

Affects of Parental Incarceration on Youth

According to the Child Welfare League of America, in 2002, there were more than 7 million children that had a parent under correctional supervision (jail, parole, prison, or probation) (<http://www.cwla.org>). Most often, the incarcerated parent was the father (90%); however in recent years, a growing number of mothers have been incarcerated, an 87% increase as compared to a 61% increase for fathers from 1991-2000 (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).

Although, extensive studies have not been conducted, it has been agreed upon by researchers that incarceration of a parent will have varying affects on the child based on factors such as age, caregiver prior to and post-admission to prison, two-parent vs. single parent homes, explanation given regarding absence of parent, length of time in prison, gender of the child, as well as whether it is the mother or the father that is incarcerated. Most recent research has revealed that the mean age of children with incarcerated parents is 8 years old, 58% being under the age of 10 years. Interestingly, many children did not live with the inmate parent (state or federal prisoners) prior to the time of admission to prison (43% and 57%, respectively), possibly affecting coping mechanisms and parent-child dynamics differently when compared to children that were under parental care by the incarcerated parent prior to admission (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).

An additional, important factor that may determine how a child is affected by parental incarceration is who will obtain guardianship of the child during imprisonment. Less than 4-10% of children are actually placed in foster care. Most are cared for by the remaining parent, grandparent, or other relatives within the kin network (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).

However, although the numbers of variables affecting the response of children that have experienced a parent being incarcerated are substantial, patterns or generalities of behavior have emerged among groups of children and are noted below:

- Children that witnessed their mother's arrest reported having nightmares and flashbacks to the arrest (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).
- Children that were not provided the truth about their parent's incarceration and why they are no longer in the home were more anxious and fearful (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001)
- Infants of incarcerated mothers that do not develop an emotional bond/ attachment have emotional and /or behavioral problems as toddlers or children when the mother is released and attempts to return to the child (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).
- Incarceration of a parent that has a young child will adversely affect the quality of the child's attachment to the parent (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).
- Young children that had an insecure attachment with the parent due to unstable life circumstances have displayed poorer peer relationships and diminished cognitive abilities (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).

- 70% of young children with an incarcerated mother suffer from emotional or psychological problems and exhibit anxiety, withdrawal, hypervigilance, depression, shame and guilt (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).
- School-aged children display problems within the school system and peer relationships (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).
- Adolescents of an incarcerated parent have a higher rate of suspension and drop-out (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001)
- Instability (child abuse/ neglect, poverty, marital conflict or parental absence) often precedes incarceration and may be a factor in behavioral problems (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).
- Antisocial behavior (disobedience, aggression, temper tantrums, lying stealing, and violence) is more likely to be displayed by adolescent children of incarcerated parents (Eddy & Reid, 2001).
- Adolescents display more behavioral problems than other age-groups (Eddy & Reid, 2001).

References

Eddy, J.M. & Reid, J.B. (2001). The Antisocial Behavior of the Adolescent Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Developmental Perspective. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Urban Institute. National Policy Conference January, 2002. From Prison to Home: The Effect of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families and Communities.

Parke, R.D. & Clarke-Stewart, K.A. (2001). Effects of Parental Incarceration on Young Children. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Urban Institute. National Policy Conference January, 2002. From Prison to Home: The Effect of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families and Communities.

Child Welfare League of America. Frequently Asked questions <http://www.cwla.org>