



Impact of Parental Imprisonment on Children

Social Science

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ABSTRACT

The nation's growing prison and jail population has raised serious questions about the collateral effects of imprisonment on children, families and communities. Whatever one's views about the appropriate role of imprisonment in the criminal justice system, it is clear that imprisonment disrupts positive, nurturing relationships between many parents—particularly mothers—and their children. The purpose of a prison sentence is to punish offenders, not their children. It is likely that disruption associated with parental imprisonment, and the values, attitudes and behaviours that are promoted in the child throughout this experience, will be a very negative experience for the child, and may increase the probability of the child him/herself offending later in life (Reed and Reed 1997: 59; Gabel and Johnston 1995:83). It therefore makes sense to protect children as much as possible from the potentially harmful consequences of parental imprisonment.

This paper will provide brief explanation about parental imprisonment create dangerous consequences of parental imprisonment. The point to which parental incarceration causes deviant behaviour problems and crime in the next generation is an important question for criminal justice and sentencing policy to consider as a potential negative externality.

KEYWORDS:

Family Child Consequence Criminal behaviour

Introduction

The consequences of imprisonment on children have received least attention in academic research, prison statistics, public policy, and media exposure. Children do not choose their parents and they are innocent of their parents' crimes. Yet children share the punishing consequences of the imprisonment of parents. If we fail to consider potential impacts of imprisonment on children, we risk neglecting at-risk youth, which may contribute to crime problems in the next generation. This is an important potential negative externality and unintended consequence of criminal justice policy, with parental imprisonment imposing larger social costs than merely the prison cost.

Methodology

In this paper, the study is based on descriptive and secondary data taken from different research reports, journals and research papers. The research was based on the study of components of value base of International prospective

Objective of the study:

1. Study the consequences of imprisonment on children.
2. To identify the significant effects of parent imprisonment on children's delinquency and behaviour problems

Theoretical frame work

Four key criminological theories suggest that parental imprisonment might cause an increase in child antisocial and criminal behaviour (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999; Murray & Farrington, in press). First, social bonding theory suggests that parental imprisonment might harm children because parent-child separation disrupts children's attachment relations. Second, strain theory suggests that the loss of family income and other negative life events after parental imprisonment might cause offending behaviour. Third, social control theory suggests that parental imprisonment might cause delinquency via reduced quality of care and supervision. And fourth, labelling theory suggests that social stigma and official bias following parental imprisonment may cause an increased probability of being charged and convicted for criminal behaviour. These processes of attachment disruption, strain, poor quality child care, and stigma are also associated with adverse mental health outcomes for children (Garber, 2000; Harrington, 2002; Hinshaw & Cicchetti, 2000; Klein & Pine, 2002). Hence parental imprisonment might cause antisocial and criminal behaviour and mental health problems for children.

Two alternative theories suggest that parental imprisonment does not cause negative outcomes for children. First, even if children of prisoners have worse outcomes than their peers, this may be because of parental criminality and disadvantage prior to imprisonment, not

because parental imprisonment itself is causal. Second, imprisonment of an abusive or antisocial parent might actually decrease children's likelihood of developing behaviour problems because it removes a disruptive and antisocial influence from their lives. Existing evidence needs to be synthesized to evaluate these competing hypotheses

Review of literature

This article summarises the key findings of the effects of parental imprisonment on children as documented in the literature. It aims to provide the reader with an overview of the parental imprisonment literature and its effects on children. It will also consider the methodological weaknesses of the subject area. In addition it will provide justification of this research and offer insights into how it might relate to wider criminological knowledge.

Children of prisoners have been referred to as the 'orphans of justice' and 'innocent victims of punishment'. The limited existing evidence on prisoner's children is drawn from small-scale, mostly qualitative research studies, and have rarely included longitudinal follow-up. The consequences for children of ever-increasing levels of imprisonment are maybe the least understood aspect of the potential positive or harmful impacts of imprisonment policy on families and communities. Parental separation which results from imprisonment may create unique risks in its effect on children and the family, relative to parental separations due to divorce, which has a huge research literature. A prison sentence may be a death sentence of a father's relationship with his child, or on the other hand, may liberate a child from an oppressive, abusive, or negligent environment growing up; or alternatively, it may have negligible effects because of limited father involvement in the child's life prior to imprisonment.

The small research literature on children of imprisoned parents suggests that parental imprisonment is associated with increased aggressive behaviour and withdrawal (Baunach, 1985), criminal involvement (Johnston, 1992), and depression (Kampfner, 1995). Existing studies, however, have not been able to separately identify the causal effects of imprisonment from the effects of pre-incarceration risk factors such as parental substance abuse, mental health problems, and abuse histories that may have already put the child at risk before the parent was imprisoned (Johnson and Waldfogel, 2002). Although previous research on children with an incarcerated parent has been methodologically weak in assessing causality, these studies consistently document significantly more behaviour problems among these children, including aggressive behaviour, depression, hyperactivity, withdrawal, running away, sleep and eating disorders, poor school grades and delinquency (for detailed reviews, see Johnston, 1995). Potential explanations for the association between

parental incarceration and child behaviour problems include the following:

- Trauma of separation
- Parental role modelling effects (poor parenting, substance abuse, domestic violence)
- Potential beneficial effects from removing abusive parent from household
- shared childhood socioeconomic deprivation prior to imprisonment
- depleted parental resources following parental incarceration—reduction in family income and reduced quality of care (disruptions in children's care arrangements accompanied by school and residential moves)
- Genetic predisposition/inherited traits (temperament, parental criminality)

The way of the predicted impacts on children is not clear theoretically. The imprisonment of an abusive or negligent parent may benefit children and contribute to a more nurturing environment. On the other hand, the incarceration of a parent may be a traumatic event in the life of a child that has deleterious impacts on subsequent emotional and behavioural outcomes. Assessing the relative importance of these potential explanations and evaluating whether parental incarceration is merely a risk marker as opposed to a causal risk mechanism has implications for policy. For example, if shared childhood socioeconomic deprivation is the most salient factor underlying the relationship, then policies aimed at reducing poverty also reduce crime. Alternatively, if inherited traits or genetic predispositions are driving factors, then the efficacy of interventions targeted directly at the children of incarcerated parents may be very limited (absent significant nature-nurture interaction effects).

