

THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL IMPRISONMENT TO THE GROUP AGE OF 10-18 YEARS OLD

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Abstract

Having a parent in prison affects the developmental life of a child in many aspects. A loss of this kind has a great impact in emotional, psychological, developmental, and economic welfare of the child. All changes by caregivers cause feelings of abandonment and loss, attachment weakening caused by the separation and problems with receiving affection. Immediate effects observed include: shame, social stigma, loss of financial support, weakened emotional connection with the parent, changes in family composition, poor results in school, increased levels of violence, abuse or neglect. Long-term effects include questioning of parental authority, negative perceptions of the police and justice system, increasing dependency or regression in its ability to cope with traumatic events that cause stress and developmental disorders. Parental incarceration is also seen in terms of losing the gender roles. Children of incarcerated fathers tend to act out (external behaviors) whereas children of incarcerated mothers tend to internalize (internalized behavior) their reactions to imprisonment. Imprisonment of a parent also affect the dynamics into the family. In this way some of the functions of family are and are subject to change. Family's living habits, family structure, emotional support system, financial relations and income change. As a result, it is important to acknowledge and examine the totality of these children's experiences. The research will provide an overview of literature on the effects of parental incarceration on children. Therefore there is a need for theoretical frameworks to be analyzed and applied to gain a full understanding and to assist families and children who experience parental incarceration.

Key words: *parental imprisonment, long-term psycho-emotional effects, impact, gendered loss.*

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INTRODUCTION

Qualitative studies suggest that children react to parental incarceration developing internalized behavior and external display. [Murray, L & Farrington, P, D. (2008), Parental Imprisonment, Long Lasting effects on Boys' Internalizing problems through the life course. Development and Psychopathology 20, 273-290, Cambridge University Press]. Internalized Behavior included reactions such as depression and attachment difficulty (Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981; Johnston, 1995a-c; Johnston & Waldfoegel, 2002, unpublished Manuscript. Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002, unpublished Manuscript, Philips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer & Robbins, 2002; Simmons, 2000. in Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal) and externalized behavior which include aggression and delinquent behavior (Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981; Gabel & Shindledecker, 1993, Johnston, 1995 b, c, Parke & Clarke-Stewart , 2002, unpublished Manuscript, Springer, Lynch & Rubin, 2000).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Can we talk about different reactions to the psychological level, depending on gender differences of the imprisoned parent?
2. What causes short and long term effects on children of parents who commit an offense, get arrested and go to a detention centre, which are psycho-social consequences?"

PURPOSE

The main purpose of this study is to understand the impact of parental incarceration to the general welfare of the child, particularly in mental health.

OBJECTIVES

1. Providing new information, which will provide a major contribution to understanding how parental incarceration can be a traumatic event for the child.
2. Understanding how the imprisonment of a parent affects the child's ties with other family members.

1.0 Parent-Child Relationships

In general, our parents are the first people we know and with whom we create our first bonds. They provide, with few exceptions, shelter, security, love, and nourishment. However, our current society is an ever-changing world. These changes include an increasing probability that children will live without adequate adult supervision and in homes that are unstable and violent. One thing that is observed is that Children can detach from family members and the situation is more dangerous when these members are the mother or father. Relationships are fundamental building blocks to our families, communities, state, and country. Relationships are affected by the economy, the society, and individual actions of the people involved.

Children learn how to build and foster relationships by watching how their parents and family interact with each other and society. Being a member of a family confirms and develops our sense of identity and self-esteem. Any changes within the family affect all members of that family. Family cohesion and harmony have been

determined to be significant variables in the development of positive self-esteem in children (Napoli, Kilbride, & Tebbs, 1992).

Families are unique social systems insofar as membership is based on combinations of biological, legal, affectional, geographic and historical ties. In contrast to other social systems, entry into family systems is through birth, adoption, fostering or marriage and members can leave only by death. Severing all family connections is never possible. Furthermore, while family members fulfil certain roles, which entail specific definable tasks such as the provision of food and shelter, it is the relationships within families which are primary and irreplaceable. (Carr, A. (2006). *Family Therapy, Concepts, Process and Practice*, 2nd Edition, Wiley Series in Clinical Psychology, pg.30).

