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The Impact of Incarceration on Families: A Summary of the Literature

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Summer 2011

The Impact of Incarceration on Families: A Summary of the Literature

Since the mid-1970's, the United States (U.S.) has seen a continuous rise in the rates of incarceration. Prior to the 1970's, the rate of incarceration had remained relatively steady at an average of 110 inmates per 100,000 residents for over half a century (Tonry, 2001). Between 1980 and 2000, the U.S. incarceration rates have increased by a minimum of 35,000 each year, with the average year bringing in between 55,000 and 75,000 new inmates (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003). Contrasting the U.S. rates with those of other countries clearly demonstrates that the U.S. is a major outlier among its peers with respect to incarceration. For example, the U.S. has an incarceration rate of 743 inmates per 100,000 citizens, compared to 117 in Canada, 111 in Italy, and 152 in England and Wales (International Centre for Prison Studies, 2011). This proliferation in the rates of incarceration has occurred despite relatively level crime rates over the last four decades (Dixon, 2005).

According to Garland (2001), the transformation in the U.S. incarceration profile “deserves a name of its own...America now has ‘mass imprisonment’—a new name to describe an altogether new phenomenon” (p. 1-2). He asserts that there are two distinct features of mass incarceration: (1) a rate of incarceration and a prison population that are significantly above the historical and comparative norm, and (2) “the social concentration of imprisonment’s effects...[due to] the systemic imprisonment of whole groups of the population,” in which he is referring to the disproportionate incarceration of African American men in the U.S. prison system (p.2).

The impact of mass incarceration is not limited to those serving time behind bars. Most inmates are members of family and friendship networks which also experience the consequences of incarceration (Paylor & Smith, 1994). While inmates experience the direct affects of confinement, their families live their lives in what Codd (2008) describes as the shadow of

prison. Until recently, research efforts have given little consideration to the experiences of families interfacing with the criminal justice system (Arditti, 2005). The present paper provides a summary of the available literature with respect to the impact of incarceration on the family members of those incarcerated.

Prisoners' Families

Prisoners' families are a heterogeneous group. However, the vast majority of the research literature reflects the heterosexual, nuclear family unit, usually consisting of an incarcerated father, a non-incarcerated mother, and young children (Boswell & Wedge, 2001; Paylor & Smith, 1994). The available research literature is completely void of any discussion of non-imprisoned male partners of female prisoners or of same-sex partners. Research addressing families of elderly inmates is lacking, and very little is known about the parents or siblings of incarcerated individuals (Codd, 2008).

One thing that is clear, however, is that the impact of incarceration is disproportionately felt by families and communities of color, which reflects the markedly disproportionate number of incarcerated ethnic minorities (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003). In 2003, the racial composition of the state and federal prison population was 44% African American and 35% Caucasian, while in the general population African American make up 12.8% and Caucasians comprise 80% (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; U.S. Census, 2006). According to Harrison and Beck (2006), the U.S. incarceration rate among Black men of all ages is 5 to 7 times higher than those of white men. The authors report that among men aged 25 to 39 approximately 12% of African American males were incarcerated in 2005, compared to approximately 4% Latino and approximately 2% of whites. Furthermore, Pettit and Western (2004) report that recent birth cohorts of Black men are more likely to have prison records (22.4%) than military records

(17.4%) or bachelor's degrees (12.5%). Dixon (2005) captured the scope of the issue in the following statement: "Right now, the shadow of prison squats at the corners of, and often at the center of nearly every black family's life in this nation" (Dixon, 2005).

Historically, the criminal justice system has tended to focus on offenders as individuals, while ignoring their families. In addition, while social service agencies were developed to support families, the reality for incarcerated parents is that the system works most often to separate families, rather than reunify them (Kazuri, 2001). For example, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) enacted by President Clinton in 1997, authorizes the termination of parental rights when a child has been living under foster care for 15 months out of the last 22 months. Considering the fact that the average prison sentence exceeds 22 months, incarcerated parents whose children are placed in foster care are at risk of losing custody. This policy is of particular concern to mothers in prison, who are five times as likely as men to report having children placed in a foster home (The Sentencing Project, 2009).

Relationships

Stable marriages and strong familial relationships have been found to be protective factors which serve to reduce the risk of reoffending (Codd, 2008). Research indicates that a strong and lasting emotional attachment, in the form of marriage, or otherwise, detracts men from engaging in criminal behavior (Uggen & Wakefield, 2005). However, the same does not appear to be true for female offenders in relation to men (Leverentz, 2006). In many cases women often engage in criminal behavior as accomplices to their male partners.

