



Maternal and paternal imprisonment in the stress process

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ABSTRACT

Parental incarceration is now prevalent in community samples (e.g., with 11% of children reporting paternal imprisonment and 3% reporting maternal imprisonment in a national sample), pointing to a potentially important childhood trauma that should be included in work on contemporary childhood stressors in this era of mass incarceration. This paper investigates the influences of maternal and paternal imprisonment on changes in young adult mental health using a nationally representative sample. We assess four perspectives—gendered loss, same-sex role model, intergenerational stress, and maternal salience—on the joint influences of maternal and paternal incarceration within the broader stress process paradigm. The results generalize support for a gendered loss perspective developed in work on parental death and an early small study of parental incarceration. This pattern reveals maternal incarceration increases depressive symptoms while paternal incarceration increases substance role problems. Chronicity of parental imprisonment and its timing are also influential. Analyses further specify a vulnerability of male and minority young adults to high levels of mental health problems following maternal and paternal incarceration in adolescence.

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1. Introduction

Mass imprisonment – the historically and nationally elevated rates of current imprisonment in the US Garland (2001) has brought incarceration experiences into the purview of the stress process as a contemporary influence on health (Massoglia, 2008; Schnittker and John, 2007). Between 1980 and 2000, the US tripled its state and federal prison population (Maruschak et al., 2010). The current incarceration rate of 743 prisoners per 100,000 US residents is far greater than other Western industrialized nations (Glaze, 2010; International Centre for Prison Studies, 2011; Western, 2006). Growth in US imprisonment began to slow in 2009, but this masked an increase in federal prisoners alongside a modest decrease in those incarcerated in state prisons (West et al., 2010). While stress process research to date has examined the health consequences of incarceration for adults, we focus here on the implications of parental imprisonment for children's well-being. The majority of inmates are now parents (Mumola, 2000; Glaze and Maruschak, 2008) and recent analyses establish intergenerational influences of paternal incarceration on young children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011). We examine the intergenerational effects of both mothers' and fathers' imprisonment during the transition of their children to adulthood.

Exhaustive measurement of the stress process is essential for understanding disparities in health (Turner et al., 1995; Turner, 2010), including attention to the stresses experienced by the next generation. Parental imprisonment is an increasingly frequent experience of youth who have transitioned to adulthood over the last two decades. Rates of maternal and

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paternal imprisonment vary significantly by race and ethnicity [i.e., 6.7–11% among African American children, followed by 2.4–3.5% of Hispanic children, and .9–1.75% of non-Hispanic white children (Glaze and Marushack, 2008; Western and Pettit, 2010)]. Wildeman (2009) estimates 1 in 25 white children born in 1990 experienced parental imprisonment by the time they were 14, whereas 1 in 4 African American children have had this experience. Furthermore, the number of minor children with a mother in prison more than doubled from 1991 to 2007 (up 131%), while paternal imprisonment increased by 76% (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008). Thus both maternal and paternal imprisonment have become more common in the life course of American children. Rates are further concentrated by educational disadvantage: 50.5% of African American children whose parents have less than a high school education have experienced paternal imprisonment while 5% have experienced maternal imprisonment (Wildeman, 2009). Among white children, 7% of these children have experienced paternal imprisonment and 1% have experienced maternal imprisonment (Wildeman, 2009). Therefore maternal and paternal imprisonment experiences have become more common among children, and this exposure is socially structured.

Our intergenerational model of parental imprisonment on children's mental health draws on the life course and stress process paradigms, highlighting the principle of "linked lives" in an intergenerational context (Elder, 1998) and the concept of "stress proliferation" (Pearlin et al., 2005; Thoits, 2010). Stressors initially affecting one member of a role set can affect others, for example, when adverse intergenerational consequences reverberate through families (Pearlin et al., 2005; Thoits, 2010).

