



## The impact of maternal incarceration on their daughter's empathy



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Incarceration rates in the United States have seen a rapid increase over the past several decades, and although more men are incarcerated than women, incarceration rates for women have risen faster than men in recent years (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2010; Scott, Dennis, & Lurigio, 2015). Currently, the U.S. makes up only 5% of the world population, yet the U.S. holds approximately 22% of the world's prisoners (American Psychological Association, 2014; Lee, 2015). Of which, 52–63% of U.S. prisoners are parents. While a smaller number of mothers are incarcerated (65,600) when compared to fathers (744,200), the number of children with a mother in prison has almost doubled since 1991 (up by 131%; Glaze & Maruschak, 2010, p. 2). With 1,706,600 children affected by parental incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010), there are concerns about the short- and long-term effects. Indeed, prior research has shown children of incarcerated parents display problems in school, higher levels of substance use, delinquency, home instability, social adjustment, and externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Arditti, 2012; Hagan & Foster, 2012; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Murray & Farrington, 2008a, 2008b; Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012). Further, Murray and Farrington (2005) found parental incarceration was related to more adverse childhood outcomes than other types of parental separation (e.g., parental death, hospitalization, disharmony). Thus, it may be expected that parental incarceration influences a child's development, leaving long-term effects on personality traits into adulthood.

Empathy is of particular importance, as higher levels of empathy are associated with prosocial benefits such as altruism (Paciello, Fida, Cerniglia, Tramontano, & Cole, 2013), while lower levels of empathy play an integral role in criminal behavior (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004).

Given that parents play a fundamental role in the development of empathy (Farrant, Devine, Maybery, & Fletcher, 2012; Taylor, Eisenberg, Spinrad, Eggum, & Sulik, 2013), parental incarceration may have long-term effects on the offspring's levels of empathy. This may explain why offspring of incarcerated parents are more likely to engage in criminal behavior (Murray & Farrington, 2008a, 2008b).

### 1. Pathways into crime from parental incarceration

Offspring of incarcerated parents are more at risk of being arrested and incarcerated as adults (Farrington et al., 2006). There are four proposed pathways in which parental incarceration increases the likelihood of criminality (Murray & Farrington, 2008a, 2008b). Trauma-related theories suggest children may become fractured from their parents by the sudden and unexpected withdrawal of parental contact (van de Rakt, Murray, & Nieuwebeerta, 2011). A consequence of sudden adverse changes in life circumstances has been linked to a variety of child outcomes, including poorer peer relationships, diminished cognitive abilities, and insecure attachments (Sroufe, 1988). Future contact may be difficult because of the financial and logistical challenges faced in order to visit the parent, which typically has a greater impact on those from a lower socioeconomic background (Kaplan & Sasser, 1996; Young & Smith, 2000). Thus, parental incarceration not only causes distress to the child, but a continued lack of contact and development in a secure parental relationship may lead to greater emotional problems, including depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Braman, 2002; Sharp & Marcus-Mendoza, 2001). The second theory, the modeling and social learning theory, suggests parental incarceration may increase a child's involvement in crime because antisocial behavior becomes normalized or desirable (Sutherland, Cressey, & Luckenbill, 1992). The third theory, strain theory, proposes that parental incarceration often means losing financial support. Low income has been consistently linked with delinquency in children (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Murray & Farrington, 2008a, 2008b). Further, when a father is incarcerated the mother most often becomes the sole caregiver, whereas when the mother is incarcerated the child is cared for by relatives or placed in foster care, where financial resources are less (Mumola, 2000). Thus, it may be that having a mother incarcerated is more deleterious to the child (Dallaire, 2007; Dallaire & Wilson, 2010; Lee, Fang, & Luo, 2013).

Lastly, labeling theory suggests when parents go to prison, children often experience stigma, including bullying, and teasing (Boswell & Wedge, 2002; Braman, 2002). This may increase the chance for children

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with incarcerated parents to follow the same route as their parents. These children may avoid socializing, including skipping school, which make them less able to perform in school and engage in prosocial relationships. Thus, collectively, the four theories, which are not mutually exclusive, indicate that parental incarceration may not only increase a child's likelihood to engage in antisocial behavior into adulthood but also affect social bonding and attachment. Poor parental attachment has been related to lower levels of empathy (Panfile & Laible, 2012; van der Mark, van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2002). Therefore, we can expect those having experienced parental incarceration to have lower levels of empathy (Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004).

## 2. Empathy

Empathy is a multidimensional construct consisting of three factors; cognitive, affective, and social skills (Allison, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Stone, & Muncer, 2011; Baron-Cohen, 2011). Cognitive empathy is the ability to identify another person's point of view (Baron-Cohen, 1995). Affective empathy is the drive to respond to another person's thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion, such as sympathy or concern. Dadds et al. (2009) distinguish cognitive empathy as knowing the 'how' and 'why' of other people's feelings, whereas affective empathy is the 'feeling' of the emotions of another person. Cognitive and affective empathy rely on different non-overlapping neurocognitive circuits (Singer, 2006). The neurodevelopment of cognitive empathy is thought to occur later than that of affective empathy (Singer, 2006). Lastly, social skills are the ability to successfully navigate and interact within social situations.

