Separation and Stigma: The Negative Impacts of Parental Incarceration on their Children

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Abstract

This paper was written for Dr. Danielle Murdoch's Crim 343 Correctional Practice course. The paper asked students to describe the impact incarceration has on family members with examples from a documentary (portions related to the documentary were removed for this submission). The paper uses APA citation style.

It is estimated that over 350,000 children in Canada are impacted by parental incarceration (Withers & Folsom, 2007, p. 16). As incarceration rates continue to increase for marginalized offenders in Canada (Zinger, 2016, p. 612), this issue will likely continue to disproportionately impact marginalized children. Unfortunately, research has illustrated children with incarcerated parents experience struggles including social isolation and an increased likelihood of engaging in antisocial behaviour (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010, p. 404). However, despite the large number of Canadian children affected by parental incarceration, minimal resources are available (Hyslop, 2018, para 2). Ultimately, the objective of this paper is to illustrate the negative impacts incarceration has on relationships between prisoners and their children both during incarceration and upon community re-entry as well as demonstrating how children's peer relationships are adversely affected. Firstly, it will be argued that the physical separation imposed by incarceration negatively affects prisoner-child relationships. Although these adverse impacts can be reduced through in-person visits, the unsuitability of the prison environment for children makes in-person contact challenging. Next, the stigma experienced by children whose parents are incarcerated and the consequences this has on their peer relationships will be discussed. Lastly, it will be argued that incarceration, through institutionalizing prisoners, has long-lasting negative impacts on prisoner-child relationships.

Physical Separation Imposed by Prison: Consequences for Relationships

The physical separation between prisoners and their children resulting from incarceration negatively impacts their relationship. Children with an incarcerated parent must grieve the sudden loss of their parent (Arditti, Lamburt-Shute, & Joest, 2003, p. 201) which often evokes feelings of sadness, anger, and despair; these emotions are felt most strongly by children who were close to their parents prior to their parent's incarceration (Sharratt, 2014, p. 765). These feelings can lead children to feel unsupported by their incarcerated parent who is not around to provide reassurance (Young & Smith, 2019, p. 434). Contrastingly, while many children acknowledge they feel supported by their incarcerated parent, they also report they are unable to sufficiently communicate with them due to barriers of contact created by their physical separation from their parent (Bocknek, Sanderson, & Britner, 2009, p. 329). Thus, the physical separation imposed by incarceration strains prisoner-child relationships both through reducing the support children feel from their parents as well as imposing limitations on the support parents can realistically provide to their children. While in-person contact during incarceration mitigates the tension incarceration places on familial relationships (La Vigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro, 2005, p. 331), there are many challenges to conducting in-person visits with children that limits the in-person contact prisoners can have with their children. This may be why prisoner's relationships with their children, compared to other family members, are more likely to suffer while they are incarcerated (La Vigne et al., 2005, p. 331).

Particularly, in-person contact is limited between prisoners and their children because many parents deem the prison environment to be unsuitable for children. Firstly, the security measures imposed within prison, including searches prior to visits and restrictions on physical contact during visits, can be confusing and frightening for children (Sharratt, 2014, p.768). As an illustration, children who visited their parents and found they were unable to hug them or engage in physical play often left visits feeling dissatisfied (Sharratt, 2014, p. 768). Additionally, although these security measures are in place to ensure visitor well-being, they appear to do little to increase feelings of safety as children still report feeling unsafe in the prison (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008, p. 1126) as well as few positive visiting experiences overall (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010, p. 402). Thus, these visiting spaces and rules that are not child-friendly increase the difficulties prisoners have in maintaining contact with their children (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008, p. 1125) as it makes both prisoners (Murdoch & King, 2019, p. 11) and

caregivers (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010, p. 402) hesitant to bring their children into the prison for visits. Unfortunately, although it is common for caregivers to prohibit their children from visiting their incarcerated parent due to these concerns (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010, p. 403), it limits the contact prisoners can have with their children.

Lastly, the physical distance of families from the prison can also make in-person visits challenging (Miller, 2006, p. 476). Long travelling distances are made difficult due to the financial burdens experienced by many families once a parent is incarcerated (Arditti et al., 2003, p. 201). Ultimately, this can make travelling costs or taking time off work to visit loved ones financially infeasible. These factors all likely contribute to the low prison visitation rates of children within Canadian institutions (Withers & Folsom, 2007, p. 14).

