

Parental Incarceration

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In this paper, I will be discussing the controversial topic parental incarceration. Parental incarceration is an important research topic to be informed about because it affects more than just the person in prison, but their whole family system. There are numerous issues with the prison systems already, but incarcerated parents have an especially tough time. Parents that are incarcerated are at risk for more than losing precious years of their life locked behind bars, but will also face depression, negative long-lasting effects with children and other family members, and loss of family systems. Some theories I will incorporate in this paper are the Family Systems Theory, Attachment Theory, and the Ecological Systems Theory. The first subtopic that will be discussed is education programs for incarcerated parents, stress and depression affiliated with being a parent in prison, and the last topic I will discuss is the effects it has on children. Parental incarceration is a complicated topic

Education Programs

The first subtopic that I will be discussing is different parent education programs available for incarcerated parents. Parent education classes are important for people in jail because they are unlikely to be educated in how to properly take care of children, and without seeing their child everyday it is difficult to learn the appropriate techniques. According to research conducted by (Scudder, McNeil, Chengappa, Costello, 2014) approximately 336,000 households in the United States with minor children are directly affected by parental imprisonment, and the majority of inmates have reported to be parents of minors. The first program is a facility-based program, the parent-child interaction therapy (PCIT) class was provided for mothers seeking the opportunity to learn relationship building exercises, active listening, and communication skills. Mothers enrolled in the PCIT class demonstrated enhanced parenting skills during 5-minute

child-led play role-play interactions. This type of program lead to decreases in parent stress from pre-treatment to post-treatment. In Colorado, parent education programs were implemented to target parents in the process of reuniting with their families' post-release. The study revealed that mothers who took part in the parenting education program significantly benefitted by increasing their efficacy in communication, improving parenting skills, and increasing knowledge about child development (Gonzalez, Romero, & Cerbana, 2007). In addition, research conducted by (Loper & Tuerk, 2006) found that most parenting programs in prison have the same overarching goal of improving the relationship between parent and child, both during and after incarceration. Despite the similar goals, typical parenting programs offer different components regarding child development: enhanced visiting, parental rights training, nursery programs, or support groups. This study found that inmates' attitudes before and after parenting programs found positive results; scales that can be used to measure changes in parenting attitudes are the Porter Parental Acceptance Scale, Parenting Stress Index, and the Child Behavior Management which all reveal different aspects of program efficacy. All of the research studies had some limitations and areas that could be improved upon. The main area that could be improved for future studies are including both parental and maternal research findings to broaden the findings. All of the studies focused mainly on the mother and their experience with incarceration, but the paternal research could alter many of the results. In addition, the research studies conducted only had short-term findings, but if the studies were conducted longitudinally there may be more findings that were not recognizable before. The main theory that correlates with this subtopic is the Family Systems Theory. This theory relates to this section because incarcerated parents disrupt their family system by being away and having limited access to see their children. The model recognizes that family members experience developmental changes and confront crises in ways that enhance

effective functioning. The Family Systems Theory views the family as an emotional unit and are interconnected; relating to community service programs which are trying to rebuild family connections that have been lost. This model explains how everyday functioning takes place in a family, how rules evolve to govern the family unit, designated roles, and how the roles relate to family. The main priority of this theory is to have a nurturing parent-child relationship that values bidirectional communication; parents' roles are sensitive in the family system (Bigner & Gerhardt, 2014). This is important when considering parent-education programs because most incarcerated parents have little to no knowledge about child development, and through their education courses they learn the importance of being there for their child once released from prison. Furthermore, parent education classes are crucial for incarcerated parents because they typically do not have knowledge about child development, so having these programs are beneficial for both parent and child's well-being.

Depression amongst Incarcerated Parents

The next subtopic that I will discuss is stress and depression amongst incarcerated parents. Research conducted by (Roxburgh & Fitch, 2014) found that parents who are incarcerated are significantly more likely to be depressed than inmates without children. Findings also suggested that women report more distress than men, and also have higher levels of anger and resentment than men. In addition, a huge contributing factor to distress levels were based on communication with children. If the child was under grandparent custody and kept frequent contact with parent, especially by mail or in-person visits is associated with lower levels of depression. Furthermore, parent levels of distress were also due to if the child was in custody by family member or foster care. According to a study conducted by (Cunningham, 2001) parents are deeply affected by family separation. Families may be traumatized by arrest and incarceration, and feel helpless and

confused. Incarcerated parents have to handle the situation of explaining to their children their incarceration. Large numbers of parents provided false explanations to their children about their absence. Many parents feel helpless and powerless, with a loss of parental authority; their ability to parent is impacted by who is caring for the children and the role they are prepared to take in order to maintain contact. These experiences are traumatic for both the incarcerated parent and child because the children may feel they did something wrong that caused the parent to leave, and experience anger, isolation, and confusion. Since many prisons are not geographically close to where families reside, many incarcerated parents do not have the opportunity to see their children due to economic reasons. Parents in prison may have their children in the welfare system; they fear that important decisions regarding the child's well-being may be made in absence of the custodial parent. Prisoners who maintain contact with children and families are less likely to re-offend after release because during incarceration many individuals reflect on and renew their relationships with family. Furthermore, research conducted by (Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014) found that family contact during incarceration is a key factor relating to stress and depression. On one side, high quality in-person visits are associated with decreased depression and stress levels and increased parenting skills as well as improved family relationship. On the other side, visitation that inhibits family interactions may result in insecure attachments for the child and parent. All of the research studies conducted were very thorough and provided detailed information, but the main criticism that was found was the measure the researchers were using to find out the reason for depression and stress among incarcerated parents. These research studies relate to the Attachment Theory because parents are feeling depressed due to lack of contact with child. The less the parent knows about the child and receives information from the child, the more likely it is for the parent to be depressed. Writing letters is not as rewarding as in-person