Everyone attempts to meet their needs and the needs of their children as described by Maslow. A family who is dealing with the incarceration of a parent may need to re-examine their basic level in Maslow's hierarchy. This is apparent especially if the person incarcerated provided financial and emotional support; the remaining members need to focus on Maslow's level one, the physiological level. The resident parent, or guardian, needs to determine how to provide for the family's basic needs. In addition, when a member of the family is removed, children may feel a loss of security. The family will need to determine methods to help them reestablish a sense of safety. The restructuring of love and belonging will need to be developed if the physiological and safety needs of Maslow's hierarchy, are to be substantially satisfied. Children who have a parent in jail contend with feelings such as anxiety, shame, sadness, grief, social isolation, and guilt (Doerr, M, S. (2001). *The Social Impact on Elementary Students with Incarcerated Parents* pg.9 Hagan, 2000).

In this way the quality of parent-child relationship is a factor to be taken in account in determining the impact of parental incarceration to the children. Experts have agreed that positive parent-child attachment is fundamental and essential for parents to assume their role in assisting the child to cooperate with social issues. Lack of parent-child relationships can cause irreparable damage to family relationships; therefore are appropriate to be encouraged face to face visits and written communication. Also is very important the relationship parent-child before incarceration. If pre-existing bonds between parent and child has been positive, subsequent maintenance of relationships through occasional visits are essential.

In this way the visits with the parent can bring benefits if we talk for long periods of time. But for various reasons children can have few visits or not at all to their parent in prison. Conversely other children may exhibit ambivalence and choose to forget the visits as a protective way for themselves from further disappointments. Consequently they are not informed about the location and situation of the parent. This is a point that should be studied more as a parent incarceration male versus female parent, has another impact on albanian culture and mentality.

Families can lie or cheat on parental incarceration because they may feel ashamed about the criminal behavior of a family member or they may try to protect the psychological and emotional well-being of the child. In cases in which the child is still young and fails to understand the concept of incarceration, caregivers invent different story to protect the child. Even when the intentions of the caregivers are good, they lack insight for negative and dangerous consequences of the lies to the child (Johnston, 1995).

Lies lead to confusion, lack of confidence and uncertainty. Children get worried that their parents can be in a very dangerous situation or may feel intimidated that they themselves can disappear into the unknown. The child fill in the gaps with fancies about the absent parent,

preparing their self for the disappointment they can have from the parent return which may fail to meet the expectations of the child.

Caregivers may decide not to tell the truth because of social stigmas on criminal behavior. Depending on cultural factors, most children are aware of the stigmas that society decides about criminal behavior, particularly when it comes to the mother.

Children with incarcerated parents feel ashamed and can reach the conclusion that they can be rejected by others because of the behavior and actions of their parents. Instead rejecting behaviors is not isolated in society. Family and friends may reject these children, affecting their further deterioration in their psycho-emotional well being. Family members may have feelings of anger towards the perpetrator because of their new position as caregiver. To protect themselves, children tend to avoid rejection by withdrawal of their selves from important relationships. Young people can be shown egocentric and can often blame themselves for the criminal behavior of their parents. They feel especially guilty when a parent is imprisoned for theft, drug sales or prostitution to support the family. Children who carry on this responsibility can have long-term psychological effects in time if their beliefs on impeachment are persistent and taken for granted.

To analyze the happening of acute stress reactions associated with parental separation an experiment was conducted with young people who had incarcerated mothers (Kampfner, 1995). One of the main research hypothesis was that the combination of parent-child separation and silence forced upon incarceration of a parent because of the shame may increase the trauma to children. Approximately 75% of children in the study group reported symptoms related to stress. These children showed difficulty in sleeping, concentration and showed signs of depression. These children reported having little or no emotional support to discuss feelings and thoughts about their mother's incarceration (Kampfner, 1995).

Maladaptive and rebellious behavior such as emotional departure from school, abstinence, drug abuse, lower academic performance and problem behavior may encounter when young people face emotional and psychological problems. Children look for groups in which they are accepted, but unfortunately can influence negatively. They usually join gangs and engage in criminal activities with a minimum duration of two years which lead to involvement in the justice system for young or adult. A new generation of children is placed in intergenerational risk detention (McQuaid & Ehrenreich, 1998).

According to Springer et al. (2000), children with incarcerated parents are 5-6 times more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system.

The literature suggests that there is a greater probability that some of these young people have cognitive avoidance, evasion or regression in development and inadequate cooperation strategy (Child Welfare League of America, 1998). They may exhibit difficulties in developmental tasks such as attachment relations, development of trust, autonomy, initiative, productivity and identity development (Seymour, 1998). Theoretically when children have access to resources that help them collaborate with developmental challenges, they successfully manage to develop these tasks. When challenges exceed the capabilities to cooperate, emotional survival becomes the primary, and the achievement of specific tasks terminated (Child Welfare League of America, 1998).

