



Is prior parental criminal justice involvement associated with child maltreatment? A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

Parental criminal justice involvement is prevalent in the United States and potentially associated with a range of negative outcomes for children including child abuse and neglect. However, the association between prior parental criminal justice involvement and child maltreatment is not well understood. This paper reviewed the existing literature regarding maltreatment victimization among children of parents with prior criminal justice involvement. Results from ten reviewed studies demonstrated an association between prior parental criminal justice involvement and child maltreatment, but did not provide sufficient evidence to determine whether parental criminal justice involvement is an independent risk factor for child maltreatment or of the specific mechanisms through which this association occurs. Recommendations for future research include use of multivariate analysis methods that account for variations in the type and timing of parental criminal justice involvement and child maltreatment. Implications for practice include the development of strategies to address the adverse family contexts commonly found among these parents and children.

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1. Introduction

Approximately 1 in 35 adults in the United States are involved in the criminal justice system as probationers, parolees, or inmates of jails or prisons (Glaze & Kaeble, 2014). Importantly, many of these adults are parents to minor children. In 2008, more than half of state (52%) and federal (63%) inmates reported being a parent of one or more children under the age of 18 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). A growing body of research has found parental criminal justice involvement (CJI) to be associated with negative health, social, emotional, and economic outcomes for children (Dallaire, Zeman, & Thrash, 2015; Nichols & Loper, 2012; Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, & Mincy, 2009; Dallaire, 2007; Wilbur et al., 2007; Phillips, Erkanli, Keeler, Costello, & Angold, 2006). Less well understood is the association of parental CJI with subsequent child maltreatment and Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement, an additional risk factor for poor outcomes for children. Understanding this association is important as children exposed to both parental CJI and child maltreatment may be particularly vulnerable to poor outcomes. Moreover, parents involved in the criminal justice system are a population that can be readily identified and potentially targeted with child maltreatment prevention strategies. Thus, the aim of the present study was to conduct a systematic review of the literature regarding maltreatment among children whose parents have been previously

involved in the criminal justice system and to describe the characteristics of these families.

1.1. Defining parental CJI and the impact on children

Parental CJI includes parents who have been arrested and parents who are currently or have been sentenced to probation, parole, or incarceration. To date, parental incarceration has received the most attention in the literature regarding the effects on child wellbeing. Approximately 2.3% of children under the age of 18 in the United States have a parent who is incarcerated (Glaze & Kaeble, 2014). Parental incarceration has been found to be associated with poor child outcomes both directly and indirectly through the family and community context in which the child lives before, during, and after incarceration (Lee, Fang, & Luo, 2013). Children of incarcerated parents have been found to report more depressive symptoms and exhibit more internalizing and externalizing behaviors compared to their counterparts (Dallaire et al., 2015; Wilbur et al., 2007). In adolescence and young adulthood, parental incarceration has been linked to poor mental health, substance abuse, serious injury, low educational attainment, arrest, and incarceration (Miller & Barnes, 2015; Muftić, Bouffard, & Armstrong, 2015; Nichols & Loper, 2012). Importantly, the nature of the parental CJI such as the type (arrest, probation, parole, or incarceration) and frequency of CJI may have implications for the effect of parental CJI on child wellbeing, and any associations found are likely complex (Shlafer, Poehlmann, & Donelan-McCall, 2012; Kinner, Alati, Najman, & Williams, 2007).

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1.2. Defining child maltreatment and the impact on children

Child maltreatment is abuse or neglect of a child under the age of 18 by a parent or other adult caregiver that results in potential or actual harm to a child. Child maltreatment includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; physical, emotional, educational, and medical neglect; and failure to supervise or abandonment (Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon, & Arias, 2008). Results from a nationally representative sample estimate that approximately 10.2% of children under the age of 18 in the United States experience physical or emotional abuse or neglect each year (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009). In addition, it is estimated that 12.5% of U.S. children will be confirmed by CPS to have been maltreated by age 18 (Wildeman et al., 2014). Child maltreatment has been shown to have adverse effects on physical, social, emotional, and developmental outcomes across the lifecourse. During childhood, child maltreatment has been found to be associated with deficits in cognitive development, internalizing and externalizing problems, and increases in the number of physical health problems (Lanier, Jonson-Reid, Stahlschmidt, Drake, & Constantino, 2010; Graham-Bermann & Seng, 2005; Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001; Glaser, 2000). Child maltreatment has also been found to be associated with substance use, depression, violent behavior, and low academic achievement in adolescence and adult health problems such as anxiety, chronic pain, heart disease, and low health-related quality of life (Bonomi, Cannon, Anderson, Rivara, & Thompson, 2008; Corso, Edwards, Fang, & Mercy, 2008; Boden, Horwood, & Fergusson, 2007; Sachs-Ericsson, Kendall-Tackett, & Hernandez, 2007; Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007; Hussey, Chang, & Kotch, 2006; Dong et al., 2004).

