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Review Article

Parental Incarceration Negatively Impacts Children's Development

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Abstract

Children of incarcerated parents are those children whose parents are, or have been, incarcerated in jail or prison, regardless of whether that parent was custodial. These children face multiple adversities that are the result of and comorbidities of parental incarceration. These adversities harm children's social, cognitive, and emotional development and lead to outcomes that differ from their peers. Parental incarceration (parental incarceration) is both a risk factor and a signal that other adversities (e.g., poverty, housing instability, marital discord) are also present in the child's household. This is especially of concern for young children, whose early development is significantly impacted by parents. This paper will examine five studies of children of incarcerated parents between 36 months old and young adulthood, providing a review of findings, limitations, and areas for future research. Next, two studies proposing mitigation strategies will be presented. The first is a study of incarcerated fathers' efforts to positively impact their children's moral development. The second examines the effect of parent-child visitation during incarceration on child adjustment. Taken together, these eight studies present a picture of potentially dire outcomes that highlight the need for hope and efforts to support these children and their families.

Key words: parental incarceration; child development; adversities

Introduction

Several studies [5, 9, 13] have explored the impact of parental incarceration on child development, and most agree that given the associated risks to children, this area of study is crucial to developing resources to support children of incarcerated parents. However, they also agree that parental incarceration is a complex variable to isolate, particularly in the face of pre-incarceration environmental variables (e.g., parent-child relationship, marital relationship, finances). There is evidence that adverse effects are found in children as young as 36 months and as old as young adults and include both internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Effects are found regardless of the sex of the incarcerated parent and across multiple developmental domains [9].

Population and prevalence

Most children of incarcerated parents first experienced parental incarceration at age nine or younger [2]. The number of these children has risen to over five million in the United States, translating to nearly one in fourteen children [8, 11]. This may be an underestimate, because it may not account for children whose noncustodial parent is incarcerated [11]. Most incarcerated people have children, and the United States incarcerates people at the highest rate in the world [10]. In fact, 52% of people in state and 63% of people in federal prison have at least one minor child [11]. This number is expected to grow, as the rate of female incarcerations continues to rise (up by 18% between 2011 and 2014 alone; 11). Nonetheless, incarcerated fathers still far outnumber mothers. When fathers are incarcerated in prison, children remain with their mothers 88% of the time. However, children whose mothers are incarcerated only reside with their fathers 28-31% of the time; 53% reside with grandparents; the remainder reside in other kinship or extrafamilial foster placements [11].

With most U.S. inmates incarcerated in jails (10 million admissions annually), most incarcerated parents are jail inmates (10). Black Americans are more likely to be incarcerated than whites at a rate of 1.8 for females and 5.8 for males. Black children are 7.5 times more likely to have an incarcerated parent than their white counterparts; Hispanic children are 2.5 times as likely [11]. Of children born in 1990 to Black fathers without high school diplomas, 50% experienced parental incarceration; for children of white fathers without high school diplomas, the rate was only 7% [11]. The disparity between white and Hispanic children is also evident, with this group being the largest ethnic group in federal prisons (40%), as compared to whites (27%) and Blacks (23%), without accounting for current immigration policy enforcement increasing the imprisonment of Hispanic people [11].

Impact studies

Kjellstrand, Reinke, & Eddy (2018)

Using latent growth curve modeling, Kjellstrand et al. (2018) examined the impact of parental incarceration on children in late childhood through adolescence, finding an increased risk of externalizing behaviors (e.g., overt and covert aggression, hyperactivity, and disruptive behavior). Controlling for covariates such as parent-child relationship, parental depression, socioeconomic status, and gender, the authors found that parental incarceration is typically an extension of other family problems, such as

poverty, criminality, substance use disorder, and mental health issues. Among these factors, only parental incarceration predicted these behaviors in late childhood and continued through adolescence. Interestingly, parental incarceration was not associated with baseline levels of externalizing behaviors, but with their growth over time. The authors interpreted that children of incarcerated parents accumulate risks, which exponentially compounds their likelihood of acting out, resulting in much higher levels of these behaviors as compared to peers. As acting out increases, so does stigma around those behaviors, further propelling the child into externalizing behaviors. Another explanation is that the attenuation of positive parenting and family protective factors as risk increases creates an accumulation of risk factors for the child. Positive factors diminish, leading to increased family conflict, which can drive the child toward socialization with negative peers and engagement in delinquent behavior. Even in those households with stronger parenting and general family functioning, adolescents turn toward peers as role models. Through parental and associate modeling, children see criminal behavior as acceptable, and their association with negative peers increases.

