

19

The Systemic Invisibility of Children of Prisoners

Else Marie Knudsen

Introduction

In beginning a study of children of prisoners in Canada 2011, I immediately faced a significant hurdle: no one seemed to know anything about my topic. As I widened my net to approach policy makers, advocacy organizations, social service agencies, child welfare agencies, probation services, and anyone else I could think of, I kept receiving a variation of the same response: ‘Oh that’s interesting. We don’t have any data/ programs/experience, but there must be someone who does?’ Few had any information, resources, or leads, which is curious given there are likely around 40,000 children in Canada who *currently* have a parent in prison (Knudsen, 2016). Even as I began to meet families of prisoners, I found that few wanted to participate, and a common reason given was that their child didn’t know where the incarcerated parent was.

While I eventually met with several very knowledgeable key informants¹ and generous participant families, the pervasive ignorance about the experiences of Canadian children of prisoners was striking. Indeed, writing about families of prisoners often begins with a mention of their virtual absence from academic research until the 2000s. Until the recent escalation of research, this topic was under-examined, equivocal, and poorly understood, and continues to be so in some country-specific contexts including Canada. McCormick et al. (2014) write, ‘children of criminally incarcerated parents are an invisible population in Canada’. This invisibility extends beyond the lack of academic research; parental incarceration is often enrobed in secrecy, confusion, and misunderstanding—within families, in communities, and in public policy.

In this chapter, I will argue that children of prisoners are rendered invisible from the micro to the macro level, through a series of interconnected processes I will call *systemic invisibility*. While these children make up a sizeable population, and the experience and outcomes of parental incarceration appear to be significant, they are often hidden from view, subject to layers of invisibility. Starting from children’s own families, to their relationship with their schools and communities, to the policies and practices of the prison systems in which they are so tightly intertwined, and finally to the broader social policy context, I will discuss the ways in which parental incarceration is kept secret, enigmatic, and poorly understood. Finally, I will discuss the meanings and reasons behind these connected layers of invisibility.

¹ I am deeply indebted to the organizations that generously supported my research and allowed me to meet potential participants: Jessica and Derek Reid of FEAT for Children, as well as the John Howard Society of Hamilton, Cpt. Laura Burrell of the Salvation Army Kingston, Judith Laus of Prison Fellowship International’s Angel Tree program, and Louise Leonardi and Lloyd Withers of Canadian Families and Corrections Network

This discussion will be illustrated with data from my doctoral research into the experiences of Canadian children of prisoners, and thus make particular reference to the Canadian context, a jurisdiction in which there is a particular lack of policy attention. The study involved qualitative interviews with twenty-two children and youths, aged between 6 and 17, as well as their caregivers and a variety of key informants; study methodology is extensively described in Knudsen (2016).

Secrecy within families of prisoners

A challenge that immediately arose in my attempts to recruit families for the present study was a seemingly pervasive secrecy within families about parental incarceration. While this could not be a target of this study of self-reported experiences of parental incarceration, I found much anecdotal evidence of caregivers misleading children about their incarcerated parents' whereabouts. Many caregivers I met reported that they had not, or 'not yet', told their child the truth, including some I met while on trips with their children to prisons. One parent reported she'd told her son that they were going to an 'electricity factory' to explain why their parent would be behind glass in the remand centre. Several of my child participants had been lied to in the past. For example, 10-year-old Sophia described a trip to prison, at which the family was in fact refused the visit after travelling over 350km from their home to the prison due to not being properly registered for the visit:

Mom kinda had to lie to us, she was like 'oh we're gonna see [family friend] in his new place' and I was, 'cool.' And then after that, I found out, they said 'Oh guys you can't go visit your dad.' And we're like, 'wait, we're supposed to visit our dad?'

Okay, so you didn't know?

Yeah, I didn't know. None of us did besides [15-year-old-brother]

So you didn't know it was a prison, either?

I didn't know, I thought it was a food tasting place.

(Sophia, 10)

Question about lying to children about parental incarceration is a common topic of discussion for caregivers. For example, discussing parental incarceration with children is a common topic of factsheets and flyers provided to families of prisoners by charitable organizations (such as Adalist-Estrin, 2014 and CFCN, n.d.). An American online support network for prisoners' families, 'Prison Talk Online' has a sub-forum for people raising children who have a parent in prison, and the issue of whether to tell children about their parent's incarceration is a common topic of conversation (PrisonTalk Online, 2017); the advice varies between those who tell children that dad is away at work or college, and those who tell them that dad is in prison or use 'developmental explanations' (Poehlmann, 2005) such as that the parent is 'away on a time-out'.

Scholars have long relied on anecdotal evidence to suggest that children are pervasively lied to (Ayre et al., 2011; Hairston, 2002; Caddle and Crisp, 1997) and empirical data on the issue of children being lied to beginning to emerge (Smith, 2014; Lockwood and Raikes, 2015). Poehlmann (2005) studied children with a mother in prison, their caregiver and their incarcerated mother, and found the following: 57 per cent of caregivers gave honest information or developmental explanations of their mother's incarceration; 35 per cent gave distorted explanations (such as that she was away at college) or did not tell the child where their mother was; and 8 per cent told

the child about their mother's incarceration but included developmentally inappropriate details. Pehlmann (2005, 692) found that children are slightly more likely to have a positive view of their incarcerated mother when they are told about her imprisonment in a way that was 'simple, honest, and developmentally appropriate'.