Incarceration places marital relationships under significant stress. Sometimes, the stress is a consequence of the criminal behavior itself, while at other times it is a consequence of separation or from other difficulties faced during the sentence (Codd, 2008). In many cases

there are a host of family problems that precede incarceration (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). For example, family members who live with offenders prior to their arrests often experience police contact, family discord or domestic violence, poverty, substance abuse, or other criminal behavior (Johnston, 1995; Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). Thus, incarceration may serve as the final straw in an already troubled relationship. A partner's incarceration may provide a spouse with the opportunity to take the first step in severing ties with an offender with whom there has been a history of problems.

Research suggests that 45% of inmates lose contact with their families during their incarceration and 22% of married inmates divorce or separate (Salmon, 2007). One possible explanation is that correctional facilities are often geographically isolated making travel to and from the facility challenging. For those families who do make the trip, they are often faced with inadequate visiting facilities that hinder healthy family interaction. According to Nesmith and Ruhland (2008), familial relationships may be further strained by awkward phone calls that consist of superficial conversations in which painful or personal topics are avoided (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Telephone contact, via collect calls or prepaid phone cards, is also very costly, thereby limiting those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Financial Impact

The financial impact of incarceration for families is well documented. The experiences of these families are almost entirely experiences of extreme financial hardship. For some families, incarceration of a family member may mean the loss of the family's primary source of income (Codd, 2008). However, Hairston (2003) points out that over 50% of inmates report being unemployed prior to their incarceration, and most report a history of substance abuse; thus, Hairston asserts that it is reasonable to assume that prior to incarceration the family member

likely acted as a drain on family income, rather than contribute to it. In situations in which the incarcerated family member was not actively involved, or living with the family, the financial impact may be lessened, but there could still be consequential financial loss, such as the loss of child support benefits (Hairston, 2003).

The financial burden of incarceration is greatest when families try to maintain their relationship with the imprisoned person (Hairston, 2003). The impoverishment of families supporting prisoners has been described as ‘a shadow punishment’ (Codd, 2008). Inmates are often more dependent upon their families during their incarceration than they had been prior to their arrest. For example, inmates depend on their families for money, telephone contact, and personal items. These responsibilities may be especially burdensome for families who are economically challenged. Incarcerated parents must also rely on others, often family members, to facilitate visits with their children, which can be costly to caregivers (Kazuri, 2001).

The financial impact of incarceration is not limited to immediate family members. Grandparents who care for their grandchildren during a parent’s incarceration have identified financial problems as one of their primary sources of difficulty. In situations in which grandparents care for the children of inmates, especially for children of imprisoned women, they will almost certainly experience financial hardship (Codd, 2008). In the U.S., when mothers receive benefits prior to their incarceration, these benefits are not automatically transferred to care providing grandparents (Hairston, 2003).

Family Blaming and Social Stigma

The experience of stigmatization among family members of those incarcerated is a reoccurring theme in the literature (Codd, 2008). The stigmatized person is treated as an ‘other’ and is subjected to hostility and/or lack of support (Davies, 1992). A key characteristic of

stigmatization is secrecy which can lead to further distress. For many families the level of fear experienced by the perceived threats involved in disclosing their situation may be greater than the experience of overt hostility (Codd, 2008). However, living under a constant state of perceived threat and fear can create problems on its own.

There is a tendency to blame prisoners' families for their own situation. The behavior of the offender is frequently extended to his or her family. Consequently, family members are often treated as 'guilty by association.' For example, incarceration of a family member often results in an involuntary, single-parent household. In general, single parenthood is often met with sympathy and support. However, the non-imprisoned single-parent is often denied these things. Although the single-parent in this situation may define their situation as involuntary, society most often views it as voluntary. The non-imprisoned single-parent is often perceived as somehow at fault, and thereby undeserving of support or assistance (Arditti, 2005).

Research indicates that family members feel most stigmatized when interacting with official agencies (Codd, 2008). Feelings of shame and the experience of stigmatization may be most evident when family members visit correctional institutions (Codd, 2008). Family members often report experiencing disrespect, hostility, and humiliation upon visiting their incarcerated family members. They are often made to wait for hours without any indication when, or even if, they will be allowed into the visiting center. Upon entry, they are subject to extensive security clearance procedures, which can be especially traumatizing to young children. Codd (2008) provides an example in which a young girl witnessed her dolls head being torn off by corrections officer who were checking for contraband.

Grief and Loss

Doka's (1989) discussion on disenfranchised grief provides a conceptual framework for understanding the experience of grief among families disrupted by incarceration.

Disenfranchised grief occurs when the experience of loss is not, or cannot be openly acknowledged, publically expressed, or socially supported. Incarceration provides such a circumstance because it results in the 'social death' of a loved one in which the surviving family members may experience a significant sense of loss. However, this form of loss is not socially validated. In fact, in many cases family member of incarcerated individuals are met with hostile, disapproving social attitudes related to incarceration that can exacerbate the distress of losing a family member to imprisonment (Arditti, 2005).

