The Psychosocial and Behavioral Effects of Parental Incarceration on Youth and Adolescents

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Abstract

A growing number of children and adolescents in the United States fall victim to having a parent taken away due to incarceration. This literature review examines the potential psychosocial and behavioral effects of parental incarceration on children and adolescents. An analysis of the topic is a crucial stepping-stone in developing infrastructure within communities and the government to ameliorate the negative effects. Research reports that children of prisoners suffer from emotional instability, increased delinquency, school problems, and increased rates of alcohol and drug use. This paper examines the negative consequences over the life course of children within a wide range of contextual factors. There is a presentation of information to better understand the impact of parental incarceration with suggestions to improve the outcomes for children with incarcerated parents. This paper also includes an analysis of the topic through an Adlerian lens, with suggestions regarding how to implement Adlerian theory with children of incarcerated parents.
The Psychosocial and Behavioral Effects of Parental Incarceration on Youth and Adolescents

An estimated 1,706,600 minor children have a parent in prison according to the U.S. Department of Justice (2008). This number is staggering, causing the children of incarcerated parents to become a topic of concern. Attention to the issues faced by children and families of incarcerated parents (CFIP) has grown over the last few years both nationally and in Washington State. Changes in drug and sentencing laws in the 1980s, which increased the criminal penalties for non-violent drug offenses (Bearse, 2008) have caused significant inflation in the prison population. Between 1991 and midyear 2007, parents held in state and federal prisons increased by 79% (Glaze & Marushak, 2008). Currently in our nation, 1 in 32 adults in the United States is under correctional supervision (Bearse, 2008). Of parents held in the nation’s prisons, 52% of state inmates and 63% of federal inmates report having minor children (Glaze & Marushak, 2008). One cannot help but wonder what the potential emotional, behavioral, and psychological effects might be on these children. In order to delve into this topic further, the demographics of this population and their families must be determined.

The Incarcerated Population and Their Children

The broad and far-reaching scope of this issue necessitates recognizing the identity of the incarcerated parents and children in order to serve them better. In 2006, over 7.2 million people on probation, in jail or prison, or on parole constituted 3.2% of all U.S. adult residents (Bearse, 2008). Some communities report even higher rates. Poorly educated, minority, young people represent an overwhelming majority of the incarcerated population (Geller, Cooper, Garfinkle, Schwartz-Soicher & Mincy, 2010). Parental incarceration disproportionately affects certain neighborhoods and areas. High minority populations often define these neighborhoods. This links the overrepresentation of parental incarceration with the overrepresentation of minority
populations overall in the criminal justice system. The black community seems to be the most highly affected with approximately 1 in 9 African-American males nationally impacted by the correctional system (Bearse, 2008). Among both state and federal prisoners with minor children, blacks compromise the largest racial/ethnic group. In state prisons, 49% of parents identify as black, 29% white, and 19% Hispanic. In federal prisons, blacks compromise 44% of prisoners, followed by Hispanics (30%), and whites (22%) (Mumola, 2000).

Racial/ethnic groups consist of staggering disparities. This social issue most greatly impacts African American children, accounting for over 50% of all children of incarcerated parents (Miller, 2007). According to the U.S. Department of Justice, parental incarceration impacts black children at seven and a half times the rate of white children. Parental incarceration also impacts Hispanic children at two and a half times the rate of white children (Glaze & Marushak, 2008).

When considering the numbers, determining why parental incarceration impacts some communities more greatly than others remains essential. Contextual factors such as: level of education, socioeconomic status, community violence, and substance use/abuse must be considered. For example, one-fourth of all children of non-college educated black fathers experience parental imprisonment by age 14, compared with 4 percent of the children of non-college educated white fathers (Roettger, 2009). These numbers provide a compelling reason for research to take a second look into how the imprisonment of parents impacts children and how communities and government agencies can make a difference in their lives.

**Purpose**

When one contemplates the depth of the problem at hand, the data proves to be overwhelming. The available literature covering the topic from all angles varies greatly. Many
studies have concluded that parental incarceration does in fact have a negative impact on the children involved. Other studies found inconclusive evidence or found no correlation at all. Analyzing the potential effects of parental arrest and imprisonment in order to help youth who may be at risk provides a purpose for reviewing the literature. Families impacted by incarceration of a parent face multiple challenges including poverty, substance abuse, mental illness, and abuse/neglect (Bearse, 2008). Often times the family suffers financially when parental incarceration occurs and the impact trickles down to the children.

Research consistently indicates that serious problems such as psychopathology, drug use, and delinquency occur more frequently among children whose parents offend than among other children in the general population (Phillips & Dettlaff, 2009). The effect varies from one child to another, but research confirms that the consequences can be potentially negative. In a study about prisoners’ families, Lowenstein’s (1986) findings indicated that in about 40% of families, children experienced emotional and interactional difficulties, and in about 20% of the families they experienced behavioral problems.

Strides need to be made towards lessening the effects of parental incarceration for many reasons. From a social standpoint, ameliorating this problem will lead to fewer incarcerated individuals in the communities in which they reside. Research consistently demonstrates that children whose parents offend become more likely than other children in the general population to develop serious problems. Those problems, in turn, increase the likelihood that the children of offenders, like their parents, will become involved with criminal authorities (Phillips & Dettlaff, 2009). If communities learn how to lessen the impact of parental incarceration, then the number of youth who choose a delinquent path will be reduced. If this occurs, then theoretically the number of incarcerated individuals in the future will be reduced as well. Roger Shaw said it best
when he pointed out almost 20 years ago, “If we do not attend to the effects of imprisonment on children, we face the possibility of punishing innocent victims, neglecting a seriously at risk group, and possibly causing crime in the next generation” (Murray, 2005, p. 443).

**Negative Outcomes for Children of Incarcerated Parents**

“Having an incarcerated parent has been compared to living in an unwanted state. Children experience profound feelings of loss, rejection, and abandonment even when they have never known their parent” (Lange, 2000, p.62).

**Attachment Insecurities**

Attachment is defined as an emotional bond to another person. From birth, the growing and developing child forms a bond with his or her caregivers. Attachment theorist John Bowlby believed that the earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers have a tremendous impact that continues throughout life (Cherry, 2005). Since its inception, attachment theory has emphasized the negative effects of separation from parents on children’s attachments and subsequent developmental outcomes (Bowlby, 1980, as cited in Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). Insecure attachments – a consequence of adverse shifts in life circumstances – in turn, have been linked to a variety of child outcomes, including poorer peer relationships and diminished cognitive abilities. Bearing in mind what the literature states about attachment, separation from caregivers due to incarceration will likely cause children to form insecure attachments. Research suggests that a failure to form secure attachments early in life can have a negative impact on behavior in later childhood and throughout life (Cherry, 2005).

Children, especially young children, separated from their parent due to incarceration, may face many challenges due to the disruption in attachment. Having an incarcerated mother places children at an especially high risk for a host of negative outcomes, including separation reactions...
and attachment insecurities, behavior problems, cognitive delays, and delinquency (Murray & Farrington, 2005).

Schlafer and Poehlmann (2010) conducted a mixed-method study, longitudinal in design, to examine attachment and care giving in relation to children’s contact with incarcerated parents. They also examined care giving stability, and children’s behavior problems at home and at school in families affected by parental incarceration. Their study focused on 57 families who participated in a mentoring program for children of incarcerated parents. They conducted monthly interviews with the children, their caregivers, and mentors during the first six months of the program. In their findings, the authors of the study noted that children of incarcerated parents rated higher as exhibiting behavior problems than normative samples, with a multitude of comments about behavior problems and challenges at school (Schlafer & Poehlmann, 2010).

Children’s attachment relationships and corresponding internal working models have long-term implications for their social and emotional competence (Schlafer & Poehlmann, 2010). In their study, Schlafer and Poehlmann (2010) found that many children in their sample rejected their peers, lacked self-confidence, and doubted their friendships, indicating insecure attachment styles. Securely attached children relate more positively to their peers and demonstrate more competence, empathy, and self-confidence.

“First there is the experience of separation and loss. Attachment theory predicts that rupturing of parent child bonds through separation causes psychosocial difficulties for children” (Murray, 2005, p.450).

