss the topic of incarceration without addressing the issue of racial disparity within the prison population. Haskins notes in her paper that “nearly 60 percent of Black children and 45 percent of Hispanic children experience paternal incarceration at some point by age nine, whereas for Whites the percentage hovers around 30%” (2016, p. 874-875). Haskins found that children who experienced their father being incarcerated for the first time in their lives between the ages of one and nine were at greater risk for having cognitive dysfunctions than the other age groups in her research. This is concerning not only because external imprisonment comes with the risk of negatively affecting children’s external health and academics, but also perpetuates intergenerational education disparities due to the difference in frequency of incarceration among non-white individuals.

Like mental health at large, parental incarceration is associated with significant stigmatization of the child. Some children, Philips and Gates explain, can acquire a sense of guilt or shame for being the child of an incarcerated or incarcerated parent. The potential to identify a portion of the population that may be at risk of struggling with. Importantly, the negative relationship that is expected from this study have the potential to identify a portion of the population that struggles academically. The possession of such information could lead to the development of programs designed to assist children of incarcerated parents with their academics, so that the cycle of imprisonment is ceased, and the prisoner disadvantages are eliminated.

If a student did not complete a section, the data associated with their subject number will be discarded due to lack of completeness. The scores of the incarcerated parent group and non-incarcerated parent group will be compared via a one-tailed t-test to assess for significance in the negative direction. It is expected that a statistically significant negative relationship will be discovered when comparing the scores for each group. These results imply that having a parent incarcerated from ages of eight to fourteen might have negative effects on a child’s academic cognition. However, there is a possibility that the data will not show a negative relationship between having a parent incarcerated and a child’s academic abilities. If this should be the case, then academic shortcoming has the potential to be ruled out as a possible contributor to the increasing rates of incarceration and even imprisonment disparities.