

The Forgotten Victims: Children of Incarcerated Parents

Yen H. Nong, MPH

Nancy P. Correa, MPH

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have been well recognized as having a profound impact on the life course of a person. Since the original ACE study in the 1990s, there have been hundreds of research articles and community programs that have addressed ACEs, including child abuse and neglect, intimate partner violence, maternal mental health, family dynamics, and parental substance abuse (Felitti et al., 1998; Green, Browne, & Chou, 2017; Hughes et al., 2017). However, although parental incarceration is recognized as an ACE, it has received less attention and is not as well understood.

Children of incarcerated parents have been described as the “forgotten victims” of crime (Matthews, 1983, title), the “orphans of justice” (Shaw, 1992, p. 41), the “hidden victims of imprisonment” (Cunningham & Baker, 2003, p. 2), and the “unseen victims of the prison boom” (Petersilia, 2005 p. 34). The body of literature that examines the impact of parental incarceration on children is limited, few community programs and resources are directed to this vulnerable population, and policy makers have largely neglected to consider the implications of parental incarcerations on children. This article provides an overview of the impact of incarceration on children, discusses risk factors that may modify outcomes, and highlights future directions for researchers, policy makers, healthcare providers, schools, and community-based organizations.

Prevalence and Trends in Parental Incarceration

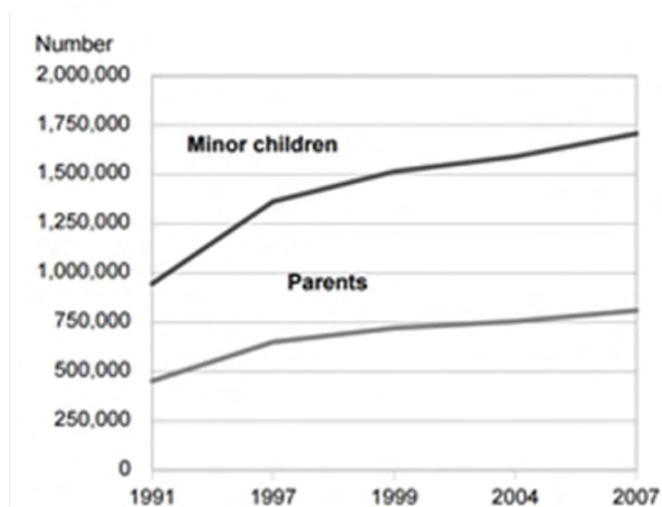
The rate of incarceration in the United States has more

than quadrupled in the last four decades, and the United States has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world (The Sentencing Project, 2017; Walmsley, 2015, p. 15). The American criminal justice system is complex, and as of 2016 it holds more than 2.3 million people in 1,719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 942 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,283 local jails, and 79 Indian Country jails (Wagner & Rabuy, 2016). Overall, close to 22% of the world’s prisoners are held in the United States (Walmsley, 2015). Incarceration in the United States disproportionately affects males and racial and ethnic minorities. Data from the 2015 Bureau of Justice Statistics report indicate that males account for at least 85% of the jail inmate population (Minton & Zeng, 2016, p. 15). In federal and state prisons, the imprisonment rate of white males is 312 per 100,000 compared with 1,745 per 100,000 black males, and 820 per 100,000 Hispanic males. Similarly, the rate of imprisonment for black females is twice the rate of white females at 103 per 100,000 and 52 per 100,000, respectively (Carson & Anderson, 2016, p. 25).

In a 2010 special report on parents in prison by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, data showed that 51% of males and 62% of females in state prisons report having children under the age of 18, and 63% of males and 59% of females in federal prisons (see Figure 1). Together that means approximately 1.7 million children, 2.3% of the U.S. resident population under the age of 18, have a parent being held in state or federal prisons (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010, p. 25). Hispanic and black children are more likely to experience the incarceration of a parent compared with white children (Gjelsvik, Dumont, Nunn, & Rosen, 2014). An analysis of a 1990 birth cohort found that white children had a 3.6-4.4% cumulative risk of experiencing parental incarceration by age 14, while black children in the same age cohort

had a 25%–28% cumulative risk (Wildeman, 2009).

Figure 1. Estimated Number of Parents in State and Federal Prison and Their Minor Children.