**Behavior Problems**

The notion that children of incarcerated parents may not form a secure attachment provides the jumping board for a host of other consequences related to parental incarceration. As noted in
the study conducted by Schlafer and Poehlmann (2010), behavior problems and challenges at school dominate in children of incarcerated parents. Other literature supports this claim as well. A meta-analysis of the available literature conducted by Murray, Farrington & Sekol (2009) made note that children of prisoners have about twice the risk of antisocial behavior and poor mental health outcomes compared to children without imprisoned parents. This meta-analysis also found, after controlling for other risk factors, a significant independent effect of parental incarceration on child drug use, school problems, and unemployment.

**Delinquency**

Several research studies have concluded that parental incarceration may have both short and long term negative outcomes for the children involved. Of the potential negative outcomes, the most pervasive include antisocial behavior and delinquency. Children of incarcerated parents have higher rates of juvenile crime and externalizing behaviors than peers in the general population, even when considering the contribution of other variables such as socio-economic status. Having an incarcerated father offers the single best predictor of criminal behavior (Lange, 2000). Males age 18-25- with incarcerated fathers, report engaging in serious delinquency themselves at almost twice the rate of other males (Roettger, 2009).

Murray and Farrington (2005) examined the effects of parental imprisonment on boy’s antisocial behavior and delinquency through the life course. Their study examined later life outcomes for prisoner’s children compared to children separated for other reasons. Previous research had shown an association between parent-child separation and delinquency, and that belonging to a disrupted family increases the risk of antisocial behavior and delinquency compared to children from intact homes. They hypothesized that separation because of parental imprisonment predicts boys’ own antisocial and delinquent outcomes through the life-course.
They also hypothesized that separation because of parental imprisonment predicts worse outcomes for boys than separation for any other reason.

The authors used longitudinal data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD). The CSDD surveyed the development of offending and antisocial behavior in 411 males from a working-class inner-city area in South London. The CSDD chose boys based on age and location. The researchers chose to take the sample from all of the boys who were then aged 8-9 and on the registers of 6 state primary schools within a one-mile radius of the established research office. Murray and Farrington (2005) then used the data from the CSDD to compare five mutually exclusive groups of boys according to whether they were separated from a parent, and if separation occurred because of incarceration. The experimental group consisted of 23 boys who experienced parental imprisonment within the first 10 years of life. The authors comprised four control groups. The first consisted of 227 boys who did not experience parent-child separation within the first 10 years, or parental incarceration at any time before the boys 18th birthdays. The second consisted of 77 boys who did not experience parental incarceration, but did experience separation because of hospitalization or death in the first 10 years. The third group consisted of 61 boys with no parental incarceration, but who experienced separation for reasons other than hospitalization or death. The fourth consisted of 17 boys impacted by parental incarceration before the boy’s birth, but not again between birth and the 18th birthday. Because the number of boys whose parents were imprisoned within the first 10 years of life was a smaller number of cases, they used t-tests and meta-analyses of odds ratios to investigate average effects of parental imprisonment on boys’ outcomes through the life-course (Murray & Farrington, 2005).
The authors of this study concluded that there appears to be a strong correlation between parental imprisonment and adverse outcomes in children. They found separation because of parental imprisonment to be a strong predictor of antisocial and delinquent outcomes of boys through the life-course. Their research indicated that 71% of boys who experienced parental imprisonment during childhood had antisocial personalities at age 32, compared with only 19% of boys who were not separated and whose parents never went to prison. In each of their analyses, they found that boys separated because of parental imprisonment had more delinquent behavior than boys separated for any other reason (i.e. hospitalization, death, and disharmony) (Murray & Farrington, 2005).

The results of this study carried much strength. The first strength being the relatively large sample size of 411 as larger sample sizes provide value for obtaining more accurate, representative results. The longitudinal design emerged as another strength in the study. The authors noted that much of the previous research on this topic had been short term, or only followed the sample up to one year after the parental imprisonment. The data from the CSDD assessed eleven antisocial and delinquent outcomes of the boys between the ages of 14 and 40. This allowed for better analyses of the effects of parental imprisonment through the life-course and not just in the first few months or years. The authors also attempted to control for any possible confounding variables by using four control groups.

This study, coupled with the wealth of other research studies that have touched on the subject, offers compelling evidence that parental incarceration can absolutely be detrimental to children and increase the likelihood that the children themselves might become offenders later in life.
Emotional Issues

Children with incarcerated parents experience many emotions including fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, loneliness, and guilt. They may also develop low self-esteem, depression, and emotional withdrawal (Seymour, 1998). One estimate states that up to 70% of young children with incarcerated mothers have emotional or psychological problems (Parke & Stewart, 2001). Many research studies have validated these claims and found the emotional trauma of losing a parent to incarceration to be significant. The emotions that these children experience need to be addressed early to prevent lifelong struggles for the children and their families.

One study conducted by Wilbur, Marani, Appugliese, Woods, Siegel, Cabral and Frank (2007) focused on the effects of parent’s incarceration on school-aged children. This study evaluated whether children of incarcerated fathers reported or exhibited behavioral symptoms at higher rates than their equally disadvantaged peers without an incarcerated father.

This evaluation occurred during a longitudinal study of intrauterine cocaine exposure involving 102 children (50% male and 89% black) from urban, low-income homes. The children’s caregivers responded to questions regarding incarceration of the child’s father at each visit during school age. The researchers also administered several evaluations to the children themselves, to their primary caregivers, and to their teachers in order to determine any behavioral symptoms the children exhibited. At ages 6, 8.5, 9.5, and 11, trained research assistants, unaware of the child’s previous or current developmental findings conducted interviews with caregivers. Trained assessors masked to the children’s prenatal drug exposure administered instruments to the children themselves. This testing and surveying of children, caregivers, and teachers recurred at each age between 6 and 11 years. After gathering all information, the researchers conducted analyses by using SAS 8.2 software. They first conducted bivariate
comparisons of children with and without incarcerated fathers with respect to the outcomes of interest, and then conducted more complex multivariate analyses (Wilbur et al., 2007).

The authors concluded that after controlling for other bio-psycho-social risk factors, father’s incarceration remained correlated with children’s depressive symptoms and behavior problems (Wilbur et al., 2007). The teachers of children with incarcerated fathers also reported higher Teacher Report Form externalizing scores.

This study produced strong evidence in respect to the effect of father’s incarceration on school-aged children. The large sample size achieved statistical significance. They conducted the analyses of the children at each year between 6 and 11. This gave a clear picture of the long-term effects of paternal incarceration. Having a parent imprisoned profoundly impacted the young children involved in the study. Clearly, strides need to be made in reaching out to other children like them in order to help diminish their depressive symptoms and prevent it from turning into major depression in later years.

**Problems in School**

Parental incarceration produces trauma for children. This trauma, as mentioned previously, can lead to many emotional and behavioral issues for children and adolescents. Youth may act out, experience depression, lose sleep, or use drugs. All of the possible negative consequences that a child may experience translate into trouble at school as well. When compared to each other and their peers, research indicates that having an incarcerated mother poses the highest risk for school failure in these children (Dallaire, 2007).

School aged children of incarcerated parents exhibit school-related problems and problems with peer relationships. Parke & Clarke-Stewart (2001) reported that over 50% of the children of incarcerated parents had school problems such as poor grades. In another report
Stanton (1980) found that 70% of children of incarcerated mothers showed poor academic performance (as cited in Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). Compounded with poor academic achievement, these children suffer internally because of teasing and shame imposed upon them from other children. Success in school is an important part of a child’s life; therefore, ways must be found to ameliorate the negative effects. Being a high school graduate greatly increases one’s chances of obtaining a higher income, and potentially pursuing higher education. If the children of prisoners slip through the cracks and drop out, the potential for them to spend their lives unemployed, living on government assistance, or cycling in and out of the prison system prevails (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). Problems at school will translate into problems later in life for these children, as well as for the economy.

**Alcohol and Drug Use**

Parental incarceration puts children at risk for increased alcohol and drug use as well. A pattern can be formed, from parental arrest, to behavior problems, to school dropout, to alcohol and drug use, to impending incarceration. Roettgers’ summary of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health makes a significant observation. Among males reporting select adverse outcomes in their lifetime, those with a history of paternal incarceration report in statistically higher numbers. Furthermore, the proportion of young men reporting using hard drugs and engaging in arrestable offenses increases by more than ten percent with a father who has history of incarceration (Roettger, 2009).

Other research studies have found similar evidence linking paternal arrest and imprisonment to child substance use. A study conducted by Kinner, Alati, Najman and Williams (2007) had the purpose of determining if a relationship exists between paternal arrest/imprisonment and subsequent poor child behavior, mental health and substance abuse in
adolescence. The researchers aimed to determine if the relationships varied by child gender, and to what extent other risk factors accounted for the relationship. The authors sought to determine if the incidence of behavior problems in the children of imprisoned fathers outweighed those of other disadvantaged children.

