

Avoiding the pathologizing of children of prisoners

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Abstract

Using the existing empirical literature and making reference to original research with Canadian children of prisoners, this Practice Note offers a caution to practitioners against making homogenizing or pathologizing assumptions about children who have a parent involved in the criminal justice system. Specifically, the notions that children of prisoners are highly likely to follow their parent to prison, are identical in their experiences of parental incarceration, or are necessarily in need of a specific counselling intervention are challenged. While children with a parent in prison are vulnerable to a variety of risk factors such as poverty, the relationship between parental incarceration, its covariates, and negative outcomes is complex. This paper concludes with four recommendations to practitioners working with families of prisoners and others involved in the justice system.

Keywords

antisocial behaviour, at-risk youth, children of prisoners, intervention strategies, pathologizing

Introduction

Children of prisoners, until recently 'invisible', are increasingly being recognized and discussed by researchers, charities and practitioners. In 1999, Hagen and Dinovitzer argued that 'The impact of the imprisonment of parents on children ... may be the least understood and most consequential implication of the high reliance on incarceration in America.' Any impact on children that results from parental

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incarceration demands study given the massive numbers and profound race and class disparities involved (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008; Wildeman, 2009).

In the course of recent qualitative research with Canadian children with a parent currently in prison, I found that my participant families had a diversity of experiences of parental incarceration, which corroborated the existing empirical literature. However, in reviewing media coverage and the materials of social agencies I found that some framed children of prisoners as a deeply homogenous and pathologized group. This Practice Note reviews the existing empirical literature and refers to findings from my study¹ to offer a caution to practitioners against making simple assumptions about this group. Counter to some representations, children of prisoners are not highly likely to follow their parent to prison, they vary in their experiences, and they are not necessarily in need of specific counselling interventions. While these children are vulnerable to a variety of risk factors, including high rates of poverty and parental substance use, the relationship between parental incarceration, its covariates, and negative outcomes is complex.

Moderate effect size

A glance at some of the responses by media and charities to the issue of children of prisoners suggests that they are at high risk of engaging in criminal behaviour:

Children with a parent in prison are ... three times more likely to be involved in offending. Sixty-five per cent of boys with a convicted father will go on to offend themselves. (Barnardo's, 2016)

These children often deal with lowered self-esteem, truancy, and are four times more likely than other children to be in conflict with the law themselves. (Torontoist, 2015)

Children of incarcerated parents are six times more likely to end up incarcerated themselves. (ABC, 2015)

The troubling statistic that children of incarcerated parents are seven times more likely to become incarcerated. (Big Brothers Big Sisters, 2016)

However, these figures, particularly that children of prisoners are many times more likely than other children to come into conflict with the law, are not accurate representations of the empirical literature. Murray and Farrington (2008) note that the 'six times more likely' statistic is, in particular, frequently used in the lay and even academic literature, but is not based in any empirical finding. The existing research does suggest that children of prisoners are more likely to engage in anti-social behaviour; however, the rate is around double that of their peers (Murray et al., 2009). Further, 'anti-social behaviour' is used here to refer to a range of externalizing behaviours and not necessarily behaviours that result in criminal charges, including issues such as persistent lying (Murray et al., 2009).

Finally, a 'correlation does not mean causation' problem is at work. Parental incarceration may co-occur with a variety of risk factors associated with negative outcomes, such as: poverty; entry into the child welfare system; parental criminality and witnessing a parent's arrest; low educational attainment by a parent; suddenly

being cared for by a lone parent; and parental substance use and mental health concerns, as well as their own pre-existing mental health and behavioural concerns (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008; Phillips et al., 2006; Farrington et al., 2009; Dallaire and Wilson, 2010; Mumola, 2000; Social Exclusion Unit, 2002).

Empirically determining the associations between this tangle of factors has only recently begun. When parental criminality and children's existing behavioural concerns are controlled for, the effect size of parental incarceration on later antisocial behaviour is not very dramatic: Murray et al.'s (2012) meta-analysis of 40 studies found that the independent effect of parental incarceration is a 10% increase in risk of antisocial behaviour in children of incarcerated parents. Several factors have a higher effect size for antisocial behaviour in children, such as family victimization and conflict, or parental criminality (Aaron and Dallaire, 2010). In terms of other negative impacts of parental incarceration, the above meta-analysis concludes that while some studies 'have suggested that there are multiple types of adverse effects of parental incarceration on children, taking all evidence into account, the only outcome that remains associated with parental incarceration after adjustment for covariates is children's antisocial behavior' (Murray et al., 2012: 191).

