Reducing Youth Incarceration Through Protections in Childhood Development: A Case Study of West Virginia

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Reducing Youth Incarceration Through Protections in Childhood Development: A Case Study of West Virginia

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Abstract

Childhood Development is a trajectory that is subject to many risks and protections, enacted by a host of institutions, systems and actors. High rates of youth incarceration in the U.S. demonstrate one of the ways risk factors in childhood can lead to outcomes that are often very harmful to development beyond childhood. West Virginia has the highest rate of youth incarceration in the U.S. and therefore offers a unique look into what systems are at play when considering vulnerable youth populations. Through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory I examine the various systems of childhood development and how they interact to affect youth incarceration. In speaking with individuals from West Virginia, and through research into youth incarceration and the risk and protective factors acting on youth in West Virginia specifically, I have found that the change must be enacted at all levels of the Ecological Systems Theory model in order for healthier childhood pathways to emerge. Most crucial in these changes is the strengthening of communication between systems and institutions.
Introduction

In 2019 the child advocacy organization, A Better Childhood filed a lawsuit on the behalf of a number of children against West Virginia’s child welfare system: The Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR). The lawsuit was filed on the grounds that DHHR had failed to appropriately care for children in their custody (Allen, 2020). While this incident attempted to shine a light on the issue of mismanagement in agencies caring for children, it was not the first time that the state of West Virginia had been brought to court on account of child care discrepancies. Five years early, in 2014, the United States Department of Justice conducted an investigation into the treatment of children with mental health care needs who were in the care of DHHR, the West Virginia Department of Education and other state run agencies. These incidents of legal action reflect a long struggle that this area has endured, dealing with the disproportionate challenges that children have faced in a state that is rural, mountainous, and mostly poor. Because of these factors it is a state with a vulnerable population that faces difficulty in creating infrastructure to prevent hardships from affecting the population. It is a state with alarmingly high rates of people living in poverty, children in foster care, drug overdose and incarcerated youth. West Virginia is a place where children are exposed to a number of risk factors on their path towards healthy emotional, social and physical development. These lawsuits calling for reform of the agencies that care for children in this state bring direct focus to this issue. A deeper look into the data that reveals how vulnerable West Virginia’s youth population is illuminated by one statistic that represents the causal effect of this vulnerability. That is the significance of an incredibly high rate of youth incarceration.
The percentage of incarcerated youth in West Virginia when compared with the U.S. as a whole reveals that West Virginia is incarcerating an unusually massive number of youth. This raises the question of what factors are contributing to this issue and what systems and institutions are introducing risk factors to childhood development that contribute to an overreliance on systems of incarceration. The flip side of this question is to consider what types of protections could be put in place to redirect and allow for children to navigate healthy and productive developmental paths. Childhood development is influenced by a great number of factors that are occurring from different vantage points in the child's life. Through a model of conceptualizing the levels at which developmental influences take place I will be applying the specific circumstances in West Virginia to consider the factors that contribute to youth incarceration. This is an examination of how culture, family, government, community and support systems mold a developing mind. Through the exploration of this topic I have come to the understanding that the development of the child is affected by a vast number of factors, all existing at a range of proximity to the individual. These factors are each important to the whole but the presence or lack of connectivity between these factors is the most crucial aspect of successful and healthy development. Without successful communication between these institutions of support the scaffolding that is built around the child cannot stand.

**A Short History of Youth Incarceration in Public Discourse**

When looking at the ways that a child's environment affects their likelihood of becoming involved in the system of incarceration we must first look at the ways the general public speaks about and categorizes youth who enter this system. The narratives used in discourse regarding marginalized and at-risk youth in the context of criminality and punishment highlight the ways
rhetoric can lead to negative perception of this population. Children and adolescents are often regarded as a sector of the population that should be protected and guarded, regarded as a sensitive population that must be treated with intentionally cultivated care in the sphere of education, discipline and socialization. The debate around how these pieces of a youth’s scaffolding should play into their lives is as highly debated as parenting strategies. There is one group of youth, however, who is regarded with a different tone, almost as the antithesis to childhood. They are seen as the threat against innocence. This is the population of youth who are involved with the criminal justice system, often perpetrators of criminal acts. The term “juvenile delinquents” is often attached to this group, a phrase that has become linked to a negative emotion and fear.

In 1995, a criminologist named John DiLulio popularized the term superpredator as part of his theory that youth offenders had the capacity and drive to commit violent acts with no remorse or moral consideration. He wrote a piece for the Washington Examiner that predicted a massive increase in the number of violent crimes perpetrated by youth, particularly young men of color. He theorized first, that there was a rise in “hardened and remorseless juveniles” committing violent crimes and second that with the rise in the youth population in the coming years there would be a subsequent rise in violent juvenile crime (DiLulio, 1995). In the article, he uses language that sensationalizes and generalizes a group of young people, degrading them to immoral citizens. “The buzz of impulsive violence, the vacant stares and smiles, and the remorseless eyes were at once too frightening and too depressing (my God, these are children!).” (DiLulio, 1995). In the years that followed his predictions were proven unfounded and entirely inaccurate, as crime rates among youth offenders declined (New York Times, 2014). But the
rhetoric that this theory spurred left a harmful mark and added to an already robust fear-mongering vocabulary regarding “delinquent youth.” The word “super-predator” instills an amount of fear as well as a deeply negative and violent association. Media and news reports on this even included a mini documentary entitled, “The ‘Superpredator’ Scare,” produced by The New York Times. They interviewed DiLulio along with other criminologists, sociologists, linguists and the youth that inspired the predictions made by DiLulio. In the documentary, linguist Ben Zimmer breaks down the implications that a word like “predator” has and how these implications are multiplied when the word “super” is added as a prefix. Zimmer effectively explains how these words create an incredibly harmful rhetoric in reference to youth. In essence this term evokes the association of hunting habits among animals. When used to describe a young person, that association automatically offers a certain prejudice against the youth and degrades their personhood to that of less than human (The New York Times, 2014). The power of this word took root in the criminal justice system, causing a ripple effect in which new laws were enacted and regulations put in place regarding juvenile offenders. Notably many states changed their minimum sentencing age in response to the fear of juvenile violence. These changes meant that more children were tried as adults and treated with harsher punitive measures (Equal Justice Initiative, 2014).

Fear has long been a tool used by the criminal justice system in order to create a social understanding of criminality that centralizes the offender as the embodiment of the issue. In turn this minimizes the role of external factors that play a role in criminalized behaviors. This fear is driven in communities through words, rhetoric and highly cultivated narratives that are fed to the public and society through media and news outlets, through policy and law making and through a
practice of sensationalization. The case of the superpredator is one example of using language to create a system of fear. But there are other ways in which this phenomenon of language, acting as a weapon, occurs. The focus that is placed on safeguarding schools against violence and heightening discipline in an attempt to protect youth in schools at the state and community levels is a double edged sword in many respects. While general discourse is focused on protection of youth populations this protection often comes at the expense of underrepresented and disadvantaged youth who are inevitably painted as the threat to safety. These youth are disproportionately coming from backgrounds and racial groups that are historically disadvantaged. Victor Rios’s book *Punished* provides an ethnographic study of Black and Latino boys in the San Francisco Bay Area and the ways in which their communities mark them as criminals.

*Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* (2011), explores the social architecture that surrounds young men of color in Oakland, California and the way their identity becomes intertwined with the label of criminal. Communities and agencies of power determining that youth are essentially criminal by nature is the act of criminalizing them. Criminalization refers literally to a behavior that is made illegal and is, therefore, a criminal act. When used to refer to the process of criminalizing people or bodies it similarly means turning that person into a criminal by making their actions or behavior illegal. When Rios refers to “criminalization,” he is often using it as a broader term to discuss a system that consistently makes the actions, and therefore the personhood of a certain population illegal, sometimes before they have transgressed against the legal system. “Criminalize” in this less literal sense expresses a concept of criminalizing people who have not committed an illegal act and instead employs the term as a
reference for a sociological phenomenon. This phenomenon sheds light on the labels that are made for youth who are often associated with the criminal justice system because of their minority status or the neighborhoods in which they live. Rios elaborates on this trend and makes the argument that many marginalized young men are given the label of “criminal” or “deviant” simply because of their circumstance, race or placement in society.

Through observations and interviews with a number of Black and Latino young men living in highly policed neighborhoods in the Bay area, Rios attempts to pinpoint the social, cultural and governmental processes that aid the cycle of the criminalization of Black and Latino youth in this area. He wishes to draw attention to the institutions involved in criminalizing Black and Latino youth and the ways in which these youth are criminalized before they have ever committed a crime. The involvement of law enforcement and the way the police treat these boys is central to a larger claim that he is making. He believes that the poor have not been forgotten but rather scooped up by the governmental systems that wish to crack down on them and by default intensify a sense of criminality in their communities.

Rios argues that criminalization has become a piece of the social fabric of these communities and has informed them in major ways. Ultimately, Rios claims that the youth have begun to internalize this phenomenon and it creates in them a certain awareness of the fact that they are victims of a social fabric designed to criminalize all Black and Latino youth and thus perpetuate a cycle before it has taken action.

The system of labelling that we see when examining the traction of the concept of a superpredator and the prominence of behaviors that criminalize youth is damaging to the child and also to the building blocks of their community. Popular rhetoric and discourse inform many
of the biases that have great effects on the way institutions and government agencies are run. When these agencies are built to support the healthy growth of children, falsely informed or ignorant concepts regarding vulnerable youth populations can further a cycle of deficiencies in healthy developmental models. Rhetoric is just one of the aspects that plays a role in influencing the way children are treated in various levels of their community. Language is important in terms of understanding the misconceptions that lie behind policy decisions, but perhaps more important is the actions that follow these misconceptions. The agencies that have the power to act in support or to inhibit healthy development exist at various proximity to the child and their capacity for allowing harm or enacting protection of youth are varied as well. To get a better understanding of the framework for how this harm can be categorized and at which levels these agencies exist I will be discussing risk and protections and a model of ecological systems.