The researchers used data from the Mater University Study of Pregnancy (MUSP), an Australian birth cohort study that identified a number of important risk factors for externalizing, internalizing and substance abuse problems among adolescence. The data included information regarding socioeconomic disadvantage, early motherhood, marital discord, unstable family circumstances, maternal substance abuse and poor maternal mental health. The cohort for the paper consisted of a subgroup of 2,399 adolescents (1,247 males, 1,152 females), for whom complete data on paternal criminal history and all other variables of interest could be provided (Kinner et al., 2007). The researchers used the data from the MUSP and analyzed data collected at the antenatal visit, the 5-year and 14 year follow-up phases. The researchers utilized Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyze the data.

The interesting positive correlations found by the authors determined both paternal arrest and imprisonment to be associated with alcohol use at age 14, and that for boys, paternal arrest was significantly associated with increased risk of both alcohol and tobacco use (Kinner et al., 2007). These associations provide significant incentive for reaching out to the children of prisoners and offenders as a way to reduce the rise in childhood alcohol and drug use.

**Negative Outcomes Over the Life Course**

“Every stress suffered by such families weakens the family and increases the likelihood of other family members, especially children, becoming social casualties, thus not only adding to
the charge upon the community but to the sum of human unhappiness” (Morris, 1965, cited by Laing & McCarthy, 2002, p. 14)

The impact of having a parent incarcerated extends far beyond childhood and into adulthood. Children who embark upon a negative life course, and begin living on the useless side of life, impact communities for years to come. Hypothetically the problem begins in childhood with behaviors such as acting out and/or depressing. As adolescence they begin to experiment with alcohol and drugs, get into academic trouble, and drop out of high school. As adults who had incarcerated parents as children, they may end up living a life of poverty and crime, the same kind of life their imprisoned parent lived. Exceptions to every rule exist, and the path mentioned above does not have to be the path that every child with an offending parent takes. Nonetheless, importance lies with the steps taken to help the children who do have a parent in prison or jail in order to avoid the potential negative outcomes.

As noted previously, Murray and Farrington found that an astounding 71% of boys who experienced parental imprisonment during childhood had antisocial personalities at age 32. They also found separation because of parental imprisonment to be a strong predictor of many antisocial and delinquent outcomes up to age 40. Separation due to imprisonment also produced worse outcomes than separation from a parent for any other reason. These findings indicate that parental imprisonment confers specific risk on children (Murray & Farrington, 2005).

Murray and Farrington (2005) also found that boys separated from their parent because of incarceration faced almost five times the risk for adult imprisonment than boys separated from their parent for reasons other than incarceration. Clearly, as validated by international research, having a parent in prison increases children’s chances of experiencing adverse outcomes over the
life course including criminal justice contact, using drugs, being unemployed and not in school, and offending (Roettger, 2009).

The likelihood of intergenerational incarceration remains high for the children of both incarcerated mothers and fathers. Dallaire found that there might be an increased likelihood for the children of incarcerated mothers. The study conducted by Dallaire investigated differences between the rates that incarcerated mothers and fathers reported the incarceration of their adult children. They aimed to determine if a difference exists between the rates that inmate mothers’ adult children become incarcerated versus the rate that inmate fathers’ adult children become incarcerated. They also sought to examine the associated risk factors, such as living situation of the minor children and parental drug use. The study examined the following research questions: (a) do reports of the incidence of familial history of incarceration, and other risk factors, differ for incarcerated mothers compared to incarcerated fathers; (b) do incarcerated mothers report their adult children incarcerated more often than adult children of incarcerated fathers; (c) are there differential predictors of, and risks for, adult children’s incarceration of mothers and fathers; (d) are more risks associated with higher rates of incarceration; and (e) in what ways do minor children’s living situations differ on the basis of maternal or paternal incarceration (Dallaire, 2007).

The authors of the study used a sample of inmates in federal and state correctional facilities that self identified as a parent of at least one child. The total sample size consisted of 7,245 inmates, including 6,146 males and 1,014 females. Of the female inmates 70% identified as mothers of minor children and 30% identified as mothers of adult children. Of the males, 78% identified as fathers of minor children and the remainder fathers of adult children. The collection of the data took place as part of a survey of inmates in state and federal correctional facilities in
The study then compiled three sets of variables and examined them separately for mothers and fathers of minor and adult children. After compiling all the data, the researchers utilized two-tailed z-approximations to test for significant differences between mothers and fathers (Dallaire, 2007). They also made use of risk ratios to compare the probability of the incidence of incarceration and living situation of minor children in each group.

The authors made several interesting conclusions from the data they analyzed. First, they found that incarcerated mothers reported the incarceration of their adult children 2.5 times more frequently than the incarcerated fathers of adult children. They also found the adult children of incarcerated mothers who had used drugs to be especially at risk. As the associated risk factors accumulated, parents, especially mothers, reported the incarceration of their adult children at an increased frequency. Incarcerated mothers also reported the placement of their minor children in non-familial care situations such as foster care or orphanages more often. Overall they concluded that taken together, the analyses of specific risks and the accumulation of risk factors indicate that maternal incarceration over paternal incarceration represents a risk for children to be incarcerated themselves (Dallaire, 2007).

Another interesting finding in the Dallaire study related to intergenerational patterns of crime concerned the imprisoned fathers of minor children. They found men to be more likely than women to report that their mother had been incarcerated (Dallaire, 2007). This suggests that future research may need to be especially geared towards boys of incarcerated mothers because they may be at an increased risk for incarceration themselves.

**Contextual Factors**

The negative effects on children related to parental incarceration, although compelling, can also be accounted for by many of the contextual factors that produce an environment where
parents become involved with the criminal justice system. Children from homes with incarcerated parents face significantly more contextual disadvantages such as: low parent education, teen motherhood, minority/race/ethnicity, residence in urban neighborhoods, high unemployment rate, low family income, parental substance abuse, and community crime. Gender of the incarcerated parent as well as the gender and age of the child at the time of parental imprisonment can also be potential variables. These variables must be taken into consideration when one looks at the impact of incarceration on youth, and how the negative impact can be lessened. On a broader scale, changes need to be made to whole communities and sociological structures in order to create the largest impact.

In many ways, contextual and incarceration related risk factors are inextricably related. Understanding the prevalence of contextual risk factors in addition to incarceration-related risk factors in the lives of children with incarcerated mothers and fathers may help elucidate the mechanisms of risk; that is, how and why children with incarcerated parents are at increased risk for negative outcomes like incarceration (Dallaire, 2007, p. 442).

**Poverty and Economic Hardship**

It is estimated that children of incarcerated parents may be up to 80% more likely to live in a household that struggles financially than children who come from an intact family (Bearse, 2008). Because of the fact that poverty and crime seem to be highly correlated, the children who grow and live in an impoverished atmosphere become more susceptible to a life of crime. Many of the children of incarcerated parents live in poverty because of the loss of income from one parent, who is often times the father.

Harper and McLanahan’s (2004) study made a connection between father absence and youth incarceration. Their study measured the likelihood of youth incarceration amongst
adolescent males from father-absent households, using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79). The researchers used data from a sample (n=2,846) of youth under age 18 at the initial year of the NLSY79. The NLSY79 began in 1979 with a sample of 14-22 year olds and has continued to re-interview the same group each year with a follow up rate close to 98%. The NLSYS79 survey remains one of the few longitudinal data sets with individual level information on both family life and incarceration (Harper & McLanahan, 2004).

The main research hypothesis of the study delineated that father absence increases the chances of incarceration for male children. Investigations also delved into other aspects of father absent households such as income, family disruption, and timing of father’s departure (Harper & McLanahan, 2004). The results of their study indicated that adolescents from father absent households showed significantly higher delinquency rates. The incarceration risks in the national male cohort were elevated for these youth as well.

In the analysis of father absence, the researchers found family income levels in father absent homes to be half that of two parent homes. The poverty that those households experienced did play a sizeable role in the likelihood of incarceration for the youth (Harper & McLanahan, 2004). This finding is significant when considering the contextual factors influencing the effects of parental incarceration on adolescents. Parental incarceration results in a form of father absence, indicating that the findings of the Harper and McLanahan study can be applied to the population of interest.

