

The Social Impact on Children with Incarcerated Parents

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Abstract: This study sought to define the socialization needs of children, whose parents are incarcerated. A review and critique of related literature indicated that there are unintended consequences on children due to the incarceration of their parents. These consequences include a low self-concept, impaired school achievement, poor peer relationships, changes in behavior, and isolation. Information was collected through reviewing and critiquing current literature regarding the effects of having parents in jail/ prison on their family, especially their children. The information and data gathered, through this research, is intended to help social workers and others professionals to provide meaningful services to children and their families with information that can be used in designing and modifying future guidance and counseling programs. Strengths and weaknesses of this research are given, as well as recommendations for future research. The research has shown that the family suffers economically, socially, and emotionally. There may be some stigma attached to the family or feelings of anger, guilt and depression. Future recommendations on this topic would be to look at the family situation prior to the parent being incarcerated.

Keywords: socialization, children, incarceration parents, social work

1. Introduction

In general, our parents are the first people we know and with whom we create our first bonds. They provide, with few exceptions, shelter, security, love, and nourishment. Children learn how to build and foster relationships by watching how their parents and family interact with each other and society. Any changes within the family affect all members of that family. Family cohesion and harmony have been determined to be significant variables in the development of positive self-esteem in children (Napoli, Kilbride, & Tebbs, 1992).

Imprisonment has a more immediate and wide reaching impact on affected families. Hagan (2000) states that the incarceration of parents can seriously diminish the economic and social capital on which families and communities depend to successfully raise children. The disintegration of the family that often results from imprisonment means that children can experience prolonged and intensified periods of instability and uncertainty. He suggests that parental imprisonment may have the following negative effects: the strains of economic deprivation; the loss of parental socialization through role modeling, support and supervision; and the stigma and shame of being labeled by society.

Children can be affected in different ways, depending on the role that was played by the parent who is imprisoned. One significant issue that arises is the provision of alternative care in cases where women who were the primary caregivers are incarcerated. Women are more likely than men to be primary caregivers prior to incarceration, which means that the children of female inmates are likely to experience greater disruption to care-giving arrangements (Healy et. al, 2000). Extended family networks often become involved, with grandparents, aunts and uncles taking over the role of carer. If such support is not available, foster care becomes an option (Howard, 2000). On the other hand, the imprisonment of fathers can sometimes remove the main earner from the family structure, which increases the likelihood of financial hardship. Remaining single parents may therefore have less money and less time for their children, which can affect their overall development.

Children of incarcerated parents are among the most vulnerable populations of children, at high risk for neglect, abuse, behavioral health problems, delinquency and substance abuse. The problems of children, whose parents are incarcerated, if unattended, can produce intergenerational patterns of crime and violence. Historic changes in family structure, substance abuse rates, criminal sentencing policies and related increases in the number of incarcerated parents have exerted a profound negative impact on the well being of children of incarcerated parents.

The following sections outline some of the difficulties that children may experience as a result of parental imprisonment. The difficulties involved in making any generalizations about the impact on children of separation from their parent as a result of imprisonment have been noted by several commentators (eg, Shaw, 1992; Johnston et. al, 1996), however. Seymour (1998) states that the true extent of the problems caused by parental imprisonment cannot be

estimated because few reliable statistics exist. She outlines how much of the research on children with incarcerated parents has been methodologically limited and that there have been no longitudinal studies following children through different phases of parental incarceration and release. The extent to which a child will be affected by parental incarceration depends on a large number of variables, including the age at which parent-child separation occurs, the length of separation, the child's familiarity with his or her new caregiver or placement, and the degree of stigma that the child's community associates with imprisonment.

2. Perspectives from the Literature: Impact of Parental Incarceration on Families and Children

Over the past dozen years, a number of studies have examined the impact of parental incarceration on families and children. Most notable are Gabel and Johnston (1995), Parke and Clarke-Stewart (2002), Petersilia (2003), Travis (2003), and Farrington and Welsh (2007). By looking at the impact of incarceration on children as a process, we are better able to understand how and when incarceration affects them. The three stages in the process of incarceration from children's perspectives include (1) arrest and immediate separation, (2) incarceration and parental unavailability, and (3) the effects of reunion after incarceration.

Stage 1 - Arrest and immediate separation.

Gabel and Johnston (1995) describe the trauma of arrest that affects children of any age. They relate that one in five children is present during the time of arrest and witnesses the parent being taken away by authorities. More than half of the children who witness this event are under seven years of age and are left in the sole care of their mother. Some argue that explanations should be minimized to protect the child, while others argue that nondisclosure is harmful and exacerbates distress when the child is lied to or left to wonder about his/her parent's whereabouts. This is often referred to as a "conspiracy of silence" or "forced silence" that can raise even greater anxiety in the child.

Stage 2 - Incarceration and parental unavailability.

