

EFFECTS OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION ON CHILDREN: CONSIDERATIONS FOR SINGAPORE

INTRODUCTION

Children of incarcerated parents have been almost invisible until recent years from the attention of public policymakers, academic researchers and social service providers. Even so, research that concentrates on this group of children has been scarce and limited although it is clear that the child is affected by the imprisonment of his father or mother in various ways (Hairston, 2007).

According to current literature on the subject, the impact on children when their parents are imprisoned may potentially be a traumatic event in their lives and may force them to face economic, social and emotional consequences that can lead to various outcomes such as poor performance in school, behavioural issues, shame and stigma, as well as relationship problems (Hairston, 2007).

This paper will focus on examining literature available in the public domain regarding the impact of parental incarceration on this vulnerable group of children. Implications and recommendations relating to this issue in the Singapore context will be also considered and discussed.

IMPACT OF PARENTAL IMPRISONMENT ON CHILDREN

According to studies in the United States, many of those incarcerated, both men and women, are parents. The majority of them were found to have children aged less than 18 years old and many of them were either married or divorced. It has also been reported that prior to incarceration, 46% of all imprisoned parents lived with their minor children, whilst 80% of incarcerated parents indicated that their children were living with either one of the parents (Hairston, 2007). This finding is noteworthy, considering that almost half of the world's prisoners are held in the United States and it stands as the country with the world's largest number of prisoners at 738 imprisoned people per 100,000 of the national population according to a study in 2007 (Goh, 2008).

The United States also holds the record for having the largest number of women in the correctional facilities, where female prisoners make up 8.6% of the entire prison population. This contrasts with most countries, wherein female prisoners constitute between 2% and 9% of the total prison population (Goh, 2008). In this regard, only 12 countries have a higher percentage of females in custody and Singapore is one of them, with 11% of the total prison population comprising of female prisoners. In addition, around the world as the prison population grows over the years, so does the number of minor children in the world who have a parent in the prison (Goh, 2008).

What is critical to bear in mind is that the incarceration of any one individual has economic, social and emotional impact and consequences not just on the imprisoned, but also for his/her family members, bearing in mind that the imprisoned individual may well be a parent of a dependent child. Indeed, imprisonment of a parent is a family matter at heart and it can affect the child's well-being not just from the point of the parent's incarceration but

even long after the parent's release from prison (Christian, 2009; Hairston, 2007; Robertson, 2007).

Indeed, research has found that parental imprisonment is related to criminal behaviour of their children. According to one study in England and the Netherlands using two prospective longitudinal datasets from 1946 to 1981, after controlling for number of parental convictions and other childhood risk factors, the number of parental imprisonments and sons' offending are found to be significantly related. However, when parental imprisonment at different ages is studied, parental imprisonment significantly predicted sons' offending only when it occurred after the sons' seventh birthday (Besemer, Geest, Murray, Bijleveld & Farrington, 2011). Likewise, another study that examined father and offspring criminal careers by using the semi-parametric, group-based trajectories methodology reported that children of sporadic and chronic offenders have significantly more convictions than children of non-offenders. However, chronic offending fathers do not have more chronic offending children than sporadic fathers. Hence, although these findings establish strong intergenerational transmission of criminal behaviour, it is the fathers having a conviction rather than their conviction trajectory which is associated to offspring convictions (Besemer & Farrington, 2012).

Similarly, another study which examined the effects of fathers' incarceration on criminal convictions of their children aged 18 to 30 using growth curve analysis also found that the two are related. Particular attention is paid to the timing and the duration of the fathers' imprisonment in this study and the study established a link between fathers' imprisonment and child convictions, particularly when fathers are imprisoned when the child is aged between 0 and 12 years (Rakt, Murray & Nieuwebeerta, 2012).

In relation to the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of criminal behaviour, another study focused on examining the effects of the timing and frequency of the parents' criminal behaviour whilst including risk factors for criminal behaviour. The study found that the parents' number of criminal convictions is positively related to the child's conviction rate. Children whose parents had only been convicted before the child's birth have more convictions than those whose parents had never been convicted and children whose parents had been convicted after the child's birth have more convictions than those whose parents had only been convicted before the child's birth. When parental convictions at different ages were studied, children whose parents had been convicted between 7 to 13 years old show more criminal behaviour than children whose parents were convicted in other periods, but none of the differences were significant. There does not seem to be a sensitive period for the effect of parental criminal behaviour. However, the findings reveal support for both static and dynamic explanations of intergenerational transmission such as the transmission of a criminogenic environment and/or mediation through risk factors (Besemer, 2012).