Racial disparities. The issue of poverty and economic hardship creates a common stressor among any family impacted by incarceration. Evidence, however, suggests that this problem most acutely affects the Black community. Minority status in this nation can be one of the most determinate factors that affect income (Miller, 2007). According to the U.S. Bureau of
the Census (2009), 25.8% of African American versus 9.4% of Caucasian families lives in poverty. These poor communities often lack resources to break away from the cycle of poverty, and suffer a reduction in the ability to meet basic survival needs (Miller, 2007).

Statistics on the prison population show that a large percentage of prisoners live in poverty prior to incarceration and that the children of these inmates suffer the same circumstances after the incarceration of a parent (Miller, 2007). Criminal activity including gangs, violence, and the sale and use of drugs define a life of poverty. The combination of crime and poverty produces a breeding ground for the likelihood of people of color becoming involved with the correctional system.

The disproportionate number of minorities in correctional institutions negatively impacts communities such that incarceration becomes an expectation and a part of the minority experience. The youth within these communities, particularly those with parents in the correctional system, potentially become desensitized to criminality. They are at risk for adopting criminogenic thinking. The separation from a parent may not be as influential as the belief that they too are destined to follow the criminal paths of their parents and others within the community (Miller, 2007, p.28-29).

**Parental Substance Abuse**

In the United States only about 9% of people over age 12 depend on or abuse drugs or alcohol, compared to 68% of jail inmates in the U.S. who used or depended on drugs or alcohol at the time of their arrest (Phillips, Gleeson & Waites-Garrett, 2009). Many imprisoned parents have children outside the prison walls, which demonstrates why this issue concerns scholars. According to Phillips, Burns, Wagner, and Barth (2004) the proportion of children whose parents had a substance abuse problem was found to be eight times greater among children with recently
arrested parents. Also, more than 4 in 5 incarcerated parents reported drug use within the month prior to their crime (Bearse, 2008).

The children whose parents abuse drugs and alcohol and become involved with the criminal justice system comprise an at risk group. Parental substance abuse contributes to poor child outcomes in a myriad of ways. The substance abuse adversely affects the children’s family lives by facilitating inadequate, neglectful, and abusive parenting (Phillips et al., 2009). Home life with a substance-abusing parent can lead to emotional and behavioral problems in children. The substance abuse may also precede parental incarceration, which leads to adverse outcomes such as emotional and behavioral problems, substance abuse, and delinquency.

Research indicates higher rates of internalizing problems among the children of substance-abusing parents, versus children in the general population. Affective disorders impact approximately 21% of children whose parent’s abuse substances, versus only 5% in other community samples. Burstein et al. (2006) conducted a study examining parent psychopathology, parenting, and child internalizing problems in substance-abusing families. The sample consisted of 242 parents receiving substance abuse treatment. The parents completed measures including the SCL-90, the BDI-II, and the APQ for themselves, and the Child Behavior Checklist for their children. Among many findings, they found that parent-externalizing problems (e.g. substance abuse) exerted direct effects on child internalizing problems (affective and anxiety disorders) (Burstein et al., 2006).

This research provides valuable insight into the effects of parental substance abuse. The children of parents who abuse any drug may become more likely to develop psychosocial difficulties and behavioral problems (Burstein, 2006). Parental substance abuse likely adds a contextual variable to the impact of parental incarceration on youth and adolescence. Examining
the role parental substance abuse plays in conjunction with the impact of parental incarceration leads to a better understanding of how to mitigate the negative consequences. Phillips, Gleeson & Waites-Garrett make an important point:

If parental arrest and incarceration create family problems above and beyond those attributable to parental substance abuse alone, children may actually be placed at additional risk by the actions the criminal justice system takes in dealing with parents with substance abuse problems (Phillips, Gleeson & Waites-Garrett, 2009, p. 122)

**Age of Child at Time of Incarceration**

**Infants.** In the United States, more than two thirds of imprisoned women have a child under the age of 18, and approximately 6% of those women are pregnant at the time of their arrest. In some prison systems separation does not occur between mothers and infants (Hotelling, 2008), this remains the exception rather than the rule. “Most states make no special arrangements for the care of newborns in prison. After delivery, separation typically occurs between mother and child-sometimes within hours. The infant is sent to live with a family member or goes straight to foster care (Drummond, 2000, p. 2)”. In most cases, mothers of newborn infants are permitted only a couple of days with their child before they give up their baby and return to prison (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002); this clearly does not provide enough time for the child to develop a bond to his or her mother.

As a result of the short time an infant is allowed with his or her mother, the crucial task of developing a bond between mother and child does not occur (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). “The central theme of attachment theory is that mothers who are available and responsive to their infant's needs establish a sense of security. The infant knows that the caregiver is dependable, which creates a secure base for the child to then explore the world (Cherry, 2005, p.1).”
infant who does not develop this secure base may suffer in the future, developing emotional and behavioral problems later in life.

**Young children.** Similar to infants born to mothers in prison, young children (12 months-6 years) may also experience disruptions in attachment, along with the disruptions in his or her home life and living arrangements. Approximately half of all children with parents in prison are under the age of 10, and 22% of children of state inmates and 16% of children of federal inmates are under the age of 5 years (The Sentencing Project, 2009). Children in this age group often exhibit internalizing problems such as anxiety and withdrawal and externalizing problems such as anger and aggression (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002).

**School aged children.** Many children of prisoners have been found to exhibit relational and behavioral problems at home and at school. Over 50% of children of incarcerated parents report school problems, many exhibit poor academic performance, and aggression (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). Some research suggests the exacerbation of the impact of incarceration for boys especially. Sack (1977) suggested aggression to be most common in boys aged six to twelve in reaction to parental imprisonment.

Murray and Farrington found boys separated from a parent before ten years old because of parental incarceration to be more likely to exhibit internalizing symptoms and antisocial outcomes in adolescence and adulthood. They also found an increased risk of developing antisocial personalities in boys who experienced parental imprisonment during childhood in comparison to those whose parents went to prison before they were born (Murray & Farrington, 2005). This finding is suggestive of the impact of separation/attachment from a parent and its negative consequences. “This is perhaps that purest evidence of an effect of separation caused by parental imprisonment over and above the effect of parental convictions, other childhood risk
factors, and even parental imprisonment before birth” (Murray & Farrington, 2005, p. 1276).

**Paternal Incarceration vs. Maternal Incarceration**

Living arrangements post incarceration tend to be one of the main differences existing between the children who experience maternal incarceration and the children who experience paternal incarceration. Children whose fathers become incarcerated remain with their mothers 90% of the time, whereas only 20-30% of children affected by maternal imprisonment live with their fathers (Poehlmann, 2008). “The imprisonment of mothers is often more detrimental to children than imprisonment of fathers, owing to the fact that mothers are more likely to have been the primary caregiver of their children prior to arrest” (Laing & McCarthy, 2002, p. 6).

Sharp, Marcus-Mendoza, Bently, Simpson, and Love (1998) found females to be almost twice as likely as males to have reported that they had a child of their own living with them prior to the arrest; therefore their imprisonment was more likely to have disrupted their children’s living arrangements. The females in their study reported significantly less often than males that their children were living with the other parent. “Taken in conjunction, those two statistics emphasized the fact that almost 50% of children of incarcerated mothers may have found themselves not only without a mother, but also without their home” (Sharp et al., 1998, p. 11).

The alternative living arrangements tend to be more complex when a mother goes to prison. Most often grandparents care for children when a mother is incarcerated, and around 10% of the time children live in non-relative foster care (Poehlmann et al, 2008). Kinship care, such as that of a grandparent or other relative, tends to be more stable and allow for the child to avoid some of the discontinuities that often occur in the foster system (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). Evidence suggests that children placed in the foster system experience a myriad of problems
including maltreatment, neglect, and shifts in care, which can be associated with negative developmental outcomes (Poehlmann et al., 2008).

Children may also be separated from siblings and other family members in the transition to foster care, which may be emotionally challenging. Literature on the topic describes siblings as potential subsidiary attachment figures for young children during a parent's absence (Poehlmann et al., 2008). “Separation from those siblings may prove to be traumatizing, and any non-maternal caregiver’s willingness to parent groups of siblings may be reflected by their investment in the children” (Poehlmann, et al., 2008, p. 269). For this reason, it appears to be in the best interest of the child to be placed with family or their alternate parent. Problems do exist with kinship arrangements that may also be detrimental to the child.

