Can parents of juvenile offenders still dream?

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A new study from Michigan State University published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence* reveals that mothers don't lose hope for their sons' futures and potential -- even if they are arrested as a minor. Credit: Michigan State University

Mothers want the best for their sons, but what happens to a mother's hopes and dreams when her son is charged as a juvenile offender?

A new study from Michigan State University published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence* reveals that mothers don't lose hope for their sons' futures and potential—even if they are arrested as a minor.

"Mothers who were a part of this study had uniformly high aspirations for their sons—as in, what they hope and dream that their sons will achieve," said Caitlin Cavanagh, assistant professor of criminal justice at MSU. "What changed, however, were their expectations of the feasibility of those achievements."

A wealth of research exists on how parents influence their children in an academic setting by sharing aspirations and expectations, Cavanagh explained, but little has been studied as it relates to juvenile justice.

Cavanagh talked to more than 300 first-time juvenile offenders and their mothers over a course of 36 months. The mother-son pairs were mostly non-white and located in metropolitan areas of Philadelphia, New Orleans and Orange County, Calif., and the sons' offenses were low- to moderate-level crimes, such as theft, assault and vandalism.

To determine aspiration levels for their sons, or what they wished for their sons' futures, Cavanagh asked the mothers a series of questions about how important it was for them to see their sons graduate from high school, get married, find a good job and so on.

When talking to mothers about expectations, or what they thought was likely for their sons to achieve later in life, Cavanagh asked them about similar achievements—but positioned the question as how likely it was to see their sons reach these goals.

Over the course of three years, the mothers were interviewed right after their sons' arrests and again a few years later to see whether expectations and aspirations changed when their sons continued offending the law.

"What was especially interesting was that of the 317 mothers we interviewed, zero said 'unimportant' when it came to their aspirations for sons. In spite of their run-ins with the law, it was still very important to mothers to see their sons thrive," Cavanagh said. "Although their aspirations stayed the same, their expectations that those aspirations would become reality decreased in response to continued delinquency."

Cavanagh's research findings were more distinct for mothers of younger offenders. For example, a mother of a 13-year-old offender has lower expectations for her son than a mom with an older teenage boy.

"For younger offenders, mothers' expectations decreased more rapidly in response to continued delinquency than for older offenders. This could be because mothers worry that the doors will close on opportunities for their sons when they are breaking the law so young," Cavanagh said. "If you have the 'bad kid' reputation early on, it's hard to erase."

Of the mothers surveyed, those who came from lower socioeconomic background had higher aspirations for their sons than the better-off counterparts.

"Goals related to upward mobility may be more salient for lower-income mothers, who may want their sons to 'get ahead' and change the circumstances in which they were raised," Cavanagh said.

The next phase of research is to test the downward spiral that parents' perceptions can influence juvenile offenders.

"If sons who reoffend are aware that their mothers' expectations decrease, will the sons continue to reoffend?" If you knew that your parents thought you didn't have a future, it could foster an attitude of indifference," Cavanaugh said.

Provided by Michigan State University