The focus on maternal incarceration in Pehlmann's study renders it less generalizable and suggests that the rate of distorted explanations could be much higher. Men make up over 90 per cent of the prison population, thus paternal incarceration is much more prevalent. The vast majority (90 per cent) of children with incarcerated fathers in the US live with their mothers and have not faced any change in caregiver with the incarceration of their father, where children of incarcerated mothers are more likely to live with someone other than their father (which 28 per cent do) (Mumola, 2000). It would seem logical that caregivers of children who have changed caregivers due to parental incarceration are much less likely to provide a distorted explanation or no explanation at all.

The low rate of physical contact between prisoners and their children may also support the hypothesis of widespread secrecy. Only 20–25 per cent of US prisoner parents have monthly or more frequent visits with their children, and the majority of parents in prison have never had a visit from their children since their admission (Mumola, 2000). The reasons for this low contact likely include a range of explanations that are both consistent with pervasive family secrecy, as well as a variety of other explanations such as prohibitive travel costs, lack of meaningful relationship, or the unwillingness of the custody holder to support contact (Smith, 2014). Hutton's chapter in this volume provides further insight into the challenges faced by visitors to prison.

If one begins with the assumption that caregivers seek to optimize their child's best interest, and that decisions that appear inconsistent with this aim are due to ignorance or external barriers, this decision can be seen as not at all surprising. Parents might be concerned that a child may not be developmentally ready to receive this information (Crenshaw and Lee, 2011), that it will cause distress, that it may damage their relationship with the incarcerated parent, or that a child will tell others and be ill-treated or otherwise stigmatized (e.g. by teachers). In my conversations with caregivers of children of prisoners, reasons for lying that were less active decisions emerged, such as wanting to wait until the outcome of a trial in case the parent was acquitted; these lies were therefore a type of denial, 'vital lie' (Cohen, 2001). Given the oppression and marginalization more likely to be faced by families of prisoners, who are more likely to be Black or Indigenous, living in poverty, and have lower educational attainment, this fear of mistreatment by figures in authority is unsurprising (Juristat, 2009 and 2015; Statistics Canada, 2007; Glaze and Maraschuk, 2008; Murray and Farrington, 2005; Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). Caregivers may also be prioritizing short-term goals or delaying full explanations when making the decision not to tell children about parental incarceration. Given the uncertain and chaotic nature of initial periods of incarceration, such as prior to bail decisions being made, caregivers may feel that children need not be told about parental incarceration that is not (or hoped not to be) long term.

This seemingly pervasive lying to children about their incarceration caregivers is not innocuous. First, a widespread practice of lying to children about their parent's incarceration suggests that caregivers understand parental incarceration as needing to be kept secret because this knowledge would present risks or vulnerabilities for their children. Both the reasons for these fears and whether they are borne out present significant concerns and need for attention. Second, the decision to keep the incarcerated parent's whereabouts a secret from a child is not a neutral choice; it may

have negative emotional implications for children. Arditti (2012, 104) notes that secrecy towards children about their parent's incarceration, due to families colluding to keep secrets and not socially validating the child's experience of loss, contributed to the disenfranchised nature of the grief they experience. Loss that is disenfranchised is thought to inhibit the progress and resolution of that grief (Doka, 1989). Scholars warn that children may also experience anger, frustration, distrust, and fear associated with being lied to about a parent being in prison and (Robertson, 2007; Glover, 2009; Ayre et al., 2006; Loureiro, 2010; Katz, 2002). A key informant in the present study, a mental health professional around the prison system, links parents' decisions to lie to their own confusion with the system, but notes the harm this may pose to children:

If they think their parent has just chosen a job somewhere to go to construction or is working in a prison and you only get to see [them there]. So is the child thinking, 'did you choose a job far away rather than be with me?'

(Key informant 2)

Finally studies on children experiencing other types of loss further support the possibility that lying to children about parental incarceration may be harmful to children. For example, research into children's experience of divorce and other family transitions have highlighted the gulf between parents' and children's perceptions about how well an event or transition has been explained (Dunn et al., 2001; Smart, 2002), as well as children's desire to be heard and resentment at poor communication by their caregivers (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Dunn et al., 2001; Smart, 2002).

In this vein, one participant in the present study, 17-year-old Josh, reported that when he found out that his mother was in prison, one of his main concerns was that his caregiver (his maternal aunt) had lied to him about his mother's whereabouts:

Then my mom told me, she was, was like, 'yeah I was in the hospital for the time your aunt's letting you know I was in the hospital. Just recently I actually got put into the prison.' So I was like, 'oh okay, makes sense, lovely. She didn't lie to me or anything?' I was like 'okay cool, that's all I want to know, makes sense'

(Josh, 17)

Secrecy by children in their communities

While secrecy from children about parental incarceration was an anecdotal element of my study, secrets kept *by* children about their parent in prison was a significant finding; every child participant reported that keeping their parent's incarceration secret from everyone outside the home was their default response; most told no one but closest friends, and all of those who disclosed did so with caution. Children all seemed to understand their parent's incarceration to be a risky or vulnerable piece of information to them, even if some could not articulate the risk it posed. Some had been explicitly instructed by caregivers to keep this a secret. Ten-year-old Darcy reported:

Do you tell anyone, any of your friends that dad is in prison?

No.

Is it a secret?

Hmm ... I'm not sure 'cause my mom just said 'don't tell people.'

Gotcha. What do you think about that?

I think that it's right 'cause like ... I'm not sure. I just think it's right.

(Darcy, 10)

The children who were able to describe the reasons for their secrecy did so in three broad categories: First, several feared negative responses such as ridicule or shaming. For example, 10-year-old Sophia reported that she did not tell others 'Cause I thought that like they'd make fun of me about it'. Secondly, some older children reported a concern over potentially awkward or uncomfortable reactions. Fourteen-year-old Amy reported, for example, that she disliked being pitied for having a parent in prison, saying:

And I don't like that, when people [say] 'oh I'm sorry'. I don't care if you're sorry for me, it's fine [. . .] I'm not a big fan of [pity]. No, like it's, it's been like a whole life thing.

