



## Parents in Prison and the Silent Victims

SHAUNA MEDINA

In this research-intensive synthesis, Shauna Medina reviews scholarship on how parental incarceration detrimentally affects children, after which she suggests several practical conclusions of this research and reflects on her own personal investment in the issue. The essay was written for *Infant, Child, and Adolescent Development* with Dr. Misty Steele.

### **ABSTRACT**

RECENT TRENDS IN RISING PRISON populations have resulted in many inmates leaving behind their families. Many of these parents live in poverty, have limited education, and have guardianship over minors. According to The Bureau of Justice Statistics, children with incarcerated parents account for 2.3% of the U.S. population under 18 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Professionals researching this subject matter refer to these children as silent victims. Schools, welfare providers, and government agencies come in contact with many of those affected every day. Children of inmates struggle to adapt to their new lives without one or both parents. As laws grow tougher in America, rifts throughout the community can be felt in the youngest of individuals. There are very few studies that suggest exactly how

many children are affected by this phenomenon. However, evidentiary information can be found that advocating these children through stress would reduce a negative outcome (Miller, 2006).

**Keywords:** Parental incarceration, children, development

**A**N ESTIMATED 2.8 MILLION PEOPLE make up today's prison population in the United States. This number results in 1.7 million children with parents incarcerated in state and federal correctional facilities across the nation, significantly because the years 1980 and 1990 saw the rise of stricter laws and harsher sentences for offenders (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). Numbers were especially high among lower income households and minorities. Many of these families experienced adverse effects due to detainment of a parent and subsequent separation of parents from children (Miller, 2006). Studies have shown that children with a parent in the correctional system are three-to-four times more likely to engage in delinquent and antisocial behavior than those without an imprisoned parent (Makariev & Shaver, 2009). These children are shown to be at risk long before their parents' incarceration due to environmental factors. Consequently, this heightens the likelihood of maladjustment (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). The need exists for proactive interventions to help these endangered youth cope with the loss of a parent while adapting to their ever-changing environments. Exploring the risk factors associated with parental incarceration and its effect on child behavior might help eradicate an endless cycle of criminal offenders.

The United States currently has the highest prison population rates in the world. The rate of incarcerated adults rose from 500,000 in 1980 to 1.5 million in 1990. By the year 2000, that number had climbed to 1.9 million (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). Since the 1980s, the rate of parents housed in state and federal prisons rose by 79% (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). While the male prison population continues to be the dominant demographic, female imprisonment has risen rapidly, with a 400% increase in the last 30 years

(Miller, 2006). Studies contend children of incarcerated mothers are more prone to more risk factors, leading up to adult imprisonment, than those who have a father in prison (Covington, 2016). Maternal incarceration has shown to have a greater impact on the child's wellbeing due to the mother's traditional role as primary caretaker. Children who lose mothers to the criminal justice system have higher chances of various placement outcomes and sibling separation. Temporary placements, such as living with a relative or in foster care, pose a threat when longer prison sentences are involved. According to the Adoption and State Families Act (ASFA), a parent's rights are relinquished after a child is in foster care for 15 of 22 months. The maximum median term for female offenders is 60 months (Miller, 2006). In addition, expectant mothers account for 5-10% of those incarcerated. This, most often, results in a separation between the mother and infant immediately following the child's birth (Makariev & Shaver, 2009).

Researchers have also studied the links between parental incarceration and its negative effects on youth. Children with a parent in prison have an increased risk of developing not only delinquency, but emotional trauma as well (Makariev & Shaver, 2009; Miller, 2006). Depression, nightmares, and trouble sleeping were found to be recurring symptoms of those who reported having experienced trauma (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). Children affected were likely to demonstrate internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Arditti & Savla, 2013). Because of the social stigma involved with having an imprisoned parent, many of the youth studied sought negatively-influenced social circles (Miller, 2006). This, in turn, increased the risk of truancy, juvenile delinquency, and poor academic performance; maternal incarceration, in particular, was found to have a noticeable effect on high-school dropout rates among teens (Johnson & Easterling, 2012). Children of those incarcerated were also more likely to be sexually promiscuous and become parents at an early age (Miller, 2006). Growing up without one or both parents,

these adolescents find themselves having poor relationships and unable to make lasting bonds. This results in detachment towards their own children (Miller, 2006). Identifying the influence of parental incarceration on their offspring develops useful tactics to better address these issues.

