



Maternal incarceration and children's delinquent involvement: The role of sibling relationships



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ABSTRACT

Researchers have estimated that 63% of incarcerated women have one or more minor children and most report living with their children prior to incarceration (Mumola, 2000). While much of the research on the consequences of maternal incarceration on children supports an association between negative child outcomes and maternal incarceration, not all findings have yielded the same conclusions. Because of the heterogeneous nature of maternal incarceration effects on children, consideration of the specific factors that explain variation in children wellbeing is warranted. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study we consider the role of sibling relationships within the context of maternal incarceration. Consistent with prior research, our findings indicate that maternal incarceration is associated with variation in children's delinquent involvement. Furthermore, findings suggest that the effect of maternal incarceration on juvenile delinquency is a function of sibling relationship quality. We discuss the implications of our findings for research, practitioners, and policymakers, and note the potential utility of directing attention to sibling relationships in programmatic efforts focused on the children of inmates.

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1. Introduction

It is well known that the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with more than 2.2 million adults behind bars as of 2013 (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Glaze, 2014). Although men comprise the vast majority of the prison population, the rate of incarcerated females housed in state or federal prisons increased by 21% between 2000 and 2010, outpacing the rate of male incarceration by twice the annual growth rate (Glaze, 2014). Related to the number of adults confined to jails and prisons is the number of children exposed to parental incarceration. By mid-2007 the number of children with incarcerated parents increased by 80% to more than 1.7 million children (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002; Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Since 1991, the number of children with a father in prison grew by 77%, while the number of children with a mother in prison more than doubled (131%) (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010).

Given the striking number of U.S. children touched by parental incarceration, scholars have begun to examine the collateral consequences of incarceration for the next generation. Findings from this work have revealed that parental incarceration is associated with detriments to child wellbeing across a range of domains including mental and physical health, behavioral problems, and academic achievement (Cho, 2011; Cho, 2009; Dallaire, 2007; Dallaire, Ciccone, & Wilson, 2010; Foster & Hagan, 2013; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Phillips,

Burns, Wagner, Kramer, & Robbins, 2002; Poehlmann, 2005; Zhang & Emory, 2015). Although most of the work in the incarceration effects tradition focuses on paternal incarceration, there is some evidence to suggest that having a mother imprisoned may be more harmful to families and communities (Mumola, 2000). That is, an estimated two-thirds of incarcerated women have one or more minor children, with most of these mothers reporting having lived with their children prior to being incarcerated (as compared to only 36% of fathers) (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010; Mumola, 2000). Additionally, mothers were almost three times more likely than fathers to be the child's primary caregiver prior to incarceration, and were five times more likely than fathers to report that their children were in the care of a foster home, agency, or institution while incarcerated (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010).

Thus, although maternal incarceration is much less frequent, the above suggests that a mother's imprisonment is potentially more disruptive to the lives of children. Accordingly, a growing body of research has examined the consequences of maternal incarceration on children (Cho, 2011; Cho, 2009; Dallaire et al., 2010; Foster & Hagan, 2013; Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; Turney & Wildeman, 2015). Yet findings from this work are inconclusive, and suggest that there is still much to be learned with respect to the mechanisms underlying associations between maternal incarceration and child outcomes—and factors linked to variation in child wellbeing in particular (Murray & Farrington, 2008). More specifically, researchers have suggested the need to examine potential protective factors and resiliency processes in children with incarcerated parents, emphasizing the need to focus on important interpersonal relationships (Poehlmann & Eddy, 2013). This includes

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the exploration of sources of social support that may condition the influence of parental imprisonment on children (Murray & Farrington, 2008).

The current study seeks to contribute to the body of literature on incarceration effects by examining sources of variation in child wellbeing. Drawing on insights from social learning and general strain theories, the current investigation focuses in particular on the role of sibling relationships to examine whether attention to this important socialization agent and source of social support contributes to our understanding of variation in children's involvement in delinquent behavior in the context of maternal incarceration. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study we begin by examining associations between maternal incarceration and juvenile delinquency, controlling for key confounds. Next, we direct attention to the role of sibling relationships, first examining basic associations between the presence of siblings, as well as sibling relationship quality (positive and negative), and early juvenile delinquency. In this way, we are able to determine whether attention to sibling factors helps explain previously observed associations between maternal incarceration and child wellbeing. Finally, we examine a series of interactions to determine whether the association between maternal incarceration and early juvenile delinquency varies across the different sibling relationship indicators included in this investigation. We discuss the implications of our findings for policy and programmatic efforts, and suggest a number of directions for future research.

