

Behavioural problems in the children of incarcerated parents

There were more than 948,000 individuals in U.S. state and federal prisons at the end of 1993⁽²⁾ and roughly 343,000 people housed in local jails as of 1988.⁽³⁾ While the average number of children per inmate is unknown, these figures suggest that millions of children have a parent who either is, or has been, incarcerated.

Relatively little is known about the psychological reactions and behaviour of children of incarcerated parents. Several researchers suggest that children may experience a wide variety of problems due to separation from the parent, the stigma associated with incarceration and the deception that tends to occur as to their parent's whereabouts and circumstances.

It has been further argued that antisocial behaviour in boys may follow directly from paternal incarceration.⁴ It is clear that boys are overrepresented in mental health facilities and that boys are more likely than girls to demonstrate aggressive and antisocial behaviour.⁽⁵⁾ Men are also more than 10 times as likely as women to be incarcerated.⁽⁶⁾

For these reasons and because most research into the effects of parental incarceration focuses on incarcerated fathers, this article synthesizes the current knowledge and understanding of the behavioural and emotional reactions of children during paternal incarceration, emphasizing the effects on boys.

Literature review One of the earliest research efforts in this area examined the effects of incarceration on male inmates and their families in England.⁽⁷⁾ Overall, the behaviour of about 20% of the children studied was felt to have deteriorated after their father's imprisonment.

Soon after, a California study focused on teachers' ratings of children whose father had been incarcerated.⁽⁸⁾ The study revealed that children with an incarcerated father were rated below average in various social and psychological areas more often than other children. However, the study's control group was not comparable to the experimental group because the experimental group contained significantly more Mexican-American children.

The next link in the chain was a 1966 descriptive report that examined the effects of deceiving children about the imprisonment of their father.⁽⁹⁾ This report argued that disobedience, temper tantrums and destructive or delinquent behaviour were often responses to this deception.

Other reports have since corroborated the harm caused by such deception.⁽¹⁰⁾ It has been argued that this practice may make it impossible for children to work through their feelings about their parent's incarceration.⁽¹¹⁾

A 1978 study assessed the changes that occurred in the families of 93 incarcerated Black men.⁽¹²⁾ The social stigma of incarceration was generally found not to be a problem for these families because they tended to view incarceration as the result of prejudice against minority groups.

Still, approximately two thirds of these inmates' wives thought the incarceration had negative effects

on the family.

An interesting 1981 research effort examined both male and female inmates' impressions of their children's behavioural response to parental incarceration.⁽¹³⁾ Two thirds of these inmates felt that their child(ren) developed behavioural problems after their incarceration. The incarcerated men reported problems such as truancy, discipline and delinquency, while the women reported fearfulness, poor school performance and nightmares.

Around the same time, another project focused on families of 192 Black male inmates in Alabama and Tennessee.⁽¹⁴⁾ Imprisonment was found to have had little or slight effect on about one half of the children, while having a major impact on about 30%. Further, approximately 11% of the children were said to have been greatly upset by the stigmatizing remarks of other children in the community.

Finally, an examination of 118 first-time male Jewish offenders in Israel reported that, according to their mothers, the majority of children's problems were school- or health related.⁽¹⁵⁾ Relationships, discipline, aggressive behaviour and withdrawal also tended to be problem areas. The mother and family's coping resources were viewed as crucial to responding to these difficulties.

It was also argued that the stigma of incarceration was particularly difficult to bear for children whose father had been convicted of a white-collar crime or sexual offence because most of these families had had no prior contact with the criminal justice system.

The studies noted thus far relied mostly on parental reports about their children's behavioural reactions. Many of the children involved were quite young. Therefore, since boys of fathers with criminal backgrounds are at high risk of juvenile delinquency and/or adult criminality,⁽¹⁶⁾ a 1977 clinical report examined the rapid emergence of antisocial behaviour in boys between the ages of 6 and 13 whose fathers had recently been incarcerated.⁽¹⁷⁾

The study focused on six lower- and middle-class White Boston families. Of 24 children, 12 boys displayed aggressive or antisocial behaviour within two months of their father's incarceration. Male children between the ages of 11 and 13 seemed the most vulnerable to the effects of paternal separation, although younger children sometimes displayed temporary separation anxiety.