This is not presented to imply that parental incarceration is not a potentially very negative and challenging experience, but rather to discourage charities and practitioners from framing parental incarceration as causing a dramatic risk of children engaging in delinquent behaviour and inadvertently further stigmatizing this vulnerable group. Although well-intentioned campaigners for children's rights may be invested in emphasizing the harms faced by children of prisoners, their clients may not benefit from overstating their risk of delinquency. Children of prisoners face high rates of poverty and other types of disadvantage, and are likely to be best served by efforts to implement and evaluate strategies to reduce the harms associated with the incarceration of a parent, such as sudden drops in income or increases in caregiver stress. Poverty-alleviation and other social welfare strategies are some of the most effective crime prevention approaches (Leschied et al., 2006).

Heterogeneity of experiences

Certain charities and media sources also tended to make assumptions about the ways in which children experience parental incarceration, such as suggesting that trauma is necessarily part of the experience. For example:

Children of incarcerated parents carry the burden of the highest volume of risk factors among any grouping of at-risk children, and are vulnerable to poor educational performance, high rates of teen pregnancy and substance abuse, higher rates of teen suicide, developmental lags, and a constellation of mental health issues due to trauma, loss, grief and the three S's: Stigma, Silence, and Shame. (Arkansas Voices, 2013)

These ideas rest on a very specific representation of the child of a prisoner, one in which: (the things that follow 'which:' are a list of elements prior to incarceration, the parent lived at home with the child, was a primary caregiver and provided

financial support; the child witnessed the parent's arrest; the parent was not responsible for ongoing violence towards the child or his other caregiver; the child is aware of the parent's incarceration; and the child has ongoing, positive contact with the incarcerated parent.

While this certainly may be the case for many children, the empirical literature does not support the homogeneity of this experience. Existing research suggests that around half of children of prisoners lived with this parent prior to their incarceration (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). There is evidence hinting that many children are not even aware of their parent's incarceration. For example, one study found that fully 35% of children with a mother in prison were not told this (Poehlmann, 2005). This rate is likely higher for fathers in prison as their children are much less likely to have had a change of caregiver after parental incarceration (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). Finally, some children may derive a net benefit from their parent's absence as a result of incarceration, such as children who were being harmed by the parent's domestic violence, criminal involvement, or drug use (Holt et al., 2008; Turanovic et al., 2012).

The findings of the present study support this literature. Some children did indeed lose a primary caregiver to incarceration, but others did not live with the parent prior to their incarceration, thus they never experienced the loss of a parent nor were they exposed to his or her criminality. Some children had seen their parent arrested but most had not; some had child welfare involvement but most did not; and some had large spheres of extended family support while others were more isolated.

Some children, particularly those who were infants or not born when their parent was incarcerated, characterized their parental incarceration as significant, sad and unwanted, but also 'normal' or them. For example Grace, aged 7, was born several years after her father's incarceration and has visited him frequently and consistently since she was a baby. She said about having a father in prison: 'it's kind of normal. It's just like my mom's divorced, and he lives in another house.'

I present these data to support the argument that children of prisoners are not a homogenous group nor identical in their experiences of parental incarceration. Moreover, my study and many others suggest that while the experience of parental incarceration is often momentous and perceived as largely negative, there is no empirical justification to pathologize children of prisoners as necessarily psychologically unwell or traumatized.

Lack of intervention clarity

These issues lead to challenges for service providers in the community. With a (perhaps newfound) recognition of children of prisoners and the desire to respond to and support their welfare needs, but limited empirical evidence about the extent or nature of the impact of parental incarceration nor about evaluated interventions, the best clinical response to working with these children is unclear (Eddy et al., 2008; Kjellstrand et al., 2012). Nonetheless, services that aim to support children of prisoners have begun to be developed, such as transportation programs, mentoring, counselling, and visiting centres.

Visits between prisoners and their families and children are indeed consistently associated with benefits for prisoners, such as reduction in violence during incarceration and reduced recidivism and prison readmission after release (e.g. Schafer, 1994; Bales and Mears, 2008; Derkzen et al., 2009). However, benefits to children of visiting a parent in prison are less clear. While visits were widely praised by child participants in my study, Poehlmann (2005) found that visiting with an incarcerated mother was associated with insecure attachment in children, and queried whether visits activated the child's attachment system but did not allow them to receive the comfort, support and reassurance they needed to deactivate it. Poehlmann et al.'s (2010) review of the literature on visiting a parent in prison found that the research shows positive outcomes for children when the visit occurred as part of a supportive intervention, but that more visits with incarcerated parents in non-'child-friendly' visitation environments may be associated with attachment concerns, and more attention and behavioural problems.

Similarly, caregivers of children with a parent in prison may be advised to disclose this to the child's teacher (e.g. Gloucestershire, 2016). Indeed, increased communication between children's parents, teachers and other community caregivers would seem indisputably positive, as children could receive more bespoke care, have access to more knowledgeable caregivers and would not be burdened by secrets. However, the reality appears to be rather more complex.