Psychological effects can be short or long term and include neurophysiological changes such as loss of speech as a parent ends up in jail. Children can suffer from depression, anxiety, and other severe emotional problems. Children of incarcerated parents reported stress syndrome symptoms of post-traumatic analogous to that of children whose parents have died (Breen, 1995). It is a matter for discussion whether parental imprisonment may be more difficult to overcome compared with death, because death is a natural phenomenon and that determines an end, and separation due to incarceration is ambiguous. Children are confused in terms of

their feelings and are unsure how to suffer the loss of a parent who is alive but emotionally and physically absent (Breen, 1995).

The researchers say that when a child witness the arrest of a parent, it is more likely to suffer mental problems. They become confused or unable to understand the consequences of arrest. Children can also have nightmares of the night about the event. Also they may lose confidence in the rule of law, viewing it as a threat rather than a protection for society (Miller, M, K. 2006. The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children: An Emerging Need for Effective Interventions. Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, Vol. 23, No, 4).

2.0 Hypothesis of Gendered Loss

Instead there are few studies that have examined the effects of parental incarceration and the maternal (Murray & Farrington, 2008a on "Maternal and paternal imprisonment in the stress process" by Foster, H & Hagan, J. 2013 Social Science Research. Elsevier Inc.) and theoretically still we haven't managed to prove the multiple influences of parental incarceration. A recent review concluded that "maintaining balance, suggests a link between parental incarceration and the worsening of mental health and behavior on children ... There is even less data on parental incarceration " (Wakefield & UGGE, 2010, p. 398, *ibid.*) Parental incarceration can be seen in terms of loss of gender roles. Assumptions about losing gender roles from literature on mental health problems of children whose parents are dead (Umberson & Chen, 1994; Umberson, 2003) and from an early study on the influence of parental imprisonment on children (Fritsch and Burkhead, 1981). Parental relational influences on children may vary by developmental stage (Collins and Russell, 1991), which we examine during young adulthood.

Fritsch and Burkhead (1981) found similarities in the number of problems exhibited in a middle childhood sample of incarcerated parents, regardless of parental gender (Foster, H., Hagan, J. Maternal and paternal imprisonment in the stress process. *Social Sci. Res.* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2013.01.008>) . The children differed, however, in types of problems observed. Children of incarcerated mothers were significantly more likely to exhibit internalizing behavior problems (e.g., withdrawal), while children of incarcerated fathers were more likely to show externalizing problems (e.g., hostile behavior). Fritsch and Burkhead (1981) theorize that the types of behavior problems shown by children are related to traditional parenting roles in the home:

(a)bsence of the father who normally assumes the role of disciplinarian leads to acting-out behavior. On the other hand, absence of the mother whose usual function is to nurture and provide emotional support for her children contributes to acting-in behavior (p. 86).

The nature of parental-child relationships are elaborated further in work on parental death with adults. Umberson (2003) reports that relationships with mothers are characterized by emotional closeness (see also Lawton et al., 1994; Swartz, 2009). Thus the loss of a mother and relationships involving closeness and expressivity (Rossi and Rossi, 1990; Hosely and Montemayor, 1997) may lead to an emotional response in the child. Following maternal death, adult children are likely to experience more psychological distress compared to other indices of health status (Umberson, 2003; Umberson and Chen, 1994). We hypothesize the same will be true for separations from mothers due to maternal imprisonment, as also suggested by Fritsch and Burkhead (1981) (Foster, H., Hagan, J. Maternal and paternal imprisonment in the stress process. *Social Sci. Res.* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2013.01.008>) .

Relationships with fathers are more likely to be activity based and characterized by instrumental involvements, from play in childhood through watching television together in adulthood (Umberson, 2003). Although father–child relationships have multiple dimensions, national research on levels of paternal involvement in two parent homes finds children spend the largest part of their time with fathers in play and companionship (Yeung et al., 2001; see also Collins and Russell, 1991; Pleck, 2010; McBride and Mills, 1993). Hosley and Montemayor’s (1997) review of father-adolescent relationships also indicates that youth engage in more free time activities with fathers than mothers; television watching is a common example. Umberson’s work on parental death suggests that due to the instrumental nature of father-child relationships, father loss should lead to alcohol problems in adulthood, while Fritsch and Burkhead’s (1981) incarceration research suggests that the disciplinary absence of fathers is influential in this way (Foster, H., Hagan, J. Maternal and paternal imprisonment in the stress process. *Social Sci. Res.* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2013.01.008>).

Building on this prior research, we hypothesize from a gendered loss perspective that the imprisonment of a mother should increase depressive symptoms, while the imprisonment of a father should increase substance related role problems in young adulthood (Foster, H., Hagan, J. Maternal and paternal imprisonment in the stress process. *Social Sci. Res.* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2013.01.008>).

