The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children: An Emerging Need for Effective Interventions

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ABSTRACT: The increasing number of children with incarcerated parents constitutes perhaps one of the largest at-risk populations in the United States. Short- and long-term effects of parental incarceration are difficult to quantify; however, the current literature indicates that this population is negatively responding to major shifts in family structure, and is vulnerable to economic stress and adverse interpersonal issues. Service providers are seeking appropriate intervention strategies to address the resultant issues of parental incarceration. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research on effective practice methods. This paper reviews the literature on the potential implications parental incarceration has on children, and discusses service providers' concerted efforts to allay the consequences. Recommendations for appropriate data collection and identification of relevant gender, developmental, and cultural interventions are provided.

KEY WORDS: Children; Parental Incarceration; Intervention.

In the past two decades, the unprecedented 3.8% annual growth of the United States prison population has created a burgeoning number of children with incarcerated parents. There is no official statistic to enumerate the youth impacted. It is conservatively estimated that 1.5–2 million children are affected nationwide (Child Welfare League of America, 2004; Krisberg & Temin, 2001). Since 1991 the number of children with parents in the correctional system has doubled (Horn, 2002), making them perhaps one of the largest at-risk...
populations in the United States (Mumola, 2000). Estimates suggest that an additional 10 million children have a parent with a history in the criminal justice system (Brenner, 1998; Reed & Reed, 1997).

Children of inmates are often referred to as the “hidden victims” of crime because they traditionally have been underserved and understudied (Seymour, 1998). In the 1990s, professionals increasingly encountered youth who experienced myriad adverse reactions that were associated with parent–child separation. Consequently, there was a surge of attention brought to the emerging impact of parent imprisonment. The literature provides practitioners with only an orientation to the multiple implications, and unfortunately there is a dearth of empirical studies on specific interventions that address the adverse effects. Interventions that give consideration to gender differences, developmental stages, and cultural relevance are also significant factors that merit further discussion. Mitigating all problems may pose a challenge, but it is important to note that children have the capacity to cope with adversity. Thus, identifying the issues this population encounters is pivotal to foster support and promote positive outcomes.

This paper reviews the literature on the consequences of family restructuring, economic implications, and interpersonal risks associated with having a parent in the correctional system. Descriptions of programs that address many of these issues are discussed. Finally, this paper encourages professionals to systematically identify children of incarcerated parents, and to explore substantive interventions that are gender specific as well as developmentally and culturally relevant.

Implications of Parental Incarceration

Some researchers posit that exposure to crime-infested neighborhoods, poverty, family substance abuse, and violence are arguably more significant risk factors among children with incarcerated parents than parent imprisonment alone (Gabel & Shindledecker, 1993). It may be unclear what effect a parent’s involvement in the correctional system has, but there is evidence to suggest that children are responding negatively to being separated from their parents. The short- and long-term effects are difficult to quantify; however, the most commonly cited adverse reactions include internalizing behaviors such as depression and difficulty forming attachments
(Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981; Johnston, 1995a–c; Johnson & Waldfo- gel, 2002, unpublished manuscript; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002, unpublished manuscript; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Rob- bins, 2002; Simmons, 2000) and externalizing behaviors that may in- clude aggression and delinquent activity (Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981; Gabel & Shindledecker, 1993; Johnston, 1995b,c; Parke & Clarke- Stewart, 2002, unpublished manuscript; Springer, Lynch, & Rubin, 2000). These issues are significant, yet only part of the total picture. Children with parents in prison are also vulnerable to ephemeral home placements and economic stress.

Shift in Family Structure and Child Placement Issues

Traditionally, families experienced loss of a father to the criminal justice system. This trend is rapidly shifting. Since 1986 the incarcerated female population has increased by 400%. There are approximately 90,000–100,000 women in United States federal and state prisons (Enders, Paterniti, & Meyers, 2005; Ruiz, 2002). Researchers have found that paternal incarceration usually results in mild to moderate family tensions while on average maternal incarceration may have a greater impact, specifically regarding child placement options and their ability to adjust to new family structures. Unlike men entering prison, women entering the correctional system were generally raising their children without a significant other. Their children have a high probability of sibling separation and numerous temporary placements with family, friends, child welfare systems, or a combination of these placement options.

Grandmothers are the most likely candidates for either formal or informal kinship care. According to Mumola (2000), approximately 15% of children with fathers and 50% of children with mothers in prison live with a grandparent. In many instances children residing with grandparents during their parent’s imprisonment have a greater likelihood of returning to their parent’s care once released from prison.