(Amy, 14)

Finally, several children noted a concern about people finding out about their parent's incarceration due to the breach of privacy itself, regardless of any emotional or concrete impact. The harm here appears to be solely the thought process of the potential 'listener', regardless of what that person might do or say as a result. For example, 15-year-old Oliver explained:

Like everybody that I know knows pretty much. But like only my, I only tell like certain things to my best friend. [. . .] . . . Because I can trust him, not to tell anybody

Okay, okay. What would happen if somebody did tell somebody, like what's the concern? For you?

It wasn't their business to know.

(Oliver, 15)

These findings are consistent with the research in this area; studies consistently find that children tend to keep parental incarceration a closely guarded secret from both peers and adults in their community (Lockwood and Raikes, 2015). Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) found that every participant in their study of thirty-four children and youths of prisoners reported concerns and confusion about whether to disclose to friends and teachers that they have a parent in prison. They presented as keenly aware of the risks and negative associations that this information holds and reported a desire for privacy. Another study found children expressing a desire to keep parental incarceration a secret from others and fear that others knowing would lead to bad consequences (Boswell, 2002).

This seemingly pervasive secrecy can have direct and indirect negative effects for children. First, secrecy prohibits community caregivers from the opportunity to provide potentially useful support. Ideally, having teachers, doctors, and other key caregiving figures in children's lives aware of their parental incarceration will provide them with insights into, and opportunities for responsive care to meet the child's emotional and behavioural needs. Effective social support networks have been shown to have an array of benefits to children's outcomes and wellbeing (Hagen and Myers, 2003).

Connecting children's microsystems via increased communication between caring teachers and concerned caregivers could help improve children's outcomes, as children may have access to more caring individuals who are committed to helping them deal with their parent's incarceration. (Dallaire et al., 2010, 289).

Indeed, a few youths in one study reported positive experiences such as a new friendship and feelings of solidarity which resulted from finding another youth with a parent in prison after disclosing (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008). The present study also found several children reported that when they did make the decision to tell others of their parent's incarceration, the experience was positive. Ten-year-old Phoebe reported the experience of telling a peer 'was awesome, to have friends on my side' and others found that adults could be surprising sources of support and reassurance.

Further, keeping secrets can in itself be an isolating, disconnecting experience and limit the ways in which these children can connect to, participate in, and be known to their communities. Studies of partners of prisoners have consistently found this group experiencing social isolation (Arditti et al., 2003; Condry, 2007; Smith et al., 2008).

Harter et al. (2005, 322) write about their similarly secretive subjects, homeless youths: ‘when the hidden homeless remain invisible, their life experience too often are sequestered, opportunities for emancipation too often diminished, and potentialities too often suppressed rather than actualized.’ Thus while efforts to pass as normal may be a tactic to meet short-term goals of relieving risk and discomfort, the invisibility of children of prisoners from their communities may exclude them, and have profoundly negative effects on their social capital.

However there is a counter perspective, that secrecy around parental incarceration is protective for children. Hagen and Myers (2003) studied a large sample of children of female prisoners and found that for children with low levels of social support, those who did not keep maternal incarceration a secret had higher internalizing and externalizing problem scores. That is, those children with few people to talk to but who spoke freely about their mother being in prison had the worst outcomes. They note that keeping secrets is a normal, pervasive, and positive developmental step for children, and further that parents requiring that their children keep this potentially stigmatizing information secret may be wise and protective (Hagen and Myers, 2003).

One explanation for this last finding is that secrecy about parental incarceration is an effective stigma management tool and that stigma is damaging to children’s outcomes. Stigma, the convergence of labelling, stereotyping, and separation (Link and Phelan, 2001), is a concept that has been widely applied by researchers to aid in understanding familial incarceration—including in the chapter by Hutton in this volume—some arguing that stigma may be one of the mediators of negative outcomes in children of prisoners (Hannem, 2010; Phillips and Gates, 2011; Hagan and Foster, 2012; Arditti, 2012). Studies of the partners of prisoners have similarly found that they experience shame and stigma through association with, or ‘contamination’ by, the offender (Condry, 2007; Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008; Cunningham, 2001; Lowenstein, 1986). Harter et al. (2005) describe the serious lengths that their similar respondents, homeless youths, went to in their efforts at secrecy, to ‘remain invisible and thereby pass as normal rather than deviant ... when participants shed their protective anonymity, they risk stigmatisation.’

This fear may be well-founded. In an intriguing study, Dallaire et al. (2010) found that teachers who assessed a fictional student describe a student whose mother is away in prison as less competent than a student whose mother is away for other reasons. Further, the teachers, all of whom expressed support and care about students with a parent in prison, reported concerns that *other* teachers would have lower expectations of and stigmatize these students (Dallaire et al., 2010).

However secrecy may, in a circular fashion, reinforce the very stigmatizing attributes that children seek to hide. Harter et al. (2005) note that: ‘Stigmatization not only creates definitions of acceptable and non-acceptable individuals and groups, it creates powerful cognitive maps of acceptable and non-acceptable places (and the types of people to be encountered in particular social settings).’ Children of prisoners learn that incarceration is socially negative and any connection to prisons a negative attribute, but through their secrecy, they reinforce for themselves and others that prisons and prisoners require secrecy. Their efforts at self-protection through secrecy renders children of prisoners invisible to the communities with which they interact, and may contribute to the notable lack of policy attention to the topic of parental incarceration; in

turn, the lack of policy and programme attention to parental incarceration in Canada (described further below) may contribute to children feeling invisible and isolated. In this way, the invisibility of children of prisoners becomes contagious, systemically crossing through the layers of children's lives.

