"Parents need a village": Caseworkers' perceptions of the challenges faced by single parents of system-involved youth

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the lived experience of juvenile justice caseworkers, this phenomenological study aimed to describe the challenges faced by single parents with children in the custody of the juvenile justice system, and how parenting practices are affected. Ten caseworkers were interviewed, from which the following essence emerged: "Parents need a village." Five themes supported and contextualized this essence by detailing how challenges not only fall along each level of the Ecological Model, but also interact with one another, leaving parents with a profound sense of powerlessness and detachment from their children, themselves, and their futures. This study underscores that stakeholders combating youth violence must take an ecological approach in their efforts to support parents. Interventions should target neighborhood and individual needs, such as employment, housing, crime, service accessibility, and mental health problems, while simultaneously addressing issues of classism and racism that trap parents in cycles of poverty and violence.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of youth who are arrested for criminal behavior and adjudicated as delinquent (Sickmund & Puzzanchera, 2014). Youth who have been charged with a violent crime – which represents 10% of the 1.3 million crimes annually committed by youth (Puzzanchera & Kang, 2014) – typically are committed to state juvenile justice departments, where they are assigned a caseworker who assists with case management and community supervision.

Efforts to understand and, thus prevent, youth violence have led to abundant literature on the factors associated with violent behavior. This research indicates that youth who engage in violent behavior have histories marked by child maltreatment, poverty, and exposure to delinquent peers, gangs, and community violence (Sickmund and Puzzanchera, 2014). These youth also are more likely to be raised in single parent households (Henry, Avshalom, Moffitt, & Silva, 1996; Vaden-Kiernan, Ialongno, Pearson, & Kellam, 1995) by a parent with an authoritarian parenting style (i.e., harsh, hostile, and aggressive; Steinberg, Blatt-Eisengart, & Cauffman, 2006; Wiggins, Mitchell, Hyde, & Monk, 2015) and without sufficient supervision, monitoring, or effective family management (Capaldi & Patterson, 1996; Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Diaz, & Miller, 2000; Hawkins, Arthur, & Catalano, 1995; McCurley & Snyder, 2004).

Together, these factors underscore the enormous adversity that many youth face prior to, and following, their entree into violence and the juvenile justice system. And, by extension, they hint at the many difficulties that surround, and likely challenge, the people trying to parent these youth. Indeed, a substantial body of research indicates that structural and ecological factors can have considerable influence on parents and their parenting styles (Pinderhughes et al., 2001). Few studies, however, focus on this relationship for single parents with children involved in the juvenile justice system.

Even more rare are investigations that gather data from the juvenile justice caseworkers who serve these families. This oversight is a missed opportunity: these caseworkers' have intimate knowledge of their clients' lives and communities due to their intensive collaboration with youth, their families, and the constellation of service providers that surround families. They possess a unique insider/outsider perspective that can deepen the existing understanding of the many challenges experienced by families who are involved in the juvenile justice system. The present study addresses this gap by exploring juvenile justice caseworkers' perspectives on how community-level factors affect the parents with whom they work.

1.1. Parenting and parenting styles

Parents have a profound influence on their children's behavior. Perhaps most important, parents hold primary responsibility for introducing the skills necessary for successful integration into the family and society. The way parents instill these and other skills is referred to as parenting style. Baumrind (1968) classified parenting into three distinct

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styles that vary in the warmth and supervision displayed by the parent – permissive, authoritative, and authoritarian –and influence over their children's behavior and outcomes. For example, considerable research shows that authoritarian parenting, described as harsh, hostile or aggressive parenting marked by inconsistent supervision (Baumrind, 1968), is associated with negative behavioral outcomes such as aggression and delinquency (Brannigan, Gemmell, Pevalin, & Wade Terrance, 2002; Farrington, 1989; Griffin et al., 2000; Yildirim & Roopnarine, 2015).

Parents and the parenting practices they develop are influenced by a range of individual, interpersonal, and structural factors. The ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is a useful framework for understanding this complex process. In this model, individuals exist within, and are influenced by, a system comprised of multiple layers that often interact. These levels consist of national, economic, and political forces (macro level); neighborhood factors, relationships, and institutions immediately surrounding an individual (exo level); and individual characteristics (micro level). Herein, we review research on factors that affect parenting, with specific attention to literature on youth violence, organized by ecological level.

1.2. Factors that affect parenting

At the macro level, the combination of political, social, and economic forces perpetuate a range of structural inequalities that affect communities, neighborhoods, and residents. These inequalities include the systemic racism and classism that informs the policies and practices responsible for employment opportunities, available housing stock, and business development at the national and state level; the effects of which manifest as poverty, unemployment, unsafe and unaffordable housing, and a lack of thriving business and cultural centers in local communities (Browning & Jackson, 2013; Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Warner, 2003).