Transition from a grandparent’s care to the parent is theoretically the most reasonable and least disruptive transition; yet legal parent–child reunification is not always an option. Despite the efforts of child welfare agencies to reunite children with parents, parental rights are at-risk of being relinquished when individuals serve longer sentences than the timeframes the Adoption and State Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 allows parents to reestablish custody (Child Welfare
League of America, 1998). The Government Accounting Office (GAO) reports the maximum median prison sentence for women is 60 months (Simmons, 2000). The ASFA policy dictates that if a child is in foster care for 15 of 22 months, parental rights are terminated. Thus, permanent placement in the child welfare system is a strong possibility for children of single parents in the correctional system.

**Economic Factors**

Changes in family composition can be devastating not only emotionally and psychologically but also economically. For individuals in the workforce prior to incarceration, the loss of their income can have a significant impact on families. Fathers who do not reside with their children may also create a financial burden. Evidence supports that although sometimes limited, fathers provided formal or informal financial assistance (Hairston, 1998). Loss of a mother’s income can have greater economic consequences (Bloom, 1995). This assertion is likely antithetical to society’s general understanding of how an individual’s income affects a family. However, most offenders lived in poverty prior to their arrest, were young, and single (Reed & Reed, 1997). Most women in prison are single mothers and the sole economic support for their families. Children possibly continue to experience similar or greater economic impoverishment once a parent enters the correctional system because they often enter poverty-stricken caregivers’ homes (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Dressel & Barnhill, 1994; Seymour, 1998). The new addition to already overburdened families causes more financial strain, especially when government policies fail to make access to public assistance such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) easily available to grandparents or other relative caregivers (Seymour, 1998; Young & Smith, 2000).

**Parent–Child Relationships**

The quality of parent–child bonds is a major factor determining the degree a child adjusts to parental incarceration. Experts agree that positive parent–child attachment is crucial for connection and essential for parents to assume their role in helping children deal with societal issues. The lack of a parent–child relationship can cause irreparable damage to family bonds; therefore, face-to-face contact or written communication is encouraged. Consideration to the
parent–child relationship status prior to incarceration is important. If the pre-existing relationship between parent and child was positive, then maintaining that relationship through frequent visits is even more essential. If there were no incidences of abuse against the child, caregivers and helping professionals want to avoid dismissing the importance of continued parent–child contact. While relationship building may be an arduous process, particularly for caregivers responsible for helping parents and children maintain frequent contact, it benefits the child in the long-term.

Most correctional facilities provide family visitations; however, children may inevitably lose contact with their parent. According to Seymour (1998), approximately one-half of parents in the correctional system do not receive visits, and the other half report infrequent visits from their children. Geographical proximity is a major determining factor for loss of contact. It is difficult for caregivers to arrange visits when parents are in prisons hundreds of miles from where the children reside. Over 50% of state inmates and 40% of federal inmates live between 100 and 500 miles from their children and 43% of federal inmates live more than 500 miles from their children (Mumola, 2000). Even if a parent is in close proximity, they may be reluctant to allow their children visit while in prison. Children may also show ambivalence, choosing to forgo visits to protect themselves from further disappointment. A caregiver may consider it psychologically harmful for the child to visit their parent in prison. Consequently, they are not forthcoming about the parent’s location and situation.

Families may also deceive children about their parent’s incarceration because either they are embarrassed about the family member’s criminal behavior or they are attempting to protect the child’s emotional or psychological well-being. When children are very young and incapable of comprehending the concept of incarceration, caregivers are more likely to concoct stories to protect the child. Even when caregivers’ intentions are good, they lack insight into the potentially detrimental consequences for misleading a child. Several studies indicate that deceiving children has damaging consequences (Johnston, 1995c). Deception leads to confusion, distrust, and uncertainty. Children possibly become concerned that their parent is in a horrible dangerous plight or fear that they too may disappear into the unknown. A child fills the void by fantasizing about the absent parent, setting them up for disappointment when the parent returns and fails to meet their expectations.
Caregivers opting not to acknowledge a family member’s incarceration may also be a result of society’s stigmatization of criminal behavior. Depending on cultural factors, most children are aware of society placing a stigma on criminal behavior, especially of having a mother incarcerated. Individuals living in impoverished communities or crime-infested neighborhoods may find involvement in the correctional system less of a stigma, rather a community norm. Helping professionals are sometimes working with children with desensitization to criminality and incarceration; therefore, dealing with criminogenic thinking. However, most children are aware of society’s stigma on criminal behavior.