Although video visitation has been proposed to address the challenges of conducting in-person visits with children, it fails to resolve many of these issues, and thereby still creates struggles for prisoners who are trying to maintain contact with their children. Firstly, within provincial prisons in British Columbia, the long distances between prisons and families that make in-person visits challenging are still an issue, as families are required to travel to the prison to engage in video visits with their incarcerated family members (D. Murdoch, Personal Communication, November 7, 2019). Additionally, while video visitation does reduce concerns of children being exposed to the institutional environment, it also loses the personal feeling of in-person visits and is considered less intimate by prisoners (Murdoch & King, 2019, p. 11). Furthermore, it appears in-person contact, compared to more indirect communication methods, is particularly important for strengthening the relationship between prisoners and their children during incarceration (La Vigne et al., 2005, p. 331). Thus, although video visitation does allow children to maintain contact with parents while avoiding the prison environment, it does not resolve issues of long travelling distances and offers less intimate contact that can be frustrating for prisoners.

As reduced contact with incarcerated parents has been found to increase negative emotions experienced by children, it is essential to work towards solutions that allow prisoners to maintain contact with their children while incarcerated. Children who maintain regular contact with their incarcerated parents experience reduced feelings of anger and alienation compared to children with limited parental contact (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010, p. 403). As these feelings of alienation have been linked to negative peer relationships, poor

academic performance, and future behavioural problems (Bocknek et al., 2008, p. 328), increasing prisoner-child contact can mitigate these negative outcomes, thereby providing long-term benefits for children (Miller, 2006, p. 476). As such, it is necessary to find a way to improve the communication between children and their incarcerated parents.

The Stigma of Having an Incarcerated Parent

In addition to disrupted relationships between children and their incarcerated parents, the stigma of having an incarcerated parent adversely impacts relationships between children and their peers. Although stigmatization is generally thought of in relation to its impact on prisoners, this stigma has been demonstrated to transfer onto the prisoner's family members (Hannem, 2008. p. 174). Particularly, research has demonstrated that children with incarcerated parents are often excluded by their peers (Phillips & Gate, 2011, p. 290). Specifically, many children with incarcerated parents report having few friends, troubled peer relationships (Bocknek et al., 2009, p. 328), and being victims of bullying (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010, p. 404) as a result of children learning they have a parent who is incarcerated. Fear of this bullying can lead children to hide their parent's incarceration from peers to avoid being stigmatized (Hannem, 2008, p. 200). However, this secrecy can promote feelings of shame and isolation (Hagen & Myers, 2003, p. 230) that end up negatively impacting peer relationships (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008, p. 1123), suggesting secrecy about parental incarceration will not prevent social isolation from occurring.

Peer relationships can also be negatively impacted due to stigma imposed by parents of other children. Research has demonstrated some parents view children with incarcerated parents as troublemakers; accordingly, they often prohibit their children from engaging with children whose parents are incarcerated for fear that these children will be a bad influence (Hannem, 2008, p. 181). Thus, the negative views society has of those who are incarcerated are transferred to a prisoner's loved ones, thereby impacting their relationships with other family members and friends.

Unfortunately, the stigmatization children experience can lead to feelings of isolation and behavioural concerns. Many children report feelings of self-doubt as a result of the stigma they experience (Young & Smith, 2019, p. 434). This stigmatization also makes it harder for children to properly process their emotional responses to their parent's incarceration as they feel they are unable to

talk about it with peers for fear of being stigmatized (Arditti, 2016, p. 70). Ultimately, these feelings can lead children to act out through externalizing behaviours, such as getting into fights with peers (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010, p. 404), or internalizing behaviours, such as isolating from peers (Bocnek et al., 2009, p. 330). Given the importance of social support for improving children's resiliency while experiencing parental incarceration (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008, p. 1127), finding a way to reduce the stigma children experience, and thereby reducing their isolation from peers, is essential for their long-term success.