Three of the six families were further disrupted by divorce, which was seemingly precipitated by the incarceration, and the boys in these families caused many disturbances during the next two years. These families, however, had histories of separations, marital discord and physical abuse.

The boys in the three families that remained intact were somewhat younger and did not display the same degree of antisocial behaviour as the first group. They also seemed to do much better during the next two years. It is not clear, however, whether this less severe response was related to the fact they were younger when their father was incarcerated or to their less chaotic home environments.

The author subsequently studied other children whose parents were incarcerated, but his findings as to antisocial behaviour were not as striking.⁽¹⁸⁾

He did, however, find that inmates' wives generally saw their children as having become more disruptive and aggressive and less obedient after their father's incarceration, while the incarcerated father tended to characterize his children's problems as mild or non-existent. Major themes A number of major themes have emerged from research into the impact of parental incarceration on children. First, separation from a parent is likely to be traumatic, disrupt personal and family bonds, and worsen the family's social and financial situation. Behavioural problems also tend to emerge in a sizeable minority of children, with problems usually relating to family supports and coping mechanisms.

The stigma of incarceration is also an important problem for many children, although the level of difficulty experienced may reflect the family's view of incarceration. It was argued, for example, that some Black families feel that incarceration is often the result of social prejudice and does not, therefore, reflect negatively on the incarcerated individual. Consequently, children within these families may feel less stigma when a parent is incarcerated.

Children are also often deceived about incarceration. Some children are never told that their father is, or has been, in prison. Such deception has been universally condemned by authors as harmful to children and as perhaps the cause of behavioural difficulties.

It has also been found that most children do not commit severe antisocial behaviour at the time of their parent's incarceration, although boys in their early teens may be at greater risk of conduct problems. This type of behaviour appears more likely to emerge in existing dysfunctional family situations.

Finally, it is important to note that maternal incarceration may place even greater burdens on children if the children lose their primary caretaker (temporarily or permanently). The children of incarcerated fathers typically continue to be cared for by their mother, but the children of incarcerated mothers are rarely cared for by their father.⁽¹⁹⁾

(1)The Children's Hospital, 1056 East 19th Avenue, Denver, Colorado 80218. This article has been taken, with minor changes, from S. Gabel, "Behavioral Problems in Sons of Incarcerated or Otherwise Absent Fathers: The Issue of Separation," *Family Process*, 31(1992): 303-314.

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(3)"Census of Local Jails: 1988," *Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 1990).

(4)W. H. Sack, "Children of Imprisoned Fathers," *Psychiatry*, 40 (1977): 163-174.

(5)S. Gabel and R. Shindledecker, "Aggressive Behavior in Youth: Characteristics, Outcome, and Psychiatric Diagnoses," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 30 (1991): 982-988.

(6)"Prisoners in 1993."

(7)P. Morris, *Prisoners and Their Families* (New York: Hart, 1965).

(8)S. Friedman and T. C. Esseistyn, "The Adjustment of Children of Jail Inmates," *Federal Probation*, 29

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(13)T. A. Fritsch and I. D. Burkhead, "Behavioral Reactions of Children to Parental Absence due to Imprisonment," *Family Relations*, 30 (1981): 83-88.

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(16)D.P. Farrington, "The Family Backgrounds of Aggressive Youths," *Aggression and Antisocial Behaviour in Childhood and Adolescence* (Book supplement to the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 1), L. A. Hersov, M. Berger and D. Shaffer, eds. (New York: Pergamon Press, 1978): 73-93. See also S. Glueck and E. Glueck, *Unravelling Juvenile Delinquency* (New York: Commonwealth Fund, 1950). And see J. McCord, W. McCord and E. Thurber, "Some Effects of Paternal Absence on Male Children," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 64 (1962): 361-369. And see L. N. Robins, P. A. West and B. L. Herjanic, "Arrests and Delinquency in Two Generations: A Study of Black Urban Families and Their Children," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 16 (1975): 125-140.

(17)Sack, "Children of Imprisoned Fathers."

(18)W.H. Sack, J. Seidler and S. Thomas, "The Children of Imprisoned Parents: A Psychosocial Exploration," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 46 (1976): 618-628. See also W.H. Sack and J. Seidler, "Should Children Visit Their Parents in Prison?" *Law and Human Behaviour*, 2 (1978): 261-226.

(19)R.M. Glick and V. V. Neto, *National Study of Women's Correctional Programs* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 1977).