Children with incarcerated parents are likely to feel ashamed and realize that individuals may reject them because of their parent’s actions. Rejection is not isolated to society. Family and friends may reject these children, exacerbating their fragile psycho-emotional disposition. Family members may resent the offender for putting them in the position of caregiver. To protect themselves, children attempt to avoid rejection by withdrawing from meaningful relationships. Youth can be egocentric, and often blame themselves for their parent’s criminal behavior. They especially feel culpable when a parent is in prison for stealing, selling drugs, or prostituting to support the family. Children who take on this burden may have long-term psychological issues if their beliefs concerning their culpability persist and is undisputed.

A study was conducted on youth with incarcerated mothers to examine whether parental separation increased the likelihood of acute stress reactions (Kampfner, 1995). One of the main research hypotheses was that a combination of parent–child separation and forced silence about the incarcerated parents due to potential shame on the family would increases trauma in children. Approximately 75% of the children in the study group reported symptoms characterized as trauma-related stress. These children exhibited difficulty sleeping, concentrating, and had signs of depression. These children reported that they had little or no emotional supports to discuss their feelings and thoughts about their mother’s incarceration (Kampfner, 1995).

Maladaptive and contumacious behaviors such as withdrawing emotionally in school, truancy, pregnancy, drug abuse, diminished
academic performance, and disruptive behavior may surface when youths experience emotional and psychological problems. Children seek social cliques that are more accepting of them, but unfortunately, often negatively influencing. It is common for this population to join gangs and become involved in perennial delinquent activity that leads to involvement in the juvenile justice system and perhaps the adult system. New generations of children become at-risk of intergenerational incarceration (McQuaide & Ehrenreich, 1998). Approximately 50% of youths in the correctional system have a parent in the adult system (Mumola, 2000). According to Springer et al. (2000), children with parents in prison are 5–6 times more at-risk to become involved in the criminal justice system.

The literature contends that there is a high probability that many of these youth encounter cognitive delays, developmental regression or delays, and inappropriate coping strategies (Child Welfare League of America, 1998). They possibly have difficulty successfully meeting developmental tasks, such as forming attachments, developing trust, autonomy, initiative, productivity, and achieving identity (Seymour, 1998). Theoretically, when children have access to resources that help them cope with developmental challenges, they successfully achieve developmental tasks. When challenges exceed a child’s capacity to cope, emotional survival takes precedence, and meeting specific developmental tasks are interrupted (Child Welfare League of America, 1998).

There can be long-term psychological effects or immediate neuro-physiological changes such as loss of speech after a parent goes to prison. Children may suffer from depression, anxiety, and other serious emotional problems. Children of incarcerated parents have reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome analogous to children whose parents have died (Breen, 1995). Arguably, parental incarceration may be more difficult to cope with because death is naturally occurring and final, while separation due to incarceration is ambiguous. Children are confused about their feelings and unsure how to grieve the loss of a parent who is alive, yet emotionally and physically absent (Breen, 1995).

Researchers posit that when a child witnesses their parent’s arrest, they have increased chances for mental health issues. They become confused or unable to comprehend the consequences of the arrest. According to the Child Welfare League of America (1998), one in five children witnessed their mother’s arrest, and those who
did not reconstructed the event in their minds. Children may also experience frequent nightmares about the event. Youth witnessing their parent’s arrest may distrust law enforcement, viewing them as a threat rather than individuals who provide protection for society.

A few studies associate antisocial behaviors in boys to parental imprisonment. Experts question and even repudiate the studies’ validity, recognizing that the conclusion is highly equivocal due to external risk factors. The limited research subjects and flawed methodological design attribute to the controversy concerning the likelihood that parental imprisonment, specifically paternal, is a link to antisocial behavior in male children (Gabel & Shindledecker, 1993). This notion merits additional research to provide concrete statistical data that evaluates the assertion’s validity.

**Alleviating Consequences of Parental Incarceration**

Professionals working with children of incarcerated parents have implemented various models to address attachment issues, coping strategies, and adverse reactions to parental incarceration. The programs discussed are samplings of programs using various practice models and theoretical concepts. Most programs work with the parent and child jointly and use attachment theoretical perspectives. The programs identified that only work with children use grief and loss models.