The authors identified several limitations to their study. First, in any study of parental incarceration, parental incarceration is a nonspecific variable. It is unclear which aspects of parental incarceration are responsible for which outcomes. For children of incarcerated parents, aspects of parental incarceration include changing family dynamics, loss of parental relationships, stigma related to incarceration, and family financial hardship, among others. There are other elements of parental incarceration, such as length of incarceration (impacting length of exposure), the age of the child at the time of incarceration, parent-child dynamics, family disruption, and amount and quality of parent-child interaction during incarceration, that contribute to the heterogeneity of this population. Further research is needed to isolate such factors related to parental incarceration, potentially considering relevant covariates, to highlight the mechanisms of influence. Additionally, future studies could consider such variables as parental criminality, parental substance use, and family structure, to see whether and how they are related to adolescent externalizing behaviors. Such efforts would lead to a clearer understanding of how and why parental incarceration impacts children. Another consideration is that future studies should match participants to the greater demographic of children of incarcerated parents. Given the concentration of Black and brown people in United States jails and prisons, studies such as Kjellstrand et al.'s (2018) of primarily white participants are limited in their ability to demonstrate how parental incarceration affects children across ethnic groups.

Kjellstrand, Yu, Mark, & Clark, (2020)

Kjellstrand et al. (2020) used growth mixture modeling to examine adolescent internalizing behavior problems in children of incarcerated parents, finding associations between parental incarceration and adolescent depression, anxiety, substance use disorder, suicidality, and antisocial behavior. These behaviors were associated with parental mental health diagnosis, harsh parenting, poor parent-child relationship, and adversity. Adolescents, in general, are already at risk for internalizing problems: even among children whose parents were never incarcerated, by age 19, nearly 25% of adolescents have experienced a major depressive episode [6]. This risk is elevated when parents have a mental health diagnosis, use harsh discipline, have a strained relationship with the child, or are experiencing adversity [6]. The authors concluded that being a child of an incarcerated parent may be more of a risk marker than a risk itself. A risk marker is a signal that other risk factors or adversities are present; for children of incarcerated parents, the conceptualization of parental incarceration as a risk marker suggests that risk of internalizing behavior problems might be mitigated by some other variable, such as a strong relationship with parent.

Kjellstrand et al.'s (2020) study illuminates different developmental pathways for internalizing problems. They found increasing levels of problems across multiple pathways, particularly increased delinquency, substance use, and suicidality. Their findings align with what we know about risk in childhood: it affects different children in different ways, depending on internal characteristics and environmental influences. They also identified protective factors such as solid parent-child relationship, consistency in parenting, less harsh discipline, mentally healthy parents, and low general stress.

Again, the authors acknowledge limitations to their study, pointing out difficulties with the non-specificity of parental incarceration as a variable. Their measure of parental incarceration did not account for dynamic features such as individual characteristics and onset and duration of incarceration, which could confound results. Third, their sample was comprised of participants with low prevalence of parental incarceration at baseline, which calls into question the generalizability of their findings. Fourth, predictor variables such as parent-child relationship and parental discipline are dynamic and multi-factorial, complicating correlational study. Fifth, the study did not account for pubertal changes in the participants, which could have yielded further variation in the results. Last, the sample was primarily white, which does not reflect the demographics of most incarcerated people. The sample was also pulled from a small region in Washington State, which may not generalize to other parts of the country. Therefore, more diverse samples will be needed to corroborate the authors' findings. Additionally, studies of individual children may highlight the myriad pathways of stress and risk related to being a child of an incarcerated parent. This approach will assist treatment providers in developing individualized protocols for these children and their families [6].

Turney & Goodsell (2018)

Studies that isolated parental incarceration have shown it to be associated with impairments across behavior, education, health, and hardship and deprivation domains [13]. Behaviorally, children of incarcerated parents exhibited increased aggression, both interpersonal and property damage; internalizing behaviors such as withdrawal, anxiety, and child-reported delinquency; and depression in young adulthood (particularly when the child's mother was incarcerated). In the education domain, paternal incarceration was found to be associated with cognitive impairments among nine-year-olds, particularly in reading, math, and memory. These children were more likely to be retained, placed in special education, or suspended. Impairments in this domain were also found among children of previously incarcerated fathers. These children had lower educational achievement, poorer academic performance, more absences, and less likelihood of college graduation. Physically, children of incarcerated parents were at risk for asthma, obesity, high cholesterol, migraines, HIV/AIDS, and poor health overall. Last, in the domain of hardship and deprivation, even accounting for the pre-incarceration environment, paternal incarceration resulted in family and maternal financial hardship, food insecurity and homelessness, and unmet healthcare needs.