**Risk and Protective Factors & Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory**

Risk and protective factors are terms used to understand and contextualize negative outcomes for youth. This framework often pertains to the experiences of youth related to mental health, behavioral issues, substance abuse or involvement in the criminal justice system. Put simply, risk factors are environmental or individual actors that precede negative outcomes. Protective factors are actors that correlate positively with positive outcomes, and thus act as a predictor for advantageous and healthy life circumstances (O’Connell, Boat & Warner, 2009).

A number of studies and meta analysis examining incarcerated youth have identified core factors that create risk or protection to these youth prior to incarceration or involvement in the juvenile justice system. Christle and Yell’s 2008 article entitled “Preventing Youth Incarceration
Through Reading Remediation” offers a framework for internal and external representations of risk and protective factors. They specify how each of these factors fit under a certain overall grouping in terms of proximity to the individual. Internal factors refer to things like self-esteem or high IQ. These traits or behaviors are demonstrated by the individual and not necessarily linked to the environment, though there is ample room for overlap. External factors refer to the circumstances that the individual finds themselves in, such as family structure, home life, economic stability, school systems, and neighborhood environment (Christle & Yell, 2008). In order to build an understanding of the multiple systems and levels at play in the examination of risk and protection, “The Ecological Systems Theory” is an effective model for highlighting the context around which these factors exist.

“The Ecological Systems Theory,” or EST, first developed by Uri Bonfenbrenner, breaks down the complex network of systems that play crucial roles in shaping the lifetime success of children and adolescents. The model demonstrates these systems as levels that each play specific roles in influencing the trajectory of development in children. These levels are demonstrated on a visual field as nested around the individual, as seen in Figure 1.
Figure 1. (Guy-Evans, 2020)

Seeing that the child is at the center, the smallest and most proximal circle in Figure 1 is the microsystem. This system is made up of the immediate influences in a young individual's life. These are relationships with the family unit, child care or schooling centers and neighborhood areas. In the theory model it is emphasized that the relationship between the individual and these proximal systems is informed by bidirectional influences. In other words the immediate family unit will influence the individual but the individual will also provide key feedback to the family unit that will in turn inform the relationship. So if a child acts up in school or at home they will be treated differently and therefore the relationship will be informed by both sides (Berk, 2012).
The next level is that of the mesosystem. This level is defined by the communication and interaction between the different components of the microsystem. For example, the mesosystem is concerned with the way the family unit and the school center are interacting or the neighborhood and the family unit. One way this can be observed is by considering the amount to which each of these components are interrelated. If schoolwork is being reinforced at home in the family unit that would demonstrate a higher level of connection, just as parental involvement and knowledge of the neighborhood play spaces would create a stronger connection between those systems. The mesosystem does not focus so much directly on the individual but rather on the strengths and weaknesses of the web of their outer circles (Berk, 2012).

The third level is that of the exosystem. This level includes many groups, institutions and settings that provide informal or indirect support to the individual through the support given to the parents and immediate family. These systems include parents' place of work, extended family, health, school systems and other services in the immediate community, as well as the social network of the parents. Settings such as the parents’ place of work can support the child indirectly by providing maternity or paternity services. In a similar way the involvement of a strong social network, or a highly involved extended family for the parents provides a stronger network for them to fall back on, which in turn affects the type of care and amount of time they are able to provide their child with. Here we can observe the negative effect that unemployment or social isolation could play in the life of the child through the experience of the parent (Berk, 2012).

Finally, the macrosystem is the outermost level containing factors that influence childhood development. These factors are on a larger scale and include things such as
governmental laws as well as cultural, state and national customs and values. Many of these factors exist at the national level and are informed by the types of community and government support that can be provided by the state or country of residence. Certain governmental social services play a large part in determining the type of care that can be administered through the other systems such as parental workplace, school systems and family units. In essence, the neighborhood, state, and city or town where the child is being raised has a larger effect on the mechanisms that can act as protection through the workings of more inner systems (Berk, 2012).

Lastly, Bronfenbrenner specifies through the term “chronosystem” that each of these systems is not a stagnant or inflexible component to child development. He uses the idea of the chronosystem to emphasize that there is significant give and take in each of these systems and many components of change affect how each system operates and the success of each. Essentially it speaks to a bidirectional conversation and connectivity that occurs and shifts over time. For example, the behavior and needs of the child informs the type of care they are provided, just as the dynamics of their family unit changes the type of attention they may receive. Additionally some aspects of this system have the ability to undermine aspects of other pieces of the system. For example, the macrosystem may determine the types of government aid that can be distributed in a certain country but if the family unit does not have a need for public aid, this aspect is less relevant to the development of the child. Each of these systems and their interaction with one another cross over in different ways over the lifespan of the child into adolescence (Berk, 2012).

Through the model of the systems theory, we are able to identify and categorize the levels at which different risks and protections are acting upon youth and in their daily lives. Risk and
protection are deeply interrelated but not always correlated directly. For example physical abuse of a child in the home may certainly be a risk factor but the lack of physical abuse would not necessarily be a protective factor if other types of abuse or neglect still exist in the home. Unruh, Povenmire-Kirk and Yamamoto authored an article in 2009 entitled “Perceived Barriers and Protective Factors of Juvenile Offenders on their Developmental Pathway to Adulthood.” They conducted a study based on interviews with youth either confined in juvenile correctional facilities or who were on parole post release from such facilities. In these interviews they attempted to gain an understanding of the barriers (risk factors) that these children had faced prior to incarceration and the aspects of their lives that they perceived as creating positive interference in their involvement with the juvenile justice system (Unruh, et al. 2009).

Unruh et al. were able to identify key components of these children’s lives that provided space for both risk and protection. These components were identified as education, employment, independent living, family, peer and social relations and the individual. The data they collected from the interviews for each of these categories revealed specific protections and risks that the youth identified as being positively or negatively impactful in their lives. When discussing challenges in the educational system, common themes from these interviews touched on lack of access, lack of classroom-related knowledge, room for growth in learning skills, and poor educational staff. When asked about aspects of the educational system that aided in positive change during or after incarceration the subjects in the study highlighted the importance of having access to educational facilities, college courses, and extracurricular activities as well as making efforts to attend classes and having adequate academic skills (Unruh, et al. 2009). These
examples highlight two different aspects of risk and protection that were also mentioned by Christle and Yell in their 2008 article.

This is the distinction between external and internal protections and risk. From the data provided by Unruh et al., we can divide the perceived protections into external and internal categories. For example, access to educational facilities, classroom space and quality teaching is protective on an external level, as it is something provided by systems of education and community outreach. Conversely, protections such as academic skills training and a focus on attendance could be considered internal factors, though they are informed in many ways by the motivations and resources the youth were given, and they are ultimately things that the youth must implement themselves.

Christle and Yell elaborate on these types of internal protections and expand on the ways that they can be affected by both external and internal factors. From the standpoint of the Ecological Systems Theory we can conceptualize the levels in which protective interference can be enacted. For example, when considering academic skills as protective, we are in part discussing the learning capabilities of the individual; however, this is also reflective of the type of learning advantages they received in the home, at the microlevel, as well as the academic support they were provided from the school system on the exosystem. Additionally, academic aid must be communicated through the mesosystem in order to provide quality support. So here we can see how at least four levels are in conversation when considering one protective factor.

Elaborating on the factor of academic skills and advantages, Christle and Yell offer information regarding learning disabilities and the cognitive deficits that pose barriers to success in school settings. In this discussion they emphasize the prevalence of Emotional and Behavioral
Disorders (EBD) that are often present in the youth population at risk for involvement in the criminal justice system. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as well as learning disabilities are two more internal barriers that they touch upon. Through data showing that 34% of youth in the juvenile justice system display disabilities of these sorts while only 12% display the same disabilities in public schools, they make the claim that youth with disabilities are far over-represented in the juvenile justice system. When discussing EBD, however, the percentage gap is even larger with 47% of youth in the juvenile justice system having EBD while only 1% in public schools have it. Though this data definitely seems to nod to a correlation, the authors emphasize that while a high proportion of youth in the justice system have learning disabilities, they do not have evidence to imply that learning disabilities in children cause delinquency (Christle & Yell, 2008). Unruh et al. and Christle & Yell both provide key information regarding the complex web of protection, risk and the multiple levels and systems at which they impact youth and incarceration trends.

The Ecological Systems Theory outlines a potential framework through which intervention in a child's life can be constructed. With the psychological processes of the individual considered crucial to the outcome of the intervention, this theory brings to developmental psychology a perspective tied closely to sociology and social psychology. It aims to bring the individual into the larger context and consider all the influences that act on the individual. However the ultimate measure of success or failure of an intervention is measured by the positive effects and overall well-being of the child, which situates this theory at the center of developmental and social impacts. As Bronfenbrenner classifies it “development occurs through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving
biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate external environment” (Burns et al. 2015). This description also highlights the piece of the theory that Bronfenbrenner introduces after the initial publication of his work. This is the idea that each system or outer layer of the child's surroundings have the most crucial impact in the ways in which they interact with each other. The connection between each system is another system in itself, hence a complexity of interaction is created. This classification of a biopsychological human organism makes the argument that perhaps the best way to create positive change in the life of a child is to start higher up; to implement something that could affect the psychosocial organism as a whole and thus intervene in the development of many children. An article on Ecological Systems Theory in schools by Burns et al. compares the ways that EST has been cited throughout literature and studies of childhood intervention models within the school system.