Problems with Prisoner-Child Relationships upon Re-Entry

In addition to the communication challenges prisoners experience with their families while incarcerated, these issues continue upon re-entry to the community due to the socialization prisoners undergo within prison. When entering prison, prisoners often abide by the established norms due to a fear of victimization (Ricciardelli, 2014, p. 250). These established norms, referred to as the inmate code, include tenets like minding your own business and acting tough (Ricciardelli, 2014, p. 247). While these norms can be useful for avoiding victimization within the institution, these mindsets continue to impact behaviour after a prisoner is released (Riccardelli, 2014, p. 246). Upon release, these mindsets are not useful as they prohibit the ex-prisoner from communicating openly with their family about their feelings because of entrenched beliefs that they should be tough and focused on self-preservation (Ricciardelli, 2014, p. 247). Unfortunately, as prisoners become institutionalized, re-establishing family relationships upon release becomes more difficult (Grieb et al., 2014, p. 1191). Particularly, ex-prisoners struggle to re-enter the family role they previously occupied due to a lack of open communication with their families (Grieb et al., 2014, p. 1191). Thus, the adverse effects of imprisonment on familial relationships do not dissipate at the end of a prison sentence; strained relationships continue to be a struggle after incarceration has ended (Young & Smith, 2019, p. 438).

However, the struggle for prisoners to re-establish familial relationships is likely increased for relationships with their children due to their limited contact throughout incarceration. Long periods of time between communication with prisoners and their children have been found to increase the awkwardness of communication due to how quickly children and their interests evolve (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008, p. 1124). Thus, the barriers limiting frequent communication between prisoners and their children can make it challenging for ex-prisoners to step back into the role of a parent upon community re-entry. Additionally,

although open communication improves the process of ex-prisoners re-entering their previously established familial roles, this communication is often thwarted by the ex-prisoner's refusal to discuss their experience of incarceration (Grieb et al., 2014, p. 1191). As parents fear prison is not suitable for children to be exposed to (Murdoch & King, 2019, p.11), it is probable they will be less likely to discuss their incarceration experiences with their children. This may make re-establishing their parental role more challenging through creating tension within their relationship with their child (Grieb et al., 2014, p. 1191). As evidence of this, many children whose parents were previously incarcerated discuss how their relationships with their parents are not typical as they cannot depend on their parents in the way most children can (Young & Smith, 2019, p. 430).

Ultimately, interventions should be implemented to aid prisoners in re-establishing relationships with their children upon release due to the positive impacts these relationships have on both parents and their children. Because of the positive impact family relationships have in reducing recidivism (La Vigne et al., 2005, p. 332), improving the connection between prisoners and their children could reduce future offending which is beneficial for public safety. In addition, although the negative emotions children experience due to parental incarceration remain for years after the incarcerated parent has returned home (Young & Smith, 2019, p. 434), the impact of these negative emotions can be mitigated through increasing contact between prisoners and their children (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010, p. 403). Thus, it is in the prisoner's and child's best interest to improve their relationship upon re-entry.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Prison negatively impacts familial relationships, but particularly relationships between prisoners and their children. The physical separation of children from their incarcerated parents, as well as limitations of in-person visits due to the unsuitable visiting environment (Sharratt, 2014, p. 768), makes maintaining contact during incarceration challenging. Additionally, children with incarcerated parents also exhibit reduced peer relationships as a result of stigma surrounding their parent's incarceration (Arditti, 2016, p. 70). This stigma, along with their strained relationships with their parents, has lasting impacts on a child's behaviour through increasing the likelihood of future antisocial behaviour (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010, p. 404). Negative emotions, including self-doubt, despair, and frustration, are felt long after the incarcerated parent has returned home (Young & Smith, 2019, p. 434), illustrating the lasting impacts incarceration has

on children. Similarly, the long-lasting impacts of prison socialization may make it hard for ex-prisoners to re-occupy the parental role they once filled (Grieb et al., 2014, p. 1191) which strains their relationships with their children even after they are released. Despite these known negative impacts of parental incarceration, there are minimal resources available to help children with incarcerated parents (Hyslop, 2018, para 2).

Support groups for children with incarcerated parents would be a beneficial resource given the importance social support has in improving resiliency (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008, p. 1127). Importantly, it would allow children to discuss their feelings in a non-judgmental environment free of stigma and could highlight to children that there are others in the same situation as them (Grieb et al., 2014, p. 1194). However, it is also crucial to improve the contact children can have with their incarcerated parents given the long-lasting consequences of reduced parental contact (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010, p. 404).

Thus, prison visiting policies, as well as visiting spaces, should be designed while considering the needs and comfort of children. Increasing child comfort within the institution (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008, p. 1128), through reducing security screenings or allowing unrestricted physical contact between prisoners and their children during visitation, could make prisoners and caregivers more willing to allow their children to enter the prison for visits. As such, communication during the parent's prison sentence could be improved which would also benefit prisoner-child relationships upon release. Hopefully then, the adverse consequences experienced by children as a result of their parent's incarceration could be reduced.

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