This is the most complex stage of the incarceration process. It includes issues related to the developmental level of the child (infancy through young adulthood), the effects on the incarcerated parent and family unit, and whether or not programs within the criminal justice and social service systems meet the families' needs. Travis (2003) states that:

"Their children must come to terms with the reality of an absent parent, the stigma of parental imprisonment, and an altered support system... In addition, in those communities where incarceration rates are high, the experience of having a mother or father in prison is now quite commonplace, with untold consequences for foster care systems, multigenerational households, social service delivery, community norms, childhood development, and parenting patterns."

A. Financial effects

According to studies that have been conducted in countries that include Denmark, England, the United States and Australia, the majority of prisoners tend to come from low income backgrounds, which have immediate implications for their families. The findings indicated that the children of imprisoned fathers tended to be socially, financially and educationally deprived to start off with.

The socio-economic status of prisoners' families often means that their needs do not receive much attention. As Wedge and Boswell (1999) point out, prisoners' families tend to belong to low income and low status groups, whose needs and rights do not receive routine consideration during the sentencing process and who are not seen to merit systematic support during the sentences themselves. In some cases, mothers who are left to support the children on their own may have no option but to take up employment outside the home. Their children could therefore receive less attention than they had in the past.

B. Emotional and behavioral responses to parental imprisonment

It has been noted that some children can become defiant or aggressive and can display antisocial behaviour as a result of having a parent imprisoned (Springer et. al, 1999). According to one of the first studies carried out on the children of

prisoners (Sack et al, 1976), typical reactions that can characterize their responses to parental imprisonment include more aggressive and disruptive behaviour, reduced levels of obedience and a decrease in school performance.

Children whose parents are incarcerated carry tremendous emotional burdens. In such cases therapeutic help may be beneficial for trauma, anger, fear for their parent's safety and well being, abandonment and other emotional issues (fear, anxiety, sadness, loss and guilt). Problems relating to lack of contact; physical care and custody; child abuse and neglect; family stress associated with community and family reintegration, may also improve with services, including therapy.

- Children need parental guidance, love, and a strong role model.
- There is stigma, harassment, mocking by other kids.
- Children are often exposed to drug abuse in the home, before, during and after parental incarceration.
- Children often have to raise themselves and/or their siblings.
- Children often have to deal with the fact there is no food, no clean clothes, and no support for going to school.
- Children may feel confusion and/or fear for parent(s) and insecurity regarding their future/what will happen next, after arrest, and beyond.
- There are often changes in living location and conditions including school and friends.
- There is often a lack of accessible benefits/services (e.g. medical, dental, nutritional, behavioral, and counseling).
- There is often difficulty with the reunification and transition processes.
- Children may develop negative views of authority figures.

C. Stigma caused by parental imprisonment

Previous studies have found that it is common for families to feel stigmatized when one of their members is imprisoned, which can have long-term effects on children's development. Fear of stigmatization can place children under further stress, in that they may feel pressurized into keeping the reason for their parent's absence a secret from their peers or people in the wider community. Further problems can be caused by the fact that parents or caregivers may be unwilling to tell children the reason for the parents' absence. Prisoners' families may be concerned about how others would react (Myers et. al, 1998):

"Some parents, due to the very realistic concerns about community scorn or rejection; try very hard to hide the truth of the situation from their children... As a result, children may experience shame, and many have reported social isolation from their friends.

According to Shaw (1992), the lack of information can be very frightening for children and can encourage their fears or fantasies about where their parent actually is. Gabel et. al (1995) state that the fact that the truth may be hidden from the children or from the community in general can be very detrimental for children because they *"are unable to process the effects of trauma, including the trauma of parent-child separation without expressing their feelings verbally"*.

Stage 3 - Effects of reunion after incarceration

Reentry into society has become a major issue in corrections over the past 10 years. Travis (2005) sheds light on the magnitude of the problem, as unprecedented numbers of men and women have been incarcerated under the sentencing reforms of the past 30 years; and, having completed their sentences, now are reentering the lives of their families and communities. They are often reentering unsupervised, without guidance in overcoming old or new obstacles to making the transition a successful one. Travis notes difficulties associated with reintegrating the formerly incarcerated parent into his or her family, unsupported. Travis goes on to say, would take community-wide coalitions, strong support from local governments, and partnerships with state correction agencies that shared the coalitions' goal:

"...to recognize the important role that families can play in successful reintegration, to minimize the harm experienced by the children of incarcerated parents, and to promote strong and healthy families for each prisoner (p. 149)."

3. Other Impacts on Children of Parental Incarceration

Criminological research has shown that having an antisocial parent or parents (those who lie, steal, disobey, and engage in violence) is one of the strongest predictors of violence or serious delinquency in adolescence and youth adulthood.

Lipsey and Derzon (1998) found that youth with the most antisocial parent(s) were three to six times more likely to exhibit violent or serious delinquency than youth with the least antisocial parents. The authors estimated that from 15 to 20 percent of youth with the most antisocial parents would become delinquent, and from 47 to 62 percent of all who became delinquent would have at least one antisocial parent. In contrast, from 94 to 96 percent of those without an antisocial parent would not become delinquent, and from 77 to 78 percent of those who did not become delinquent would not have an antisocial parent. These percentages indicated that parental criminality is an important risk factor for adolescent antisocial behavior.