Collectively, empathy is essential for prosocial behavior and a protective factor for antisocial behavior. Indeed, children with incarcerated fathers have been found to exhibit higher externalizing behaviors (Wilbur et al., 2007). A large meta-analysis including 40 studies found children with an incarcerated parent were at higher risk of antisocial behavior (Murray et al., 2012). Further, Dallaire and Zeman (2013) found children (7–11 years) of incarcerated parents had lower levels of empathy and displayed greater levels of aggression when compared to children whose parents were not incarcerated. However, children who experienced parental incarceration who had higher levels of empathy were not at greater risk of aggression (Dallaire & Zeman, 2013). Therefore, empathy may serve as a protective factor of delinquency while parents are incarcerated. However, since empathy in part develops from a secure attachment (Grusec & Davido, 2010), the stressful separation experience of parental incarceration may impact the child's sense of security, thus disrupting the development of empathy.

On average, women have higher levels of empathy than men (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004; Thomson, Wurtzburg, & Centifanti, 2015). Nevertheless, men and women with a history of antisocial behavior exhibit lower levels of empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007). At the dimensional level, further differences emerge. A meta-analysis found levels of affective empathy did not differ between offenders and non-offenders, but cognitive empathy was lower in the offender groups (van Langen, Wissink, van Vugt, Van der Stouwe, & Stams, 2014). While no studies have explored the association between empathy and parental incarceration in adult women, we expect differences at the dimensional level. Firstly, the heritability of affective empathy is 52–57%, whereas the heritability of cognitive is much smaller and therefore more influenced by social and environmental factors (Melchers, Montag, Reuter, Spinath, & Hahn, 2016). Further, low parental bonding is associated with deficits in cognitive empathy in women but is not associated with affective empathy (Parlar et al., 2014). Therefore, because women with incarcerated parents may not have developed a secure parental bond and are influenced by different environmental factors (e.g., placed into foster care), these women may display deficits in cognitive empathy but not affective empathy. However, offenders and non-offenders differ in empathy levels (Beven, O'Brien-Malone, & Hall, 2004), so we may expect this association to be more evident in second-generation offenders. That is, those women

who are incarcerated and have experienced parental incarceration may display greater deficits in cognitive empathy when compared with incarcerated women who have not experienced parental incarceration.

## 3. Parental incarceration for women

The effect of parental incarceration is more harmful to girls than boys (Murray, Janson, & Farrington, 2007). For instance, parental incarceration for girls is associated with early-onset of sexual relationships and risky sexual behaviors (Smith, Leve, & Chamberlain, 2006). Further, Murray et al. (2007) found women with incarcerated parents were more at risk of offending than men. Muftic, Bouffard, and Armstrong (2016) suggest the consequences of parental incarceration may be different based on paternal and maternal incarceration. For instance, Grant (2006) found maternal incarceration was negatively associated with young girls' self-perceptions, while Murray and Farrington (2008a, 2008b) found internalizing symptoms were higher for daughters of incarcerated mothers. Thus, it may be that having a mother incarcerated, compared to a father incarcerated, has more long-term negative effects on daughters, which may be evident into adulthood. However, comparative maternal and paternal incarceration effects remain largely unexplored, especially in women and girls.

## 4. The current study

It has been suggested that there is an inter-generational influence of parental incarceration on children, which carries through into adulthood (Murray & Farrington, 2008a, 2008b; Will, Loper, & Jackson, 2016). However, past studies have not examined the long-term effect of parental incarceration on empathy among female offspring from both offender and non-offender samples. In order to explore the association between parental incarceration and empathy, we first tested the 3-factor model of the Empathy Quotient (EQ; Muncer & Ling, 2006), using an ethnically diverse female non-offender and offender sample. Using the 3-factor model, we tested whether the offender and non-offender samples differed on empathy and rates of parental incarceration. Based on prior research, we expected the offender sample to score lower on the total score of empathy and cognitive empathy than the non-offender sample (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004; van Langen et al., 2014). Individuals with incarcerated parents are more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007), thus, we expected the offender sample to have higher rates of parental incarceration (paternal, maternal, and both parents incarcerated). Our final aim was to test if social skills, cognitive, or affective empathy increased the likelihood of women belonging to one of the parental incarceration groups: no parental incarceration, mother-only, father-only, or both parents. In the offender sample, we hypothesized that those who scored low in cognitive empathy would be more likely to belong to the mother-only or both parents incarcerated group. In the non-offender group, we expected empathy levels to not differentiate women in any of the parental incarceration groups.

## 5. Method

### 5.1. Participants: non-offender sample

Female students ( $N = 197$ ,  $M_{age} = 20.97$  years, age range: 17–44 years) were recruited from university courses. Students ranged in year of study, 1st year (22%), 2nd year (27%), 3rd year (24%), 4th year (16%), and more than four years (11%). The ethnicity of the participants were 30% Caucasian, 23% Asian American, 21% Asian, 10% Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, and 16% included other ethnicities (European, Hispanic-American, African-American, Mexican, Middle Eastern, Native American/Alaskan). None of the participants had spent time in prison or a juvenile detention center. The administration took place in classes. Classes ranged in size with no less than eight students and no more than 150 participants in an administration. Each

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