



In their own words: School lives of children with an imprisoned parent[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to explore in depth the impact of parental imprisonment on the school lives of children. A phenomenological qualitative methodology has been utilised to explore the experiences of children whose father is imprisoned. The sample consists of 12 adolescents between the ages of 11–17 whose fathers are currently in prison. The data were collected through interviews. The theoretical design guiding this research is an integrated theoretical approach, drawing upon a combination of stigma, social control and strain theories. The study has revealed that five children have dropped out of school. The others face truancy problems in order to visit their parent on school days. The majority of participants have stated they are stigmatised. With one of the parents imprisoned, the families have financial problems and this affects the children left behind. Further studies on the numbers, problems and needs of children with an imprisoned parent in Turkey are recommended.

1. Introduction

In the 2000s, the number of prisoners in Turkey has increased dramatically, from 49,512 to 197,297, an increase of nearly 400% (Ceza ve Tevkifevleri Genel Müdürlüğü, 2016). The number of children with imprisoned parents is estimated to be at least 400,000. However, what is known about these children, their statistical numbers, identities and problems, is very limited.

Speaking metaphorically, when it comes to successfully providing an education, it is desirable to fill any existing gaps, at the local, national and international levels, without smoothing out the peaks. One of the most serious problems in education is the inequity of educational opportunity. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2011) defines educational equity as existing when personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background are not obstacles to achieving educational potential and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills. Those who are not able to obtain educational services equal in both content and quality are disadvantaged. A disadvantaged group of children have fewer educational opportunities than advantaged ones. Without a doubt, children with an imprisoned parent, or even parents, are one of the disadvantaged groups of children (Scharff-Smith and Gampell, 2011; Shaw, 2001; Wildeman, 2009).

Once a parent goes to prison, children are exposed to certain side effects (Edmonds, 2012). Research shows that the number of children with an imprisoned parent is increasing and they are facing very different problems than their peer groups (Vacca, 2001). Having a parent

in prison may result in behavioural and emotional problems (Cunningham, 2001). Though they are not guilty themselves, they are strongly affected by the parental imprisonment. Yet, the goal of prison is to punish the criminals and offenders, not their children (Cunningham, 2001). Those children are known to have a higher risk of antisocial and aggressive behaviour, alcohol and substance addiction, school truancy, academic failure and so on (Martin, 2001; Snyder et al., 2002). Murray and Farrington's (2008) research on the relationship between antisocial behaviour and parental imprisonment proves that children with an imprisoned parent display antisocial behaviour at three times the rate of other children.

When children fall into such a disadvantaged situation, they do so suddenly; Shaw (2001) calls them 'orphans of justice'. Children with an imprisoned parent not only have a stressful life but also experience tough conditions (Raikes, 2014). If the peer group of these children knows that they have an imprisoned parent, they are exposed to victimisation and may even drop out of school (Marshall, 2008). At the same time, they are ignored within the policies that are otherwise applied to disadvantaged groups (Murray and Farrington, 2008a, 2008b). Limited research in the field shows that the findings of the studies on children with an imprisoned parent are varied and complex and discussed from different perspectives (Rosenberg, 2009). One consistent finding of these studies, however, is that imprisonment affects the relationship between child and parents in a negative way (Christian, 2009).

Without a doubt, the structure of the society is also very important regarding how parental imprisonment is perceived. While in Western

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societies, individualism is the dominant social philosophy, in Turkey, the communitarian understanding is dominant. Therefore, once the child is separated from the parents, grandparents or relatives take care of him or her. In most societies, however, grandmothers are the first choice as carer when the parents not available – especially when mothers are sent to prison (Hanlon et al., 2007).

Related literature shows that children with an imprisoned parent frequently have serious problems with school truancy and dropout. Quite a few studies on both school truancy and dropout have been conducted, although the definition, content, reasons and solutions for the phenomena are varied within those researches. Although family-based reasons are evaluated as one of the categories for truancy and dropout reasons, parental imprisonment is not directly presented as being a reason for truancy and dropout (Altinkurt, 2008; Doll et al., 2013; Göksen et al., 2006; MEB, 2013; Sabates et al., 2010; Şimşek, 2011). In fact, research on children with an imprisoned parent shows that school failure, truancy and dropout rates are much higher with these children (Huynh-Hohnbaum et al., 2015). This means these children are both disadvantaged and overlooked. Nevertheless, as research on children with imprisoned parents is limited, the effects, problems and solutions for the losses suffered by children with imprisoned parents are not really clear (Sanders and Dunifon, 2011). As it turns out, there are quite a number of studies focused on the educational achievement of children with imprisoned parents.

