A Family Perspective on Parental Incarceration

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What is a Family Perspective?

“The happiness of any society begins with the well-being of the families that live in it.” Kofi Annan

A family perspective:

- Acknowledges the important role of family considerations in policy issues (Bogenschneider, 2002)
- Criterion for analysis is family well-being
- Examines how incarceration affects the imprisoned parent, family stability, the quality of parenting and important family relationships, and the family’s ability to carry out its responsibilities and functions.
The lack of a family perspective has had consequences for families...

- Criminal Justice Policy has not been formulated with family functioning and child well-being as an explicit concern.

- Yet, empirical studies document the nature of harms resulting from parental incarceration such as:
  - Incapacitation of the offender parent
  - Parenting distress for non-incarcerated caregivers
  - Traumatic separation and negative outcomes for children with an incarcerated parent
  - Family dissolution and estranged parent-child relationships
  - Economic and health declines in families
  - Difficulty for ex-offenders who reenter family life after incarceration.
Parental Imprisonment Facts

- The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world (surpassing Russia in 2000).

- Since 1970, the proportion of nonviolent offenders rose from 1/2 to 2/3; proportion of drug offenders has increased from 1/10-1/3 prisoners.

- 52% state & 63% federal of incarcerated men and women are parents.

- Parents of minor children held in prison increased by 79% between 1991 & 2007.

- Prisoners in the U.S. reported having an estimate of 1,706,600 children—about 2.3% of the US population under 18. 1/3 of these children will reach the age of 18 while their parent is still incarcerated.
Contextual Factors and Parental incarceration

**Context** refers to the facts and circumstances that surround parental incarceration.

Contextual factors are *distal, structural, or environmental* influences that have bearing on family processes.

1. **Demographic Characteristics** such as gender, minority status, family structure
   - 1 in 3 AA men incarcerated or under the supervision of the CJS
   - Women are the fastest growing prison population
   - Incarceration strains marriage; female inmates often single mothers

2. **Cumulative Disadvantage factors** such as poverty, stressful life events, substance use
   - High rates of mental health problems and substance abuse/dependence
   - About ¾ of female inmates characterized by comorbidity
   - Incarcerated persons often come from intense histories of disadvantage and trauma exposure

3. **Institutional Practices** such as prison/jail conditions, rehabilitative opportunities, prison overcrowding, length of confinement

4. **Socio-Political factors** such as “deep break” policy, mandatory minimum policy, harsh drug laws
Incarceration and Family Processes

**Process** involves the intra-psychic and interpersonal experience of the incarcerated parent.

From a process lens, parenting and family relationships are altered by incarceration for several reasons:

- **1. Prisonized Parental Identities;** incarceration changes the way offender parents see themselves. Many parents experience this dominantly by distress and helplessness. Offender parents may withdraw from their families and children.

- **2. Caregiver Instability and Distress** linked to the offender’s confinement. *Non-incarcerated caregivers may be unprepared or overwhelmed by responsibilities.*

- **3. Changed parenting roles and lack of a co-parenting alliance;** confinement of the offender precludes the enactment of key parenting functions and co-parenting with children’s caregivers.

- **4. Family contact becomes constrained per prison policies controlling phone, mail, and family visitation--changes the way in which families communicate and show affection***
Prison Visitation: A Critical Family Process

- Prison visitation represents the most **proximal form of contact**; therefore it has the most impact on parent and child outcomes.
- Most offender parents report some form of contact; however at least 1/2 of offender parents do not receive any visits. **Mothers receive more visits than fathers.**
- In general, most offender parents seem to benefit from visitation and want to have contact with their children.
  - Some evidence suggests that visits link with better offender behavior in prison and less recidivism after release; other research contradicts this finding.
- Family visitation may be characterized by a lack of privacy; tedious and lengthy waits; humiliation and rude treatment by correctional officers; and visiting in crowded, noisy, and dirty facilities.
- **Visitation can help and hurt children:** it is a source of connection and traumatic separation. Visitation may also arouse strong emotions among parents and caregivers.

Visitation difficulties, being housed far from home, being unmarried, not living with children before confinement, and lengthier prison sentences, are all factors that discourage visits and link to weaker family ties.
Negative and Positive Effects

Parental incarceration has profound emotional, social, and economic effects on families. These effects can be conceptualized as unfolding over time, and may be primary (directly resulting from the incarceration) or indirect (resulting from the changes associated with a parent’s incarceration). As with any family situation, the quality of children’s day to day care is of primary importance in determining outcomes.

Negative outcomes are likely to occur if the offender parent contributed to child and family well-being prior to incarceration. Parental involvement prior to incarceration modifies the impact of how children experience their parents’ confinement.

- **Maternal incarceration** is generally linked to even more profound child adjustment difficulties, including intergenerational incarceration
  - Many mothers were primary caregivers prior to their incarceration thus creating care discontinuities for children
  - When mothers are incarcerated there is a heightened chance that children’s fathers are also incarcerated, compounding risk

Conversely, positive outcomes are possible to the extent that incarceration removed an abusive or neglectful parent, or if the offender parent gained resources while in prison.

- Sometime prison time can be a “wake up call” for parents to stop destructive behavior and “clean up their act”.
  - Ties with children serve as an important incentive for some parents to turn their lives around
  - Rehabilitation opportunities, work-release, mentoring, and mental health and drug treatment while incarcerated can make a big difference for some parents
Process Implications for Intervention

- Families’ experiences connected to incarceration occur in a **nested system** with many potential sources of intervention.

- **Strengths based interventions** emphasize the importance of not blaming families and the use of nonthreatening therapeutic approaches. This approach is particularly applicable for work with families impacted by incarceration given challenges associated with stigma, disenfranchised grief, and ambiguous loss.

- Formal and informal efforts to **empower caregivers** are important and represent the most proximal form of intervention; many caregivers are unprepared to raise the incarcerated parent’s children, or parenting may already be troubled in the home.

- Visiting a parent in prison may serve as a “traumatic reminder” to children and family, compound the depletion of family resources, and intensify parental distress. Conversely visitation may mitigate some of the effects of incarceration and enhance family ties. **Less restrictive, “family friendly” visiting programs hold promise**, and should be thoughtfully implemented.

- Families dealing with incarceration would benefit from intervention and activities that are nonstigmatizing and **break social isolation** given that many of these families receive little validation and support. Mentoring programs aimed at children hold promise to the extent that the adult mentor stays connected to children and is a source of support and resources for the family.

- **Collaborations** between correctional staff with child welfare/human services practitioners seem to be particularly important. Justice involved families are overrepresented in the child welfare system.