Grandparents raising grandchildren face a range of challenges including emotional, physical, and financial difficulties (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). This may not be the worst of the potential problems for the children involved. Mothers often leave children in a family in which a history of abuse awaits (Laing & McCarthy, 2002). Around half of the women who participated in a Sharp et al. (1998) study reported leaving their children with grandparents even though many had family histories of alcohol and drug abuse. Two fifths of the women reported sexual abuse in their past, and the same proportion reported physical abuse. This data suggests a propensity for children to be left in homes with high likelihoods for abuse and neglect. The negative effects of being left in risky situations may impact these children for a lifetime.

By exploring the histories and behaviors of women who are incarcerated, researchers may uncover potential patterns that could lead children into deviant criminal lifestyles as well. Future research should specifically explore the histories of inmate families who
provide guardianship for minor children, lest another generation of abused children grows up to be the inmates of the future (Laing & McCarthy, 2002, p.7).

Clearly the living arrangements for children post incarceration may either help or hinder their adjustment to having an incarcerated parent. Attention needs to be paid, especially to those children being left in the care of family members or foster families. Future programming needs to be developed to lessen the negative impact and provide resources for the innocent youth placed at risk. The importance of the care giving relationships may prove to be one of the keys to ameliorating the negative consequences of parental incarceration. Research suggests that children left in a situation with continuity of care following their mother’s imprisonment have the opportunity to develop a greater sense of security.

**Contact with parent during incarceration.** The ability to visit the incarcerated parent, and the frequency of visitations emerges as another difference between maternal and paternal incarceration. Regular contact between prisoners and their families helps to prevent the breakdown of relationships and provides a way to cope with the separation (Laing & McCarthy, 2002). According to Murray (2006) children might adjust better if they have more contact with their imprisoned parent. Although there are benefits to contact, discrepancies exist between men and women in prison.

The research indicates that although many prisoners (81% of men and 95% of women) reported family contact to be of extreme importance, only 55 percent of fathers and 67 percent of mothers had visitations from their children (Murray, 2005). Similarly, in a 2007 national survey, imprisoned mothers were more likely to report at least monthly phone calls with children (47% of mothers vs. 38% of fathers), as well as mail correspondence (65% of mothers vs. 51% of fathers) (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper & Shear, 2010).
In the 1998 study conducted by Sharp et al., male inmates reported losing contact with their children and families at higher rates than female inmates. Incarcerated mothers reported receiving visits from their children most often, those visits becoming infrequent. According to Parke and Clarke-Stuart (2002) children were most likely to visit their mother in the first year and less likely to do so after that initial period. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (1993) only 8% of the incarcerated mothers in a large-scale survey of inmates saw their children as often as once a week; 18% saw them once a month; and 20% saw them less than once a month.

The benefits of visitations extend to both the prisoner and his or her children. The research indicates that children may fare better and the prisoners may be less prone to recidivism (Laing & McCarthy, 2002).

The most striking feature of the literature about the benefits of visits for prisoners, their families, and communities, is that there is little if any contrary argument and conflicting data to the general principle that the better the quality of visitation throughout the prisoners incarceration, the better the effects on the prisoner, his or her post-release adjustment, the family of the prisoner and the community (Laing & McCarthy, 2002, p. 11).

Father absence. A majority of the available research and literature confirms that in most cases, maternal incarceration remains more detrimental to the wellbeing of children. Some research touches on paternal absence in general, and its potentially hazardous impact on children. Harper and McLanahan (2004) found that youths in father absent families had significantly higher odds of incarceration, and reported significantly higher levels of serious delinquency than did those from mother-father families.
When one considers all of the potential contextual factors that impact youth from homes with paternal imprisonment, the remarriage of the custodial parent may have a moderating affect. The research, however, proves the opposite to be true. According to Harper and McLanahan (2004) youths in stepparent households faced incarceration odds almost 3 times as high as those in mother-father families, and significantly higher delinquency behaviors than those in single-parent homes.

Individuals, whether incarcerated or not, tend to divorce offenders (Sharp et al., 1998). Divorce and remarriage may not be the best answer. The data suggests that in a home where the father is imprisoned, the best course of action for the mother would be to remain a single parent for the duration of the incarceration. Divorce only opens the door to potential remarriage, which may prove to be negative for the children involved.

**Improving the Outcomes for Children of Incarcerated Parents**

The possible negative ramifications of parental incarceration for children and adolescents provide a compelling reason to find ways to prevent these children from falling victim. The children of offenders can suffer tremendously: behavioral and emotional problems, school failure, drug use, delinquency, and increased likelihood of future incarceration plague these adolescents. According to Seymour (1998) few programs have begun to focus on children with incarcerated parents. In The Child Welfare League of America’s 1997 survey, only six of 38 responding states reported having policies that focus specifically on children with incarcerated parents, and only two of the 38 states reported that they provided staff with specific training regarding the needs of children with incarcerated parents (Seymour, 1998).

The ever-expanding prison population has created a broadened interest in the children of offenders and how to help these children. Some programs have been established for children of
prisoners. Research provides several suggestions to provide help to this vulnerable population. Outcomes for these children can be improved in many simple ways, such as: helping the children to maintain contact with the incarcerated parent, improving the quality of relationships with extended family and social networks, supporting caregivers, and mentor and school based programming. According to Stephen Lange (2000):

One of the most difficult, stressful, and ambiguous situations a child can endure is the incarceration of a parent. Frequently, a parent’s incarceration is itself the culmination of a lifestyle that is narcissistic, self-serving, and inattentive to the needs of children and other family members. Throughout a parent’s incarceration, recurrent needs include helping children and families to understand and determine the personal meaning of a parent’s lifestyle and incarceration; to grieve and mourn the loss of an incarcerated parent; to foster communication among children, caretakers, and inmate-parents; to address conflict between inmate-parents and family members, including conflicts over custody issues; and to address parenting skill deficits of inmate-parents (Lange, 2000, p. 66).

**Maintaining Contact with the Incarcerated Parent**

Several studies have indicated that maintaining contact with one’s incarcerated parent may have a buffering effect for children. Keeping contact with the parent may be an effective way to improve a child’s emotional response to having a parent in prison, reduce the incidence of problematic behavior and anxiety, and improve outcomes (Bearse, 2008.) Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010) found in their quantitative analyses that children who completed the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA), and had one or more contacts with the incarcerated parent prior to participation in a mentoring program, felt less anger and alienation toward the parent. This resulted from the continued communication compared to children who experienced no contact.
Research indicates that all forms of contact (phone calls, letters, and visits) create meaning for children of incarcerated parents. Face-to-face visits however may play a unique role for maintaining relationships (Poehlmann et al., 2008). “Visiting a parent can decrease the stress of separation, enable children to maintain relationships with parents, and increase likelihood of successful reunification” (Seymour, 1998, p. 481). Facilitating visits between children and parents can be a difficult task, which is why government agencies need to be on the same page and collaborate. Prisons, for example, need to work with child welfare agencies and caseworkers. Legal mandates require child welfare workers to facilitate parent-child visits when the visits pose no detriment to the child. Lack of cooperation from departments of correction makes this a difficult task (Seymour, 1998).

Jail settings do not provide a family friendly atmosphere and often evoke distress in children, but the absence of contact may be even more problematic. Children may feel forgotten and alienated from their parents if the opportunity to visit is not provided to them. Associations can be made between children’s negative feelings about their incarcerated parents and lack of contact. If a child is allowed to keep contact with their imprisoned parent, it may help to maintain the attachment they thrive upon. Preparing children before visits provides a way to ensure that children do not suffer. The quality of parent-child interaction during the visit likely influences the children’s reaction to the visit (Poehlmann et al., 2010).

At minimum, preparation should include talking to the child about the upcoming visit in a way that the child understands given his or her age and developmental level, providing details about what the child might see and hear at each step of the visit, informing the child of institutional rules or procedures that need to be followed, and discussing potential emotional reactions that might occur. This
information should be provided in a supportive way while answering the child’s questions simply and honestly, because distorted communication about a parent’s incarceration has been linked to feelings of insecurity in young children of incarcerated mothers (Poehlmann et al., 2010, p. 594).

If caregivers and parents utilize the measures mentioned above, then visiting a parent in prison may be a beneficial and meaningful experience for young children and parents alike. As one incarcerated mother put it, “The main advantage of the visits are tightening up the relationship, watching your children grow, how you’ve changed, being able to love one another” (Datesman & Cales, 1983, p. 147, cited by Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). Knowing that children benefit from visitation with parents, and that maintaining family ties heightens post-release success, several institutions have initiated visitation programs (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). Features of the programs include special play areas for parents and children, extended visits, more flexible scheduling, and special housing of children in the institution (Clement, 1993, cited by Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002).