For example, Children of Prisoners: Interventions and Mitigations to Strengthen Mental Health (COPING), a large-scale prominent research study conducted across four focus countries (UK, Germany, Sweden and Romania) engaging over 1500 children, caregivers, imprisoned parents and stakeholders, is one of the largest of such studies. This project examined mental health, wellbeing and resilience among children of imprisoned parents in these four countries with the objective of understanding how the imprisonment of a parent actually affects children. Education-related findings of this project show that schools in Germany, Sweden and the UK were essentially supportive when informed about parental imprisonment. At the same time, while most children interviewed in Germany attended school regularly, in the UK, school attendance was negatively affected for a number of children, mainly boys, as was the case for Swedish children (Jones and Wainaina-Wozna, 2013). Likewise, Shlafer et al. (2017) demonstrated that parental imprisonment significantly affected students' school-related outcomes, though this effect varied markedly by school setting. Morgan et al. (2013) have carried out a study exploring the ways schools could support children with a parent in prison. Based on the findings, this study generated significant suggestions, such as specifying the kind of support that children with imprisoned parents need and how teachers and school staff can help children with imprisoned parents. Above all, in this study, all of the participating schools emphasised the important role they were required to play in supporting children with imprisoned parents; however, they often felt that they did not know enough about the existence of these children or their needs to be able to effectively support them. The table below, representing the estimated numbers of prisoners and children of an imprisoned parent, can help us understand the aspect of imprisonment.

As can also be seen in Table 1, most children of prisoners are children of imprisoned fathers. Newell (2012) argues that the gender is an important factor for the services to be provided to children with imprisoned parents. He evaluates that gender may play a somewhat significant role as both a protective and a risk factor and may be useful in designing programmatic services. Statistical data and estimations on children with an imprisoned parent are quite limited and found mostly in the USA and European countries. Caddle and Crisp (1997) state that female prisoners have 1.36 children on average in England. Murray (2007) on the other hand finds that male prisoners have 1.15 children on average in the USA. While the birth rate in the USA and UK is 13/1000, it is 17/1000 in Turkey (World Bank, 2012). Youth under the age of 18 years comprise 23.3% of the population in the USA (United States

Census Bureau, 2013) and 29.7% in Turkey (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2013). As can be seen from the numbers, the population under 18 and birth rates are much higher in Turkey. Based on these statistics, the current study estimates the number of children with imprisoned parents in Turkey to be at least 400,000. The rise in the number of prisoners is directly proportionate to the rise in the number of children with an imprisoned parent (Raikes, 2014).

Despite such negative effects of parental imprisonment on children, governments almost uniformly ignore the costs of imprisonment for children, families and the community (Murray, 2007a). The rise in the numbers of prisoners in Turkey, as in many other countries, has generated questions regarding the effects of parental imprisonment on children. Within this scope, the underlying goal of this research is to examine and identify the impact of parental imprisonment on the school lives of children in depth. The study seeks answers to the following research questions:

- 1) What are the social relation experiences of children with an imprisoned parent and how are these reflected in their lives?
- 2) What are the student experiences of children with an imprisoned parent and how are these reflected in their lives?
- 3) In what ways do the teachers of children with an imprisoned parent interact with them and how are these interactions reflected in their lives?
- 4) In what ways does the school administration interact with the children of an imprisoned parent and how are these interactions reflected in their lives?

The results of this study may contribute to raising awareness about the needs and problems of the disadvantaged group of children with an imprisoned parent. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that we were unable to find any existing studies of imprisoned parents concerning the effects of imprisonment on their children's education in Turkey. Accordingly, it is important that this study is able to compare the results with the situation in the other countries.

The theoretical design guiding this research is an integrated theoretical approach, drawing upon a combination of stigma, social control and strain theories. Multiple theoretical perspectives were discussed to examine and interpret the data. Fig. 1 below shows the theoretical perspective on the data (Table 2).

1.1. Stigma

Previous research has noted that children with an imprisoned parent feel stigmatised in the school setting (Nesmith and Ruhland, 2008). Once the father is imprisoned, generally, the mother takes care of the children. As a result, the children and the caregiver experience isolation from the society. In such a situation, stigma theory may help us better understand the reality. Goffman (2009) identifies three types of stigma in society:

- a) Physical attributes: various physical deformities.
- b) Blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, being dominated by unnatural passions.
- c) Tribal stigma of race, nation and religion, which equally contaminate all members of a family.

Children with an imprisoned parent are stigmatised according to the third type of stigmatisation. Such kind of stigmatisation may be transferred to all members of the family. Maybe the most difficult aspect of stigma is that the feeling of stigma felt by children of an imprisoned parent is not a result of their own fault and neither are they capable of changing the situation (Lee, 2005). Children with an imprisoned parent do not get sufficient service as a result of stigma, and evaluating and analysing the service is certainly difficult (Seymour, 1998). In fact, concerns related to services for children of imprisoned parents and

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