Source: Glaze & Maruschak (2010), p. 25.

Parental Incarceration and Child Well-Being

Parental incarceration is a traumatic experience that is often accompanied with additional ACEs. Research has shown that exposure to multiple ACEs can have a cumulative impact (Anda et al., 2006). Adversities related to parental incarceration may include, but are not limited to, acute and chronic psychological stress, parental separation, changes in living arrangements (possibly foster care), domestic violence, traumatic removal of the parent, and stigmatization (Luther, 2015; Nichols & Loper, 2012; Braman, 2004; Fritsch & Burkhead, 1981).

The exposure to a multitude of adversities when a parent is incarcerated has been considered as both a risk marker and a risk mechanism that may directly or indirectly affect a child's outcomes relating to biological aging, psychosocial development, internalizing and externalizing behavior, criminal justice involvement, drug use, and poor academic performance (Mitchell et al., 2017; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Kopak & Smith-Ruiz, 2016; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013; Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012; Hanlon et al., 2005; Foster & Hagan, 2009). Women are the fastest-growing

prison population, and some studies have shown that maternal incarceration has been linked to increased child adjustment difficulties and higher rates of intergenerational incarceration compared with paternal incarceration (Dallaire, 2007; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002).

While studies have found an association between parental incarceration and negative child outcomes, no clear causal paths have been identified. It has been a challenge for researchers to unpack the confounding factors and adversities that were present for families long before the parent was incarcerated. For example, while many studies have reported an association between parental incarceration and negative outcomes, a meta-analysis showed that parental incarceration increases the risk for children's antisocial behavior, but not poor educational performance, drug use, or mental health problems after covariates were controlled (Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012). Nonetheless, many would agree that children of incarcerated parents are a uniquely vulnerable population, and there is a need to better understand this population and how to prevent and mitigate negative outcomes.

Modifiers of Risks

A number of factors may influence how children respond to their parent's incarceration. These factors include family and household dynamics pre-incarceration, witnessing the parent's arrest, social support available during parental incarceration, relationship with the parent while they are incarcerated, and economic and residential instability due to incarceration. The following section highlights how these factors impact a child's response to parental incarceration.

Household Dynamics Prior to the Arrest

The impact of parental incarceration on children is complex and family, household, and community dynamics prior to the arrest contribute to the complexity. A major driver of a child's response to the parental arrest is whether or not the arrested parent was the child's primary care giver, if the arrested parent lived with the child, and the quality of the relationship between the arrested parent and child (Parke & Clarke-

Stewart, 2002; Texas Inmate Families Association, 2016). Approximately half of children affected by incarceration lived with the incarcerated parent prior to arrest (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). However, more children (64%) lived with their mother than with their father (47%) prior to the parent's arrest. Children who lived with an incarcerated parent and were primarily taken care of by the incarcerated parent are more likely to be affected by the incarceration than children who did not live with the incarcerated parent (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999).

While being separated from a loving caregiver can be detrimental to a child, parental incarceration can also alleviate traumatic and toxic household conditions, including exposure to domestic violence, child maltreatment, parental mental illness, drugs and alcohol abuse, and presence of criminal and violent activities (Turanovic, Rodriguez, & Pratt, 2012; Dannerbeck, 2005; Johnson & Waldfogel, 2004; Phillips, Erkanli, Keeler, Costello, & Angold, 2006). Although there is evidence that the net effect of incarceration on children is harmful (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013), it remains unclear if adverse effects from parental incarceration is due to the loss experienced during parental incarceration or the circumstances that led to the parental incarceration. The pre-existing adversities may heighten risk for maladjustment and thereby either fully or partially contribute to the negative outcomes often observed in children of incarcerated parents (Johnson & Easterling, 2012).

Witnessing Arrest

Some children with an incarcerated parent witness the arrest of their parent. Arrests often occur at night or in the early morning, when parents are likely to be home with their families (Braman, 2004). Estimates of the percentage of children who witness the arrest vary greatly, ranging from 20% to 84% (Arditti, 2012). Witnessing the arrest can be a traumatic experience for children and is associated with an increased risk for posttraumatic stress disorder, maladjustment, and problem behaviors (Arditti, 2012; Phillips & Zhao, 2010). Younger children who witness an arrest are more likely to express internalizing behaviors, such as emotional distress and increased arousal, while older children's behavioral manifestations are more external, such as irritability and immaturity (Roberts et al., 2014).