My child respondents were strongly wary of disclosing parental incarceration to their teachers, and their caregivers feared that their children would experience discriminatory attitudes. In an experimental study, Dallaire and Wilson (2010) found that teachers assessed a fictional student whose mother is in prison as being less competent than a student whose mother is away for other reasons, particularly for female students. Further, in testing a large sample of children of women prisoners, Hagen and Myers (2003) found that for children with low levels of social support, those who disclosed maternal incarceration had higher rates of behavioural and mental health concerns. The authors argue that keeping secrets is a normal developmental stage for children, and potentially protective.

Complex, and even conflicting, evidence places service providers in a difficult position. Children of prisoners have been historically neglected by policy-makers and service providers and face a variety of challenges. There is a tendency to assume both that some intervention, even if not evidence-based, is better than none, and that if practice is borne from a desire to help it will be helpful. Unfortunately, the history of the caring professions shows that these modes of reasoning do not always lead to beneficial practice (Munro, 1999; Gambrill, 2006; Lilienfeld, 2007).

More specifically, targeting services to children of prisoners because they are 'at risk' of future criminal behaviour may have unintended negative consequences if this affects their self-concept or if minor delinquency is more likely to be captured by official labelling processes (Murray and Farrington, 2014). The current actuarial, risk analysis-focused social policy environment may perpetuate a notion that children at risk of delinquency must be identified and 'risk managed' to avoid later criminality (Kemshall, 2008; Simon and Feeley, 2003; Hannah-Moffat, 2016). There is strong evidence that this can be hugely counter-productive, with early contact with welfare services disinhibiting desistance.

A better-supported strategy for working with children of prisoners is to conduct bespoke clinical assessment of a child's specific experiences related to parental incarceration that may place them at risk of emotional harm (e.g. seeing a parent arrested) and ways that these stressors may be impacting their functioning (Dallaire et al., 2015). Moreover, there is support for directing interventions towards the child's caregiver on the 'outside' and their prisoner parent. Caregivers may benefit from services as they face a variety of stressors after parental incarceration, such as a sudden drop in family income, practical demands such as negotiating the jail system, or a lack of social support (Miller et al., 2013).

Supported programs for prisoner parents include programs that teach parenting inside the prison and that provide assistance at the point of reunification in the community to find jobs and attend to mental health concerns (Kjellstrand et al., 2012). Finally, instead of presumptively encouraging visits between children and incarcerated parents, practitioners could assist children in making their own decisions about safe and available options to have contact with their parent, or encourage efforts to make existing visiting arrangements as child-focused and supportive as possible (Saunders, 2016; Poehlman et al., 2010). While all but one of the child participants in my study chose to attend visits when possible, many found aspects of the prison visiting process frightening, confusing, and frustrating.

Closing: Implications for practitioners

On the basis of this discussion, the following recommendations are offered to probation officers and other practitioners who work with parents in the criminal justice system or their children:

1. Given the limited evidence around best practices for children of prisoners, it is important that no one-size-fits-all approaches are used in clinical interventions with this group. While counselling, peer support and services that encourage visiting parents in prison may indeed benefit individual children and youth clients, the best evidence at this time does not support these intervention strategies as wholesale therapeutic responses to children of prisoners. In particular, practitioners are encouraged to be wary of any clinical approaches that uncritically assume either that all children of prisoners will benefit, or that the best interests of children and their prisoner parents *necessarily* converge.
2. Practitioners working with high-risk youth are advised to query parental incarceration and explore what specific events this entailed. For example, did the child experience the sudden loss of a primary caregiver or witness a parent's arrest?
3. Those who have adult clients that are prisoners or otherwise involved in the criminal justice system are encouraged to consider the implications that their clinical decisions may have for clients' children. While a probation client may benefit from counselling sessions with their family, for example, this may place a tremendous burden on the children in terms of time away from school, costs of transportation to sessions, or impacts of a therapeutic

process not focused on their needs. As a further example, it appears crucial that children be protected as much as possible from witnessing potentially frightening aspects of the criminal justice process.

4. The burgeoning academic interest in children of prisoners has translated into an explosion of data collection and re-purposing of secondary data with analysis aimed at better understanding the outcomes and experiences of children of prisoners, and at disentangling the relationships between covariates. As this work has great potential but is still in its relative infancy, it will be vital for practitioners to stay abreast of the emerging research literature and best practice models.

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Note

1. This study involved qualitative interviews with Canadian children (aged 6–17; $N = 22$) who currently had a parent in prison, their caregivers ($N = 12$), and a variety of key informants.

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