1.3. Parental CJI and risk for child maltreatment

1.3.1. Theory

There are several possible explanations for an association between prior parental CJI and child maltreatment. First, parental CJI may be associated with subsequent child maltreatment due to shared risk factors. Studies have consistently demonstrated that children whose parents have a history of arrest or incarceration are more likely to experience parental substance abuse and mental illness, economic and residential instability, and domestic violence than their counterparts (Tasca, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2011; Geller et al., 2009; Dallaire, 2007; Phillips et al., 2006). These adverse family contexts have also been found to be associated with child maltreatment (CDC, 2015; Gilbert et al., 2009; Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002) and may act as potential confounders in the association between prior parental CJI and child maltreatment. Second, parental CJI may be associated with child maltreatment through the financial, emotional, and social stress brought about by parental CJI. For example, studies have found that paternal incarceration is related to increases in material hardship and economic insecurity for families and decreases maternal mental health and perceived support (Turney, Schnittker, & Wildeman, 2012; Wildeman, Schnittker, & Turney, 2012; Geller, Garfinkel, & Western, 2011; Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, & Garfinkel, 2011). Such stressors may mediate the association between parental CJI and subsequent child maltreatment. Third, if child maltreatment is measured in terms of Child Protective Services (CPS) investigations for abuse or neglect, parental CJI may increase the visibility of families to various systems, services, and mandated reporters and thus increase the risk of reported child maltreatment (Drake, Lee, & Jonson-Reid, 2009; Drake & Zuravin, 1998). Fourth, parental CJI may operate as an independent causal or contributing factor to the risk of subsequent child maltreatment.

1.4. Aims of the present study

The present study systematically reviewed the existing literature regarding maltreatment among children whose parents have been involved in the criminal justice system. The aim of the study was to

examine the association of prior parent or parent figure arrest, probation, parole, or incarceration with maltreatment of children under the age of 18 and to identify key characteristics of these families. In addition, the present study sought to identify gaps and limitations in the existing literature and to provide recommendations for future research and practice.

2. Methods

2.1. Search strategy and eligibility criteria

The electronic databases PubMed, Web of Science, Embase, PsycInfo, and Academic Search Premier were searched for published peer-reviewed articles. ProQuest Dissertations was searched for unpublished dissertations. Each database was searched from its start date to August 24th, 2015. As illustrated in Fig. 1, searches were conducted using a combination of keywords relating to child maltreatment, parents, and CJI. Keywords were identified based on prior knowledge, examination of keywords used in prior systematic reviews of child maltreatment or CJI, and consultation with library scientists. Eligibility criteria included: (1) study population from the United States as criminal justice and child welfare systems differ between countries (Agrast et al., 2013; Drucker, 2011; Gilbert et al., 2009); (2) quantitative measurement of child (under age 18) maltreatment based on child, parent, or case-worker report or reports of investigated or substantiated maltreatment included in administrative databases; (3) quantitative measurement of parental (biological, step, adoptive, foster, or other primary caregivers or legal guardians) CJI (arrest, incarceration, probation, or parole) based on child, parent, or case-worker report or information obtained from administrative databases; and (4) comparison group data available. Broad definitions of child maltreatment and parental CJI were used in an effort to gain an understanding of the state and extent of the existing literature. Articles were excluded if it was clear that the index case of child maltreatment preceded the index case of parental CJI. Studies in which the timing of the events was unclear were included (Phillips et al., 2006; Gabel & Shindledecker, 1993).

2.2. Selection process

A total of 2213 articles were identified through the electronic database search (Fig. 2). One additional article was identified through a hand search of references of reviewed articles. After duplicate articles were removed, 1724 unique articles remained. The titles and abstracts of these articles were reviewed for eligibility by the author using a checklist of inclusion and exclusion criteria, and ineligible articles were excluded. The full text of 30 articles was further reviewed for eligibility, and 10 articles were identified as meeting the full eligibility criteria for inclusion in the review.

2.3. Data abstraction

Information regarding the data source, study population, sample size, measurement of child maltreatment and parental CJI, analytic procedures, and key results was abstracted from each reviewed article using standardized forms.

3. Results

3.1. Data source and study population

Characteristics of the reviewed studies are presented in Table 1. Five studies used data from the National Survey on Child and Adolescent Wellbeing (NSCAW), a longitudinal data source specific to the child welfare population (Miller, Orellana, Johnson, Krase, & Anderson-Nathe, 2013; Phillips & Dettlaff, 2009; Phillips, Leathers, & Erkanli, 2009; Phillips & Erkanli, 2008; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, &

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