Additionally, the nature of arrests can vary significantly, which may influence the level of impact on children. Arrests can be accompanied with violence, verbal altercations with the police, presence of firearms and other weapons, and criminal activity. One qualitative study interviewed 30 children who witnessed their mother's arrest and reported that the children experienced nightmares and flashbacks to the arrest (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 1999).

Social Support and Caregiving During Parental Incarceration

Regardless of where the child resides, the quality of a child's relationship with caring adults during a parent's incarceration influences his or her immediate and long-term well-being. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports a majority of children with incarcerated fathers live with their mothers during the incarceration period, whereas children with incarcerated mothers are more likely to live with their grandparents, other family members, or in foster care. An estimated 10% of incarcerated mothers have a child in foster or state care (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010).

Developmental research on resilient youth suggests that close relationships with caring adults may help mitigate the negative effects of adversity that children experience (Masten, 1994). Attachment theorists also provide evidence that children can and do form secure attachment relationships with substitute caregivers, especially in a stable environment (Poehlmann, 2005). A recent study conducted with college students who experienced parental incarceration during their childhood demonstrated how caring adults can contribute to their positive adaptation and promote resilience. Examples include the following: (1) providing access to conventional activities (e.g., athletics, day camps, community programs, religious activities, positive everyday childhood activities); (2) supporting a vision of a better life with a strong focus on academic success and exclusion of criminal activity; and (3) encouraging a redirection of their lives to not follow in the same path as their parents who were incarcerated (Luther, 2015).

Overall, social support from a trusted adult such as a caregiver, older sibling, extended family member,

educator, or church member can buffer negative effects of parental incarceration (Cohen & Wills, 1985). An unwavering primary caregiver, even if the relationship is complicated, was identified to be the most significant source of social support because children recognized that those caregivers could provide the stable and supportive home that their incarcerated parents could not (Luther, 2015).

Relationship With Incarcerated Parent While in Confinement

If a child had a strong attachment to and was being primarily cared for by the incarcerated parent, it could be detrimental to the child when that parent is no longer a presence due to incarceration. Disruption to the parent-child attachment with an uncertain future that comes with parental incarceration is traumatizing and may critically increase a child's vulnerability to later life adversities (Arditti, 2012). Studies have generally found that maintaining parent-child contact through communication and visitations during parental incarceration is beneficial to both the child and the parent (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010). Some of those benefits include lower rates of recidivism (for mothers in a nursery program during confinement), paternal involvement post release, improved inmate behavior while incarcerated, decreased feelings of alienation felt by children, and enhanced attachment and self-esteem for children (Byrne Goshin, & Joestl, 2010; Carlson, 1998; La Vigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro, 2005; Bales & Mears, 2008; Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010; Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998). Additionally, children of incarcerated parents have shared how the emotional and social support from their incarcerated or formerly incarcerated parents was a source of motivation that helped them stay on course toward college (Luther, 2015).

However, concerns regarding the condition and quality of visitation have been raised. It is not uncommon for prisons to restrict inmates to their seat, which is often bolted to the floor during visitation thus causing limitations for children to move freely and feel comfortable (Arditti, 2012). Also noted are the lack of privacy, tedious and lengthy waits, humiliation, rude treatment by correctional officers, and an environment that can be crowded, noisy, and dirty (Arditti, 2003; Comfort, 2008; Hairston, 2001). These conditions

during visitations could create difficulties for offenders and their families, not to mention be a traumatic experience itself that could lead to the arousal of painful emotions associated with the incarceration.

There is a delicate balance in maintaining the parent-child relationship during parental incarceration that promotes positive effects and minimizes further trauma. In one study, visitations that did not include family-friendly interventions to promote parent-child relationship as part of the visit resulted in negative outcomes such as insecure attachment and child attention problems (Dallaire, Ciccone, & Wilson, 2012; Poehlmann, 2005). In contrast, studies that included family-friendly interventions during visitations, such as a prison nursery program for mothers and infants or enhanced prison visitation for fathers and their school-aged children, have yielded positive child outcomes including enhanced attachment and increased self-esteem (Byrne Goshin, & Joestl, 2010; Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998). Studies have also suggested that mail correspondence is beneficial with no negative effects (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010). A 2007 survey of state and federal inmates revealed that mail correspondence is the most convenient and likely form of communication (70% state and 84% federal) for incarcerated parents and their children.