In a similar vein, another study looked into intergenerational transmission effects through three generations. The study covered three generations within the family, with 411 south London males who have been followed up from age 8 to age 48. These males were compared with their fathers and mothers and with their own biological sons and daughters. The study found that there was little evidence of intergenerational transmission from the first generation of parents to the third generation, except from grandmothers to granddaughters. The study also reported that the intergenerational transmission of offending can be mediated by socio-economic, family and individual risk factors. As such, intervention to reduce

intergenerational transmission may focus on targeting these risk factors (Farrington, Coid & Murray, 2009).

It is to be noted that children of incarcerated parents are exposed to numerous risk factors and effects of parental incarceration can vary depending on a number of variables, including pre-incarceration living arrangements for the children, degree to which the parents participated in financial support and daily care of their children prior to incarceration, quality of parent-child relationship, current living arrangements for the children; the extent of contact between the child and his/her parent, the children's gender, age, temperament, as well as his/her coping skills (Christian, 2009).

In terms of economic consequences when the parents are incarcerated, many of the affected families experience financial hardship. This is especially so for those families where the incarcerated parent is the one who has been supporting the family financially (Christian, 2009; Hairston, 2007). One large-scale, population-based longitudinal family survey study identified economic, developmental and residential risks particularly for children of incarcerated parents. Specifically, children of incarcerated parents encounter more economic and residential instability than their peers. It has also been found in the study that sons of incarcerated fathers exhibit more behavioural problems, although other developmental differences are not significant. These risks may hence be best addressed by the provision of age-appropriate social services at the point of parental incarceration to ensure timely intervention (Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper & Mincy, 2009).

Besides financial difficulties, the impact on the family, particularly children, when the parent is imprisoned, can be traumatic and may lead the child to experience shame and stigma, besides facing a higher risk for developing mental health issues (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). Indeed, when incarceration takes place, the individual who faces imprisonment and his/her family members also experience loss, facing emotional and social consequences at the same time (Hairston, 2007). Daily interactions and communication that sustain and support marital and other familial relationships are disrupted and come to an abrupt stop, leading to strained relationships between family members. The rate of break-ups and divorce is also high during incarceration, particularly for young couples. With the loss of their primary caregiver through incarceration, the child also undergoes emotional issues and upheavals (Hairston, 2007).

However, the impact of parental incarceration on children goes deeper than the relationship between parent and child alone. It also affects other aspects of the child's life, including his/her living arrangements, relationship with other family members, the child's social standing in the community, as well as how he/she copes at school (Robertson, 2007). It is also important to note that research shows parental incarceration is not a uniformly negative experience for all children. For instance, for children in situations involving child maltreatment or domestic violence; or if they have a parent with drugs or alcohol addiction and led a chaotic lifestyle, imprisonment of the parent may either have minimal impact on the child or may bring about a safer and more stable life for the child (Robertson, 2007).

Still, studies have shown that children of imprisoned parents are at high risk for various negative behaviours such as anti-social behaviour and delinquency (Brooks, 2008). Besides an increased risk for such externalizing behavioural problems, children of incarcerated parents are also at a higher risk for internalizing behaviour issues, such as withdrawal, anxiety and depression. The children are also at risk of experiencing difficulties

in school and insecure attachment since their primary caregivers may not be consistent or responsive to their social and emotional needs (Shlafer, Gerrity, Ruhland & Wheeler, 2013).

Besides economic and emotional consequences, the family members and children of incarcerated parents also face shame and social stigma. Revealing that a family member is in prison can lead to negative consequences and the family secret is usually confined to a selective few who are expected not to let others know. Children may face difficulties in managing information about their parent's incarceration in school settings where their teachers and peers may ask about their parents and family (Hairston, 2007).