**Obstacles to maintaining contact.** Most research has made a clear link to the benefits for children of visitation and contact with his or her incarcerated parent. Several practical and institutional barriers do exist which prevent contact from happening regularly. The first obstacle is the distance between parents and their children and families, “nationally women are housed in prisons an average of 160 miles away from their children, while men are an average distance of 100 miles away” (Barse, 2008). The distance alone becomes an issue for many families, often making it nearly impossible for visitation, especially if the family depends on public transportation (Laing & McCarthy, 2002).
If distance proves to be an issue, the next best option for contact would be regular phone calls with the incarcerated parent. This also presents a challenge for many families. Many prisons and jails only allow collect calls from incarcerated individuals, and receivers are often charged extraordinarily high rates for these calls. As mentioned previously, poverty often defines the lives of children of prisoners. These children may experience difficulty staying in contact with their incarcerated parent because the resources to do so do not exist or they cannot afford them (Poehlmann et al., 2010).

Other obstacles include difficulties scheduling visits (Bearse, 2008) and visiting times arranged around prison routines that may not be convenient for. Visiting times offered during the daytime hours cause children to miss school in order to attend, many parents and caregivers often do not want this to occur (Laing & McCarthy, 2002). The issue of visiting procedures such as rules regarding who is eligible to visit, the number of visitors allowed at one time, and appropriate behavior during the visit, also impede contact (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). Other prevalent obstacles include: lack of privacy, harsh treatment of visitors by correctional staff, uncomfortable or humiliating visiting procedures, inhospitable visiting rooms, and lack of facilitation of visits by caregivers (Bearse, 2008).

Many of the fundamental obstacles impeding visitation between incarcerated parents and children can be overcome. Personal obstacles, which interrupt the visitation schedule, may be slightly more difficult to defeat. Parents often resist contact with their children for a myriad of reasons:

This [resistance] can result from an inmate-parent’s deficit in communication skills, and his or her children’s level of language and social development. Inmate-parents frequently report that contacts with their children are disappointing, frustrating, and seemingly
pointless. Sometimes, neither the parent nor the child can find anything to discuss beyond a greeting, and have silent visits or calls. At other times, inmate-parents try to inappropriately assert parental authority during visits…this turns visits or calls into confrontations (Lange, 2000, p. 64).

If the personal obstacles facing parents can be overcome, additional obstacles often come into play for many inmates. Calls and visits between children and inmate parents require cooperation between the inmate-parent, child, and the caretaker (Lange, 2000). The caretaker to the child can either help or hinder this unique process. “Caretakers can assist by discussing contacts after they occur, and providing inmate-parents with follow-up calls or letters describing how the child later interpreted the visit or call” (Lange, 2000, p. 64). This can help the inmate-parent to better understand his or her child, and produce more meaningful visits in the future.

The responsibilities of caretakers consist of arranging visits and phone calls, providing transportation, and dealing with any potential consequences for the child. If the relationship between the inmate-parent and the caretaker becomes strained, this process may prove to be difficult. Caregivers who develop financial and emotional difficulties because of the inmate-parent’s behavior and incarceration may actively oppose relationships between the parent and his or her children (Lange, 2000). For example, grandmothers raising their incarcerated daughter’s children often harbor a range of negative feelings, and develop a strained relationship with the incarcerated daughter (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). “Grandmothers serve as the gatekeepers in terms of the children’s access to the parents just as divorced mothers regulate father’s access to their children” (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002, p. 8). If the “gatekeeper” opposes contact between parent and child, the visitations will not occur.
The denial of visitation between child and incarcerated parent does not only happen to children in kinship care. A local authority or foster-care may look after children with incarcerated parents. Children in these situations may face particular problems in trying to visit a parent in prison “due to the complicated processes involved in booking visits and the shortage of responsible adults (such as social workers) who can accompany them” (Laing & McCarthy, 2002, p. 12). Legal mandates require caseworkers to make “reasonable efforts” to reunify families by facilitating contact between parents and their children. Maintaining contact with a parent in prison poses a great challenge for many families (Seymour, 1998). For the children in these situations, the barriers to visitations with an incarcerated parent often prevent contact from occurring at all.

**Providing Support to Caregivers**

The care giving situation can be one of the most critical factors to the wellbeing of children facing parental incarceration. “For children of incarcerated parents, as in the case for all children, caregivers provide a crucial context for children’s development” (Shlafer & Poehlmann, 2010, p. 411). These children require stability during parental incarceration in order to thrive. Whether a child remains in the care of their non-incarcerated parent or with a friend or family member, those caring for the children need support and services. Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010) found that when caregivers reported less positive feelings about children at intake, children were rated as exhibiting more externalizing behavior problems. Conversely, Mackintosh, Meyers, and Kennon (2006) found that children of incarcerated mothers rated themselves as engaging in fewer problem behaviors when they felt more warmth and acceptance from their caregivers.
In the case of mothers caring for children when the father has been incarcerated, it appears that the more resources available, the better the children fare. Many children face a decrease in stable, quality parenting following their parent’s imprisonment (Murray, 2005). According to Lowenstein (1986) the more personal and familial resources the mother had, the better her ability to cope, which actually had a greater impact on the children’s adjustment following paternal imprisonment than the separation itself. Families often feel “guilty by association” and face a great deal of stigma and ostracism when a parent is imprisoned (Laing & McCarthy, 2002). “The availability of support from family and friends for prisoner’s families would seem to be of crucial importance” (Laing & McCarthy, 2002, p. 9).

Supporting non-parental caregivers of children appears to be of particular relevance. As mentioned previously, the ability to maintain contact with that parent influences the child’s adjustment. The caregivers often serve as the “gatekeepers,” facilitating contact between imprisoned parents and children. Because of this fact, communities and government agencies need to provide support to these caregivers so that they maintain the ability to do what is in the child’s best interest.

Interventions aimed at children and families affected by maternal incarceration should begin with the mother-caregiver relationship (Poehlmann et al., 2008). According to Poehlmann (2005) young children experienced more contact with incarcerated mothers when positive feelings existed between the mother and caregiver. This relationship likely remains more positive if the caregiver does not become overwhelmed and strained due to the additional responsibilities of caring for the incarcerated parent’s children. Phillips and Bloom (1998) articulated the need for support to caregivers well:
Caregivers need a broad array of supports. They need information on how to manage problematic behaviors and access services for children that address such behaviors. They need information about what is happening with the children’s parent: where the parent is, when she or he will be released, and when the child can visit. They need information about family law and child welfare policies to make informed decisions about their legal relationship to the children… They may need housing as a result of their expanded household size and help negotiating with landlords to include the additional children in the terms of the exiting lease. They may need transportation to gather all the documents needed to apply for social services or to take the children to visit their parents.


Regardless of who provides a home for children affected by parental imprisonment, the research indicates that promoting healthy relationships between the parent and the caregiver, and providing support to the caregiver may be critical in helping the children adjust. Helping caregivers find support from family, friends, and government programs provides an excellent way to reduce the impact of parental imprisonment on children and adolescents.

**Improve the Quality of Relationships with Extended Family**

Another predictor of how well a child adjusts to parental incarceration tends to be the quality of relationships with extended family members, especially for children of incarcerated fathers left with a single mother to parent. Women who maintain strong family ties tend to parent more positively and be more responsive to their children (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). In families affected by parental incarceration, those with stronger family ties consisting of social, emotional, and physical support produce better-adjusted children than families with limited support systems (Thompson, 1995). The family atmosphere provides a protective factor for
maintenance of family ties can help prevent children of prisoners form following the same
offending trajectories as their parents.

In Miller’s (2007) literature review of risk and resilience among African American
families, the literature found several factors that potentially mediate the relationship between
parental incarceration and developmental outcomes. Among the factors discussed, family ties
appeared to be among the most crucial in buffering the impact of parental incarceration. “The
family is a supportive resource that allows youth to express feelings about being separated from
their parent and resolve their guilt and shame about their parent’s situation” (Miller, 2007, p. 31).

Parke and Clarke-Stuart (2001) also made note of the notion of resilience by mentioning that
some children exhibit resilience even under the most difficult circumstances and may even grow
stronger from it. This resilience can be attributed to three sets of protective factors one being the
presence of a supportive family environment. Miller (2007) discussed coping and resilience as
an intergenerational mechanism:

Intergenerational coping is transmitted through the family’s ability to communicate
important social values, facilitate a spiritual and religious orientation, provide cultural
identity, engage in social and emotional support, and foster relationships between
children and adults with whom children have prior secure attachments. The acquired
ability to cope with stressful life situations is important for children of incarcerated
parents, as they begin to access religious or spiritual supports which are considered
protective factors (p. 31).

