

SECTION

4

THE EFFECTS OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION ON CHILDREN

Two percent of all children and almost seven percent of all African American children have a parent in prison.

This chapter discusses the adverse effects of parental incarceration on children and the types of stressors children experience because of their parent's arrest and imprisonment. The chapter concludes by identifying some protective factors that may promote resilience in children with an imprisoned parent.

The proportion of children affected by parental incarceration has risen substantially in recent years. In 1986, 10 in every 1,000 children had a parent in prison or jail; by 1997, that rate had doubled to 20 per 1,000, or 2.0% of all American children (Eddy & Reid, 2003; Johnson, 2006). The number of children with an incarcerated father increased 77% from 1991 to 2004 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). In 1999, 6.7% of African American children and 2.4% of Latino children had an incarcerated parent, compared to 0.9% of white children. Compared to white children, African American children were seven and a half times more likely to experience the incarceration of a parent (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

As noted earlier, an estimated 2,473,300 children in the United States have a father incarcerated in prison or jail, and unpublished estimates by Mumola (2006) indicate that 7,476,500 children have a parent who is incarcerated or under correctional supervision.

4.1 NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT

In addition to the great stress that incarceration places on the marital bond, it also negatively affects parenting efficacy and child development. Based on qualitative and cross-sectional

quantitative studies, children of incarcerated parents appear more likely to experience a range of negative outcomes than children of similar socioeconomic backgrounds who do not have an incarcerated parent. Pathways for these effects remain unclear; however, a preliminary theoretical model articulated in Parke and Clarke-Stewart's (2001) meta-analysis proposes that incarceration weakens parent-child bonds, leading to insecure attachment, diminished cognitive abilities, and weak relationships with peers.

Because much existing research on the impact of parent imprisonment on child development is not specific to fathers, we draw on studies that investigated the influence of mother involvement in the criminal justice system as well. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to experience internalizing disorders and to exhibit behavioral problems than their peers (Jose-Kampfner, 1995; Baunach, 1985). Based on a qualitative study of 30 children who had witnessed the arrest of their mothers, Jose-Kampfner (1995) posited that the high levels of anxiety and depression found among participants were associated with the experience of maternal incarceration and with trauma related to the arrest event itself. In her sample of 56 mothers incarcerated at women's prisons in Kentucky and Washington State and their children, Baunach (1985) found that 70% of the children exhibited symptoms of social and psychological disorders, such as aggression, hostility, and withdrawal. Preliminary research suggests that children with incarcerated parents may exhibit a range of academic problems, including poor grades, behavior problems, and school phobias at higher rates than children of nonincarcerated parents. Stanton (1980) compiled quantitative measures of childhood well-being for 166 children ages 6 and under whose mothers were incarcerated, and found that 70% exhibited poor academic performance.

Some studies of parental (father or mother) incarceration suggest that children whose parents spend time in prison are more likely to exhibit antisocial behavior, be involved with the criminal justice system as adolescents, and be incarcerated as adults compared with children who do not experience parental imprisonment. Murray and Farrington (2005) analyzed antisociality and delinquency data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, a longitudinal cohort of 411 London males and their parents. They compared boys who experienced

parental incarceration any time from the age of 10 or younger with four control groups (boys who did not experience separation from their parents; boys who were separated from their parents by hospitalization or death; boys who were separated from their parents for other reasons, such as family discord; and boys whose parents were only incarcerated before their birth). They found that parental incarceration up through the age of 10 predicted severe antisocial-delinquent outcomes up to age 32 compared to the four control conditions, even after controlling for a number of other childhood risk factors. Murray, Janson, & Farrington's (2007) analysis of longitudinal data on 15,117 Swedish children collected as part of the Project Metropolitan study generated similar findings: children who experienced the incarceration of a parent from the age of 6 or younger were more than twice as likely to be convicted of a criminal offense between the ages of 19 and 30 compared with children who did not have a parent incarcerated during early childhood.

Children who experienced parental incarceration at age 6 or younger were more than twice as likely to be involved in the criminal justice system as young adults.

It remains an empirical question whether the association between parental incarceration and negative child outcomes reflects a causal relationship. An analysis of data from an Australian cohort enrolled at birth and followed through age 14 found a significant association between paternal incarceration and negative child outcomes including substance use and internalizing and externalizing behavior (Kinner, Alati, Najman, & Williams, 2007). However, when socioeconomic status, maternal mental health and substance use, parenting style, and family adjustment were controlled, the associations became non-significant. Such findings highlight the uncertain status of the literature regarding whether parental incarceration itself leads to negative outcomes or is a marker for other background factors that erode child well-being (Phillips, Erkanli, Keeler, Costello, & Angold, 2006; Kinner et al., 2007; Hairston, 2008).

Many children of incarcerated parents live in impoverished households, are exposed to substance abuse, and have witnessed or been victims of family violence prior to the parent's arrest.