Psychological intervention in schools has long dealt with the issue of impact and the scope of reach to individuals. Many schools in the U.S. have a great number of children with learning and mental health needs that cannot be met in a generalized educational setting. The vast number of individual needs, however, often means that many children are left behind or given inadequate psychological attention. This meta analysis published in School Psychology Review discusses how the use of an EST intervention model can have both a broader and deeper effect within school populations when implemented successfully. The review lays out the three levels of an EST model: assessment, intervention and consultation. At each of these levels they list plans in line with an EST model, both designed to have a large breadth of impact as well as a depth of impact for each individual. The most notable assessments include universal screening for behaviors and academics as well as identifying issues posed by individuals so as to better
understand the context in which the problem is occurring (Burns et al. 2015). For intervention practices they identify the importance of understanding systemic needs and then narrowing in on the contributing factors such as individual relationships, school climate, home life, etc. In consultation models they focus on breadth through consulting with intervention teams to measure impact and outcomes of systemic changes in addition to collaborating with key actors in children's lives such as parents and teachers (Burns et al. 2015). For both the intervention and consultation levels we again see that the model starts from both ends of the issue, the individual needs as well as the systemic needs. Starting from both ends of the issue is meant to increase the depth and breadth of adequate and sustainable aid for children in school settings.

Using the EST model in relation to school systems, Erica Chenoweth and Renee V. Galliher conducted a study which assessed the aspirations of high school seniors to attend college in West Virginia. In their literature review they laid out the framework through which researchers and sociologists have conceptualized and discussed the living conditions of people in Appalachia and specifically West Virginia. There are many factors which they break down in order to build a scaffold for understanding the circumstances of rural mountainous communities and their unique hardships. Ultimately the issue of poverty is the overarching topic that acts as a lens through which other cultural trends are reflected. As Chenoweth and Galliher state, the effects of poverty largely define most of the relationships that the individual has to each of the levels defined in the EST. Socioeconomic status can be observed permeating through relationships between the child and their family, home life, peers, school system, and in neighborhood community areas (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). In continuing an observation of ecological systems acting on people living in rural, mostly poor counties in West Virginia,
Chenoweth and Galliher identify three characteristics of Appalachian culture. They define these as Localism, Historicism and Familism. These terms refer to a believed closeness with the local land, historical and ancestral roots and a deep knowledge and commitment to one's family (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). Although it is risky to sum up a vast cultural region with the use of such simplified and unyielding attributes it does give context to an aspect of Appalachian culture that is steadfast. This is the long ancestral history of families staying near their homeland for generations. This has often been viewed as a hindrance to upward mobility and a possible explanation for perpetuating conditions of poverty that largely remain the same from one generation to the next.

Chenoweth and Galliher’s study, which was conducted through questionnaires aimed at assessing the aspirations of high school seniors across five different high schools in West Virginia, found some noteworthy correlations. In the discussion of kinship and family ties in this region, the study results reflected a high correlation between parents' education and high schoolers' decision to attend college. Students who specified that their parents had gone to college were more likely to be planning to attend college. But this familial college association went beyond just parents. Students who had aunts and uncles who had attended college also showed higher rates of college plans. Most students did not report having grandparents who attended college but those who did demonstrated stronger interest in higher education as well. Another familial factor that correlated with college intent was the occupation of the parents. Most notably, students who had fathers in professional occupations correlated with positive college intent, specifically for males (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004).
It is worth considering the implications of family influence on students living in Appalachian regions. Family involvement with higher education is often associated with a student's education choices for a number of reasons. For one, they are able to set college as an example and expectation for their child. They are also able to demonstrate the tangible benefits that can come with post college degrees, importantly better jobs and more secure salaries. They can also be of help to the child in assisting and navigating the college process. In the study, one of the main reasons that students were deterred from applying to colleges was due to lack of information provided to the student. There was also a great lack of financial aid guidance in the schools and the students' lives, meaning that many students were stopped by the idea before they were able to conceptualize a realistic plan for seeking an affordable college track (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). This finding reflects back on a common thread found in discussion of the Appalachian region, that of ancestral closeness. Families in these areas typically stay for generations and thus stay in similar patterns as their parents and grandparents did. This is one reason why generational change can be so hard to implement but is also deeply effective when done in a way that inspires the next generation to continue in an upward movement such as attaining higher education. Though many of these findings highlight the crucial role of the family system in the development and life choice of youth, the most significant predictor of college intent was their grades and academic achievement in high school. The students who had done well thus far were far more likely to continue on. As each layer of the child's life plays a key role in forming and supporting their development, this study suggested that the experience of the individual and their skill and dedication was ultimately the deciding factor for their trajectory forward. However, the ability to cultivate this kind of individual success is often the result of a
supportive environment with avenues to resources and aid, an idea that brings back the cyclical nature of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Quality of education is another point of concern for students and young people in the Appalachian region. As we have seen, access to services and mobility are often limited in rural parts of the region, which pushes the burden of behavioral regulation largely onto schools. It also means that the quality of education and the commitment of educators can have a large effect on the behavior and healthy growth of the student. A study by Richard Raymond identified that out of a number of related school assets and influences, the salary of teachers was the only thing found to be positively correlated with quality of education in schools (Raymond, 1968). The study did not explore any implications for why salary was the only input measure that was positively correlated with quality of education. Some of the ideas that are presented in the discussion, touch on the possibility that teachers with higher degrees, such as Masters or Doctorates receive higher pay and may also administer higher quality teaching. The study also specifies that an increase in pay for teachers in the elementary school age group was correlated with a greater change in quality when compared to the same increase in pay for teachers in the secondary school age group. The study quotes research that has understood elementary school as the most crucial time to instill a strong attachment to the educational process and a trust in the learning system. College preparation in schools is in many ways the older sibling to this trust and belief in strong education in elementary schools and this seems to be very undervalued in many of the West Virginia schools in which Raymond’s study took place. He cites the fact that only 11-48% of students from these schools go to college, varying by county, as a possible explanation for poor college preparatory work in high school. As he puts it, it would be a poor
allocation of funds if these percentages are so low (Raymond, 1968). So many of the holes in the educational system in this area seem to be reflecting a “Catch 22.” Where there is poor access to highly educated teachers the educators are paid less which coexists with poorer education and less information given about higher education, which of course leads to lower numbers of these students carrying on their education. If these students then stay in their hometowns with less education, it is harder for them to attain higher paying careers and thus their communities remain economically disadvantaged and the school systems remain underfunded, completing the negative feedback loop. Through the model of EST, here is a crucial example of a system that has a great effect on the development of the individual and the power of the individual's development to effect the system in return.

**Barriers Facing Appalachian Youth**

The Appalachian region of the U.S. is a cultural region defined as a predominant portion of the Appalachian mountain range which stretches from Southern New York to Northern Georgia and Alabama. This includes the states of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. The Appalachian region has long been characterized as an area made up of mostly rural counties that largely have a history of impoverished conditions. Appalachia is historically a coal mining state. In an interview with author Cynthia Duncan, who writes about poverty in Appalachia, she discusses how a lack of investment in communities and workers has prevented the region from combatting many of the issues that it faces in regard to economic success. In her retelling of Appalachia’s coal history she outlines a system of worker suppression that occurred during the early years of the coal industry, in which workers were discouraged from forming unions and
denied certain protections so that labor costs could stay low. This meant that the coal companies, which were competing against each other, resorted to measures of control towards their workers that included limiting access to education and involvement in the community. This had the effect of controlling the lives of the coal miners, making them dependent on the coal industry and thus keeping wages and production costs low. As she puts in, this system kept their labor force vulnerable and powerless. In turn this resulted in a persistent lack of economic resources in the region and high rates of poverty (Duncan, 2006).

Many of the states in Appalachia have higher than average rates of incarceration, keeping with a general national trend of higher incarceration rates in more impoverished areas. An organization called the Sentencing Project offers a comparative look at incarceration trends across the U.S. Here, certain trends and links can be made but other astounding numbers are harder to relate to reasoning and predictable trends. Though many wealthy areas face high incarceration rates just as some poorer areas have fairly low rates of incarceration, poorer states on average have a consistently higher number of imprisoned people. For instance Mississippi, which is recorded as the poorest state in the U.S. has the second highest rate of incarceration, whereas Massachusetts, a historically wealthier state, has the second lowest rate of incarceration (The Sentencing Project).

A look at this data brings us back to the key observation that we are examining: West Virginia’s staggeringly high rate of youth incarceration. West Virginia leads every state in incarceration of youths with a rate double the national average and 13% higher than the next highest rate. As with the previous correlation we can observe that West Virginia is a very poor
state, but overall youth incarceration does not seem to be defined along lines that easily correlate to economic or regional trends. In closer examination of the issues facing youth in a state that is squarely situated in the center of the Appalachian region there are a few key factors that seem to be contributing to hard conditions of success for citizens as a whole and especially youth. Many of these key actors come back to the reality of poverty and the many challenges that stem from economic instability and disparity.