“Many experts identify family support as the most critical component in facilitating
resilience in children which may assuage broader environmental risks and help children cope
with stressful life situations” (Miller, 2007, p. 31). As Miller’s research indicates, the family support network characterizes many African American families. Improving the outcomes for all children facing parental incarceration may mean teaching families how to incorporate some of the same ideals which African American families posses. Resources incorporating family counseling and spiritual supports should be made available to all families and children of incarcerated parents.

**Additional Factors in Improving Outcomes for Children**

Many factors exist that may potentially ameliorate the negative effects of parental incarceration. As mentioned above, facilitating contact between the parent and child proves to be paramount. Improving relationships with extended family and friends can also be a mediating factor for children of incarcerated parents. Prevention and treatment of behavioral problems of prisoner’s children likely requires intensive intervention, including all family members (Murray & Farrington, 2005). Psychotherapy for families, education for parents, and mentoring programs in the schools may also be beneficial.

**Psychotherapy with families.** Family therapy can help many dysfunctional situations. A family therapist benefits families impacted by parental incarceration by addressing the precipitating issues in a structural way. According to Lange (2000), six tasks of psychotherapy with families of incarcerated parents exist. The first task, according to Lange, is assessment. This task involves determining how the parent’s incarceration affects the family and their daily life. This task also involves assessing coping strategies, and determining if and how the family learns to grieve the loss of the incarcerated parent. The therapist should also assess to what extent communication with the incarcerated parent occurs and whether or not the family has used deceptive tactics with the children.
The second task, according to Lange (2000), consists of encouraging appropriate disclosure with the children. This means providing explanations to children about what has taken place with their parent, and helping caretakers to frame the criminal behavior for the children involved. This task utilizes the concept that deception may be more detrimental to the child than full disclosure.

Incarceration is difficult to explain, and its truthful explanation requires a high level of personal disclosure by the incarcerated adult, or the child’s caretaker…Parents and caretakers may fear that disclosing a parents incarceration would frighten children more than incomplete or deceptive explanations… deception however has its own adverse effects… they [children] are likely to not only attribute a parents unexplained absence from family life as a choice, but also feel more afraid of an unexplained absence than one that they can come to understand (Lange, 2000, p.63).

Facilitating grief and mourning, the third task for psychotherapy with families, may prove to be difficult because the incarcerated parent still lives. Nonetheless, it remains an important task for the family to grieve the separation, and for children to understand why this happened to them. Clinicians should help families and children to understand that their emotions are normal and universal, as well as reframe their relationships with the incarcerated individual (Lange, 2000).

The fourth task involves facilitating communication. As mentioned previously, many parents find that contacts with their children are disappointing, frustrating, and seemingly pointless. This frustration likely stems from the fact that communication between the parent and child proves to be difficult. Therapists need to help facilitate communication because the quality of parent-child interaction during the visit influences the children’s reaction to the visit
(Poehlmann et al., 2010). Clinicians can teach specific techniques such as planning topics for discussion, deciding what topics will not be discussed, deciding when calls home are appropriate, and learning how to discuss contacts after they have occurred (Lange, 2000).

The final two tasks involve exploring the incarcerated parents role post release and achieving integration. The clinician can help the family to determine who will have custody of the children and how visitations will occur once the incarcerated parent is released. The clinician may also help the family with integrating the experience of parental incarceration into family life (Lange, 2000).

The tasks listed above provide a foundation to clinicians dealing with families impacted by parental incarceration. Each individual family will undoubtedly face different challenges in a variety of contexts. Psychotherapy may be the bridge that fills the void between parental incarceration and child outcomes. Children experience parental incarceration in a myriad of ways. The method to ameliorate any potentially negative consequences varies. It will take the cooperation of various agencies and therapeutic programs to begin to lessen the impact.

**School based programs for children of incarcerated parents.** Children who have an incarcerated parent frequently feel guilt, shame, embarrassment, stigma and rejection. These feelings can lead to emotional problems, nightmares, fighting in school and a decline in academic performance. Children go to school for seven hours per day, approximately 180 days per year. Because children spend so much of their time with educators, it seems obvious that programs need to be incorporated into schools to help these children adjust. Schools can identify and reach out to this at risk population. Educators, including teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, athletic counselors, and support staff can make a positive impact on the problem (Vacca, 2008).
Children with incarcerated parents often face stigma from their peers. “School staff can have an influence on children and how they perceive the world around them. They can influence how their students react, communicate and behave toward children with incarcerated parents” (Vacca, 2008, p. 52). The staff can also work on building community partnerships with key agencies in an effort to confront the popular myths and stereotypes and reduce the stigma associated with parental incarceration (Vacca, 2008).

According to the Department of Justice (U.S. DOJ, 2000), children of incarcerated parents are six times more likely than other youth to land in prison at some point in their own lives. It is important, therefore, for schools to intervene and develop programs that can be tailored to address prevention for juvenile incarceration (Vacca, 2008, p. 52).

According to Vacca (2008) a variety of positive outcomes can be revealed in the children of incarcerated parents via the introduction of an effective mentoring program in the schools. Children may be matched with an older youth, or with a positive adult who can help them with problems at school and at home. Children facing troubles with schoolwork, tensions at home, social pressures to drink or smoke, or other typical adolescent issues benefit from mentoring programs (Bilchik, 1999). “For many children, having an older youth to talk to and spend time with-someone who provides encouragement and friendship-can mean the difference between dropping out of school and graduating, or between getting involved with drugs and developing the strength and self confidence to resist such pressures” (Blichik, 1999, p. 1). The issues that plague children of incarcerated parents become more easily managed if a child has someone with whom to talk and relate. Mentoring programs could prove to be invaluable with this at risk population.

Mentoring programs, when carefully designed and well run, provide positive influences for
younger people who may need a little extra attention or who don’t have a good support system available to them. For example, a young person who has recently lost a parent or close family member or who has experienced neglect or abuse or who simply feels lonely or uncomfortable in large group situations may especially benefit from the support, attention, and kindness of a peer mentor, along with other supports (Blichek, 1999, p.1).

Applying Adlerian Concepts: Improving the Outcomes for Children of Incarcerated Parents

“Everything can also be different” – Adler (Cited in Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 106)

The works and words of Alfred Adler apply to almost every individual and family. His theory speaks to children and adults alike. The value of his words appear to be extremely applicable to the at risk population of children of incarcerated parents. Adler believed in the social embeddedness of individuals. He believed that the individual cannot be considered apart from his social situation, nor can the individual be examined as an isolated human being. (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). This view of social embeddedness is extremely applicable to the children of incarcerated parents.

Research in the realm of parental incarceration validate Adlers concept. For example, Laing and McCarthy (2002) made note that “since offenders have complex relationships with the networks in which they are embedded, which may contribute positively as well as negatively to family and community life, their removal alters these networks both positively and negatively” (p. 5). Miller (2007) also made reference to the concept of social embeddedness, stating: “Individuals exist within the realm of their social context. This makes it difficult to discuss potential developmental trajectories without consideration of the bi-directional interaction children have with their environment” (p. 27).
Clearly, social embeddedness impacts the children of incarcerated parents. Government agencies and therapists should consider the advantageous application of Adlerian theories when working with these children and their families. Adler’s holistic, social, goal oriented, and systemic approach to understanding people within the systems in which they live provides an excellent framework for working with children of incarcerated parents (Corey, 2009). Adler’s concepts such as: social interest, the useless side of life, the goals of misbehavior, encouragement, and his approaches to parent education and family therapy provide a great fit for families impacted by parental incarceration.