*Maintaining Family Bonds and Addressing Children’s Mental Health*

Maryland’s Correctional Institution for Women (MCIW) established the widely recognized program, Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (GSBB) in 1992 (Block & Potthast, 1998). Over 20 states have replicated the enhanced visitation GSBB program (Child Welfare League of America, 1998; Moses, 1995). Building on attachment theoretical concepts, the program provides opportunities for mothers and daughters to enhance their relationships through frequent visits, decrease stress of parent–child separation, and reduce anxiety about post-incarceration reunification. The GSBB also helps build a young girl’s self-esteem by providing community troop meetings and field trips, functioning as a traditional Girl Scout Troop (Block & Potthast, 1998). Mothers
and their daughters participate in Girl Scout activities every other Saturday for 2 hours. Girls participate in educational activities; discuss issues such as substance abuse, teenage pregnancy prevention, relationships, and coping with family crisis in a creative forum that is educational yet interesting and fun. Corollaries of the GSBB program with mothers in MCIW and their daughters living in Baltimore City were that participants received more visits than the control group, 64% versus 49%. Caregivers indicated that the daughters had improved self-esteem, better communication with their mother, and decreased delinquency at school and at home (Block & Potthast, 1998).

A program similar to GSBB is Living Interactive Family Education (LIFE), which in 2000 was established the Potosi Correctional Center in Mineral Point, Missouri. The program is a partnership with the University Outreach and Extension and Missouri Department of Corrections (Dunn & Arbuckle, 2002). The focus is to increase familial unity between male inmates and their children. The program also attempts to improve the life skills of father and child while improving the child's behavior and academic performance. Fathers attend parenting classes and utilize skills they obtain during father–child interactions during visitation days. Parents and children participate in 4-H activities such as arts and crafts projects. The program uses curricula to address substance abuse, conflict resolution, character development, and father–child teamwork. An impact assessment concluded that fathers reported that they felt more connected and had improved communication with their children. Life skills appeared enhanced and their children had improved academically and behaviorally (Dunn & Arbuckle, 2002).

Programs such as GSBB and LIFE not only help the children and biological parents but relative caregivers benefit as well. Improved mental health of the children can decrease caregiver's stress, which has a direct impact on the well-being of the children. These programs potentially decrease costly mental health services because children have some of their emotional, psychological, and behavioral needs addressed. Participation in these programs can be invaluable. The success the children experience academically and positive relational implications among the children and parents have the potential to alleviate subsequent long-term risks associated with having a parent in the correctional system.
Addressing Intergenerational Crime and Incarceration

Addressing intergenerational crime by using a social work perspective, Travis County Juvenile Probation and the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work collaborated to create the Deferred Prosecution Unit-Social Workers in Family Services (DPU-SWIFS) in 1999. One major component of the DPU-SWIFS program is to provide support groups to children of incarcerated parents. Group curriculum is therapeutic and didactic. Group facilitators use a grief and loss model. The focus is working through the four stages of grief: acceptance, working through the pain of grief, adjusting to new environments, and emotional relocation (shifts from the actual relationship to a symbolic relationship). The group leaders also help group members explore potential associations between the children and parent’s involvement in the criminal justice system. Initial sessions focus on providing a safe and cohesive environment to explore feelings about being mandated to participate in a group because they are the children of an incarcerated person. Members also process feelings about having a parent in prison. Facilitators eventually encourage members to discuss coping with feelings. Finally, group members discuss how coping with the loss of a parent to incarceration affects their behavior. Children reported feeling as if they had an opportunity to discuss feelings that they had suppressed. They also report feeling comfortable talking about their incarcerated parent in a safe environment.

Implications for Social Work Practice and Research

Professionals are increasingly attempting to alleviate incarceration’s impact on youth. Programs providing services appear to have positive effects, unfortunately, service providers face a challenge identifying this population because of the lack of reliable data collection across states on the prison population. Consequently, an account of the number of children impacted by crime and incarceration are only estimates, which has caused some controversy.

Evidenced-based interventions that employ gender specific, developmentally appropriate, and culturally sensitive treatment modalities is a practice area that calls for further development. Researchers have determined generalized consequences of parental incarceration, but have not determined incarceration’s impact on
specific populations. The need for specific treatment models is analogous to professionals diversifying interventions for substance abuse and domestic violence issues. Initially, substance abuse treatment and domestic violence interventions were generalist approaches. External factors were not a consideration; instead, utilization of uniform intervention methods was standard. Eventually, researchers and service providers began identifying interventions that addressed unique issues. Gender and cultural factors are now relevant when professionals determine interventions for these populations. The same type of evolutionary process must occur for children with incarcerated parents if service providers are to provide the most appropriate and effective treatment methods.