4.2 MECHANISMS OF RISK

Describing the mechanisms through which parental imprisonment affects child development is crucial for designing programs to ameliorate the negative effects. However, attempting to disentangle the influence of parental incarceration from the myriad of other risk factors to which many children of incarcerated fathers are exposed is a challenge that has been poorly met by the existing research literature. Many children of incarcerated parents live in impoverished households, are exposed to substance abuse, and have witnessed or been victims of family violence prior to the parent's arrest (Parke & Clark-Stewart, 2001). Rather than a discrete stressful event in children's lives, parental incarceration might be better conceived of as a chronic strain, interacting with a host of other risk factors (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002).

Parental incarceration is a process that unfolds over the course of many years and presents children with distinct challenges before, during, and after parental imprisonment (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). At the time of arrest, children who reside with the arrested parent are frequently exposed to trauma (Jose-Kampfner, 1995). Those who witness the parent's arrest or criminal behavior often suffer nightmares and flashbacks (Johnston, 1991). The incarceration period itself presents children with a range of challenges, including separation issues, loss of family income, disruption in the home environment, and stigmatization. When the parent is released, a new set of stressors emerge (this topic is covered in more detail in Chapter 6). Below, we discuss primary stressors associated with parental incarceration.

4.2.1 Parental Separation

Separation is a significant challenge for children of incarcerated fathers, who are typically away from their parent much longer than children of incarcerated mothers (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003). An average sentence for fathers in state prison is 12.5 years, approximately 5 years longer than the average sentence for mothers (Mumola, 2000).

One-third to one-half of incarcerated fathers never see their children during their imprisonment.

Poehlmann's (2005) qualitative study of 94 incarcerated mothers indicated that more frequent contact during incarceration was associated with more positive parent-child relationships, particularly with older children. Contact, however, is limited when a parent is in prison. A recent study indicates that two-thirds of fathers had never received a visit from their child (Day et al., 2005). Lanier's (1991) random sample of 302 men incarcerated in a maximum-security prison in New York found that 30% of fathers participated in family reunion visits (24-hour "trailer visits") with their children, 43% participated in family picnic days with their children, and 67% received conventional visits from their children. Of those who received visits from their children, 37% reported that such visits occurred less than once a month. A majority of fathers reported regular "distal" interactions with their children: 64% reported phoning their children at least once a month, including 45% who phoned their children at least once a week; 73% reported sending mail to their children at least once a month; and 56% reported receiving mail from their children at least once a month. Both proximal and distal father-child interactions during incarceration were positively correlated with a father's residence with his children prior to incarceration and his expectations of residing with them after release (Lanier, 1991).

Based on national data from the 2004 Survey of Inmates, Glaze and Maruschak (2008) reported that 30% of fathers incarcerated in state prisons had some form of weekly contact with their children, and another 23% had some form of contact at least monthly. Seventeen percent of fathers reported contact less than once a month, and 22% had no contact with their children during the current incarceration. Mail was the most common form of contact fathers experienced, with 69% reporting any mail contact with a child during their incarceration. Fifty-three percent reported having any phone contact with a child during their incarceration, and 41% reported having any personal visit with a child (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Hairston, Rollin, and Jo's analysis of the 1997 Survey of Inmates data found that incarcerated fathers were less likely than incarcerated mothers to maintain contact with their children while in prison (2004). African American parents were somewhat more likely than white or Hispanic parents to report visitation or phone contact with their children during incarceration (Hairston, 2008).

Children may be prevented from contact with their parents because the custodial parents or other relatives do not want the children to know that one of their parents is incarcerated, do not want to expose them to the prison visitation environment, or cannot afford to maintain contact (Hairston, 2001). The distance between a prisoner's home and the facility at which he is incarcerated is a strong predictor of any in-person contact (Hairston, 2008). In addition, the quality of relationships between incarcerated parents and their children's caregivers appears to play a central role in determining frequency of parent-child contact (Poehlmann, 2005). For fathers who perpetrated domestic violence prior to incarceration, partners and caregivers may view the incarceration as a welcome reprieve for children who formerly witnessed or experienced violence in the home (Hairston and Oliver, 2006); in such cases, they are not likely to encourage maintenance of father-child contact during the incarceration.

4.2.2 Economic Hardship and Harsh Parenting

As discussed earlier, the loss of income brought about by imprisonment can present significant hardship to families. Although figures specific to the households of incarcerated fathers are not available, longitudinal data on divorced families indicate that family income falls by an average of 41% in the first year that one parent is absent (Page & Stevens, 2004). This magnitude of income loss can be particularly destabilizing in households that were struggling financially before an incarceration (Braman & Wood, 2003). Drawing on data from the Great Smoky Mountain study, a prospective cohort study of 1,400 children in North Carolina, (Phillips et al., 2006) found that parental incarceration was associated with family instability and economic strain, which are known risk factors for poor child outcomes. Other studies suggest that income loss may contribute to negative parenting and parenting stress, both of which are associated with poor socio-emotional outcomes among children (Braman & Wood, 2003; McLoyd, 1998).

