
Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children and Families

Lois E. Wright, Ph.D. and Cynthia B. Seymour, JD

Despite the large and increasing numbers of incarcerated parents, the children have been a forgotten population, with their special needs inadequately understood or addressed. Despite the inadequacy of our data on these children, the limited research, taken together with our theoretical and empirical knowledge of similar populations, can provide us with some understanding of the effects of parental incarceration on children.

It is exceptional for a family to experience incarceration in the absence of other difficulties. More often than not, an array of social, cultural, and familial risk factors coexist, each adding perhaps only a small increment to the totality of risk for the child and family. Though no one factor is predictive of particular child difficulties, we can predict negative outcomes from an accumulative array of factors; generally, the more endangering factors, the greater the risk. (This is not to say that negative outcomes are inevitable, and resilience within children with incarcerated parents remains largely unexplored.)

What Are the Effects on Children?

To understand the effects of parental incarceration on a child, we must look at the totality of a family's experiences involving a multiplicity of interrelated social, cultural, and familial factors, making it difficult to sort out the results of crime, arrest, and incarceration from ongoing life problems. To begin to understand these children's difficulties, we must look at their experiences both before the incarceration and during the incarceration. Though some children may have enjoyed a fairly stable and nurturing preincarceration family life, most will have experienced considerable instability and possibly maltreatment, with the problems related to incarceration superimposed upon existing difficulties.

Children's circumstances will vary, and each may experience a unique combination of risk factors. In addition, each child will react differently to his or her experiences, and available services and supports for each child vary. These differences complicate our ability to understand children's reactions to parental incarceration.

Some of the risk factors occurring both before and during incarceration are:

Poverty. Parents are apt to have been living in poverty before their incarceration and to have been unable to provide basic material resources. Poverty is often the core issue for a range of other difficulties that have consequences for children, including living in impoverished neighborhoods, limited parental educational achievement and limited parental job prospects.

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Alcohol and other drugs. Substance use and abuse is associated with poor neighborhoods, child maltreatment, and other social ills, severely limiting the user's ability to function appropriately across a range of life roles. Substance abuse usually has a role in the incarceration, either as a causal factor or as the primary offense. Even without the additional problems created by arrest and incarceration, "a mother's drug addiction can undermine her ability to provide consistent nurturing to her children" [8].

Crime. Living in an environment of ongoing criminal activity, either the parent's own crime or crime in the neighborhood, has documented effects on children, as they may live in constant fear or may have become numb, accepting danger as a normal part of growing up.

Intrafamilial violence. The parent may have been battered or a batterer. If the mother's partner is currently abusing her, her children are likely to be exposed to that violence at home [8]. Witnessing battering has been documented to negatively affect children (e.g., fear, guilt, and desensitizing to violence) [1].

Child maltreatment. Abuse or neglect of a child for some period before incarceration or as a precipitating factor in the incarceration is well documented as having a range of effects on children.

Previous separations. The children may have experienced previous foster care or other separation, and this period of incarceration may represent one more separation, though one with a slightly different meaning. Still, an ongoing pattern of instability leaves children more vulnerable to effects from additional separations.

Parent's history of abuse. The parent him/herself may have been maltreated as a child, and this experience can affect parenting abilities [8]. Abused parents who have not had the opportunity to deal with their own histories of child abuse or to recognize the ways it might affect how they raise their children may have an impaired ability to provide nurturing and discipline.

Enduring trauma. Enduring trauma is not a separate risk factor but rather a term used by The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents to describe the multiple and ongoing traumatization some children experience throughout one or several life stages, with no recovery time or supportive resources between traumas [6].

Arrest and incarceration. The parental arrest and incarceration expose the child to additional risks: further separations from the parent and possibly siblings, unstable care arrangements, uncertainty about his or her future, secrecy and deception regarding the incarceration, stigma, and difficulties with visitation.

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What Are Children's Reactions?