For the purpose of my exploration into the topic of protections for youth at risk of incarceration I will be examining the challenges that youth are facing in West Virginia specifically. I am focusing on West Virginia as a case study because it represents an example of a state that is contending with a massive percentage of incarcerated youth. This number indicates that the West Virginia institutions in charge of protecting and caring for children are on the front lines of a national crisis of mass incarceration of adults and the over incarceration of youth. The youth incarceration system intertwines and interacts heavily with the adult incarceration system and trends in one seem to inform trends in the other. For one thing youth who are placed in detention centers or incarcerated in other ways by the state are more likely to also be incarcerated in adult facilities later on. While the trend of youth incarceration in the U.S. has not increased at such a dramatic rate as the adult incarceration rate since the late 1900s, both adult incarceration and youth incarceration suffered a massive increase after the 1980s. The number of youth held in adult prisons reflects upon the general trend that youth incarceration has taken since 1985. This practice of incarcerating youth as adults is another avenue through which the adult prison system interacts in crucial ways with the juvenile justice system. Figure 2 shows the number of youth incarcerated in adult prisons between 1985 and 2018. The graph is labeled with “Jails” and
“Prisons.” Jails are institutions designed for shorter term stays. They generally hold people pre-trial or for short term sentences. Prisons are for longer sentences and hold people who have been convicted and given a sentence by a court (Merriam-Webster). When speaking about incarceration I am referring to both institutions. *Figure 3* depicts the U.S. general incarceration trend from 1925 to 2018. In comparing both figures we can see that there are similarities and differences in the two trends. Both show a general upward trend starting in the 1980s and beginning to level off in the late 1990s, however the rate of U.S. incarceration which includes youth and adults makes a steeper upward incline, meaning that the rate of incarceration increased more dramatically than when we look only at youth.

*Figure 2.* (The Sentencing Project, 2020)
Figure 3. (The Sentencing Project, 2020)

From the figures we can see that youth incarceration, similar to adult incarceration, began to decrease by the early 2000s. The decrease in youth incarceration from the 1990s to the present day is quite significant and reflects a larger change than we see in the adult incarceration rate. When viewed state by state, however, the decrease in youth incarcerated from 2001 to 2013 is highly variable between states. While states such as Mississippi, Massachusetts and Louisiana decreased the number of incarcerated youth in this period by upwards of 70%, West Virginia, alongside Arkansas and North Dakota, decreased youth incarceration by less than 15%. Observing the major disparity between states could be indicative of many different cultural or governmental circumstances. With the highest rate of youth incarceration, West Virginia’s position in relation to other states places it in a crucial position for considering and evaluating the
factors that lead to higher rates of youth incarceration and thus the areas that could be most advantageous for disrupting this system.

West Virginia is situated in a mountainous area, largely isolated from other states and mostly separated from major cities. Most counties are very rural and economically depend on a limited number of jobs and economic institutions. Historically the coal mining industry in West Virginia was the largest source of income and jobs but in recent years prisons have become one of the few major employment institutions in particularly isolated counties throughout the state (Mannion & Billings, 2006). The introduction to a book titled The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia by Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen M. Blee gives a framework for the factors that may have led to persistent poverty throughout the region's history as well as the discussion and rhetoric used to conceptualize and categorize this poverty. Billings and Blee highlight the cultural theories for why the mountainous areas in the Appalachian region remain so impoverished. One of these theories centers around the idea that the coal mining industry became a sort of colonization by the U.S. upon the natural land throughout Kentucky and West Virginia. The Appalachian natural landscape is rich in resources and so the region has a history of supporting large coal mining industries. Most of these industries were owned by non-local agencies and thus the colonization theory is supported by this idea. Billings and Blee push back against this theory by arguing that locally owned mining industries saw equally bad income insecurity (Billings & Blee, 13). Ultimately it seems that exploitation through the coal mining industry led to an increase in job and income insecurity throughout the rural and mountainous areas of Appalachia. Another cultural theory is that of intergenerational poverty and learned helplessness. This theory highlights the observation that many of the families in these
areas have faced the same problems generation after generation and a large percentage of them do not leave the region to enact upward mobility (Billings & Blee, 13). Other explanations for the conditions of the region center around the topographic and social isolation that many of the citizens must contend with. This social isolation creates barriers for economic growth and community development as well as a distinct lack of access to services and community aid as well as a lack of public transportation options. In recent years the isolation and lack of access set up the region to fall victim to a devastating opioid epidemic that has had harmful and lasting repercussions for the region and its economic stability. Beginning in the 1990s and stretching well into the first two decades of the 2000s, the opioid epidemic plagued a great number of places across the U.S. and especially in the Appalachian region with deadly addictions stemming from prescription opioids. West Virginia had the highest mortality rate from the epidemic of any U.S. state (Brill & Ganz, 2018). This rate reflects in large part the accessibility to health services that many of the rural citizens of West Virginia contend with. Isolation from urban spaces that provide aid in many different areas have been highlighted as one of the leading factors for an astronomically high rate of youth incarceration in West Virginia.

Dana Goldstein, a writer for the Marshall project, a journal about issues of criminal justice, writes about the story of one West Virginia youth put into a detention facility for getting in a fight at school. Her story about Junior Smith uncovers some of the conditions in the state that create a series of barriers for youth to succeed and overcome circumstances involving mental health, drugs and economically or emotionally unstable homes. Through her work reporting on the experience of a family navigating the juvenile justice system she gathers input from crucial actors and testimony regarding the sensitive and vulnerable population inside juvenile detention
centers. Goldstein’s piece communicates some of the realizations that Junior Smith and his family come to recognize through their close encounter with the state's governmental systems. Junior Smith observes the level of economic instability that many of the other youth are experiencing within the institution. He comes to understand that phone calls and visits from family are a privilege that come along with a certain amount of income and reliable means of transportation, something that is less available to other families with children in the system (Goldstein, 2014).

One of Goldstien’s overarching takeaways when considering the problem of West Virginia's position atop the list of juvenile incarceration rates in the U.S. is the barriers to services. Essentially the rural conditions are the final straw for a lot of families that struggle to build healthy and supportive lives for their children. With so many people living spread out across the state in incredibly small and isolated communities it is incredibly difficult to provide those people with mental health, community support and other treatment oriented social services. Without access to these services students who pose issues to educators are not given extra support that could divert them from continuing to engage in destructive, addictive or problematic behaviors. Subsequently, detention and treatment centers, as well as spaces of juvenile confinement, become the last options for giving these children the support that they are unable to get at home. A quote taken from the judge that ruled on Junior Smith’s case summoned up this issue with striking clarity: “There is a lack of substance abuse services, a lack of counseling, a lack of ability to have in-home services to maintain kids in the family...So many times I will
remove a child and place him in a facility, if they’re on the verge of doing bad things or getting into drugs. When they have structure, they thrive.” (Goldstein, 2014)

This lack of access that is highlighted in the case of Junior Smith is a theme that is reiterated in many different ways by professionals working in various departments with youth in West Virginia.

**Discussions with Child Welfare Workers in West Virginia**

In order to gain a more personal and intimate understanding of the barriers facing youth day to day I reached out to a number of professionals working in fields related to child services in West Virginia. These professionals included government employees working in the Department of Education and the Bureau of Children and Families as well as individuals working for private and non-profit organizations that work to support youth in various care systems. In the end I was able to speak with five individuals in different organizations and lines of work.

When choosing people to speak with I put my sights on two specific umbrellas of professional work. These are people who work in or around the foster care system or the school system. There are a great deal of organizations and agencies that play a role in the life and development of children and would be crucial to disrupting or aiding the cycle of youth incarceration. For the sake of looking deeper into the ways that these systems can positively or negatively influence the incarceration cycle I chose two systems that are unique to childhood. The foster care system serves mainly children under the age of 18, with some programs designed to help former foster children after they age out. The school system similarly serves children
from early childhood until the age of 17 or 18. This places both the school system and the foster care system in a unique and transformative role for intervening in and affecting childhood development.

The questions that I developed for these interviews were designed in order to gain insight into the interviewees personal opinions and experiences relating to a number of topics. A full list of the questions can be found in the Appendix. They included the optimal ages for childhood intervention, the systems in the community that most heavily contribute to healthy and harmful childhood development and what aspects of the education system and foster care system interconnect in order to create safety nets for children at risk of incarceration. Among the five individuals I spoke with, four of them worked with children or with departments that directly support childhood education or healthy family development. All of the names of the people who I spoke with have been changed. When transcribing their exact words I have removed extra wording that confuses the sentence structure for clarity. In all of these cases this removal did not change or interfere with the sentiment of the sentence. I have indicated with ellipses in brackets wherever I removed words or verbal sounds.

My first interviewee, who I will refer to as Samantha, has been working for an organization called West Virginia CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) for the past six months following her time as a foster parent. CASA works closely with the foster care system and the court system. They train volunteers to act as advocates for children and families who are navigating the foster care system. Samantha does a great amount of work in advocating for children and families from behind the scenes. That is to say she works to find services to provide
to families as well as pushing for new and improved circumstances for homeless children and teens. Another woman who I spoke with is involved in administration and school improvement in the Department of Education. I will refer to her as Sonja. She came from a background in which she worked directly with children in the school system and has recently moved to this administrative position. Sonja is involved not only with the school system but also at a higher-up level, as she coordinates and maintains communication between a number of other institutions and agencies such as the foster care system, the juvenile justice system, and the West Virginia court system. This work is through an initiative aimed at breaking down the silos that maintain information barriers between crucial actors in a child's development. The work that Sonja does provides important context for what initiatives acting within the mesosystem of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model can look like. Through this work she is involved in efforts to change the way the state handles cases of truancy and she works personally to mitigate the factors that cause kids to stay out of school. Both Samantha and Sonja have personal experience working with children in the foster care system as they have both acted either as the adoptive parent of an older child or as a foster parent for a number of years.

One question that I asked of all my participants was pertaining to the age at which it seems crucial for a child to have experienced positive adult intervention. This is to say if a child is at risk of being separated from their family due to child abuse or neglect or if a child is demonstrating absenteeism, learning challenges or any other social, emotional or circumstantial challenges, is there an age at which it becomes impossible for that child to catch up with their peers? This question warranted a number of differing responses from my interviewees, though most of them tread along a similar line, arguing that any and all intervention at any and all ages
is important and crucial. Along with this reasoning many of my interviewees voiced a confirming narrative for crucial intervention to be most impactful at and before the pre-teen age group. Samantha deliberated over the concept of a crucial intervention age before expressing that by eight years old it seemed to her that children must have some sort of exposure to positive adult influences who are actively engaged in a child’s life. She explained that before the age of eight, children are largely receptive to adult behavior and able to engage in following adult models. They mostly look up to and trust the adult figures in their life at this age. From her experience working very closely with the foster care system she expressed that finding a permanent placement for children over 13 is extremely difficult.