Not surprisingly, raising children in such disadvantaged environments compounds the usual challenges of parenting. In particular, insufficient capital – economic, social, and cultural – has a tremendous impact on parenting (Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo, & García Coll, 2001; Huizinga, 2005; Lee, 2009). Research specifically focused on youth violence indicates that specific macro-level factors – namely, community-level poverty, residential instability, and community disorganization – foster parenting practices associated with children's violent delinquency (Chung & Steinberg, 2006: Jean, 2008; Pinderhughes et al., 2001).

At the exo-level, interpersonal and neighborhood-level dynamics also affect parenting. These dynamics include the extent to which parents feel connected to community members (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002; Sampson, 1992; Warner, 2007), perceive the neighborhood as dangerous (Guterman, Lee, Taylor, & Rathouz, 2009; McDonell, 2007; Sampson, 1992; Zhang & Anderson, 2010; Zhang & Eamon, 2011) and have access to public services (Pinderhughes, et al., 2001). Research specifically focused on youth violence indicates that neighborhood-level poverty, the stress of living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and a lack of social cohesion can contribute to the parenting practices correlated with children's violent behavior (Chung & Steinberg, 2006; Church, Jaggers, & Taylor, 2012).

At the micro level, the factors commonly associated with parenting include age of the parent, marital status, number of children, education level, employment status, and socioeconomic status (Kohen, Leventhal, Dahinten, & McIntosh, 2008; Lee, 2009; McDonell, 2007; Pinderhughes et al., 2001; Zhang & Anderson, 2010). Other micro-level factors include caregiver stress, mental health, and intimate partner violence (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002; Church et al., 2012; Ehrensaft, Knous-Westfall, & Cohen, 2016; Walters, 2015). Research specifically focused on youth violence indicates that parents who are depressed, under stress, struggling with poverty, and raising children without a co-parent (i.e., single parents) are more likely to exhibit the parenting practices associated with

violent outcomes in children (Church et al., 2012; Sedlack & Bruce, 2010; Walters, 2015).

Finally, parents and parenting practices appear to be heavily influenced by the interactions that occur among the macro-, *exo*-, and micro-level factors. For example, high levels of poverty, crime, and violence impede the development of social ties, leaving parents without support from neighbors who might otherwise provide help with monitoring children and providing parenting advice (Chung & Steinberg, 2006). Likewise, community and neighborhood levels of poverty intersect with parents' mental health to create stress and can lead to parenting practices associated with youth violence (Henninger & Luze, 2014).

To date, research on this topic has been largely quantitative in nature. Qualitative studies such as the current study are needed to capture the nuanced ways in which these multileveled factors manifest in the lives of parents and their parenting practices.

1.3. The role of juvenile justice caseworkers in the lives of parents

Juvenile justice caseworkers provide supervision and case management to the youth in their care and their families. These case management services include conducting assessments, identifying service goals, creating and evaluating service plans, monitoring participant adherence, working with collaborating agencies, and troubleshooting daily issues (Hyland, 2006). Typically, juvenile justice caseworkers are employed by state agencies that are tasked with the overall management of juvenile offenders.

Research on youth violence has not sufficiently explored the experiences of juvenile justice caseworkers. At present, research with this population is limited to those who work with juveniles who are on probation. For example, Mandisa (2007) conducted interviews with 12 social workers and 2 probation officers in South Africa to explore their perspective on issues within the home and family that contribute to youthful offending. According to interviewees, young offenders are often raised in homes marked by domestic violence, weak discipline, and a lack of supervision, leading the author to recommend increased efforts to strengthen services provided to parents and families. Similarly, Maschi, Schwalbe, and Ristow (2013) interviewed 31 probation officers in the United States to explore the ways in which they engaged parents of youth involved in the juvenile justice system. Participants described how parental involvement ranged along a continuum and that engagement strategies needed to be tailored to each parent due to the variety of barriers (e.g., poverty, domestic violence, substance use, single parenting) that hinder parents' ability to be involved.

Although these two studies are valuable, missing from the literature is the perspective of those who work with youth who have been committed to, and therefore in the custody of, the juvenile justice system. These youth typically present with more complex needs and a higher level of dangerousness than those on probation, thus demanding intensive case management services. The juvenile justice caseworkers who work with youth in custody have a particularly unique insight into the challenges that parents face in raising these youth. Indeed, research on related topics such as child welfare, social service delivery, and foster care has demonstrated that people who provide case management services are an important data source; they give voice to hard-to-access populations and provide multifaceted perspectives on factors that influence system-involved parents (Cameron et al., 2013; Leathers, 2005; Saltiel, 2013).

1.4. Summary and study aims

Research on youth violence has overlooked the insight of juvenile justice caseworkers who provide services to youth and parents in the juvenile justice system. To our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the perspective of juvenile justice caseworkers whose lived experience includes working with youth committed to state-level juvenile justice agencies and their parents. The aims of this study were to explore