According to Doka (1989) an additional reason for disenfranchised grief involves circumstances in which the characteristics of the bereaved serve to disenfranchise their grief. Children are an excellent example as they are typically perceived by others as having little comprehension of loss. In the case of parental incarceration, the loss experienced by children tends to be ignored despite research demonstrating that these children acknowledge a sense of loss and report missing their incarcerated parents (Arditti, 2003).

Children of Incarcerated Parents

In 2007, there were almost two million minor children in the United States with an incarcerated parent, representing an 82% increase since 1991. Furthermore, it is estimated that approximately 10 million more children have parents who were incarcerated at some point in their lives (The Sentencing Project, 2009). Despite the large number of children affected by parental incarceration, very little is known about these children, and they continue to be ignored by the criminal justice and social service systems (Simmons, 2000). Currently, there is no policy in

place in which police or the courts inquire at the time of arrest or sentencing whether a prisoner has children. Therefore, the true scope of the problem is unknown. However, Bloom (1998) asserts that the well-being of these children is critically tied to the future well-being of society.

Research suggests that the children of incarcerated parents are among the most at-risk, yet least visible, populations of children (Reed & Reed, 1997). Parental incarceration serves as significant risk factor for a host of negative consequences, particularly with respect to emotional and behavioral factors, physical care and custody, and contact with the parents (Seymour, 2001). Furthermore, the risk of these children being imprisoned themselves is well-documented. In a recent study evaluating 1,427 incarcerated parents with an adult child, 21% of mothers and 8.5% of fathers reported having an adult child who had been incarcerated (Dallaire, 2007). There is a great deal of concern that not only is there an intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior, but also that incarceration may lose its novelty, or worse, may be perceived as rite of passage (Krisberg & Temin, 2001; Reed & Reed, 1997).

According to Gaudin and Sutphen (1993), the extent to which a child is affected by parental incarceration depends on several factors. These factors include the age at which separation occurs, the overall health of the family, the level of disruption caused by the incarceration, the child's familiarity and comfort with their primary care provider(s), the availability of supportive networks, the occurrence and consequences of previous separation experiences, the nature of the parent's crime, sentence length, and the degree of experienced stigma. The impact of loss is also linked to the strength of the parent-child relationship prior to the parent's incarceration. Edin, Nelson, Paranal (2004) found that among offenders who had consistent contact with their child/children prior to incarceration, the incarceration had a profoundly negative effect on the parent-child relationship. Adalist-Estrin, (1995) suggests that

incarceration diminishes already lacking social skills, which the author perceives as contributing to the estrangement between the child and parent, during the latter's incarceration.

Emotional and Behavioral Affects

The Osborne Association (1993) reports that children with an incarcerated parent experience a wide range of emotional consequences, such as fear, guilt, sadness, anger, anxiety, and loneliness. In addition, they may express low self-esteem, depression, and/or engage in social withdrawal. Without intervention, children's emotional responses can manifest behaviorally, possibly in the form of physical and/or verbal aggression, withdrawal, hypervigilance, or sexualized behavior (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). Furthermore, children impacted by parental incarceration frequently develop school-related problems, such as disruptive classroom behavior and/or deterioration in academic performance (Gabel, 1992).

Parental Contact

According to Johnston (1995), without adequate access to the incarcerated parent, children may face a disruption in the parent-child attachment, which can adversely affect the child's development. Nevertheless, it is estimated that half of all incarcerated parents do not receive any visits from their children, while the other half receive infrequent visits (Snell, 1994). There are several factors that may impact these statistics. One such factor is that many prisons are geographically isolated (Bloom, 1998). This may inhibit caretakers from facilitating visits due to the sheer inconvenience, the inability to get sufficient time off work or away from other responsibilities, or it may be improbable due to limited financial means. Other factors may involve inhospitable visiting areas that are not child/family friendly, or perhaps, caregivers have personal reasons for which they feel it is appropriate to restrict contact between the child and the incarcerated parent (e.g. domestic violence). Contact through letters and telephone calls are

more common, but they are limited to those who can afford expensive collect calls and writing supplies (Snell, 1994). Written communication is also impacted by one's ability to read and write.

The Social Impact

Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) interviewed 34 children who, at the time of the study, had a parent incarcerated. The children demonstrated an acute awareness of the negative assumptions that may be made about them because they had a parent in prison. Several of the children described their struggles with deciding to disclose their parent's incarceration to others or to keep it private. The researchers found that nearly all of the children expressed a desire to reveal their situation to others, while simultaneously acknowledging the risks associated with doing so.