**The Useless Side of Life and Social Interest**

Having a parent in prison increases children’s chances of experiencing adverse outcomes over the life course. These adverse outcomes include criminal justice contact, using drugs, being unemployed and not in school, and offending (Roettger, 2009). These outcomes in Adlerian terms could be described as living on the useless side of life:

The useless side of life, or wasting orientation, is a self-defeating lifestyle in which people fail to engage themselves in meeting the tasks of life (i.e. work, relational intimacy, and social interest). Instead of belonging usefully and productively with others, people who have gravitated to the useless side of life are known for failing to cooperate and to contribute. These people possess guiding lines that preclude them from assuming the usual responsibilities of life and at the same time supply them with a myriad of reasons for occupying their inert positions. In the movement that comprises the experience of life, people with this orientation do not apply their talents and abilities and may remain generally untested by the challenges of life (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 203).
Social interest and community feeling or Gemeinschaftsgefühl, comprise Adler's most significant and distinctive concepts (Corey, 2009). Oberst and Stewart define social interest as follows:

Social interest reflects both the attitudes and behaviors of caring, concern, and compassion for fellow humans. Social interest embodies efforts to meet the tasks of the community and contributing to others welfare also enhances it. Social interest functions as a cause of meaningful health engagement with others and as a cumulative effect on such involvement. Consequently, social interest embodied in peoples attitudes and behaviors is one indicator of emotional heal in Adlerian theory (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 201).

In working with children experiencing parental incarceration, according to the works of Adler, a means of preventing them from gravitating towards the useless side of life would be to help them to foster social interest and community feeling. Those who lack community feeling and the fulfillment of the basic needs of acceptance, security and worthiness, may become discouraged and end up on the useless side of life (Corey, 2009). “The socialization process, which begins in childhood, involves finding a place in society and acquiring a sense of belonging and of contributing” (Corey, 2009, p.102). This social interest must be instilled in children from a young age. Adler believed social interest to be innate, but he also recognized that it must be taught and learned (Corey, 2009).

Parents, caretakers, educators, and mentors must be educated in the teachings of Adler and taught how to help children of incarcerated parents develop social interest. “Individual psychology rests on a central belief that our happiness and success are largely related to this social connectedness” (Corey, 2009, p. 102). Inspiring this social interest in at risk youth may
help to promote their success rather than failure. “Encouraging a child to develop more social interest requires a great amount of time and dedication, so Adler and Dreikurs always insisted on the preventative value of their method: if more and more parents and teachers are trained in their method, small problems can be detected at the beginning and treated more effectively before they become pathological” (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 106).

**The Goals of Misbehavior**

Children of incarcerated parents often exhibit behavioral problems, such as acting out at school and home, using drugs and alcohol, and participating in other delinquent acts (Murray, Farrington & Sekol, 2009). Before any intervention with children, detecting the goal the child pursues with his or her misbehavior takes precedence. Children of incarcerated parents, like any child, may experience discouragement, therefore pursuing mistaken goals. The four erroneous goals of misbehavior according to Rudolph Dreikurs include: (1) Attention seeking, (2) Seeking power, (3) Seeking revenge, and (4) Withdrawal or inadequacy (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

With misbehaving children, parents, caretakers and educators must be able to identify the child’s goal and respond accordingly. When a child inappropriately seeks attention, it may seem that the child only feels appreciated when somebody gives him attention or does something for him. In this circumstance, the corrective measure to be taken involves withdrawing from the child’s radius of action; doing something unexpected; ignoring the misbehavior and giving attention when the child behaves or does something positive (Oberst & Stewart, 2003).

Power is the second goal of misbehavior. Children seeking power may refuse to cooperate with adults. In these situations, the adult often criticizes and reprimands the child. This does not achieve desirable results. The child who seeks power and superiority feels more discouraged than one who seeks attention. In this circumstance, Dreikurs recommends that the adult refuse to be
challenged. “…Refusing to fight; continuing to be gentle and friendly, but consequent; acting instead of preaching; avoiding punishment and using natural and logical consequences; and diverting the child’s negative impulse to something positive and productive” (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 108).

Children of incarcerated parents may also choose revenge seeking behaviors. Children seeking revenge, such as hitting another student after being punished or damaging property of others, tend to be severely discouraged. When the child seeks revenge, the adult needs to refrain from punishment because it will only reinforce the child’s inferiority feelings. Instead, the adult must be taught to give the child encouragement. “These children need constant encouragement by patient and caring teachers, parents and other caregivers” (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 109).

When all of a child’s attempts at superiority have failed, the child may withdraw from activities and give up completely. It is critical that in these situations, the adults do not give up on the child because he or she needs adult encouragement the most. It may seem that these children are intentionally seeking failure in school or relationships, when in reality the child is simply discouraged. “These children need high doses of constant and never slacking encouragement and extreme patience” (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 110).

**Encouragement.** Inferiority feelings guide the goals of misbehavior for children, and encouragement provides them with a positive influence when he or she feels discouraged. Encouragement lends emphasis to the social or functional value of a child’s behavior and acknowledges the effort more than the result (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). With children who have lost a parent to incarceration, discouragement may be high and self-esteem may be low. These two factors combine to form a child who acts out or develops emotional problems.
In the education of problem children, the adult has the tendency to focus on what the child did wrong or where the child failed. The concept of encouragement implies avoiding criticism and emphasizing positive aspects; to do this, the adult has to pay less attention to the child’s shortcomings and more to his or her strengths, which means developing a bias for the child’s strong points (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 113).

Adlerian Parent Education and Family Counseling

Parent education. As mentioned previously, facilitating communication comprises an important component of conducting psychotherapy with families experiencing the incarceration of a parent (Lange, 2000). Additionally, it would be beneficial to apply some Adlerian therapeutic techniques to help the parent, caregiver, and child communicate more effectively. Parent education offers one way this might be accomplished. “Adlerian parent education stresses listening to children, helping children to accept the consequences of their behavior, applying emotion coaching, holding family meetings, and using encouragement” (Corey, 2009, p.116). One can see how these techniques may be especially beneficial with a child who is reluctant to communicate with his or her incarcerated parent, or who has a difficult time processing the emotions that accompany parental incarceration.

Family therapy. In Adlerian family therapy, the emphasis on family atmosphere makes it extremely applicable to families impacted by parental incarceration. Family atmosphere is defined as follows:

The family atmosphere is the climate characterizing the relationship between the parents and their attitudes toward life, gender roles, decision-making, competition, and cooperation, dealing with conflict, responsibility, and so forth. This atmosphere,
including the role models the parents provide, influences the children as they grow up (Corey, 2009, p. 117).

Adlerian theory provides a sensible framework for working with families facing parental incarceration. The children with incarcerated parents “are often exposed to cumulative environmental risks” (Miller, 2007, p. 27). The risks include exposure to violence and poverty, discrimination, and other community/family stressors, which significantly influence children’s interpersonal functioning (Miller, 2007).

Adlerian family therapy focuses on the emphasis of the interactive goals of each family member and on the family system. In the systems approach, symptoms are viewed as an expression of the intergenerational habits and patterns formed within a family (Corey, 2009). In families experiencing parental incarceration, one might interpret the incarceration as the symptom, and that symptom may be an identifier of how the family system functions. A therapist working with a family impacted by incarceration would be well suited to apply an Adlerian systemic approach. “By working with the whole family-or even the community-system, the therapist has the chance to observe how individuals act within the system and participate in maintaining the status quo; how the system influences (and is influenced by) the individual; and what interventions might lead to changes that help the couple, family, or larger system…” (Corey, 2009, p. 413). The Adlerian approach to therapy may help families impacted by intergenerational incarceration to change the “status quo” and break free from the cycle that impedes children’s growth and development.

Conclusion

A wealth of research has supported the hypothesis that parental incarceration negatively impacts children. The effects extend far beyond childhood and into adulthood as evidenced by
the literature. For children, parental incarceration increases attachment insecurities, behavior problems, school failure and dropout, delinquency, alcohol and drug use, and emotional problems. Over the life course, children impacted by parental incarceration face an increased risk of developing an antisocial personality, of becoming incarcerated themselves, of using drugs, and of being impacted by unemployment among other negative effects. There are many contextual factors that mediate and moderate the effects of parental incarceration, however most research concludes that the outcome typically remains negative unless the child is remarkably resilient.

Future research should focus on improving the outcomes for children of incarcerated parents. The available literature suggests that helping children maintain contact with their incarcerated parent may be one of the best ways to moderate the effects. “With more and more families being affected by parental incarceration over time, it is important that additional research be conducted to explore the conditions under which contact and visitation can benefit incarcerated parents and their children” (Poehlmann et al., 2010, p. 595). Future research should also examine the role and benefits of utilizing psychotherapy with families and children impacted by parental incarceration. A new area of interest might be to explore how Adlerian psychotherapy may be beneficial to this at risk group. Most of all, future research must bring attention to the impact of the high U.S. incarceration rate on children, and find ways to ameliorate the problems associated with it.
References


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can our schools do to help them? *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice, 21*(1), 49-56.