OVERSEAS PRACTICES AND PROGRAMMES

As mentioned at the outset, research on children of incarcerated parents has not been extensive, with the exception of large-scale surveys that provide basic statistics about this group and many are overseas studies, especially in the United States. Most studies have also been restricted to non-representative small samples and some studies did not have methodological rigor. Nevertheless, findings have been consistent in various areas. As such, although they do not provide a firm foundation for establishing best practices, information from current studies on the topic together with knowledge from related work provide broad guidelines for the development of policies, programmes and services in this area to help improve children's well-being (Hairston, 2007).

As reviewed earlier, studies have found that parental incarceration has a positive relationship with children's criminal behaviour. In addition, risk factors include parental substance abuse, family violence and financial difficulties, and these conditions are often present even prior to their parents' incarceration. As such, the range of risk factors that can affect these children should be recognized and accounted for in research, policies and programmes (Hairston, 2007).

Another key challenge that children of incarcerated parents face is poor performance in school. With regard to this matter, reasons for why school experiences have been negative for so many children whose parents are imprisoned should be systematically examined and investigated. This is important because school is a significant part of the lives of children and success in school is fundamental to their overall well-being. In addition, there should also be initiatives to help this group of children to provide them with the extra help required to succeed in school (Hairston, 2007).

Likewise, it is also critical to engage the incarcerated parents early and regularly through appropriate programmes and services in order to assist the families and children affected by the incarceration of these parents, such as by improving the relationship between parents, caregivers and children through improvements in their communication (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). Examples of such programmes that help imprisoned parents on establishing, sustaining and strengthening of their relationship with their children include parent education programmes, parent-child visiting programmes, mentoring programmes, support groups, as well as counselling services. Further research should also be carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of these programmes (Hairston, 2007).

In addition, in developing programmes and services for incarcerated parents and their children, it is critical to acknowledge and include the caregiver and/or the non-incarcerated

parent as well (Hairston, 2007). An example of such a programme that is cognizant of the critical role that all members of a family play in the life of the affected child, is the GO KIDS (Giving Offenders' Kids Incentive and Direction to Succeed) initiative implemented by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). This programme promotes the importance of the preservation of family ties and provides prevention and intervention services to at-risk children of incarcerated parents (Crain, 2008).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the above review in mind, there are a number of implications and recommendations that can be made for consideration in Singapore's context. Firstly, there should be a systematic and regular collection of data in relation to the number of parents incarcerated and number of children affected by parental incarceration and the related statistics in Singapore (Goh, 2008; Shlafer et al., 2013).

To date, there is a lack of official statistical data on the number and information about children of incarcerated parents and there is also scarce academic knowledge on this issue. Such information is classified and not readily available to the public in Singapore (Goh, 2008). In addition, there is little published information about this topic in Singapore and the limited information available that is related to the issue are unpublished academic exercises which focus mainly on the offender population in general (Goh, 2008). Without basic statistics on the profile and background of children of incarcerated parents and their families, it will not be possible to come up with more effective policies, programmes and services to better assist the affected children and families affected by the incarceration of the family member.

There are a number of programmes and services available to provide assistance and support for the children and family members affected by incarceration of a family member in Singapore. For example, the befriending and peer mentoring programme provided by the Salvation Army (Siau, 2013) and the Initiative for Incarcerated Mothers and Affected Children (IIMAC) programme run by the Singapore After-Care Association reach out specifically to families and children affected by the incarceration of a family member. Likewise, the Family Resource Centre is another resource for families to tap upon for various services when a family member goes through imprisonment in Singapore. However, these resources, programmes and services may or may not be known to all individuals affected by the incarceration of a family member and social stigma and shame may also be possible obstacles for family members to seek help (Goh, 2008). In this regard, it will be necessary to evaluate the extent to which local programmes and services serve the needs of children and family members affected by parental incarceration and examine ways to improve and address the gaps in services required.

Indeed, the importance of the provision of early intervention for at-risk children of incarcerated parents cannot be underestimated. As discussed, current literature on the issue suggests that amongst various difficulties which families of incarcerated parents face at the point of incarceration include a great risk of instability and hardship for families and behavioural problems for young boys particularly. In view of these findings, family services focused on providing assistance to help alleviate material hardship, ensure some stability of resources, as well as help on residential stability will be critical. Likewise, age-appropriate

mental health services and support for children who are separated from their parents by incarceration will be essential (Geller et al., 2009).