Many of the children indicated that it was important that they keep their family affairs private, which was a value echoed by their caregivers. The authors noted that the value placed on privacy was highest among the older children in the sample. However, many of the children sampled reportedly had sought out others who also had a parent in prison. They described this as a delicate situation because it required that one child to be the first to disclose. Approximately a quarter of the children reported knowing of other children with a parent in prison, and one girl described it as being similar to "finding another family member." However, the majority of the children knew of no one outside of their own family with an incarcerated parent, and many described feeling isolated.

The researchers also inquired about who the children looked up to as role models. Some of the children had no problem identifying a role model, many naming their mothers or another family member. However, some struggled with identifying anyone as a role model, and not one of the boys surveyed could name a male role model. The children who described themselves as

feeling isolated and socially stigmatized were at times able to locate some supportive resources, but the authors describe them as a whole, as being “without role models, unable to connect to others like themselves, or to find trustworthy people who would help them feel less marginalized in general” (p. 1123).

Care and Custody

When fathers are incarcerated, the majority of their children remain in the care of their mothers (Codd, 2008). However, research suggests that when a mother is incarcerated, children often experience multiple placements. According to Snell (1994) approximately one-half of children whose mothers are incarcerated live with grandparents, one-quarter live with their fathers, and one quarter are placed in foster care or live with other relatives or family friends. The children in the latter group are often separated from siblings and may experience multiple shifts in living arrangements. Caregivers often have limited financial means and lack social support (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993). While grandparents serving as caregivers may experience similar concerns as other caregivers, their difficulties may be compounded if they are elderly, in poor health, or have difficulty navigating social services in order to receive benefits (Codd, 2008).

Child Abuse and Neglect

Parental incarceration has been identified as a risk factor of child abuse and neglect (Gabel, 1992). A parent’s incarceration may be symptomatic of pre-existing familial problems which may have included violence and/or neglect. Children may also be at risk if they are placed with caregivers who are unable or unwilling to provide appropriate care during their parent’s incarceration. The increased stress associated with release and reintegration may also increase a child’s risk of abuse and/or neglect (Seymour, 2001).

Awareness of Adult Needs

Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) found that children of incarcerated parents tend to be very aware of the stresses experienced by their caregivers as well as those of their incarcerated parents. The children in their study were sensitive to, and attentive of their caregiver's emotions and needs. In situations in which the caregiver and incarcerated parent had a strained or conflictual relationship, the children reported worrying about both, but felt as though they had to hide their concern for one from the other. Overall, the children expressed a great deal of gratitude and appreciation for their caregiver's efforts in caring for them in the face of multiple challenges. Many of the children reported having had tried to provide their caregivers with some relief by taking on adult responsibilities themselves. Some children even stated they felt the need to fill the role of the absent parent.

Conclusion

The U.S. has seen a proliferation in the rates of incarceration since the 1970's, and the numbers continue to rise despite a relatively stable crime rate. This phenomenon of mass incarceration has far reaching affects. A large proportion of the population is affected by a family member's incarceration, yet little is known about this population. Despite the fact that strong family relations serve as a protective factor and minimize the risk of recidivism, there are few resources available to help foster these relationships.

The rate of divorce among married inmates is extremely high and almost half of all inmates lose contact with their families during their incarceration. These families face significant financial hardships, leaving many living in poverty which increases their risk for a multitude of other problems (academic, occupational, health, crime, etc.). Family members experience a significant sense of loss when a family member becomes incarcerated, yet this form

of loss is not socially validated. Thus, these families may not be able to express their grief in a healthy manner. The social stigma of imprisonment is a recurrent theme in the literature. Often these family members are perceived as guilty by association. In an effort to avoid perceived or actual threat, they may attempt to keep their situation secret, which serves to further limit access to support.

A significant number of children are affected by parental incarceration. These children have been found to be at increased risk of incarceration, yet there are very few interventions in place to minimize this risk. The extent to which a parent's incarceration affects a child is contingent on several factors, but what has been observed is that these children generally experience profound psychological consequences, barriers to continued contact with their incarcerated parent, risk of abuse and neglect, and multiple, erratic shifts in placement. In addition, these children often feel isolated by their experience. They describe ambivalence regarding disclosing their situation to others and often feel pressured to keep family affairs private.

It is clear that the consequences of incarceration on family members are numerous and they place already fragile families at increased risk. Despite their mass in numbers, these families remain largely ignored. Recent research demonstrating the positive social implications of fostering healthy familial relationships among inmates and their families has led to the implementation of some intervention programs, both in correctional facilities and in the community. However, these programs are scarce. Therefore, continued efforts should be aimed at making these programs more readily available and to assessing their efficacy. Efforts should also be made toward increasing social awareness and reducing the stigma experienced by these families.

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