Sonja had a stronger view point in the direction of not asserting any one specific age. She asserted that the circumstances and life situation of the child is a key component to making this sort of assessment. As she stated: “I’ve seen some kids in elementary school, as young as five, that things have happened [in their life] that have shut them down.” Her take away point from this response, however, was that you should never stop trying because ultimately she believes it is never too late.

A third interviewee, who I will refer to as Lucy emphasized throughout the interview the massive impact of trauma that many of the kids she works with experience. In answering this question she highlighted that trauma as a crucial component when considering intervention. Like Sonja, she believed that many instances of children facing family, school or mental health challenges were heavily influenced by the specific circumstances of the child. Lucy pushed back on the idea that any one age could be a proxy to generalize about children from different
backgrounds. Her main reasoning for making this statement was rooted in her experience viewing the different types of trauma that children experience. As she put it: “there are different stages in life where this trauma is gonna rear its ugly head […] a kid might do real well at six or seven and kind of be able to cope, but then let’s say they hit puberty, if they were sexually abused they hit puberty and now all of a sudden they've got feelings that are coming back up.”

Lucy works as a clinical social worker for West Virginia Systems of Care. She does not work directly with children in her role but she is in charge of reviewing cases and offering recommendations for the type of care a child should receive. The cases that she gets are generally pertaining to children who are at risk of being put into out-of-home care. Under her job she works closely with the Bureau of Juvenile Services in order to find appropriate placements for children. When asked if she had ever encountered a situation in which she felt she was too late, she responded: “yeah all the time. I mean we see so many kids that don't come onto our plate until two months before they’re 18 and the kids are saying ‘as soon as I turn 18 I'm out of here’ [the foster system].” Her immediate response to this question, which raised hesitancy in other interviewees, reflected, in many ways, the nature of the services she provides. As she said, she reads through a great deal of cases with many kids that are on the later end of being eligible to receive services. And so many of the cases that she deals with reflect failings by a number of different systems to intervene at an earlier stage in the children’s lives. She pointed to the fact that many children do not come into their care until they have suffered a long period of neglect or abuse in the home without the knowledge of or intervention by the state. In her previous role working on mental health grants for the schools, she emphasized the importance of teachers looking out, not only for the most apparent cases of students acting up, but also for the students
who do not clearly present symptoms of trauma or a need for home life intervention. As she stated, “now sometimes, you know, little Sally in the corner who won't talk to anybody, I mean, she could be just as damaged and having as many problems as Bobby that's bouncing off the walls… sometimes the schools are so overcrowded and dealing with so many behavioral issues that they miss, sometimes, the kids that also need help but aren't acting out.” Here she is talking about instituting increased oversight of and attention paid towards the mental wellbeing of students by teachers. This could be implemented if the teachers are able to check in more frequently with students who may otherwise be overlooked if they do not demand attention. But in order for that to be feasible for teachers who are very busy there must also be more support given to those teachers. The overcrowding that she mentions is a major roadblock that strips teachers of the type of support that could be helpful for better student oversight.

Lucy also pointed to the fact that many children suffer abuse in foster homes after they have been removed from their ‘birth’ home. Through the stories she told she highlighted the fact that though there needs to be more eyes on the students at the school level, the foster care system is also not always the safest place for them to go once they have been removed from the home. This could be due to a lack of proper vetting or a lack of checks and balances in monitoring the living situation of the child. In speaking with Lucy I was convinced of the importance of communication and multilevel changes.

A fourth interviewee who I will refer to as Mary offered me some insights from the perspective of someone working with the foster care system as a social worker under the Bureau for Children and Family Services (BCF). From her vantage point she was able to address the
struggles and inner workings of the foster care system and reasons why her position, as a social worker is often criticized and undervalued. Mary has been working with the BCF for ten years and has spent the last year in the position of Program Manager for Child and Adult services. She has also worked as a policy specialist in the past. When asked what she thinks should be more discussed in her line of work she brought up the fact that often social workers and the Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR) which houses BCF are given a very bad rap for situations like the ones that Lucy highlighted in regards to the mishandling of foster placements. As Mary stated, “you hear negative stories and those sort of take on a life of their own, right? And they become sort of a poster of what child welfare workers do and […] I think that that's unfortunate because our child welfare workers are working so hard in very tough conditions. And they work with really troubled families. They work sometimes in very dangerous conditions and they make really positive impacts and they don't get to talk about it.” Mary also offered some examples of her own experiences working with families and the ways in which communication with the family unit can be extremely difficult from the vantage point of a social worker. She talked about how, often, families who have been placed under the eye of child protection and removal services, will want nothing to do with the BCF worker and do everything in their power to resist communication or collaboration with the institution. Here is a strong example of the ways in which that crucial line of communication between the people in child welfare organizations and the child’s family unit can be tenuous and strained, therefore creating difficulties in making productive changes within the child’s living conditions.

In her interview, Lucy spoke often and in different ways about the prevalence of trauma and mental health concerns in children that are neglected or overlooked. As stated before, she
made reference to the importance of teachers not only taking notice of children acting out, but also the children that say less and fly under the radar. When discussing this topic Lucy highlighted the importance of teachers becoming more cognizant of issues that children may be up against. This sentiment makes me think of the different actors in a child's life that are held responsible for noticing and taking action when a child is in need. Lucy alluded to the role of mandated reporters as an important component of strengthening the lines of communication in order to keep kids safe. If more responsibility were to fall onto mandated reporters, such as teachers, it would be important to create a safety net that would ensure that these reporters were well advised so as not to profile or report children with no just cause. This is where it is important to ensure that each level of each system is working to a highly professional and well-trained standard. As we see through various interviews, holding each agency to a high standard becomes difficult in states like West Virginia, which has a lack of resources and has many organizations whose employees are overworked and underpaid.

Many people I spoke with made reference to a web of agencies and people that could play a more active role with children but who are blocked for various reasons, some having to do with the circumstances of the state, some with the agencies themselves. This web of agencies and institutions can be applied to the model of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory and offer a way of contextualizing the effect that each institution has, directly or indirectly, on the individual child. As a few interviewees mentioned, children can fall through the cracks at a range of different levels, from the family circle out to governmental policies and institutions. With a wide array of people that could potentially be looking out for trouble in a child's life there are
many places where the chain of communication between these people can be broken or disrupted. Furthermore, sometimes there is interference in accessing a solution.

When considering the chain of communication we can observe the effects of protection and risk in the pattern of children falling through the cracks. There are risk factors appearing at various levels that pose barriers to intervention and there are protective factors that provide opportunities for positive intervention. In interviews, many of the people I spoke with highlighted limitations that West Virginia faces. These limitations pose the problem of enacting barriers between the chain of communication between institutions, agencies and systems of care. Protections to these barriers, or places for positive intervention are mentioned by interviewees largely as a reverse effect of the negative realities. Protections are not always the inverse of risk factors, however, based on the personal testimonies of the interviewees, it appears that strengthening the weaknesses highlighted in each of the systems is crucial to strengthening the lines of communication between them. Many of the specific experiences that the interviewees discuss pertain to the deficits that they are witnessing.

One example of a barrier that interfered with accessing solutions in the line of communication between these levels is something that Samantha referenced in regards to one of her cases. She discussed an example regarding the circumstances of a child who was observed to be in need of mental health services, and how a state like West Virginia cannot always provide those services. “In West Virginia one of the struggles that [...] we all say, okay, this is a mental illness, you need this type of specialist, therapist, but we don't have any, we don't have these specialists, we don't have the therapist, they're not accessible to all of the regions. We’re
widespread, we’re rural. Overall we're impoverished [...] we can't afford to pay them to come here and so they're not here and that's one of the major issues with mental health services.” She went on to emphasize the barriers posed by West Virginia’s rural geography. She specified that in many cases mental health providers can be two or more hours away from wherever the child is placed. If the foster family is unable to drive them there, then these services will simply be classified as inaccessible and the judge will not require the child to receive treatment because it is not practical or logistically feasible.

What Samantha is discussing here draws on a very crucial point and one that highlights the role of cyclical deficits. From what she says, therapists and mental health care workers are under-incentivised to work in rural areas because the pay is lower and they would not be guaranteed the same client base. But because mental health care providers are few and far between, the state cannot expect these services to be accessible and therefore they are not considered as a solution of immediate importance or as a feasible solution to misbehavior in school or unhealthy home environments. Because they are not a mandated solution to strengthening families and addressing mental health concerns in children, therapy and similar practices are undervalued by the state and therefore under-utilized which in turn causes therapists to have very little incentive to come to these underserved areas.

Almost all of the people I spoke with brought up the barriers that children face in response to West Virginia's rural geography. When asked about the biggest challenges that youth face in West Virginia specifically, Mary first mentioned the ways in which West Virginia's geography is unique. “We're so spread out and rural and so you have kids in these different
pockets with their own unique challenges: you have kids in, you know, the Green Bank area that have [...] no internet connectivity and cell service. And so these kids are particularly isolated, you have, you know, kids that in these rural areas, they may have connectivity but they don't have any transportation. They’re so stricken with poverty that they don't have [...] the means to get to school if they missed the bus. They don't have the means to make it to court on court day necessarily.” She went on to highlight other challenges that children who live in West Virginia’s urban areas face, such as exposure to drugs in certain neighborhoods, a consistent lack of after-school programming and positive spaces for kids.

