



DATA TRENDS: January, 2004 #91

Summaries of research on mental health services for children and adolescents and their families



The Implications of Incarceration for Children and Families

Source: Arditti, J. A., Lambert-Shute, J., & Joest, K. (2003). Saturday morning at the jail: Implications of incarceration for families and children. *Family Relations*, 52(3), 195-204.

In 1999, an estimated 2.1% of all children under age 18 in the U.S, or 1,498,800 children, had a parent in state or federal prison¹. This represents an increase of over 500,000 since 1991. However, national figures hide the disproportionate impact on some communities. In comparison to white children, African American children are nearly nine times more likely to have a parent in prison, and Latino children are three times as likely to have a parent in prison¹. In this paper, the authors explore ways in which incarceration of a parent affects the family. While most current research focuses on the offender rather than the whole family, there is some evidence to indicate that having a parent in jail increases the risk of a range of negative outcomes for children. These include poor academic performance, alcohol and drug abuse, and involvement of children with the criminal justice system themselves. A better understanding of how families are affected by incarceration is particularly important issues in the context of significant growth in the prison population.

Methods and Sample

Participants were recruited from a jail that was a holding facility for state and federal prisoners. Over a ten-week period, semi-structured confidential interviews were conducted with 56 parents or other caregivers who were bringing the inmate's minor children to visit him or her. Children's visits were restricted to Saturday mornings between 8am and 11am, and each visit was a maximum of twenty minutes. Visitors sat in a booth behind a Plexiglas wall, and children communicated with their incarcerated parent by telephone.

The interviews took place in the waiting area of the jail, and a student was available to play with the children during the interview. The data collected included demographic information about the family, the legal context of the family member's incarceration, and information about finances, parenting, and the participant's health. Each participant received a coupon for a Happy Meal at MacDonald's. Most of the participants were female (96.4%) and had resided with the inmate prior to incarceration (94.6%). The typical interviewee was thirty years old, with three children. Half of the participants were African American. Although about two-thirds of the participants were in paid employment (63.5%) at the time of the interview, the rates of employment for respondents was substantially higher (88.5%) prior to the incarceration of their domestic partner.

Results

The findings suggest that while many of the families already lived well below the poverty line, having a family member in jail greatly increased their financial vulnerability. Two-thirds of the

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interviewees reported that they were financially worse off since the incarceration. Reasons for this included loss of income formerly provided by employment of the incarcerated family member, loss of their own income due to giving up paid work outside the home, loss of child support income, and additional expenses related to the incarceration such as legal costs.

The majority of participants (81.6%) reported that the incarceration created significant problems for the family, including emotional stress, declining health, social isolation, parenting strain, work-family conflict, and concerns about their children, who experienced difficulties in school, mood changes, and behavioral regression. Approximately one-third of the participants (30.2%) reported that before the incarceration, they spend more time with their children. Thus the child may experience not only the loss of the one parent who is incarcerated, but also loss due to the reduced availability of the custodial parent who must cope with intensified demands.

Discussions and Implications

The authors conclude that “incarceration does social and economic harm that goes well beyond the individual inmate and extends to his or her family” (p. 202). They call for practice that supports the family and policy development that acknowledges the links between crime, poverty, and family life. While this study is based on a small sample in one location, this research is an important step in “beginning to make visible the experiences of this largely ignored population of families and children” (p. 201). The growth in the prison population and the structural inequalities evident in the system underline the need for urgent attention to the implications of parental incarceration for families.

Reference

¹ Incarcerated parents and their children. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special report, August 2000, NCJ 182335, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/iptc.pdf>

Information on Resources

Shilton, M. K. (2001). Resources for Mother-Child Community Corrections. NCJ 190352. <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/topics/mcres.pdf>. This is a resource directory (of advocacy groups, educational, research, governmental, and civic organizations) prepared by the Mother-Child Community Corrections Project.

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