Children react to situations they face in the only way they know, through their behavior. Excessive stress can cause headaches and stomach pain, boredom and health problems. When the stress level reaches its maximum, it can cause feelings of fatigue, anger, and / or sadness or hopelessness (Channing, 1994).

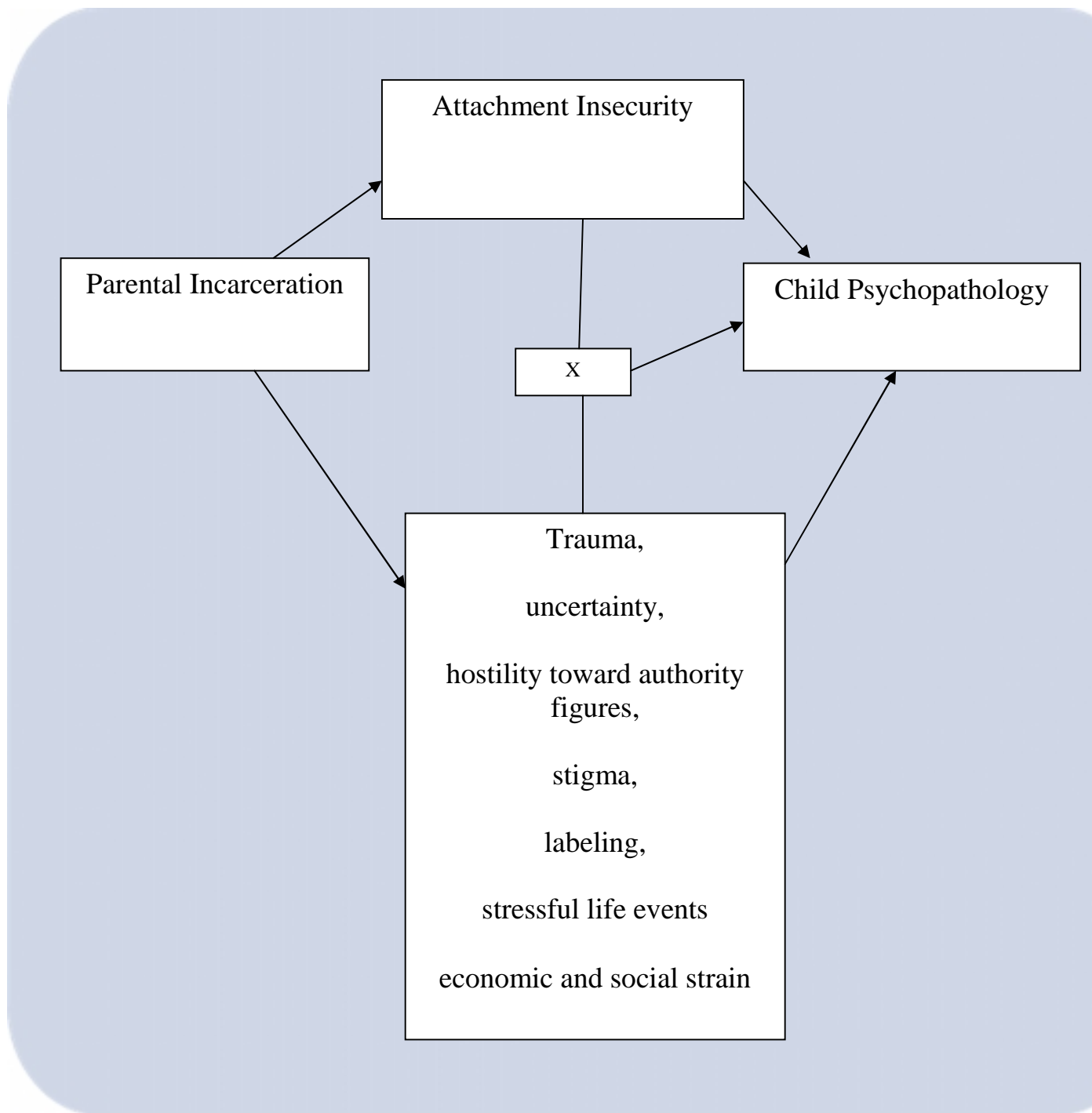


Figure 1. Multiple processes by which parental incarceration might contribute to child psychopathology².

² Joseph Murray & Lynne Murray (2010): Parental incarceration, attachment and child psychopathology, *Attachment & Human Development*, 12:4, 289-309

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