4.2.3 Change in Caregivers

Another potential disruption in the child's life associated with parental incarceration is a change in the child's caregivers or the addition of a new member to the household (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002; Nurse, 2004). For children who reside with a parent who becomes incarcerated, parental arrest can trigger

placement in foster care, the introduction of new partners or family members into the household, and increased reliance on nonparent adults for care. Frequent changes in relationships appear to represent a common source of disruption in children's lives (Furstenburg, 1995; Nurse, 2004). Citing Whelan's (1993) finding that the presence of adults other than blood relatives in a child's home increases the chance of victimization, Johnston (2006) suggests that the relationship between parental incarceration and various negative child outcomes may be affected by changes in family structure and an associated increase in victimization experiences among children with an incarcerated parent as well as by incarceration itself.

Longitudinal data from the first three waves of the Fragile Families Study indicates that instability in the home environment, particularly changes in a mother's romantic relationships when a child is young, can lead to increased child behavioral problems. Following a sample of 2,111 children for 3 years, Osborne and McLanahan (2007) found that each change in a mother's romantic partnership was associated with an increase in children's anxiety, depression, and aggression. Furthermore, the influence of mother's relationship changes was largely mediated by maternal stress and negative parenting practices.

Out-of-home placement has been suggested as another contributor to the negative effect of incarceration on children's well-being. A study of 258 adolescents receiving mental health services found that out-of-home placement appeared to exacerbate the effect of incarceration on adolescents' emotional and behavioral problems (Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002). The likelihood of placement with a nonparent increases with the presence of other psychosocial risk factors in the child's life, including low paternal or maternal educational attainment, public benefit receipt, and paternal or maternal history of abuse (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002).

Because of stigma, children with fathers in prison are frequently denied the social support and sympathy provided to children experiencing other types of parental separation or loss such as divorce or death.

4.2.4 Stigma and Social Isolation

Initial qualitative findings from a 3-year ethnographic study of families of male prisoners in Washington, DC, suggest that children are also affected by social stigma during a parent's incarceration (Braman & Wood, 2003). Other qualitative work indicates that children of incarcerated parents may not be privy to the social support and sympathy otherwise afforded families experiencing the involuntary loss or absence of a family member (Arditti, 2005; Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). Children may be exposed to criticism of themselves or their mothers regarding their involvement or lack of involvement with their incarcerated father (Braman & Wood, 2003). Finally, children who maintain in-person contact with their fathers during incarceration may undergo potentially stigmatizing experiences in the correctional environment as part of the visitation routine (Arditti, 2005; Hairston, 2001).

4.3 PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Children differ in how they respond to parental incarceration. Factors such as positive relationships with other caregivers can protect children from negative outcomes (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001). For example, a high-quality relationship with the imprisoned parent prior to the incarceration has been proposed as an important protective factor. The quality of a child's relationships with the remaining parent, extended family, and nonfamily adults also appears to predict better adjustment. Researchers have begun to suggest that the quality and frequency of contact with the incarcerated parent (if positive) can moderate negative child outcomes (Johnson, 2006; Arditti, 2005; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001). These findings highlight protective factors which may be bolstered to support child-well being during parental imprisonment.

4.4 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

An empirical understanding of the effect of paternal incarceration on children is beginning to emerge, particularly in the wake of several major longitudinal analyses of child outcomes in cohorts that included children of incarcerated parents (Murray & Farrington, 2005; Phillips et al., 2006; Kinner et al., 2007; Murray et al., 2007). Several serious limitations persist in the literature. Studies that aim to measure the effect of parental incarceration often do not distinguish between the experiences of children with incarcerated mothers

and those with incarcerated fathers, even though researchers acknowledge that these experiences are likely quite different (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003). More research is needed to distinguish the unique stressors and outcomes related to having a mother versus father incarcerated as well as the developmental implications of the timing of their imprisonment. Many studies of the children of prisoners have relied on data collected via surveys of the incarcerated parents (Johnston, 1995). Therefore, data on psychosocial outcomes in this population are based on secondhand reports rather than on direct administration of assessment tools to children. Future research should incorporate direct child assessments and observational studies of parent-child interaction. Most studies of the effects of parental incarceration have employed cross-sectional rather than longitudinal designs, have examined small and nonrepresentative samples, and rarely have been grounded in principles of child developmental or other theoretical perspectives (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003). Of utmost importance is the need to conduct longitudinal, prospective studies that follow children through the various stages of their parents' involvement with the criminal justice system (arrest, sentencing, imprisonment, release) to assess changes in well-being over time and identify malleable risk and protective factors for future intervention. The limitations addressed here make it difficult to draw firm conclusions regarding differential outcomes for these children and even more challenging to determine causal pathways (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999).