The authors found that parental incarceration is detrimental for three reasons. First, there are the circumstances of the crime, including the child witnessing the criminal activity and/or the arrest and trial. Second, there is trauma and loss associated with the parent's physical and emotional absence. Third, children of incarcerated parents endure social stigma and shame associated with that group membership. Furthermore, the incarceration creates physical, emotional, and financial changes in the family home. It hinders the parent's ability to provide for the family during and after the incarceration. Debts, legal fees, and daily expenses often overcome the parent's ability to provide for necessities. Because parental incarceration often heightens partner conflict, there is an increased risk of separation and divorce, which can be independent risk factors for internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Last, the stress from all these factors impacts the mental health of all family members.

However, not all children of incarcerated parents experience these factors. Some may even benefit, in that the removal of the parent from the home may lessen stressors such as harsh discipline, overt criminality, and a poor parent-child relationship. One of the variables may be which of the child's parents is incarcerated. In paternal incarceration, the child typically remains in the home with the mother, resulting in less disruption. However, in maternal incarceration, the child is likely to be placed in kinship or extrafamilial foster care, thus heightening stressors [11,13]. The authors also found that parental incarceration affects boys and those children who whose parent was living with them prior to the incarceration. Because of the disparate impact of incarceration on people of color, these negative impacts increase negative overall outcomes in these groups.

The authors acknowledged several research limitations to their study. First, nonexperimental data precludes causal conclusions. We learn more about children of incarcerated parents but cannot draw definitive causes for elevated risk. Second, due to pre-incarceration factors, it is difficult to find comparison groups. Pre-incarceration factors such as poverty, residence instability, and proximity to crime often co-occur among each other and with parental incarceration. Third, the study yielded insufficient data to understand individual variations among children of incarcerated parents, such as dynamic effects. Last, like most research on children of incarcerated parents, the study yielded associative information, but could not elucidate the mechanisms of the relationship between parental incarceration and risk to the child.

Pech, Curran, Speirs, Li, Barnett, & Paschall (2020)

Pech et al. (2020) sought to understand the impact of parental incarceration on young children (36 months) whose fathers had previously been incarcerated, particularly related to parental depression, relationship quality, coparenting, and child behavior problems. They chose this age group because of the ripple effect caused by preschool behavior problems. Developmental tasks at this age result in "increases in psychological autonomy and the ability to recall negative incidents," placing them at risk for both internalizing and externalizing problems [9].

The authors found bi-directional associations between paternal depression and children's internalizing problems. The mechanism driving this association is that depressed parents tend to be avoidant, withdrawn, and hostile to which children respond with dysregulated behavior. A negative feedback loop is created: parental negative affect is reinforced by frustration with the child's behavior, leading to hostility toward the child. Additionally, these young children may see their fathers as models, and thus internalize their depressed affect and cognitions. The authors found a much stronger association between paternal depression and child behavior than with maternal depression, but they wondered whether there was underreporting of depression at play. Maternal destructive conflict within the adult relationship was found to be associated more strongly with their children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors; paternal destructive conflict was associated only with externalizing behaviors. When both parents had elevated destructive conflict, children demonstrated more emotional insecurity and externalizing behaviors. Given the association between parental incarceration and relationship discord both alone and in response to stressors such as stigma and financial hardship, this is a particularly salient finding. They concluded that the diversity of family structures extends to the co-parenting relationship, and that both individual factors (e.g., paternal depression) and relational factors (e.g., parental conflict styles) contribute the internalized and externalized behaviors in their children.

This study was limited by a lack of information about the paternal incarceration (e.g., child's age, length of sentence) and the concurrence of maternal, paternal, and past paternal incarceration in the sample. Additionally, their cross-sectional design does not reveal the direction of effects, particularly child effects. They recommend further investigation into paternal depressive symptoms and their relationship to incarceration, to follow up on their findings of an association between those symptoms and child behavior problems.

Bell, Bayliss, Glauert, & Ohan (2018)

Bell et al. (2018) investigated developmental and educational outcomes of young children of incarcerated parents in Australia. Using linked data (records of parental convictions and children's scores on a teacher-completed measure of physical, social, emotional, communicative, and cognitive development), the authors then adjusted models to account for child and parent individual and demographic factors. They found that children of incarcerated parents were more developmentally vulnerable than their peers and noticed incremental gradations in vulnerability depending upon whether the parent had been sentenced to community service versus incarceration. This was particularly true for physical, communicative, and cognitive developmental markers. The authors noted that because the children they were studying were in their first year of formal schooling, academic and social impairments were likely to impact the rest of their education. These children were more likely to experience school problems such as academic underachievement, social maladjustment, absenteeism, and suspensions. These behaviors put them at risk of experiencing social judgment and stigma related to these failings; this stigma can last throughout the child's school career, working as a negative feedback loop that feeds further difficulties. The child acts out, is shunned by peers, becomes depressed, and acting out increases. Some of these difficulties extend beyond the school environment into drop-out and delinquency.