Despite the limitations in our knowledge of this population and the difficulty of establishing cause-effect relationships amid the potential multiplicity of risk factors, we do have a beginning body of knowledge about some of the negative consequences. Studies have indicated some child difficulties that may be related to the incarceration itself and that distinguish this group of children. We will review here some more general findings (i.e., effects that are similar to those of other forms of trauma) as well as those specifically linked to parental crime, arrest, and incarceration.

As a general context for looking at children's specific reactions to parental incarceration, it is important to understanding the following:

Children are diverted from development tasks when they experience trauma. It is normally expected that children's emotional energy will be invested in mastering their age-specific developmental tasks (i.e., forming attachments and developing trust, developing autonomy, developing initiative, learning to work productively, and achieving identity). The everyday challenges children experience, if they have the coping resources to meet them, make children stronger and move them forward developmentally. But if the challenges are too great and exceed children's capacity to cope, emotional survival begins to take precedence over mastery of developmental tasks, and they begin to show developmental delays (e.g., retarded language development) or regression (e.g., soiling or clinging), as well as other inappropriate coping strategies (e.g., numbing).

Children's responses to trauma will vary according to age. For instance, Johnston (1992) found disorganized feelings and behaviors in early childhood and maladaptive behaviors in later childhood (i.e., antisocial behaviors such as lying and stealing, aggressive or isolated behavioral disorders, conduct disorders, and depression). Among older children, sexual misconduct, truancy, delinquency, substance abuse, and gang activity were found [5]. In addition, children of different ages vary in terms of coping ability. Young children are least likely to have acquired the developmental skills necessary to cope with trauma and will be most in need of intervention. If they are unable to respond adaptively, they will respond maladaptively [5].

Children's reactions will vary over time. While we lack longitudinal studies documenting how children's reactions change overtime, we know generally that a crisis reaction is different from a long-term accommodation (adaptive or maladaptive) to trauma. In addition, we know that intervention is more effective if it is offered before maladaptive patterns have settled in and begun to feel "normal" for the child. Theory related to the grieving process suggests that people go through stages of grieving; these children are grieving for the absent parent. While the pattern of reaction is not invariable and the theory not entirely substantiated, it does provide some guidelines for understanding changing reactions over time. In addition, long after the traumatic event, posttraumatic stress reaction has been observed in some children [5].

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Children are always traumatized by separation. Regardless of the cause of the separation (e.g., parental death, divorce, military service, incapacity, or incarceration), it has a profound effect. These effects on children of different ages have already been well documented in the child welfare and divorce literature. We know that, depending upon the child's age and length of separation, reactions can include such things as inability to form later attachments, woebegone searching, numbing, self-blame, anger, depression, regression, and antisocial behaviors.

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Children's abilities to cope are hampered by uncertainty. While coping with bad situations is difficult, coping with uncertainty (e.g., relatives missing in action or abducted) is even more difficult. Yet uncertainty pervades the child's life when a parent is incarcerated, touching basic life issues. Answers to questions such as "what is going on?" "where will I live?" "who will care for me?" "when will I see my parent again?" "when will she/he home again?" "will there be enough money?" and "what will happen next?" remain nebulous. The child enters a period of remarkable instability and uncertainty, not even knowing with what he or she must cope. Often, a caregiver's well-meaning attempts to deceive the child only serve to increase the child's stress.

Children's trauma due to parental incarceration has some unique features. Sometimes the parent's crime is actually against the child, as in the case of severe physical or sexual abuse. The child may have witnessed a crime (including murder) by one parent against another. The child might have witnessed other types of criminal activity or been solicited for involvement in criminal activity (considered emotional abuse). Thus, it may pit family member against family member, undermining the child's sense of safety, security, and loyalty to a parent.

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Children express their distress through their bodies. Most children will find it difficult to communicate their distress through words, unless there is strong support for doing so. Rather, they express themselves through physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral means that we call symptoms.

In addition, posttraumatic stress reaction is receiving increasing attention. When children have been exposed to multiple and ongoing traumas, such as seeing a parent arrested, unstable care arrangements, secrecy, and stigma, they begin to show a constellation of symptoms that comprise posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [8]. Chart 1 presents some of the physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions that have been noted in children with incarcerated parents.