Economic and Residential Instability

Parental incarceration is often coupled with economic disadvantage and inconsistent living arrangements. The removal of a working adult parent from the home usually involves a loss of monetary contributions from that individual. In addition, incarceration may lead to additional expenses for the family, such as travel costs and days taken off work to visit the inmate, phone calls through expensive collect call rates, and mailing packages to supplement food and hygiene needs lacking in the incarcerated facilities (Braman, 2004; Comfort, 2008; Grinstead, Faigeles, Bancroft, & Zack, 2001).

After being released, there is a string of additional economic hardships involved as the offender seeks to re-enter society. Analysis using population-based sampling of 20 large cities in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study showed a strong and significant relationship between parental incarceration and a number of economic and family instability outcomes

post release. Fathers who have spent time in jail or prison are significantly less likely to be employed, less likely to work consistently, and less likely to have earnings comparable to their counterparts with no history of incarceration (Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, & Mincy, 2009). As such, contributions to the household may diminish and lead to considerable hardships and difficulty in meeting basic material and residential needs, such as food, rent, utility bills, and medical expenses that last beyond the period of incarceration. In addition, any legal fees or debt that has incurred during incarceration can compound these difficulties (Harris, Evans, & Beckett, 2010).

Discussion

Parental incarceration is a dynamic and complex phenomenon that affects approximately 1.7 million children in the United States. Children of incarcerated parents are a vulnerable population that often experience multiple adversities, yet are often overlooked and do not receive the attention or support of other vulnerable populations. Academia, policy makers, healthcare providers, schools, and community-based organizations need to address this vulnerable and often overlooked population.

Given that over 50% of inmates have children, policy makers and government officials need to consider the needs of children from the time of a parent's arrest through post release. For example, could visitation procedures be modified to create a less traumatic environment for children visiting their parents while maintaining a safe environment? What policies and programs can be put in place to ensure that children of incarcerated parents have safe, stable, and nurturing relationships with caregivers and other adults during the incarceration? What parent education or family support programs can be provided to parents while in confinement or after release?

Community-based organizations and social service agencies need to ensure services are continually available to support the children of incarcerated parents and their caregivers. Many of these children are exposed to multiple adversities in addition to parental incarceration and appropriate interventions may be beneficial. In addition to more programs and policies

that support children of incarcerated parents, more research is needed to understand the unique needs of children of incarcerated parents and the most effective way to support this vulnerable population. Research suggests that parental incarceration is harmful for children, but more research is needed with stronger designs including prospective longitudinal studies that address confounding and pre-existing factors. Future areas of research may include how children in different circumstances respond to parental incarceration, such as children who are separated from their primary care giver compared with children who are not separated from their primary caregiver, or children who are not exposed to multiple adversities compared with children who are exposed only to parental incarceration.

In addition to the need for research, we need to collect more data from jails and prisons on the children of incarcerated parents. Many jails do not collect any information on the children of inmates, so communities do not know the prevalence of children of incarcerated parents or how to reach these children for interventions and programs.

Academia, policy makers, health care providers, schools, and community-based organizations continue to make strides toward recognizing the impact of childhood adversity and the need for trauma-informed care. However, more attention needs to be directed to the children of incarcerated parents and how to prevent and mitigate negative outcomes for this vulnerable population.

About the Authors

Yen H. Nong, MPH, is Research Associate in the Section of Public Health Pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine/Texas Children's Hospital. She conducts research around supporting families to reduce childhood maltreatment and improve health outcomes for children and families. Address correspondence concerning this article to Yen H. Nong, Abercrombie Building MC A2275, 6621 Fannin Street, Houston, TX 77030. Contact: yhnong@bcm.edu

Nancy P. Correa, MPH, is Senior Community Initiatives Coordinator for the Section of Public Health Pediatrics at Texas Children's Hospital. In this role, she leads community collaborations to strategically address gaps in practice and knowledge to mitigate childhood adversities and foster resilience in individuals, families, and communities.

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