Lack of community between prisoners' families

Another element of the invisibility of children of prisoners is the lack of political organizing or advocacy by and for this group in the public sphere. Unlike other groups of parents with concerns about the ways their children are being treated by state systems, caregivers of children who have a parent in prison appear, in Canada, to rarely engage in resisting, organizing, or even meeting each other (Knudsen, 2016).

There are a variety of practical issues that may prevent the formation of connections and sense of 'community' between family members of prisoners. The nature of being a prisoner's family member means that one only meets peers in person if paths cross in the strange space of prison waiting rooms. If prisoners' families find each other online, the initial period of remand may be marked by much confusion, or hopes that the situation is temporary (and thus not be worth investing in forging new peer relationships). Moreover, the common denominator between them is highly negative and unwanted, and stigma or fear may also prevent efforts to meet others. These families may also simply be too exhausted to take on advocacy activities; given the demands on their finances, time, and emotions that are involved in having a loved one in prison, there may be no resources left with which to enact resistance.

Further, while families of prisoners share a greater likelihood of facing social risks such as poverty, they are far from homogenous in other aspects of their lives, experiences, and interests. Wacquant (2016) warns,

The sociology of marginality must fasten not on vulnerable 'groups' (which often exist merely on paper, if that) but on the institutional mechanisms that produce, reproduce and transform the network of positions to which its supposed members are dispatched and attached. And it urges us to remain agnostic as to the particular social and spatial configuration assumed by the resulting district of dispossession. In particular, we cannot presume that the emerging social entity is a 'community' (implying at minimum a shared surround and identity, horizontal social bonds and common interests), even a community of fate, given the diversity of social trajectories that lead into and out of such areas.

While peer support groups, which exist in many jurisdictions, might seem to be effective in supporting prisoners' partners to advocate for themselves and their families' rights, this does not necessarily constitute collective resistance faced by families of prisoners, both because it may not challenge systemic stigma or other repressive structures, and because, as Cornish (2006) notes, the advocacy is not widely known.

Cornish (2006) argues that self-stigma is challenged by problematising it, through using the language of rights, showing equivalencies with other repressed groups and movements which have successfully organised for change, and showing the group's own positive achievements. It is interesting, then, that existing organisations working with families of prisoners tend not to problematise the treatment of prisoners' families by prison systems, at least in their public materials (Knudsen, 2016). For example, the security processes faced by visitors is widely presented as challenging but necessary, infallible and politically neutral.

As these groups would be the natural source for organizing collective resistance, their lack of criticism and problematization is not benign. Organized resistance has the potential to improve the conditions faced by aggrieved groups, but even if ineffective at promoting change in conditions, these actions can ‘give voice’ to invisible groups. In this way, the processes that pose barriers to organizing, both pragmatic and structural, contribute to the invisibility of families of prisoners at the political and policy level.

Invisibility in prison and children’s policy

The invisibility of children of prisoners in Canada runs deeper than can be explained by their and their caregivers’ individual secrecy. As researchers began to explore the outcomes of parental incarceration in the 1990s and 2000s, the data suggested that children of prisoners faced gravely poor outcomes, and the sheer number of these children with the late modern penal explosion meant that even small differences were massively consequential. Murray (2006, 771) writes that these findings:

... should have prompted large-scale epidemiological and intervention studies to assess the risks associated with parental imprisonment and to evaluate programs aimed at supporting prisoners’ children. Penal and social policies should have been implemented to prevent harmful effects on children. Neither the research nor the social policy has been forthcoming.

While this appears to be starting to change in Europe, Canadian children of prisoners have not been recognized in social policy, they are markedly absent from a variety of discussions, policies, and systems in which they would be expected to be recognized, and their absence causes contradictions in stated policy intentions. Formal policies and legislation around Canadian prisons, at both the federal and provincial level, make virtually no mention of children of prisoners (Knudsen, 2016), as Oldrup and Frederikson note was the case in European states until the 2000s (Oldrup and Frederikson, this volume).

Even policies that are seemingly explicitly about children, such as the Canadian Mother–Child programme, which allows women prisoners to reside with their young children inside federal institutions under certain conditions, is marked by an absence of children. The programme is extremely difficult to access and thus consistently ‘hardly used’ since its 2001 inception; the part-time programme in particular has been ‘rarely used’ at any point (Brennan, 2014). There are around 900 women incarcerated in federal institutions (Juristat, 2015), around half of them mothers, and the programme (both its full and part-time iterations) has been used by an average of 2.9 mothers per year since its inception (Brennan, 2014.).

Children of prisoners are also absent from the broader children and family policy context. While this group of children can easily be described as high needs and high risk, and number in the hundreds of thousands, they simply do not exist in Canadian social policy (Knudsen, 2016). There is no special mention of this group in government documentation at the Ontario provincial or federal level, despite both levels of government having a stated focus on supporting children and families, and making special mention of a variety of other sub-groups of children who have special needs or interests (Canada, 2015; Ontario, 2015). Systems and institutions in Canada who would seem to have an interest in understanding and attending to this particularly vulnerable group of children similarly, such as primary education Boards and child welfare agencies, appear to have no policy, research, or programming related specifically to children of prisoners.

Similarly, there is a marked paucity of research about Canadian families of prisoners. While there has been an explosion of research in this area internationally in recent years, rigorous research into parental incarceration of Canadian children continues to be virtually non-existent (Bayes, 2002; McCormick et al., 2014). Exceptions include these aforementioned sources, and Withers and Folsom, (2007). This is undoubtedly related to the lack of available data to work from; like the Irish system described by Parkes and Donson in this volume, neither the Canadian federal system nor the Ontario provincial system keep any recorded statistics on children, parenting status, or visits of their prisoners. Lack of research evidence can, in turn, only support the lack of prison policy or broader social policy attention to children of prisoners.