CONCLUSION

As this paper has highlighted from current literature available, children are affected by parental incarceration before, during and after the actual imprisonment of the parent. The impact on these children may be varied and may differ in their extent and duration. Nevertheless, they constitute as a vulnerable group in the community and they need support and assistance as part of the family that is affected by the incarceration of an individual (Robertson, 2007).

It is critical as well to ensure early and timely intervention and preventive work and services be provided for children of incarcerated parents, given that research findings have revealed a positive relationship between parental incarceration and their children's subsequent criminal behaviour. In this regard, policymakers and community social service providers should look into ways to provide appropriate support for this vulnerable group of children, since it has also been reported that intergenerational transmission of offending can be mediated by socio-economic, family and individual risk factors (Farrington et al., 2009).

Indeed, research has also suggested that interventions in the lives of incarcerated parents and their children to strengthen and sustain positive family relationships and connections can bring about positive societal benefits in the form of reduced recidivism, healthy child development, as well as reduced risk in the children's anti-social and other negative behaviours (Christian, 2009). In view of these key findings, it will be pertinent then for policy makers and service providers to first gain a better understanding of the situation in Singapore of children and their families affected by parental incarceration at the outset in order to provide a more comprehensive system of support for this vulnerable group.

REFERENCES

- Besemer, S. (2012). The impact of timing and frequency of parental criminal behaviour and risk factors on offspring offending. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 1-22.
- Besemer, S., & Farrington, D.P. (2012). Intergenerational transmission of criminal behaviour: Conviction trajectories of fathers and their children. *European Journal of Criminology*, 9(2), 120-141.
- Besemer, S., Geest, V., Murray, J., Bijleveld, C.C., & Farrington, D.P. (2011). The Relationship Between Parental Imprisonment and Offspring Offending in England and The Netherlands. *British Journal of Criminology*, 51(2), 413-437.
- Brooks, S. (2008). *Out of the Shadows: What Child Welfare Workers Can Do to Help Children and their Incarcerated Parents*. Retrieved from http://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/news/pdf/074_140.pdf
- Christian, S. (2009). *Children of Incarcerated Parents*. Retrieved from http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/PDFs/fatherhood/NCSL_ChildrenOfIncarceratedParents_0309.pdf
- Crain, C.M. (2008). *Children of Offenders and the Cycle Of Intergenerational Incarceration*. Retrieved from https://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/documents/gokids_Crain.pdf
- Farrington, D.P., Coid, J.W., & Murray, J. (2009). Family factors in the intergenerational transmission of offending. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, 19(2), 109-124.
- Geller, A., Garfinkel, I., Cooper, C.E., & Mincy, R.B. (2009). Parental Incarceration and Child Well-Being: Implications for Urban Families. *Social Science Quarterly*, 90(5), 1186-1202.
- Goh, S.Y.J., (2008). *The Hidden Population: Familial Relationships and Social Supports Upon Parental Incarceration*. Retrieved from <http://www.socialserviceinstitute.org/RP/Families/Fulltext/03.pdf>
- Hairston, C.F. (2007). *Focus on Children with Incarcerated Parents: An Overview of the Research Literature*. Retrieved from <http://www.f2f.ca.gov/res/pdf/FocusOnChildrenWith.pdf>
- Rakt, M., Murray, J., & Nieuwebeerta, P. (2012). The Long-Term Effects of Paternal Imprisonment on Criminal Trajectories of Children. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 49(1), 81-108.
- Robertson, O. (2007). *Women in Prison and Children of Imprisoned Mothers Series: The impact of parental imprisonment on children*. Retrieved from http://www.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Impact_English.pdf

Shlafer, R.J., Gerrity, E., Ruhland, E., & Wheeler, M., (2013). *Children with Incarcerated Parents – Considering Children’s Outcomes in the Context of Family Experiences*. Retrieved from <http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/cyfc/our-programs/ereview/docs/June2013ereview.pdf>

Siau, M.E. (2 August 2013). New programmes to help children with incarcerated parents launched. Today. Retrieved from <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/new-programmes-help-children-incarcerated-parents-launched>

The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2011). *When a Parent is Incarcerated: A Primer for Social Workers*. Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-WhenAParentIsIncarceratedPrimer-2011.pdf>