Because results were adjusted for sociodemographic factors, the authors were able to isolate parental incarceration as an independent risk factor for child development. Furthermore, when adjusted for parent sex (mother, father, or both parents), all children of incarcerated parents showed developmental vulnerability, without results that distinguished between mother and father. As expected, children with both parents incarcerated fared worse than those with one incarcerated parent. This adds to the literature that remains divided on whether parental sex is a risk factor for internalizing or externalizing behaviors, and, as the authors noted, indicates the need for further study. As in the United States, Black children in Australia are under-represented in the general population but over-represented among children of incarcerated parents. Among adults, they represent 2% of the Australian population, yet 27% of the prison population [1]. Black children in the Bell et al. (2018) study were more likely to have an incarcerated parent, to live in a lower socioeconomic class, and to exhibit developmental vulnerabilities.

As with the other studies presented here, while the Bell et al. (2018) study highlighted associations between parental incarceration and risk to child development, they were unable to identify the mechanisms by which parental incarceration impacts children. They also contributed to the research on sociodemographic factors and development, with which parental incarceration is inextricably linked. The authors noted that there are several variables of parental incarceration that were not investigated, including the timing of the incarceration, sentence length, parent-child dynamics, and other family support factors; they hypothesize that these may exert a mediating effect on the impact of parental incarceration on child development. Another study limitation was that the authors could not determine which children were residing with the parent at the time of the incarceration, a variable that may influence outcomes. They also acknowledge that teacher bias against children with incarcerated parents may have affected their ratings. Last, there may be other relationships between parental criminal behavior and child development that may confound results.

Mitigation Strategies

Most research into children of incarcerated parents focuses on behavioral outcomes [7]. Reading this research naturally generates questions about protective factors and mitigation strategies to protect these children. Kaiper-Martinez, Stickel, and Prins (2021) propose an intervention aimed at

incarcerated parents to help them mitigate the risks of their incarceration on their children by supporting their moral development. Kremer et al., (2022) investigated the effect of parent-child visits during incarceration on children's self-confidence and the parent-child relationship.

Kaiper-Martinez, Stickel, & Prins (2021)

Kaiper-Martinez et al. (2021) examined moral development in children of incarcerated parents. They sought to understand how, if parents are the moral models for their children, incarceration, which is a message from society to the parent that they are morally deviant, impacts their ability to positively influence their children's moral development. Twelve men in a Pennsylvania prison were interviewed on their efforts to instill prosocial morals in their children. The men used induction to explain their incarceration, modeled remorse, set high standards for school success, and provided nurturing and support, all of which have research support for shaping moral development [4]. Additionally, they employed moral preaching, emphasis on compliance with external standards, and self-esteem bolstering, which have research support in developing meta-moral characteristics [4]. By providing this moral foundation for their children, the authors argued, incarcerated parents are proving that they are not the amoral individuals that society believes them to be.

The authors note that the primary limitation to this study is its small scope (twelve fathers in one prison). While it may be true that men in a similar program could positively impact their children through prosocial moral development, a large-scale study is needed to examine the efficacy of this approach. Given the challenges and risks we know to be associated with parental incarceration, including externalizing behaviors such as delinquency and aggression, it would be interesting to see the impact of parental moral education on these behaviors.

Looking at the risks related to rupture of the parent-child relationship, Kremer et al. (2022) hypothesized that in-person visits during incarceration would support children's confidence in their bond with the incarcerated parent, thereby protecting them from negative outcomes related to negative beliefs about their future and their parental bond. Certainly, there are logistical barriers to be overcome, especially if the jail or prison is located far from the child's home, and legal barriers if the parent is legally prohibited from visiting with the child. The process itself, including security screening, a noisy visit hall, and crowds, may be stressful for children. Taken together, these barriers may seem insurmountable for families. However, the authors cite work by Trice and Brewster (2004), Poehlmann-Tynan and Pritzl (2019), and Schlafer and Poehlmann (2022) who found that despite these barriers, children who visited their incarcerated parent fared better (respectively, better adjustment as opposed to school dropout and suspensions; a sense of family connection; and decreased feelings of anger and alienation from parents). In response to these findings, some prison facilities have created enhanced visitation programs designed to reduce barriers to visiting [8].