Understanding children of prisoners' systemic invisibility

Having described the ways in which children of prisoners are rendered invisible in all of the layers of their lives, from the micro to the macro level, and several ways in which these layers of invisibility are interconnected, I seek now to consolidate these arguments, suggesting that this invisibility is systemic.

I suggest that the secrecy around parental incarceration is both pervasive and contagious. As argued above, the widespread secrecy from and by children about their parent's incarceration may contribute to a broader ignorance by the communities that serve them about parental incarceration. This in turn may contribute to the large-scale paucity of attention to children of prisoners by the many people, organizations and systems who would otherwise be considered knowledgeable about the experiences of marginalized children or criminalized people, such as child welfare agencies, or prisoner rights organizations. Perhaps the relationship may also travel in the other direction; the profound lack of Canadian programming, policy, or research may affect children's decisions to disclose parental incarceration to peers and teachers by communicating implicitly that this is an unknown, misunderstood, and even shameful topic. I posit three overarching reasons that contribute to children of prisoners being rendered invisible at every level:

1. Intersecting Invisibility

The lack of research data, public policy, and programming focused on children of prisoners stands in sharp contrast to the amount of data, policy, and programming focused on prisoners themselves. Indeed, stigma cannot be the main reason for the lack of policy and programme attention to children of prisoners.

Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach's (2008) concept of intersectional invisibility provides a useful explanation. Specifically, they argue that less prototypical members of oppressed groups that also belong to another subordinate group are not recognized as members of either group. Like any group, people connected by subordination are heterogeneous, subject to internal power hierarchies that see the most powerful members as controlling elites, even if they occupy a limited social space as a group (Hannem, 2012). In this way, the marginal members of marginalized groups become 'acutely socially invisible'. (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008). Cornish (2006) notes that 'the most profound stigmatisation often occurs at the intersection of multiple forms of exclusion'. This corresponds to Crenshaw's work on intersectionality, which argues that there is a unique marginalization at the intersection of forms of oppression such as racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 2002).

I suggest that intersectional invisibility contributes to the absence of any significant advocacy work, research, service provision, or other attention to children of prisoners in Canada. Children are clearly marginal and less powerful members (in both abstract and practical terms) of groups that include adults. Their interests are particularly rendered invisible when they are assumed to have identical interests to the more powerful members of a series of more specific groups: the criminalized, secondarily criminalized people, or even the family of an individual prisoner.

Children's interests may fail to be privileged even in services that explicitly seek to support them. For example, many jurisdictions offer transportation or visiting services aimed explicitly at supporting or even encouraging children to visit incarcerated parents. However this approach to prison visits is grounded in several uncritical and unfounded beliefs. One is that visits are always and necessarily beneficial to children and that prisoners' and children's interests and wishes coincide. While it is certainly the case that family visits are beneficial for prisoners, having been shown to reduce violence and recidivism (Schafer, 1994; Bales and Mears, 2008; Derkzen et al., 2009), the outcomes of children of prisoners is much less clearly positive. Pohlmann's (2005) study found negative emotional outcomes associated with children visiting prisons in some situations, and Pohlmann et al.'s (2010) review of the literature on visiting a parent in prison found that the research suggested that visits with incarcerated parents in non-'child-friendly' visitation environments are associated with attachment concerns, and attention and behavioural problems. Thus, any blanket recommendation that children visit incarcerated parents, or programme that seeks to encourage visits to take place without support or assessment is privileging the prisoner's and the prison service's interests over the child's.

Another problematic belief is that prisoners' needs for reintegration success is a goal for which a child's visit can and ought to be a means, an issue of instrumentalizing discussed in the chapters by Hutton and Loucks and Loureiro in this volume. Codd (2007, 258) notes the concerns about using children as tools to increase the wellbeing and interests of their parent: 'it is more appropriate to support families for their own sake, rather than as instruments of penal policy.' To become 'visible', children must be both attended to in policy and practice, but also have their needs and wishes privileged as worthy in themselves.

i. Less accountability

Another reason for the invisibility of children of prisoners in the criminal justice system is, I argue, that it serves the needs of this system for these children to be unknown, empirically. As noted, no quantifiable data is collected about Canadian children of prisoners or parenting in prison and without basic knowledge about families of prisoners, it is possible to not take (or be given) any responsibility for their wellbeing or outcomes. A senior official responded as follows to my questions about the lack of available data about children of prisoners:

We don't know. If you were to ask me the question how many have children and age ranges and what happens to them, and are they involved in child welfare or Children's Aid Societies, I could not tell you.

Why?

Let me be careful but, it serves no purpose to know ...

(Key informant 1)

The data, if known, could lead to the government being given challenging responsibilities for children of prisoners' wellbeing and for addressing the impact of parental incarceration. For example, public awareness of the numbers and plight of children of prisoners could create political pressure to provide a variety of services and supports. Further, basic data about children of prisoners, combined with recognition of their needs and outcomes, could lead to administrative, judicial, or quasi-judicial demands that children of prisoners be treated as clients of the prison service. This would not be unfounded; children enter prisons, are subject to prison rules, enter into communication with prison residents which is mediated by the prison, and are profoundly emotionally and materially affected by prison policies. That the prison service has responsibilities to its child visitors can certainly be argued, as Donson and Parkes set out in the European context in this volume.