The focus around creating safe spaces for kids to spend time with other children and positive adult figures is something that Mary believes to be beneficial for kids in terms of helping them combat some of the barriers they face in their communities. In a list of things that the state could and has implemented to serve as protections for at-risk youth she mentions groups for kids who are dealing with troubles at home where they are provided space to talk with one another about similar situations and where they can speak with caring adults. She reiterates the importance of building positive adult relationships and creating outlets for kids in a safe space, such as peer groups or programming with positive adult figures. Another protection that she mentioned are programs that have been implemented whose aim is to provide means of transportation to children in rural areas. The programs that she mentioned are designed to pick up kids from their homes and take them directly to centers where they can access educational and emotional support resources. The benefits that she saw in groups such as these fit into the importance of strong peer ties during development. Within the microsystem of the Ecological Systems Theory peers are one of the vital components in creating a secure social emotional
environment for development. So, programs such as these would hopefully add to the strength of this social sphere.

Rural geography and lack of reliable transportation is one barrier that a few of my interviewees mentioned. Another recurring response was the opioid crisis. Samantha illustrated the link that exists between poverty, rural geography, drugs and cases of neglect. She spoke about the perception of how children turn to drugs and that often the assumption is that there is little to do in rural areas and so the children turn to drugs if they are the available commodity. She added context to this assumption by pointing out that there are many activities available in the Appalachian region such as hiking and exploring nature, but many of the outdoor activities cost money or require mobilization to which many families have limited access. Other interviewees also spoke about the correlation between poverty and drugs and offered background into the roots of the drug problem in this area.

Beginning in 2010, the U.S. suffered an epidemic of drug overdoses due to the over-prescription of opioids by doctors and pharmaceutical companies. Previously a drug associated mainly with pain regulation for cancer patients, the laws governing opioid regulation changed during this time, allowing for a more liberal ability to prescribe them to patients with a larger array of conditions. Pharmaceutical companies used this as an opportunity to get pain relieving drugs into the hands of patients. This series of events unfolded to become a deadly and widespread epidemic across the U.S. (Manchikanti et al., 2012). The Appalachian region and specifically West Virginia has suffered a large number of deaths due to overdose during the decade in which the crisis has taken place. The researchers of an article entitled “The Opioid
Epidemic in West Virginia” conducted a literature review in order to gain a better understanding of why West Virginia was affected the most out of any U.S. state. The article begins by illuminating the positionality of West Virginia within the data of drug related deaths during the period of the opioid epidemic. In 2015 no other state had as many deaths from opioid overdose or misuse as West Virginia. The rate of overdose in West Virginia was 41.5 per 100,000 adults in 2015. Here the authors and scientists explore the possible reasons why West Virginia is subject to a much higher loss of life due to opioids than any other state. Coupled with a very high rate of doctors prescribing opioids for pain, West Virginia has sociocultural factors that increase the danger of addiction and overdose. Merino et al. first lists ‘a depressed economy’ and ‘lack of education’ as two factors that are relevant to West Virginia and could offer an explanation for why the overdose rate is inflated in the area. They highlight three main factors that seem to be at play in creating a high rate of overdose in West Virginia. The three factors they highlight are as follows: first is the mental health status of the state's population, second is a higher rate of jobs that require manual labor and third, the financial incentives of distributing legal and illegal opioids. (Merino et al., 2019). The first two factors reflect the population of the state and the social makeup of that specific area. The third factor speaks more to a structure of economic depression that leads to a desirability for financial gain. This third factor is also likely to have played a key role in the opioid crisis across the United States. The economy of West Virginia, however, exacerbated the incentives for money making in drug distribution.

The first factor that they name is one that has come up a lot in my interviews. A lack of adequate mental health services is one of the key factors that contributes to higher rates of youth incarceration according to the accounts of my interviewees. The issue of mental health care is
one that permeates each level of healthy childhood development. For example, the availability of local services for receiving care affects the outcome of whether mental health support is made accessible to children and therefore utilized by that child. The attitude towards receiving care for mental health problems within the school system and within the family unit are also key indicators of whether a child will receive care for learning disabilities, trauma, addiction, mental illness, etcetera. In West Virginia many small communities and geographically isolated populations are not supplied with proficient access, emphasis, or financial accessibility when it comes to mental health. In consideration of mental health care it follows that health care for other or related needs is subject to a similar trend of inaccessibility. Therefore we are able to see that the opioid epidemic had more catastrophic effects in terms of death and overdose in West Virginia than in any other state. Through speaking with professionals in the area it is clear that there are many factors that lead to the disruption of healthy child development. The opioid epidemic is an event that my interviewees seemed reluctant to reference, in part because of the over emphasis that West Virginia’s struggle with opioids has received in the national conversation. It was certainly central to the discussion, as the effects of such a devastating crisis affected West Virginia’s sociocultural and economic stability at the state and local levels. The massive effects that the opioid crisis had on the wellbeing of families and children in the area has added to a web of possible exposure to risk factors during development.

The impact of the opioid crisis could be contributing to high rates of youth incarceration both directly and indirectly and from various entry points within the The Bronfenbrenner model. According to reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), West Virginia had the highest rate of infants born with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS). NAS is caused
by opioid use during pregnancy and causes infants to suffer withdrawal from the drugs after birth. In 2017 West Virginia’s rate of NAS per 1,000 babies born was 56.2, while the national average was 7.3 (HCUP Fast Stats). NAS caused by opioids taken by the mother during pregnancy can cause seizures and other severe withdrawal symptoms in the infant along with possible developmental delays later in life (Freeborn, 2021). These developmental delays affect the child at the very core level of the Ecological Systems Theory, causing direct harm to the wellbeing of the individual in a way that affects the types of services and specific environment that they require.

The effects of parental drug use could also be linked to the environment of the child. Aside from physical traumas caused by NAS, infants are also highly affected by opioids and addiction at other levels of the developmental circle. Drug use during pregnancy is considered child abuse and thus many infants born with NAS are put into the foster care system after birth. If they are not removed from the home they may face other challenges such as exposure to drug addiction. The ways in which the statewide struggle with opioid addiction and overdose affects various levels of the microsystem are numerous. Drug use can have a major effect on family life as well as the school system and peer groups. All of these circles make up the microsystem that surrounds the individual. One layer removed in the Ecological Systems Theory, the exosystem, demonstrates how the medical professionals interacting with parents affect children by proxy. The over-prescription of pain medications sparked this epidemic which had a particularly strong hold on West Virginia and therefore had a large effect on children born to parents exposed to addiction. This relationship between the parents and their healthcare professionals or their place of work can serve to illustrate how the chain of support ultimately leads back to the development
of the child. For example if a parent is unable to access quality healthcare they may be more likely to be untreated for addiction or receive less education about the risks of drug related behaviors or other health risks. If this parent is not receiving that kind of care and education the child is likely deprived of aspects of parental care that are crucial for healthy development and the parents may be at higher risk of overdose, continued drug use or mismanagement of other health related issues. Zooming out from the direct effects of drugs, the influence of opioids on the community also means that the parents could be terminated from their place of employment, therefore the change in financial or social circumstances of the family could lead to a disruption in the healthy development of the child. Loss of income can lead to food insecurity, and the deprivation of other basic needs such as housing and healthcare.

Through the study of NAS we see how the use of drugs directly affects the health of the child in infancy. We also see how the relationship between caregivers and the establishments that support them affect the child. Another very important way in which the use of drugs in this area has caused major changes is in the type of caregiving that children receive in the home. That is, the child welfare and foster care systems. This is an expansive and highly utilized system in West Virginia. An article titled “Substance Use, the Opioid Epidemic, and the Child Welfare System” studies the relationship between opioid use and incidences of child welfare. One section of the study shows a map of the U.S. which outlines the pattern of overdose death and foster care in every county, this can be seen in Figure 4. The counties shown in red represent places where both the rate of foster care and the rate of overdose deaths are above the national average, indicating a double effect. Figure 5 offers a magnified version of Figure 4 in order to isolate
West Virginia on the map. Here we can see that West Virginia has the highest density of counties whose rates are statistically higher than the U.S. average.

**Figure 2.** Counties with Rates of Drug Overdose Deaths and Foster Care Entries Both above the National Median in 2016

Sources: CDC/NCHS, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality; HHS/ACF, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System.

**Figure 4.** (Radel et al., 2018)

**Figure 5.** (Radel et al., 2018)

The study was examining the U.S. data as a whole and therefore could not offer specific data for West Virginia. However, overall, the study did find a positive relationship between an increase in drug overdose deaths and children entering the child welfare system. They specify
that areas that were harder hit by the opioid crisis, such as West Virginia, saw a stronger positive relationship (Radel et al., 2018).

According to Child Trends and a number of other data sources, West Virginia has the highest rate in the country of children in foster care. Compared to the U.S. average in 2020 of 5.8 per 1,000 children, West Virginia has a rate of 20.2 per 1,000 (childtrends.org). They have also been observing a steady rise in cases of children in the foster care system. Between the year 2000 and 2018 the number of children in foster care in West Virginia more than doubled (kidscoucount.org). It has continued to rise since. Looking just at the data the link between foster care and the opioid crisis seems to be represented. In 2019, 51% of children in foster care were there due to parental substance abuse. In the U.S. this population of youth involved in the foster care system is made up primarily of cases of neglect, while the cases of parental substance abuse account for 38% of all cases. Though the correlation between substance abuse and foster care may be indicative of a number of other factors that are at play in West Virginia it does illustrate that many children struggling with the circumstances of the child welfare system are also experiencing the effects of substance abuse in the home. Both of these factors play an important role in development of the child at the level of the microsystem.