Kremer, Poon, Jones, Hagler, Kuperschmidt, Stelter, Stump, & Rhodes (2020)

In their study of 238 children of incarcerated parents, Kremer et al. (2022) found that those children who visited their parents one to six times per year had "significantly higher quality relationships with their incarcerated parents" at six months; this finding remained consistent at 12 months and was associated with "children's life purpose and depression/loneliness" (p. 213). These findings suggest that the benefits of parent-child contact far outweigh the stressors related to the visit process and by seeing their parent in a prison or jail context. The authors call the loss of a parent to incarceration an "ambiguous loss" due to the shame, stigma, and secrecy that can surround incarceration (p. 213).

The authors conclude that the mechanism by which visitation is associated with better outcomes for the children is that the "beyond-the-self focus and personal meaning" that is derived from the relationship leads to a sense of purpose for the child [8]. Having a sense of purpose is thought to be inconsistent with lack of academic effort or antisocial behavior. Furthermore, it is possible that this sense of purpose also helps children to cope with adversity and focus on positive factors of negative situations [8]. The impact of visits on child attitudes was moderated by distance from the prison: children who lived within 20 miles of the incarcerated parent felt more optimistic for the future than children who lived 20-50 miles away. That distance may determine the frequency of visits and may be the reason for the effect.

Limitations to this study include a lack of information about details of incarceration (dates, length of time, release), so some parents were released during the study, which could have positively impacted their relationship with their child(ren). Others may have been incarcerated longer than the study, so their children's outcomes are not known. Second, this study focused on a group of children also enrolled in a larger study of a mentoring program, so it is unclear where the effects of mentoring ended, and the effects of visiting began. This may also highlight a self-selection bias, in that parents who allow their children to participate in such a program may be different in some way from parents who do not, perhaps feeling more acceptance of the incarcerated parent and interest in supporting their children during the experience. Third, the researchers only considered data from children and parents who completed surveys at baseline, six months, and twelve months, suggesting that these individuals may have simply been more conscientious than their peers, which may have biased the sample. Last, the researchers used only the custodial parent's account of the child's relationship with the incarcerated parent; excluding input from the incarcerated parent may have resulted in an absence of important information about the relationship.

Conclusion

The five outcome studies presented here found that children of incarcerated parents, as compared to their peers, suffer detrimental effects across behavioral, emotional, and educational domains. As a result, they are at risk of internalizing and externalizing behaviors as they struggle to process the incarceration and its sequela. Risks are often compounded by internal factors, particularly in children who are predisposed to anxiety and depression. Because young children tend to internalize family problems and blame themselves for family stress, they are at risk of decreased self-esteem, which heightens their risk for depression. Environmental factors, including the pre-incarceration environment, may worsen the effects as the child's family is at risk of hardships such as financial difficulty and housing instability. Social stigma may compound the stress experienced by the child, both from having an incarcerated parent and when they exhibit emotional or behavioral problems in school. These factors contribute to poorer academic performance and behaviors that make school life difficult to navigate.

Not only is it established in the research, but it is also intuitive that having an incarcerated parent is a stressor for children. While we also know that this stressor places children at risk for poorer outcomes and works with other stressors and risk factors to compound the chance of negative outcomes, what is not yet clear is the mechanism(s) by which parental incarceration impacts children. Length and timing of incarceration; the child's degree of exposure to the criminal activity, arrest, and trial; the age, development, personality, and other individual factors of the child; and the relationship between the parents are all variables to be considered. Further research is needed to tease out the characteristics and effects of parental incarceration and to account for individual differences among children of incarcerated parents.

The two studies that highlighted potential mitigation strategies also demand attention. While further research into outcomes for children of incarcerated parents is important, we have enough of a research base to know that without support and resources, their functioning is threatened. Equal research time and effort should be directed at mitigating risk and protecting children from these outcomes. Because we are still learning about the variables that lead to

these outcomes, interventions should come from multiple sources (e.g., family service agencies, prisons, schools, and religious institutions) and at multiple points during children's development. We must also work to decrease the stigma around children of incarcerated parents, so that children are not afraid to talk about and process their experiences with trusted adults. Parental incarceration is a risk to children and the synergistic effects of its sequela are compounded by race, socioeconomic factors, and other adverse experiences. These children are a profoundly vulnerable population in need of significant resources and support. Research into the lives and experiences of children of incarcerated parents is a vital part of identifying how, where, when, and how often to implement these supports.

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