Saving Children from a Life of Crime (Farrington & Welsh 2007) examines decades of rigorous studies about the early risk factors for offending. Citing classic longitudinal surveys by Joan McCord (1977) and Lee Robins (1978), it found that criminal parents tended to have delinquent and antisocial children. To explain why, the authors described "six possible explanations (not mutually exclusive) for why offending tended to be concentrated in certain families and transmitted from one generation to the next" (Farrington et al. 2001):

1. Transmission of offending is part of a larger cycle of deprivation and antisocial behavior.
2. Assortative mating -- female offenders tend to cohabit with or marry male offenders.
3. Direct and mutual influences of family members on each other, although there is no evidence that parents directly encourage their children to commit crimes or teach them criminal techniques.
4. Environmental mechanisms: Arrested fathers tend to impregnate young women, to live in bad neighborhoods, and to use poor child-rearing methods, such as harsh or erratic discipline.
5. Genetic mechanisms, the important question being how genetic potential interacts with environment to produce offending behavior.
6. Official (police and court) bias against known criminal families.

The extent to which a child will be affected by parental incarceration depends on a large number of variables, including the age at which the parent-child separation occurs, length of the separation, health of the family, disruptiveness of the incarceration, and the child's familiarity with the placement or new caregiver. Other variables may be the strength of the parent-child relationship, number and result of previous separation experiences, nature of the parent's crime, length of the parent's sentence, availability of family or community support, and degree of stigma that the community associates with incarceration (Seymour, 1998).

Dr. Denise Johnston, Director of the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, California, has studied the impact of parental crime, arrest and incarceration on children's development. Her work is summarized in table 1 (Simmons, 2000).

Possible Developmental Effects on Children of Parental Crime, Arrest, and Incarceration				
Developmental	Stage	Developmental	Characteristics	Developmental
Infancy (0-2 years)	Total dependency	Attachment and trust	Parent-child separation	Impaired parent-child bonding
Early childhood (2-6 years)	Increased perception and mobility; incomplete individuation from parent	Sense of autonomy, independence and initiative	Parent-child separation; Trauma	Anxiety, developmental regression, acute traumatic stress, survivor guilt
Middle childhood (7-10 years)	Increased independence, ability to reason, importance of peers	Sense of industry, ability to work productively	Parent-child separation, enduring trauma	Acute traumatic stress and reactive behaviors
Early adolescence (11-14 years)	Increasing abstract thinking, future oriented behavior, aggression, puberty	Ability to work productively with others, control of emotions	Parent-child separation, enduring trauma	Rejection of limits on behavior, trauma reactive behaviors
Late adolescence (15-18 years)	Emotional crisis and confusion, adult sexual development, abstract thinking, independence	Achieves identity, engages in adult work and relationships, resolves conflicts with family and society	Parent-child separation, enduring trauma	Premature termination of parent-child relationship; intergenerational crime and incarceration

Another aspect of the children's life that may be affected by having a parent incarcerated is lowered self-esteem or self-concept. Self-esteem is learned through social interactions and accomplishing the tasks that we set out to do. These expectations that we have about ourselves do not have to be based in reality. They are fostered through an individual's actions, behaviors, and beliefs about themselves.

Hopelessness and negative self-esteem are likely to be associated with social withdrawal, resulting in part from the perceived futility, helplessness, and lack of confidence of social encounters. Limited social interactions with others are likely to foster diminished social reinforcement, withdrawal, or lack of approach responses on the part of others and, in a reciprocal fashion, further social withdrawal (Kazdin, Rodgers, and Colbus, 1986). How children see and respond to a given situation will affect all aspects of their life. It has been shown that people with low self-esteem often have little confidence in their abilities. If a child lacks self-confidence the risk is that no effort will be made toward attaining their goals.

4. Recommendations

I. The research has shown that the family suffers economically, socially, and emotionally. When a parent is imprisoned, the family may need to move away from their home in order to be closer to the incarcerated parent or to escape the social stigma that is placed on their family. Having a parent in prison may influence children on their outlook on life. They may feel that it is inevitable for them to also be placed in jail. A sense of hopelessness regarding their future may develop. Without positive role models the children will look at their peers for guidance and direction. In some cases, the children will join gangs to have a sense of connection and belonging.

Future recommendations on this topic would be to look at the family situation prior to the parent being incarcerated. One could look into the family dynamics; determine the roles of the family members. In addition, researchers could investigate what the living conditions were before the incarceration or design a study that looks into the background differences and family circumstances. These are just a few of the variables that will need to be considered in future studies.

These children are innocent victims who should have the right:

- To be kept safe and informed at the time of their parent's arrest;
- To be cared for in their parent's absence; and
- To be emotional support as they struggle with their parent's incarceration.

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