Across the United States, different organizations have employed strategies to help recuperate parent-child relationships among those affected. Deferred Prosecution Unit-Social Workers (DPU-SWIFS) is a program out of Texas looking to educate children on their parents' incarceration. DPU-SWIFS also works alongside their local Juvenile Justice department with at-risk adolescents capable of entering adult facilities (Voss, 2008). According to Voss (2008), the purpose of the program is to provide "a safe and cohesive environment" for the children of those incarcerated who have struggled to cope with the repercussions. Group therapy and grief counseling are among some of the practices DPU-SWIFS offers. Additionally, in 1992, Maryland's Correctional Institute for Women created Girl Scouts Behind Bars (GSBB). This program was designed to enhance relationships between incarcerated mothers and their daughters by increasing visitation, providing Girl Scout activities, and providing educational counseling. Since then, more than 20 states have followed suit with the GSBB program (Miller, 2006). Actualizing programs such as these have proven to be successful in the mental well-being of the child. Caregivers and those incarcerated reported children with higher self-esteem, reduction in delinquent behavior, and improved academic performance. Parents also had improved communication with their children (Miller, 2006).

Very little research still exists on the comprehensive effects parental incarceration has on children. The number of children affected by parental incarceration is often left to estimate, as this data is not commonly collected by correctional facilities, schools, or social services (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010). However, collection of accurate data on those affected is imperative to profes-

sionals who seek to enhance mediation processes, and developmental factors in children afflicted is but one topic researchers work to better understand. By exploring the topic of behavioral changes among different sexes, researchers could help explain the hypothesis that girls and boys react differently to parental incarceration (Miller, 2006). Therefore, facilitating a comprehensive collection of data and improving child-parent visitation through the prison system could possibly lessen the likelihood of a revolving door of criminal offenders.

### EXPLORATIVE

WHEN I BEGAN THIS RESEARCH paper, I was more than a little excited about this topic. More than anything, I wanted the information I provided to be detailed, accurate, and intriguing. Hopefully, through that, I am able to convey my passion for this subject. Today's prisons are overcrowded. That alone should bother a lot of people. These prisoners are humans who made a mistake; not all of them unredeemable. What is most troubling is that our prison system is occupied by those who could have been saved in the past. They are the children of those who struggled with poverty, addiction, and abuse. They are the children of those who were punished for their disadvantages and put in prison. We look at them today and see lost causes, but do we see who they were when they were infants, toddlers, and children?

Prison populations began to rise the decade I was born. I remember visiting my biological father in Lexington, OK, while he served his prison sentence. Lucky for me, he was not a big part of my life before and he has not been since. However, there are many individuals out there, young and old, who have parents who were detained during a vulnerable time in their lives. There are not enough resources out there for these children because there are not enough people who care about their well-being. Today's children are

tomorrow's adult offenders. We need to be considering rehabilitating instead of locking them up and throwing away the key. We need to start looking at those children left behind when society wants to turn a blind eye. I was happy to cover this topic because I hope to be a part of this movement someday. ►►

►► REFERENCES

- ARDITTI, J., & SAVLA, J. (2015). Parental incarceration and child trauma systems in single caregiver homes. *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, 24, 551-561.
- COVINGTON, R. (2016). Incarcerated mother, invisible child. *Emory International Law Review*, 31, 99-133.
- GLAZE, L. E., & MARUSCHAK, L. M. (2008). *Parents in prison and their minor children*. Retrieved from <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>
- JOHNSON, E. I., & EASTERLING, B. (2012). Understanding unique effects of parental incarceration on children: Challenges, progress, and recommendations. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74, 342-356.
- MAKARIEV, D. W., & SHAVER, P. R. (2009). Attachment, parental incarceration and possibilities for intervention: An overview. *Attachment & Human Development*, 12, 311-331.
- MILLER, K. (2006). The impact of parental incarceration on children: An emerging need for effective interventions. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 23, 472-486.
- POEHLMANN, J., DALLAIRE, D., LOPER, A. B., & SHEAR, L. (2014). *Children's contact with their incarcerated parents*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4229080/>
- VOSS, T. (2008). *Group intervention on juvenile justice clients' understanding of parental incarceration*. Retrieved from <https://social-work.utexas.edu/projects/ro238/>