**Data Collection**

Before service providers are able to determine needs for children of incarcerated parents, a conscious effort to obtain an accurate account of youth affected by parental incarceration is necessary. A lack of reliable statistics makes it difficult to quantify the extent of incarceration’s implications (Johnston, 1995b; Seymour, 1998). One factor contributing to the difficulty of obtaining an accurate account is that individuals have multiple encounters at various levels in the correctional system. Consequently, there is data duplication (Johnston, 1995b). Correctional systems across states do not use standardized methods for collecting data. Data collection by an appointed agency would likely decrease the ambiguity on the number of individuals in the correctional system. A proposal for two or three states with large prison populations such as California, Texas, and New York agreeing to a uniform data collection system would be beneficial. Once an account of incarcerated individuals is established, quantitative and qualitative research on incarcerations consequences will develop coherent and unified knowledge. Moreover, longitudinal research can articulate the short- and long-term effects of parental incarceration on children.

**Gender, Developmentally, and Culturally Relevant Interventions**

Reliable data collection will allow service providers to identify relevant interventions for subgroups with the children of incarcerated parent population. There has been some acknowledgement that
researchers and service providers neglect accounting for gender, developmental stages, and cultural factors, however, there is not a focus on developing a research agenda on relevant interventions. Most studies usually do not distinguish between male and female children with a parent in prison and those that do emphasize, study male subjects (Gabel, 1992). Consequently, it is unclear whether boys and girls respond differently. Hypothetically, boys and girls are likely to react differently to parental incarceration. Modifying interventions accordingly is crucial in order to address gender specific reactions to incarceration. Additional studies are necessary to address how a parent’s gender effects the reaction of children. Limited studies have suggested that, regardless of gender, children “act out” when a man enters prison and “act in” when a woman enters prison. Acting out behaviors include substance use, truancy, aggression, etc., while acting in behaviors consist of nightmares, withdrawal, fear, decreased school performance (Breen, 1995; Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981). The literature indicates that children’s reactions have a link to the areas that the absent parent would traditionally accept as their major responsibility to their children (Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981).

Developmental stages play a significant role in the child’s ability to comprehend parental involvement in the criminal justice system. In fact, they are a major determining factor of how a child will respond. Finding developmentally appropriate interventions is imperative in helping children comprehend incarceration and articulate feelings about separation from their parent. Attachment theory is used, yet there is limited substantial statistical data on theoretical perspectives effectiveness. Researchers can inquire whether developmentally sensitive bereavement models would prove useful in addressing grief and loss issues for children of incarcerated parents.

Influencing variables such as additional associated risk factors affecting minority children’s ability to resolve or ease effects of parental incarceration is another neglected area. Minority experiences, lifestyles, expectations, and problems may differ from individuals in the majority culture; therefore, unique provisions of services may be necessary (Hairston, 1996). Substantive research is imperative for determining the unique consequence incarceration has on children of color. As are the poor, people of color are a disproportionate representation in the correctional system. Consequently, African American children are nine times more likely to have an incarcerated
parent and Hispanic children are three times more likely to have a parent in prison (Seymour & Wright, 2002). According to report done by the US Department of Justice (2000), 767,200 African American children, 384,500 white children, and 301,600 Hispanic children had a parent incarcerated in 1999. Given this statistical data, it is evident that service providers will need information on factors to determine whether they are utilizing appropriate culturally sensitive treatment models.

People of color are more likely to come from impoverished neighborhoods where criminal behavior is common. Professionals will need to be cognizant of whether the culture places a stigma on individuals seeking services and talk about their feelings. Service providers may find that disputing criminogenic thinking is part of their intervention strategy. The disproportionate number of minorities in correctional institutions, the negative impact it may have on communities, and the resulting expectation of imprisonment as part of the minority experience are relevant factors in determining appropriate intervention strategies with children affected by incarceration.

Summary

Evidenced by the surge of attention children of incarcerated parents have received over the past decade, this growing population is experiencing a myriad of issues that need continuous attention. Further research into the associated risk factors of incarceration will increase service provider’s competency in comprehending the intricacies involved in the mitigating challenges for children with incarcerated parents. Provision of services promoting innovative and relevant interventions is imperative to ensure that service providers are equipped with the essential tools to employ appropriate and effective strategies to alleviate parental incarceration’s impact on children.

References