visits, however the parent feels more attachment with the child due to the reflective activity that provides inmates with opportunities to develop self-understanding and enhance their bond with their children. Typically, when discussing attachment classes focus on the child's point of view. However, while in prison parents become depressed because they do not have the chance to connect with their child, and will potentially never receive the opportunity to ever reconcile. Prison is an already stressful experience, but adding children to the mix leads many parents to feel guilt and shame about separation from their children. Overall, incarcerated parents may feel less attachment to child due to limited visitation, and even when the child visits there are still boundaries that limit interaction and broaden the separation both parent and child feel.

Effects on Children

The third and last subtopic I will discuss is how parental incarceration effects children emotionally and developmentally. Many children with incarcerated parents experience a variety of negative emotional outcomes depending the age at which parents were incarcerated, child's familiarity with new environment, length of separation and strength of parent-child relationship. Having an incarcerated parent leads to experiencing a broad range of emotions, including fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, and loneliness. These children also exhibit low self-esteem, depression, and emotional withdrawal from peers and family. Subsequently, these children may begin to act inappropriately, become disruptive in class, or become antisocial. A causing factor may be the amount of contact the children receives with the parent. Approximately one half of incarcerated parents do not see their children at all; the others receive sporadic visits depending on the location of the prison, family's ability to transport there, and possibly the willingness of caregiver to facilitate a relationship between parent and child. Children that have been placed in foster care have unique needs compared to other foster children. They face trauma from being

separated and can result in long-term effects. Although there have been rising numbers of parental incarceration, few child welfare policies and procedures have been developed. Out of the fifty states, only twenty-eight states provide programs and services available to children with parents in prison (Seymour, 2008). In addition, a study conducted by (Miller, et al., 2013) found that children who lost their mothers to incarceration at a young age was extremely destabilizing. Parent incarceration may exacerbate existing family-level stress because someone has to step up and take care of the child. Children of incarcerated parents feel abandoned and express anger towards caregiver, and in turn, the caregiver can grow to resent parent in prison and/or resent child who rejects help. Similar to other studies, there were greater effects of child outcomes being negative. However, this study used a small sample size, which could have skewed the results. Subsequently, children of different ages react differently to parental incarceration; younger children may not be able to cognitively understand that they will ever see their parent again, and cannot communicate their need for nurture. Children are frequently left out of conversations concerning custody and visitation, which can increase feelings of unease and insecurity during development. Furthermore, children of incarcerated parents experienced higher rates of antisocial and criminal behavior, and if such behaviors continued throughout adolescence, the child can get into legal problems. A drawback from this study is that the results were gathered from the caregivers of the children, so for future studies it would be more beneficial to conduct a more extensive evaluation of child functioning using behavioral observations and interviews. A research study conducted by (Hambrick, 2017) revealed that nearly 50% of incarcerated parents reported observable changes in their children after their incarceration. Adolescent children were more likely to exhibit violence or serious delinquencies than peers who had little or no criminal justice system interactions. Despite all of the statistics

depicting the poor developmental outcomes of having an incarcerated parent, the judicial and penal systems frequently viewed as neither deserving of help by the federal system. The theory that that can correlate with this subtopic is the Ecological Systems Theory because children require a stable environment to develop properly and form positive attachments. The Ecological Systems Theory represents a sociocultural view of development; the theory focuses on five distinct but related environmental settings to explain how children and their family systems are influenced in their development, how relationships function, and how interactions occur.

However, with an incarcerated parent their microsystem is completely altered due to their primary caregivers not being able to provide support anymore. Since the child's microsystem is altered, that results in their macrosystem and exosystem changing as well. Their whole lives will be changed and there will be no stability, especially if the child is placed in the child welfare system. Children of incarcerated parents face a unique situation, and this is an important problem that requires more attention. Overall, parental incarceration is a risk factor for a broad range of negative outcomes during childhood, from externalizing behaviors such as aggression, violence and crime, to internalizing emotions such as depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders (Swisher & Shaw-Smith, 2015).

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed different community service options that have been implemented for incarcerated parents, and the benefits of these programs. The theory that coincides with this subtopic was the Family Systems Theory; I used this because having a parent in prison is extremely detrimental to the emotional unit of a family. The next subtopic I discussed was stress and depression amongst incarcerated parents. This is an important aspect to recognize because parents in prison typically express more distress than other prisoners due to the unknown

information they hold about their children. I used the Attachment theory for this section because parents also require attachment with their children to form any sort of bond, but since they're in prison it is very unlikely there will be a chance for reparation. Lastly, I focused on the effects of incarcerated parents on children's emotional development. This section correlated with the Ecological Systems Theory because once children become separated from their parents their entire microsystem is altered and leads to negative developmental outcomes. In all, parents that are incarcerated are at risk for more than losing precious years of their life locked behind bars, but will also face depression, negative long-lasting effects with children and other family members, and loss of family systems.

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