If children of prisoners were seen as secondary clients of the prison service, responsibilities would be a high financial cost in the short term; providing, for example, transportation services, financial resources to support family visiting, further visiting options including video visits, structured and supported family visits, bespoke programming for child of prisoners, would all be associated with high financial cost, particularly in development. These costs may actually also be a wise long-term financial investment, potentially recuperated through lower recidivism rates, and meet other correctional and social justice goals, however short political cycles may make such investments unattractive.

In addition to financial costs, responsibility for children of prisoners might be seen as adding to the risk and liability faced by the prison service. If 40,000 Canadian children became clients of the prison service, and their wellbeing and outcomes thereby fell under the purview and mandate of the service, a secondary concern after cost might likely be the security risks and other changes the prison would see this as presenting. Watson (2015, 342) argues that the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) resists research by external sources in an effort to avoid criticism, transparency, and change: 'Asking for [in her case] staff perceptions could potentially open a door to problems or criticisms that would demand organisational attention and modification of the status quo.' Remaining in the 'knowing-not knowing' state allows the institution to deny a potentially uncomfortable state (Cohen, 2001).

The prison system has also long been argued to take an actuarial approach, reducing prisoners to their risk assessment (Hannah-Moffatt, 2016). Lives reduced to actuarial rates and devoid of social context are surely less messy to manage. A striking piece of evidence of this faith in actuarial assessments, and reluctance to discuss experiences is found in Watson's (2015) case study of her failed attempt to gain research access to federal prisons. She received the following response from CSC to her proposal to ask staff about their perceptions (of substance abuse programming):

CSC currently uses a variety of actuarial tools to assess change and the impact of a program, which have been demonstrated to be more effective than clinical assessment. Accordingly, the basis for asking for opinions is not supported by research.

(Quoted in Watson 2015, 342)

Munn (2012) invokes Foucault to argue that prisoners' lives are lived under regulation, discipline, and surveillance, all through the language of risk assessment but which, she suggests, sends the message of undesirability and unfitnes. Reduced to their level of cost, liability, and risk to the institution is, like being reduced to their utility, surely a process of dehumanization, rendering children of prisoners invisible.

ii. Political utility

The final reason for the invisibility of children in penal policy is, I suggest, that the construction of prisoners as parents is incompatible and disruptive to the political narrative of criminals in late modernity. The invisibility of children of prisoners therefore serves the ideological needs of the system. Canadian criminal justice policy has changed dramatically since the Conservative Party formed the first of three consecutive governments in 2006. An explicit push by that government to change the penal landscape of the country saw a myriad of legislative changes in line with the punitive trend across English-speaking and Western European countries.

The government introduced broad-ranging mandatory minimum prison sentences, actively resisted research- and court-supported safe injection sites, and introduced a ‘dangerous offender’ designation which allows prisoners to be kept incarcerated indefinitely (CBC, 2011). The 2015 Election platform by the incumbent Conservative Party continued to use criminal justice policy as a major election issue and to use a punitivism narrative with a promise to introduce ‘Life means life’ legislation (removal of parole for certain life sentences) and attack the other two major political parties for their criminal justice stances. While the centrist Liberal Party gained power in 2015 and campaigned on promises to reverse some of these Law and Order policies, they have, to date, failed to take any meaningful action (Brown and Lacy, 2018).

Under this ideology, criminals are constructed as unredeemable, deviant ‘others,’ and people in prison exemplify the extreme binary on which the punitive Law and Order approach to criminal justice relies. In this normative and strict binary, the category of ‘criminal’ is constructed as mutually exclusive from other law-abiding and hardworking citizens. This is seen in the frequent use of a ‘zero-sum game’ to suggest that criminals having rights harms or preclude the rights of victims (Reiner, 2007). For example, one press release stated that another party leader’s ‘dangerous, ideology driven criminal justice policy would make our communities less safe by putting the so-called “rights” of criminals ahead of the rights of victims’ (Conservatives, 2015). This narrative crosses through layers of Canadians’ lives, impacting or reflecting everything from policy, to service to everyday conversation.

To this strict binary, the presence of children and parenting roles is, I would argue, disruptive. Outside of the prison context, young children are constructed as universally innocent, and parenting as valuable and worthy of policy support. Further, parenting is profoundly human and complex, an irreconcilable contrast to the construction of prisoners as narrowly deviant, less-human ‘others.’

Giddens (1984, 192) describes ideology as functioning to legitimate and favour dominant interests by constructing narrow interests as universal, denying contradictions, and bolstering existing social structures. As such, children of prisoners and prisoners’ parenting roles certainly present a contradiction to the current criminal justice ideology and thus rendering these invisible, from the micro to the macro level, is a method of maintain the ideology’s legitimation and sense.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined an argument that children of prisoners are ‘invisible’ at a variety of levels of their lives. Secrecy by and towards these children renders them hidden in their families and communities, and lack of policy and data hides them from public debate or attention. These types of invisibility may be interconnected and

be exacerbated by factors, such as intersectional invisibility, as well as the liability and ideological interests that these children's absence may serve for prison systems. The breadth and reach of this absence across and between the micro to the macro level suggests it is a systemic invisibility. This invisibility is likely to be far from innocuous; children of prisoners deserve the practical and abstract benefits of being recognized, heard, and valued.