Because involvement in the foster care system is nearly always indicative of difficult circumstances in the home it is hard to isolate a clear link between the foster care system and high rates of youth incarceration. Considering these restraints on data purity, an article titled “From placement to prison: The path to adolescent incarceration from child welfare supervised foster or group care” details the findings from a study conducted from data regarding youth who
entered the system of youth incarceration after receiving care within the foster system. They reiterate in their findings that it is difficult to make inferences about whether foster care played a role in youth incarceration or whether other factors such as unstable home life, parental drug use, abuse or neglect are the more important factors. They found a high association between the number of placements that a child had in foster care and likelihood to enter the system of youth incarceration. These results were especially present in children who had entered the foster care system between the ages of 11 and 14. This means that the data suggested that after the age of 14 children entering the foster care system were not as likely to enter the juvenile justice system (Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000). One explanation that they considered for why this may have been is that children who are in unstable homes but not involved in the foster care system could act out and become involved in the juvenile justice system before they are ever removed from their home. Overall the data did not strongly support a direct and obvious link between these two systems which they mainly attributed to the many confounding variables that could affect the populations involved in both systems. What we do learn from this research and the data regarding opioid use is that each of these crises seem to be closely related and developing in tandem in a place like West Virginia. A general lack of resources and a depressed economy seem to aid heavily in the collection of statistically high rates of harmful and dangerous circumstances. Seeing strong correlations between high rates of drug overdose, foster care and youth incarceration reinforces a truth that positive changes in West Virginia must be made across multiple layers in the Ecological Systems Theory. A visual for what this connection of improvement could look like can be seen on page 58.
Returning to information gathered through the interview testimonials, both Lucy and Sonja immediately referenced the opioid epidemic when asked about the specific struggles facing West Virginia youth. Lucy introduced the topic of the epidemic briefly and with the preface that it is a widely known issue for the state of West Virginia and the Appalachian region. She spoke about it as a generational problem. Thus, the way it affects youth is by affecting the grandparents and then parents of these children, which creates a cycle of drug abuse that can be hard for many families to break out of. When asked directly about the reason for youth incarceration in West Virginia, Lucy held the same line as she did regarding the drug epidemic: “I've got to again think it - probably a part of it - plays on [...] the opiate crisis. And I mean how many kids are being born addicted, which then cause cognitive problems [...] and of course if they're in a household with opiates [...] the chances of them experiencing trauma are much greater.” When Lucy spoke about trauma and households in which it occurs at a higher rate, she was referencing her experience reviewing cases in which children came from homes with addiction. Based on her statement alone we cannot infer that addiction leads directly to the trauma of children in that household. But what Lucy was getting at was that through the observation of a great many cases she saw that often, homes in which abuse or neglect occurred, also experienced parental drug use.

One thing that seems to indicate higher exposure to trauma is the correlation between drug use and childhood psychiatric disorders (Kelley et al., 2010). Research has also shown that children exposed to drug use in the home are more likely to use drugs themselves later in life (Kelley et al., 2010). Lucy went on to speculate that the lack of [financial, programing, or health care] resources may be potential factors, leading to more drug use and trouble in school. By
trouble in school, she was referring to truancy issues, adolescent drug use and mental health issues among children. The correlations between these issues and parental drug use also garner some support from a study conducted by Kelley et al. that found a correlation between children of substance abusers and higher rates of anxiety, depression, self-concept and academic difficulties (Kelley et al., 2010). These findings tie back into Lucy’s statements regarding the trauma and trouble performing in school experienced by children who are exposed to substance abuse.

Sonja also prefaced her reference to the opioid crisis when pinpointing specific barriers to healthy development in West Virginia. She started by saying that she hated to even bring this up, because it is so often used as an excuse by the school system. But she believes that the opioid crisis created a domino effect for other challenges posed to children and youth. “We also have a lot of grandparents raising our children [...]. In the last two years I know [...] we were kind of leading in that statistic [children raised by grandparents] and that leads to [some] problems, we have, you know, older people who are trying to raise kids who [...] get bamboozled a lot, they're easy to run over, they’re old. [...] I've had several grandparents that would come to the school [and say] I'm tired, I don't want to do this.” The drawbacks she seems to be highlighting in regards to children being raised by their grandparents, is that children can take advantage of older caregivers. Many other interviewees listed care by grandparents or family members as a protective factor, so the drawback that she highlights may be one that is linked to any circumstance in which the child is being raised by an authority figure that is not their biological or adopted parent.
In addition to the drawbacks of children being placed with grandparents she also discussed the severe lack of foster placement homes in the state. One major result of the drug crisis in this area is that it led to an uptick in children in need of out-of-home placements (Radel et al., 2018). And as Sonja observed, there are simply not enough foster homes for these children. She even mentioned that there have been discussions around reinstating orphanages, a claim that I have not verified, but seems to indicate the general attitude around this issue that she is experiencing in the education department. The significance of returning to an orphanage system is that the reinstatement of a depersonalized housing model would take away the benefits of a child being raised in a family unit.

Sonja’s comments about children being raised by grandparents were not the only reference to kinship care, (the care of a non-parent relative or family member) that I was provided by interviewees. Mary, when speaking about things that West Virginia does for kids that she is proud of, mentioned that kinship care is a valuable asset for kids and their families within the foster care system. Here, Mary spoke about the ways in which West Virginia places value on kinship care: “I'm also very proud of how we handle kinship care. We have one of the highest rates in the country of children placed in kinship care [compared to non kinship out-of-home placements]. So we do a really good job, when we have to remove a child from the home, [of] finding a relative for that child to live with. And we certify those relatives as foster providers which not a lot - not every state - does, and so that relative caregiver will get the same rate [monetary compensation] [...] as a traditional foster parent.” This theme of intergenerational connections was one that recurred in my interviews.
In Susan Emley Keefe’s Book titled *Appalachian Mental Health*, she speaks about the family ties that exist in the Appalachian region. She talks about the ways in which the Appalachian region has cultivated a culture that is strongly centered around family and kinship. This is attributed partly to geographic proximity. In these rural areas more families remain in the places where they were raised and thus extended family remains local to one another. In her section detailing family ties she speaks about the ways in which family and kin often have an exchange of mutual aid. This can apply to labor, nursing one another or caring for the children of family members (Keefe, 30). Later sections of the book go on to explore possible mental health protections and stressors associated with close family bonds. In essence it appears that the family structures that exist in this region create a system that can both promote and constrict the mental health of individuals. Keefe suggests that the best approach to creating stronger systems of support for mental health and wellness is to develop support and recognition of value for mental health services within the family (Keefe, 34). This would mean promoting a set of family values that includes utilizing mental health care services. This, of course, would also entail ensuring that community and family cultures recognize mental health as a real and serious health concern.

Promoting social and cultural support for mental health services is also a valuable protection that could be applied to a number of different levels in Bronfenbrenner’s model of healthy childhood development. In creating stronger systems of support it is vital to work alongside family units so that the lines of communication remain intact and the perception around protective programming is seen as positive by the community. Enacting this change could look like creating more exposure so that people within the family unit are familiar with the concept and benefits of
mental health services. If there is more exposure within the family unit the concept of health care for emotional and mental needs will be less foreign and more readily accepted and utilized.

In response to the same question about the challenges facing youth in West Virginia, Samantha brought up the issue of reactive care systems and how responses are often enacted too late. “There's a saying and I use it all the time about prevention or reaction, [...] being proactive versus reactive and oftentimes with youth we’re reactive [...] [the response is often] ‘let's come in and fix it’ instead of coming in the front side and saying ‘hey, this family doesn't have these things, their child is going to be hungry.’” She went on to give an example that can easily stand as a metaphor for how children who enter the juvenile justice system are often neglected by the agencies that should be in place to protect them and aid against criminal involvement. “The child doesn't have food. So they go into the grocery store and they steal a candy bar. They’re hungry. [...] If we had stepped in in the first place and delivered them a bag of groceries they wouldn't need to go into the store and steal the food. [...] Is it fair that we're holding that child responsible...? They see food on the shelf, they take it and then we put them in jail for it.” This example gives a clear context for the approach to protection that Samantha is trying to emphasize. The food example is one that we have heard many times, starting with stories of children stealing a bit of bread to feed their hungry family and it is one that can be applied to many other real world situations. Her point is getting at a lack of support being offered to children before they warrant a necessity for reactionary intervention. As Samantha says, the system is constantly trying to keep up with the problems that have already arisen for these children and so focussing on implementing aid and care for children who are not yet involved in this system of government intervention does not appear to be an immediate necessity or a
responsible use of resources. It often takes money, time and many willing people to implement programs that preemptively protect against hunger, abuse, neglect, poverty or any number of other factors that lead to an interruption in healthy child development. These are things that poorer states and counties don't have as much access to and therefore they are spending those resources in efforts to react to the issues instead of preventing them.

Samantha went on to outline another common series of events that fall into line with lack of resources and lack of proactive intervention. “Is it fair to remove a child because [their] Mom couldn't get a job, and because she didn't have a job she wasn't able to [...] pay for a car and so because she didn't have a car she couldn't go to [...] the DHHR and get food stamps or keep her cards active and and so are we removing based off of that?” This example ties in closely with the issue of access and the ways in which changes cannot exist without consideration for how services will and can be utilized by the population. The ways they can be utilized encompass all of the potential for the services, including the hope and expectation for its impact, but the ways that they will be utilized is something that also must be considered and reflects more upon the reality of how well-received and practical the services will be. Samantha went on to elaborate on how this can look and the point at which a vision for infrastructure and positive change can diverge from the practicality of how it will function in the community. In her example regarding access she brings us back to the issue of transportation. “So sometimes when we talk about the challenges facing the youth [...] I tell people [...] we're not in an if-you-build-it-they-will-come area. Just because you offer these services [...] they're not accessible, tangibly accessible to them. [...] We don't have anything [transport] that's going and taking these services to the
families. So when they're at odds in that, then the youth are obviously neglected because the family didn't have, wasn't able to get, what they needed and then it starts this whole spiral.”