2. Background

The immediate and long-term effects of parental incarceration on child wellbeing have been quantified in numerous studies (e.g., Foster & Hagan, 2007; Mears & Siennick, 2015; Murray & Farrington, 2008; Wildeman & Wakefield, 2014). Although the number of studies examining the effects of maternal incarceration has grown, there is little consensus on whether the detrimental outcomes observed among the children of incarcerated mothers are due to the incarceration itself, or other sources of adversity. One perspective holds that the disadvantages in the lives of children whose mothers are incarcerated explain the association between maternal incarceration and children's behavioral problems (Giordano, 2010; Giordano & Copp, 2015; Siegel, 2011). Alternatively, negative youth outcomes may be explained by the stigma of criminalization on children experiencing maternal incarceration due to being treated as outcasts by others, or more harshly within the criminal justice system (Hagan & Palloni, 1990; Leiber & Mack, 2003). Another perspective suggests that the imprisonment of a parent may be seen as a potential source of relief for families, and particularly when the incarcerated parent was the source of economic or emotional strain on the family (Hagan & Dinovitzer, 1999). Still other scholars find that maternal incarceration, as compared to paternal incarceration, is more problematic as the children of incarcerated mothers experience greater disruptions to their daily lives, and a higher likelihood of displacement from the home (Hanlon, Carswell, & Rose, 2006).

These differing perspectives correspond to mixed findings within the research literature on maternal incarceration effects. Maternal incarceration has been linked to higher school dropout rates, higher levels of depression, delinquency, separation anxiety, and drug use (e.g., Cho, 2011; Cho, 2009; Dallaire, 2007; Foster & Hagan, 2013; Poehlmann, 2005). Additionally, adult children of incarcerated mothers have greater involvement with the criminal justice system (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; Muftic, Bouffard, & Armstrong, 2016). Some researchers, however, find that other indicators of disadvantage explain children's negative outcomes (e.g., Giordano, 2010), while still other studies find no association between maternal incarceration and children's behavioral problems and grade retention (Cho, 2009; Wildeman & Turney, 2014). Further research is needed to disentangle the factors that contribute to variation in child wellbeing outcomes and potentially explain the inconsistent effects of maternal incarceration on child wellbeing

documented in the literature. In the current investigation we focus on one such potential source of variability—sibling relationships—to determine whether attention to children's key social relationships and sources of social support may improve our understanding of observed heterogeneity in maternal incarceration effects.

2.1. Coping with maternal incarceration

Faced with maternal incarceration, it is important for children to find effective ways to cope with the loss of a parent, as well as the financial, emotional, and psychological strains that frequently accompany maternal incarceration. The concept of resilience in the face of adversity may provide an explanation as to why many children of incarcerated parents are capable of achieving healthy outcomes. Interestingly, despite increasing attention to factors that promote positive outcomes among children with incarcerated parents, very little empirical research exists on how young people cope with the stressors they experience during and after a parent's imprisonment. However, a growing body of qualitative work in this area has revealed unique insights about the social and emotional difficulties that children encounter during parental incarceration (Miller, 2007; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Siegel, 2011). Nevertheless, the precise mechanisms or factors that contribute to children's positive functioning despite exposure to maternal incarceration remain largely unknown.

Several seminal longitudinal studies on risk and resiliency have followed children through much of their childhoods, and while not focused explicitly on parental incarceration, these studies have examined overlapping risk factors such as divorce, child-parent separation, living in poverty and high-crime neighborhoods (Garmezy, 1998; Masten, Miliotis, Graham-Bermann, Ramirez, & Neemann, 1993; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992). The undesirable outcomes associated with these risk factors include those sometimes observed among children of incarcerated parents, including delinquency, early alcohol use, poor school performance, and aggressiveness. Scholars have also identified a number of protective factors for children exposed to these different sources of adversity, including social support, positive parent-child relationships, religiosity, a positive sense of self, and other support systems that may reinforce children's coping efforts (Grossman et al., 1992; Jensen, 1997; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992).

Family members play a particularly important role in facilitating resilience mechanisms that may allay broader environmental risks and help children cope with stressful life situations (i.e., maternal incarceration) (Dulmus & Hilarski, 2003; Kirby & Fraser, 1997; Werner & Smith, 1992). In interviews with children who experienced paternal incarceration, Nesmith and Ruhland (2008) found that the children who did well at school and had a positive outlook on life had greater access to sources of social support and resources—assets that are well-documented as critical to later-life resiliency (Scales & Leffert, 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992). Cicchetti (2013) noted that maltreated children who are able to build relationships could develop a positive self-concept and manifest greater ease in developing resilience. The development of affective bonds and, in particular, the perception of emotional support, allows adolescents to build relationships of greater security with themselves and with the social world, which improves their ability to cope with adversity (Herrick & Piccus, 2005). Such bonds are often developed within the family context, and accordingly, affective bonds with family members may provide the stability and support to help children overcome adverse experiences, including the incarceration of a parent.

2.2. The role of siblings in the context of maternal incarceration

The parent-child relationship is often emphasized in research on adolescent development as a key resource for helping children overcome exposure to risk (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Yet limited consideration has been given to familial relationships beyond the parent-child dyad, including sibling relationships. An estimated 90% of children in

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