Chart 1. Child Reactions to Parental Incarceration

- Identification with the incarcerated parent, awareness of social stigma
- Change in future orientation and intrusive thoughts about their parents
- Concern about outcomes of case, unsure and worried about how to live without mother, concern about an uncertain future
- Flashbacks to traumatic events related to arrests
- Embarrassment and anger
- Fear, sadness, loneliness, guilt, low self-esteem, depression, emotional withdrawal from friends and family
- Separation anxiety and fears of abandonment
- Eating and sleeping disorders
- Aggression, anxiety and hyperarousal, attention disorders and developmental regression
- Physical aggression, withdrawal, acting out, academic and classroom behavior difficulties, truancy.

Source: Table 7. Child Reactions to Parental Incarceration, Wright, L.E. & Seymour, C. B. (2000). *Working with Children and Families Separated by Incarceration: A Handbook for Child Welfare Agencies*. Washington, D.C.: CWLA Press.

What Are the Effects on the Family?

It is important to look at the effects on the family, because that is the primary environment of the child, providing support and protection or exposing the child to threat and endangerment. As noted above, many families experience ongoing difficulties: poverty, instability, violence, and substance involvement, upon which the crisis of crime and incarceration is superimposed. How is the family different after the crime and incarceration? The primary changes can be categorized as structural, material, emotional, and dynamic, though these actually interact, each impacting the other.

Perhaps the most immediately apparent change in a family is structural. A family member is now absent, and either a remaining family member must take on the departing parent's roles and responsibilities, or those roles remain unfulfilled. Either scenario produces stress on the family.

Though most incarcerated men are either single or divorced, with fewer than one-fourth being married, most have children in whose lives they have played some part prior to incarceration [3]. Usually, because the father is seldom the sole caregiver of a child, the children continue to live with their mother. Still, the incarceration, whether the father was a full-time member of a household or a nonresident contributor, does remove him from whatever roles he may have filled in his child's household (and some fathers leave several households behind, as they have fathered children by several women).

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Because the mother is more likely than the father is to be the custodial parent and primary caregiver of a child, her incarceration will most likely have an even greater effect on family structure. If she has run an independent household, her children will need new living arrangements. Usually her children will stay with a relative, most often the maternal grandmother. The caregiver's home will also experience structural change through the addition of the children. Children may find themselves living in a home that has been disrupted by their presence even though they may be wanted there. Sometimes one caregiver is not able to care for an entire sibling group, so brothers and sisters may be separated. This separation only contributes to the trauma and disorientation that children experience when mothers become incarcerated.

Incarceration occurs disproportionately for families who are already living in poverty [4] and poses further financial difficulties. If a father is incarcerated, child support (court ordered or informal help) will be interrupted, possibly plunging the family into financial crisis. If he is the sole support of his family, the mother may have to go to work, which will have structural, emotional, and dynamic reverberations. If a mother who is the primary caregiver is incarcerated, the children may be left with no means of financial support except what can be provided by the substitute caregiver, often with state assistance.

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If the substitute caregiver is a relative, most likely a grandmother, she may be unprepared for the financial effect of taking on a new child or children. Meeting children's needs is not without cost, and the older the child, the greater the cost.

The whole family may go through an emotional upheaval as they experience the stigma, shame, guilt, and pain of dealing with a family member's incarceration. Dealing with the criminal justice system—the lack of information about how to contact the parent, conditions surrounding visits, uncertainty about what will happen to the parent—involves additional stress. While some families will cope admirably well, others may cope by expressing anger at the parent or insisting on secrecy about the incarceration.

It is important to reemphasize that some families will have experienced few of these factors. Perhaps for them the parent's crime and incarceration were fairly isolated incidents in otherwise stable families. We can't stereotype these families, which are as different from one another as any group of families would be. Just as multiple factors combine to pose risk for children and families, multiple factors can also influence eventual positive outcomes.

Adapted with permission from Wright, L.E. & Seymour, C. B. (2000). *Working with Children and Families Separated by Incarceration: A Handbook for Child Welfare Agencies*. Washington, D.C.: CWLA Press.