When looking at a number of these challenges that interviewees mention there is one very literal explanation for why rates of incarceration may be so high. Mary expresses an issue that others also touched upon. This is the fact that many children who act up in school, struggle with mental health conditions, or suffer from drug addiction do not have access to resources, such as treatment centers or positive community and social programming, in their own communities. This means that when their actions begin to be perceived as harmful or a risk to their community they can be removed to the only place where ‘support’ can be accessed: confinement facilities or incarceration. Mary framed it in these words: “because we have such a lack of community resources in these very rural communities [...] there's absolutely no service providers for sure. They’re [people in rural communities] riding an hour and a half on a bus [to access service] and so when you look at those sorts of situations often, the only way to access treatment was to remove a child from their home and put them in one of these facilities. [...] What that child may actually need might be a mentor and we don't have a funding stream for that [...]. And so I think that the over-reliance on out-of-home placement [incarceration] has come because of the lack of accessibility, [...]and a lack of community services.”

**Conclusion**

It is clear that there is not one single thing that is causing high rates of youth incarceration in West Virginia. Accessibility, transportation, a depressed economy, single-sided rhetoric, addiction, food insecurity, mental health, physical health, geographic isolation, poorly
funded government agencies, inaccessible health care, inappropriate use of institutions and a
general lack of services are all factors that have been highlighted through research and in my
interviews. In consideration of these many things we see a system of disadvantage that is
composed of many issues, occurring at every level of childhood development. Considering the
testimonials regarding risk factors that are present in West Virginia, it is clear that these factors
exist at and across various levels. Each of the levels of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems
Theory carries a range of real-life challenges that are being faced in West Virginia, regarding
youth and the factors occurring on various levels that lead to involvement in the criminal justice
realm. Taking into consideration the myriad systems, agencies, organizations, institutions and
community groups that came up throughout this examination into youth incarceration in West
Virginia I have created a version of the Ecological Systems Theory model that represents the
struggles faced along a path to incarceration in West Virginia specifically. This can be seen in
Figure 6.
At the most inner level we look to the circumstances of the children themselves. Here we can consider the ways in which the child is affected by the struggles occurring directly inside the body and mind. These include learning disabilities, mental and physical health, effects of drugs taken in utero (such as NAS) and developmental delays, sometimes caused by these effects.
At the level of the microsystem in Figure 6 we can see a compilation of the conditions of each of the systems that affect the child from the vantage point of this most proximal level. Each of these conditions reflects a relationship in the child’s life that is crucial to development at the most basic levels. These include their living space, family relationships, social sphere, school system and access to their basic needs for physical and mental health. In this model the conditions of these relationships are informed by the major topics revealed through research and interviews regarding West Virginia. Each of these conditions also has an effect on other relationships within this sphere as well as the conditions at the level of the individual. For example, the presence or absence of abuse has a major effect on mental and physical health as well as the child’s relationship to their home environment.

In the exosystem of Figure 6, I examine the nature of the conditions occurring in systems that directly affect the actors in the microsystem. Here we have the availability of services that are offered to the caregivers and community. In West Virginia the emphasis on transportation and geographic accessibility is highlighted when looking at services offered to the child’s community. Familial proximity is also a large component here as well as the quality of various institutions and the involvement of community investments into these institutions.

Finally, the macrosystem in Figure 6 demonstrates the ways in which very large actors have an effect on the child and what laws and larger government institutions are most important when considering vulnerable youth in West Virginia. Laws, government spending and cultural values specific to West Virginia are all relevant here and inform each other level.
This next diagram (Figure 7) offers a visual representation for the one system from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory that is not shown in those concentric circles of Figure 6. That is the level concerned with the communication and interaction between each level: the mesosystem. Figure 7 offers a slightly overwhelming portrait of the number of lines of connection that exist between and within each system. In this diagram I connect each condition, agency, unit or group with others that it is in communication with or directly related to. As stated earlier there is no one factor that has the power to reduce the rate of incarceration among youth in West Virginia; I argue, however, that the mesosystem is the most crucial level at which
effective change can take root. If reducing incarceration among youth happens through the strengthening of healthy childhood development and the improvement of environmental scaffolding then it stands to reason that building strong structures takes cooperation, communication and interaction.

The essence of Bronfenbrenner’s theory is that childhood is determined and sculpted by a large number of systems that work in different ways to determine developmental outcomes. In West Virginia children are up against a great number of risk factors that make them vulnerable and susceptible to incarceration. Each of these factors must be strengthened and restored for healthy development to occur and in order to disrupt the pathway to incarceration; however restoration of individual systems will never be enough on its own. In speaking with individuals working in fields related to child welfare in West Virginia, it was apparent that their experiences were of fractured lines of communication and strained cooperation between institutions. Their stories and my research reveal a pattern of courts failing to communicate with foster care, foster care struggling to connect with families, families rendered unable to communicate with health care providers, government failing to provide adequate transportation, large institutions controlling economic stability, communities being isolated from one another and incarceration being used as a substitute for treatment. These patterns outline a structure of broken lines of communication.

West Virginia is a place where the risks often outweigh the protections and where the consequences for these risks are overly enforced. For this reason it is in many ways primed to evolve by strengthening communication and cooperation between institutions and offering an
avenue towards building strong scaffolding for child development, one that is not dependent on incarceration. An evolution of this sort would offer pathways for children that do not include confinement and thus, stand as a bold and important model for the United States as a whole.
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Appendix A

International Review Board Letter of Approval

Bard College Institutional Review Board

Date: December 1, 2020

To: Claire Lindsay

Cc: Sarah Dunphy-Lelii, Deborah Treadway, Brandt Burgess

From: Tom Hutcheon, IRB Chair

Re: Appalachian Youth in the Carceral System: Protective Factors for Children in West Virginia

DECISION: APPROVED

Dear Claire,

The Bard Institutional Review Board has reviewed your revisions and approved your proposal entitled “Appalachian Youth in the Carceral System: Protective Factors for Children in West Virginia.” Your proposal is approved through December 1, 2021 and your case number is 2020DEC01-LIN.

Please notify the IRB if your methodology changes or unexpected events arise. We wish you the best of luck with your research!

Tom Hutcheon

IRB Chair thutcheo@bard.edu
Appendix B

Informed Consent

Appalachian Youth in the Carceral System: Protective Factors for Juveniles in West Virginia
Claire Lindsay
Bard College

In this study I am interested in learning about the protective factors for West Virginian youth at risk of being exposed to the juvenile justice system.

If you choose to participate in this interview you will be asked to speak with me about your own experience in your field of work as guided by the questions that I have provided you. The interview should take approximately 30 minutes. I will be recording the interview on my phone so that I can transcribe it later. If your words are published in my final project they will not be tied to your name or identifying information. Your name and all identifying information from our conversation will be kept entirely confidential and only viewed by me.

Though your identity will not be shared, in the event that your comments are traced back to you there is a chance that any negative comments made about your organization or agency could affect your relationship with that organization or agency. Another potential risk in participating in this interview is minimal discomfort if you discuss personal experiences, specifically ones that may have been emotionally exhausting. The interview is not expected to cause more stress than a typical conversation about your work may evoke. Your participation is valuable for expanding on my research and learning about the work that you are doing to better serve your community.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You may decide to stop the interview at any time. You also are free to decide not to answer any questions that you don't wish to speak about. If you would like a copy of the transcript of our conversation after the interview I can send this to you. If you wish to withdraw or alter any of your statements from my records you may email me with this information at any point up until April 5th and I will make those changes. A debriefing statement will be provided to you at the end of the interview at which time I will reiterate the specific topic of my research and allow you time to ask any questions you may have.

All audio recordings and transcriptions of our interview will be kept in a password protected folder on my personal google drive account. Your name will not appear anywhere in my final project report.
If you have any questions about this project, or the interview please contact Claire Lindsay at cl9303@bard.edu or by phone at (404)-398-5939. Additionally you may contact my advisor Sarah Dunphy-Lelii at sdl@bard.edu. If you have questions about your rights as an interview participant please contact the Bard College Institutional Review Board at irb@bard.edu

The purpose of this interview has been sufficiently explained and I hereby give permission to participate in this interview. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the interview at any time or ask for my interview to not be used at any point until April 5th 2021. I confirm that I am over 18 years of age. By signing below, I am indicating that I am in agreement with the above statement of consent.

Signature of participant ________________________________

Date ________________________________
Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. What is your Name, the Organization you work for and your role in that Organization?

2. How long have you worked in this department?

3. In what ways does your role affect the lives of youth, either directly or indirectly?

4. In your experience or knowledge what age seems to be the most crucial for intervention? At what age does it become harder to make positive changes in the lives of the youth you work with?

5. How many institutions (i.e. education, department of children and families, juvenile justice system, mental health services) do you come into contact with in your work. How complex is the web of connection?

6. Have you ever encountered a situation in which you felt you were too late to intervene with a youth, family or adult?

7. What services that you provide do you think have the largest positive impact?

8. In your experience what are the biggest challenges facing youth in West Virginia? What are the most important protections to combat these challenges?

9. West Virginia has a youth incarceration rate that is twice the national average. Do you have any insight into why this might be?

10. What are some things that West Virginia does for youth that you are proud of? What are some things that you think they could be doing better?

11. What is a topic in your line of work that you believe should be discussed more or offered better recognition?

12. What is a moment in your career that has been particularly challenging or rewarding?