References

- Adalist-Estrin, A., 2014. *Fact and issues: Questions Children Ask. Children of Incarcerated Parents Library Factsheet*. National Resource Centre on Children and Families of the Incarcerated. Accessed 22 April 2017 at: <http://nrccf.camden.rutgers.edu/files/cipl103-conversations-questionschildrenask.pdf>.
- Arditti, J. A. 2012. *Parental Incarceration and the Family*. New York: NYU Press.
- Arditti, J. A., Lambert-Shute, J., and Joest, K. 2003. 'Saturday Mornings at the Jail: Implications of Incarceration for Families and Children'. *Family Relations*, 52(3), 195–204.
- Ayre, E., Gampell, L., and Smith, P. S. 2011. 'Introduction'. In Smith, P. S. and Gampell, L. (eds.) *Children of Imprisoned Parents. Denmark*, The Danish Institute for Human Rights, European Network for Children of Imprisoned Parents, University of Elster and Bambinisenzasbarre. 3–11.
- Bales, W. D. and Mears, D. P. 2008. 'Inmate Social Ties and the Transition to Society: Does Visitation Reduce Recidivism?'. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 45(3), 287–321.
- Bayes, S. 2002. *A Snowball's Chance: Children of Offenders and Canadian Social Policy*. Vancouver: Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver.
- Boswell, G. 2002. 'Imprisoned Fathers: The Children's View'. *The Howard Journal*, 41(1), 14–26.
- Brennan, S. 2014. 'Canada's Mother-Child Program: Examining Its Emergence, Usage and Current State'. *Canadian Graduate Journal of Sociology and Criminology*, 3(1). 11–33.
- Brown, D. and Lacy, M. 2018. 'Trudeau government is falling short on justice reform'. *The Toronto Star*. 30 January 2018. Accessed 28 May 2018 at: <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2018/01/30/trudeau-government-is-falling-short-on-justice-reform.html>.
- CBC, 2011. 'Tory Crime bill cracks down on drug, sex offences'. 20 September 2011 Accessed 22 November 2015 at: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/tory-crime-bill-cracks-down-on-drug-sex-offences-1.1003225>.
- Caddle, D. and Crisp, D. 1997. *Imprisoned Women and Mothers: Home Office Research Study 162*. London: Home Office.
- Canada, Government of. (2015b) Website: *Helping Families Prosper*. Accessed 20 November 2015 at: <http://www.canada.ca/en/campaign/taxsavings/transcript-hfp.html>.
- Canadian Families and Corrections Network, n.d. Flyer: 'Telling the Children: How to talk to Children about a loved One's Incarceration'. Accessed 22 April 2017 at: <http://www.cfcn-rcafd.org/text/TellingtheChildren.pdf>.
- Christensen, E. 1999. *Forældre i fængsel – en undersøgelse af børn og forældres erfaringer*. Copenhagen: Socialforskningsinstituttet.
- Codd, H. 2007. 'Prisoners' Families and Resettlement: A Critical Analysis'. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 46(3), 255–63.
- Cohen, S. 2001. *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Condry, R. 2007. *Families Shamed: The Consequences of Crime for Relatives of Serious Offenders*. Cullompton: Willan.
- Conservative Party of Canada. 2015, 18 August. Press Release: 'Harper Announces "Life Means Life" as his Government's top justice priority'. Accessed 1 November 2016 at: <http://www.conservative.ca/harper-announces-life-means-life-as-his-governments-top-justice-priority/>.

AQ: please
check link.
Proof query

- Cornish, F. 2006. 'Challenging the Stigma of Sex Work in India: Material Context and Symbolic Change'. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 16(6), 462–71.
- Crenshaw, K. W. 2002. 'First Decade: Critical Reflections, or a Foot in the Closing Door', *The UCLA Law Review*, 49, 1343.
- Crenshaw, D. A. and Lee, J. 2011. 'The Disenfranchised Grief of Children'. In Webb, N. B. (ed.) *Helping Bereaved Children: A Handbook for Practitioners*. Guilford Press. 91–108.
- Cunningham, A. 2001. 'Forgotten Families—The Impacts of Imprisonment'. *Family Matters*, 59, 35–8.
- Dallaire, D. H., Ciccone, A., and Wilson, L. C. 2010. 'Teachers' Experiences with and Expectations of Children with Incarcerated Parents'. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 31(4), 281–90.
- Derkzen, D. M., Gobeil, R., and Gileno, J. 2009. *Visitation and Post-Release Outcome among Federally-Sentenced Offenders*. Canada: Correctional Service of Canada.
- Doka, K. J. 1989. *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow*. Lexington MA: Lexington Press.
- Dunn, J., Davies, L. C., O'Connor, T. G., and Sturgess, W. 2001. 'Family Lives and Friendships: The Perspectives of Children in Step-, Single-Parent, and Nonstep Families'. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15(2), 272–87.
- Garland, D. 2001. *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Giddens, A. 1984. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Glaze, L. and Maruschak, L. 2008. *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children*. US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Glover, J. 2009. *Every Night you Cry: The Realities of Having a Parent in Prison*. Essex: Barnados.
- Hagan, J., and Foster, H. 2012. 'Children of the American Prison Generation: Student and School Spillover Effects of Incarcerating Mothers'. *Law & Society Review*, 46(1), 37–69.
- Hagen, K. A., and Myers, B. J. 2003. 'The Effect of Secrecy and Social Support on Behavioral Problems in Children of Incarcerated Women'. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 12(2), 229–42.
- Hairston, C. 2002. 'Prisoners and Families: Parenting Issues During Incarceration'. Paper presented at the US Department of Health and Human Services conference: 'From Prison to Home: The Effect of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families and Communities', January 2002.
- Hannah-Moffat K. 2016. 'A Conceptual Kaleidoscope: Contemplating "Dynamic Structural Risk" and an Uncoupling of Risk from Need'. *Psychology, Crime & Law* 22(1), 33–46.
- Hannem, S. 2010. 'Stigma, Marginality, Gender and the Families of Male Prisoners in Canada'. In Doyle, A. and Moore, D. (eds.) *Critical Criminology in Canada: New Voices, New Directions*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press. 183–218.
- Hannem, S. 2012. 'The mark of association: Transferred stigma and the families of male prisoners'. Hannem, S., & Bruckert, C. (Eds.) *Stigma revisited: Implications of the mark*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Harter, L. M., Berquist, C., Scott Titsworth, B., Novak, D., and Brokaw, T. 2005. 'The structuring of invisibility among the hidden homeless: The politics of space, stigma, and identity construction'. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 33(4), 305–27.
- Juristat 2015. *Adult Correctional Services Survey 2013/2014*. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Statistics Canada.
- Katz, A. 2002 'Parents In Prison'. *Criminal Justice Matters*, 50(1), 18–19.
- Knudsen, Else Marie. 2016. *The experiences of Canadian children of prisoners*. PhD thesis, The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).
- Link, B. G., and Phelan, J. C. 2001. 'Conceptualizing Stigma'. *Annual review of Sociology*, 27(1), 363–85.