There are a countless of ways in which parental imprisonment may compound disadvantage. It may

- 1) Increase the probabilities of growing up poor and/or with a single parent; and/or
- 2) Raise the risk of criminal involvement and imprisonment later in life for children of the imprisoned prison-boom generation.

There are a variety of potential mechanisms through which parental incarceration may affect child outcomes including economic instability, living-arrangement instability, parental attachment issues, and role model effects, to name a few. A primary goal of this research is to identify the reduced-form effects, not separately recognize the pathways.

The evidence presented in this chapter will bear on the question of the likelihood and extent that parental incarceration has exacerbated racial disparities in childhood and in early adulthood. Given extant evidence that children who begin early formation of deviant behaviours in childhood are more likely to develop persistent, serious criminal involvement in adulthood, it is important to target intervention in early childhood due to the greater economic efficiency of policies aimed at prevention versus remediation

Using data from Sweden, Hjalmarsson and Lindquist (2007) report significant father-son correlations in criminal activity that begin to appear between ages 7 and 12 and are fully established by ages 13 to 19. The implication of this finding is that expectations during childhood about future adulthood opportunities shape deviant behaviour over the life course and can explain a significant part of the father-son correlation. Identifying early antecedents in childhood for deviant behaviour has the potential to reduce risks of criminal involvement in adulthood, and thereby break the cycle of victimization-to-offending behaviour pattern.

Because most incarcerated parents are fathers (with whom boys might identify more), and because boys appear to be more negatively impacted than girls by other types of family disruption such as parental divorce (McLanahan, 2002),

We expect the consequences for boys to be larger. Previous research has shown that the absence of the father leads to "acting-out" behaviour (externalizing behaviour problems) and absence of the mother associated with "acting-in" behaviour (internalizing behaviour problems) (Fritsch and Burkhead, 1981).

It is important to bear in mind that not all children respond similarly to parental criminal involvement, incarceration risk, or neighbourhood

disadvantage. For some, these experiences cause permanent developmental disruptions; others experience latent effects and appear to respond well in the face of difficult challenges early on, followed by behaviour problems later in adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Still others exhibit resilience in the face of adversity and appear to be strengthened by these early-life traumatic events (Rutter, 1987, 1993).

Murray et al. (2007) identify significant effects of parent imprisonment on boy's delinquency and behavior problems in England, but not in Sweden, and speculate that the reasons for this cross-national difference may be the combined result of shorter prison sentences in Sweden, more family-friendly prison policies, a welfare-oriented juvenile justice system, and more sympathetic public attitudes toward crime and punishment. In Sweden, child welfare, rather than punishment, is the paramount concern in cases of child delinquency. There is more to learn from cross-national comparisons as well as consequences in the U.S. of differences in state social and prison policies. For example, effects of parental incarceration could be compared between states with different policies on prisoner-family contact, average length of sentence, and social support provided to prisoners' families. Given the significant rise in parental incarceration in the U.S. (and disproportionate incidence among African-American children), the coordinated efforts of courts, prisons, community and social service agencies, schools, and policy makers informed by research evidence are requisite to develop and implement effective programs that will support children, families, and kin of incarcerated parents. There are currently no policies and programs targeting this subset of at-risk children. The societal welfare implications warrant a major research agenda to further study these issues.

Rucker C. Johnson (2008) researcher identifies some potential unintended negative consequences for children of incarceration policies designed to "get tough" on crime. A key goal of social welfare policy in the U.S. should be to "break the cycle" of poverty and unemployment from one generation to the next. It is only by following the children of at-risk parents that we can know whether their developmental trajectories point toward a brighter economic future than the one like their own parents once faced.

Conclusion

Imprisoning parents may cause greater deviant behaviour and crime in the next generation, and thereby contribute to the intergenerational transmission of criminal involvement. The extent to which parental incarceration causes deviant behaviour problems and crime in the next generation is an important question for criminal justice and sentencing policy to consider as a potential negative externality. If parental incarceration does lead to greater child behaviour problems as the evidence here suggests, parenthood could be treated as an extenuating factor in sentencing, because of concerns about the child's well-being. As well, there could be a more extensive range of family and child support services offered when parental incarceration does occur. Future work is needed to improve our understanding of how social welfare policies can protect children from some of the potential adverse effects of parental incarceration. Policy-makers may need to consider the merits of provision of some form of community-based sentencing as an alternative to non-custodial prison sentencing.

Future research should examine pathways through which parental imprisonment may affect child well-being and whether the effects depend on the length of the parent's sentence and type of crime, paternal versus maternal incarceration, child developmental stage, differential effects for boys versus girls and on internalizing versus externalizing behavioural problems, the amount of parent-child contact before imprisonment and amount maintained during imprisonment spell; explanations given to children about their parent's absence; children's experiences of stigma; levels of social support, socioeconomic status and race; and neighbourhood disadvantage.

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