Few studies have comparatively examined maternal and paternal imprisonment effects (Murray and Farrington, 2008a) and theory has not yet probed the potential joint influences of parental imprisonment. A recent review concludes "(o)n balance, the best evidence demonstrates a link between paternal imprisonment and worsening mental and behavioral health among children. . . There is much less evidence for maternal incarceration" (Wakefield and Uggen, 2010, p. 398). We add to extant theory by forwarding four main theoretical arguments on the range of joint influences of maternal and paternal imprisonment.

Recent reviews of the literature on incarceration and children highlight the need for a developmental perspective (Eddy and Poehlmann, 2010). This paper focuses on the mental health influences of parental imprisonment among young adults.

1.1. Parental incarceration as a traumatic stressor

Conceptualizing parental incarceration as a source of stress is consistent with several theoretical perspectives in the intergenerational effects literature (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999). Although parental incarceration effects posit accompanying experiences of economic strain (Geller et al., 2011; Philips et al., 2006), disrupted socialization, stigmatization (Dallaire et al., 2010; Schnittker and John, 2007), and psycho-social trauma (i.e., social bonding/loss/and attachment perspectives) (Bocknek et al., 2009; Murray and Farrington, 2008a; Poehlmann, 2005), there is also a shared underlying concern about social stress across these perspectives. Conceptualizing the place of parental imprisonment in the "stress universe" of children is a necessary part of understanding modern childhood (Avison, 2010; Wheaton, 1994; Turner et al., 1995). Of course, parental imprisonment may also serve as a form of "stress relief" (Wheaton, 1990; Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999) – when a burdensome or even abusive parent is removed from the home. However, most contemporary research finds net negative effects involving children's emotional and behavioral problems at varying stages of the life course (Hagan and Dinovitzer, 1999; Huebner and Gustafson, 2007; Murray and Farrington, 2005, 2008a,b; Murray et al., 2009; Murray, 2010; Roettger et al., 2011; Wakefield and Uggen, 2010; Wakefield and Wildeman, 2011; Wildeman, 2010).

As predicted by the stress process perspective, we find that parental incarceration is socially structured along dimensions of social disadvantage (Aneshensel, 1992; Pearlin, 1989). The disproportionate incarceration of minorities makes this source of disadvantage a special concern. Parental incarceration has been conceptualized as a life event, but it may have more lasting consequences indicative of a traumatic stressor. Traumatic stressors are distinguished by their severity and long-term impact (Wheaton, 1999). However, community surveys have not included parental imprisonment among measured traumatic stressors. Given the increased prevalence of mass incarceration in America, it is now important to measure both paternal and maternal imprisonment in broad community samples to comprehensively assess stressors in the lives of children (Menaghan, 2010). We separately consider maternal and paternal incarceration as potential sources of traumatic stress for children.

Further work on parental imprisonment is needed to assess which aspects of this experience are influential. We need to consider the timing of the parental imprisonment in the child's life, as well as the "dosage" or chronicity of parental imprisonment (i.e., the number of incarcerations). Several studies have investigated the relative timing of imprisonment. Kjellstrand and Eddy (2011) found an effect of early life parental incarceration (between child ages 0–10) on Grades 5, 8 and 10 externalizing problems. Besemer et al. (2011) used data from a prospective longitudinal English sample and found that parental imprisonment (compared to parental conviction) increased son's offending when it occurred between ages 7–12 and 13–18. No effect of parental imprisonment was found at younger ages (0–6).

Using a Chicago data set, Cho (2009a, 2009b, 2010) has examined the influences of maternal incarceration on test scores, school dropout, and grade retention among children with a mother either sent to prison (e.g., treatment group) or a short term stay in jail (e.g., control group). While no effects are found on grade retention or standardized test scores of maternal imprisonment, Cho (2010) found that maternal imprisonment between the ages of 5–10 and ages 11–14 increased the risk of high school dropout [(although she did not find significant influences at older ages (15–17)]. Since children in both of Cho's

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