- Lockwood, K. and Raikes, B. 2015. 'A Difficult Disclosure: The Dilemmas Faced by Families Affected by Parental Imprisonment Regarding What Information to Share'. In Reeves, C. (ed) *Experiencing Imprisonment: Research on the Experience of Living and Working in Carceral Institutions*. London: Routledge. 230–47.
- Loureiro, T. 2010. *Perspectives of Children and Young People with a Parent in Prison*, Scotland's Commission for Children and Young People.
- Lowenstein, A. 1986. 'Temporary Single Parenthood--The Case of Prisoners' Families'. *Family Relations*, 35(1), 79–85.
- McCormick, A. V., Millar, H. A., and Paddock, G. B. 2014. 'In the Best Interests of the Child: Strategies for Recognizing and Supporting Canada's At-risk Population of Children with Incarcerated Parents'. University of the Fraser Valley. Centre for Safe Schools and Communities.
- Mumola, C. 2000. *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children* (NCJ-182335). Washington, DC: Department of Justice.
- Munn, M. 2012. 'The Mark of Criminality Rejections and Reversals, Disclosure and Distance: Stigma and the Ex-Prisoner'. In Hannem, S., and Bruckert, C. (eds) *Stigma Revisited: Implications of the Mark*. University of Ottawa Press. 147–69.
- Murray, J. 2006. 'Review: All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated'. *British Journal of Criminology*, 46(4), 771–74.
- Murray, J. and Farrington, D. P. 2005. 'Parental Imprisonment: Effects on Boys' Antisocial Behaviour and Delinquency Through the Life-Course'. *Journal of Child Psychology and psychiatry*, 46(12), 1269–78.
- Nesmith, A. and Ruhland, E. 2008. 'Children of Incarcerated Parents: Challenges and Resiliency, in Their Own Words'. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(10), 1119–30.
- Ontario 2015. News release: 'Ontario Launches Enhanced Youth Action Plan'. Accessed 1 November 2015 at: <https://news.ontario.ca/mcys/en/2015/06/ontario-launches-enhanced-youth-action-plan.html>.
- Phillips, S. D. and Gates, T. 2011. 'A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Stigmatization of Children of Incarcerated Parents'. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 20(3), 286–94.
- Poehlmann, J. 2005. 'Representations of Attachment Relationships in Children of Incarcerated Mothers'. *Child Development*, 76(3), 679–96.
- Poehlmann, J., Dallaire, D., Loper, A. B., and Shear, L. D. 2010. 'Children's Contact with Their Incarcerated Parents: Research Findings and Recommendations'. *American Psychologist*, 65(6), 575–98.
- Prison Talk Online. 2017. 'When to tell children'. Bulletin Board Post. Accessed 22 April 2017 at: <http://www.prisonstalk.com/forums/showthread.php?t=683883>.
- Pryor J., and Rodgers, B. (2001). *Children in Changing families: Life After Parental Separation*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Purdie-Vaughns, V. and Eibach, R. P. 2008. 'Intersectional Invisibility: The Distinctive Advantages and Disadvantages of Multiple Subordinate-Group Identities'. *Sex Roles*, 59(5–6), 377–91.
- Reiner, R. 2007. *Law and Order: An Honest Citizen's Guide to Crime and Control*. London: Polity.
- Robertson, O. 2007. *The Impact of Parental Imprisonment on Children*. Geneva: Quaker United Nations Office.
- Schafer, N. E. 1994. 'Exploring the Link between Visits and Parole Success: A Survey of Prison Visitors'. *International Journal of Offender Therapy & Comparative Criminology*, 38(1), 17–32.
- Smith, P. 2014. *When the Innocent are Punished: The Children of Imprisoned Parents*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Smart, C. 2002. 'From Children's Shoes to Children's Voices'. *Family Court Review*, 40(3), 307–19.

- Smith, R., Grimshaw, R., Romeo, R., and Knapp, M. 2008. 'Prisoners' Families: Civic Virtue and Policies of Impoverishment'. *Benefits*, 16(1), 3–17.
- Social Exclusion Unit. 2002. *Reducing Re-Offending by Ex-Prisoners*. Social Exclusion Unit.
- Statistics Canada. 2007. *Population and Dwelling Counts, 2006 Census*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 97-550-XWE2006002. Ottawa, Ontario.
- Wacquant, L. 2016. 'Revisiting Territories of Relegation: Class, Ethnicity and State in the Making of Advanced Marginality'. *Urban Studies*, 53(6), 1077–88.
- Watson, T. M. 2015. 'Research Access Barriers as Reputational Risk Management: A Case Study of Censorship in Corrections'. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 57(3), 330–62.
- Withers, L. and Folsom, J. 2007. *Incarcerated Fathers: A Descriptive Analysis*. Canada: Correctional Service of Canada.

AQ: please
supply
location: proof
query

